

蔡深江：漫步經心

A Ramble Through the Heart

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Deserts and sheep

In every heart lies a desert where one can lose oneself. I occasionally wander in by accident and indulge in melancholy within its boundless horizons for several nights before finding my way back to our bustling city with its flowers and plants.

Sometimes, I yearn to make a trip to this vast land, where, like the narrator in *The Little Prince*, I can draw sheep and yawn amid the barren terrain in peace all by myself, but I can never find a direction that I can set my heart on.

Can greenery take root in such a place? I often wonder. In the morning, I pay close attention to the other passengers slumbering on the swaying bus as it travels at its monotonous pace. All of them have woken up too early. As the bus meanders along the border between darkness and dawn, they quickly give in to the gentle undulation of a baby's cradle.

The driver always demonstrates unerring judgement in steering the vehicle, humming nursery rhymes in lighter moments; in any case, he won't take a wrong turn into childhood. No matter how much I focus on the sleeping passengers, I can never make out the intimations pooling faintly in the corners of their mouths. I am curious if there is, after all, springtime in the deserts of their hearts.

Sometimes, life can be completely absurd, like an ancient timber sail-boat standing in a desert, a wan, serene smile on its face, as if it knows just how out of place it looks. Sometimes, while crossing between two buildings, I look up at the sky and see a swirling current, on which are floating clouds as pure and white as ducks.

In any case, you are in a hurry, your gaze darting from one face to another, as if collecting expressions. Indeed, we compete every day to see how many expressions we can gather, recording them in our diaries. Sometimes, on weekends, we even stand in long lines for tickets so we can get into cinema halls that are as boundless as a dark desert, but confined at the same time, just so we can continue to amass more of them.

That is why we subconsciously cultivate a desert in our hearts, not unlike how we can always recall the vocabulary we once acquired in some corner of a long-unused basic learners' dictionary. The definition of 'desert' has been all but forgotten as we take for granted the erroneous belief that life is a long and distant journey that one travels aimlessly. You can take a walk outside if you do not believe me; even if it is along the beach in the evening, not a single person will be giving serious thought to whether there is indeed an arid desert existing in our hearts.

That is because this truly is a bustling city with flowers and plants.

Standing in line

If you pay attention while dreaming, you will notice an endearing phenomenon: the sheep stand quietly and placidly in line as they wait to jump over the fence into dreamland.

This does not mean that the sheep are educated and civilized. Under some mysterious circumstance, they invariably get emotionally embroiled in understandable predicaments, like fences, bringing about an image full of enigmatic countenances that has existed since the dawn of time.

Our childhood years were certainly happy ones. This was not just because of the immense future stretching far ahead of us or the friendlier sky. A greater part of the reason lay in the fact that we had yet to learn to 'stand in line', a civilizing concept that is a serious violation of human nature. In reality, 'civilization', too, is a relative term shaped by considerations of personal gain and loss.

On clear afternoons, if a kite drifted lazily down to the ground, we would scramble in the direction where it landed, falling over one another. We did not understand why ants walk in single file and thought it was because they feared they might get lost.

Later, when we entered primary school, our teachers would devote much

effort to teaching us how to stand in line. I was a well-behaved child and carefully complied with the rules on queuing. When I got home, I would surreptitiously peer into my mother's vanity mirror to see how I looked while standing in line, feeling a tinge of delight at growing up. This illusion persisted until I got my test papers back, whereupon I realized that the meanings of the words we were tested on did not change simply because I had learned to queue.

Before we graduated from primary school, we went on an excursion to the zoo. After entering the gates, we walked in pairs before I discovered that animals, regardless of how they were confined, never learned to stand in line. Moreover, judging from the bars on their enclosures, I could tell that despite having all the creature comforts, they hated their surroundings. I even told one of the zookeepers in my awkward English that I would bet the Nice biscuits I brought for my lunch that the animals would flee if the gates of their cages were opened. As for the elephants, I thought of them as ants, walking around one behind another no matter what. This has nothing to do with the skill of the zookeepers. If you do not believe me, try disrupting a colony of ants and see how the elephants scramble.

After that, I grew to dislike standing in line. I also began to doze off easily.

Like the waterline at high tide, the sheep waiting to chew on the scenery of my dreamscape vie to surge over the fence swiftly, completing their mission without much ado. A rather peculiar phenomenon is how I would often be jolted awake to find myself in a state of extreme panic, like the Osmanthus tree on the moon in Chinese mythology, forever in dread of being cut down. I wear the unease on my face when I board the crowded bus in the morning, where I eventually find some relief.

It was because of this that I discovered that ministerial leaders who advocate standing in line have all been elevated to higher terrain where queues are not needed. Occasionally, they go back to their villages, where they demonstrate their benevolent instinct of standing in line.

Deserts and sheep

Deserts like this are never completely silent. You probably have had insomnia before. It doesn't matter. Perhaps you never have. But sheep have always had to jump over fences in dreams, one after another, as they head off toward the

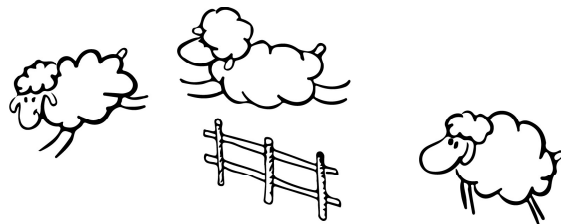
dreamscape. They continue on without turning back, until they recede happily into the distance. It was only one night, when a timid sheep did not dare make the jump, that you realize that there has always been a sheep imprisoned in your heart. It could never cross into dreamland, but stayed on in the desert, gnawing on whatever buds of green it could find.

Thus, the desert is not completely silent. It is just that people, because of the hubbub they create, fail to deal with the puzzled look on the face of the sheep that has lost its way.

Eventually, the sheep grew used to the desolation of the desert and fell in love with it. It would roam the sands happily each day, neglecting to visit the dreamland to face that perplexing fence. You begin to think that you have matured enough not to need sheep to stand in line and jump over fences, and you gradually abandon your desert. Moreover, you are confident that your wanderings should begin from the Sahara, with all items required for the journey in your knapsack.

In any case, this desert exists, whose winds and sand assume the entire weight of your ignorance amid your words and actions, your laughter and curses. Perhaps you have experience of dreaming. It doesn't matter. You may have already forgotten. But as dawn breaks each day, you shuffle out of your dreamscape half-awake to brush your teeth, wash your face, and have breakfast, or you slowly open your eyes and let the dreamscape retreat menacingly like the tide.

What is important is that during your nightly hurried journey from nightfall to daybreak, or even when you travel too far, waking up only when the sun is overhead, you would certainly have slipped a few times, as if you had tripped over some inexplicable ditch. In truth, you never noticed or you may even have forgotten the colour of your dreamscape, where an aloof sheep stands gazing at you dispassionately, like a traffic policeman who appears without warning on the highway, his uniform pristine white and his gaze emotionless. Thus, you breathe carefully, a piece of desert rising in your heart only when you sleep, but you do not know; you never do.



A wooden chair

In the heart of every person I know sits a chair, a wooden one.

When we go through a period of happiness, we often wonder, with a sense of unease, how far we are away from sorrow. At these times, a wooden chair becomes more important than ever. This is especially the case in adulthood, when we have to leave the house every day to go someplace or to stand in line. A wooden chair comes in handy when you desperately need an escape from the unhappy scenery in front of you. It gives you a calm perch amid the vast wilderness of your heart, where you can catch your breath, gather your thoughts, and quickly return to the crowded city to go someplace or to stand in line.

When we were young, we used to drag a wooden chair from our living room to the guava-tree when grandma was napping. We would climb onto the firmly planted chair to pluck the half-ripe days and blades of leaves above us.

Generally, the sweetest guavas were those that had been pecked at by birds. We never held it against them and often fought over the ripe fruits with the nicks in them from the gnawing of the birds. We were happy.

Thereafter, the afternoon would inevitably stir with the sounds of our laughter, as we bickered and fought over food. Grandma was still in good health at the time. Worrying that we may fall, she would chide us for not knowing what a chair is for as she carried it back into the house.

Then, we entered primary school. We often tried to behave in a way that would lead to the punishment of standing on our chairs, which granted us an absurdly expansive view of the surroundings. The obedient classmates who listened to the lesson while sitting at their desks were deprived of this. In fact, we were afraid that should others find out how enjoyable it was to stand on one's chair, the teacher might do away with this beneficent punishment. The wooden chairs in our primary school classroom gave off an air of superiority, stubborn and silent.

An abandoned pond

In every heart exists a pond. A pond where, as children, we would toss our smiles.

Later, it was abandoned, the ultimate destiny of every myth, like an outsider determined to wander the world returning to some small town on an unfamiliar itinerary that he has already become used to.

The pond needs to be abandoned and forgotten by the children now grown up.

Imagine that you are standing along the street, and to every child passing by you offer a balloon in exchange for the wish in their heart: a smiling red balloon; an honest white balloon; a confident green balloon; a beautiful yellow balloon; a light-hearted blue balloon; a kindly orange balloon; each traded for the innocent and cruel wish of a child. These wishes are like the noble aspirations marooned within the crooked Chinese characters scrawled out in composition class, still struggling to stay afloat in the little squares on the writing-paper. You may remember the story about the ant that fell into the water. A child who stubbornly insists on exchanging the pond in his heart for a balloon of whichever colour will become the target of sympathetic looks from the many warm-hearted passers-by. You know this child must have failed his mathematics test again and probably just scraped through his English oral assessment. Therefore, to grant him his wish, please put all the balloons you have into his small hesitant hand and let him bring them into his dreamscape. He will be smiling as he sits quietly on the fence, imagining himself soaring unconstrained through the skies.

When dusk falls, the balloons will drift into the child's dream, parking themselves over the pond like clouds. It is just that when we were young, we rarely looked up at the sky, for our eyes were too tiny to accommodate an entire humdrum afternoon.

The pond certainly exists. We disliked wearing shoes at that age and, barefoot, we ran faster than anyone else and never feared getting lost no matter how far we ran; regardless of the distance, we still had to be home for dinner. Usually, we would run until we reached the bodhi tree, where we would gasp for breath as we faced the pond, never believing that the innocent face reflected in the water would one day abandon childhood resolutely to be content rushing from place to place in an alien adult world. Against the afternoon sky, the innocent face looked terrified and confident at the same time.

Sometimes, when there was a heavy rain after lunch, we would sit by the wooden door watching the raindrops pelt the muddy ground, bringing forth sad and beautiful blossoms. As soon as the rain stopped, we would run barefoot to the bodhi tree, gasping for breath as we faced the pond, never believing that it could so nonchalantly bear the weight of all the rain that had just fallen, like how our ears could take in the endless rebukes from our mothers' lips on those naughty afternoons.

We also liked to toss the stones beneath the tree into the pond, quiet smiles on our faces as we tried to duplicate the blossoms created by the pelting rain.

You will not be able to remember ponds like this; actually, you will not find any trace of such ponds even if you scrutinize your photo albums. It is sad. The one place where they may still exist is the basic learners' dictionary, where a thoughtful and understanding editor may have appended a picture showing the phenomenon and shape of a pond. This is because the pond has been abandoned in your childhood memories; in fact, it completely ceased to exist when a shopping mall with three basement levels was constructed on the site. And so, people have to continue to trudge on in their dreams, searching for sources of water in their desert-like memories, a sheep's expression in their eyes.

Or perhaps a voice in the crowd will quietly say, 'Oh, a pond.' The balloons remain parked like clouds in the air in the dream; it is a pity their colours have abandoned them too.

Deserts and sheep

As for the desert, it exhales sorrow each evening, unhurried and resonant, like a train that never falls behind schedule, but it feels not the slightest tinge of sadness.

You probably cannot help but wonder why the desert is not humid and cool, since we drink water every day. But do we not urinate and record our unhappiness in our diaries daily, thereby depleting the water in the desert? That is why everyone cannot but maintain the desert in their hearts.

As for the rain, that was something that happened a long time ago. When one grows up, one forgets the demeanour of being caught in the rain and only remembers the colour of the umbrella.

A wooden chair

The days became muddled after we left primary school. Examinations grew in importance, academic scores became more terrifying, and teachers and adults began to measure good and evil in new ways. That was the period we gave our all to our studies, when we would smile sadly while recalling our primary school days. The wooden chair in our hearts was where we would still go when we

needed to escape. We would sit there quietly and placidly, saying nothing until sundown, before taking the familiar path back to our textbooks.

Subsequently, the days evolved to become an amnesiac fish diligently learning to swim. If we lost our way, we would instinctively go sit on that wooden chair in our hearts, where we might surprise ourselves by humming a nursery rhyme, the wooden chair giving off an air of unendurable plainness.

