

Letter from Sun Dew to Zhoujun

My Beloved Lord,

Everything was well arranged by Master Wong, as it turned out. You had no cause to doubt him. His devotion to you – and hence his commitment to my cause – over-rides all the other calls on his attention. When you entrusted me to him, at the border, I felt that everything was lost. To be leaving you was more than I could bear. To be in the custody of Wong, who appears and disappears so erratically, without warning, seemed to seal my doom. But I created for myself, out of some deepest place, a shell of faith into which I withdrew: a faith that I shall see you again. This is the shield that enabled me to withstand the terrible journey, and the desolate arrival in this alien land. And Master Wong did not fail me. The detailed arrangements he had made for my travel across south eastern Asia, the papers he procured, the passage from Malaya to Darwin in the hold of a cargo ship, all these extreme and exacting measures held up. And he was at the wharf to release me upon my arrival.

Oh my beloved! I know nothing of what you might be going through! I want to spare you the tale of my discomfort at this time. When our two foreheads touch again I shall tell you everything. My heart cries incessantly for that moment, but I have a sad certainty that it will not be soon.

Master Wong tells me I must be sparing with letters. With his many occult devices he can keep track of your hiding places and disguises and can arrange for our letters to be delivered, but not often. It is an effort, even for a magus of his high calibre, to maintain the conditions for this correspondence. So for the most part, my dear, I shall, I fear, have to rely on herons and cranes for a sense of your presence.

Let me tell you a little about my present life. I have settled into a remote outpost called Lombadina. It's a mission for the native people here, set on a wild cape above the pearling town of Broome in the far north west of this vast Australian continent. Before the America-Japan war, a large asiatic contingent, including many Chinese, worked in Broome as pearl divers – a dangerous occupation! Now these people are mostly gone. But there had been so much intermarriage between the races – Chinese, Japanese, Malay, Manilamen, Aboriginal – and so much unrecorded immigration, that Master Wong thought my chances of passing unremarked among the Ah Fat's, Chi's and Ah Choo's who still abound in these parts was fairly high, better, at any rate, than in other parts of the country. He organized a job for me as a cook at Lombadina. My many years of running abbeys should stand me in good stead for the post!

I had barely heard of the native people of this land before I arrived here. Or rather, I knew that Master Wong had an entrance to this little-known shore from within the Fabled Mountains. I remember him telling us – yes, you were there – that Greensickness Peak, where he found the stone he entrusted to me so long ago, was the inside of a mountain located in that rugged, far-off land. There were stories too – do you remember? – about a native people whose lineage stretched back, like ours, to the times before the last Ice Age. Master Wong had been visiting them since long, long before I ever met him. But I paid those stories scant attention, never imagining that I myself would one day be thrown onto the mercy of this wild land. Already now however, after having been in Lombadina only two full moons, my heart is overflowing with the affection and laughter that the local people have bestowed on me. I know nothing yet of their metaphysics, only of a welcoming friendliness that has won my heart.

The red sand of this hot and humid cape is clothed in jade vegetation with stands of great tropical trees and vast coastal swamps of mangrove. The mission is built in a style they call colonial, since it was created by Europeans, who first ventured here in the 1890s. The houses are heavy-and-dark-timbered and look out over neat lawns that seem unreal against a backdrop of wild dunes. There is a church built of corrugated iron and rough-cut poles with a paperbark roof and semi-open walls. The floorboards, altar and pews are of a richly polished bush mahogany, the altar inlaid with mother-of-pearl. Christian icons hang from available nails. I have to tell you, my dear, that when I first set foot on those mahogany floorboards, my spine tingled, such was the pull of dark passions and spiritual undertows in this strange temple to an alien god in a land already palpably ablaze with its own sacred tendencies. I felt on the edge of tears. Everything about the place – the deceptive peace, the dark, out-of-keeping houses, the lovely white-limbed eucalyptus, the dishevelled dunes howling just behind the general store – spoke to something obscure in me, a yearning for something more passionate than I could name, a marriage of some kind, tragic but compelling, of one god to another perhaps?

This feeling followed me when I wandered into the cemetery. The graves are simple and clean, each one marked by a small mound of white shellgrit and a white wooden cross, marked with just the name of the deceased, and perhaps some dates. Just like a dormitory of well-made children's beds. Ornamental shells decorate the mounds, and some of the crosses are inlaid with pearlshell. The paths between the graves are raked each day, and each grave, without exception, is arrayed with fresh flowers, usually the beautiful pink and coral blooms of a virile creeper known as bougainvillea.

The mass – a Christian sacrament – is held each Sunday out of doors amongst the graves. I can't follow the ritual in any detail, but there is such a light-hearted – almost carnival – atmosphere in the little seaside cemetery that it refreshes even my uncomprehending spirit.

Amongst all the new impressions however, my dear love, I think of you. Always. Every moment. I understand why you must remain behind, to keep the Dao, whatever comes. I understand too why you insisted that I leave, to keep the Dao in exile in case it is extinguished in our own land. I tremble for you, but concur in your dispensations, as always. We have our responsibilities, and my heart is no less large and laden with them than is yours. Do not think me deficient in this. But who will keep this love of ours? I have watched you acquiesce in this love, and then, over aeons, find your present great-heartedness in the radiance of its warmth. It is that great-heartedness, that tenderness grown from a human source, that sets you apart from the mere technicians of Dao. You are a seer, yes, but unlike the technicians, you see with your heart – as when, considering where I should be sent for safekeeping, you felt the loneliness of this distant land, the bereftness of the great rocks in the aftermath of their custodians' demise. When you detected the dark draughts of this loneliness you could pinpoint the exact location of their emanation, and from that moment they were vivid to your mind's eye. No need for occult devices. No mastery of the cosmos. Just this wise and deeply practised heart.

But now who is to keep this love, my Lord, while you keep the Dao in our homeland and I keep it here? Can we in fact keep the Dao without it, or has this love become our Way? True, our separations in the past have been many. Remember the decades I spent travelling in Europe, wandering the ancient provinces of Greece and Rome with Stoics and Cynics, while you were in retreat on Wudang Mountain. Remember too that period in the thirteenth century when you disappeared into the Middle East and returned with the ardent Sufi teachings. But the present is different; these are new, possibly terminal, times. The worlds we separately inhabit now are disjoint, with no evident line of passage between them.

Master Wong of course slips between worlds as easily as a mouse. Here one moment, traversing the Fabled Mountains the next, from thence to emerge in the Himalayas or the frozen fastnesses of Greenland or the arid gorges of the Kimberley. But you and I do not follow the magus path. That is not our Way.

I wonder about this stone I wear around my neck. I have never removed it since the day Master Wong gave it to me, straight after my very first encounter with you. I have worn it with faith but also dread. I suspect that the time of its speaking – once so far in the future – might now be near.

I am worn by the rigours of the voyage here, by the pain of separation, by my fear for you. I will not pretend to you, my dearest love, that I am not thin and in ill health. But do not doubt that I will endure. I live for the day, no matter how far off, when I shall find my way home to your arms again.

Your own

Sun Dew

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Beloved Lord,

I have written to you several times over this last year, but have received nothing since your first letter. I kissed that small piece of paper when it arrived till it almost disintegrated, and I keep it inside my dress, close to my breast, like the letters you sent me in our earliest days. I could feel the urgency of your situation from the hasty scratching of the characters, and I had to meditate for more than an hour before I could read the letter through to the end.

How can I comfort you, my Lord? To think of you suffering is for me to teeter on the precipice-edge of my sanity – but this, I know, is not what you wish to hear, you who are so valiant, always, in the face of terror. I know that what you want to hear is that I am well, that I am finding my feet and carving out a niche here within which to keep our precious Dao. And so I am, my dear. Master Wong will, I trust, have relayed this to you, and it is true. So have no anxiety on my account. Your foresight has ensured that I am a thousand times safer than you are in the land of snows (for Wong has told me that you are now hidden in the western highlands, close to the Tibetan plateau).

Were you aware, when you selected this remote country as my destination, that it is home to the largest and most graceful of all the cranes, the Brolga? These stately birds dance in pairs, male to female and female to male, and mate for life. Their dancing is ethereal, their movement slightly suspended, as if they have stepped through from the Fabled Mountains, and have not yet quite touched ground or fully assumed corporeal form. One has no trouble at all believing in their immortality. When I take myself off into the bush to ramble or to meditate, they unfailingly appear, wherever I am. I watch them bowing to each other, like grave spirit courtiers, and I could turn to you and take your arm, so near to me do you feel. The birds are called the native companion by the white folk here, and amongst the natives themselves they are taboo to kill.

I did not linger long at Lombadina, but have been wandering around this country they call the Kimberley, cooking on cattle camps and pastoral stations. I was drawn away from the coast, with its sparkling south-sea-island atmosphere, into the intensity of the stone country. I have spent months at a time too in the bush camps of the native people. Only they offer me reliable refuge from officialdom. The people of European descent are uncongenial in their attitudes, cold and arrogant towards asiatics. Asiatics themselves are overly curious – the secret of my identity is scarcely safe with them! But the Aboriginal people ask no questions; they care nothing about my origins and history but make a place for me here and now in the present moment amongst themselves. With my quick tongue I am learning several of their languages, as well as the English of the white society.

Where will it end, beloved? Will I still be Chinese when I see you again? (Oh happy day! Let my mind not turn to its favorite obsession, for fear of vexing you!) I await your news with my heart in a state of suspension. As ever, yet also as never before.

Your own,

Sun Dew

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Beloved One,

Master Wong assures me that you are safe, though still I have not heard from you. He cannot tell me where you are, of course. It is vital that I do not know, otherwise my longing might transmit this information to the dangerous but receptive minds of traitorous adepts. It is better, anyway, that I do not know. As long as I cannot picture your circumstances I cannot torment myself with images of harm befalling you!

Oh, but I do greet you, beloved Lord! I hold your face in my hands and my eyes stream into yours. How well I remember the words inscribed in hermitages on all the holy mountains of our homeland: “the heart of the recluse is a placid pool unruffled by the winds of circumstance”. How often have those words returned to mock me here! How many nights have I lain in the warm bush – gazing up into a Milky Way that sweeps across the sky here like the glistening wake of the swift-tailed Dao – with my heart pitching and keeling at the thought of you. But on that day when I hold your face in my own two hands I shall regain at last that placid pool.

This is an archaic land indeed, my Lord. It reminds me of the wilds we roamed together after I left the rocky passes of Tai Shan. And the Dao is here! Yes, beloved! I understand entirely now why this was where you chose to send me. Where else on earth today, outside certain parts of China that have not yet fallen to the red tide, would one find a land so electrified with this primordial charge? It sings daily, hourly to its people, who serenade it daily, hourly, in reply, and keep the One as faithfully as they might have on the first day of Creation. And while dragons filled the air when the world was young and Dao was undisputed, here rainbow serpents haunt the springs and hidden rock holes, manifesting the watery element, the raw serpentine stream and flow, of primal Dao.

Indeed, far from being lonely and abandoned, in need of companionship, this country is veritably sizzling with serpents-in-residence! One has to be careful where one treads, so abundant are they in the landscape. They dwell in spring-fed dens, and often manifest as rainbows, whether skyborn or seen through the misty veils of waterfalls or through the miniature windows of quartz crystals. Around the coast they are even detected by the native people in the shimmerings of pearl shell. I have often seen pools shining opalescent with the presence of the elusive guardian. But these rainbows, like dragons, are elemental and easy to antagonize. To camp near their waterholes, to light a crackling fire or even to slap a mosquito in their vicinity is to risk rousing them; a roused rainbow starts by hissing and spitting streams of water and ends by unleashing flash floods that surge through ravines and gorges to swallow the unfortunate offender. The rainbow kills, without justice, but those whom it swallows are vomited forth again, so it is said, as landforms or new creatures.

Everywhere I travel – and I often walk from camp to camp with Aboriginal folk, cooking for them in the ancient Chinese fashion – I am shown galleries of rock art, in which all manner of local spirits and ancestors are depicted. But though each clan has its own stories, its own versions of the Creation myth, most of these stories include the figure of the rainbow serpent. These serpents are strikingly dragonlike in character. They are often shown with long snouts and curved teeth and sometimes even tufted head-dresses. Master Wong confirms that they are like the feathered serpents and dragons of archaic cultures the world over. But they are also possibly the oldest of the dragon brigade, since I am assured by those who show me the sacred paintings and engravings that such serpents have figured in the galleries since the time of the Flood – which is well remembered in these people's tales. So it would seem that Dao has presided here since long, long before dragons were born in ancient China. I cannot credit that you were entirely unaware of these portentous connections when you sent me here, my Lord, and that you did not mean that I should not investigate them?

Indeed, no sooner had I begun to frequent the native camps than I perceived that these people, insofar as they cleave to the traditional ways, are at one with Dao. Not that they appear to have a concept of Dao, but in a sense, of course, Dao is already lost when a concept of it is discovered. Nor do these people seem to practise any of the meditational and alchemical arts associated with Dao in our own homeland. They seem not to have to recover Dao, painstakingly, as we do, but are born to it. This suggests to me that it is perhaps in the transition to civilization that Dao is lost. When people forage for their livelihood, dwelling in lands that are ancestrally theirs and are in every sense the ground of their existence, then their identities are imprinted from birth with the complex gradients and contours of reality. They are not harnessed, in their inmost essence, to the contingent idealities of social convention, as occurs under the urbanized conditions of civilization, when the tie of the self to its birth-ground is severed.

Do you follow the drift of my thinking, dear Lord? In childhood we are contoured – both psychically and physically – by the particular place into which we are born: we are scored with the patterns of its landforms, its weather, its temperatures, the habits of its plants, the tracks of its animals, its peaks and flatnesses, its secrets and silences, the cadences of its particular poetics. If one's entire life is played out within the frame of that original scene, in ceaseless attunement to its flows and patterns, would there ever be occasion for self-alienation? The self would witness its own dynamics writ large in the country that contained it. How then could it lose the pattern of those dynamics? Such a self would inevitably remain one-with-Dao. Yet it would not be non-specific. Were you to ask it who it was it would not say, I am emptiness. It would draw a picture in the sand.... a picture of its own land.

How different is the situation of those who live under the – urban – conditions of civilization, people who dwell in permanent built settlements with agriculture as their collective means of livelihood. Through agriculture the land has been divided up into private allotments, its natural cycles and patterns overlaid with productive grids designed to suit the purposes of human owners. As cities expand, in accordance with the imperial logic of civilization, individuals, indeed whole peoples, are set in motion, through conquest, enslavement, colonialism, and the requirements of the military and administration. Individuals are no longer intimately engaged with the terrain that formed their energetic signature at birth, and that terrain is in any case itself energetically fractured and disturbed. So where are individuals to turn for a sense of who they are? To ideality – to stories, both collective and personal: to abstract conceptions of selfhood, in terms of station and office, of social placement. The individual accommodates

herself to such abstract conceptions.....and so begins the process of alienation from Dao.

I need hardly dwell on this process, my Lord; our Masters instructed us in its detail more than 2000 years ago, and on the consequent need to shed idealities and reconnect with the flow of reality in our own energetic patterns. But after experiencing life here in the native camps I am wondering whether our Masters took sufficient account of the fact that individuals do need names if they are to function collectively in society. We cannot pass ourselves off merely as the Happy Fool of Laozi or the Laughing Sage of Zhuangzi if we are to join forces with the rest of the human race and devise a workable social contract. Is it possible that the Way, as it was taught to us, had its blindspots? For our Way, the Way of ancient China, was a way of withdrawal from society, of release from the delusional entrapments of the 'world of dust'. But of course this withdrawal was itself a socially defined and sanctioned act: individuals, like us, who 'withdrew from society', merely donned a new – highly respectable – mantle of convention, as hermit, monk, nun or esteemed abbess or abbot. Did not you and I compute each other, when first we met, as members of an elect band with a well-defined – and distinguished – niche in society? Where is the freedom from conventionality, and hence from delusion, in this? But how could things be otherwise? Must not self always bring a frame of some kind to its conversation with other-self? How else would conversation be feasible? If we lacked object-identities altogether – the kind of identities denoted by name and role in society, for instance – organized collective life, with its economic and political requirements, would, again, scarcely be practicable? In a word, the Way of the hermit – of the nameless Happy Fool – is not universalizable. But if it is not universalizable, then the Way of the entire hermetic tradition, which is to say, the tradition of Dao in ancient China, is not universalizable either. Might this be why Daoism, for all its antiquity and tenacity, has always existed in complex association with the ideology of Kong Fu? Why it has never stood alone or historically held sway? Has it, from the very start, functioned only as an antidote to an excessively bureaucratized civilization, rather than as a prescription for society in its own right?

Without the example of the native people here, my Lord, these doubts would never have arisen in my mind. But in witnessing the Way of these amiable folk, I have been unable to avoid asking this question whether our Masters, in their eagerness to shed the delusional self, perhaps taught their disciples to discard too much, while also themselves discarding less than they estimated. Perhaps it is landedness which enables individuals to maintain specific identities yet at the same time free themselves from the social idealities that would estrange them from reality.

I am anxious, my Lord, lest the point I am venturing to make here is both overbold and insufficiently-explained. Will you bear with me if I tease out the thought again, the better to articulate it both for you and for my own self? Let me start by rehearsing the axioms of our teaching. Under conditions of civilization, individuals assume conventional identities – inspector, archivist, cook, courtesan, dignitary, person-of-renown, servant – and such identities inform not only their social personas but their inmost psyches. To a degree, these identities follow fact and to that extent they are unobjectionable: if a person prepares food all day in the imperial kitchen, then this activity will sculpt his energy patterns, and to this extent it would indeed be accurate to describe him as a cook. But these roles, and the identities derived from them, function prescriptively as well as descriptively. To be a cook requires that one act in a way that satisfies certain guidelines whether or not one feels the urge, at any given moment, to follow those guidelines. Such moulding is, again, necessary, to a degree, if collective life is to be appropriately organized – people must fulfil their appointed tasks whether or not they are energetically inclined to do so. But under conditions of civilization, this necessity is pushed too far. Roles are transformed into intricately and rigidly defined norms with implications for social placement that infiltrate every aspect of an individual's experience. Individuals are squeezed into these pre-cast moulds to the point where their own original energetic dispositions are suppressed; eventually the individual loses touch with de – her original nature – and is not only functionally but psychically co-opted by society. With the loss of de, of the dynamics of her original nature, her capacity for real engagement with other-selves is lost, since real engagement consists in the mutual blending of energetic patterns. And, of course, the more she is estranged from her own energetic wellsprings, the more desperately she clings to her conventional identity – the identity assigned her by society – since this is now the only self, and the only bridge to other-self, available to her.

Enter the Dao, or rather Daoism, in its remedial role, sweeping away, with its spiritual broom, all these layers of conventional expectation in order to reveal, beneath the dust, the live and luminous face of the real. But in sweeping away the layers of 'dust', mightn't we Daoists also be sweeping away the very possibility of organized collective life? Is this why we retreat to mountain wilds and leave to others the business of realizing the frame and fabric of society?

If we substitute, for the conditions of civilization, conditions of landedness, a new possibility – of combining the original nature of individuals with the requirements of society – appears. Under conditions of landedness, land rather than convention provides a template for individual identity. Individuals can thus wear the identity tags necessary for others to refer to them conveniently in the third person but they can do so without suffering energetic estrangement from

the real. Such individuals do, then, enjoy specific identities – they do not empty themselves of self, as was the traditional aim of Daoists – but these identities are not such as to obscure Dao; rather, they open into it, since land, from which these identities derive, is the province of Dao.

Of course, Lao looked back to an earlier age in which village people were still, he believed, joined to Dao. But he did not remark on the fact that it was perhaps the connection of those folk to land that underwrote their attunement to Dao. But nor might those villagers have been as close to Dao as has been supposed. As agricultural peoples, their lands would already have borne the stamp of human intention and to this extent would no longer have been the province of Dao; people's connection to it, then, would not have ensured that their essence was Dao-blended.

You can see, my love, how deeply my intimacy with the native people here has set me thinking about our own tradition. Of course this link to land, to indigeneity, was always implicit in the practice of Daoism. To become one with Dao, and hence to attain the status of an immortal, was always, in the first instance, to establish a dwelling in the wild, in a place not yet rearranged to conform to human requirements. In practice, of course, that meant finding a mountain.¹ And while resort to the mountain was, on the one hand, a retreat from society, it was also, on the other hand, a merging of self into a wild place in which Dao still reigned. In other words, those who aspired to immortality sought, individually, what indigenous people already enjoy collectively: identification with a particular place still unfolding according to its own dispositions, not converted to agricultural or other human ends. Shunning grains – the staple of civilization – we ate roots and leaves and wild fruits, filling our bodies with the juices of the wild. Our attainment was to shuck off the world of dust, of delusion – at least insofar as we did not fixate on becoming notable 'hermits', 'sages' or 'immortals' – and to find anchorage in the real. Mountains were our definitive haunt not only because they were still the province of Dao but because of their tangibility, their monumental solidity. How we loved rocky places – towers and temples and citadels hewn by the hand of nature! In seeking out caverns and dens deep in the folds of the mountain we were, literally, re-entering reality, eschewing the delusional embrace of the ideal. And many of us did indeed become presiding daemons or deities of place, the spirit of a particular waterfall or hanging valley, intimate with it in every way, as the people here are with their homelands.

The impulse towards indigeneity was unquestionably present then in Daoism as we practised it, but its significance was not explicit.

¹ Translator's note: the original meaning of the word, 'immortal', is man or woman of the mountain.

Does this realization – if it is a realization – in any way help us, do you think, my Lord, to keep the Dao in the detribalized, disinhabited context of the modern world, in which society no longer follows even the agricultural, let alone the indigenous, path, but marches under the sign of the all-devouring machine? For my own part, I am unclear. Perhaps a nomination of homelands of some kind is indeed the remedy of which members of modern societies stand in need. There is no doubt about the need of the land itself, which is to be allowed to unfold again in accordance with its own principles, and in doing so to sustain a template for human reality. Yes. To pitch their great camps within the streaming body of the earth again, to sculpt their cities from within the spiritual contours of the rock, is unquestionably what these modern societies do need. But how this is to be accomplished, my dear, I confess I cannot see.

Your own,

Sun Dew

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Beloved,

It is with piercing chagrin that I see I have displeased you with my comments on our venerable tradition. Oh, how I reproach myself! How could I have been so ox-like as to blunder in, through all your anxieties and sufferings in defence of that tradition, and pronounce on its “deficiencies”! Please forgive me, dearest one. You have sent me here as trusted custodian of our Mysteries, sparing me the deadly risks and hardships you yourself face at home, only for me to squander our precious opportunities for communion with inane denigration of our school. Not another word on this score shall I utter. I hereby forbid myself even to think such disloyal things. It is to our tradition, and not my own presumptuous thoughts, that I shall cleave.

I have recently taken up a new post at a very remote settlement – a pearl farm – in the far north. Since the wild oysters that were abundant on the coastline until the America–Japan War have been pretty much exhausted now, a new venture in cultivation has begun, at Kuri Bay, from whence I am writing this. What dramatic landscapes awaited me here! The sea simmers under a supreme sun all day long and rises to drown the inlets with king tides at appointed moments in its cycle. There are storms, in the wet season, that electrify the Gates of Heaven and conspire to set the Palace of the Gods alight. During those blazing interludes we, the staff (most of whom are Malays), withdraw into the concrete compound that serves as our quarters. From there we watch the waves

scrumming out in the bay and casting long violent tongues up the coastal cliffs and islands. Never have I witnessed such storms, my Lord! Typhoons strike occasionally also. Of these there is little to report, since the metal shutters are then drawn in the compound; the air is in any case turbid and tumultuous, like churning fog, and visibility is nil. After they pass we step out to find boats and old luggers washed inland and perched on stone piles or sandy rises. Last time I happened upon the bodies of two drowned dolphins cast ashore. Many sea mammals perish in these terrifying episodes, I am told. But do not fear. The compound is secure. Only those of our workers caught out at sea are in genuine peril.

My position here is that of House Keeper, overseeing the maintenance of the quarters. I order supplies, arrange for repairs, supervise the domestic staff. This involves considerable paperwork but my English is, by this stage, equal to the task. Such work is, again, not so different from administering an abbey.....

So remote is Kuri Bay from any other settlement it can be reached only by sea-plane. It is quite an experience, my love, to fly in the air, not riding the wind like our ancestors, but borne aloft on rickety tin wings, from thence to meet the sea-face on great mechanical rocker-feet. I mention this because a curious incident occurred the first time I flew to the company's headquarters in the port town of Darwin. We were flying inland, with the coast still visible far to the north, when a mountain of most striking appearance came into view. It rose almost vertically from the plain; from its lower slopes, clothed in vegetation, it sheered up abruptly in vertical rock walls, its upper half a massive rectangular block of bare stone, like a sky-borne fort or watch tower, entirely inaccessible from below. Stonehouse Mountain, I whispered when I saw it, and at that very moment the greenstone pendant around my neck began to buzz! Truly, beloved. It started to vibrate against my breastbone, emitting an electrical burr, too slight for the pilot to hear, but distinctly audible to me. It has never acted in this – or any other! – way before, so you can imagine my astonishment. The pilot circled the mountain once or twice, showing it off to me, for it was indeed a spectacle, known to very few but its own local custodians, as there are no roads and no regular air or sea routes into this remote region. My stone did not cease to buzz until the mountain was far behind us. What do you make of this, my Lord? Can you shed any light on this strange circumstance? If not, Master Wong is sure to be able to do so, but of course I have no way of knowing when he will next appear. My letters to you are sent – in accordance with his instructions – to a post office box in Darwin, from whence he somehow contrives for them to find their way to you. But I am not privy to these arrangements, and it is more than a year now since I met the magus himself, face to face.

I don't think I shall remain long at Kuri Bay. I am happiest in the camps of the native people, and when I have funds enough from this current stint of work, I shall rejoin them. (But do not fear, my Lord, I shall not indulge in comparisons between their tradition and ours.) I am also drawn, however, by country far to the south of here. That is the land, I sense, whose cry of loneliness reached your heart in far off China. Here in the Kimberley, and even to the immediate south, in the region known as the Pilbara, the land is well companioned. The rocks and ranges, galleries and water-places, all have their keepers, the keepers of their sacred secrets. But even I can now hear the lamentation of the rocks to the south of the Pilbara, their cry for the keepers and companions who have perished or vanished in the face of an invasion that knows no limits, an antagonism directed at the very earth. For the time being, however, I shall remain in the employ of the invaders, mastering their tongue and struggling to decode this modern mindset. In my spare time I read voluminously, borrowing books from distant libraries, on history, science, philosophy; I am no longer an esteemed teacher and authority but an anonymous learner, seeking out the facts, ideas and skills I need to function within, and understand, this extraordinary new chapter of civilization that is gathering all the peoples of the earth in its vast and imperious march.

I keep your last letter tucked into my dress, as always, close to my breast; with every breath I take I feel its light presence. You are behind every thought that arises in my mind; even when I rest in the primal state, you are there, dispersed throughout infinite space, your essence blended into boundlessness, your hand the last thing I let go as I slip into the loving plenitude of the Unconditioned.

Fare safely, beloved, for whatever happens I must hold your face in my hands again, if only once!

Your own,

Sun Dew

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Beloved Lord,

How relieved I was to hear you were not vexed after all at my bold speculations! And how gracious was your claim that even such a slight reminder of our old, unceasing discourse was a tonic for your spirit! Your avowal brought home to me the sadness of thinking-alone; how I miss the sweet renewal-of-the-world that was always the fruit of our thinking-together! You insist you would prefer us to remain joined by the thread of that dear discourse, however attenuated,

rather than by the sharing of our troubles. On this point, my love, I suspect you are seeking to protect me, for I have few troubles, while yours are grave and plentiful. Believe me, I have no need to be spared the tale of those troubles! However painful that tale is to me, I crave the truth, and nothing less, about your situation. But you refuse to indulge me on this point, and so my fears on your behalf outstrip any possible calamity, and only the occasional assurance from Master Wong succeeds in placating me.

It occurs to me now that it was perhaps even part of your intention, in sending me here, that I should not merely keep the Dao while it was banished in our homeland, but also that I might have occasion to reflect on our tradition in light of these twin experiences of indigeneity and modern civilization, so dynamically juxtaposed at this ancient edge of the rest of the world. If this is so, my Lord, I tremble at the faith and expectation vested in me, and doubt my capacity, as my main reaction to these twin experiences has been one of dizzying confusion. But I am encouraged by your confidence and will convey to you whatever impressions and ideas seem most salient.

Let me continue then the line of thought begun in my last-letter-but-one, about Daoism and the native tradition. What is most striking about the native people I have met is simply their at-easement with one another and the world. If this cannot be described as living with Dao, then I can scarcely imagine what can be so described. But hasn't Daoism, as a discipline, lost sight of this simple goal? Perhaps it fell, long ago, too much under the influence of Buddhist teachings. (Remember when Xuanzang returned to the Tang Court after the journey to the Western provinces. How eagerly we all studied the sutras for the next hundred years! How their influence was shed like fresh spring rain on sacred mountain strongholds throughout the whole of China!) But as a technical study of the ultimate nature and structure of subjectivity, Buddhism is on a par, in relation to inner reality, with modern scientific investigations of outer reality, such as quantum mechanics. (I have been reading up recently on the bizarre – but also oddly familiar – findings of Western physics!) Just as it is unnecessary to grasp quantum physics in order to function appropriately in the physical world, isn't it unnecessary, really, to grasp the depth-structure of subjectivity in order to live in an appropriate manner?

Let me put this question – of whether we need to grasp the “quantum” structure of subjectivity in order simply to know how to live – slightly differently. The traditions of Buddhism, and under its influence, Daoism, have given us all manner of techniques for exploring the limits and levels of consciousness. Daoism, especially, has become floridly “scientific” in its objectives, turning the hermit's cell into an elaborate laboratory and the hermit herself into an alchemist. Embarked on these investigations, the practitioner does indeed

discover all manner of altered states and marvellous sensations, possibilities of mind as arcane as the scientist's quarks and neutrinos. But none of these inquiries into the mental equivalent of arcane particles provide, in themselves, any reason to exist. They do not entice us into the embrace of the Ten Thousand or invite us to jump, trustingly and feet first, into the uncertainty of life. But this is what I, for my part, am perennially seeking. Not knowledge for its own sake; not the detachment of the adept/scientist; but life. I seek to entwine my signature with the manifold signatures of the Many, and, in so doing, to dance new forms into existence – to take my part in uncoiling the great vine-stems of this universe and feeling the juice, the surge, as they burst, in ever-new tapestries, into the light.

Yes, the technician, in pursuit of the arcane, sifts through layers of reality down to the micro-level of matter or the sub-ideational level of mind. But isn't reality revealing itself, in each instance, in the terms of the technician's question, a question framed within a preconceived set of assumptions? It is this kind of investigation which reveals, on the one hand, wave-particle duality or the constancy of the speed of light, and, on the other, the capacity to raise or lower one's own bodily temperature or dissolve, upon death, into a rainbow body. But in order simply to live, to enter into the stream of life with grace and wisdom, isn't it unnecessary to know reality, in esoteric ways such as these, at all? Oughtn't we rather to engage with it, to fraternize amiably with the rest of the Ten Thousand, making poetry with them? Isn't it this which enables creation to happen? The quantum structure is just the flesh on the dream, the air which allows the song to be sung, the space for the leap. For creation to occur, isn't it the dream and the song and the leap we need, not esoteric knowledge of quantum dimensions? To seek such knowledge is to pursue "perfection", end-states such as enlightenment or immortality that transcend our creaturely essence to a point unintended by nature. Isn't such knowledge conducive to self-absorption rather than engagement? Were we created for perfectability? Weren't we put into the world to play, to contribute through play to the efflorescence of new form, new registers of creation? Isn't it through the engagement of the Ten Thousand that the world continually unrolls into new poetic terrain and is thereby reborn?

Perhaps I shouldn't worry, for doesn't this irrepressible world convert even the quest of the technician into its favorite game of hide and seek: it is a quantum world today, relative to the "game" the physicist plays, and a world of dependent co-arising tomorrow, relative to the "game" that Tibetan lamas devise for it. These are the faces it turns to us in response to our questions. Even when we refuse its overtures and deny its very capacity to play, representing it – as Western science does – merely as an acted-upon, it responds, by showing us its back, its material carapace, its inert aspect. But

when we acknowledge its responsiveness and address it in the poetic terms of a ritual or a story, then won't it, within the limits of its own possibilities, engage with us in those same terms? At the same time, won't the faces it turns to us always be aspects of a potentiality which is forever beyond specification, and forever mutable? For this reason mustn't the question we bring to it ultimately be, not, what is it? but, what can happen when we join it, creatively and expressively? The answer to this question is not to be found in the laboratories of the alchemists. It can surely only be found by diving into the realm of the Ten Thousand, by approaching each Thing attentively, with an eye for possibilities of coming-together, for the joy that creating new conjunctions, new poetic configurations, brings.

This has been the approach of the native people here in their relations with me. When they looked at me their eyes did not say, who is she? what is her history? but rather, will she play? With this question in their eyes they scrutinized me closely, noting every clue to my potential for engagement. They approach their own country in like manner, not wresting from it the secrets of its substructure but synchronizing their steps, their thoughts, their heartbeats with its rhythms, slipping into story, into song, with it.

Has our own tradition perhaps lost sight of this simple essence, my Lord, an essence which was still strong in the days of Master Lao and Master Zhuang and our own Stone Cloud? Has the tradition since those days become distracted by alchemy, the pursuit of the arcane? Have its practitioners become technicians, unwittingly hubristic in their quests, elitist in their exclusivity, repairing to the highest of places, there to look down with disdain on the "world of dust"? Oh my Lord, it pains me to ask these questions. I fear, greatly, that it is I who am hubristic in asking them, I who am disrespectful in contesting our precious heritage. But my time with the native people here has stirred these reflections, and I pass them on.

Might the point of the great red take-over of our homeland have been to launch a Chinese diaspora that would bring our people into contact with other, unselfconscious manifestations of Dao, where this would in turn give rise to a reanimation of our own tradition, hopefully rendering it fit to meet the challenge of the new civilization that is now everywhere chasing the old ways from the face of earth?

Your own,

Sun Dew