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## Writing Sample

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Excerpt from Atlas – Archaeology of an Imaginary City and excerpt from Histories of Time.

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**DUNG Kai-cheung****Two excerpts****I.****1. Spring Garden Lane**

Spring Garden Lane was one of the oldest streets in Hong Kong. It had already become a settlement for British people on the Island when Hong Kong was first opened as a treaty port, and it is said that the first governor's official residence was located on this site. According to research by Ye Lingfeng, the word 'spring' in Spring Garden does not refer to the season (as in the Chinese version of the name) but to a water source. Ye quotes a passage in John Luff's *The Hong Kong Story* describing the scene as it looked in the summer of 1841, on the stretch of road going west from Wong Nai Chung on Hong Kong Island:

On the way, where they are marking out the road, you pass through a most pleasant spot, where a cool spring gushes from the ground. This pleasant spot is quite a contrast with the rest of the water front, its richer foliage giving it an almost English appearance. One or two people have it in mind, for the shady trees will form a most welcome garden spot. The Spring, gushing cool and sweet from the ground suggests the name its first occupants will bestow upon it: Spring Gardens.

Ye Lingfeng also describes a lithograph by Murdoch Bruce in 1846, called 'Spring Gardens':

The houses are two-storeyed buildings in the tropical colonial style with spacious balconies. A European woman holding a parasol is walking her pet dog down the street. A broad path down the middle has been made for horse riding or light carriages. It shows how prosperous the street was at this time.

This ideal residential environment was originally located at the Praya at the starting point of Queen's Road East, which later became Wan Chai. After more than a century of land reclamation, the present Spring Garden Street became quite far from the waterfront. There are at least two different versions chronicling the rise and decline of Spring Garden.

Norman Elton's *Legends from the Four Wans and Nine Yeuks* relates the life story of a British merchant, Jonathan Parker. Parker was one of the first to move into Spring Garden in the early years, and some people say that the name Spring Garden started with him. He and his wife Camille passed an idyllic existence in Spring Garden, where they gave birth to a son. Parker and his wife lost their lives when they were attacked by local bandits while on a walking trip in the hills near Wong Nai Chung in the summer of 1848. Their relatives took their son back to Britain, and Parker's property in Spring Garden gradually fell in to disrepair. Fifty years later, their son Charles, who had become a successful businessman, returned to Spring Garden, where he put considerable effort into rebuilding the property, restoring Spring Garden to its former glory. Charles married the daughter of a wealthy Chinese merchant, and they resided in Spring Garden for the rest of their lives. Thereafter Spring Garden once again passed from prosperity to decay, and this time its decline was not reversed.

The local historian Liu Tao, however, gave an entirely different account in his *Stories of Hong Kong Streets*:

As the British residents in Hong Kong moved into the cooler areas on the Peak, the area around Spring Garden lost its former gentility. It eventually degenerated into a quarter for low class prostitutes, known locally as *dai lumba* (literally, big numbers). These prostitutes, whose clientele was exclusively foreign sailors and seamen, were frequently treated with brutality. A British sailor named Charles, whose nickname was 'the Avenger', raped and then strangled a Chinese prostitute. When the Hong Kong police authorities issued a warrant for his arrest, his drowned corpse was eventually discovered in the harbor.

In the 1996 street directory, Spring Garden Lane was only one of many narrow lanes in the old part of Wan Chai, indistinguishable from nearby Stone Nullah Lane. Spring Garden withered and dried up between these tales of restoration and revenge.

## 2. Ice House Street

Ice House Street was a hillside road located in Central. Its upper end was connected to Lower Albert Road, and it intersected with Queen's Road at the bottom. Originally there had been an ice warehouse on this street, established in 1845, which imported natural ice blocks from America for the consumption of foreigners living in Hong Kong during the summer and to provide cold storage for foodstuffs. It also supplied

ice free of charge to local hospitals. Since Queen's Road ran alongside the harbor in those days, it was convenient for ships transporting the ice to unload their cargo for storage at the harborside. The Ice House's profitability was threatened when a merchant set up a factory for manufacturing ice in Spring Garden in Wan Chai in 1866, and it eventually stopped importing natural ice in 1880. The Ice House and its competitor, the Hong Kong Ice Company, were both taken over by Dairy Farm in 1918.

As it happens, the Chinese name of the street does not correspond exactly with its English name: pronounced *suet chong* in Cantonese, it literally means 'snow factory'. The Chinese word for 'ice' is *bing*, but at that time, Hong Kong people were in the habit of referring to 'ice' as 'snow' (*suet*). Another thing is that the 'snow factory' was not actually a factory (*chong*) but a godown (*fu*). In short, the correct translation for the English name would have been *bing fu*.

There is an argument to the contrary, however, according to which the term 'snow factory' is an accurate description of the company, or, at least, that manufacturing snow was one of the Ice House's sidelines. According to this claim, the 'snow factory' in its early days was investigating how to manufacture snow, as well as supplying ice to local residents. This suggests that snow might actually have been manufactured, that is, creating the effect of a mock snowstorm in imitation of the weather conditions in the expatriates' home country. The idea was both to ease the discomfort caused by the summer heat (to which the foreigners found it hard to adjust) and to dispel their homesickness at the lack of a true winter. In this sense, 'snow factory' is not a mistranslation but a wholly appropriate term for the enterprise's other function and purpose.

The advantage of 'snow factory' as a term, compared with 'ice house', is that it actually comes closer to revealing the true nature of colonial society. We have no way of knowing now whether the plan to manufacture snow eventually succeeded, but it was at one time a very agreeable (although secret) custom to go to the Ice House to experience the joys of a chilly European winter. There was supposed to have been a fully furnished Victorian-style living-room in the cellar, where ladies and gentlemen could sit at their leisure and enjoy the warmth and comfort of afternoon tea around an open fireplace.

In the colony's early days there was a story that circulated widely among the local Chinese that the first act of each new arrival from Britain was to head straight for the Ice House in Central to put their memories and dreams into cold storage in the cellar, lest they rot in the cruel sub-tropical climate.

Hong Kong people call ice-cream 'snow cake' (*suet gou*). Dairy Farm, the company which took over the Ice House, afterwards became a major manufacturer of

ice-cream. Its depot used to be in Ice House Street, next to the Ice House, and the building afterwards became the premises of the Fringe Club, a place where artists could perform their dreams whether sweet and creamy or icy cold.

### 3. Sugar Street

Sugar Street was a short street located between Yee Wo Street (named after Jardine Matheson, known in Cantonese as the Yee Wo Company) and Gloucester Road in Causeway Bay, although it's so short it seems hardly worth mentioning on a map. There used to be a sugar refinery in the street, hence the name. However, the street also had an unofficial name, Silver Dollar Street, because the refinery's forerunner on the site was a mint. In fact, the interchangeability of coinage and sugar casts an intriguing light on local historical developments.

In 1866, the government invested 400,000 dollars in the construction of the Hong Kong Mint in Causeway Bay to mint its own silver coinage (of the kind in common use in Britain), also re-minting on commission new silver dollars in place of the clients' old coins. But the mint did poor business, failing to make a profit, and financial difficulties brought operations to an end in 1868. The plant was sold to Japan for 60,000 dollars, and the site was bought by Jardine Matheson for 60,000 dollars for development as a sugar refinery.

However, there is another version of the mint's closure. According to rumour, a strange event took place when the mint first went into operation. After the workers had poured the molten silver into the casting molds, what emerged at the other end were heaps of sparkling white sugar. The same thing happened continuously over the next two years. Reluctant to let it be known and obliged to compensate its clients from its own silver reserves, the government suffered severe financial losses.

This massively extravagant by-product of the mint was initially allocated for internal consumption only, supplied to high officials and departments for use in sweetening their afternoon tea. Later, some of it was disposed of in secret at street markets, or shipped to other British colonies in Southeast Asia, even to Britain itself. There was a somewhat exaggerated claim that Queen Victoria and members of the royal family were particularly fond of sugar produced by the Hong Kong Mint because it represented such good value. Although the side effects of the mint's malfunction were within acceptable boundaries, nevertheless the Hong Kong government in the end closed the mint down, partly because the costs were far too high and also for fear that the truth would leak out.

Commentators believed that selling the mint to Jardine Matheson was a

government cover-up to conceal the scandal; some even believed that Jardine Matheson had been a partner in constructing the mint in the first place. Once it had bought the mint and ordered the purchase of new plant, the sugar produced by Jardine Matheson was sold locally and in China. People have speculated that its sugar trade was enormously prosperous, becoming perhaps its most important source of profits for apart from opium. Lo Tung, in his *Record of Strange Happenings in Hong Kong*, quotes a worker at the refinery as saying that every day they would pour the raw materials for refining white sugar into the machines, while what emerged at the other end was a steady stream of sparkling, sweet silver coins.

The refinery was subsequently destroyed in the typhoon of 1874, when the whole plant and warehouse stock were swept out to sea by huge waves. Seamen and fishermen have testified that following the disaster the brackish waters of Victoria Harbor began to taste sweet, and there was also a tendency for fish caught in the harbor to be over-sweet and fatty. The refinery was not rebuilt, for reasons that are not clear, and only the name lingered on as witness to its former existence. Lo Tung summed up his narrative with the following enigmatic line in colloquial Cantonese: 'That's how it goes: feed them sugar and you feed them shit'. It remains unclear whether this is a comment on the ruling strategy of the colonial government in exercising its political and economic powers or to the operation of divine justice.

**From *Atlas – Archaeology of an Imaginary City***  
*Translated from the Chinese by Bonnie McDougall*

## INITIUM

Light. Consciousness told her. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth and then said, Light. No, I'm not talking about God. I'm talking about her consciousness. In the beginning it was light first, then the heavens and the earth. To her this was how it happened. For the time being, however, she did not know the heavens or the earth. She knew only light, like a boundless ocean. In the light there was a faint and yet far-reaching pulse, just like the rhythmic vibration of a photon. No, that was sound, not light. That was the sound coming from inside her body, and it was light that wrapped her up from the outside. But she could not hear. She could not hear, but she listened with her body, just as she received light with her body. That was not strong light, obviously not. Rather, that light was indistinct, smooth, pristine, hazy, not marked off from shadow, not opposed to darkness, hardly perceptible and yet undeniable. That was definitely not the light from a moment of explosion. No, not the light from the Big Bang. There was in fact light before there was light. But one will always come to that point in time, that line of demarcation where nothing became something, where there was no before. But she could never know for sure where that *where* was. Knew only light. And the rhythm in her body. The mechanical beat that was so definite, distinct, never disorderly, always stress-timed, like a poem with a strict meter and a perfect rhyme, and yet surprisingly devoid of monotony. Around the corners of her mouth there seemed to appear the hint of a smile. Perhaps that was just a reflex action in a half-awake state. She was not in a dream, she knew. At least not sinking all the way into the deep sea of a dream. Through the eyelids that she could not yet open, she seemed to see the hazy, changing light in the shallow layer of the water, but still she felt resistance and could not rise above the surface of the water. She could feel that someone was moving on the surface of the water but her consciousness was rising and sinking below the surface of the water. That's God moving on the surface of the water, yet all along you've been talking about consciousness. You mean the Spirit. Is it possible to take consciousness and God as two aspects of one body? And the water is the body, and the surface of the water is the skin? Consciousness emerges from the surface of the body, and attains union with God. I'm afraid metaphors cannot bear much pressing and squeezing like this. What I want to talk about is the state in the beginning. Her body could not feel the force of the waves but her skin was savouring the touch of the undercurrents – those continuous, cool caresses, like fingertips, apparently shy but actually daring, touching one after another (but it also seemed all at once) the nervous endings all over her body. But her heartbeat was still so regular, not upset or bumpy at all. She

felt like a clock in the midst of elusive light and ever-changing shapes, as awkward and stubborn as a huge rock, standing alone at the farthest corner of the earth, experiencing time, but gradually losing its identity, losing its memory, and not knowing whether it would become a lighthouse that guides sailors, or a submerged rock that spells death for sailors. Oh yes, I am a clock. At this point she was certain about this.

The consciousness of being a clock was foregrounded at this point, but she did not know time. That is something we will talk about later. She at this point only knew that somewhere slightly to the left of the centre of her chest something was pulsing beat by beat. For the time being, she could not recall the term 'escapement', but she could feel strongly the alternation of locking up and letting go that allowed her to mark her own coordinates in the big big sea. The gentle beat in her left chest radiated out and met resistance at the left side of her body. The soft resistance came from the mattress bearing the weight of the body lying sideways. The vibrations naturally centred on her left nipple. The thermometer-like sensitive nerves in the nipple, like new sprouts, knew the moist, slightly cool air. Diffusing the milky colour of spring. No, in that light, still unseparated from darkness, colours did not yet exist, nor did forms. Only focus of consciousness, as if the erect nipple was the whole body. Following the soaring movement of that point of focus, the flesh seemed to be spiralling slowly upwards. The deep slow breathing, however, drew the breasts back to a half-drunk, unawake state, and the minimal mass of the body, because it was lying sideways, now intensified their sense of existence and their mutual gravitational attraction. The left shoulder, and even the upper part of the left arm curling on the bed, grew numb under the weight of the body and lost their sense of being real. The right arm curling in front, unreservedly exposed to the moist cool air, looked as if it was about to strike or block a blow. Her body heat was outlined by the contours created by the relaxed capillaries running from the outside upper arm to the elbow, bent at 90 degrees, and through the outside elbow to the fingers touching the forehead. The curve formed by the neck and the right shoulder, because of the tension between the tight muscles and the soft surface of the skin, seemed set to produce a dramatic reaction from the body at the slightest touch. At the base of the neck curve hung a necklace that looked like a string of ants. The pendant fell on the bed, like an anchor at the end of a chain pulling slightly at the neck. At the top of the neck curve her hair was flowing loose. From the way the scalp tightened and loosened, one could feel the strands of hair crawling over the pillow onto the bed sheet like the tentacles of a jellyfish. The hairline on the side of the face described a curve that laid bare the ear, which looked a bit too prominent. Consciousness flowed downwards along the spine, as if passing through conductors, and met resistance at



some point between the slightly asymmetrical shoulder blades. Consciousness tried to force its way through but the spinal joints got stuck at some indeterminate point. She was certain that she was not in a dream. She could almost see herself passing through her body, but she could not comprehend this in terms of images. That was definitely not like climbing a slope, even though the spine, which bent slightly to the right, looked just like a gently undulating slope in its present posture. Even lying on the left side could not completely offset the abnormal curvature of the spine. The whole body was twisting and turning spirally on its central axis. Straightforward progression was impeded. Entry was impossible except by means of a similar spiral movement. It seemed as if the whole chest and the organs in the abdomen, following the spiralling axis, were beginning to twist and turn slowly in a minute but undeniable movement. This subtle twisting and turning of the interconnected muscles, bones and organs was just like a sculpture of time. No, it was rather a clay body being pressed and squeezed by the hands of time on a turntable. She imagined a pair of invisible hands slowly wrapping around her waist from behind. That pair of hands had long delicate fingers, like the lips of small fish, extremely gentle, not rough at all, but gradually her turning waist was transforming in those soft hands. The fingers halted at the two sides of her abdomen – one could not tell whether it was just out of shyness, or it was a deliberate attempt to delay the process. They moved downwards and pressed the sides of her pelvis. The fingertips imprinted a dent into the part where the legs joined the abdomen. Then the palms polished her small hips in a circular movement. She felt her body evolving. The lower part of her body, formless, like prehistoric fish, was being slowly shaped into a pair of curling legs. Those nimble fingers carefully fashioned the back thighs, bent the knees, crafted the curves of the calves and heels, made the front thighs parallel, and finally came to the dent where her legs met, that place where light had not reached. That pair of hands halted. Unless in accordance with God's will, Raise your staff to divide the water and open up a passage in the seabed. She shook her head, no, her whole body stayed still but she shook her head in her consciousness, saying, Don't! You'll drown. Unless – we board the ark of promise, this is the only way we can survive the flood. This was silent speech in her consciousness, taking the form of lip shapes, of writing. It was only after she said those words that she felt her left abdomen and lower left ribs pressed against something that seemed real and yet unreal. Getting closer to the surface of the water, her mind was bathed in much brighter light. A book.

The book had been there all along. It was the book you had been reading in bed before you fell sleep the previous night. You did not reach underneath your body to take it away, but not because you could not move. You could get up whenever you wanted. But you let the book press against the side of your abdomen. It was just a

little book in paperback, a very old edition, which made the mouldy yellowing pages all the more soft. It did not feel painful in any way against your skin. You could almost smell the musty odour of this old book. It felt especially warm when mixed with the odour emitting from your uncovered armpits. It was as if you and the book had long been fused together to form one body. You had become not only the content of the book, a character in the book, but the book itself. You had been opened. You had been read. You had been understood, or not understood, or misunderstood. You had been closed. But who would read this book that was you? For many years now, you yourself had been your only reader. You had become a library. You had lived in yourself. But so far no one had visited this library, and no one had read the books inside. You displayed yourself, unreservedly, longing to be decoded. But perhaps you had already become a book that was too big, too thick, too deep, and too old.

Although your body was so flimsy, your consciousness was so young and innocent. You would scare away all the readers, if there still lived humans who could be called readers in this world. So you opened up yourself day after day, reading yourself. Your delicate flat abdomen seemed so incongruous with this musty old book, but every book you touched would keep memories fresh and alive. You were the patron saint of books, the saviour of books. Now you remembered what that book was about. It told of the history of time, its possible beginning, and its possible end. No, it was about you. You had not been mixed with a character in the book, no, there were no characters in this book. You had become its theme. You had become the flesh of time. In you, the history of time could be re-presented, and all forms of time could be put into effect.

Gradually you remembered. You were reading this book when that person appeared. That happened the previous day. But it could also be the previous year. The previous day or the previous year, it did not make much difference to you. All the same, what you remembered was that particular moment. You were seated at a window on the second floor of the library, reading. You had just found this book in a box containing the things left behind by your deceased father. Perhaps, you had actually found this book in the box many times before. But every time you found this book, it was like the first time – it made you feel so curious, so fresh. So you brought the book to the reading desk at the window on the second floor. You did not find the content of the book difficult. You even found it very familiar, but still it was just as amazing as the first time you read it. Just when you felt a bit drowsy and stood up to take a look at the view outside the window, you saw someone following the path down along the pond and climbing the uphill steps. That person emerged from among the trees at the top of the slope. He stood on the opposite side of the road, and lifted his head to look at the library on this side of the road. At that point he probably

did not see you standing behind a small framed window on the second floor, but you saw very clearly how he lifted his head and squinted his eyes. A stranger. A man. Very young. You could not remember how many years it had been since anyone visited this library in the hills. You were not frightened, but not exactly excited either. Just very naturally, you ran down the stairs to the ground floor of the library and, through the glass doors, saw this young man already standing outside. He saw you, too. His face showed not surprise, but rather expectations realised. Through the glass doors you stared at each other, like stars separated by light-years. Then you crouched down to unlock the doors, pushed them open, and greeted him without a trace of shyness. You also greeted the coolness, the wetness, the fragrance of spring flowers, and the smell of soil outside. You seemed to remember asking at that time, Where do you come from? But how it was possible for you to ask, you could not be certain. You only knew that the man actually understood and answered, I come from the book. And you actually knew what he meant. Perhaps you read the answer from his lips. Perhaps he said nothing and just pointed at your right hand hanging at the side. Only then did you realise that you had been holding in your hand that book about the history of time. He did not lie. He came from the book pressed against your left abdomen. And therefore seemed to be derived from your body. Just near the lowest rib in your left chest. Now, your consciousness returned to the present moment. You felt something touching your ribs, as if they were touched by God's fingers. This touching caused you to tremble, though on the surface you did not move a bit. But actually no one had touched you. You were alone, curled up naked, lying sideways. If there was anyone else, it could only be him, that young man named Fa, literally 'flower'. Probably he was standing on the threshold of the room, looking at your back from that angle. The faint blue light of morning coming through the windows sketched out your small delicate body. Your hair flowing loose, the blocking arm in front, the ribs undulating like small hills, the slightly dented sides of the abdomen, the slightly bulging side hips, the curling legs. Like a newborn landmass emerging from under water. You closed your eyes, and in this way pictured Fa. You pictured him gazing at you from behind. You could not be absolutely sure, but you did not intend to turn around to make sure. You did not know whether or not that pair of invisible hands belonged to him. And you did not know whether you were a masterpiece shaped by his hands. Or he was a creation of your imagination.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Looking at what was before my eyes, I suspected, This was the moment God created the heavens and the earth. A tiny little room, a row of glass windows on one side, and bookcase walls on the other three sides. Outside the glass windows were the deep blue sky and the green hills but, if one stared long enough, the scene became gradually suffused with a

light like that of a glow-in-the-dark watch. It was as if seeds of light sown in the darkness of night had already sprouted secretly before the sun actually returned. At the bottom of the picture created by the window frame were tree crowns of different shapes, which fused into a thick intense dark green, faintly billowing. Those were the trees in front of the library. Beyond the treetops were the pond and the lowland overgrown with bushes. The pond water seemed to have solidified into murky jade. The path along the pond was covered with weeds, and the stone bridge was shadowed by trees. Access from outside seemed non-existent. Beyond the pond were the woodlands. Beyond the woodlands was where the disused railway station was supposed to be, but in the light and from the angle at the present moment its existence was doubtful, too. Still further, the coast of the inland sea could be seen. From the coast to the library, the terrain was not steep but, because of the continuous sweep of woodlands, the area looked isolated from the outside world and gave the false impression that the library was located deep in the hills. At a time when the sky was getting bright but not completely bright, the dark green belt of trees seemed a thick soup in ancient times, and fogs of early spring were wafting over the soup. Lying across the middle of the picture created by the window frame was the narrow elongated inland sea, waveless, unchanging in colour, producing the paradoxical impression of a stretch of lifeless bald land. On the opposite coast of the sea were the ruins of high-rise residential towers built many years ago. Beyond those tombstone-like buildings rose high hills locked up in fogs and clouds. The only open hole in the cloud layer above the hills revealed a small patch of sky, and released a blue light that seemed lacklustre and unextraordinary at first sight but became gradually haunting under my steady gaze. In the darkness that had not yet been driven away completely, this light allowed most contours and colours to remain concealed, but nevertheless set in relief just a few details and in this way blew them up out of all proportion. This light illuminated and yet at the same time concealed. This light filled up the whole picture, and spilled over into the room. Spilling over, it drowned, but also foregrounded certain features. Within the surrounding bookcase walls, another wall was constructed from books stacked in piles on the desk, the chair, the floor, the windowsill, and on the edge of the bed. The naked girl curled up sleeping in bed was walled in by layers of stacked books. Viewed in this way, the girl was like a foetus cowering in the womb of books. From where I was standing, I could not see the expression on her face. I only knew that, from the moment when light started to sprout slowly, her body began to glow like unglazed pure white porcelain. The jointed bones of her spine, visibly prominent on her naked back, pricked my eyes. I saw a little book pressing against the side of her abdomen. That was probably the book she was holding when I saw her for the first time.

When I saw her for the first time, I was not surprised at all, as if everything was within expectations, or everything had already happened in my memory. Separated by the glass doors at the library entrance, she was standing inside, and I was standing outside. She had not changed a bit, still so slim and delicate, and yet her body and limbs were flexible, tough, agile and dexterous through and through, just like her in my memory. I had not seen her naked body in my memory, but at this point I felt at ease and uninhibited, as if I were looking at my own body. In fact, on the glass pane my reflection overlapped with her body, and in the reflection I saw myself when I was young. I was not surprised at this at all. For a wanderer of time and space, an unusual increase or decrease in age could be completely expected. Obviously this library had a magic power that allowed her to keep her body young forever. As I entered its field, my body also underwent amazing change. At that time I did not know that it had actually to do with the clock in her body. The glass doors opened, and she and I stood on the opposite sides of the threshold. Her hands were hanging at her sides. A book in her right hand, she fixed her eyes on me. Her thick luxuriant hair, hanging loose, could not completely cover her prominent elflike ears. In the gloomy light of early spring, her body was glowing faintly. Across her white, almost transparent, chest could be seen the furrows and ridges created by her rib cage. By contrast, her small breasts seemed conspicuous. Her two pink areolas lent a splash of colour to a world of greyness, as if it was from these two pink buds that all the blossoms on the trees and all the colours of spring in the hills were to emerge later. Between the breasts was something golden and shimmering, hanging on a chain around her neck. That was a small key. Then I noticed a little scar-like dent in the skin above her left breast. That was the only part of her body that was unfamiliar to me. As for her twisted skeleton, slightly uneven shoulders, asymmetrical rib cage, rightward waist curvature, I knew already. It was just that they were more pronounced than I previously thought. Or perhaps this was just because I had never seen her body uncovered by clothing. I broke the silence, saying, Virginia, I've been looking for you for a long time. I noticed my voice had also become younger. Of course, I was not unaware that, although she had a pair of prominent ears, she could not hear. At least in my memory she could not hear, and I had no reason to suppose that now she could hear. But I believed she could read, just like before. She could not speak, of course, but her face showed innocent puzzlement. I intuitively knew her reply, How long is a long time? So I said, So long I almost can't remember the beginning. Again she showed incomprehension, What beginning? I said, In the beginning when we met. She tilted her head slightly sideways to suggest, We met before? I said, Of course, we met before, Virginia. At that time we were very young. She raised her eyebrows in response, But you're still young! I nodded, smiling. A

silent sentence came out of her mouth, Where do you come from? I saw and understood. Pointing at the book in her hand, I said, I come from the book. And she smiled. She did not smile with her mouth, eyes or face. Rather, she smiled with her whole body. I saw that her ears, her neck, her shoulders, her chest, her breasts, her navel, her arms, her legs all fused into a complete smile. Then she pointed at me, and then pointed her first two fingers downwards to make a walking motion to ask, How did you find me here? With the help of gesture and movement, I said slowly, I walked along the old railway track and found the disused railway station. In the railway station there lived a tall, lean, old man. I asked him how I could find the library in the hills. He asked me what I went to the library for. So I said, Looking for someone. He asked me who I was looking for. So I said, A girl, someone I lost in a time-space far far away. An expression of surprise appeared on his face. He was sizing me up, with an expression of hostility in his eyes. I was looking at him, too. I felt like I had seen him somewhere before. And then he suddenly said, Walk along the pond path and get in. The girl lives in the library on the slope. So this was how I got in. I did not know whether or not she could completely understand me. She looked pensive, as if to say, Perhaps we really met before. Then she looked at me with an expression of puzzlement. I knew she wanted to ask, What's your name? So I said, My name's Fa. Fa. She pressed one of her futile ears with the hand that was not holding the book, and used her lips and teeth to pronounce, with a slight breathing, my name. Her slightly uncertain pronunciation sounded like a baby learning to speak. At last I heard her voice. This set my heart thumping wildly. But her expression was so calm and cool. She lifted her head to look at something behind me. I also lifted my head and turned to look back. The blossoming bauhinia variegata was emitting rings of pink light.

Light. In the window frame, above the sea of trees rose buds of light. The heavens and the earth were gradually being lit. She stirred slightly, stretched her legs, and wriggled her toes like minibeasts waking up. Behind her in the bed sheet was the flat indentation of another body. But that could be a false impression created by shadows. He was standing still on the threshold, neither coming nor going. One could not tell whether he had just come in from outside, or he had moved away. He heard the clear ticking of a clock inside the room, but could not see where the clock was. But he was not surprised at all. She felt there was someone at the door, but was not in a hurry to look for proof. She reached for the book pressing against her body, pulled the book from underneath, and just dropped it without even taking a look. She rubbed the area that had been pressed against the book, not really painful, just a bit hollow like something missing there. She was going to rise above the surface of the water. Opening her eyes, she was enveloped by a curtain of light. As she winked her

eyes, the shapes of the clouds and the changing light in the sky suddenly appeared and disappeared. She pushed herself up with her left arm and sat sideways. Looking out of the window, she brushed her loose hair with her right hand. Then she pressed her right hand against her left chest, and picked up the regular gentle beat with her palm. She felt an icy touch in the middle of her chest. That was the small metal object falling on her skin. A small key hanging on the necklace. She picked up the small, elongated key between her fingertips, and traced its front end lightly over the skin above her left breast. She sat cross-legged. She pressed her left hand against the part above her left breast, and identified a position between the index finger and the middle finger. The pointed end of the key found the position, and plunged smoothly into the little dent in the skin. She felt a quiver spreading out from that point and reaching the whole body. It was just an extremely gentle glide but every time she felt a strong indescribable spasm. She took a deep breath, and started turning the golden key clockwise with her right hand. In her chest could be heard the sound of a spring being coiled. As the number of turns accumulated, she experienced a progressive tightening of the heart. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve. Twelve. Every time she counted. Twelve turns, then the spring would be just about tight. Of course it was possible to turn one or two times more but she knew it should not be too tight. That was something she must do every day she woke up. She took another deep breath, and lowered her head, as if she had done some physically hard work. She pulled out the key and let it drop so that, hanging from the chain, the key swung between her breasts like the pendulum of a clock. A little while later, she brushed the loose strands of hair off her face, looked up at the door, as if to say, It's you. He nodded, saying, It's me. She touched her face lightly, as if to say, You were really here. I was not dreaming. He said, Sorry for disturbing you so early. A bright smile spread across her face. She shook her head to suggest, Never mind. She smoothed the bed sheet, and wrote on it: It's six three already.

**From *Histories of Time***

*Translated from the Chinese by Yau Wai-ping*

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