

Independent scholar

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Walking slowly wearing crimson

Biographical note:

Dr Jyanni N'Steffensen was formerly a Professor of English Literature and Film at universities in Manchuria (half way between Beijing and Siberia); Ningbo (just south of Shanghai) and Oman in the Middle East. Currently, she lives and writes in far north Queensland.

Seasickened, he moved toward the conclusion of the narrative, looked at water the colour of heartlessness.

We know why he left Prague although history had almost lost him. He did not know that his journey was a journey from Prague to a woman in a scarlet dress – a woman who, right now, is in another story.

*It has taken many accidents, many surprising coincidences (and perhaps many efforts), for me to find a place which, out of a thousand, suits my desire.*¹

Mind your steps, the green grass is afraid of your feet.

Daisy Bloom, however, never made a journey without maps. She was writing a *roman policier*.

'?', shrugged The Chinese Detective, 'dead or not, is Derrida aware of your desire(s)?'

The alabaster-hued English Professor desired snow and train travel. She was an accidental academic, a migrant teacher, a fugitive from obsessive anxieties. She suffered from irresistible urges to include mad footnotes in her research.

*I am in a condition of perpetual departure, of journeying. The other is motionless, nailed to the spot, motionless, at hand, in expectation – like a package in some forgotten corner of a railway station*²

vagabond n wanderer or vagrant, esp. an idle or dishonest one³

The Chinese Detective incorporated the image of the woman in the scarlet dress into the design of a series of postcards. At the Shanghai railway terminus, she posted one to Daisy Bloom. On it she inscribed nothing. For Li LiLi the story had already taken place.

According to the critic, the structural confusion of the narrative is generally regarded as its main stylistically weakness; yet he insists that its charm lies precisely in its rather bizarre arrangement in which a list of 'awful things', for example, is followed by an account of a Yuenu swordswoman teaching the Imperial Army, after which comes an apparently unrelated incident about the Czech refugee crossing Siberia sixty years ago (Are you following me?) and then a short, lyrical description of a thin fall of snow.

Disassembled by desire, Li LiLi laughed, her raucous ghost laugh. She dogged the characters who most loved reading texts by Hanif Kureishi and Kazuo Ishiguro.

114 *It is delightful when there has been a thin fall of snow*

*It is delightful when there has been a thin fall of snow; or again when it has piled up very high and in the evening we sit round a brazier at the edge of the verandah with a few congenial friends, chatting until darkness falls. There is no need for the lamp, since the snow itself reflects a clear light. Raking the ashes in the brazier with a pair of fire-tongs, we discuss all sorts of moving and amusing things.*⁴

The train

*All life's serious journeys involve a railway terminus.*⁵

The train was already in motion. Ignoring the perversities of railroad travel, Li LiLi departed Shanghai. Other passengers suspected that she was not really Chinese at all. She was no amateur detective. She smoked cigarettes and searched for traces of Eugene Kafka. (You might scoff, but now that I have your attention, where do you think this train is going?).

The narrator followed a man she met on a boat. She disguised herself and followed him around the deck(s). Sometimes she followed complete strangers. Li LiLi once photographed writing and objects in a hotel room in Beijing. The room had been momentarily unoccupied by Sophie Calle. If you think that you are being misled, I assure you that I am utterly trustworthy.

*mys-ter-y*¹ (mɪs'tɪəri)

1. One that is not fully understood or that baffles or eludes the understanding; an enigma: *How he got into the plot is a mystery.*
2. One whose identity is unknown and who arouses curiosity: *The scarlet woman in the photograph is a mystery.*

Daisy Bloom wrote that she thought that she (Li LiLi) was skating on thin ice.

Li LiLi responded, 'You are fictional.'

*Neatly folded on the top of the case was a thin scarlet silk kimono embroidered with dragons.*⁶

Daisy Bloom went to the market to buy more silk, lots more silk.⁷

The younger girls are soaking the cocoons in boiling water until the silk threads loosen. It's one of the most important jobs here. They have to find the main thread from which the entire web of silk is unravelled.⁸

In one of Li LiLi's photographs, Daisy Bloom is seated in the university boardroom below a portrait of Marx. She is wearing Armani sunglasses. Opposite her, the Chief of Police is seated under Lenin. The chair under Stalin is left vacant. The Chancellor is seated in front of the window. Daisy Bloom's whiteness is ghostly. The photograph became lost in the digital ether, sent but never received. The Chinese Detective was preoccupied, leaping the barriers between art and history.

Star-crossed lovers

'When I love, I am very exclusive,' Freud says. Barthes takes Freud here to be the paragon of normality. Who am I to argue?

At times, Daisy Bloom felt that she was in a critical theory nightmare. She compiled a *List of star cross'd lover on film*. She thought that there were ice-skating scenes in both Pushkin's *Onegin* and Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*.

language n 1 (U) system of sounds, words, patterns, etc. used by humans to communicate thoughts and feelings. 2 (C) form of language used by a particular group, nation etc.

The Students continued to create their own language: Her feet covered many cocoons; He stood there, dumb as a wooden duck; bookhouse (library); epidermis (the exterior of the Freud Museum); waterdown (waterfall). At the Buddhist temple, Li LiLi lit a cigarette and photographed the signs that demanded No Burning (No Smoking) and No Photoing. One of The Students described her family to Daisy Bloom as 'fragrant.' Daisy Bloom desired this adorable language. She proved unable to learn it. Outside the train station, she sat down in the thin snow and wept.

Li LiLi rode downtown on the *gong gong qiche* past the barber shops where the prostitutes peered from behind lace curtains. She played *mah jong* with the ancient Mr. Wang. She was West and he was East. She tried to concentrate on the little ivory tiles. Mr. Wang curated the (former) Ohel Moishe Synagogue, north of Suzhou Creek. He had been expecting her.

From time to time Daisy Bloom forgot about the *roman policier*. Li LiLi photographed the hotel rooms of absent guests in the wildly art deco Guojin Fandian Hotel. She did not consider life as a narrative, but more as a putting of accidents in order. She had not lived according to some comprehensive plot.

Tobogganing without snow

In *Anna Karenina*⁹ the tragically shy Levin went to the pond in the Zoological Gardens in Moscow where Kitty was skating. He wanted to propose to her, but speechless or not, it did him no good. He was, however, an excellent skater.

So, it is rumoured, was Lenin. He forced himself not to be distracted by his twin passions for night skating and Latin.

11 November St Petersburg 1891

Horse-drawn sleighs are skimming along the glassy highway of the Neva, today the busiest thoroughfare in all (St) Peter(sburg) With my skates on, I have been able to move from one end of the capital to the other at the speed that only a steam locomotive could exceed.¹⁰

In another of Li LiLi's images a man is walking a dog along Green Street in Soho, New York. It is snowing heavily. In the foreground two people are walking, leaning forward, arms crossed, heads bowed into the wind.

One day, when the snow lay thick on the ground and was still coming down heavily, I saw a woman in a red *qipao* who had a fresh complexion and a pleasant, youthful look. Her beautiful, crimson- purple coloured coat, which she wore over the scarlet costume, brushed the ground as she walked. The dark purple garment stood out startlingly against the white snow. I could see her under-jackets, dyed scarlet and a beautiful rose-yellow. She had opened her umbrella, but since it was very windy the snow came at her from the side and she bent forward slightly as she walked. The sparkling white snow covered her feet all the way to the tips of her lacquered leather shoes.

Daisy Bloom began reading *Anna Karenina* again from the beginning without skipping the characters who appealed to her least.

Li LiLi photographed objects in the Gongti Hotel. In Room 204 she accidentally shot a body.

The swordswoman of Gongti

We saw swordswomen jump over houses from a standstill; they didn't even need a running start.¹¹

Li LiLi practised a form of *gong fu* sword called Yuenu. It was invented by a woman who was also called Yuenu.

When I could point at the sky and make a sword appear, a silver bolt of sunlight, and control its slashing with my mind, the old people said I was ready to leave.¹²

By the stone bridge Li LiLi learned Spinning Sword, Parrying Sword, Resting Sword (thrust), Raised Sword, Hacking Sword, Upper-cutting, Intercepting (left and right), Tilting Sword, Upward Chop, Spin Sword and Sweeping Sword. She practised thrusting until her heart hurt.

The art of stories¹³

'The art of the catastrophe calms me down.'¹⁴

Cryptic crossword clues

Clue: depressed as a duck after preening. **Answer:** down in the mouth.¹⁵

Clue: it turns into a different story. **Answer:** spiral staircase.¹⁶

Clue: _____ (1,6,1,4) **Answer:** I haven't a clue.¹⁷

The poetics of Chinese pharmacology

The vendors also came, one after another, old women with herbs that could cure any ailment, from the physical to the emotional. They carried everything in glass jars, and measured the dark twigs and dried leaves into white pieces of paper folded neatly into perfect squares.¹⁸

The instructions on the packet of capsules that Daisy Bloom acquired from the well lighted pharmacy in Jiefang Lu suggested that: 'To take the capsule can nourish blood, moisturize yin, and nourish heart and quiet spirit. Distinct effects for neutral nervous system in repressing, calming, pain-settling and anti-fright reversal. The medicine can settle the following symptoms:

- insufficiency of yin-blood, insomnia and
- over-dreaming Weakening memory, heart
- palpitation Vexing heart in five hearts,
- night sweating and tinitus.'

'That's it,' thought Daisy Bloom, 'anti-fright reversal is what I need'.

Li LiLi steals the letter of the body, leaving another in its place. Lacan is puzzled.

From where does this terrible fearfulness come? If, as Freud says, my symptom speaks, then what is it trying to say?

Desire

In spite of it all, Sei Shonagon insisted that when a woman lives alone, her house should be extremely dilapidated, the mud wall should be falling to pieces, and if there is a pond, it should be overgrown with water-plants. It is not essential that the garden be covered with sage-brush, but weeds should be growing through the sand in patches, for this gives the place a poignantly desolate look.

She was fond of telling both Li LiLi and Daisy Bloom that she greatly disliked a woman's house when it was clear that she had scurried about with a knowing look on her face, arranging everything just as it should be, and when the gate was kept tightly shut.

The art of stories calmed Daisy Bloom.

Li LiLi always thinks of Marco Polo as 'the Italian Interlocutor' but is always misheard as saying 'Italian Interloper.'

Daisy Bloom began *A list of Chinese culinary moments*.

Mao apparently studied at night under a street lamp.

From the skies

Two people fell from an Air France jet (a Boeing 777) as it was preparing to land at Pudong airport. The two falling bodies crashed into a small village in Nanhui District,

one in an orchard and one through the roof of a house. 'It's so frightening. I could not fall asleep,' said Ding Xiaolin, 80, who was cooking in her kitchen when a body fell through the roof and landed beside her.¹⁹

non-sequitur n (Latin) statement that does not follow logically from the previous statement(s) or argument(s).

The most splendid thing



Yukiko

Li LiLi always slept soundly.

Endnotes

1 Rewritten from Barthes, Roland 1978 *A lover's discourse*, New York: Hill and Wang, The Noonday Press, 20. (Somewhere between Lacan and Proust)

2 *A lover's discourse*, 13 (A wilful misquotation)

3 *Oxford advanced learner's English-Chinese dictionary* 1989 (4th Edition), Oxford: Oxford University Press/The Commercial Press, 1677

4 Shonagon, Sei 1986 *The pillow book* [around 1000], Ivan Morris (trans and ed) Middlesex, New York, Auckland, Ontario, Ringwood: Penguin Classics, 184

5 Wilde, Oscar (played by Stephen Fry) to Lord Alfred 'Bosie' Douglas (Jude Law) in *Wilde* (dir Brian Gilbert, 1997)

6 Christie, Agatha 1994 *Murder on the Orient Express*, Beijing: Beijing Foreign Languages Press (Not for sale outside the People's Republic of China)

7 *The story of silk*

It began with the difference between Japanese and Chinese gardens or the problem of how to add colour to shade. It is also the story of how Marco Polo left Venice and mysteriously found himself in Suzhou.

Marco Polo comes to Suzhou.

One of his travel companions – a botanist - meets a beautiful Chinese woman in one of the gardens of Suzhou. They have a daughter who is rejected by the Chinese community. Polo and the horticulturist return to Italy – Polo to Venice and the horticulturist to Florence. The daughter, whose name means 'silk', becomes a concubine and has a daughter also. Female descendants of the botanist's daughter become 1) a female banker in Shanghai and 2) a revolutionary.

A female descendant of the Florentine botanist migrates to Australia in 1945 and settles in Adelaide. Her daughter becomes an academic and writer who moves to China. Here she meets a successful female silk merchant who lives in Shanghai but who was born in Suzhou.

Peony

The silk merchant's name was Peony. She had travelled the world selling her silk. As a younger woman she had studied textiles in New York even though the United States did not, she felt, understand silk. It is the touch that counts, the lightness and texture of the cloth. She fingered her forehead frequently, kneading it furtively when stressed or worried.

8 Tsukiyama, Gail 1991 *Women of the silk: a novel*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 37

9 Tolstoy, Leo 1960 *Anna Karenina*, Joel Carmichael (trans), Toronto, New York, London, Sydney: Bantam Books

10 Brien, Alan 1987 *Lenin: the novel*, London: Secker & Warburg, 74

11 Hong Kingston, Maxine 1989 *The warrior woman*, New York: Random House, 19

12 *The warrior woman*, 33

13 *Hypotext/hypertext: The pillow book* (the film), Peter Greenaway (1996)

The pillow book (the film) begins with a Japanese mother reading to her daughter Nagiko who is in bed. On Nagiko's face is a 'birthday greeting' written by her father. Her father has written her name on her face and his signature on the nape of her neck. Her mother reads to her Section 150 of Sei Shonagon's *The pillow book* (the book).

'The Empress wore a robe of green Chinese silk. Beneath a Chinese jacket were five unlined robes. She also wore a skirt of ceremonial elephant-eye silk. I felt that nothing in the world would compare with her beauty.'

She says, 'I will make you a List of Elegant Things'.

Chinese silk. Duck eggs. Shaved ice in a silver bowl. Wisteria blossoms. Plum blossoms covered in snow. A child eating strawberries. (Nagiko is seen eating a bowl of strawberries) Things that make one's heart beat faster (Nagiko has peered through a gap between the sliding paper doors at her father being fucked by his publisher). To sleep in a room where incense is burning.

Nagiko develops a lifelong passion for being written upon.

The grown Nagiko (played by Vivian Wu) says:

'I would fill [my book] with all manner of observations just like Sei Shonagon. Perhaps one day, like her, I will fill it with accounts of all my lovers.'

Her mother continues to read Sei Shonagon's List of splendid things: Chinese brocade. An imperial procession led by the Empress. A large garden covered in snow. Indigo coloured silk. Anything coloured indigo is splendid. Indigo coloured flowers. Indigo thread and especially indigo paper.

Later in the film, Jerome (Ewan McGregor), one of Nagiko's lover's says, 'Write on me. Treat me like the pages of a book'. His publisher (who was also Nagiko's father's publisher) is impressed. He says, 'Copy that text'. In her List of Body parts she lists penises as 'pickled gerkins'.

He (Jerome) wrote on Nagiko in English, Hebrew, Japanese and Latin. She said, 'I would like to honour my father by becoming a writer'. 'I can help', he replied.

Nagiko writes on Jerome in gold ink.

14 *A lover's discourse*, 143

15 The cryptic crossword clue is Nancy Sibtain's all-time favourite. Quoted from Fiona Harari 'The Clue Room', *The weekend Australian*, 13-14 October, 2001, Review, 12

16 Will Shortz's favourite clue. He is crossword editor of *The New York times*

17 Taffy Davies, a former cryptic compiler for *The daily telegraph*, Sydney

18 Tsukiyama, Gail 1991 *Women of the silk: a novel*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 107

19 Zhu Yanyan, Zhu and Yi, Zhang 2003 'Air France deaths still a mystery.' *Shanghai daily*, Saturday-Sunday 25-26 Januar, 1