

RMIT University

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The fifth story

Biographical note:

Julienne van Loon is a Vice Chancellor's Senior Research Fellow in the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University. An Australian fiction writer and essayist, her publications include the novel *Harmless* (Fremantle Press 2013) and the short story 'Bring closer what is left to come' in *Best Australian Stories* (2014). Julienne's most recent scholarly articles have been published in *TEXT* and *New Writing* and her research interests include play in context of research, philosophical fiction, and the form of the essay.

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For Clarice Lispector

The story could be called ‘The story of K’ang Ming Kan’. Another possible title would be ‘The Tiger.’ Or, alternatively, ‘The assault.’

The first story is about K’ang Ming Kan, who was born to a wealthy family in North-eastern China during the fifth century, under the rule of the Northern Liang. Perhaps because of her family’s wealth, K’ang Ming Kan was abducted at the age of sixteen. It is rumoured that she refused to give in to her captors, though who is to say what this means? The thieves took her far from her home to an isolated mountainous region of the far north-west, where she was forced to work as a shepherd. She did so for almost a decade.

I picture K’ang Ming Kan tending her livestock during those many years beyond the drama of the initial theft. Did she ever feel her body her own again? Or was she, like the livestock she tended, reminded daily of the limits of her freedom? The story goes that one day when she was working in the fields she happened across a wandering Buddhist monk. His explanation of the Buddha’s teaching was the most convincing philosophy of life she had ever heard. She asked him to grant her the five precepts of a Buddhist layperson, and he did so. The next day, she made a determination: she would escape her captors. Her plan was humble. She would simply walk away.

The problem was that the young shepherdess did not know her way home. She chose to travel east, towards the rising sun. Perhaps it was autumn. Perhaps she had no shoes. She walked and begged for food and water, and then walked some more. At the base of the Mount Wutai she came to a rest beneath a juniper tree and closed her eyes. There were no longer any farms or villages in sight, only the imposing ranges rising up to the east, arid and cold. Sheer exhaustion threatened to overwhelm her. Her feet ached with blisters. Her stomach groaned for food. When she opened her eyes again she found herself looking squarely into the eyes of a wild forest tiger that lay languidly, gazing at her from beneath a nearby tree.

The animal blinked at her and licked its lips. K’ang Ming Kan lowered her gaze. “If this is the end,” she thought, “then let it be so,” and at the moment of acceptance her fear of the tiger lifted and disappeared. Just then, the animal stood and stretched, pushing its chest to the ground and its nose to its forelegs, as if bowing towards the beckoning east. It walked a little ahead, then paused to look back at K’ang Ming Kan. She stood up. The tiger walked on some way then paused once more. The young woman followed. In this manner, the two travelled companionably through the Mount Wutai ranges. They walked for hours, days, weeks. As they descended on the other side of the mountain, K’ang Ming Kan recognised the valley of the Yellow River and knew she was approaching her home village of Kao p’ing. When they arrived at the outskirts, she stopped. The sky was tinted with the pale orange tones of a dry season sunset. The air smelt of dust. K’ang Ming Kan straightened her clothes and smoothed her hair, preparing herself to meet her mother once more, but at that moment, there was a rush of white noise in her ears, and when she looked over her shoulder the tiger had disappeared.

In the next moment, rough hands grabbed her from behind. Someone threw a coarse sack over her head. The air left K'ang Ming Kan's lungs and she blacked out for a time. When she became aware of her surroundings again, she realised that her wrists were tied behind her back, and she could no longer feel the tips of her fingers. She had been abducted.

Hence, the first story comes full circle. It is endless.

The next story is also about K'ang Ming Kan, and it is the same story, up to a point. In this version, there is an important intervention immediately following the second abduction. K'ang Ming Kan's second round of captors apparently keep her captive quite close to her home town, and word gets back to her family. A ransom is promptly negotiated, and after a few weeks she is released.

How then, does one settle back into normal life? By now in her mid-twenties, K'ang Ming Kan lives with her parents for several years, but there is a problem. Her ordeals mean that she is no longer marriage material. She pleads with her parents to be given permission to ordain as a Buddhist nun. They are skeptical. Buddhist ideas are new to their area and might lead to trouble with the ruling patriarch. Eventually, however, her parents agree to her request. She is granted robes. There are no monasteries for women in the region of the capital at that time. The records tell us that in 348, K'ang Ming Kan travelled south of the Yangtze River with ten other ordinate women to appeal to a minister in the Jin Dynasty for a place in which to practice. They must have made quite an impression, for the minister looked sympathetically on the request and converted one of his private residences to accommodate the women. It was here that K'ang Ming Kan would live out the rest of her days.

The third story, which now begins, is called 'The Tiger' and it begins with me. It begins with me reading about K'ang Ming Kan fifteen centuries later and becoming completely enamoured of the tiger. When she is granted the opportunity to break out of the circle, K'ang Ming Kan lives a perfectly good life. I can picture her immersed in meditation and chanting and the other daily rituals and routines of monastery life, making a project of stillness. She goes on, incidentally, to become a leading teacher in early Buddhism, which is why her story is written into the annals of history. But I can't help but wonder: during all those decades in robes, did she ever find herself longing for the close and understanding companionship of the tiger? I mean, really, didn't she long for it?

The fourth story is also about me, but it opens at a different time. The story begins, as it has often done, with an assault. I work in state-funded, inner-city primary school, a feeder to a neighbouring housing estate. It is a neighbourhood of a few tight blocks in which methamphetamine wreaks havoc. I am on my way to school one weekday morning when I am assaulted. I should mention that the children I teach see me in the music room out of choice. We work one-to-one on the violin and the cello. They are still very young and are wonderfully attentive to the transformative capacity of music. I love teaching them. I love my job. But that morning, as I am getting out of my car, a stranger grabs me from behind. He is unkempt. The stench of him is so awful it makes me gag. The man has appeared as if from nowhere and his thick, ropy fingers have hold of the shoulder bag in which I keep my laptop. But he will not have it. I won't let

him. When this becomes clear to him, he pulls out a weapon and stabs me in the leg. The swift force of the energy of this act shocks both of us: no sooner has the knife gone in than the stranger turns and runs away down the street, empty-handed. The precious shoulder bag, with its cargo intact, falls open on the road. It all happens so quickly that it takes me a little while to understand that the itch in my thigh is to do with wetness, that it is to do with the passage of my own blood.

The fifth story desires to be called 'Intersection.' It will be some time before I'll be ready to return to school. Like the second story, the fifth will put a stop to the endless loop. It is in this story that I am introduced to the story of K'ang Ming Kan for the first time. Did I tell you that I am still not ready to return to school? The chief problem with the fifth story is that it remains unfinished. I aim to establish a junction of sorts. That is my plan. It's just that I'm on the long walk. I am on the long walk, and I am still awaiting the appearance of the tiger.

Research statement

Research background

‘The fifth story’ approaches gendered violence in a manner that foregrounds both repetition and the possibility of intervention. It engages intertextually with two sources – a biography of a 4th-century Chinese nun and a short story.

Research contribution

Structurally, this work echoes a like-titled short story by Lispector: each text begins over and again, imitating a cubist painting. Repeated attempts at beginning emphasise the way in which the matter at hand can perhaps never be properly broached or understood. Lispector’s work has been noted for how it ‘foregrounds perception that transcends blinkered normality’ (Power 2014). This work links an early biography with a recent assault in inner Melbourne to attempt to achieve the same end. Closure is disturbingly elusive.

Research significance

This work extends a developing trajectory in Australian fiction that engages with Asia and early Buddhism, including my own earlier works (2005, 2013), and works by Chi Vu and Hua Pham. Such works re-interpret early Buddhist fable while privileging feminist approaches to subjectivity. This work is the product of a nationally competitive Asialink Arts residency at Peking University, Beijing, 2014. It is a timely engagement in the cycle of violence against women and, importantly, offers women who have been victims of violence the narrative possibility of courage and hope.

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