Death is a Tiger Butterfly

By Wu Ming-yi

But my heart was strangely quiet. Something had made it friendly to death.

Naoya Shiga, "At Kinosaki"

In that tiny, quenched image of vitality, a bird like a leaf dropped by the wind in passing, I felt something of our common, friable substance – a shared vulnerability…

John Haines, "Death is a Meadowlark"

In the department office, after the staff had all gone, I encountered my colleague Professor Kang, whose father had recently passed away. She looked exhausted. I sat across from her, going on about the things I'd been reading as she sorted through her mail. Suddenly, she looked up and asked, "How long did you spend grieving your father? Until you were able to move on?"

I couldn't say, my dear Professor Kang. You understand life more than me. With every breath you take, you are more in synchrony with the rhythms of the Earth, and closer to the Lord than me. I couldn't say, Professor Kang. I don't know how much time I spent grieving. Maybe I don't even know if there's a time when (or a space where?) one can finally move on.

On 14 April, 1964, Rachel Carson died in Silver Spring, Maryland. A few days later, at the funeral, the minister read a letter Carson had sent the previous September to her friend Dorothy Freeman. In the letter, Carson wrote about a trip they'd taken together, about how moved they were to witness a monarch butterfly migration in Maine at the end of the summer. Pouring out her feelings with every tear and every bead of sweat, Carson pondered the memory:

But most of all I shall remember the monarchs, that unhurried westward drift of one small winged form after another, each drawn by some invisible force. We talked a little about their migration, their life history. Did they return? We thought not; for most, at least, this was the closing journey of their lives.

But it occurred to me this afternoon, remembering, that it had been a happy spectacle, that we had felt no sadness when we spoke of the fact that there would be no return. And rightly – for when any living thing has come to the end of its life cycle we accept that end as natural.

Professor Kang, this is what Carson, not knowing that she was just half a year from the end of her own life cycle, was writing about, what the migrating monarchs had related to her in the whispered language of flight. They revealed the riddle of what life is, before leaving with the key to the riddle. For they were soon to be discarded by life: once the monarch mothers lay their eggs they lose the impulse to fly. They decompose into organic matter in the soil where, the following spring, a cluster of milkweeds will bloom.

Professor Kang, I admit the metaphor is inapt, because a father is not the same as a monarch butterfly. After all, I am an organic outgrowth of my own father's cellular tissue. We're bound by the same genetic chain, by a set of circumstances related to survival, you might say. Father bit his nails when his mind wandered, the same way I do. I have poor color vision, because he had poor color vision. But while he might have been worried about keeping the family shoe store afloat. I would just let myself sink into a nameless funk

between excitement and dejection. He used to stitch soles, while I would doodle on the shoeboxes.

To be honest, I don't know whether he was able "to regard the end as natural" when he was about to leave this world. But it seems to me that sorrow is a parasite emotion that cannot survive without its host. My father's sorrow passed away when his irises dulled, while I have given up on moving on from the space of grief. (Or should I say, the time?) I have even, at certain secret moments, been drawn out by sorrow into long discussions with my father, on several different occasions. God knows what a stranger I became to my father, from the year I turned sixteen! And how unrecognizable my father was to me after he suffered heart failure, after the vessels in his brain grew thin and brittle.

In that room of time I am unable to leave, I gaze out the window at scenes I've never seen before. A flying fox, spectral and crafty, streaks across the moon, a monarch butterfly, suspended in its chrysalis, flashes filaments of gold, while fierce fathead ants dismember everything they encounter: flaccid flesh, swollen lymph glands, humid femorotibial joints, clouded sclerae, the stench of rot, and rotten memory. I've almost forgotten the rough feeling of my father's hand in mine when I was a child. How I wish I could have the memory whole! The flesh is the first thing that goes, too, for decomposing leaves. In the end, all that's left is the skeletal pattern of the veins. The main vein holds up until the end, but nothing green can stay.

My sorrow will end when my life ends, irrevocably. As John Haines put it, death is a meadowlark, *for death is waiting, even in the voice of a meadowlark*.

Death is a monarch butterfly. Did she not just flutter her flame-like wings?

There are monarchs on record in Taiwan, especially in the south. But in the 1960s the monarchs mysteriously disappeared, all over Asia – swiftly, helplessly, heavy as a sigh. The great Taiwanese lepidopterist Mr. Chen Wei-shou once said that a monarch is so full of vitality that when you catch it to make a specimen, it's not easy to pinch it unconscious. Even if you pinch it so hard its body breaks, it will thrash about in the three-cornered envelope, as if refusing, while still able to fly, to die.

A close relation of the monarch (*Danaus plexippus*), the tiger butterfly (*Danaus genutia*) is still found in Taiwan. It is slightly smaller, and its wings don't bear the same black filigree, only a black mottling. But to predators, its beautiful body is just as much a symbol of death.

A symbol of death, residing in the flesh.

In mythic Greece there lived a surpassingly beautiful girl from Thessaly, Coronis by name. The sun god Apollo fell for her, and with her composed a song of love. But despite his divine perfection, Apollo had an ordinary man's jealous heart. He sent his pet bird to spy on Coronis, not suspecting the bird would return with a dubious message: rumor had it that Coronis had fallen in love with a mortal man.

In a rage, the god of truth lost the light of reason and called upon his sister Artemis, the goddess of the hunt, to use an infallible arrow to murder love on his behalf. But in the end, Apollo decided to burn Coronis alive. As he watched her beautiful face contort with

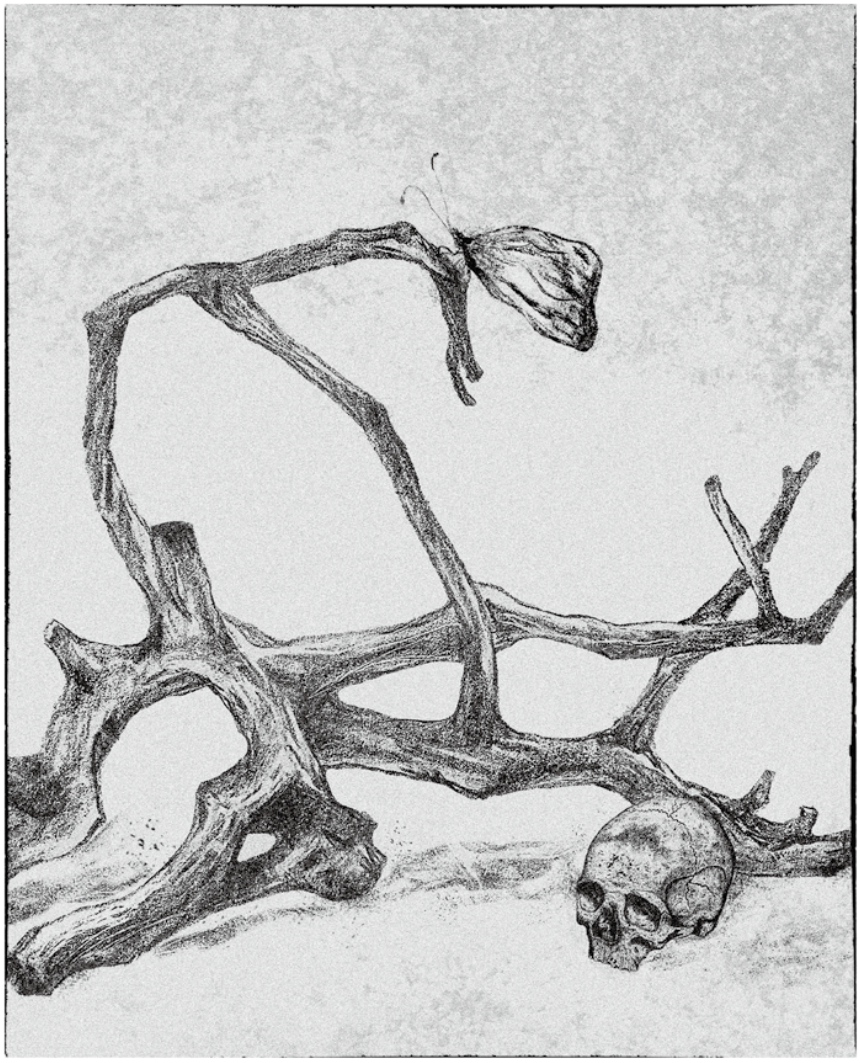

Illustration by Wang Yan

fear of flame, he remembered the beautiful moments they'd shared together, until he heard an infant crying. He managed to save the infant from the peril into which it had just been born. That infant, the fruit of Apollo and Coronis's love, had survived upon a thread of breath.

And the bird that delivered the message? Apollo, tormented by jealousy, sorrow and rage, changed its color, turning it from white to black. From that day on it could only caw.

Never again would good news be conveyed by mouth of crow.

The fortunate baby boy was raised by the centaur Chiron in a cave on Mount Pelion amongst the

myriad things of nature, on the border between the spirit and the human realms. He grew up investigating the efficacy of various medicinal herbs and testing out enchantments. For he was the future god of healers, Asclepius.

After Asclepius came of age, his therapeutic skill became so refined that his touch could restore the sick to health, the lame to wholeness, and even the dead to life. So many souls deserted the netherworld that Hades went to complain to Zeus: "The human realm is full, without a soul in hell. Is life without death not an affront to the law of existence?" he asked. Zeus heard his complaint, thought it just, and struck down the healer Asclepius with a thunderbolt.

And the wheel of life and death started to turn once again.

Apollo was furious at the death of his beloved son, and took it out on a race of giants, Zeus's arrow makers, pursuing them with death. Thereupon Zeus punished Apollo with descent into the mortal realm. Honestly, I feel that Zeus's punishment was no punishment at all, for a god of Olympus. Tormented by love, plagued by jealousy, maddened by anger, the Olympians were all more human than humankind.

Life and death, the gods of healing and hell, the spirit world and the human world, curing and killing – these dualities, these pairs of opposites seem to belong to two diametrically opposed dimensions, but in fact a shadowy chain binds them all. Do we not all exist astride this shadowy chain?

Milkweed, with soft lanceolate leaves and sailing cottony seeds, is so called because when you break its stem the wound will flow with milky sap. This sap contains alkaloids called cardiac glycosides, which, once refined, can be used to treat heart conditions. In Chinese medicine, all parts of the milkweed plant are used to reduce inflammation and fever, to cool corporeal fire and slake thirst, to detoxify and to disperse bruising. It is effective for wounds and lung infections, too. The root is used as an emetic, even as an antidote to snakebite and a treatment for tumorous growths. But, as we know, medicinal properties can coexist with poison in a single plant, and consumption of milkweed that has not been properly prepared leads to debilitation and difficulty breathing, to hyperpyrexia and tachycardia: one burns up as one's heart races. It's said that assassins in ancient Rome used to dip their weapons in milkweed sap.

Milkweeds belong to the genus *Asclepias*, named after the Greek healer. That frail but poisonous plant contains in the shadow of death the hope of life. Maybe it's a metaphor for the fact that not even a god can stop the wheel of life and death from turning.

Milkweed. Asclepias. A milk of life, a poison drink of death.

Indeed, the sap of a milkweed, of many species in the family Asclepiadaceae, is milk and honey to the larvae of the tiger butterfly. They absorb and accumulate the alkaloids through adolescence, brewing in their bodies a poison wine for would-be predators to drink. But self-protection can sometimes turn into suicide, as primary larvae sometimes choke to death trying to swallow sticky milkweed sap. Tiger butterfly larvae quietly chew their way through milkweed, gambling with their lives.

The butterflies never get particularly poisonous, and a single meal isn't fatal. Birds or praying mantises that feed on a tiger butterfly will throw up, feel faint, frail, generally debilitated. Debility is not death, but in nature the shades of death always follow the shadows of the feeble. Any predator that has consumed a tiger butterfly knows the fear of debility – the fear that it will be too weak to escape or resist when its natural enemies appear. Any hunter that has gotten sick on a tiger might remember its discomfort the next time it sees a flying fireball bearing tawny blemishes, a warning coloration, and leave it off the menu. It might also pass on butterflies that mimic the tiger: the Indian fritillary (*Argyreus hyperbius*) and female Danaid eggflies (*Hypolimnas misippus*).

In this way, the death of a tiger butterfly becomes a ritual self-sacrifice in a population's struggle for life.

In early summer, from time to time, a tiger butterfly lays her eggs on the milkweeds I grow on my balcony. Somehow she knows there's a cluster of edible plants out there. Like a wealthy woman checking the quality of a bolt of cloth, she brushes a leaf with her forelegs, to make sure that her young will have good food to eat. Just six or seven carefully placed eggs doom a potted milkweed to be eaten alive, which comes as no surprise: a tiger butterfly baby, with black and white and yellow stripes across its back and four swaggering palps around its proboscis, can increase its bodyweight three thousand times. Compare that with a human infant, who will only get about twenty times heavier from birth to maturity.

The primary larvae eat the epidermis off the leaves, and obtain sustenance from the flesh within. The paths they nibble in the leaves are like furrows, or secret portals, through the stuff of life. With the increase in larval body size and appetite, the paths gradually grow into arc-shaped holes, the freshly chewed margins of which ooze the milkweed's poison sap. Third instar caterpillars will chew on the petiole until it snaps, leaving the leaf hanging vertical. Then they eat their way around the margins. Ready to molt, each caterpillar selects the back of a leaf big enough to cover it, then spins a silken pad – to give it something to hold onto – clutches the leaf and sloughs off its old skin to release its bloated new body. A tiger in the final stage of larval existence (say, fifth instar) slithers like a little speckled snake up and down the stem, eating what it wants: leaves, petals, sometimes even the stem itself.

A final instar caterpillar curls itself into the shape of a comma, as if to signify that its life is about to enter a new phase, in which the order of its cells will be redisposed. It's as if it uses some kind of molecular converter to transform itself into an extraterrestrial. Watching a final instar caterpillar's final transformation is unforgettable: it writhes with particular violence to escape (or rip up) its old self as it molts into a bean-shaped chrysalis, a still soft body without organs, to enter the "pseudo-dormancy" of pupation.

About ten days later, the process of cell differentiation, division and redisposition is almost complete. The walls of the chrysalis thin, the color darkens, and you can vaguely see the corner of a wing inside. I wait and wait, and then for several minutes am utterly absorbed as the butterfly frees itself from the golden

cateniform of the chrysalis, a symbol of death, with its soft wet wings. As if plucking up the courage to face the world, it strolls until it finds a spot where it can spread its wings.

With its wings open, it is a golden Pegasus.

The butterfly hasn't been 'reborn' so much as thrown in the way of death. The only way for him to survive is to avoid all potential forms of fatality, for even though the angel of death will eventually catch up with any distracted, debilitated, or decrepit fleshly body, he has got to suck the nectar and dance the mating dance until the moment he is caught. He must never stop. Dance, dance, dance.

Actually, a "poisonous" butterfly is not invulnerable to all predators. Animals in the oyamel fir forests in which monarch butterflies winter have evolved either a stomach that can digest the poison or an instinct to avoid the toxic parts. Like gourmands, who know how to avoid the toxic organs of a pufferfish, the black-headed oriole and the black-headed grosbeak leisurely wring the necks and pluck off the wings with their beaks, dine upon the butterfly's flesh, and shriek with satisfaction. There's a local endemic species of "black-eared" opossum with a high poison-tolerance that feeds upon monarchs: the opossums have even matched their breeding season to the arrival of the monarchs, like a veteran fisherman waiting for the mullet to return.

"For every strategy, no matter how perfect, there is a counterstrategy," exclaimed the University of Cornell biologist Thomas Eisner upon discovering that the Brazilian ant has evolved specialized jaws that enable it to strip the bristles off a millipede. Emerson expressed the same idea poetically: "Nature is always consistent, though she feigns to contravene her own laws. She keeps her laws, and seems to transcend them. She arms and equips an animal to find its place and living in the earth, and at the same time she arms and equips another animal to destroy it."

I don't know whether birds and small mammals in Taiwan have evolved stomachs to neutralize the poison of a tiger butterfly, or the culinary skill to prepare one. But many times in the wild have I seen slightly dull pieces of tiger butterfly wing in a web whose architect sits to the one side, coolly waiting for its next meal. Which suggests that webs are sacrificial altars for tiger butterflies, even if spiders don't eat them.

A spider uses the four "looms" at the base of its abdomen to spin silk threads, which it hangs from branch to branch before lying in wait like the god of death at the gate to hell. Different strands have different textures and functions: sticky and wind-resistant, the woof strands are for catching prey, while the dry warp strands provide support. The spider usually walks only on the radial warp strands, and even if it touches a spiraling woof strand by accident, its claws and an oily substance on its feet prevent it from getting trapped in its own net.

To an unfortunate tiger butterfly, the web is not like the post beside which a proverbial Chinese farmer waited passively for rabbits, but rather an active trap. A web is structurally creative and intricate, reminiscent of a damask wall hanging in the Louvre. Some webs are invisible under sunlight, like silent killers. And some can reflect ultraviolet light, emitting a soft floral spectrum that insects find appealing. A web is

an amazing snare, combining optics, mechanics, and chemistry into a fantastic trap, a visual lure that beckons insects irresistibly.

Brimming with toxic cardiac glycosides, a tiger might well, in a happy hunting mood, get beguiled by the colorful curse a spider has wrought in silk and dive right in. Maybe there are spiders that can secrete digestive enzymes to transform the glycosides in the flesh of the tigers into carbohydrates and digest the once flying life into venom, into spermatozoa, into the kinetic mobility of a segmented monster, into an amazing aptitude for ultraviolet hunting.

But to the butterflies, considering that only a few will be predated upon, the real concern is not predation but the disappearance of edible herbs and habitat. The monarch faces a crisis of survival with the decline of its wintering ground in Mexico. Once the wintering forests disappear, millions of monarchs will lose their journey's destination.

In a multi-generational flying relay of over four thousand kilometers, where shall they find a place to rest?

But it's bigger than butterflies. The disappearance of the forest might mean more than the collapse of mutually antagonistic or reinforcing survival networks within the food chain. It might mean spiritual aphasia, the loss of a medium of interspecies intercourse. In pre-Columbian Mexican mythology, the arrival of the monarchs meant the return of the spirits of the dead. Over ten million monarchs (or spirits) gather in the cooling season each year to gaze at the living. If the monarchs one day disappear, Mexicans who attend to the old stories and believe that the ancestors still exist in some form will lose contact with the departed forever. And the souls that return every year will, along with memory, melt away in the sun.

"Death" does not just signify the departure of an embodied spirit. The dead take with them the gazes and the tears of many living beings, among other things.

Some time after my father died I reread Naoya Shiga's "At Kinosaki".

"At Kinosaki" is a record of a conversation the author had with death while convalescing after a traffic accident. One morning, in a languid countryside in which even the air circulated slowly, he saw a dead bee on the roof of the porch:

Its legs were doubled tight under it, its feelers dropped untidily over its head. The other bees seemed indifferent to it, quite untroubled as they crawled busily around it on their way in and out. The industrious living bees gave so completely a sense of life. The other beside them, rolled over with its legs under it, still in the same spot whenever I looked at it, morning, noon, night – how completely it gave a sense of death. For three days it lay there. It gave me a feeling of utter quietness. Of loneliness. It was lonely to see the dead body left there on the cold tile in the evening when the rest had gone inside. And at the same time it was tranquil, soothing.

Naoya Shiga wrote that his heart was strangely quiet, that something had made it friendly to death.

Soon after, while walking by the river, he saw a rat struggling for its life in the water, with a skewer thrust through the skin of its neck. Badly wounded, the rat swam to the bank and tried to climb up, but got caught

on the rocks, and all the while a rickshawman and a few children were chucking stones at it. Naoya Shiga wrote:

I did not want to see the end. The sight of the rat, doomed to die and yet putting its whole strength into the search for an escape, lingered stubbornly in my mind. I felt lonely and unhappy. Here was the truth, I told myself. It was terrible to think that this suffering lay before the quiet I was after. Even if I did feel a certain nearness to that quiet after death, still the struggle on the way was terrible. Beasts that do not know suicide must continue the struggle until it is finally cut short by death. What would I do if what was happening to the rat were happening to me now? Would I not, after all, struggle as the rat was struggling?

All mortals must die. The rocks and stones that forced the rat into the water are everywhere. I imagine Naoya Shiga, in a body that might at any moment be near to death, asking, and pondering answers to, these questions, whispering words upon the page as a way of testing his temperature in the face of death. As he wrote, he remembered strolling barefoot on the path first thing in the morning and watching as everything proceeded slowly and calmly, as the cool of the morning dew and the sting of the grass were clearly conveyed through the soles of his feet.

As Naoya Shiga wrote in "At Kinosaki", "To be alive and to be dead were not two opposite extremes. There did not seem to be much difference between them." As Martin Heidegger wrote in *Being and Time*, people are beings-toward-death. As the sick old lady who lingers in the "Swedenborg Room" in Lars von Trier's miniseries *The Kingdom* is fond of saying, death is the duty of all who believe in souls. And, in a turn of phrase with which you, Professor Kang, as a Christian, must be familiar, as Jesus said to Simon Peter, death is an exodus, literally an out-going, a *de-parture*. Death is just departure, just departure.

A body is first the house of a living soul and then the house of death. One leaves, the other moves in, and the house collapses in a chilly heap of dust. That's why we must shed tears: to maintain appropriate levels of humidity and temperature for a living being.

Professor Kang, you asked me how long I spent grieving my father's death, when I was able to move on, and I said, "You know, I can't actually remember. That's how time passes." Forgive me, Professor Kang. I was lying. Actually, time hasn't passed, not at all. My memories are like the people of Pompei, completely buried by Vesuvius in volcanic ash, preserving postures of flight, repast, sleep, love and fear, muscles tense but eternally slack. At that, I silently withdrew from the department office, quietly closed the door behind me, walked slowly down the stairs and opened my umbrella.

Maybe forgetting is necessary, as John Haines said. Isn't it so? In English, "lethal" is cognate both with the genus of a butterfly I once wrote about – *Lethe europa pavida*, the bamboo treebrown – and with Lethe, the river of forgetting.

Forgetting is necessary, but not inevitable. As the highway lights flowed past on the drive home, many scenes streamed through my mind. There, in the depths of a snowy oyamel forest, was fire, while from every twig, from every hole in every tree, from every pine needle there hung clumps of stiffened monarch butterflies (at a temperature that would chill even

spirits). The ground layer of the forest was covered in hundreds of thousands of butterfly bodies, frozen to death. The dead butterflies were still brilliantly colored, legs upcurled, immobilized mouthparts elongated. A possum scurried about, holding corpses in its mouth, swiveling its enchanting eyes. The yellow highway lights poured down like rain and turned to liquid light. A cage of society finches I raised as a child was attacked by a rat one night. All that remained of one finch was a head in a bloody corner of the cage, while the other kept pecking away at food pellets with terrified eyes and broken wings. The snow melted, into water that seeped into the soil. In the army, I dug a grave for Little Yeller, as the corner of its mouth dripped blood under the blistering sun of southern Taiwan. Just the day before he'd been wagging his tail and rubbing against my army issue 57 rifle! Before Father's casket was nailed shut, my elder brothers and I put a gold ring on his finger. Was that cold hard piece of matter I felt through the white glove the hand that would hand me balloons? Was that my father's hand?

The rain got so heavy I had to turn the wipers up to high.

A monarch butterfly takes flight. Ten thousand monarch butterflies take flight. Ten million monarch butterflies take flight, a fireball takes flight, the spring season takes flight, resolution takes flight. All the leaves in the forest seem ready to fly north. One generation of monarch butterflies can't complete the journey, but a younger generation will take over. The airborne odyssey will continue, in fits and starts.

Maybe only things which have once been given life, which have once been happy or sad, will die. Including lifeless bodies that we regard as "seemingly alive." But they too might literally come to life, somewhere.

Professor, have you ever seen migrating monarch butterflies? Although I've never seen a live monarch butterfly before, when I sight tigers in the wild I imagine a scene of monarch migration. If I have the chance I must go to the oyamel forests of Mexico to see the spirits of the dead who have descended from the north. Until that time comes, I'm happy to keep observing the golden Pegasus that flies over Taiwan, from my sundeck or wherever I happen to be in the wild.

Tiger butterfly of mine, in the cramped black display of my camera tremble flame-gilt butterfly wings. You know that spirit lingers in that mobile body. You know that all joy and sorrow linger there.

You know death is a tiger butterfly, and so are joy and sorrow.

Translated by Darryl Sterk

Excerpts from "At Kinosaki" by Naoya Shiga
translated by Edward Seidensticker