

陳映真：淒慘的無言的嘴

Poor Poor Dumb Mouths

By Chen Yingzhen

AFTER CHANGING into a clean bed shirt, I forced myself to lie down flat on the bed again. Nonetheless, my heart was pounding stubbornly, the same as ever. It made me feel uneasy—after all, my sickness was not completely cured. But then I thought to myself:

“You aren’t all well yet, that’s all. But you’ll get better, no question of that.”

ONE DAY half a month ago, that young doctor—but he is balding—sought me out for a chat. It’s part of regular hospital procedure. As we spoke, he was dashing everything down in sweeping strokes on a set of note cards. At the end of the session, he said:

“OK, that’s it.”

I stood up. He groped for a cigarette in his slightly soiled white lab-coat, thrust it in the corner of his mouth, and at the same time, put in order the card stack and locked it away. I stared at his long white filter-tipped cigarette, and began to feel disgruntled. As soon as you are admitted into the hospital, you’re told: “Quit smoking.” Right away I concluded this: any doctor who smokes in front of a patient who has been forbidden to smoke plainly has no integrity at all. Yet all he did was say:

“OK, that’s it. That’s it.”

His face had a kind of pleased expression. It was a look that is seldom seen on the cold disinterested faces of the professionals around here. Just then Mr. Guo, a seminary student, entered the office. He looked as if he were already dead beat, but the moment he saw me, he broke into a smile—I won’t say there was any malicious intent, but it was manifestly hypocritical. He patted my shoulder as though he were coaxing a child. In times like that all I can manage is a benign smile. The doctor stood watching us with his hands stuck in his lab-coat pockets. With that

I walked out.

He’d consistently been one to think he was right, just like most young doctors.

I hadn’t gone but a few steps out of the office when I heard the doctor saying to Mr. Guo, in Japanese:¹

“That guy—it’s obvious *he’s* getting better.”

I stood there dumbly for a few seconds. After a while I realized I simply wasn’t up to attending my afternoon piano lesson, so I returned to my room to lie down for a rest. For the first time I figured out that I had already been in this mental hospital for a year and a half.

Not long after this conversation with the doctor, I was actually granted permission to take afternoon walks outside the hospital.

I SAT UP in bed and smoothed out the wrinkles in my clothes, then stuck my hair into place with my fingers and walked to the duty desk. I didn’t expect Miss Gao to be there. She was sitting reading a very fat Japanese magazine. I stood in the doorway looking from a distance at magazine’s illustrations. She raised her head. Our glances met one another in our images reflected in the glass window. I flashed a smile. She, however, clearly did not. It was a bit awkward having to wipe off my grin. She is a stout person, no beauty it’s true, but she is not an ugly woman either. She tore out a pass and filled it in.

“For how long?” she asked.

“The usual, eh? Same as always.”

¹A few select Taiwanese were trained in Japanese medical schools when Taiwan was under Japanese control (1895-1945), and many Taiwanese studied in Japan after World War II. Japanese language ability is a vestige of Japanese domination (when all public school instruction was in Japanese), and is sometimes a mark of superior education.

"Be back at 5:00."

"Uh-huh."

As she was fixing the seal to the pass, I spotted a car coming through the big gate of the hospital. Miss Gao laid the pass on the corner of her desk.

"Miss Gao," I addressed her. She turned her head and gazed at me. I gave her another smile. "Here's a patient."

She opened the window. A man was being carried in who was shaking all over. His family trailed behind bringing bedding, a wash basin, and a hot water bottle.² The scene made me sick, but Miss Gao just put on her uniform cloak indolently, affixed a marker at the page she was reading, and shut her magazine. She leaned back against the wall and turned to me:

"What are you doing still hanging around?"

As she was putting her magazine in a drawer I walked out. The sun was shining on the hospital's little stretch of lawn. A hired car blocked the main gate and two children were sitting in the shade of the car. They looked like they belonged to the new patient's family. Seeing those guileless unhappy faces, I hastily elected to leave by the back gate.

A south wind was blowing over the rich glossy green of the rice paddies. I followed along the high wall of the hospital thinking of Nurse Gao's taciturn facial expression.

"What are you doing still hanging around?" she had said, wrinkling her brow.

I know just how she was thinking: "How come you're still here? I've got a new patient, right? I must get busy!" I wouldn't say she was acting phoney, but I'll not forget an incident that happened over seven months ago, that would be sometime in March probably. It was one of those evenings when I'd be alternately lucid and incoherent. I don't know why, but I was all alone in my room and I started crying. Nurse Gao happened to pass by—a coincidence, I guess. She opened the door and came in, but as soon as she did I stopped crying. It seems to me a man suffers a great loss of face if he weeps in front of a woman. She asked all sorts of questions, but I wouldn't pay any heed to her. I think she wanted to leave yet she stood there a while. Suddenly she

²Such items are considered personal and are brought to the hospital by relatives.

was drying my tears with her handkerchief. She kept drying my cheeks, and I heard her say:

"You're a big boy in college now—what are you doing crying?"

Her voice sounded weak, nervous, and somewhat hoarse. I lay there very quietly, not making a sound. I don't know when it was exactly, but I became aware that in place of the handkerchief there were the steady movements of a hand as soft as cotton lightly massaging my cheeks.

For a long time after this I have had a complex about Miss Gao. It is a mixed bag of nervous fear and familiarity. In the daytime, for instance, she is really good at looking as though nothing has happened, just like that moment at the duty desk. I would insist that this is a kind of shameful hypocrisy. But it is just as the doctor says: whether people are normal or abnormal, everybody has two or even several faces. Sometimes perhaps it would be better stated: the person who is able to balance his life wearing a variety of different faces may be called "normal".

But I'll never forget that soft hand continuously stroking my face, and all the more so since I have been studying piano with Nurse Gao in the hospital, and it is one and the same hand that practises the piano so well.

"You dummy!" she often explodes, while I gaze silently at her flashing eyes. It is only then that there is something about her that would be called beautiful. She will play three or four measures for me enthusiastically. Yet admittedly I really am a "dummy" at playing the piano, though I have a good ear. Once I heard her play a bit of the first part of Tchaikovsky's "Meditation". Encore! Encore! It was simply magnificent. Yet that Mr. Guo in his ignorance disdains her potential talent. One time I almost had a fight with him about it. He also plays, but without the finished style that comes from training and discipline.

AS I LEFT the hospital grounds I decided to visit Mr. Guo at the little Christian Mission Centre where he was living during his internship as a theology student. I remember one occasion when I asked him the following question:

"From the viewpoint of theology, what is mental sickness?"

"Ah, ah," he said.

With that his whole being sank into a profound meditation. He worked hard explicating the difference between mental illness and spirit possession.

"If I didn't have personal experience of this myself," he said, "it would be difficult for an intellectual like me to mention it." Thereupon he began to narrate his "personal experience".

He said once he went with his teacher to see a country doctor who was possessed. As soon as they entered the latter's door, the evil spirit spoke using the doctor as a mouthpiece.

"Reverend, this is a personal grudge. There is no use in your concerning yourself. If you insist, I'll lay bare your deepest secrets, as well as those of others of your type, before a host of people."

The doctor underwent this ordeal until the day he died. According to Mr. Guo, the whole affair was a matter of sin. The evil spirit was reputed to have been a man the doctor had killed in order to run off with his wife. This adulterous woman who became the doctor's wife ended up a suicide.

And so on and so forth.

Surprisingly, I was spellbound by this story. I've always been one with a yen for mysticism, so that's how Mr. Guo and I became intimate.

MR. GUO came out to open his door scantily clad in rather grubby underwear. This was the first time I had seen his physique. He was quite well built. We are about the same age, but in comparison to me he is very hairy.

As I entered his room, I noticed a record revolving on the turntable with some chorus singing an American folksong. I thumbed through his bookshelf and took down a volume, flipping through it casually, and waited for him to speak. He has always been the first to open his mouth. Though I kept turning pages for a long while, he did not say anything.

I looked him over. He seemed to be just sitting there, wrapped up in the music.

"There's another patient in the hospital," I said. He looked at me, as though in a daze.

"What?" he mumbled.

I spoke louder:

"Another patient has been admitted to our hospital."

He nodded, then abruptly shut off the phonograph. In an instant, the room fell silent. I could

hear water dripping faintly.

"You didn't turn off the faucet?" I asked.

"It's broken!" he said, smiling.

Our conversation ground to a halt. After a while I laid the book down on the desk and said:

"That person was trembling and jerking all over. I didn't know there were so many kinds of mental illness."

Mr. Guo said nothing, but poured me some tea.

"Thanks," I said.

"How the way of the world is changing!" he exclaimed.

"It seems God has abandoned the world," I commented. "It is so chaotic and disordered."

He puzzled over this a while. Again there was silence between us. Whenever in an argument, he always ends up retreating to the defense and valiantly adopting the position of a student of theology.

"That's not accurate either," he offered hesitantly. "It's what it says in the Bible: at the end of the world there will be revolutions, endless natural calamities, wars, massacres, and strange diseases . . . And mental illness is one of the 'strange diseases.'"

I thought of those patients with minor conditions who sit out on the lawn in the afternoon sun. Every face pale and wan, every pair of eyes a passive expression of helplessness, all of them smothering a chill bitterness. Often these sad faces will smile mischievously, causing you to start. It is as though someone were penetrating into your deepest recesses.

"Sin," I remarked casually, "the offspring of the poisonous snake!"

He paid no regard to my ridicule. He was being quite deliberate about turning on the phonograph and setting the volume low.

"I've thought it through," he went on. "It's like you said. The majority of the mentally ill are victims who are crushed and ground up by society. But Christianity cannot help but perceive human sin in the very midst of social oppression."

I noticed he lowered those honest eyes of his. It seemed he was really making an effort to protect the principles he relied on for his words and actions, but he himself had long since lost hope for the New Jerusalem. And where is my Jerusalem? All that remains is that fated grand calamity, the End of the World.

The conversation made us pensive. Though the source of depression in each was not identical, it had the same character.

At that moment my glance happened to light upon a white card beside my tea cup. I picked it up and realized it was a photograph. It was an old picture of a female student. I felt anxious lest he be angry, and I immediately put it back where it was. But he thrust out his hand and took it. He looked at the photograph and all of a sudden an awkward shyness caused him to blush around the eyes.

"Your sweetheart?" I asked.

"Probably it was stuck in that book you had and fell out."

"Probably so," I said. He merely smiled and put the photo in an English-language dictionary which was close at hand.

"Boy, that was a long time ago," he said finally.

Apparently, there was some scar in this. Suddenly I felt remorseful, so I made an offhand remark:

"Romantic attachments have never gone very smoothly for me."

He looked at me directly and turned off the phonograph. His neat tidy face was gradually suffused with empathy.

I began to panic and throw together a very unsatisfactory story about some love affair.

"And later on?" he asked solemnly.

"Later on?" I repeated, feigning a long face.

"Later on the girl became sick and died. Before she died she said she still hated me."

"But I believe she actually loved you," he said ardently.

Mr. Guo began to talk about women himself. He considered himself quite a big man, one who had gotten all sorts of women to fall for him. I was really surprised. This proved he was even worse than those single men who brag about their exploits.

He proceeded to talk about Miss Gao. "I just thought we shared an interest in music. I certainly did not expect that one day I would receive a passionate note from her."

"Eh!" I exclaimed.

"You'd never think she was that kind of a woman," he said with a self-complacent air. "And she's older than us."

I loathed his mention of "us". Of course I

didn't believe anything he said from the start, but I began to feel bored and vexed by him. Maybe from jealousy.

All of a sudden, he asked:

"Have you ever touched a woman?"

It took me a little while to get what he meant.

"Umm," I said.

"Eh?" he inquired.

"Once a woman felt my face."

He was perplexed for a moment, then burst out laughing. I stood up and said I had to go.

"I won't see you off," he said.³

I left his room, again hearing the dripping of the leaky faucet. I felt somewhat disconsolate.

Just opposite the Christian Mission Centre lay this wearisome little town's street, the same as always. As I walked along I kept telling myself:

"Eighty percent of what Mr. Guo said is bunk. Men of his ilk are always like that."

Then I remembered a fellow student at the university who was nick-named "Baby Ox". He was one of those students who got into college through the "Minority Peoples" quota system. He was a little like Mr. Guo. Much to people's disgust, Baby Ox was always venting his shallow male chauvinism. So the Miss Gao affair had to be just as phony. Of course I thought about it this way: "Whether real or not, it's of no consequence to me, especially since I'll soon be completely well and able to get out of here."

I was really hopeful I could make it to Taipei⁴ and see off a good classmate of mine, Yu Jizhong, who was going abroad. Yu had come to see me four times, and he was very diligent about writing. He had a head full of nothing but "the American way of life". What he often said was:

"It's always good to leave. A new sky, a new earth. Nothing can be the same."

I never commented one way or the other, but I remember asking him casually:

"Isn't that just floating? Or even plain exile?"

Suddenly he looked me straight in the eye. His handsome countenance was that of a man set on going abroad.

"You're not just floating too?" he asked,

³A common polite expression when friends part.

⁴The capital of Taiwan and site of several universities and colleges.



incredulously. He laughed. "We are all rootless people."

I can recall how low I felt at that time. Still, I did not oppose his way of thinking. Partly because we were good friends, but also it seemed there was nothing untrue about what he said. Wasn't my very dejection witness to its accuracy? I didn't know then that Yu's statement, "It's always good to leave", would be such a source of refreshing joy to me now.

And I am going to leave here too. The doctor said so himself. Too bad for him and the rest of them that they always assume I don't know Japanese. It was an elective at college. People like them are so fond of speaking a foreign language—it's enough to show they don't have roots either. But the fact that I do not harbour any resentment towards them for liking foreign languages proves I'm really a rootless person myself. What Yu Jizhong said was not all wrong.

SINCE IT was not to be long before my release, I wanted to have a look at some sugar-cane fields nearby. In the past, I'd always gone to the right at the railway crossing and followed along the sugar factory's narrow gauge railway so as to

watch the workmen at the warehouse there.

Always there are just about ten men. On their feet they wear things that are made out of rubber tires. What I love most are those sandal-like shoes. Each pair is matched by well-built muscular legs. They really make me think of Roman soldiers. I was once nearly an art student and accordingly have a great predilection for the workers' beautiful legs and bodies. They are so rich in form, and they look as though they are carved by their sweat. To see these ten or so men in the brilliant full sunlight put their shoulders to a fully loaded boxcar and push it slowly forward—this really is a moving sight.

Often in my letters to Yu Jizhong I write an uninhibited description of this scene, and tell him that this is excellent material from everyday life for a sculpture relief. But he is ever cold and insensitive. What a pity it is he does not understand art.

Besides watching the labourers at work, I would also see them gnawing on sugar-cane in a boxcar, or two or three of them squatting playing chess. Such a pleasant sight. Regrettably, I don't understand their dialect. Besides I would have on the kind of distinctive hospital garb that people here

could recognize easily, so ordinarily I just watched them from afar.

But today I decided not to go over to the warehouse area. When I reached the railway crossing, I walked to the left. As I looked up along the narrow-gauge rails of the little railway, I became aware of the openness of a strip of sugar-cane field far in the distance which lay between the rails and was set in relief by them. The scene was so enchanting that I stepped out along the railway ties. There was a bit of the child in me yet.

I hadn't gone very far when I discovered that today there appeared to be a lot of people walking along the railway, and moreover they were all passing me as they walked towards the warehouse. I asked what was going on and was told that someone had been murdered.

I turned around and went back stepping along the railway ties. And of course I walked very quickly, really it was almost a run. But the ties weren't evenly distributed, so it was awkward going. In fact, it turned out that there really was a large number of people gathered at the side of the warehouse. There was noise and bustling all about. A murder is something you often hear about, but I had never seen one with my own eyes.

The emaciated yet well developed corpse of a young girl lay stiffly on the ground, her face in the mud. Her skirt and top had been cut open by the police investigators, and her back looked the waxy colour of dead flesh. To the right of her spine and separated quite distinctly from each other were three gashes, black with congealed blood. The blood from one of these had stained the strap of her brassiere a tangerine red.

An inspector, wearing a sportshirt, inserted a delicate dissecting knife into the mouth of the stab wounds.

"Tsk-tsk, look at that!" an old woman exclaimed among the onlookers.

"Used a chisel," said a man. "Attacked her from the back. Hack, hack, hack. Three of them." The late arrivals listened attentively.

A police sergeant waved his hand, stopping several children in the circle of onlookers from flocking about the dead body. The sun was already slanting to the west, illuminating the warehouse well with a faint blush of red.

People crowded together, their stares cold and indifferent, as though they were gazing at the dis-

memberment of livestock. The Inspector thrust in the dissecting knife as deeply as possible, turned it to the left and right, and then withdrew it. He used a ruler to gauge the depth. To the side an assistant marked down numbers and notations on the profile of a body outlined on a sheet.

"The killer?" somebody asked.

"Ran off. Over towards the sugar-cane fields."

I overheard someone say the girl was a fledgling prostitute who had been attempting to run away. She'd been killed by the person who sold her.

The inspector stood up and began to turn over the body to check the front. The crowd could see now many more little spots of congealed blood. At first glance, it looked as if some flies had settled lightly on her body. But actually every black spot was a chisel hole.

When the bra was scissored open, a pair of stiff little breasts were exposed. In one breast there was a small chisel hole that was very clean. There wasn't even any fluid or blood in it. Her face looked thin, and from the corner of her mouth saliva hung mixed with blood. One could not tell whether her face was attractive or ugly. It was covered with the pallor of death. Her hair was soaked in mud and of course excessively filthy.

At first all the men were busily engaged in speculating and talking. But with the exposure of a naked body like hers, they fell into a wondrous silence and the women who normally love to ask questions also shut their mouths.

I squeezed my way through the crowd. Maybe it was because I felt it was time to get back to the hospital, not to mention the fact that I had not brought a watch. For a while I was in a stupor, wandering aimlessly along toward the hospital. This was the very first time in my life I had seen the naked body of a woman. I thought of that pair of little breasts. My impression was that they were a little like yesterday's steamed dumplings, dried by the wind. But what gave me the most anxiety was that head of filthy hair.

Back at the hospital I saw the doctor at the entrance gate chatting with the family of the new patient who had been admitted that afternoon. Because they and their car were blocking the main gate, I just stood to one side looking at the children who were now sitting in the car. The youngest little boy was asleep with his head aslant.

Immediately, I began to feel upset.

The doctor saw me standing there and stood well aside for me to get by. As I squeezed through their midst I overheard the doctor saying to the family:

"Let's give it a try, OK? We'll keep in contact."

I walked slowly across the grass; the weather felt a little cooler. All of a sudden I recalled Mark Antony's speech in *Julius Caesar*:

"I

Show you sweet Caesar's wounds, poor poor dumb mouths,

And bid them speak for me."

Act three, scene two, I think. I had it in an exam once. I remember our Shakespeare professor, Father Huang, reciting the original scene aloud in his exquisite English. The iambic cadence was melodic, like the harmonious song of a pipe organ. I really delighted in that experience. But it is not until now that I realize how cruel and gloomy the literary work of a great talent is which makes an analogy between human mouths and mortal stab wounds on a body, wounds of congealed blood.

THE NEXT DAY happened to be again the time for my routine check-up and diagnosis.

"I think you can probably be released now," said the doctor.

"Oh," I replied.

He looked at me. After a while, he asked: "Don't you feel happy?"

"Uh. Uh-huh. Of course I'm happy," I said. The doctor began to smile slightly. I don't know why, but I blurted out impulsively:

"Yesterday I had a dream, a very entertaining dream."

"Eh?"

"I suppose it was kind of boring really, not worth mentioning."

"Go ahead and describe it, let's see."

"I dreamt I was in a dark room. There wasn't a ray of light. Mildew had been growing there for a long time and was covering everything."

The doctor tore off a sheet of wrapping paper, and began writing in sweeping strokes. I felt some anxiety creeping up. Actually, I couldn't remember for sure whether I really had had a dream. But I kept speaking.

"A girl was lying down in front of me. There

were mouths all over her body. Many of them."

"Many what?"

"Many *mouths*." I pointed to my mouth. "Lips," I said.

The doctor stared at me, wrinkled his brow, and said:

"And then?"

"The mouths talked. And what did they say? 'Open up the window, let the sunlight come in!'"

The doctor was listening very conscientiously. Seldom was he that way. Generally I'm of the opinion that egocentric people hardly ever listen to what others are saying. His way of inclining his head to listen carefully made his face look rather intelligent. Because he was paying attention I went on.

"Have you heard of 'Ge-de'?"

"What?"

I stuck out my hand and he handed me another sheet of paper. I used the quill pen on the table and wrote out the name of 'Ge-de' in full. He read the name in German:

"Johann Wolfgang von Goethe."

"It's what he said when he was dying: 'Open up the window, let the sunlight in!'"

"Oh, oh!" said the doctor.

"After that there was a Roman soldier. He took a sword and split open the darkness, and the sunlight shot in like the shaft of a golden arrow. All the mildew faded away; the toads, the leeches, the bats dried and shrivelled up. And I too dried up and withered away."

I was grinning, but the doctor was not. He pondered for a while, then carefully took the piece of paper and stuck it in the stack of file cards. He glanced up and looked at me. His eyes had a look of hidden pity. I stood up.

"In fact it is a very entertaining dream," he commented.

NONETHELESS, after a week I was released from the hospital in the best of health. As I left, I asked again about the meaning of my dream, and the doctor answered:

"You are no longer a sick person now, so as far as I'm concerned, your dreams have no meaning."

We looked at one another and laughed. But I have never been able to remember clearly whether I really had a nightmare or not.