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### What Exactly Did I Lose?

The butterfly specimen I put on my desk vanished today somehow.

It was a “sulphur butterfly”. I had sealed its remains in transparent plastic 15 years ago.

Losing the specimen seems to jettison me from my childhood. Time never travels in a straight line.

My childhood was the brown and grey world of insects. My family was not rich and I had a strict father. I was often home alone, living in my own world. Insects were a very important part of my childhood.

Luwen 陸雯 was touched by the death of Japanese cartoonist Fujiko Fujio. She gushes on and on about Doraemon and Nobi Nobita. Lost for words, I can only lend her an attentive ear. Luwen and I are lovers.

I tell her about my childhood, which lacked things like cartoons, models and toys, pianos, children's tales and electronic games. Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, said unfulfilled childhood desires are repressed, lying in wait for the chance to leap into the conscious mind in adulthood. I often feel a sense of loss, yet I am not sure if it has anything to do with my childhood lack.

Luwen is very interested in my childhood. She is keen on everything to do with my past. Often she tells me she loves me, and that she wants to know everything about me. I feel the same. But we have missed 25 years of each other's lives. We can only pay brief visits to each other's past by means of memory. And memory is like a fishnet, full of holes. What I can summon is but a very condensed version...

My understanding of life probably started with insects. Insects, the recreation of my childhood, the outlet for my primordial creativity.

To destroy a cockroach, I came up with all kinds of mischief.

Dismemberment—from the feelers to the arms and legs, severed one by one. Watching the final death throes of the cockroach, observing the function of each part of its anatomy.

Poisoning—mixing soap, toothpaste, soy sauce and all kinds of domestic fluids to concoct homemade poison into which the cockroach is plunged. With eyes wide open, I watched the violent spasms of its limbs and feelers, its survival instinct, then gradual relaxation, loss of consciousness, death, rigor mortis, like a piece of music that turns from *presto* to *largo*, then *fine*. Death was the unlikely source of my ecstasy and I was only a child.

Burning—from textbooks, I learned how to ignite an object by concentrating sunlight onto a single spot through a magnifying glass. I caught a languishing cockroach and set it on fire the same way. For me, it was a great scientific experiment. Death by fire—how spectacular.

Suffocation—I learnt from a science textbook that living organisms thrive on oxygen. I stuffed a cockroach into a tiny, airtight plastic bag, confident that the oxygen inside would be depleted sooner or later. I waited patiently. The cockroach died, the bag becoming its coffin. But I could not figure out whether it was suffocation or starvation that killed it.

Freezing, slinging a rubber band at close range, incapacitating with adhesive tape.... infinite means of torture, on a par with the torture chambers of the Qing dynasty. At once destruction and creation. Besides cockroaches, I slaughtered flies, armies of ants, even those vicious crickets.

From insects, I learned torture. How to let them neither live nor die, until their final gasp.

From insects, I realized what is life and death.

From insects, I saw blood. Flies have blood, ants do not. I concluded therefore that flies are higher up in the hierarchy than ants.

From insects, I understood punishment and pardon. Sometimes seized by a fit of “kindness”, I would release them after an extended bout of torture.

From insects, I learned what conquer and escape are all about.

Insects were the universe of my childhood; this universe was so bloody and relentlessly violent...

Since nightfall, I have been looking for my butterfly specimen but it is nowhere to be seen. As I search, I wait for her to call. Luwen is holidaying in Beijing. For the past eight nights, she had consistently rung around 10 to put me at ease. Today is the ninth day. It's 11 and she still hasn't called. Unable to sleep, I carry on my search. The search keeps killing time, memory unveils in silence...

The insect world of my childhood was not entirely bloody. The sulphur butterfly I made into a specimen had flown into my home, covered in wounds, when I was 10. I caught it and placed it gingerly into a ventilated box I had made, hoping to save its life.

Regrettably, it soon turned rigid. I put the corpse on my palm and went to a neighborhood stationery shop where I had it sealed in transparent plastic for 50 cents. Sealing it, I also sealed my feelings and childhood memories. Experienced separation for the first time and cried my eyes out.

Tears do not change reality. I came to realize that I have infinite power to destroy life yet I was powerless to save it.

How strange. Before this butterfly appeared, insects had been my enemy. But this time, I felt pity for a butterfly. It touched me.

For some unknown reason, an ambiguous moral boundary shimmered into shape in my heart. I seemed to divide insects into the kingdoms of “good” and “evil”: cockroaches,

crickets, ants, flies, beetles, fleas, spiders and the like were atrocious—they deserved death or at least severe punishment; but moths, butterflies, dragonflies were benign creatures that existed in harmony with people.

In hindsight, this concept of right and wrong appears very childish; it is also far removed from reality. The insect species I have come across in books since then must have outnumbered the ones I knew as a child by tens of thousands of times. To our knowledge, there are one million species of animals on earth, and of these, more than 800,000 are insects. Species of flatidae alone number over 110,000, many of which are pests. For example, the large green slug caterpillar is a deadly pest to crops in the tropical regions of Asia, wreaking the worst havoc on the tung oil trees of Malaysia and Indonesia. But on second thought, this view of good and evil was, after all, anthropomorphic.

When I was little, I did not have the wisdom to understand all this. In a child's world, there is a clear border between black and white, good and evil. But as I grew up, the world I knew changed. There is no longer a clear line between black and white. In its place is a long stretch of gray with vague, murky boundaries...

I continue to wait. The clock strikes midnight. No call from Luwen. She has always been a very responsible person. I start to feel uneasy.

Outside the window, it is drizzling and the wind chime is tinkling. Suddenly a butterfly enters, fluttering in circles before alighting on a white wall. Upon careful inspection, I find that it is a sulphur butterfly exactly like my specimen.

I feel a chill down my spine and goose-bumps on my skin. There is something unsettling about it all. A specimen vanishes without a trace. A sulphur butterfly makes its way to my home that very night. Coincidence or premonition?

“When I leave this world, I will turn into a butterfly and keep you company every night,” I remember Luwen saying. The memory strikes me all of a sudden. My heart starts to pound and I get both hot flashes and chills. Her words drag me into the abyss of my thoughts...

Once I chased away a huge cockroach for her. Terrified of cockroaches, she would scream and run every time she saw one. I can't remember how many times I have helped her get rid of them.

“Don't creepy-crawlies freak you out? Winged ones are the worst. One time, I was staying up to study and in flew a cockroach. I scurried into bed and threw the covers over my head. So much for studying,” she said.

“There's nothing to be scared of. I don't understand you girls. Aren't human beings more frightening than animals?” I paused, then continued, “except, except for nocturnal insects.” Because insects can become something more than insects.

When I was a child my mother loved to tell me stories, including ghost stories.

One particular night, in a particular year, a moth fluttered into our home. Mother told me that insects that appeared at night might be possessed by spirits. Later, I saw a similar story on a TV programme, *Mystery Beyond*, which seemed to substantiate my mother's words. From then on, though I had no way of proving that insects are spirits incarnate, this belief was hammered like a nail into my mind.

When I was really young—I forget which year it was—my maternal grandma passed away. For a long time afterwards, whenever insects like moths and butterflies came to our home at night, mother would say grandma had returned and tell me not to hurt them.

I was 19 when my paternal grandmother died of lung cancer. Mother had stopped talking about spirit possession. Perhaps because I was no longer a child. Yet, in the depths of night, especially at midnight, the insects that visited my home all seemed to be the departed loved one. When my missing of my grandma intensified, projecting it on these winged creatures somehow made it easier to bear.

“If that is true, I will turn into a butterfly every night and keep you company after I leave this world,” Luwen said. That's Luwen for you—unconsciously emanating a brand of romance that is poignant and beautiful. Very moving yet distressing. Why these talks of separation at the height of passion?

I pondered and said, “How would I know it's you?”

“Go with the flow. You will sense it. Maybe I'll alight on our picture.”...

Luwen, have you fallen asleep, exhausted after an exciting day, and forgotten to call? How would I know? Feelings, I find, are unreliable.

Luwen, without a recognizable face, without fingerprints, smell, voice or breathing, will I be able to sense your existence? My feelings are not functioning. Negative thoughts crowd my brain. I wish my feelings were paralyzed. When I'm weak, only touch is tangible and real.

The room is silent. Only the sound of my breathing and the fluttering of the butterfly.

It is 3 a.m. Still no call. I am weary, my thoughts grind to a stop. I slip into dreams.

A face appears, its countenance hidden under a swarm of insects—layers and layers crammed into a face. Many, many insects. Grasshoppers, crickets, earwigs, cockroaches, termites, yellow ants, beetles, mayflies, etc. etc. etc. Frantic, I push them away with my hands, yet the harder I push, the more they come. I have tortured and killed countless of these creatures. Now it seems that they are here to denounce me, get even with me.

The phone wakes me from my nightmare. I am covered in cold sweat.

“Hello.” It is a male voice.

“Hello, Kong Sang 港生, I just received news that James 英傑 was on the plane that crashed in the U.K. yesterday. It's uncertain whether he's alive.”

My hand weakens, barely able to hold up the receiver. I'm lost for words. My brain goes blank and tears well up. James is our buddy from secondary school.

Tears do not change reality. I have infinite power to destroy life yet I am powerless to save it.

I only know that I often feel a sense of loss.

Within a day, I lost a specimen from my childhood, a good friend from secondary school. And there seems to be other losses, indescribable, ineffable.

I seem to be jettisoned from my childhood. Time never travels in a straight line.

And Luwen, where are you now? I am very weak, I desperately need you by my side.

The butterfly on the wall flaps its wings and lands on the photograph of me and Luwen.

“How would I know it's you?”

“Go with the flow. You will sense it. Maybe I'll alight on our picture.”

I am losing my mind. No, I can't lose you. I'd rather this butterfly were James.

The sulphur butterfly hangs firmly on to the picture. Feelings, I find, are unreliable. My feelings have completely lost their function.

Then it dawns on me that sulphur butterflies are sexually dimorphic. The difference lies in the black extremity of the wings.

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*Translated from the Chinese by Piera Chen*  
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