

DREAM DIALOGUES

夢中通訊

Poet and essayist Ci Yun records his reflections on family catastrophes and illness, questioning the meaning and purpose of life. Through a series of self-revelatory essays, he engages in inner dialogues on the historical process of becoming his present self.

Marked by literary diction and reflections steeped in Buddhist thought, *Dream Dialogues* transcends the bounds of the typical family memoir. The author, Ci Yun, skillfully employs poetic language and imagery to trace the evolution of his relationship with his parents, and their responses to the tragedy of debilitating illness. Through the clarifying lens of time, Ci Yun reconciles himself to the past, granting readers an elevated perspective of measured detachment from the inevitable upheavals and challenges of life.

The book revolves around three core axes: self, mother, and father. Beginning from the self, Ci Yun explores his expectations of societal acknowledgement as a means to reveal his understanding of his own character. Next, he records his mother's descent into schizophrenia, and the evolution of their relationship over the course of more than a decade of illness, using his mother's inability to distinguish reality from delusion as the basis for a philosophical inquiry into the nature of truth. Finally, he turns his attention to the process of becoming an organ donor to save his father from liver cancer.

Dreaming is a significant theme throughout the book, taking on various meanings as it links each of the axes. Ci Yun learns to accept his mother's schizophrenia as a disease which impairs the ability to distinguish dreams from reality. In another episode, while lying in the intensive care unit following the donation of part of his liver, the author enters a series of nested dreams, like Russian dolls. There, free from the constraints of time and physical existence, he engages in a dialogue with his dream-reality.



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Dreams take on a new level of meaning in a discussion of *Dream Travels*, a text by Hanshan Deqing, the Ming dynasty Buddhist master. Therein, life itself is ephemeral – another dreamscape. The dichotomies of fortune and misfortune, honor and shame, and happiness and sadness are viewed as lessons in a long course of study. We need not wrestle with faith, nor struggle against suffering. We need only engage in a dialogue with time, allowing each moment to speak, whether it brings pleasure or pain – for all experiences, good and bad, provide the essential nutrients that will allow us to grow, and continue our life’s journey.

Collecting multiple award-winning essays by author and poet Ci Yun, *Dream Dialogues* is both a record of suffering, and an expression of the joy of creation. It is a book that gracefully confronts the realities of lost companionship and our basic aloneness. Yet, beneath the still surface of its detached prose, there is a vibrant, pulsing love of life, family, and the world we inhabit.

Ci Yun 崎雲

Ci Yun is the pen name of Tainan native and National Chengchi University PhD student Wu Chun-Lin. His essays and poems have been awarded numerous local literary awards, and been collected under the titles *The Tears of All Heavens*, *Animitta*, *Return*, *Lies About Time*, and *Dream Dialogues*.

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By Ci Yun

Translated by Shanna Tan

Mama Lotus

Whenever she had nothing better to do, Mama Lotus would ride her scooter back to her hometown to pick fruits and vegetables from the fields. Her memory seemed to reside in the past, but in fact, the old house she'd grown up in, where dreams, folk taboos, and village myths were once tended to, had been torn down years ago. On a small plot of the land, Fifth Uncle continued to grow easy crops like sweet potatoes, peanuts, luffa, leaving the rest to go to waste. Ever since Mama Lotus fell sick thirty years ago, her capacity to remember everyday things progressively worsened, and in recent years, even her sense of direction was failing. But because she refused to carry a phone outside, we had no way of knowing where she'd gone until she finally returned home late in the evening. To keep tabs on her whereabouts, I fell into the habit of asking her where she was heading whenever I saw her heading out, and gradually pieced together a map of her go-to places – Fanziliao in Jiali District, Fifth Uncle's house at Haidian Road, Anping Old Street, Fucheng Secondhand Bookshop, the library and Dawan Street Market.

On several occasions, Mama Lotus got ready to head out at the crack of dawn only to find her scooter missing. The first few times, we made a report and when the police came to check the security cameras, they found the scooter parked neatly outside the supermarket round the corner on the main street. After a few false alarms, whenever Mama Lotus complained that her scooter had gone missing again, I'd lead her to the supermarket and the neighboring drugstore barely a hundred meters away from our house. "Urgh, someone stole a ride on it again," she'd say in Hokkien, her brows deeply furrowed despite finding the scooter safely parked in front of the shops each time. "Why always me," she'd grumble as she lifted the seat storage and put on her helmet. Her brows remained knitted as she started the engine. "Only know how to steal mine." Her voice agitated, darkened by the helplessness and despair.

Get on, Mama Lotus said. I shook my head, saying that I'd grab a cup of coffee at the convenience store and walk back on my own.

There were times, like this, when Mama Lotus would happily invite me to join her, whether it was shopping at the small craft shops on Anping Street, admiring the flowers at the weekend farmer's market next to the Tainan Motor Vehicles Office, taking an evening stroll at Dadong Night Market or visiting Sister Pan – *Pan Jie* – at Fucheng Secondhand Bookshop in the basement. On the way, Mother would murmur into my ear, "Go slowly, you're going too fast, I'm scared." She enjoyed giving me a running commentary on changes in the street, like the old temple or a new shop, or sometimes she'd point out a place where an acquaintance used to stay, or tell

me about a delicious snack she'd discovered on her previous visit, or the shop she'd bought her new dress from. In such moments, Mama Lotus seemed to remember more than she'd forgotten, her nostalgia tinged with awe at the changes, as if the sights and the streets were the neurons in her brain, the muscles in her heart, the threads of her memory, and where her mind resided.

To Mama Lotus, everything about day-to-day life was in fragments, like slices of cake or loose tetris-like dream sequences. After repeated bumps and scrapes, the weathered pieces would crumble like loose soil falling through the cracks of time. Whenever she lost yet another piece of memory, she pushed the blame onto others and acted as if there was a gang of thieves out to get her. Mama Lotus had anemia, and whenever she stood up quickly, dizziness would hit her like a flash of blinding light and she thought the thieves would dart out in that moment to steal things that were seemingly not of value but always what she most needed in that moment – her scooter, reading glasses, an old photo, heels, health insurance card. She found the thieving creatures absolutely annoying, like sprites that pranked humans, or karmic creditors dancing in the shadows.

The world was out to spite her, and only after it succeeded would the forces of time and space crack a Cheshire cat grin and spit out the items they'd swallowed. Mama Lotus, whose memories were being devoured, would sometimes invite me to join her outings, but whenever I asked her to go somewhere, the answer would almost always be a *no*.

After multiple false alarms about the thefts, the police phoned us and gently suggested that besides her schizophrenia, we might want to keep an eye out on whether she might be displaying symptoms of dementia. I told them I understood, but Mama Lotus was adamantly against visiting the hospital “for no good reason”. Only when she herself felt, through bodily pains or otherwise, “a reason” for doing so would she oblige and be willing to listen to the doctor. If not, she'd insist that everyone was lying to her or worse, threatening her. Her scheduled appointments always involved herculean efforts to stage a whole scripted show. First was to book the appointment online, next was to work with the employees from the Health Bureau and the doctors and nurses from Jianan Psychiatric Center to assure her that it was just a routine check-up. To coax her into it, we'd tell her that her doctor had been asking how she'd been.

That said, if Mama Lotus refused to go to an appointment that'd already been fixed, she'd pretend to forget. And if we dared to chide her, God forbid, her expression would harden immediately. “I'm not sick, why for see the doctor!” She'd snap as she put on her earphones to shut out everyone and everything else. When that happened, all we could do was to give her space.

For decades, that was how stubborn she could be. She knew that we'd never abandon her, and I knew that she was truly aggrieved. To people outside the family, they only saw her friendliness and her eagerness for knowledge, taking this side of her as her personality. Like the bookshop owner who'd known her for years, who often said, “Your mom is just more sensitive.” Perhaps that was because her episodes came and went. One moment, everything was as usual, but the next instant, it was as if the whole world had turned against her and what everyone else knew to be untrue was real to her. The sudden, explosive wave of anger and despair, the extreme interpretations of our actions, the voices and images – a mix of memories and hallucinations – in

her head, the coagulation of time and space, the conversations with beings visible only to her...to Mama Lotus, everything was real.

And for us – her family – who could only watch from the side, things were real too. The bitterness, the helplessness, the heartaches – everything was real. A few months before her passing, Mama Lotus started spending more time watching clips on her phone and talking to the air. One of my younger sisters asked her who she was talking to, and she replied, “My dead classmate. They came in from the balcony and are asking me how I’ve been.” To her, death and life didn’t seem too different. Or rather, living felt like death, and it was just a matter of a difference in “state”. In the end, whether something was real or fake wasn’t important, and whether the person she’d been talking to was alive or dead didn’t matter much either.

Sometimes Mama Lotus seemed to be in between worlds. As we became more steeped in her world, slowly, we were learning, in some sense, to understand and to accept what was normal or otherwise for her. As if trying to understand a brand-new world from a child’s perspective, to figure out the roles that others played in her world, the reasons for her sudden waves of hate, sadness and suffering, and climbing the ladder into the cracks of her memories and seek out those lost, but important life experiences. And other times, it felt like meeting a shaman in seclusion who was using Mother as a mouthpiece, learning to understand the workings of another dimension, the complexity of the secular world, of destiny and fate in past lives, the afterlife. And out of the blue, she’d say something sagely, and even if that wasn’t her intention, it wiped away our worries at one go.

Like the time I was working on my master’s thesis and didn’t return home for nearly a year. After the final oral defense of my dissertation, I took a four-hour intercity bus back home, just in time for Mother’s Day. I opened the front door, bouquet of flowers in hand, only to be greeted by a frown. Mama Lotus was sitting in the living room, and she nodded at me, her tone polite yet distant. “Who are you? Why do you have our house keys?”

“It’s me, your son!” I exclaimed.

“My son is studying in Hsinchu! You look nothing like him.”

Hearing that, Father turned his head towards Mama Lotus. “You don’t even recognize your own son?”

Mama Lotus cocked her head, only to look quizzically at me in silence. It took a couple of days of living under the same roof for my face to slowly overlap with the one in her memories. “Remember me now?” I asked. She smiled. “How can I not know my own son?”

But to her, nothing was impossible to forget. And when she’d forgotten, what replaced me was either the baby-who-gave-her-too-much-grief-during-labor, the “always tardy” and “weak, sickly” child, or the son who “only returns home to Tainan when he’s free”, the one “studying and working in Hsinchu”. Yet, somehow, she’d never forgotten the way back to her ancestral home.

I was impressed at how, despite her failing memory, she could set off from Houjia, cruise down the roads on her scooter at a leisurely speed to her hometown more than twenty kilometers away, back to the abandoned land where the now-demolished ancestral house used to stand. Only much later did I learn that the first time she went there alone without telling any of us, she’d

trailed behind a Shing Nan city bus, following it through all its stops, as if they were the signposts for her to return to the hometown in her memories.

When she got lost, she'd ask a passer-by for directions. But in the countryside, sometimes she'd have to keep riding straight before meeting anyone and that was how, after repeated practice, she gradually familiarized herself with her own unique route to Fanziliao. Once, I asked her why a Shing Nan bus, and she replied that in her younger days, she'd worked at a factory and always took a Shing Nan bus home.

I marveled at her reckless bravery, but as her children, we were often worried. Worried that she'd never find her way back home. Grandpa used to drive Shing Nan buses in his younger days, and for a while, I'd wondered if it was his soul who came back to guide Mother into a limbo of travelling back and forth to her childhood home, as if tracing the path of a klein bottle. The straight country road, the archway of the temple, all the lost items piled up in the abandoned field behind. In the field, a hole, narrow but deep, hiding a piece of the universe behind the broken tiles and bricks.

Crickets and grasshoppers chirped loudly, the mirror-like hole reflecting a different world within. On the other side was the undisturbed village of the past, the traditional houses with low ceilings nestled amongst the fertile land, the dirt road that was occasionally caked with mud, the smell from the pigsty and chicken coops attacking our nostrils, wild dogs chasing one another, frogs camouflaged in the embankments. And on this end was the present, a quiet village town with fewer open fields, now taken over by villas, farms, and manors that stretched along the lengthening asphalt road. The new houses emanated a different mood – in front was the parking space, to the side was a garden where a dog barked loudly whenever a car zoomed past.

It was now a stretch of wasteland, mostly, but the place used to be home to a mud brick house where Mama Lotus was born and raised. In her life, she had two names, both written with a flower character. Lotuses in *Hsiu Lien* and orchids in *Kuei Lan*. Mama was Hsiu Lien when she was living in Fanziliao; Kuei Lan when she moved to Tainan City. As for me, I barely had any memories of Mother's ancestral home. The only things I remembered were the stretch of sugarcane fields filled with snails, frogs and grasshoppers. When I was in elementary school, I used to play amongst the sugarcane and corn crops with my older cousins. At that time, the world seemed infinite, and the mud beneath our feet soft. We spent our time catching earthworms, luring the mole crickets out by flooding their holes with water. Life was carefree; we had nothing to worry about. But not Mama Lotus. I remembered her telling me how she'd hated people calling her Kuei Lan.

After my grandparents passed away, Fifth Uncle took over managing the land. On a small plot, he grew an assortment of crops – brinjal, sugar cane, peanuts, bananas – whatever seeds he had on hand. Mama Lotus frequently rode all the way there to “help” Fifth Uncle gather the crops. Sometimes, she'd even bring back some soil in plastic bags. As for the crops she'd taken, she'd share some with Second Uncle and her friends. Only after that would she do her own gardening on our balcony. Because of that, Fifth Uncle would often complain about Mama Lotus, saying that

when she went to “inspect” the land, even the unripe fruits and vegetables weren’t safe from her hands.

Every time he discovered bald patches amongst the crops, Fifth Uncle would call to ask if Mama Lotus had gone to the fields again. He sounded more resigned than upset, as if he’d given up trying to dissuade her and was more worried that Mama Lotus hadn’t known that some of the crops were sprayed with pesticide. It was true that she had her fair share of mishaps at the fields. Once, fire ants swarmed out from nowhere to bite her until her hands and legs were red and swollen with pus. She suffered a terrible itch, and we spent a hefty sum getting medicine that wasn’t covered by insurance and it took several trips to the dermatologist before she recovered. Once, perhaps sick of all the nagging, after she picked all the crops, Mama Lotus planted an assortment of flowers in the soil – orchids, lotuses, flanked with stalks of red berries, creating a vibrant and prosperous sight. A few days later, Fifth Uncle, who usually had a soft spot for Mother, called to yell at her. Not because of the vegetables and fruits she’d taken, but because the flowers she’d planted were the fake flowers used as festival decorations.

Ever since that incident, Mama Lotus stopped going back as often.

On what would turn out to be her final trip, she pocketed some soil and poured it into a round fruit bowl at home. She patted down the soil and watered it before planting peanuts. From afar, it looked like we had lotuses growing on the balcony – the bowl resembled lotus leaves supported by a thin narrow stalk. I scoffed at the sight, waiting to see it turn into the butt of a joke. Mama Lotus told me I had no clue, and to mind my own business. When she got up early in the morning to do the laundry, she’d water the peanuts and a few days later, I was surprised to see hints of sprouting. Unfortunately, Mama Lotus passed away in her sleep a few weeks later, and with no one taking care of it, the soil became dry and cracked. From afar, the patterns reminded me of the tortoises we used to keep but died on the balcony when they crawled out of their tank one night.

Belatedly, I tried to save the seeds by loosening the soil and watering it, but it was a futile effort. Instead of moisture and growth, the wisps of sprouts now symbolized death and wilting. The dry soil had caked into a dull grey, much like Mama Lotus’s tight fists held across her chest on her deathbed. It was some time later – half a year – that we found out from other relatives that the ancestral land had actually been sold a long time ago. All this while, Fifth Uncle had had a different motivation for stopping Mama Lotus to return to the fields.

(This essay won the 44th Want Want China Times Literary Award prize in 2023.)

The Signs

The first signs began a few weeks ago.

The big wardrobe in the bedroom was where Mother and I divided our territories. Pleased that I’d returned home to Tainan, Mother generously parceled out a plot for me. “You can

have this space,” she said with child-like eagerness. The wardrobe was the old-school type with a built-in mirror in the middle pane and doors on both sides. The stainless-steel handles had long lost their shine, now dull with grime and scratches. Pulling out the two rows of drawers beneath would send little wood shavings flying, like dried grass being carried in the desert wind before landing on the old newspapers that lined the drawers.

Because the bedroom was small, there was no choice but to have the wardrobe face the bed, which, according to fengshui, was a no-no because having a mirror facing the bed would disturb the energy flow and whoever slept there would feel ill at ease. To counter that, my parents covered the mirror with red paper, but throughout the passing years, it’d started to peel until it was torn off during new year and never replaced again. When I was a kid, I’d believed that the red paper was hiding secrets lurking in the mirror. I’d read many stories of how mirrors were used to summon ghosts. Mirrors that’d been blessed in religious rites could be used to ward off evil spirits, deflect negative energy, but if placed in the wrong position, they could also attract rotten love affairs.

Such was the duality of mirrors. On nights when sleep evaded me, I’d stare at the red paper. Whose soul was trapped behind the mirror, I wondered. Or was it a portal for them to cross over to our world? As my thoughts drifted, I fell asleep. But on nights when I’d overthink, those thoughts followed me into my dreams.

In my dream, I lifted the red paper as if it were a curtain and walked through the mirror. Everything inside was the flip image of the outside world but in that symmetrical universe, I was the only person. I turned around, only to see that beyond the red curtain, I was still lying on the bed, arms on my chest rising and falling in a gentle rhythm. I turned back again to the world inside the mirror. I seemed to be standing inside someone else’s body. All around me was darkness and I felt myself turning from cold to hot. I yearned to return to the outside world, back to my own body, but every step I took was arduous, as if thorned vines had wrapped themselves around my body as I sunk deeper into a swamp. I jolted awake, only to find myself wrapped in my thick cotton blanket. My long hair was slick with sweat, plastered to my forehead and nape. I could feel myself burning up, but my forehead was clammy.

Such dreams always found me in summer, and I always reached for thick blankets in that season, not because I was cold, but for the safety and comfort of being wrapped up like a cocoon. Thinking I’d probably dream more frequently at the sight of the red paper, I didn’t cover up the mirror this time when I moved home. I stared at my reflection in it, marveling at how I’d wandered more than ten years only to return once more. The wardrobe had once been shared among me and my two younger sisters, but when I moved out for school, I’d taken along most of my clothes, while the ones left behind were stuffed into a big black plastic bag that was crammed on top of the wardrobe. And when my sisters got married, they moved out their belongings and gradually, the space was taken over by Mother’s new dresses.

These changes felt like a clear message that none of us were its true owners. Only Mother was the king of the wardrobe; everything inside was parts and pieces of her – her old heart, her new faith. After all, she’d spent much of her time in front of the mirror combing and blow-drying

her hair, and the glass held many of those memories. After I moved back, Mother shifted some of her dresses and clothes to the sliding cupboard in her bedroom, and to accommodate the new entrants, an assortment of junk was forced to surrender space. The dresses were stacked up like brick walls, turning the cupboard into her second wardrobe, an extension of her territory, a fortress to block out the strange noises in her head. Sometimes they were stacked too high and fell with a dull thud. She'd grumble, thinking that it was the mischief of those pesky spirits again. Sliding open the door, she took out the clothes, folded them neatly, and then muttered curses under her breath in an attempt to chase the spirits away before putting them back in position. That said, the sliver of territory Mother had so kindly bestowed upon me was barely enough for two or three jackets and a couple of shirts. Most of the time, I had to push hard to eke out a spot for myself and my clothes in that bursting wardrobe.