

Letters from Sun Dew

Compiled and Arranged, and with Replies, by Rosmarin

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13 October 2004

Dearest Ma Fei,

Remember when I was staying amongst the great granite domes on a sheep run – Nardoo Station – way out west in the Murchison and sending daily accounts of my adventures to you? It's more than four years ago now, but how vivid those days still seem to me! There was an incident however, towards the end of my stay that I never mentioned. Why, I'm not quite sure. It was an encounter of such a mysterious kind I have held it protectively to my breast. But the time has come to disclose it, though only to you. I have to call on your help. For the upshot of that meeting was that I now have in my possession some papers that I wish to entrust to your care.

How to explain to you what took place on that singular occasion? You will remember that for many weeks I had been exploring the great granite islands that stud those arid plains. In addition to the letters I was writing to you I was also keeping a diary. I think it may be easiest simply to transcribe the diary entry for that day.

On my way out to Wongalara today I took, on impulse, an unmarked turn-off. This was admittedly reckless, but it felt so good to strike out on this relatively disused track and to know for sure I would not be disturbed. After a while I came to a ruined windmill. There the track ran out. I wandered around the derelict camp that adjoined the well. Bottles were scattered under a shady gum beside which stood a couple of capsized sheep pens. For some reason I felt extraordinarily happy. A copperback butterfly landed on my breast and sat there contentedly for at least two minutes while I checked the various tyre tracks. After the last few – enforced and unwelcome – days in town I was back where things were feeling utterly right again. No-one knew where I was but oh, the joy of simply being there, totally alone and hence able to take in everything, everything!

A little more scouting turned up some tyre marks that did not peter out in sand a couple of hundred metres from the mill, so I cleared the track of sharp twigs and gingerly drove as far as I could. What awaited me was a complete surprise.

A kilometre or so from the old camp I came to an expanse of shallow, mottled granite slabs and mounds ascending gradually in gentle swells and billows to the dome of yet another great granite monolith, rust-coloured and streaked all over with darker stripes. I stood transfixed when I realized what it was. A deeper-than-usual hush hung in the air, but there was a tangible presence, as of a sleeping giant silently breathing just beneath the carapace of rock. The shallow mounds were cut through by terraced creeks punctuated by deep pools and miniature falls. Slightly dazed, I climbed directly to the top of the spine, forgetful of my usual etiquette of circumambulation. From the highest point I gazed across the plain. What an outlook! The Margu range spanned the western horizon and to the south lay the shining expanse of Lake Maringa, usually dry but at that moment partially filled. It was hard to compute that this was arid country, with vegetation lapping every horizon, and a salt lake as vast as an inland sea in the middle distance, and behind it, indigo ranges, with only their ochre flanks, picked out by sunlight, betraying the arid truth. This was indeed a fabled land, a setting for myth. It was as if the gods were still at work here, still making the landscape ready for the people, who were yet to come. A serpentine land, its surface broken here and there by copper humps and coils. Nearby, to the south east, another dome rose out of the scrub. It was smaller and less sprawling than the one I had just mounted, perfectly rounded and smooth, bleached on top, like a risen damper. One prick with a serpent's tooth, and the crust would surely have collapsed! Ancient rock roadways led away from the base of that damper rock to distant destinations, like antipodean versions of the Via Antiqua, built by the gods to transport granite domes, salt pans, folded-up creek beds, seams of gold and cart loads of emu, goanna, kangaroo to the frontiers of Creation.

I was so excited I was drawn in a dozen directions at once, rushing from this pavilion to that wind-sculpted boulder, from this fern-fringed gully to that wave-rock wall. The pungent odour of billy goat hung in the gullies and at one point I met a little troupe high up on the spine, a white mother, twin white kids and twin black juveniles – further evidence that a billy goat was somewhere in residence. After a couple of hours of intense exploration of the first outcrop I plucked up courage to attempt the crossing to the damper rock. Much baa-ing and bleating was emanating from the stretch of scrub between the two outcrops, but I managed to negotiate it without incident, happening en route upon a grove of banksia edging a long rock gutter, its scarlet bottlebrushes creating a festive effect. At damper rock I remembered to circumambulate, which was easy to do, since this was a miniature and neatly circumscribed granite, though it did have a curving tail on its far side. In any case, the circumambulation did not take more than quarter of an hour, after which I made my way up its steep slopes to the crown, where there was, as it turned out, little to see. A few dried out pools. A dead goat. Here and there an

amethyst-green silk chrysalis fastened to the bare rock. A dove grey raptor glided up to inspect this intruder in its airy rooms, and hovered a couple of metres above my head. I could hear the familiar emu tomtoms – of warning or alarm, I'm not sure which – as I gazed out over the fabled land. They had followed me all around the perimeter of damper rock. Now one of the birds strolled into view along the Via Antiqua. After a moment a second bird appeared. They strolled in a studied manner, announcing themselves, till they eventually disappeared into the scrub. When I returned to the base of damper-rock I found a goat skull with enormously long, twisty, pointed horns. Warily I made my way across the stretch of shrubland back to the relative safety of the first great mound.

Once there I sought out the little staircase creeks cut into the stone shelves at the mound's base and, on a patch of moss under a kurrajong tree, I made my lunch camp. Turquoise and scarlet dragonflies patrolled the creeks, and scolding frogs were much in evidence, calling from hollows under the rock's carapace so that their cries were amplified. Copperback butterflies, their wings edged with magpie markings, were here joined by umber-coloured relatives with amber 'eyes', their design redolent of ancient Egypt. Both kinds of butterfly were feeding in large numbers on tea tree bushes with pink wax flowers.

After lunch and a few cups of green tea from my flask I lay down in the shade. It was hot. I was quite exhausted after my excited morning and I soon fell asleep. I awoke to a call. A woman was squatting on the far side of the little creek, smiling, and trying to attract my attention. I sat up hurriedly. She was a Chinese woman, as tiny as a bird but with a brimming smile. She laughed gently at my discomposure. 'I'm sorry to startle you,' she said, still laughing, 'but I saw you here and thought I should come and introduce myself. My name is Sun Dew.' She held out her hand. She explained that she was camping at another granite nearby, and had come over to investigate this one. She spoke with just the slightest trace of a Chinese accent, enough to indicate that she was not Australian-born. Her face was weathered but youthful under her stockman's hat, her smile a little lopsided. As soon as I had recovered from my surprise, I felt intrigued by this woman, and at ease with her. I offered her some green tea, and as we chatted, I learned she was a practitioner of Chinese medicine in Perth but often made the trip up to the rangelands for a recreational break. She seemed well educated though at home in the bush, warm but poised and formal in her manners. She invited me to join her at her camp. I was only too ready to do so. She accompanied me back to the old windmill, where her vehicle was now also parked, and then I followed her along disused tracks, with which she was clearly quite familiar, into terrain which was, for me, entirely new. We drew up at another old well in a sandy corner where two fences, in an advanced state

of disrepair, intersected. 'We have to walk in from here', she called as she took a well-stocked pack from the rear of her vehicle.

We followed the line of the fallen fence through thick scrub for the best part of an hour until we reached the outliers of another stripy outcrop. We then cut across a wide expanse of fresh greenpick to the outermost granite fields. A couple of rainpools added to the park-like atmosphere. A mob of emu sauntered by, watching us with defiant fascination. Sun Dew led me into a valley between two great granite tentacles. At the end of the valley the wall was sheer, wave-like in formation, buff-coloured rather than red, with darker vertical striations. The valley itself shone a strange leached jade-green, the effect of a spreading herb which sparsely covered the otherwise bare ground. It was crunchy underfoot but its desiccated leaves and stems held this preternatural light. An edge of brighter pick lined the base of the rock wall. The valley was alive with copperback butterflies; around some of the creepers that hung from the rock-face they clustered in fistfuls. It was into this translucent place, more dreamlike than any I had ever seen, that Sun Dew invited me.

Well, Ma Fei, I stayed four days at Sun Dew's camp. They were extraordinary days. Sun Dew herself was unlike anyone I have ever met, and I have to say, I fell in love. My soul was dazzled. To describe to you what happened between us I would have to see you face to face; none of this can be committed to paper. After those four days, Sun Dew returned to Perth, and our correspondence soon commenced. You will find that correspondence in the accompanying package. (During our time among the rocks Sun Dew had bestowed on me the strange name, Rosmarin. It is under that name that I corresponded with her and it is that name I have now taken as my own.)

In the package you will find two other bundles of papers, consisting of translations of selected letters from Sun Dew to her long-time mentor, Master Zhou. There is a large number of such letters in existence, but those in the first bundle are very, very old. I won't try to explain the fact of this antiquity to you; the letters are self-explanatory. I will leave it to you to read them. The second bundle contains translations of much more recent letters that Sun Dew sent Master Zhou when she fled from China after the communist triumph.

The originals of these letters were vouchsafed to me by Sun Dew herself when she came to visit me, more than a year ago now, at a little granite mountain in Central Victoria, not unlike the wild granites on which we first met. We spent two weeks in conversation there. One day I shall write about what transpired during those two weeks, but not now. At the end of our time together, Sun Dew took her leave of me, ostensibly to head for northern Australia. I have had no news of her since.

Together with a large amount of other correspondence, the older letters I am now sending you had been in the possession of a friend of Sun Dew's, Charles Wong, who seems to have acted as archivist for many exiles and fugitives from revolutionary China. Sun Dew hurriedly retrieved these particular letters for me before her departure in the hope that I might find in them answers to certain questions I had been urgently pursuing with her. I have only just completed the translations. The very early letters were of course extremely difficult to render into anything like contemporary English, and I could not have completed the task without Master Wong's help – and the advice of a small army of sinologists from my own university, though I was not at liberty to show them the actual letters.

I am entrusting this remarkable correspondence, together with the letters I myself exchanged with Sun Dew, to your care. I am asking you to act as custodian for them. It is clear to me that I must follow Sun Dew to a certain elusive mountain. I know that I can only find the mountain by journeying – by discovering a passage through zones. It is no use simply taking a plane to Darwin and chartering a helicopter to scour north-western Australia. I must find the portals. I have no idea how to enter this inter-zone space of journeying or where it will lead – perhaps into the interior of China? But I must know what was written on Sun Dew's stone. I must know whether there is, after all, a world Dreaming.

Dearest friend, I ask only that you hold these documents until you hear from me.

Yours fondly as ever,

Rosmarin

Letter Series 3: between Sun Dew and Rosmarin (Australia), 2000 –2001

Oh Sun Dew,

Amongst all the people I have ever known, you alone – YOU ALONE – seem to share the questions that have charted my course – my strange, unhappy course! – through life. You alone understand the inner link between the mysteries of love and those of metaphysics. I feel as if my life had been nothing but a heap of dry books until the day I awoke to find you sitting, smiling, at my side. Those few precious days we spent talking together amongst the rocks are the biggest and most vivid in my life. Yet that was just a beginning. There is so much still to ask. I never expected answers to these questions. The questions themselves, I thought, sufficed – it is through our devotion to them that we mortals stay in the shadow of the ineffable. But you showed me answers, and there was real mastery in your showing. I see now there are possibilities...realities... I had not anticipated. Who are you, Sun Dew? I know you are on a mission of your own, searching for a lost beloved. I see all manner of tragedy and strife behind your quiet smiling eyes. There is a history here that spans continents and defies my comprehension. I sense all this, and defer to you utterly. But will you continue the conversation? Since we cannot speak, can we write to each other, my treasured friend?

Rosmarin

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Rosmarin,

The days we spent together amongst the rocks are as precious in my memory as you say they are in yours. For a long time I am lacking anyone with whom I can discuss the topics about which we spoke, so I accept with alacrity your offer to continue the conversation! Since the breadth of this great continent separates us, let us indeed embark on a correspondence!

I suspect that you would like to start with the core riddle of love and metaphysics. Am I right? Give me your sense of the shape of this riddle, your sense of the feel of these questions. I vividly recall you sitting in a little stone garden at the base of one of the granites, telling me about Ralph and Ursula. Do you remember? There are natural rock and pebble arrangements all around; a floor of stone forms a paved channel draining into a miniature pond, just as if carved by a zen artist. Although both channel and pond are dry, the tortoiseshell paving is polished to high gloss by passage of water. You are telling me how, as a young woman marooned in London in your early twenties, you thrill to the tale of this young couple, Ralph and Ursula, in an old book



called Well at the World's End. While traffic rumbles up and down the road outside – it is a famous road, as I recall; is it the Kings Road? – you curl up in your tiny bare room and enter a world for which you yearn so much it pierces you like a sharp spear! See how I remember your words, Rosmarin! In search of the well at the world's end – the well that holds waters of eternal life – the young lovers, Ralph and Ursula, travel great tracts of country as yet unknown to humankind: a world of rocky plains, of bleak and barren mountains, of wildwoods, with here and there sweet-water streams and bird-sown orchards. For an entire winter, in a chestnut grove high in a mountain pass, the couple camp. Their journey is, to all appearances, a quest for love, but in fact, you say, it is the wild and luminous lands themselves that lend the adventure its enchantment. Ralph and Ursula find a gateway through the veil of the everyday and enter the shimmering realm of reality. This is their immortality. Romantic love is the pretext for the quest, but it is far from the real theme of the tale. Or so you tell me, as we sit in the stone garden. Can you take the thread up from there?

But please, dear Rosmarin, don't forget also to give me the flavour of your life at present, where you are and how you spend your time. I have returned, as you know, to my practice in Perth. Chinese medicine is in such demand these days in Australia, I fear I must set up a training clinic in addition to my practice. It is, as you well know, in this guise that Dao comes to the West. So it is for the best, but it leaves me little time for paying my respects to sites.

Your fond friend,  
Sun Dew

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Sun Dew dearest,  
I am writing to you from a property called Bindara near Hanging Rock, an hour to the north of Melbourne. I spent quite a bit of time here before my journey to Nardoo Station, but never strayed beyond the boundaries of the property and never felt the presence of country here. ('Country'. How this word grows! There has never before been a word in the English language to connote the spirit aspect of land in addition to the geographical. 'Nature' entirely lacks this connotation. Only Aboriginal English, it seems, can give us the words we need. 'Country' is alive, incandescent. Is there any such word in Chinese?)

No boundaries exist for me now. As soon as I arrived I slipped straight between the fence wires and up into the forest at the top of the ridge. I walked right along the ridge and down the far end till I came to a hidden..... 'country'! The woodland opened onto a green valley overlooked by some spectral granite

outcrops. A large mob of roos – at least fifty of them – was feeding in the valley. They all stood, like little granite pinnacles beneath the tors, staring intently at me, stock still, before taking leisurely flight. There were two granite-capped knolls, studded with some sizable boulders, and on a distant hilltop, to the east, a veritable fort. The whole vista had the shine, that metaphysical shimmer, of those landscapes within the precincts of granite outcrops in the Murchison – the kind of enchanted landscape in which you and I met. I had no choice but to go forth and explore. There were no pesky horses or cows on the other side of the high ground, to my great relief, just a wonderland of granite. What a home-coming! I sat on the rock, touched it, talked to it. Suddenly there was country all around. I expanded into it. I was no longer exiled, as I had felt since returning from Nardoo. I was back in the lap of dearest reality.

Which brings me, Sun Dew, to the question of love and metaphysics. At Nardoo I tried to convey to you, just a little, the meaning this cross-over holds for me. But I shall try to capture it again. Let me go back to the beginning. Let me tell you the story of where it all started – this encounter with reality, and hence my quest, my journey to Nardoo, and the several journeys in between.

It all started with my first visit to Daisy Plains. This was when the small pane through which I had looked at life as a child was superseded and a whole new layer of reality came into view. Not that reality per se had been entirely invisible through the earlier pane – it had not been entirely obscured by lattices of rules and conventions, of mummy-says-this and daddy-thinks-that. I had seen it in the dirt roads and paddocks surrounding our family house. It had beckoned from the creek and radiated from the grey crane poised in the fork of a white stag. It had glimmered from the mist-lakes of morning and glistened from the tops of aged manna gums.

But it manifested on an altogether different scale at Daisy Plains. There it blazed forth, to the top of the sky and to the farthest reaches of the featureless horizon. There under the desert sun it announced itself in a single deafening name that emanated from everything, from emptiness itself. It was inescapable, uncontainable. The lattices of mummy-says-this and daddy-thinks-that melted, like so many children's icy poles, into the burning sand. This is what I say, it said. Reality held one totally to attention. There was nothing else. I was branded with its name forever – up there on my forehead, of course, where I could not see it.

I was ten years old when I first set foot on those horizon-to-horizon expanses of saltbush. How well I remember the night of my arrival. We had been travelling all day, we three school friends, Shona, the daughter of the station, Hester, my then-best friend, and myself. Charlie, the station foreman, had

driven us from Melbourne, all the way up through the tame and tidy greenfields of Victoria then out finally onto these treeless flats bisected by sand roads that ran, ruler-edged, to the skyline. This was my first glimpse of the great realm that lay inland, beyond the buttercups and dingley dells of the coastlands.

We turned off the narrow road onto a tyre track and sped across miles of saltbush, past windmills and tin troughs, with mobs of roos and emu racing us in the distance. Finally, as darkness fell, we arrived at the homestead. This was again like nothing I had ever yet experienced. My family had puttered around country Victoria and up the coast of New South Wales; we had stayed overnight in the odd guesthouse or country pub. But all that now seemed like nothing more than a succession of snapshots in my mind, paper-thin and coloured like a comic book. This was a real house, numinous prototype of all those cartoon cut-outs I had known. The original cottage, hand-built in the 1880s, had been extended in so many directions it was now a labyrinth of dark rooms. A kitchen with a wood-fired stove the length of the wall served a timber-panelled dining room, furnished with a long table and chairs to seat at least twenty. Photographs of great grandfathers and of the homestead in its earlier incarnations, with horses and buggies in the foreground, hung above the fireplace. The pantry, where Shona's mother was often to surprise me in the days to come with my fist in one of the biscuit tins, was as large as an average grocer's store, with sacks and bins and storage jars. Shona's room, an enclosed portion of the back veranda, fly-wired but not glassed in, looked out onto water tanks, peppercorn trees and hitching rails. Three beds were drawn up side by side. Shona's was draped with a huge kangaroo-skin rug stitched together especially for her by Charlie. She threw herself into the fur as soon as we walked in, and rolled about like a filly in the dust. Home! Home at last! she squealed. Back in her own fiefdom. Daughter of the clan chief.

Then we were outside, running. Lights were on in the sheds, huts and shacks that clustered around the main house. People lived in these rough-and-ready dwellings. A generator rumbled. The three of us ran down to the horse-yards and climbed the high rails. Half a dozen small horses swished and shuffled in the half-light. Shona leapt in amongst them. Rex, Dixie, Tina, she shrilled. Other horses, scores of them, stocky and short like these, lived out on the plains. For work purposes they were rotated, doing brief stints under the saddle followed by long periods out in the herd. In an adjoining yard, separated from the rest, a silver stallion, as prancy as any show pony, tossed his beautiful head and whickered. Down by the pig pens, a dozen chained working dogs added their voices to the excitement. A curly-haired spaniel – the house dog – was barking a welcome. Piglets careered about in the shadows, squeezing themselves under fences and sheds, threatening to knock us off our feet. In the centre of the grounds stood two great silos with external ladders leading to the

sky. In the saddle shed, as alluring to us as a motorbike garage would have been to boys, Shona showed us exotic bridles and elaborate bits. There was antique harness and farrier equipment, and there were big stockmen's saddles, polished to oak with real use, not like the pony club fripperies we were accustomed to at home. These were the saddles we would learn to use in the days to come. Outside, a great meat-hook in a high cage dangled like a gallows against the night sky. I had never been so excited, so frightened, so exhilarated, in my young life!

Shona led us out to the women's 'dunny' (a word I had not till then been permitted to use). It was a lone sentry box beyond the circle of tenuous lights, its wooden seat perched over a thirty foot drop. As Harriet and I each took our turn, Shona locked us into the sour blackness of the box, and from the other side of the door described, choking with giggles, the dead things that lay at the bottom of the pit. When she let us out, quaking wrecks, we were calmed by the gentle thunk, thunk, of the windmills that stood somewhere further out amongst the stars.

Then there was Ted. A boy with a not-quite-finished grin, a husky voice and eyes aswim with underwater lights. A slender boy of fourteen in a worn check jacket and over-size riding boots. Again, I had never before encountered such a boy, such a presence. It is forty years ago, but I can still see every detail of his beautiful face. He was there, somehow, at the centre of it all, of all the excitement, the scariness, the enormity of the unencompassed. Playing hide and seek in the hay shed. Teasing us, mocking us, terrifying us, but always tenderly, always with eyes a-twinkle. He had promised not to swear in front of us, we were later told, and, with innate gallantry, he kept his promise. He belonged to Shona, this fatherless boy from a one-horse town, whose every hope was invested in Daisy Plains. But we were all too young to understand this then. Our eyes shone. His face was a lamp – the face of the world, achingly lovely, that glows softly and turns up to one slowly, rippling, from the very depths of the well – the well that it will be the purpose of one's life's journey to locate, somewhere beyond the rim of the known world.

I don't know if I can say more than this at the moment, Sun Dew. Each time I try to grasp the questions, they dissolve in my mind. Give me time.

Meanwhile, I feel so lucky to have found you. Let's forget love and metaphysics for the moment. Tell me all about what you are thinking and feeling.

Rosmarin.

PS I looked up this mysterious name, 'Rosmarin', that you – with such inscrutable merriment! – bestowed on me during our time amongst the rocks. Nothing to do with roses, as it turns out. Or with herbs. Rather, it is an archaic word from the Latin ros, meaning dew, and marin, meaning sea! Sea Dew. So I belong to the dew family too!!? The word also referred, apparently, to a mythical and immortal sea creature – vaguely similar in appearance to the walrus – that used to climb up cliffs to lick the dew. How on earth did you have such a name at your disposal, Sun Dew? Never mind! I will glory in it, and treat it as a Daoist appellation: Rosmarin, the Dew Drinking Recluse! Though don't think I am unaware of the connotation of tears in this image of salt dew.....

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Sweet Rosmarin,

How I thrill to your telling of the tale of Daisy Plains, of your first glimpse of the well at the world's end – where the first moment and the last, the awakening and the final realization, intersect. Shall I have an answer to your question when you find it, Rosmarin? Perhaps. But let us by all means take our time. What better way is there, after all, to fill our days than with this – necessary but oh-so-scarce – conversation?

I understand why your first encounter with the real took place on a pastoral range. And I understand why you describe your friend as the daughter of the clan chief. Although I do good work here in the city, I am dreaming, dreaming always, of rangelands! Whenever I make the trip, and finally enter again those red-soaked, sage-green expanses, fretful chatter in my heart ceases. I rejoice once more in the rightness of things. Surely this is how the world is meant to be! Sand roads leading through uncluttered country, linking homesteads to wells and pens and salt pans and to other homesteads, each homestead a tiny settlement, a cluster of dwellings. Each station a land unto itself. If I adjust somewhat the colour and contours of landscape, I can imagine myself back in pre-imperial China, before Yellow Emperor, before unification that was to result in our proud nation, when people inhabit the land in scattered clan households. Isn't there such a time throughout the world? In Europe it is the era of the 'folk', before the Romans, when clan households, linked by grass roads, lie beyond the reach of legal deeds and titles. Indeed isn't it from this time, prior to empire, that fairy tales are passed down to us, when each land is no bigger than an average sheep station – half a million acres or so, which is small enough to walk or ride in a matter of days when the way is clear, though large enough to become lost in forever if a wrong turn is taken. Each land has its own king and queen, heads of the clan household. No cities. No government. Just green roads leading through a great world that turns in its own time and to its own drumbeat.

When I leave the highway behind and drive into the range-lands and out along those dirt tracks unmarked on any map, I feel I am re-entering the real – I am rejoining the circle of the world's own turning, where life unfolds to its own tune, instead of to tuneless demands of civic code.

I remember a special day. Shall I tell you about it? That day I am at a huge granite dome in the back blocks of another station north of Nardoo. I am circumambulating – as you also do – when I come to a low reef, with slabs of rock extending out from the base of the rock for a kilometre or so, just above ground level. There are shallow rain-pools in this rock shelf; tadpoles, water insects and tiny freshwater crustaceans are making the most of an opportunity that is likely to be short-lived. Some of the tadpoles are already turning into frogs, mottled and rust-coloured like the rocks. In one of the larger pools float scraps of what appear, to my horror, to be plastic, but actually turn out to be dragonfly wings – wings of the sky-blue bodied dragonflies which patrol the sky-reflecting pools.

I pull off my shoes and socks and paddle in the dragonfly pool. The splashing of my feet makes such a lonely sound when I know that, under that whole sky, there is no-one else to hear it. I am so habituated to the city in recent years I have difficulty even grasping the fact of my absolute aloneness. I keep looking over my shoulder, expecting to catch a glimpse of something, of that little exclamation mark of..... of what? what do you call it? discrepancy? dissonance?..... in any case, of that punctuation in the landscape that announces.....the human. But there is nothing. Everything is a sea of blending, a slow-motion trading of shapes, from the rust-dappled domes and towers of rock to fire-legged black-and-white-striped grasshoppers to copper butterflies to rufous kangaroos to lizards with the colour and skin texture of the reef underfoot. On and on the forms permeate, everything partaking of the same essence, everything finding its own articulation of the same theme, improvising, elaborating, harmonizing.

Yet this vast dance of blending seems melancholy at that moment. Even the plastic water bottle I hold to my chest moans softly in the breeze that blows off the rock. Why? Is not this cohering of things the very soul of beauty? So why the melancholy? Is it because such cohering, such blending of everything with everything, is achieved, after all, by death. I find a pair of goat's horns wrecked on the baking reef, like crescent moons of starkest white, their sheaths discarded, the perfection of their geometry reconnecting mortal goat, in death, to great celestial order of orbits and spheres. The beauty of this sea of blending, the exactitude of all this orchestration of light and form, is born of a grave necessity, a necessity that transcends compassion..... But when the

human element enters, it says, no, wait a minute, I'm not ready yet to blend. Let me rearrange things to make a little more time for myself, a fraction more room to move. Look, I'll stitch together cloths to cover my nakedness, I'll hammer wheels to planks to carry my load, I'll mould clay into a jar to store my water and food. And what happens? In no time at all we have candy-pink bomber jackets, shiny land-cruisers and discarded cans and plastic bags all over the landscape. Blending is not achieved. World breaks up into unmatched bits and pieces. The smooth flow of light and form that is beauty ceases to occur.

But out there in those rangelands, everything is still in step, still swaying and clapping and turning to the same drumbeat.....

My water bottle continues to moan in the wind as I stand in the rockpool, and I can't tell you how sad its voice makes me, Rosmarin. Death. It is as if I never understand its true significance – or the true possibilities of immortality – until that day. But that is a topic for another occasion.....

In any case, dear friend, it gives me solace to confide these feelings to you, a fellow companion of the real. There is expansiveness, and reality too, in this contact between us. I embrace you, my dear one.

Sun Dew

PS The name given to me at birth is Sun Lu Zhu. Sun is a common surname in China; it simply means 'child of'; Lu Zhu means 'dew drop' or 'dew pearl'. So you see, Rosmarin, we really are sisters in Dew. Indeed, as you may be aware, immortals of old are often known as dew drinkers, as some of them live on nothing but dew, even, in certain cases, honey dew that spurts into their own mouths in the course of alchemical practice. But that too is a topic for another occasion!

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Sun Dew,

How I share your longing, my friend! I remember walking out early one evening into that country that unites our hearts. The trees were looking preternatural, lit from under by the setting sun, and I was filled suddenly with immense relief. At last there was enough of everything! Enough space. Enough native vegetation. Enough wild animals. Enough creek beds and craggy gullies and froggy pools. Enough is when there is more than can be counted, weighed, entered into inventories, onto titles, under regulations. This was not a world of remnants, of 'reserves', in which one has to make do, somehow, with a hundred acres of native grassland in an entire state, or one quarter of an acre of 'open space' in

a 500 unit development. Nor did one have to be satisfied with snatched apprehensions of 'the poetic', such as the little maidenhair 'gullies' I used to notice under the drainage grilles in the vast car park at the city Market. In the rangelands reality breathed poetry from every pore, and this poetry blew across the plains and around the arid hills, finding its way into every crack, every crevice. This was a real world adequately furnished with everything that worlds are meant to be made of, and I found I could at last relax. I realized how long and tightly I had been clenched up with a sense of insufficiency, a sense of reality running out.

Here, I am not clenched up with insufficiency, but nor is there that feeling of plenitude, of inexhaustibility, that envelopes the rangelands. This afternoon, after giving my dog a swim in the dam, I set out to explore the woodland on the ridge once more and found myself drawn into the force field of the tors again. The hills beyond were wrapped in rain-mist and the granite ruins looked more than usually ethereal. I remembered I had noticed, when I was last at Bindara, before I had discovered the tors, an ethereal quality to the landscape. Sitting on a garden seat in a shrubbery of lavender, facing east, I had noticed a certain transparency to the view. I now regard this transparency, or ethereality, as characteristic of country. The strongest impression I've ever had of this ethereality was in the jade green garden at the foot of the wave-rock wall where you were camped, Sun Dew. That place shimmered like a veil. It was solid to the touch but looked transparent enough to step through. And now that quality was present again today – much muted, of course, but still discernible. The granite-studded hills had an inner light. They shimmered like a vision, insubstantial. Beyond them, at some distance, was a higher hilltop fort or castle with broken parapets, sliding ramparts. When the clouds cleared I caught glimpses of more turrets and jagged towers beyond. I wandered all over the nearby hills but couldn't get across to the broken castle. A wide valley dotted with farms lay between the hilltop fort and me. A serious fence marked the end of my playground. Though I was far from any road and already trespassing on private land, there was a sign on this resolute fence: KEEP OUT. Who on earth could it have been intended to deter? It hung there among spectral pillars and rocks of ages, saying no to roos, cockatoos, echidnas and the ancestors and spirits who alone frequent those haunted places. Saying no to the Dreaming. Keep out of myth, keep out of the citadel of spirits.

At that moment the farms in the valley didn't really bother me. One can ignore them to some extent because, at the level of country, they are not really there. Country is and always was on the other side of the manifest. I wanted to call up the spirits. How I felt their loneliness, their abandonment! I felt how much they need us. Not in order to exist but in order to take form, here, now, in this place and time, and for no other reason than to play. Come out and play, the spirits



plead, or would plead if we gave them voice, by calling them into the here and now. And what is the game that the spirits want to play? Isn't it a game of hide-and-seek, of revelation? Isn't this what the spirits love to play with us? They offer us poetic revelations by way of salutation, and once we learn the revelatory code, we can address them through story and song and elicit the breathtaking and playful poetry of their response.

Was it you who explained this to me, Sun Dew? I feel as though I've known it forever but there is something in the words I've used that reminds me of you....

In any case, as I was thinking this and talking to country, promising, if not to paint up, then at least to put on my lipstick and come out and play each day, a stunning revelation unfolded. The rain-mist cleared and stairways of white light descended from the clouds in the west and the hillside with the castellated cap at one end was suddenly lit. It alone, in the entire landscape, was illuminated, and suddenly all the rocky spires, including the citadel, were finely etched, thrown into surreal relief, casting long shadows behind them. It was an enchanted hill, bare save for all the rocks, straight from the pages of myth. A ridge snaked away behind, etched with many more pinnacles and tors, and even another city of ruins, where before I had seen nothing. It was all there, suddenly revealed, in the midst of an otherwise sombre landscape. How I applauded. Who could ask for more in this 'penumbria', this penumbra of suburbia still within commuting distance from the city.

I could not help noticing however that though this was indeed country, it had a melancholy air. A great sadness hangs over these tors. They are like the ruins, the stumps, of the Dreaming. The rocks are not figurative, narrative in form. They are worn, faceless, cemeterial. What a contrast to the rocks at Nardoo!

Still, there is definitely an aura here, despite the used-up feel of things, so perhaps the spirits can be reawoken, reassured and re-invited to a livelier kind of intercourse, through address. The feeling that had accompanied me through all my wanderings at Nardoo was returning: the feeling that I was really working. I never have this feeling when I am doing the things one does to earn a living. All those serious activities like teaching, consulting, administering are ultimately cases of let's pretend. We adhere to a set of pre-established rules and conventions, and bingo! we are teaching, consulting, administering. But out there on the trail of country, without rules or conventions, broaching the unknown, following poetic clues, readying oneself for revelation, entering the poetics of a larger conversation, one is conscious of having finally engaged in real work, all-absorbing, energizing, endlessly exciting: one is embarked on no less than the task of encountering reality.

Rosmarin

\* \* \*

Rosmarin,

An old friend from China, Charles Wong, is presently staying in my apartment helping me with family matters. I have tidings of that loved one of whom I told you, Master Zhou, which cause me great anxiety. But your letters sustain me, dearest friend. Please continue to write to me in this musing – very delectable – vein, setting out your reflections on themes that interest us both. I shall read each letter I receive from you a hundred times, even if do not have energy to respond just yet. Bear with me, dear friend. And write.

Sun Dew

\* \* \*

Oh Sun Dew,

I am anguished on your behalf. I sense there is so much I don't know about your history and your life. Yet your reticence leaves me reluctant to inquire. Know that I am at your service in any circumstance. No explanations would be required. You need only issue instructions and, if I possibly can, I will obey.

Let me take up the train of my reflections at Nardoo. Before we met I was, as you know, walking for weeks around those granite inselbergs, especially Wongalara. Usually I was accompanied by my dog on my rambles, but whether or not Cass was with me, I carried a stick. This was partly on account of the feral goats and other wild animals, but also because, as I walked, my stick formed a staff. It was amazing how, with a dog but particularly a staff, I felt linked to a long line of pilgrims down through the centuries. This was an agreeable feeling. There is something so childish about the modern self, don't you think, as if there is no chance whatever of our maturing into long-bearded or trailing-tressed sages in touch with eternal verities. We have our taxes and health insurance, our superannuation and pensions, our investments and accounts to pay. Our jobs and our 'relationships'. Yes, we also have our mousy little church services and our borrowed yellow robes and shaman's toys, but at the end of the day it is around our jobs and 'relationships', particularly our marriages, that our identities truly turn. And jobs and marriages lash us securely to the approval of others: to earn money we must be presentable and respectable, dependable and predictable, competent and conventional. To maintain a marriage we must keep our stocks high – a personality and appearance attractive to others must be demonstrable. But none of these characteristics, core to contemporary survival, equip us to become a sage. The

sage is toothless, often grotesque, and says, 'bugger off the lot of you'. She lives for herself, thumbs her nose at the opinions of others and scorns the need for the affirmations of intimacy. She journeys deeper, ever deeper – via caves and mountain fastnesses and desert anchorages – into geological inner sanctums. It is through her that her whole society is connected, at one remove, to the metaphysical parameters of human existence. By taking a step outside the circle of social approval, she in fact becomes society's most indispensable member. But where is she today? Who in the modern West can, or would dare to, take that step? Any adventurous souls who do aspire to a less mainstream calling find that calling itself converted into a 'job'. They become a philosopher, a writer, an artist, and their calling is safely wrapped in salaries and grant applications and re-entrapped within the cage of convention. If they do happen to stumble upon a bit of ageless wisdom, they are interviewed on radio and television, and thereafter can think of nothing but their own reputation, becoming more a slave to social approval than those who stuck to being butchers and plumbers – or actuaries and computer analysts. With my staff and my dog, however, alone on the rock, I enjoyed moments of illusion that I could take the step, that I was in the lineage of these bent figures heading for the back of beyond, the black stump, down through the fathomless ages.

I remember a similar moment in the city, years ago, when I was walking along my local creek. I came out of the sunlight onto a stretch of path that led through a cave of black trees and black-lace shadows. The path itself was edged with radiant white flowers – snowbells, I called them, though they were only a common weed – the onion flower. A little wooden walkway spanned a bluestone drain that decanted into the creek. My dog was running ahead along the path, already framed in the cave of twisted trees and snowy bells. It was a perfect little cameo. For a moment it seemed to disconnect from its embedment in the here and now, and float amongst the centuries. I had a sense that I had walked this path again and again and again, in different ages, maybe even on different planets, through countless aeons. In a moment of uplift, I felt the sufficiency of the path, the creek, the flowers, the overhanging trees, my own firm step, my staff in hand, and my dog, running in her eternal now, filled with this world and belonging to it as the shadows belonged to the trees. This was indeed sufficient for eternity. But then a pang. How could I ever leave this path, never to return? I could not do so! I would have to return again and again, never to break the cycle, never to melt into the expansiveness of Source. Always I would be someone coming, staff in hand, to that numinous stretch of track somewhere out there in the endless field of stars.

At Nardoo it happened again, that sense of walking on those same sturdy feet through a piercingly beautiful landscape, adrift in space. Was I trapped in a loop of recurrence? What is the nature of the attachment that draws me back? Surely

it is not merely, as Buddhists teach, an attachment of ego? Even if I succeeded in casting off all appetite and ambition, I would still be right there, walking my dog through black tracery and snowbells in the depths of this beloved world.

Rosmarin

PS Strange that your friend is called Charles Wong. That was the name of the foreman at Daisy Plains. But I guess it's a common name amongst Chinese Australians. Besides, that was so long ago. The Charlie Wong I knew would by now be in his seventies or eighties.

\* \* \*

Rosmarin,  
I am fascinated by your thoughts about hermits, dear one. I am still tangled up with family matters, but please, if you can, elaborate.

Your  
Sun Dew

PS Strange, the coincidence of Wongs!

\* \* \*

Sun Dew,  
Elaborate about hermits?

Very well, let me try to amuse you with a tale about another day at Nardoo.

It all started when I arrived at Wongalara in a state of fury with my dog. She had hyperventilated and emitted continuous ear-splitting yelps and yaps, at a rate of about two per second, all the way out to the rock, drenching the interior of the car with flying drool and jamming her snout up against the gear-stick. I had already endured this life-endangering madness – which is not motor-phobia but motor-mania (she actually wants me to drive faster) – all the way up from Perth, and indeed had endured it, off and on, for the previous six years. But on that day I snapped. I yelled; I swore; I administered some smart smacks and squeezed the scruff of her neck, all, with weary predictability, to no avail. By the time we arrived I was feeling like a canicidal gorilla. Definitely on a lower mental plane.

If fair Ralph and Ursula had been accompanied by a dog, I thought sourly, it would have been dainty and white and would have trotted along devoutly

behind them, completing the charming tableau. It would not have marred their journey with maniacal hysterics and reduced them both to croaking wrecks.

But the wind was fluting in the great jar of the sky as I stepped out of the car, and the clunk, clunk of the friendly old windmill settled me down.

I cut across the top of Wongalara to find the point on the perimeter where I was to take up my circumambulation. Looking for a final descent I lost my way in some flat scrubland that seemed to extend indefinitely. Eventually I realized I had come off the rock without knowing it, and was wandering aimlessly on the plain. Where I had expected a sharp decline, there was nothing at all, just hill scrub that morphed into plains scrub imperceptibly. It took me an hour to relocate the spur which was to be my starting point.

Trudging through the scrub, I came upon the strangest sight. I had had my eyes on a couple of rock wallabies poised on a relatively distant mound when all at once my attention was drawn to something up ahead of me. In the upper branches of a small acacia, a white shape came twisting into view. At first I thought it must be a cockatoo, but it increased in size until it looked like a white sheet hung in the tree to dry. I stopped in my tracks and stared until, even more astonishingly, it assumed the form of a white goat. What was a goat doing standing in a treetop? Was I seeing apparitions already? Had the Old Testament tenor of my pilgrimage gone to my head? Of course, the creature had sprung onto some high rocks behind the tree, but these being obscured it appeared to be straddling the upper branches of the tree itself. Standing stock still, its head raised, the goat in the tree really did look like a message from God. It was not until I made a noise to attract its attention that it turned the skull-mask of its face to me, in slow motion. Unnerved, I called loudly to Cass; the spell was broken and the goat took off.

When I eventually regained my spur another figure appeared, this time at a much greater distance, high on the spine of the rock. This one was definitely human. He was running with outstretched arms, emitting whooping cries. Again I stared. What on earth could prompt such contrived behaviour, I wondered. Was he being filmed for a television commercial? Then I remembered. Ray, the station owner, had mentioned there would be some tourists that day. Nothing to worry about, he said; the tour operator only allowed a twenty minute stop for Wongalara. Just time for the fittest ones to climb to the cairn at the summit, then tumble down again. This figure I was watching must have been a breakaway member of the group, making the most of his minutes of liberty.

Isn't it foolish, really, I mused, to fear tourism, to fear it as a defilement of secret/sacred sites? Of course it can be materially destructive, but can it really

compromise the secretness/sacredness of things? Tourists, being consumers, are, by the logic of their position, acquisitive: they want to see as many 'sights' as possible for their dollar. But this must mean that they in fact 'see' nothing, or nothing sacred, at any rate. For the sacredness of sacred things is surely not visible to the casual eye, but is discerned only through practised attentiveness. It is made manifest through revelation, and revelation is vouchsafed solely to those who take the time and make the journey. A sacred site may be situated within the very heart of a city. It may be a landmark known to every citizen. But to few will it have been 'revealed'. Revelation emerges, a poetic turn of events, out of a delicate tissue of circumstances and intentions: when one's poetic antennae are adjusted, the site 'speaks'. Why is it that people fail to realize this? Why do they settle for sights when they could be seers?

What to do next? I decided to let the rock guide my steps. I was drawn back to the pebble gardens where I had made my first stop in the course of my circumambulation, a few days previously. As I clambered to the top of a spinifex-dotted mound, however, I came to a stand of large boulders. Inside one of these boulders a spacious and shady niche opened up invitingly. I climbed in and before long I found myself seated comfortably in a meditation posture, straight-backed, cross-legged, gazing out across the plain, surveying my domain. What a perfect little set-up, I thought, for a hermit or an anchorite. (How I love that word! 'Anchorite'. One who is anchored to reality. 'Hermit', on the other hand, has negative connotations: crabbed, misshapen, scurrying from view.) As it was too shallow for goats or rock wallabies, the niche was very clean.

It struck me that hermits and recluses and other such contemplatives were never, apparently, a feature of Aboriginal life. I guess this was because Aboriginal life, although spectacularly down-to-earth, was also always already deeply meditative. How could it fail to be so? The entire landscape is steeped in dreaminess, as if in trance. Perhaps this trancelike quality is a result of the fact that there has been time enough for that blending of everything with everything that you spoke of to occur, leaving no dissonances, no jolting stops or starts, in the fabric of the landscape. Things just flow into one another, endlessly, mesmerizingly, exactly as in a dream. No form of punctuation remains, no subject-predicate separations: how a particular thing is related to other things is already of its essence. This unbroken-ness is evident in Aboriginal languages, or at any rate in the only one of which I have made any kind of study, Pitjanjatjara. To Western ears, the words in this language seem to slide into one another, wide differences in meaning distinguished only by the subtlest phonetic nuances. Sentences grow from one or two words, as the words are modified, and new prefixes and suffixes added, each new prefix and suffix barely perceptibly different from its alternatives. Eventually the original

word, in written form, stretches halfway across the page. No subject-object metaphysics here. Everything participates, everything is swallowed and reborn from the belly of adjoining syllables.

In younger lands, evolutionary forces have not yet ironed out all the eco-tucks and geo-creases, and in lands made-over by civilization, dissonance has become the norm. In most of the present-day world then, and especially in those parts most affected by civilization, retreat is necessary if one is to recapture a sense of the native wholeness of things. So, the figure of the recluse is basically an invention of civilization. Even poor old Laozi, hardly a proponent of the asceticism we in the West associate with reclusion, was driven out into the backwoods eventually, forced to resign from his position as archivist and leave town in search of the elusive 'flow'.

I was feeling very comfortable in my niche (though I'd have to make a cushion of moss or goat-hide or something if I were settling in for the long haul). And really, how nice if Wongalara were to have its own anchorite. What is a landscape, after all, without its wise folk, its holy ones? Of course visitors to the rock depart again in twenty minutes. What is there to detain them? There is no-one – or no-one whom they can readily recognize – at home! Theirs is, in a sense, a wasted call. Quickly they add another 'sight' to their collection, via their camera lens, and hurry off to the next, hopefully more engaging, 'engagement'. It is not yet part of their worldview to regard the rock itself as an engage-able presence, with whom one could sit down and, over a cup of tea, converse on matters of mutual interest, such as metaphysics. But with a hermit in residence, visitors would have cause to linger. (I think I should use the word, 'hermit', after all, in a spirit of reclamation – as 'queer' and 'wog' have been turned around by those they had served to derogate.) Visitors would still want photos of themselves smiling at the hermit's side, perhaps with an arm draped around her shoulders, but those who felt mysteriously drawn to the rock, or who were disturbed by problems in their lives or who had questions of a cosmological nature, could consult with the hermit in a properly serious manner. How much more helpful this would be in any case than consulting a therapist or counsellor, since therapists and counsellors are generally trapped in exactly the same kind of life that is confounding the client!

Okay, I admit it, Sun Dew. I was ready to apply for the position! At that moment I would have been very, very glad to be the Wongalara anchorite (ummm...hermit). Just to sit in that alcove (after making it a bit more comfortable) and doze, and sing along with country, all day long. What happiness! To light a candle at night and sit up with the rock, discussing space and time, the ancestry of matter, the ownership of mind, the enigma of what it is to exist. Besides – in case you're feeling alarmed at the turn my thought is

taking here – I’m sure that the life of a hermit is actually quite sociable. Not only does she have the rock and all its animal folk for company, but people too would always be calling in, needy, curious, or maybe even solicitous. Hoons could be a problem, I guess, and weirdos. (Weirder than a hermit! I hear others scoff. But really, wouldn’t a hermit have to have extraordinary psychological stability in order even to begin to do the job – to discharge her duties to the rock and its visitors? (Or would they now be pilgrims?)) In any case, hoons and individuals-with-bent-agendas could surely find more accessible, less unpredictable, targets than hermits.

You would have to have supplies, of course. Pilgrims might bring the odd offering – goodies and snacks – but you would have to have the basics stashed in a cave or stone shack. You could get wise to bush tucker, keep a goat on hand (no shortage of candidates out there), cook on an open fire. The water from the spring beside the old windmill was potable. And I think today’s anchorite needs a solar-powered laptop. Seriously. Surely an anchorite is not a bumpkin, but a cultivated person of wisdom and learning. They have outgrown, not bypassed, scholarship and science. To have knowledge at their fingertips is second-nature to them. Besides, any form of ‘spirituality’ – no, this word is untenable, let’s just say, ‘seeking’ – any form of seeking today has to encompass both outwardness and inwardness. Earlier forms of seeking have tended to be exclusively inward in orientation. They scanned the mind, the heart, the mythic topography of the homeland. But in the process they turned their back on the wider world. This was understandable. How could one lift the lid off reality, how could one cultivate the depth of dwelling necessary to tap the root of things, if one were rushing hither and thither keeping abreast of human affairs. But now, with www dot, it is possible to cultivate the stillness necessary for deep dwelling, while also keeping the wider horizons of human affairs in view. This allows for an inwardness that is not insular, a seeking that does not confuse its findings with contingencies of its own culture. Above all, it allows for an inwardness that neither denies, nor is at the mercy of, the forces of outwardness, when the latter line up against it. If Aboriginal clever-men of the 18th and 19th century, and Tibetan lamas of the 20th century, had had the internet, well, they would not have been who they were, true, but nor would the peoples who depended on their wisdom have been helpless in the face of the blind forces of appropriation that overtook their societies. Besides, a form of seeking that does not deny the forces of outwardness, and has figured out how to negotiate them, will be far more robust in its ultimate grasp of reality than any of the purely yin forms that have traditionally evolved, leaving a space in the ‘outside’ world, as they do, for pure yang, a space that will inevitably be filled – with invaders, capitalists and all other manner of looters, thugs and vandals.



After these ruminations, I climbed out of my niche and ambled on. I remember, for some reason, meeting a thoroughly dead tree – one of the very few on that exuberantly regenerate rock, where most of the vegetation was at that time glossy with new life. This tree was, appropriately, one of the weeping kind, maybe a native willow. The rains had obviously been too late to save it. Its crusty black bark was in process of peeling back to reveal satiny white tree-bone beneath, just as the sheaths peel off discarded goat horns, leaving arcs of moonbone scattered here and there.

Your Rosmarin

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Sun Dew dearest,  
I have been circling, I know, around the question of love and metaphysics, but perhaps it is enough to say that today I hear the call of country in the same way I once used to hear the call of romantic love. It seems to my ears to be the same call. The longing that I once had to be held in the arms of a beloved is the longing that I now feel to be out alone in country. Not any country, but that country, the country in which you and I met, and which always feels only half tangible, as if the appearances it presents are a gently billowing veil and the challenge, the invitation, is to find the secret of stepping right through that veil into the unknowable which lights those appearances from the other side. I wonder if it is ultimately the essence of all desire, all longing, to be alone in the absolute – the unveiled – presence of the world, if not as the only person under the entire dome of sky, as at Nardoo, then at least to feel as if one is the only person to whom the song, at that moment, is addressed? Is that how one encounters reality? Is that how one falls in love?

A propos of this falling in love, I want to tell you, Sun Dew, about my magical morning. I had heard there was a lot of stone to be seen from the road to Lancefield, so I thought I'd drive out and explore for half an hour or so. Well, I was driving for three and a half hours, and practically jumping out of my skin with excitement! This was country, Sun Dew! Real country! Talking country! I was back amongst the monoliths of the rangelands. Clothed monoliths, to be sure. Discreet, very still and quiet, not like the writhing, coiling giants of the west. But there! The boulders and slabs that sit on the shoulders of the monoliths were also there, some of them weathered in similar ways, others differently. I knew straight away that I was back in country. I drove down lanes and up farm tracks. I could not believe my eyes. Yes, there were fences and the odd farm shed. But so few houses! Sacred country knows how to resist intruders. It's a country of small hills, and on the skyline, in every direction,

tors beckon. They cluster particularly on the hilltops, making stonehenge-type tableaux. Some of the lanes led deep into numinous landscapes. Interestingly, wherever the most monolithic granite was, 'keep out' signs glared on the fences. I understood this now. Country has to guard itself. However, although it was the first time I had ever seen it, I felt sure this country would know me, would open its gates for me. I was dazzled, suddenly, by the possibility of actually living in country where the gates still exist. Living there. Belonging to it. As soon as I could imagine this, the mysterious notion of immortality – so beloved by followers of Dao, such as your dear self, Sun Dew – dropped into place for me. To walk amongst the mountains and the rocks, the stonehenges and the towers, where the gates to the realm of myth still exist, and to enter those gates and to see those mountains and rocks from the other side, to be resorbed by them, this is indeed to become deathless. No wonder Aboriginal people cry for their land. It is nothing less than their immortality. To lose it is to fall, catastrophically, into the poverty of mortality. And this pitiful mortality of ours is surely what accounts for our hungry egos, our thirst for success and celebrity. As soon as I felt the possibility of stepping out of the shoes of death, into the interiority of country, not for a day or a week, but there to abide, I felt the grip of my own ambition break and a great tranquillity take its place.

Your  
Rosmarin

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Sweet Rosmarin,  
There is a story I feel I must send you. Long, long ago I heard it in a bandits' cave in southern China, though it was first told, I believe, in Thessaly in ancient Greece. It is called the Cypress and the Rose.

[For the story, see Trumpeter 24, 2, 2008]

\* \* \*

Oh Sun Dew,  
I see at once the point of the story. It is about flesh and spirit, appetite and the poetic, the secular and the sacred, the city and the wild – the divisions at the core of civilization. Rosa wins power over the hearts of men, but, being blind, changes nothing. Cypress, with her capacity for seeing, has the potential to change everything, but is empty, inefficacious, desolate. For all her fluency in the language of the poetic, her heart is hollow; she feels as if her existence has failed. Until the serpent enters the tale. The serpent restores to Cypress the

primal element she is lacking. And from that moment, her efficacy is assured. The transformation – of her life, of civilization – begins.

I understand very well what you are saying to me, Sun Dew, and I thank you. I understand too why you named me after salt tears. I beg you to teach me more about the serpent.

Your  
Rosmarin

PS Did you really have the story from a bandits' cave?!! Knowing you I can believe it to be true!

\* \* \*

Sweet Rosmarin,

It is hard to speak about the serpent, for the same reason it is hard to speak about Dao. One has to encounter it. To encounter it one must engage in certain practices, and these I shall one day show you, face to face. Suffice it to say, for the moment, that Dao is a path of serpentine desire – not the caged desire, violent and impotent by turns, of false self, self woven from threads of ideas, expectations, values, conventions and understandings that circulate in society. It is rather the elemental but trustworthy desire of reality itself, in which appetite, psyche and spirit are always interleaved. But, as I say, of this serpentine path I shall instruct you another day, when I visit you, as I shall do soon.

Meanwhile, let's return to your thoughts about anchorites. I do of course know a little about the hermit tradition and I find your observations insightful. In China the Daoist hermit is a key person. This is not because Chinese civilization is basically Daoist in nature. To the contrary! Chinese civilization from earliest days is rule-bound and status-ridden, materialist and pragmatic. Because of this, sensitive souls in China need refuge, and Daoism is that refuge. One might almost say that Daoism is reaction to Chinese civilization rather than expression of it! But of course this reaction, this refuge from a harsh order, in turn feeds influences back into that order. Through the hermit a society which is thoroughly externalised in outlook stays in touch with the interiority of things, the invisible sources and springs of existence – in your terms, Rosmarin, with metaphysics. A civilization which in so many ways cuts across the grain of Dao thus nevertheless, by this means, manages to fit itself to that grain – through its art, its poetry, its imagination – at least to the degree necessary to assure its own survival, its great longevity. In this sense the

secluded hermitage, far removed from centres of population, is, in earlier days, the foundation for true civilization.

But hermit traditions, when they fall into piety – as they often do – are prone to lapse into old divisions of spirit and flesh. Instead of releasing primal desire from the cage of social prescription, these traditions allow desire to become co-opted by the institution of hermit-hood itself. In other words, like Cypress, hermits can lose touch with the appetite end of desire, operating only at the spiritual end, in order to fit the image of respectable recluse. (For of course the role of recluse in early days is respectable and sometimes even influential. As such it can attract not only sincere persons but vain and ambitious ones, hungry for fame.) But when primal desire occurs in anything less than threefold form – when it is only appetite or only mysticism – then is it not invalid? Is not sexual desire, for instance, invalid – because deluded – if it includes only desire for body and not for subjectivity or spirit – the spirit of the One which dwells within each beloved? Isn't sexual desire which lacks any of these three dimensions in fact compromised, tangled up with social directives? Similarly with mystical desire. If it is purely mystical and cannot also find its object through sexual or psychological portals, isn't it merely sentimental, a pretty, wish fulfilling daydream.

I cannot tell you how reluctant I am, Rosmarin, to call the venerable hermit tradition into question in this way, for I believe it is, as I've said, key to the success of Chinese civilization. Modern civilization, by contrast, is dangerous and deficient precisely as it lacks any counterpart to this tradition: it has abandoned itself to social ideality and cut its moorings from the threefold truth of reality. Not only has it forgotten Dreaming, as Aboriginal people say, it has, by the same token, no life-giving desire of any kind. All desire is co-opted by false self, by the need to see oneself mirrored back as large and impressive as possible in eyes of others. This is what modern civilization is built on, and the agenda it serves, Rosmarin, whether here or in China or wherever else it has spread – which is of course everywhere. This can only end in strangling the dragon, drowning the naga, caging the rainbow serpent and losing the iridescence of the rainbow in our glances to each other.

To this theme I will return when I see you and hold your hands in mine.

Your  
Sun Dew

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Sun Dew,

I take it, my adored teacher, that you have already provided an inkling of the tenor of civilization under the sign of the dragon or the naga or the rainbow serpent, via the story of the Cypress and the Rose: such a civilization would be seeded by a new breed of dwellers reinhabiting turnstile sites – points of entry into mythscape – within the land?

Your  
Rosmarin

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Rosmarin,

Yes, sweet friend, rock dwellers, tenders of sites, are midwives of that new civilization. But turnstiles – those gateways in rocks and mountain portals beloved of Chinese immortals – are not the only points of access to the interiority and source of things. (Only Westerners, if you'll forgive me, misunderstand Dreaming in this way. Aboriginal people provide Dreaming stories for everything that is significant in Creation. And there is nothing, they know, that is not significant.)

Even if those sites are all destroyed, even if the rangelands that you and I so dearly love are – Heaven forbid – turned over to industrial farms, the 'Dreaming' or mythic aspect of reality would not be entirely lost. For 'Dreaming' in this sense is not reducible to land. It is the interior dimension of reality itself. There is a portal to it and from it in each of us. It opens sometimes in our dreams. It can also open when our consciousness attunes to the poetic rather than the merely causal order, whether in the process of writing or some other artistic activity. Surely you, as a writer, are aware of this process, Rosmarin. Surely you tap into it. If you tap into it you will know that there is major magic bound up with it. Don't themes or characters one thinks are incidental often turn out to be central – doesn't the entire piece on which one is working sometimes turn out to be a vehicle for the exploration of just these themes, a vehicle of discovery? And isn't the author's own psyche the instrument, picking up, for personal reasons, bits and pieces that resonate with it, then drawing these together – only to find, when the pattern becomes visible, that the work is actually about something completely unanticipated. The – hidden – whole comes gradually and astonishingly into view, in a blaze of synchronicities and poetic signals and clues. The sources of this kind of – basically poetic – writing or creating are plainly the same as the sources of Dreaming stories. Those sources lie in the inner, psychic dimension of reality.

Despite today's ransacking of landscape then, modern society, like all others, has access to the 'sacred', that communicative dimension of reality that is

always ready, in its own time and terms, to engage and play. The terms of stories given by these communicative channels are of course apt for contemporary consciousness: their imagery draws on present reality, not the pristine landscapes of yesterday. Yet despite this availability, still the West has no dreaming. Why? Why, Rosmarin? As a writer, ask yourself. In traditional societies, when a story bubbles up from the fertile subsoil of world psyche, through the medium of a storyteller, what transpires? The story is of course immediately given to community, which in turn offers it back to land, spirits, world, via sacred song, inscription, dance. It is ploughed straight back into that subsoil, to fertilize and replenish its source. In the process, it itself remains alive, like a dream, a charged field of proto-meaning that permeates the inner lives of those who receive it. The story takes new forms in community, draws forth further stories, continues to grow.

But what is the procedure of modern societies? The stories are disabled, Rosmarin, as soon as they are born! Their generativity, their efficacy, is quashed. How? They are published. They are converted into fully externalized objects – books and ‘articles’ – which function as commodities. The author takes exclusive credit for them, appropriating the source and thereby depriving not only the interior dimension of reality, but his readership, of any sense of participation or ownership in relation to them. Modern physicists have an expression, ‘collapsing the wave packet’ – I am sure you know it: there is a field of possibilities, of probabilities, that ‘collapse’, upon measurement, into a single actualisation. This is what happens to the offerings of mythos in modern times: the story that bubbles up from Source is given fixed and final form. Not for it the re-weaving, re-dancing, re-enactment and re-invention, in partnership with landscape, the continual unfolding into new meanings, that mythic stories undergo. In becoming externalised and finalized as book or ‘article’, the modern story loses entirely its sacred efficacy. Society may be entertained or edified by it, but will not be animated. The rich organic seepage from the poetic realm of interiority, the realm of myth, is stoppered at the root. A thousand times a day in modern society Dreaming is rebuffed this way.

Only when the author gives the story back to reality, in the form of an (always provisional) song or dance or sacred inscription that sings the sleeping outer landscape up, is she serving her true purpose, as story-diviner or dreaming rod. By returning energy to Dreaming, the author has participated directly in that inner realm and from then on belongs to it. Her footprints are inscribed in it. She breaks through the transparent walls of her finitude, the particularity of her present existence, and inscribes herself into the fabric of the mythic. She is immortal, Rosmarin. She is prepared thenceforth to quit this life; by finding the story she has completed the task of her present embodiment. Sure that she is embedded in the real, she is ready to retire from the mortal scene, perhaps to

enjoy one day a further emanation. Meanwhile, members of her community, as participants in stories transmitted by her, are also written into the fabric of the mythic, also immortal.

Your  
Sun Dew

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Sun Dew,

Ah, I see. The protean field of meaning that constellates spontaneously around the associative thought-tendrils of the storyteller is, or can be, the same in indigenous and modern societies – it is the terrain of mythos or the Dreaming. But in Western societies the act of publishing causes this protean field of meaning to be snapped shut and turned inside out; the wave ‘collapses’ into a single fixed and finite, fully externalized entity: the book or ‘article’. All its invocational efficacy is lost at that point. The magic stops. The Dreaming, sung into manifestation by the process of writing, dies.

Oh, Sun Dew! Who but you could have explained all this to me! How shall I ever repay you?

And I think you are right that many Westerners mistakenly suppose that the Dreaming is somehow coincident with land, that when the sacred sites are ransacked, the Dreaming is destroyed. After all, Aboriginal people do treat sites as indispensable, and custodians can die if their sites are trashed. Wouldn’t they themselves insist, to some extent, Sun Dew, on this coincidence of land and Dreaming?

Rosmarin

\* \* \*

Dearest one,

In traditional societies, the indispensability of sites makes perfect sense. When the psychic interiority of things is invoked under a particular aspect, and manifests under that aspect, then that manifestation is indeed the face of the sacred. It is the face that the One consents to unveil to us. We should bow before it and defend it with our lives. But when a new time arrives, and old sites are forgotten or destroyed, the people cry, where has the Dreaming gone? Then we invoke that inner dimension of things under a new aspect, and that aspect is

no longer land, if land is in ruins. But Rosmarin dearest – I can sense your anxiety – don't fear. When Dreaming is found again, under whatever aspect, in whatever part of earth or cosmos, land will be safe. For those who are in touch with the mythic interiority of things understand that everything that exists is poetically charged, emanative – sacred. Reality must be allowed to take its own course. World must be let free, uncaged, and allowed to live again. Land will restore itself, and gateways, turnstiles, will reappear. Not in your lifetime. Nor in mine. But in world's time. Rushing to protect land without discovering the roots of its life, the roots of its Dreaming – Dao – is blind. Such 'environmentalism' can only fail. It is saving the husk when the seed has gone. It is seed, my dearest one, that must be saved.

Your  
Sun Dew

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Sun Dew,  
I understand. Again, endlessly, I thank you. But dare I ask you my most urgent question? You have explained how when the story-teller, tapping into Dreaming, appropriates Dreaming by turning herself into 'author' and collapsing ever-protean story into book, then the efficacy of Dreaming dies. The self sourced to Dreaming gives way to the false self, the self made up of discursive labels. To re-enter the Dreaming then, to make it the true theatre of our lives, we must discard the false self, and stay with the self sourced to the psychic interiority of things. But how, Sun Dew, how are we to discard our false self? How are we to clear the way for true engagement with reality, the fulfilment of primal desire?

Rosmarin

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Sweet Rosmarin,  
The answer is simple, my dear. To act on it is not. The first step towards discarding false self is simply to give up the wish for 'recognition'. If you are writer, you do not have to give up the wish to write. If you are doctor, you do not have to give up the wish to heal. If you are teacher, you do not have to give up the wish to teach. If you are lover, you do not have to give up the wish for love. All that you have to give up, as Laozi repeats over and over, is your wish for recognition as writer, doctor, teacher, lover. Do the job and then move on. Do not look over your shoulder. Do not whisper to yourself, I am writer, doctor, teacher, lover. Do not aspire secretly to become celebrity, nobel laureate,



inspirational person, fatal woman. Brush all these whisperings from your heart. By doing so you won't, by compensatory magic, indeed become famous or lauded or adored. The aim is not to try to trick Dao into giving you your wish. But you can trust that if you do manage to give up secret ambitions, and enter instead into the Way of the One, you will be rewarded. You can't anticipate the form of this reward, but you can be sure it will fit your need – it will be the reward that is uniquely apt for you.

It is hard to embark on the work of expunging ambition from your heart if you do so alone, Rosmarin. In Aboriginal societies, the human propensity towards ego is understood and kept in check. Only with careful safeguards can these peoples remain peoples of the Dreaming. (How do Aboriginal mothers and elders react when children make foolish mistakes? They howl with laughter! Haven't you seen it? No cosseting of young egos allowed. And are not the names of indigenous individuals erased at death? No use aspiring to become a legend in such a society.) Under conditions of civilization, by contrast, the false self is fostered and idolized, so the task of discarding it is hard. But embark on the work, Rosmarin, and affinity will begin to work for you: individuals who can help you will step into your path. Haven't I already done so, dear one? And there are many others, concealed in cracks between the peaks and prominences of the 'world of dust'. Trust affinity, and a band of companions-of-the-Way will form about you. This I can promise.

Soon I must leave you, Rosmarin. The family matters I have mentioned from time to time are coming to a head. Zhou Laoshi, my beloved Master, is in grave danger. I have a long journey to make. I do not know if I shall return. I may have to join Master Zhou in the fabled mountains. But before I depart I long to see you again. I have much to impart. There is a small granite mountain on the wheat plains of Central Victoria, not too far from where you live. Its name is Birrabimurra, though you won't find that name on a map. I have asked Master Wong to bring you there, one week from today, at noon. Please come.

Know that I love you and that our lives have entwined many times.

Keep the One.

## Glossary

- To circumambulate – to walk around, particularly in the sense of walking around the perimeter of a sacred monument or establishment before entering or climbing it.
- Granites/inselbergs – dome-like granite islands studding plains, normally with a very particular ecology of their own.
- Emu – large flightless Australian bird, somewhat similar in appearance to an ostrich.
- Roo – kangaroo
- Goanna – large Australian lizard
- Damper – flour and water baked to a smooth round loaf in the ashes of a campfire.
- Kurrajong tree – a small trim desert tree with broad bright five-fingered leaves. Very pretty.
- Greenpick – very new, tender grass
- Station – term for ranch in Australia. There are sheep stations and cattle stations; stations are large in area – anywhere between 10,000 and 1,000,000 acres.
- Country – as used in Aboriginal English, without a definite or indefinite article. Land that is the sustenance and companion of its people, aware, sentient and responsive in its own right.
- Icy pole – ice candy for children
- Dunny – slang term for toilet
- Salt pan – dry salt lake, crusted with surface salt
- Dreaming – as used in Aboriginal English, the Creation period in which Ancestor spirits walked a still featureless world, fighting, courting, hunting, mating, giving birth, tricking, and so forth, becoming transformed in the process into plants and animals and features of the landscape. Dreaming stories tell how the land came to be inscribed with its particular land forms and

inhabited by its particular plant and animal species. Dreaming is not fixed in the past; it is also immanent in, and continually manifests in, the present.

To paint up - ceremonially to paint the body in preparation for Dreaming dances

Black stump - the phrase, 'back of the black stump' means beyond settled country, outback.

Spinifex - a very hard, sharp grass that grows in tussocks throughout much of arid Australia

Pitjanjatjara - one of the Aboriginal tribes or nations of Central Australia

Wog - slang term for immigrant from a non-Anglo country or culture

Hoon - hooligan who drives a car

Bush tucker - food that grows wild in the bush

Rainbow serpent - Dreaming spirit found throughout most of Aboriginal Australia, a very powerful Creation spirit, usually found in pools.