

Tan Lin

The Fern Rose  
Bibliography

Ejecta  
*Ari Larissa Heinrich*

“This is not the correct history”:  
Lacunae, Contested Narratives,  
and Evidentiary Images from Sri  
Lanka’s Civil War  
*M. Neelika Jayawardane*

He Brought a Swastika  
to the Summer of Love  
*William E. Jones*

The Fern Rose Bibliography  
*Tan Lin*

Racial Chain of Being:  
The More Things Change,  
The More Things Change  
*Shaka McGlotten*

# The Fern Rose Bibliography

Tan Lin

Cookie Jar 1

The Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant



For my parents, Julia Ming Chang Lin and Henry Huan Lin



I  
(August 2013)

5

My mother died of neuroendocrine cancer on August 1, 2013. Early in the morning, Jill, the day nurse, arrived and went to my mother's bedside, touching my mother on the forehead as she did each morning. Had it been a few weeks earlier, she would have gone to the kitchen and made my mother food, usually rice boiled into congee with pork *sung* I had gotten in Chinatown. This ritual had been abandoned. In July, I brought her Chinese food and she told me she wasn't hungry. By mid-month, I took Nutra shakes and peanut butter spread on a cracker to increase her caloric intake, and she pushed my arm aside. Jill put down her bag and began tidying. The night nurse got ready to leave. But first she took me by the arm.

"Your mother will die today."

I nodded.

"I can stay longer."

"OK."

"I'm not wrong." She paused. "Don't be surprised."

Five hours later, sitting on her bed, I heard an exhalation. It was too small for a breath, and I clasped her hand tighter. The sense of the future, usually unceasing, paused. Nine months had passed since the diagnosis of her cancer, one the doctors had initially told us she stood a chance of outliving. In mid-spring, I cannot remember the day my mother had asked if she could move in with my wife Clare, my daughter Ahn, and me. Our main bedroom was large enough to accommodate a hospital bed and a night nurse, and we moved my mother into it. My wife

slept with my daughter in a closet we had turned into a bedroom and I slept on an inflatable mattress in my office. My mother arrived in early May. She stayed three months, on hospice care, and did not leave our house once.

I motioned to Jill. "I have a dress."

6 It was a gold, silk cheongsam that my mother had had made in Hong Kong and that she had worn on my wedding day. My mother never weighed more than a hundred pounds. I lifted her and Jill and I slipped the dress on. She had lost thirty pounds since moving in, and the dress draped her like a sack. My mother, always girlish, had the weight of a young girl. I reached for the clock on her bedside table. I had placed it there the day she came to stay with us, next to a photo of her holding Ahn as a baby. It was 12:50 p.m.

One morning, my mother had told me she wanted her ashes scattered in Athens, Ohio, in front of the picture window where she had read and prepared for her classes. It was the house I had grown up in. Around Thanksgiving, the first without my mother, the hospice team organized monthly grief counseling meetings. My mother had never talked to me about her dying. The hospice team had offered to send a spiritual counselor, and later a Thanatos expert, and when I communicated this to my mother she replied flatly, "I don't want it." Shortly after the group meetings began, I was told that individual sessions were also available. I asked for a Chinese counselor, a woman, thinking it would help me understand the passing of the last three months.

The one-on-one sessions started before Christmas, my mother's favorite holiday. They continued into July, when the heat began to be felt in our apartment, and I found myself starting from a recurring dream: my mother was about to die and I was rushing to get to her before she did.



The counselor told me my body was “remembering seasonally.” I asked her what this meant, and she said, “Your body is remembering the summer. How it entered the room your mother died in.”

\*

7

On Saturday, two days after my mother’s death, my sister Maya and I traveled to Pennswood Village, the retirement home she moved to in 2004. My father and mother arrived in the United States from Shanghai and Fuzhou in 1948 and 1949, and Maya and I tried, over a few days, to make some sense of what should and what could be kept of the things that they had accumulated since coming to America. My mother and father loved American things; those things partly transformed them into Americans. These objects that my sister and I had grown up with were now objects my sister and I were not sure what to do with: my mother’s Lenox china, her sterling silverware, bedding and towels, everyday dishes, and vintage Ohio quilts she’d collected. In addition, there was an entire kitchen filled with rice cookers, a wok, a brass Mongolian hot pot that my parents called a *huo guo*, salad spinners, light-green-colored Depression-era glassware from Ohio and West Virginia that my mother loved, and even martini glasses that my mother and father bought in the ‘50s and never drank from.

We tossed or donated many of the things my mother brought from Ohio when she moved to Pennswood. We saved a little bit of everything we thought we should—Christmas ornaments, the hot pot and rice cooker, a Rival crock pot, a Waring ice cream maker my mother had bought at a garage sale. I did not think either my sister or I would use her Lenox wedding china or her

sterling silverware, but I gave neither away. The things we chose to save spanned roughly sixty-five years; they were chosen not because I had particularly vivid or sharply etched memories of them, but because they made me remember the general contours of an earlier life, and feelings on the verge of disappearing.

8       The history of a family is the history of persistence, and the history of persistence is the history of stuff. My parents were professors, my father of ceramics and my mother of what she, when asked, called “Oriental literature in translation.” In our family’s case, persistence took the form, partly, of books. My sister stayed the weekend, and after she left, I carried large garbage bags of stuff to the Pennswood library and flea market, loaded her car with her TV, her pantsuits, and her bed linens and took them to the St. Mary’s Thrift Shop. In between trips, I visited my mother’s friends to say goodbye. My mother’s apartment had a kitchen but I could not bear to cook in it. I occasionally dined in the cafeteria where my mother had taken most of her meals and I dined alone most evenings. My mother’s death made my hours solitary, even those spent with loved ones. This is its default action. A death of a friend takes you away from part of yourself, maybe even the better, brighter part of yourself, but the death of my mother removed the world from me. Midway through the week, a fine arts mover arrived. He and I packed twenty-one boxes with my father’s ceramics and loaded them into a van. We finished around 5 p.m. Then we drove the pots to New York.

The next day I returned to Pennsylvania. By week’s end, the Pennswood apartment was emptied of the furniture I had known since childhood, including my parents’ first and only bedroom set: a headboard, a tall dresser, and a mirrored credenza that they purchased in 1955 just after they were married. Nearly everything had been put in boxes. None of the boxes had labels. My

mother's things had been readied, but for what? It was hard to separate the boxes from the apartment I was about to surrender, from my own childhood, and from her dying. What had been taken leave of? I missed my mother intensely. Both parents were gone. It occurred to me that everyone gets two childhoods: the first ends without your noticing; the second ends when your last parent dies.

On Friday, movers picked up the bedroom set and took it to the St. Mary's Thrift Shop. Then they came back to pick up the remaining boxes: two libraries, my father's and my mother's, along with household stuff, the dining room table we ate on every night, two wardrobe cartons with my mother's Chinese dresses, as well as the beginnings of my own first library, spanning from childhood to my college years. It was all taken to a storage unit on Varick Street in downtown Manhattan on a blisteringly hot August day one week after my mother's death.

After the movers left, I remember thinking: there are no chairs in this apartment. I sat on the carpeted floor and cried. The apartment was empty except for some houseplants and a bulky, dark-green L. L. Bean down comforter I did not know what to do with. It was getting late. The thrift store was closed. I walked to my mother's car and stuffed the comforter in the trunk. I carried the orchids and put them on the terrace. My mother's library was gone.

There were five books left in the apartment, those I had not donated, mailed away, or put into boxes: a copy of the journal *Botteghe Oscure* that contained the first poem my mother published, "Song of the Crazy Monk," along with two books of translations by my mother, *Women of the Red Plain: An Anthology of Contemporary Chinese Women Poets*, which was published by Penguin when my mother was still living in Athens, and *Modern*

*Chinese Poetry: An Introduction*, published by the Institute for Comparative and Foreign Area Studies. This latter book, a translation-filled scholarly monograph, had been revised from her dissertation at the University of Washington. There was also *Seven Japanese Tales* by Junichiro Tanizaki, a small Berkeley Medallion mass-market paperback with a taped spine, and *To a Blossoming Pear Tree*, a book I had taken to Hunter College in 1978 and asked James Wright to sign, and which I had given to my mother for her fiftieth birthday. I had chosen these few books that would not be put into boxes partly for their portability and partly because they were inextricably tied to my mother, and I would carry them with me on the train to read when I got back to New York. The Tanizaki was filled with my mother's notes in red ink and, like most of the books I had set aside, was falling apart. On my last evening in the apartment, I put the five books into a small rolling suitcase. I called a taxi and shut the door to my mother's apartment without locking it.

(August 2019)

In 2019, Maya told me she had given notice that she would vacate the Varick Street storage unit before year's end. The room measured 700 square feet. In one corner, my sister had installed my mother's desk, our parents' Danish modern couch, and a wall-mounted liquor cabinet from Athens. The unit had a window, and when we first moved things into it, the overall effect was of various rooms our family had lived in, convened in a downtown loft space. In six years, I had visited once, and when I entered again, sunlight was streaming in through a large, south-facing window. The room had once reminded me of our house in Ohio; now it looked like a storage unit, and the persistence I associated with our family's life was the persistence of a few objects covered with dust. My mother had been dead for years not months; it occurred to me that I wasn't clearing out a room; I had come to make some accounting of what was a family's life.

Everything in the room, the total of things that circumscribed my mother's and father's earlier lives in China and America, was in a state of mild disarray. I went to the back of the unit and pulled my mother's wardrobe cartons to the center of the room. On a typed mover's document taped to one of the boxes, I saw the total of my parent's possessions: seven dish packs, three wardrobe cartons, nine miscellaneous boxes, and fourteen book boxes. The book boxes were filled with my mother's and father's paperwork, teaching notes, their libraries, and our family's photo albums. My parents would no longer accumulate

# BOTTEGHE OSCVRE

XVII  
Spring 1956

RENÉ CHAR · ANDRÉ DHÔTEL · MAURICE BLANCHARD ·  
GEORGES BATAILLE · PAUL CHAULOT · VIVETTE PERRET ·  
P. A. BENOIT · GASTON PUEL · MICHAEL FRANCIS GIBSON ·  
LOUIS GILLET & BERNARD BERENSON

DAVID GASCOYNE · WILLIAM SANSOM · IRIS TREE · AN-  
TONIA WILDE · GEORGE ALDIS · CHAPMAN MORTIMER ·  
PETER EVERETT · JON SILKIN · ELIZABETH MONTAGU ·  
CHARLES FOX · ANDRÉ DAVIS · THOMAS HENRY JONES ·  
HILARY CORKE

DONNA BOWEN · CAROL CHRISTOPHER DRAKE · WILLIAM  
GOYEN · STANLEY YOUNG · EUGENE WALTER · DAISY  
ALDAN · CAROL HALL · SIDNEY STEBEL · RICHARD F.  
HUGO · JOHN SIMON · LIN MING-HWEI CHANG · GENE  
BARO · DANIEL TAMKUS · CLEVELAND MOFFET · MARCIA  
NARDI · CAROLIN KIZER · KIM YONG IK · I. R. LIND ·  
STANLEY MOSS · M. BENAYA · RITTEN EDWARD LEE ·  
EDWIN S. MILLER

RAINER MARIA RILKE · RUDOLF KASSNER · MARIE-UISE  
KASCHNITZ · HANS JUERGEN VON DER LINDEN · PAUL  
CELAN · MATTIAS BRAUN · GERHARD NEUMANN · URS  
CHRISTIAN FISCHER · GERD GAISLER

CAMILLO SBARBARO · BERNARDO BERGAMO · LUCIANO  
TERESA NESSI · PERLA CACCIOPARRA

INTERNATIONAL REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Unpublished works by the most important and vital writers in  
prose and poetry of our time. Published twice a year.

stuff. Expansion and unceasing saving for the future, which had defined my parents' lives, was over. There was whittling down and contraction after my father's death in 1989 and again after my mother's death in 2013; now there was further condensation, probably the last of it. The life of my parents was mostly in the past tense. A family is a medium; within it, the past takes multiple shapes. In the years since our family's things had been moved from a house to an apartment to a storage unit, I had mostly not thought about my parents' belongings. I looked at the ice cream maker and the crock pot. They looked Chinese.

13



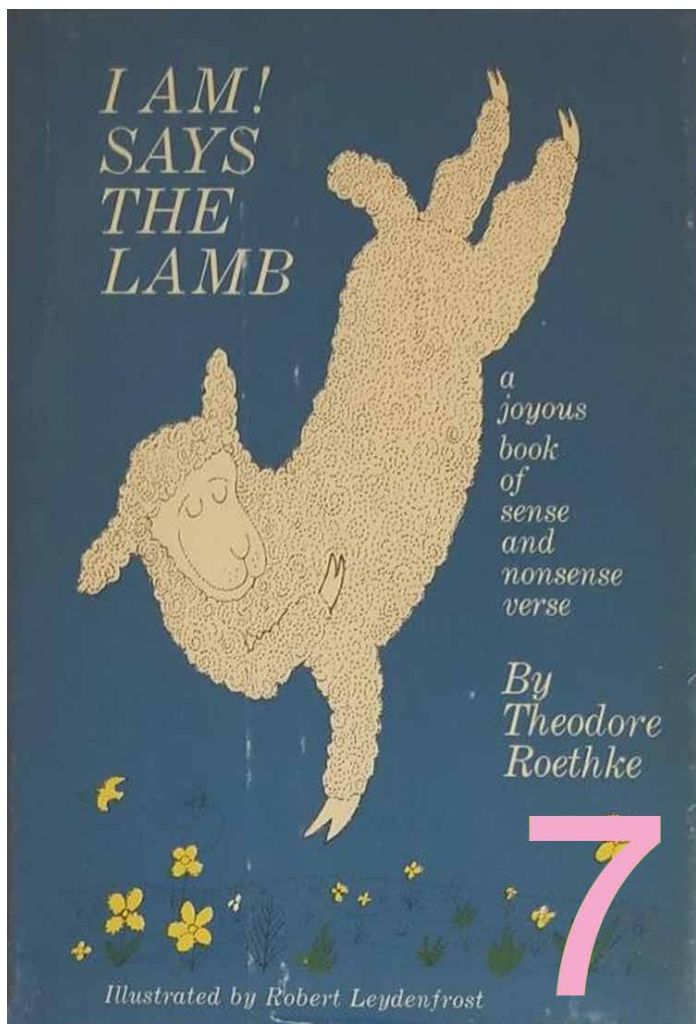
I was surrounded by boxes and my mother's death still felt raw. My father's bankers boxes had been packed thirty years earlier, in 1989, a few weeks after he died. I started with them. I worked alone in the Varick Street unit in late summer; in the fall, my sister would stop by to offer encouragement and have a cup of tea. My father's boxes had been numbered; fifteen had left Santa Barbara, California. The majority of material in the boxes was printed matter, most of it marked by a date. At some point, I entered the following on an inventory sheet: "early ceramic materials."

My mother had sorted through and consolidated the first eight boxes. Boxes numbered nine through fifteen remained,

confirming a thought that if the past isn't completely gone, it isn't fully recoverable either. In late November, I reached box eleven, 1959, the year my sister was born, with some stuff errant from the '60s. In the bankers boxes, I uncovered my father's real estate deeds, car titles, rose books, glaze tables, clay formulations, and clippings from the *Athens Messenger*, as well as his graduate school textbooks, photographic and ceramic equipment manuals, and catalogs for testing sieves, pyrometric cones, and high-temperature cements. As I advanced through the numbered boxes, my father's earlier life, his Chinese life, once absent, began to emerge. The textbooks and photography materials dated from the time when he was studying for a master's of education at the University of Washington, between 1949 and 1954, and the bulk of the remaining items were from a later period, between 1955 and 1984, when my father and mother lived in Madison, Wisconsin, and then Athens, Ohio. Over the course of eight weeks, a collective adulthood, not unlike a collective childhood, began to emerge, and like the idea of adulthood itself, it seemed to be imprinting itself over time and over some version of my childhood. Most of the people who knew my parents when they first arrived in the United States were dead; the few who were living I had not spoken to for years. Looking at the shared objects of family life, there was a strong sense of my parents' distance from the particularity of these objects. The idea of who my parents were was receding. The American parts, in spite of the objects, were already gone.

Box twelve, opened in the last week of November, contained a Nikon F2 and a 150 mm Nikon zoom lens my father had purchased on a trip to Japan when I was in middle school, along with a Rolleiflex he used to photograph high school football matches for a newspaper in Seattle. My mother had told me that





most games were at night, when it was raining, but it is hard to imagine a skinny Chinese guy like my father running up and down a field with a twin-lens Rolleiflex, photographing high school football matches in a downpour, and I have not been able to locate any of his photos in the archives of Seattle's newspapers. The box was opened around the time of my father's birthday; had he been alive, he would have been 104.

In the boxes of my father's stuff, I found many of my childhood books. These included *I Am! Says the Lamb* by Theodore Roethke, which my mother had read to me in Seattle, and *Someone Else* by Hollis Summers, which carries the subtitle *Sixteen Poems about Other Children*. Later books, like *Byrne's Standard Book of Pool and Billiards* and W. Timothy Gallwey's *The Inner Game of Tennis*, mark a time when I could be liberated from my parents and my mind could be cultivated—by me. Some of the earlier books, including *The Golden Treasury of Poetry* by Louis Untermeyer, my first poetry book, and *Stars: A Guide to the Constellations, Sun, Moon, Planets and Other features of the Heavens*, a Golden Nature Guide, were replete with vivid illustrations. The latter was adorned with hand-painted images of Mars and Saturn and my favorite constellation, Cassiopeia. I had signed each of these books: the poetry book in pencil and *Stars* with a Dymo label maker. In the box was also the first single-author book of poetry I owned, given to me by my mother on my fourteenth birthday: *The Collected Poems of T. S. Eliot*. I gave these books, minus the Eliot, to Ahn. The titles outlined below hew to a particular genre known as “family in literature,” or “domesticity diffused,” and they span three libraries and two generations, a period mainly from 1959 to 1998, when my parents, one or both, were teaching.

*Roethke's only book of children's verse*

8. ROETHKE, Theodore. *I Am! Says the Lamb: A Joyous Book of Sense and Nonsense Verse*. Illustrated by Robert Leydenfrost. New York: Doubleday, 1961.

17

Numerous line drawings in text, 71 pp. Publisher's cloth with dust jacket. Dust jacket shows rubbing, creases, with 1/8-inch tear to front.

Roethke was my mother's teacher at the University of Washington and this book, unlike Roethke's others in my mother's library, including *The Lost Son*, is neither inscribed to my mother nor signed. Divided into two sections, "The Nonsense Poems" and "The Greenhouse Poems," this book was read to me by my mother when I was not yet able to read on my own. Childlike ink drawings of gnus and kitty-cat birds are scattered throughout. Roethke had arranged for the first publication of a poem by my mother, in a journal called *Botteghe Oscure*, which I found in the boxes with Roethke's books.

*Children shout, even in poems*

12. SUMMERS, Hollis. *Someone Else: Sixteen Poems about Other Children*. Illustrated by Jane Miller. New York: J. B. Lippincott & Company, 1962.

Numerous line drawings. Drawing of a young girl sticking out her tongue stamped in yellow on cover. Dust

jacket over boards, rubbed, crayon soiling, and missing three-inch section at bottom spine. Inscribed: "For Maya and Tan. With affection for them and their parents. Hollis Summers."

- 18 Sixteen poems, each addressed to and bearing a child's name as its title, including Jennifer, Jack, and Lucille-Anne, who "has a voice so loud / She could probably quiet the largest crowd."

*A child-proof book of poetry*

1. UNTERMEYER, Louis. *The Golden Treasury of Poetry*. Selected and with commentary. Illustrated by Joan Walsh Anglund. New York: Collins, 1961.

Large-format book issued without dust jacket in spill-proof and child-proof binding.

The book contains "The Tale of Cock Robin," the first poem that, in its cartoonlike simplicity, terrified its present owner. It is the first poem read whenever the book is returned to, and the illustration depicts, with childhood grimness, the sparrow with a bow and arrow slung to his chest. Can poetry chill the heart of a child? Yes. And it still does.

15. MAYALL, R. Newton, Margaret Mayall, and Jerome Wyckoff. *The Sky Observer's Guide: A Handbook for Amateur Astronomers*. Paintings and diagrams by John Polgreen. New York: Golden Press, 1965.

19

Small-format book with 150 color paintings and photographs, 160 pp. Sky maps, lists of sky objects, magnitude charts, and lunar maps.

This book I read by flashlight, accompanied by a pair of Tasco binoculars, given to me one Christmas, and a Sears refractor telescope, given one Christmas later.

My parents treated books a little like garden tools or kitchen implements, which is to say it is impossible to separate my parents' reading habits from the things that would transform them into Chinese persons in America and then into Americans, and then, in a kind of reverse chronology, back into Chinese persons upon their deaths, and this separation between earliness and lateness in a family, which was really a kind of coming together, never went away during my adolescence. My parents were pragmatic readers and their libraries and manners of reading were unlike. My father read voraciously in imperfect English, and his reading was ongoing and mostly synchronous. He mainly read glaze tables for his pottery; catalogs for kilns he wanted to build; classified ads in the *Messenger* for used cars, stone, and farm equipment; and books about plants he was trying to grow. The only thing he read in Chinese, on those rare occasions when it was mailed to him by friends in Seattle, was the *China*

*Daily News*. My mother read in perfect but accented English the books she was teaching, mainly Asian literature in translation, like *The Tale of Genji*, *Death in Midsummer*, *The Sailor Who Fell From Grace With the Sea*, *Some Prefer Nettles*, and *A Personal Matter*, and she read cookbooks in order to cook the food my sister and I thought Americans ate. As it was for a lot of immigrants, reading was a product produced by the household; it was neither deferred nor recreational, and it stayed this way until I finished grad school, when my mother retired and spent a good deal of her days with paperbacks that were “not without detection,” as Dorothy L. Sayers noted.

I removed Sayers’s novel *Whose Body?* from a box. On the cover: a picture of a man, pince-nez perched on his nose, lying dead in a bath tub. This edition was published by Harper & Row in 1971 with a list price of \$2.50. Sayers’s Lord Peter Wimsey series were among the first English mystery novels to inject a pathologically detailed, often brutal murder into the world of vicarages, cozy firesides, and manor houses. On the flyleaf, someone had penciled “.25,” which indicated that my mother bought it at a garage sale.

As any bibliographer will tell you, bibliography is a discipline. So is the phenomenon known as “book learning.” My sister and I learned, early on, that our parents could learn to be more American, that books could start the instruction, and that Maya and I could finish it. My parents understood reading as something that bore immediacy and nearness; it hurried, implicitly, the process of becoming American. In actuality, this process was slow and unfolded in stages, and it unfurled differently and more directly for my sister and me than it did for my parents, and as I have mentioned, the whole chronological process reversed itself after my parents’ deaths. To put the matter succinctly:

family life is a problem used to solve other problems. The titles in this bibliography are, accordingly, loosely achronological. They are persistent, and they resemble the past, but maybe they are multiple versions of a childhood, a family, or a problem. The life of our family, which I associate with leave-taking, is really a bibliography divided into three broad sections: technical books about the chemical composition of glazes, books about cooking—i.e., translating Chinese food in American kitchens or American food in Chinese kitchens—and how-to books about gardening, largely involving the cultivation of Asiatic plants in America. This cross section suggests that reading, like our family, was a how-to affair with a strong educational impetus. Can you learn how to be American from a book? My parents seemed to think so.

*“It is one thing to possess a book—another to use it.”*

74. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. 14th ed., 24 vols. Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1968.

Imperial 8vo. Bound in white cream leather, gilt stamped 1768 and 1968 over a thistle. One volume index. Issued on the 200th anniversary of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

This was the only publication I watched my father buy, and he did it with my mother, me, and my sister, in our living room. The *EB* in 1968 was sold by door-to-door salesmen. The cost was high, our driveway was long, and our house was invisible from the road. Few people came to our door, and when they did, my father was exasperated.

In 1968, a Britannica salesman rapped loudly, and persuaded my father that my intellectual development would be hurried by a massive and expensive encyclopedia. My father asked me, in front of the salesman, if the set would be useful “for schoolwork,” and I, not knowing exactly what to say, said, “I think so.” And so the deed was done. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* arrived in one fell swoop and was installed in my mother’s study (I did not have a bookshelf large enough), along with a red-bound *Britannica Junior Encyclopaedia* with accompanying cherry bookstand, which was sent straight to my sister’s room. I was eleven, my sister nine. I probably did use the books to write a research paper in high school, but mainly the twenty-four volumes served as a material instantiation of who I was in my father’s eyes and who my father was in mine. We donated the set, along with the maroon-colored yearbooks that arrived annually for a decade after the initial purchase, but the *Encyclopaedia* has an intense and inexpressible emotional value. It was the first time my father understood—and he understood it before I did—that books would be the most important material element in my life, as they had been for my mother, and so it was a weighted acknowledgement of our differences and a lavish accommodation. I wish I still had the set.

94. THOMAS, Graham Stuart. *The Old Shrub Roses: With Chapters on the Evolution of Our Garden Roses by Dr. C. C. Hurst*. London: Phoenix House, 1961.



In our first years in Ohio, I did not read my parents' books. This did not begin until high school and college, and like many processes involving time and the feelings, it is ongoing and incomplete. Through the early part of my adolescence, my mother and father had already absorbed, with difficulty, the information in them, and had translated it into household pots, quasi-American-Chinese food, and rose bushes, so it was not necessary to read the books. Of course, it is in the nature of feelings to be experienced years after we've had them, and it was not until after my parents' deaths that I began cataloging and reading and occasionally supplementing the books they left behind, and so the bibliography of household reading outlined below describes the mid to late twentieth century and eventually the twenty-first. Most of our feelings are posthumous by the time they arrive.

Every family passes down things. Passing down imagines a lineage, and in our family's case, it imagines a bibliography. As I neared the end of my sorting in the storage space, the boxes reminded me of what it means to read over a period of time, and of my mother's and father's reading habits, some of which had become mine. My father's reading was connected to things, and this was as true in the years after his death as it was before it. In one of the last bankers boxes, I discovered ceramics tools, bonsai scissors, drafting pens, Chinese inkwells, bamboo brushes, tobacco pipes, and even the sign that hung beneath our mailbox. I also found his English books on roses, and a few periodicals on ferns that he had borrowed from the Ohio University library and not bothered to return. A few materials, including newspaper clippings about Ronald Reagan's presidency, came from the period after my father had moved out of the Athens house and into a second home in Santa Barbara, where he lived between 1984 and 1989.

This story takes form as descriptive bibliography; it is an inventory of books and things next to them. Many things were caused by books in our family: my sister's macramé and lost-wax casting, my self-guided tennis lessons and poetry writing, my mother's cooking, and my father's gardening and kiln building. The logic is straightforward and un-novelistic: if one family's life can have a bibliography that spans forty years in southeastern Ohio, then a family's gardens and its kitchen habits can also have one, for the simple reason that my mother and father used books to do things with, and their processing of the world requires some means for a later reader, namely me, to strictly reference, describe really, my father's multiple gardens and the books and olfactory effects that went with them, and my mother's house cooking, her Hong Kong tailoring, and the books and odors that went with them.

What would such a bibliography look like? Probably an attenuated bit of poetry. Or to translate this a little more opaquely: feelings are the snapshots left behind by objects and the people they belonged to. What follows is devoted to my father's library and the shifting sense of where it would appear. My mother's library will arrive, and I am speaking chronologically, later, in a future publication, near the work of her teacher, Theodore Roethke.

By mid-December, I was alarmed. I had two weeks to empty the storage unit and there was an awful lot of stuff left. At moments I fell into a graduate school habit: pick up a book, start reading it, and then read books near it. A week before Christmas, I found rice bowls my father made in the ceramics studios at Ohio University. Someone had meticulously wrapped them with tissue paper, then bubble wrap, and I brought them to my apartment in a suitcase, as if they were on a trip home. I took a photo of them on our dining room table, and we ate with them, me with my own bowl, Ahn with my mother's, and Clare with my father's.

My father did not permit the buying of commercial, slip-poured pottery in our house, and everything we ate on, with the inexplicable exception of a large collection of morning coffee mugs, had been thrown by my father. None of the bowls were perfect. My sister and I had identical, small rice bowls, glazed in a dark reddish-brown verging on purple, with a gentle lip that was perfect for small hands, and we each ate from our designated bowl, and this routine lasted until Maya and I left for college. These bowls were never outgrown, and to this day I prefer eating from my bowl; my mother had a medium-sized rice bowl with a grayish-blue leaf motif, and my father had a large, heavy-lipped bowl that had the color and, oddly, the slightly rough texture of a cashew nut. You can see in the photo that my bowl had a small chip in it. None of the bowls were treated with particular care. We used them every day, some of them cracked, others were dropped, and my mother routinely put them in our dishwasher.

As each member of the family had his or her own custom dinner pot, the dinnerware calls to mind a family portrait in clay or an ornithological guidebook enumerating the characteristics that distinguish one family member from another.

Tucked in one of the boxes was a lovely little usage manual, or catalog, about the Uster kiln, by a William C. Alexander. This simple publication, twelve pages long, typed, and held together with a single staple, was apparently compiled from “notes taken in Uster, Switzerland, in the summer of 1962 during the construction of a wood-burning kiln based on the hill-climbing kilns of the Orient.” The year would have corresponded to my father’s endeavor to build a freestanding kiln, possibly a “hill-climbing” kiln, next to a steep embankment on the eastern side of our garage, where the wisteria and grapevine hung.

I brew a cup of tea and start reading. This type of kiln, built out of hand-formed, articulated sections, is described in *A Potter’s Book* by Bernard Leach, which I recovered from one of the earliest boxes. Leach supplied two pen-and-ink drawings to his book, of a Chinese bank kiln and a communal Korean kiln, neither of which look at all like my father’s backyard kiln. The forms are conical rather than rectangular, allowing for two of my father’s favorite devices, heat and smoke, to climb the chambers up a hill. The ideal kiln is constructed with bricks that do not exert “too much dependence upon the mortar to hold them together.” My father built many kilns. The smaller ones were built by hand for a specific location; they were not subject to duplication or relocation, and required unceasing experimentation to control and produce consistent ware. My father’s kiln-building techniques were utilized to improve the draw in our fireplace, and he spent years tinkering with an outdoor fireplace and a double barbeque grille setup that had been constructed from

limestone and mortar by the original owner and had fallen into disrepair. Mortar-free and mortar-based kiln engineering is a skill, and my father applied it to patios, outdoor furniture, retaining walls, cisterns, runoff systems, dams constructed from freestanding rocks in a creek, laundry-line poles, our fireplace, chimney flues, and even a tetherball set.

27

As Alexander's book notes, "Kilns, like people, tend to be individuals, and each varies to some degree from the supposed norm." My father never completed the large, freestanding kiln in our backyard, and in the years after his death, I came to see the unfinished logic of the kiln as the logic of our family, which was held together without much dependence after my father moved out of the house that my sister and I grew up in and think of as "home." Of course, no two families or kilns are identical, even after they are gone. My father dismantled the foundation to the kiln in our backyard one summer, probably to salvage bricks for some other purpose, and this partial dismantling had the singular look of my father's depression, from 1984, when he retired, up until his death in 1989. The dismantling of the kiln coincided with my father's leaving Athens and my mother, and as the years after his death have passed, it has been hard to separate the logic of unfinishedness from my father and from the things I think he might have wanted to put back into place in his life, and this has left me with the idea that most of the things that someone, like a parent, can't finish will be finished posthumously by someone else, in a cycle that knows no end.

How do you find an individual after he or she is gone? Who my father was, as an individual, was difficult to grasp when he was alive, and in death the gap between who he was and our family has widened, which suggests that in a family, understanding is never complete. My father never talked about

himself with me, and never spoke of his siblings. Nor did he mention his mother, who had sent him away to live with an aunt. In passing, my mother mentioned that my father's childhood had been unhappy. The communication, or its lack, inside a family develops and modulates over time; it affects a family and then another, and it is the nature of a particular kind of emptiness to mostly go unacknowledged inside a life.

I am accustomed to think of a person as the sum of his or her desires, but my father never spoke of his desires or aspirations upon coming to America, nor was there ever talk about what may have been his depression or his choice to leave us. There is the sense, not that my father was unknowable, but that knowledge ushers mainly from what was unfinished in the things and people around him. His life may or may not be summed up by three departures: one from China in 1948, one from Seattle in 1959, and one from Athens, Ohio, in 1984. I look at a black-and-white photo of my father as a child in China. There are four children. I cannot be sure whether the young boy on the right is my father or whether it is the boy standing on the left. One of the boys must be my father's brother. The girl, I believe, is Lin Huiyin, who would later become the first Chinese woman architect and who was my father's half-sister; this would place the photo in Fukien Province in the early '20s. I look at a photo of my father from 1988, taken in Santa Barbara and probably our last photograph as a family. What will germinate in one photo, prefiguring a second? I look at this photo from 1998, and what I see looks like a departure, but I did not see this when the photo was taken.

My father's books and catalogs, as well as the newspaper clippings, are notable for their photographic illustrations, tables, and

GRAHAM STUART THOMAS F.L.S.



The Old  
Shrub  
Roses **61**

29

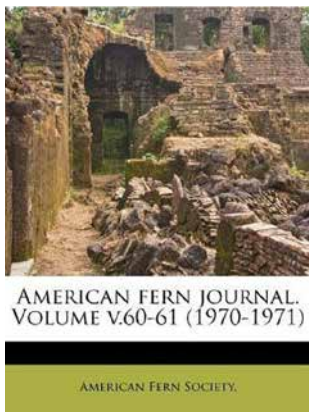
drawings, but my father was not interested in vividness—i.e., the scenery inside books—because it slowed down the words and created imprecision. Reading now, going through his library slowly and randomly, I see my father not so much as an individual with sharply delineated desires, but as described by Graham Stuart Thomas in a chapter titled “Old Roses in Pictures,” from *The Old Shrub Roses*: “[T]he general feeling of a specific type of rose is portrayed . . . but otherwise it is not often that any definite species can be recognized until we come to the age when the beauty of flowers was considered individually.”<sup>1</sup> And so, too, with my father’s feelings; they took the most general forms of expression, which is to say, indifference—if they were ever expressed at all.

My father read books almost entirely for their words in the order they were composed in, which means they were read slowly and methodically and mechanically, just as a computer reads one bit before moving to the next. Many of his ceramic books detailing chemical equations and kiln temperature ranges were taken outside, where they faded; or, in the event of a sudden thunderstorm, got soaked; or, when placed near a kiln, got clay on them or became warped from the heat.

To him, books were not amorphous or quasi-romantic or autobiographical; they were the opposite of memoirs, which is to say, they were forms of the general, the mildly inexpressive, or a kind of inexactitude in relation to any given individual’s life, much like a musical score, sleep without dreams, a room with moods, or a philatelic album with catalog numbers standing in for the stamps, that requires the addition of one thing, a bit of human labor, to come to life. In our household, there was no real

1. Thomas, *The Old Shrub Roses*, 129.





distinction between reading indoor books and reading outdoor books, and I think this was because we cooked indoors and barbecued outdoors a lot, and because my father had two indoor kilns and two gas-fired outdoor kilns behind our garage.

Within our family, where the all-weather indoor-outdoor library of youth is linked to a few species of fern and rose cultivars, any given book is an ecosystem and an indexical system of its own remembrance, and any particular memory of mine is apt to be an interval in the life of a garden or a book or a bibliography. Heidegger was right: one is never without a mood and a book is the most mood inducing of objects. Pretty much all through this period, from high school and into my college years, my father was consulting his fern and rose books, and continually transplanting hemlock seedlings, trilliums, and what I later learned was a rare variety of light-green Appalachian fern, *Trichomanes intricatum*, and moving these plants from the woods to the fifteen or so flower and fern beds, bordered with sandstone, that my father, with my mother's help, had made or refurbished.

From Ohio University's Alden Library, my father had a number of books at his disposal, chiefly F. O. Bower's *The Ferns (Filicales)*, as well as periodicals. At some point he told me that the *Trichomanes intricatum* is from the fern family, or *Pteridophyta*, though this taxonomy has since been revised. My father told me that botanists regard ferns, which have inhabited the earth for some 360 million years, as the reptiles of the plant world. Ferns are vascular plants; they do not have seeds or flowers; in fact, they preceded flowering plants by millions of years. Instead of producing seeds, ferns propagate efficiently and modestly, via a kind of cell division known as meiosis, followed by mitosis, a process wherein the plant's genome splits into two identical daughter cells, instigating a life cycle that produces two phases of life, each marked by one of two separate, nonoverlapping forms. During this process, spores located on the underside of a fern leaf will, when temperature and humidity are right, germinate—but they do not produce a fern. Instead, they produce a prothallium, an entirely dissimilar, leaf-like plant. My father looked for this when we went to dig ferns, and told me they resembled a lucky clover; but they are notoriously elusive and, my father told me, find one and you will find a love later in life. This plant, vaguely heart-shaped, contains both male and female sex organs; when it rains in the spring, the sperm is able to swim to the egg, whereupon an embryo forms, which then sends out fronds of its own. Thus, with any fern, half of the parent gene pool will have expired by the time the fern begins to take form, and the fern offspring that finally unfurls sports the fronds of its grandparents, not its parents. Such a life cycle is hard to understand in human or animal terms, where reproduction generally takes place with both parents alive at the time of birth. For reasons unknown to me, ferns remind me of *Tristram Shandy*.

I think my father was interested in ferns and fern literature because, like pots and like moss, they seem to have spent some time in Asia; they imperceptibly pull together a landscape—its rocks, its water, and its trees—over many years; they reproduce magically across generations without flowers or seeds; and because they evolved pictorially on all manner of useful objects in the late nineteenth century, where the then gothic, now goth-like, look of a fern could be found on wallpapers, gauze curtains, bedspreads and quilts, needlework, pottery and glass, and even wrought-iron benches. Ferns, like other forms of visual enchantment such as fairies and elves, appreciate humidity and the dappled mood lighting that comes down through the trees, and our valley in southeastern Ohio provided this all summer long. Here is a photo of *Trichomanes intricatum*, sometimes called the Appalachian bristle or weft fern, from an issue of the *American Fern Journal* published in 1992.



This is a familial photograph of the informal, snapshot-conductive flora lining the patio that our family made across two

summers. *Trichomanes* is a species indigenous not to Asia but southeastern Ohio, and my father and I preferred to cultivate it in the slightly less wild gardens and border areas around our patio. A garden is just a garden inside another kind of garden, but my father got this the other way around, because there was really no right way around when it comes to something mildly magical. Over time, and owing to the dampness of the valley, the Christmas and maidenhair ferns crept down from the woods under the hemlocks and a light green moss arrived ineluctably over more or less everything without much bidding from us, speckling the walkways, the house's structural terra-cotta foundation blocks, the sides of the patio, and in between the shale slabs of the garden walls so that the areas around our house seemed one endless respiration and the lawn grew less defined and more or less one with the untended woodlands and its flowers, chiefly trillium and ginseng, which we picked each spring, along with Guyandotte Beauty and sassafras, which we cut for tea late in the fall.

The genealogical history of the fern was unknown to me when I was in high school and my father and I were busy transplanting it. We usually found them on, and sometimes around, rocks in sheltered crevices and grottoes, and in spring, we would take small wooden tools from my father's ceramics studio to dig up, with lazy spatula-like motions, the ferns' rhizomes and roots, which to us looked like illustrations—from the soil between rocks and sometimes the ferns clinging to trees. The tree ferns confirmed what a botanist friend of our family had told us: that the fern is “occasionally epiphytic.” They, along with the moss that accumulated on the rocks in our shaded flowerbeds and the north-facing trunks of the oaks, reminded my father and me of a blanket continually translated and retranslated by nature, and in

my mind came to stand in for the wall-to-wall carpeting in our house, and so, in a sense, the woods for me were always a carpeted analogue just as the breathing interior of our house was, and the life of the woods around our house was in a continual cycle of self-domestication and perpetual greening, which I associated with reading and families, or else their archives and herbariums.

Reading repaired something like nature and our house, and so, too, the geography of childhood, and perhaps it repeated something of my father's impatience and his desire. Without an obstacle, desire wouldn't be a desire at all, and so, as it was with mosses and ferns, you learn to wait. I'm not sure when such a recognition dawned on any of us or whether it happened individually or all at once. As a family, we spent most of our time outdoors, working in the yard, eating in the yard, and making things in the yard look like the inside of our house, though it may have been the other way around, particularly in regards to my father's earthenware ceramic pieces, and especially those forms fired with sand on their surface, and whose earth-bound colors and brushwork replicated the pinnate fronds and leaf stalks of ferns, compound seed pods, or strands of grass.

The listing from the online botanical database Tropicos.org details *Trichomanes intricatum*'s publication. The entry dates from 1992, when my father would not have been alive to read it, and suggests the particular specimen is local to a particular area, in this instance Hooveh Hollow in Hardin County, Illinois, but also bears a family resemblance to Andean and Ecuadorian varieties. Like everything else, a fern has a family publication history, an enumerative definition of its class, and a concept or iconotype whose pictures propagate years afterwards, much like a definition of something we know. A garden or landscaped

- Group:* Fern Rank: species Herbarium Placement: Lehmann, mid. J, P15
- Published In:* American Fern Journal 82(2): 68, f. 2-3, 1992. (Amer. Fern J.)
- Type-Protologue
- Locality:* USA: Illinois: Hardin Co.: Hooveh Hollow, along base of north-facing cliffs of Pottsville sandstone along Rock Creek, 6 Jan 1982
- Collector and Number:* Farrar 82-1-6-6
- Distribution:* USA (Alabama, Connecticut, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Vermont, Virginia, West Virginia)
- Institution(s):* HT:ISC; IT:MICH,MO,NY,US
- Higher Taxa:* Taxonomy Browser
- Concept:* Andean Bryophytes  
Bolivia Checklist  
Ecuador Catalogue  
Flora Mesoamericana  
Madagascar Catalogue  
Moss Flora of China  
Peru Checklist  
System
- Class:* Equisetopsida C. Agardh
- Subclass:* Polypodiidae Cronquist, Takht. & W. Zimm.
- Order:* Hymenophyllales A.B. Frank
- Family:* Hymenophyllaceae Mart.
- Genus:* Trichomanes L.
- Keywords:* FNA

ground is an abstraction and condensation of something found in nature, and that thing, like the perpetual coming and going of moss on a stone, I think of as domesticity, and the patience that accompanies it. Ferns play a waiting game, as children do, and so, too, I suppose, did my father. I look at moss and a fern in an herbarium or book and I see my father waiting to become who he will be.

37

Besides the ferns and mosses, my father devoted his time to the study and importation, via various mail order companies, of Japan and China rose cultivars, which he selected not for their fragrances, hardiness in winter, or antifungal qualities, but for their ability to repeat or perhaps resume the changing color of their blooms through the summer. My father's favorite summer rose was a China rose climber he trained up our chimney. It disliked the cold and suffered each winter, and it had a rugged stalk and pronounced, intractable thorns that made it necessary for my father to wear his kiln gloves and winter trousers when pruning it. For years, my father would get on a ladder and photograph the climber with his Rolleiflex, repeating the plant's bloom in close-up, year in and year out, from very much the same angle, so that the proliferation of photos assumes an alarming regularity of method suggestive of botanical specimens reproducing themselves. Looking at the photos, it is impossible to assign the word "early" or "late" to any one photograph.

You can see in the photo that the flowers did not wilt but aged *as* they bloomed; the petals developed what my father called a "suntan" as summer deepened. When looked at from under their fringes, the petals called to my mind a spiky floral translation of a solar eclipse. The flowers opened golden yellow, became a vaguely musical pancake color by midsummer, and

by late August displayed their painted age like a child who has learned to read all by herself. After that point, the colors turned less robust and crimson. But unlike adolescence, and unlike chrysanthemums, which have been cultivated for centuries,<sup>2</sup> the China pinks my father favored were not illustrated in artworks or official gardening literature until the tenth century in China and not until the sixteenth century in Europe.

In the book I inherited from my father, Graham Stuart Thomas notes:

[T]he earliest trace of the introduction of the China Rose to Europe . . . is in the National Gallery, London, . . . [in] a painting by the Florentine artist, Angelo Bronzino . . . from about 1529, which shews Cupid with hands full of Pink China Roses in the act of throwing them over Folly, who is embracing Venus (Bronzino, No. 651). The small rose-pink flowers with translucent petals, incurved stamens, reflexed sepals, and small ovate shining leaflet are precisely those of the Pink China, and we may conclude that this Rose was cultivated in Italy early in the sixteenth century.<sup>3</sup>

My father consulted numerous books on the China pinks and how to go about pruning and grafting them, and through much of my adolescence, he read and reread the chapters on rose stem incisions and grafts, and the sections on how to combat rose mold, powdery mildew, and the nefarious grasshoppers and Japanese beetles that bore into his rose blooms and ruined them. My father would plant roses anywhere: wild cabbage roses by

2. See "China Roses," <http://www.rosegathering.com/china.html>, accessed November 21, 2021, 9:17 p.m.
3. Thomas, *The Old Shrub Roses*, 74.

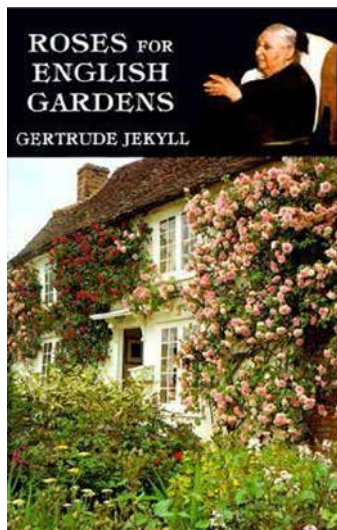


the driveway, where they naturalized with the forsythias and junipers; fairy roses near the front of the main rose bed, by our outdoor fireplace; and hybrid velvets, the petaled perpetuals my father staked in the center of a bed that he called “the Rosary” and that required daily visitation. While I had my cornflakes and half-and-half, my father read two rose books: Thomas’s *The Old Shrub Roses* and *Roses for English Gardens* by Gertrude Jekyll with Edward Mawley.<sup>4</sup> Jekyll’s book, from 1902, is acknowledged as “the finest rose manual for the amateur.” My father kept another book by Jekyll, titled simply *Roses*, in the toolshed near his lopping shears and rakes, where it eventually molded. It was a paperback whose bright-pink cover had faded from the sun and from water damage caused by our garden hoses and sprinklers. *The Old Shrub Roses*, published in 1961, bears a preface by Vita Sackville-West and contains a study of the old-fashioned “lost roses” that were rediscovered in English gardens in the mid-twentieth century, when my father first began acquiring houses and the land upon which they were found and on which he could practice rose cultivation. These books were probably acquired after we moved to 30 Cable Lane in Athens, because the earlier houses were too shady for roses and because neither of my parents thought of the first few houses we lived in as their “home.” Thomas’s book contains photos and drawings of roses from his extensive collection (one of the largest ever assembled) and of a number of shrub roses that had never before been illustrated or photographed. Like a restaurant menu with one’s favorite dish on it, the book references my father’s favorite shrub roses, which had come with the house and probably been

4. See the official website of the Jekyll Estate, <http://www.gertrudejekyll.co.uk/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=55&Itemid=143>, accessed November 21, 2021, 9:19 p.m.

planted sometime in the 1940s. Because they flowered once in late summer and gave off no extravagant fragrance, we called these flowers “Cinderella roses.” I have only one rose like this in my present garden and it seems only appropriate that it requires waiting, much as a parent waits for a child to grow up and a child waits for signs of a parent to return. Its single bloom each season marks its beginning and end, sending out a faint odor of tea with its passing. There is nothing so delicious as eating cornflakes with a rose bush blooming outside an open window.

During the summer, it was my job to use a watering wand to soak the mulched areas around the roses, but—and here my father was adamant—I was not to get too much water on the undersides of the leaves as it could cause rose mildew and wash away the pesticides my father used to deter the Japanese beetles. For my father, rose appreciation was an activity and it was olfactory. My father told me that a rose was the only way the nose



knew how to get drunk. *Rosa chinensis*, along with his shrub roses, had been planted in an earlier era in southeastern Ohio, and my father supplemented what he called “old rose smell” with what he could find locally, mainly hybrid tea roses he did not much care for and which were acquired, wrapped in a foil sheath, from a local nursery and from a discount store called Buckeye Mart, and which did not generally survive a harsh winter. When we first acquired these roses, my father said, somewhat disapprovingly, that they smelled like a gas station in Ohio, but in the end my father came to love the smell of these roses as well, even if they exuded the saccharine odor of the premium motor oil that my father gave to his Jaguar. In summer, when the air was thick, my father would drive us all out to Ray’s Freeze in one of our convertibles and upon returning, as we made our way down our long curving, limestone driveway, he would slow the car and tell us to smell the rose bushes, floating, like some invisible longitudinal marker for home, down the entire length of our driveway.

41

The scent of a rose was unlike anything else in the garden, with one exception: a flower that emerged in an area contiguous to our rose beds. At some point after our era of rose cultivation ended and the rose plants were basically doing fine on their own, and the mosses and ferns had come of their own accord to line the garden borders and stone walls we had built, sometime in the early 1980s, my sister and I noticed a scent, one that felt accidental yet no less cultivated and no less arranged in our lives, though it was probably not arranged at all. Most species of forgetfulness are species of the beautiful rearranged, and the beautiful is arranged mostly by forgetfulness. Like forgetfulness and like childhood, the scent emerged from the general direction of a shrub-like evergreen plant whose fragrant pink and white flowers were located near an outdoor natural gas meter, a gigantic yew

bush my father had grown from a cutting, and a downspout. The waist-high shrub grew in a shaded bed beside our patio, beside a large, odorless azalea, next to a table my father made from four concrete blocks and a large slab of pink marble, and in the early summer, the sun struck our windows sometime after ten o'clock, and the flowers would open. In other words, our noses were trained according to time of day and humidity. At breakfast, we smelled nothing. At dinner, some change, partly aqueous, partly vegetal, was detectable as the summer's heat dissipated, and two large dining room windows were opened to catch the evening air. For years we did not know what this change or any change was, and this is what characterizes that speculative time of life we call childhood. I thought, mistakenly, that the smell originated in the leaflets or unwinding cones of the hemlocks, or else from the ground where mourning doves had settled under a Norway spruce, or from the junipers lining our driveway.

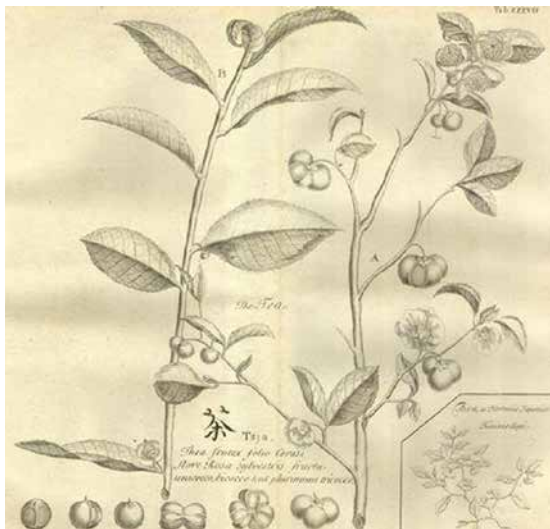
My father insisted on never pruning these evergreens, perhaps because the groundhogs we believed lived there might bite us, but one spring, my father enlisted my help to cross-stake the elephantine bushes, and as my father propped up, from the outside, the enormous branches with a garden rake, I was sent inside to erect a system of wires secured to a Y-shaped scaffolding. This interior bonsai operation insured that no bough would break beneath a wet snowfall and that any tennis ball or shuttlecock that happened to get lost in the branches would stay lost for years.

In the year before my last year of high school, I remember my father telling us the smell we had smelled for years each summer was a "remainder," and to this day I do not know if he meant "reminder." And so it was, linguistically, something my father considered a leftover, that could not be expressed in

English. Whatever it was, it was something he knew. At some point before I graduated from high school, my father looked at the bush and said “pick tea,” and added “Tieguanyin,” and I remember thinking something in a southeastern Ohio August was related to something that had passed years before, in the subtropical and mountainous Fukien Province where my father had grown up.

43

Like the ferns and plants we were continually transplanting, the flowers I associated with dinnertime retained their color indeterminately, so that the act of seeing them was rendered in my mind as an approximation, month after month, through winter, and long after my father and my mother died. My father—in anticipation, I believe, of his own death, and now, I think, of my mother’s death and probably mine—told us that the plant had 900 names in Japan. He called the fragrance only by its Chinese name, *cháhu* (茶花), and I did not learn the non-Chinese



word until years after my father's death, when I, reading seventeenth-century Metaphysical poetry and prose for my orals exams, learned that Carl Linnaeus named the genus *Camellia* in honor of the German botanist Georg Joseph Kamel, who had studied it in the Philippines. And so, the fragrance beyond the dining room windows was returned to a shrub in China whose name had been translated and whose smell called to mind Linnaeus's plan, never executed in his lifetime, for an *horologium florum*: a floral clock planted in a circular pattern, whose particular flowers open their blooms according to the time of day.

Childhood has a smell. It is long in nature and in education, and somewhere in our garden a plant (or its memories) disguises a simple fact: the present can be boiled to make a cup of tea and allow a bit of my father's life in China to return to him, and to me. What he smelled in our garden reminded him of China and what I smell in mine reminds me of something that was mostly invisible when I was young, and so, also, of a childhood rearranged by alphabetic transcription and by a death tinged by a single botanical image.

If you say the word in English, it forms an off-rhyme with Kamel's name, and the Chinese word, having the downward third tone of *cha*, echoes the rhyme found inside the first syllable of the English word. The plant received early mention in the West by Engelbert Kaempfer, in his early eighteenth-century book *Amoenitatum exoticarum politico-physico-mediciarum fasciculi V, quibus continentur . . . rerum Persicarum & ulterioris Asiae*. Kaempfer was the first scientist to illustrate and describe plants of the Orient, including my father's Tsubaki. Oddly, Kaempfer named the plant in Japanese, and referred to the flower as the Japan rose, even as he illustrated the nomenclature with Chinese characters. Eating a meal with a few camellias resting in a bowl

of water reminds me of Chinese food in southeastern Ohio circa 1978, a mildly fermented oolong tea, an open window in the dead of summer, and this bit of linguistics happens every time camellias are in summer flower.

Like most of the plants my father preferred, like the hemlocks and junipers and yews he propagated from cuttings, and the white pine grove we planted together, the evergreen nature of *cháhua* is implicated in a natural history of our family, one that is part natural and part social, part lexicographical and part botanical, part Chinese and, in this case, part Jesuit, part Latin, and part German. Kaempfer's book is notable for its engravings and textual woodcuts. The book itself, as a material object, is rare and expensive, and to read it, I relied on a digital version cataloged at Columbia University's Butler Library. The reproduction and dissemination of this text is easily removed from the story I am telling. Of course, removing something from a story is what

45



makes the story a story. And by story, I mean the things near it.

46

For the digital version I read, the pages of Kaempfer's book were photographed from copy L4563A, held at the Morgan Library in New York. Many of the book's images are covered with smudges, watermarks, stains, crooked type, and plant specimen residue—which can make conversion from image into encoded text difficult. A typical page of an old and rare book like this is usually photographed and returned to the human reader, where the images of the book contain a combination of what is unknown, what is unreadable, and what is plainly illegible. These three classes of error are costly to remove. A book transcribed in this manner requires two readers in the same room transcribing results using a key known to both and a verification method where one reader compares the transcription with the original. This can only be done one word at a time, and it is like most of the practical reading that took place in our household: time consuming, arduous, and mechanical.

It was not until the early aughts that a less costly answer for textual illegibility was developed by the computer scientist Dr. Luis von Ahn. Von Ahn let loose *two* mechanical OCR (optical character recognition) programs on the text. Each produced transcription errors—but not the same ones. The system, as a Wikipedia entry explains,

flagged any word deciphered differently or missing from an English dictionary. Words misspelled the same way by both O.C.R.'s were turned into Captchas (Completely Automated Public Turing test to tell Computers and Humans Apart). These Captchas were not “distorted” versions of the word printed in the original photographic image nor are they compounded from the O.C.R.'s



imagined translation. This word is paired with a second Captcha word whose correct translation is known. Web users seeking entry to secure sites like banks or online merchants are given *both* words and asked to decipher them separately. The system assumes that if the human types the control word correctly, the questionable word is also correct.<sup>5</sup>

47

5 Wikipedia, "Captcha," accessed September 17, 2019, 4:09 p.m.

48

It is 3:11 a.m., June 28, 2007, when I write this, and later, I come back to the MS Word document in my office, surrounded by my parents' books. I am in my office, a sort of makeshift library inside a library, and it is July 15, 2017. And when I return to the document for a third, fourth, and fifth time, it will have been July 18, 2019, July 24, 2019, and August 1, 2021, and I am leafing through my mother's books, and watching the late-night news programs on CBS and ABC on a small, vintage Panasonic TV that my aunt gave me after my father passed away. On the table, there are a few books and articles that I have been reading through the various summers of a book, in a roughly twelve- or fifteen-year period, and they sit in various states of completion and incompleteness. So what I am saying, I suppose, is that summer is specious, it falls in no acceptable order, but I remember what it feels like anyway. Most of the books of summer are not summer at all, they are just trajectories and technical debris of a bibliographic nature. A list of books reminds me of my parents' obituaries, which both appeared late in summer, and of the feelings surrounding them. Like most things, the books surface intermittently, and I list them as such in their dailiness, as if they might find something of my mother or father around them.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY A

- Louise Aronson, *Elderhood*
- Ron Lembo, *Thinking through Television*
- Daniel Miller and Don Slater, *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach*
- Matthew V. Wells, *To Die and Not Decay: Autobiography and the Pursuit of Immortality in Early China*
- Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*
- Yuen Ren Chao, *Aspects of Chinese Socio-Linguistics: Chinese Linguist, Phonologist, Composer and Author; Oral History Transcript/and Related Material, 1947–1977*
- Julia Lin, *Essays on Contemporary Chinese Poetry*
- Susan Neiman, *Why Grow Up?*
- Daniel N. Stern, *Diary of a Baby*
- Ernest Fenollosa, *Epochs of Chinese & Japanese Art*
- K. C. Chang, ed., *Food in Chinese Culture: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives*
- Philip Schmidt, *The Complete Guide to Patios: Plan, Build and Maintain*
- William G. Boltz, "Orthographic Variation in Early Chinese Manuscripts," *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 62, no. 1 (2009)
- Michael Marder, *The Philosopher's Plant: An Intellectual Herbarium*
- Junichiro Tanizaki, *Seven Japanese Tales*

49

Although the titles are arranged as a list or bibliography, they are just an obituary I haven't written yet. That obituary of reading would be mine. The question for my

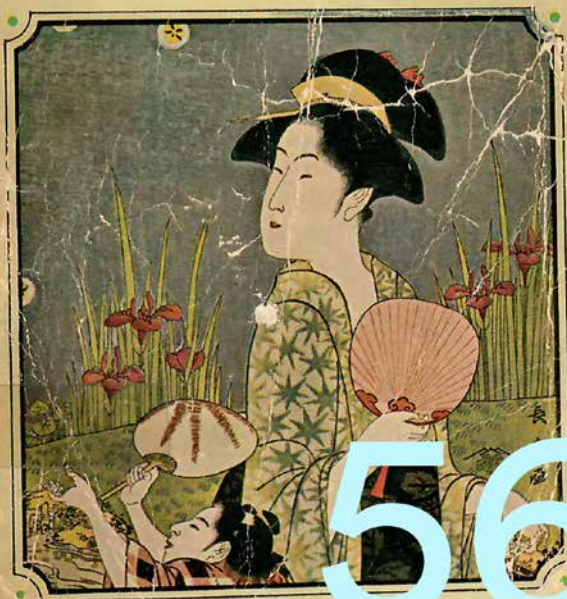
75¢  S1093

*"It would be hard  
to exaggerate the sensuous beauty  
which pervades these stories." —Newsweek*

**JUNICHIRO TANIZAKI**

(author of *THE KEY* and *SOME PREFER NETTLES*)

# SEVEN JAPANESE TALES



56

50

mother and father, and now me, I suppose, is how to make a garden or a love affair, or a family, into something to die in. On the bookshelves beside my desk, like a cycle of life reading, there are two sets of the American art historian Ernest Fenollosa's two-volume study of Chinese and Japanese art; a copy of *Botteghe Oscure*, published in Rome in 1956; and two books by the French Annaliste historian Fernand Braudel, one published in France in 1949, and one translated into English and published thirty years later.

Braudel's books were the most important historical/sociocultural books in my library from the late 1970s to the 1980s, and I actually read them, the later one in a graduate school seminar taught by Steven Marcus. The course was called "Modes and Methodologies," and it was required of first- or second-year graduate students at Columbia. It was the best course I took in graduate school and in it, I gave a twenty-minute presentation on Braudel's concept of "la longue durée," which I argued was an extensive descriptive methodology, a Rabelaisian accumulation of the things of the world. Marcus, who was stinting in his praise, and terrifyingly dismissive in his manner, said, after my presentation, "That was interesting."

26. BRAUDEL, Fernand. *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*. Vol. 1, *La part du milieu*. Paris: Colin, 1949.

Sunning to spine, with wear to front cover. Dust jacket torn. Braudel's inaugural work as an Annaliste historian, begun

as a draft written when he was captured and imprisoned by the Germans in 1940. Braudel's geo-historical methodology served as a precursor to world-systems theory and influenced a generation of European historians. The Mediterranean, as a place shot through by an expanse of time, occupied him from 1923–1949. “For Braudel there is no single Mediterranean Sea. There are many seas—indeed a ‘vast, complex expanse’ within which men operate. Life is conducted on the Mediterranean: people travel, fish, fight wars, and drown in its various contexts. And the sea articulates with the plains and islands. Life on the plains is diverse and complex; the poorer south is affected by religious diversity (Catholicism and Islam), as well as by intrusions—both cultural and economic—from the wealthier north. In other words, the Mediterranean cannot be understood independently from what is exterior to it. Any rigid adherence to boundaries falsifies the situation of the Mediterranean.”

23. BRAUDEL, Fernand. *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th–18th Century*. Translated by Siân Reynolds. Vol. 1, *The Structures of Everyday Life*. New York: HarperCollins, 1982. First published in 1979.

8vo. 623 pp., illustrations, graphs, and charts throughout. Rubbing to covers. Writing and notes in pencil. Owner's signature and date on title page.

The first volume of Braudel's three-part study of the long cycles operant through the pre-industrial world. Braudel's historiographic interest was in a temporality he called “la

longue durée,” where the emphasis lay in the unceasing regularity of daily life, the prevalence of static or slow-changing social structures, and in climactic and geographical conditions—rather than individual actors or events.

I first read Fernand Braudel in college, and his idea of the Mediterranean as a body of water—an almost material substrate, event, and congelation of social forces and inertia—stuck with me. Braudel introduced me to “the first level of time, geographical time, . . . that of the environment, with its slow, almost imperceptible change, its repetition and cycles. Such change may be slow, but it is irresistible.”<sup>6</sup>

I am not sure why a fragrance, a two-volume duplicated set of books published in the UK, a bunch of Captchas, and an Asiatic fern, along with their competing publication histories, taxonomic characteristics, and intersections with a common patio, belong here anymore than photos of late-night TV and restaurants in Manhattan, but I believe that, like ferns, roses, and haute cuisine, the course of my father’s and my mother’s lives, from China to America and back to China, was marked by an “alternation of generations,” and that childhood, its slow and indolent amassing of books and photographs, once erased, begins to reproduce itself as a geography one keeps coming back to.

I pick up the copy of *Botteghe Oscure* that contains my mother’s first publication, “Song of the Crazy Monk,” and read the poem again. Who was my mother in 1956? What can I know of her now, sixty years later? Theodore Roethke, her teacher at the University of Washington, had taken the poem, I presume revised it, and sent it off to the editors at *Botteghe*. It was

6 Wikipedia, “Fernand Braudel,” accessed September 21, 2021, 10:12 p.m.

published in Rome, the year before I was born. It was her first and her only publication. My mother had wanted to be a poet, and although she never published a volume of her own poetry, she published poems in journals and she wrote four books about Chinese poetry, along with translations of postwar and contemporary Taiwanese and Chinese poetry. Her fellow classmates included Carolyn Kizer, James Wright, and Richard Hugo, and they all went on to become poets in their own right. I had asked her about Roethke and she had told me that he called her “Lin.” And then she told me she could not become an American poet because she “did not have the language.”

9. *Botteghe Oscure*. Vol. XVII, Spring 1956.

Pbk. wrappers, green and white lettering on cream-colored papers, title printed on spine, jacket torn, spine detached from front and back panels. 550 pp. A gift copy, signed and inscribed “To my dearest New England parents. Hope they’ll enjoy my ‘Crazy Monk,’” dated 1956.

Founded in 1948 by Marguerite Caetani, the Princess di Bassiano, and published biannually till 1960, *Botteghe Oscure* published some of the most important literary figures of the period, in five languages: French, German, English, Italian, and Spanish. Volume XVII includes poems in French, by René Char, Maurice Blanchot, Georges Bataille, and Bernard Berenson, and poems in English, by David Gascoyne, Jon Silkin, Paul Celan, and Richard Hugo. After the magazine was shuttered, Caetani retired to the family’s Garden of Ninfa, considered one



of the most romantic gardens in the world, where she introduced hundreds of flowers, including the double pink *Rosa roxburghii* and the *Rosa* “Crépuscule.”

“Song of a Crazy Monk” appears on page 269. The author is listed as Lin Ming-Hwei Chang. The fifth line of the poem is crossed out and a revision is penned at the bottom of the page, suggesting that a poem, like a person, is never quite done. The biographical note reads: “Born Shanghai, China, May 4, 1928. Miss Lin was educated at Smith college; she later studied under Theodore Roethke at the University of Washington. At present she is working as a teaching assistant at the University. This is her first publication.”

55

August 1, 2020, late at night: seven years to the day my mother died in our apartment in Manhattan. I pick up Graham Stuart Thomas’s *The Old Shrub Roses*. Someone has put a bookmark at the end of chapter 8; either my father or I. Chapter 9 is devoted to the botanist Dr. C. C. Hurst and reprints Hurst’s “Notes on the Origin and Evolution of Our Garden Roses,” first published in 1922. Thomas’s chapter begins with this statement: “My earlier, historical chapters have proceeded in a curious way; each one has perforce gone a little too far, with the result that the next has had to start chronologically earlier, and this will be no exception.”

Parts of the chapter are underlined, including the opening section where Hurst is quoted: “The introduction of the China Rose to England towards the end of the eighteenth century caused a complete revolution in the garden Roses of Europe,

America, and the near east.”<sup>7</sup> This revolution was of course the ability to flower repeatedly, though I confuse this with simultaneity. The ancient roses flowered once, in early summer, but modern roses—and here I am speaking of the midcentury roses that my father planted—bloomed continuously from summer to late autumn, and thus added another seasonal dimension to the life of a rose and to my father as well. Hurst’s remarks continue: “Recent research shows that this habit of continuous flowering is due to the action of a Mendelian recessive gene introduced into our modern Roses by the China and Tea Roses, already cultivated in China for a thousand years or more.”<sup>8</sup>

The TV is playing. I am reading and writing poetry, what I think of as late-night tinkering. TBS is playing a throwback episode of Conan. Like very late-night news shows, which are breaking news shows where very little news trickles in, a life modeled on the dispersal of a library would be a life with few hints of the novelistic—i.e., the photographic—inside of it. Adulthood is a life increasingly lived in that first level of geographical time known as endless daily retrospect. My father’s and my mother’s lives, now that they are over, are the opposite of melodramatic. And yet, the years of their lives remind me of the things happiness smells like. And like the gradual appearance of summer and a fern through a window, the feelings are indirect and self-propagating, like reruns of TV after adolescence has gone away, or like the books of childhood. I think of my parents’ lives and deaths, they reoccur and alternate, their indolence as irresistible as the change of seasons.

My father died in Santa Barbara, but he really died in Ohio. His death, which was rapid and shocking, seems much less so

7 Hurst, in Thomas, *The Old Shrub Roses*, 59.

8 *Ibid.*, 60.

in retrospect and appears to be mildly Asian, at least in Ohio. Sometimes his death, like a bit of inertia in the middle of my day in New York, looks like a desk my father made for me in high school out of recycled kitchen cupboards. What is the history of a family that reads a lot, a history which I confuse with furniture and a smell, and which together now requires returning to a single bibliographic entry? What does this return to a set of books imply? Most tragedies are minor and duplicated and that's what makes them tragedies.

44. FENOLLOSA, Ernest F. *Epochs of Chinese & Japanese Art: An Outline History of East Asiatic Design*. 2 vols. London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1912.

First edition. Hardcover. 4to. xxxcii, 204; xiv, 212 pp. Plates (including fifteen in color, tissue guards with descriptive text). Index. Preface includes biography of the author. Yellow cloth spine and corner tips over tan paper boards; gilt lettering.

44A. FENOLLOSA, Ernest F. *Epochs of Chinese & Japanese Art: An Outline History of East Asiatic Design*. 2 vols. London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1912.

First edition. Hardcover. 4to. xxxcii, 204; xiv, 212 pp. Plates (including fifteen in color, tissue guards with descriptive text). Index. Preface includes biography of the author. Yellow cloth spine and corner tips over tan paper boards; gilt lettering. Foxing to endpapers and tear to spine of volume 1. Outline of a pressed rose between pages 137–38 in volume 2.

58 A year before he died of a heart attack, my father was living in Santa Barbara, and every few months we would go to a flea market at the Rose Bowl to look for used furniture, camera equipment, and knickknacks. On one of our last trips, it was 1988 or 1989, we passed a man smoking clove cigarettes and chatting in front of someone else's booth. He looked like my father except that he dressed like an Indian and wore a turban, with loose white pants that resembled pajamas and an embroidered, white, buttonless shirt. He wore cinnamon perfume.

I turned to my father and said, "He's Chinese."

My father had few friends but from that afternoon until his death, a year or two later, he conversed with the man he called "the Egyptian," and sometimes "the Pharaoh," mainly via letters and phone calls. As we paused in front of the booth, the Egyptian gesticulated and announced to everyone within earshot but speaking to my father, "I have two lives."

My father looked startled.

The Egyptian asked us to tea and walked us to his booth, where he told us that he had concocted a rare ointment for people with chronic skin problems in places like Hollywood, where people work in the movies under lots of light and think they have bad skin. My father had trouble following the Egyptian's English.

There were a few creamy-white glass jars of the skin ointment on the table, next to a copy of *View* magazine, which I bought, some Futura vases and Van Briggles bowls, a balsa gift

pack of English Leather (unopened), and a few Dansk candleholders and teak items, which I also bought. I bought everything on his table that day, even the English Leather.

A copy of *Epochs of Chinese & Japanese Art*, volumes 1 and 2, by Ernest Fenollosa, sat on a small bookshelf. The books had mustard-colored boards, and when I saw them, I remembered them. They had brown labels stamped with bright gilt letters on the covers and were published by William Heinemann in London. I lifted them up to get a closer look. The board extremities were rubbed and worn. There was foxing to the pages. The paper of the front- and rear-hinges in the second volume was torn. No date was listed anywhere inside, and I presumed the books to be the 1913 American edition, printed with sheets sent from England. When my father saw me holding the books, he said, "I gave those to your mother after we met." That would have dated them to August 1956, and I recognized the lightly stained boards from seeing them in my mother's study. The Egyptian said to me, "You can have them for twenty dollars."

My father did not say anything to me, which indicated, I think, his general approval. It was the unstated thought of both of us that the books were far more valuable than what was being asked.

I said, not quite speaking to anyone in particular, "The books mean something to us." The Egyptian shook his head. He carefully wrapped each volume in white paper and secured each package with a small amount of scotch tape. I was indescribably happy to have found the paired books; they seemed like a gift that had come from inside the world. A family gives itself gifts over and over again. Here was a gift that doubled with time.

When, a few months later, I visited my mother in Athens, I leafed through her copy and found a rose pressed between pages 136 and 137, and the rose, preserved by its own vague outlines

of a scent, had left a green and red dust cloud on the pages. If not for this, I think the editions were exactly the same. I picked up the book and brought it to my nose. I did not know what I was expecting to smell. The two copies of *Epochs*, one in my mother's study and one in my New York apartment, together suggest two distinct trajectories of a family's life. The two books read unlike a novel and more like a newspaper or the internet—more like a symbol of a book or the table of contents of a book. They have saved something of my mother and father's relationship that they themselves had not been able to. The two editions, one roseless, one with green dust, today exist at the same time and in the same place. I asked my mother whether she had read the book when she was in graduate school at the University of Washington, and she replied no, she had not had the time, she was trying to write her dissertation and taking care of Maya and me.

After the books had been wrapped in paper, the Egyptian smiled and motioned to the items on the table. My father looked at a rubbed-leather case filled with lens filters and a Rolleiflex light meter. He told me, "I have that set of lens filters in a box in Athens."

The Egyptian, who wore dark-red nail polish, said to my father, "You are yellow and you are important and you are a photographer." He announced this information matter-of-factly, as if it were known to everyone in the booth where we were sitting. A few customers stared at us. Then the Egyptian told us that his name was LordPharaoh ImHotepAmonRa. He asked my father his name, and my father replied, as he always did, "Henry Lin." The Egyptian paused, looked at my father, and asked: "What is your real name?"

He put two Turkish kettles on a hot plate, boiled water, and proceeded to brew a pot of tea. He brought out a tin of biscuits that

he called “almoond” and over tea he told us about his ointment, which he referred to as “my salve” (he pronounced it “saaav-uh”). I opened a bottle and inside was a thick, yellow, sweet-scented unguent. It was designed for rashes and sunburns but was also useful for scar tissue, a problem my father dealt with after his first coronary bypass, which, because it involved removing a vein from his leg and inserting it near his heart, created a scar that ran from his thigh to his ankle and caused him undue itching and pain. The Egyptian gave my father a jar, around which he wrapped a small piece of paper and secured it with a rubber band. A few weeks later, my father would buy one jar by mail order (a small jar cost twenty-eight dollars) and began having a jar shipped to him in Santa Barbara once a month. Mr. LordPharaoh ImHotepAmonRa said that the name he had given us was not his birth name. It was two names he had found fortuitously and put together. He told us he had been born Westley Howard. He added, “That is a boring name, but there was no shame in such a name. It was who I was.” He worked as a water filter salesman in Chicago in the ’80s. One day, he was in a diner when a man approached him, confessing that he had a secret and that he wanted to pass it on. Mr. Howard was not surprised by such a gesture. “I’m a spiritual person, so these things happen to me all the time.” The mysterious stranger gave only his last name, Imas, and announced that he was a doctor, though where he practiced, where he lived, and what his specialty was remained mysteries over more than two decades of meetings and exchanges; Dr. Imas never bothered to complete the story for Mr. Howard, and Mr. Howard never bothered to ask for the details.

Dr. Imas would, periodically, phone Mr. Howard in Washington, DC, to arrange a meeting, and at these various meetings, always held at the Tabard Inn off Dupont Circle, Dr. Imas

slowly and for no discernible reason taught him, step-by-step, though in no particular order, how to make what he called “the ancient unguent,” a concoction of olive oil, beeswax, bee pollen, royal jelly, and propolis, the substance that bees secrete in order to seal their hives from the rain. Because the recipe was completed over many years, with gradual, various, and often quite minor additions, its teaching overlapped with a number of American presidents, from Jimmy Carter to Bill Clinton, spanning the entire term of Ronald Reagan. The arrival of the ointment in the mail reminded me of the American presidency, the end of the Cold War, and of the undulating core of a lava lamp, which is to say that the jars had the effect of a TV sitcom or the evening news sealed inside a jar. The ointment my father used, the Reagan cream, is inextricably linked to my father’s first, and nonlethal, heart attack; to his love of newspapers, especially the classified ads; and, of course, to the president at the time immediately preceding his heart attack, whom my father referred to as Mr. Reagan and whom I associate with (posthumous) forgetting.

Why the Egyptian bothered to tell us his history my father and I were never able to figure out, but I suspect it had little to do with the claims he made for his magical ointment. He spoke an impeccable English and his identity, whatever it was, seemed to issue from a world that communicated solely by word of mouth, without recourse to advertising. And sure enough, as the Egyptian would soon tell us, celebrities started gravitating to his stuff when it got out in places like Los Angeles and Aspen. Madonna bought jars and jars and gave them away. Sarah Polley, Michelle Williams, Emily Blunt, Kate Hudson, and Virginia Madsen carried it around in their huge handbags. Bill Clinton, lounging by the fireplace at the Tabard Inn, ordered a case for Chelsea, who was living in Boston, and who reputedly gave jars away to her bridal party.



Barack Obama was given a box by Michelle just after the 2008 Democratic National Convention; John McCain received a box, anonymously, from Cindy. These were all documented in a story on unexpected campaign gifts in *Politico*.

At times when my father needed another jar, he would take out his pen and write a letter to Mr. LordPharaoh ImHotepAmonRa. Invariably, a few weeks after the order had arrived, my father would receive a second small packet from “the Egyptian,” usually bearing a few photos. One time it included a photo of “my wife Vanessa,” another time some Fotomat photos of his daughters, and once, in a small glassine envelope, a photo of a young woman in a belly dancing outfit. Pencil on the outside of the envelope was “my girlfriend Erika.” The Egyptian never wrote on stationery, just on the backs of envelopes or on postcards he found at hotels. On one of his postcards, he told my father that Egyptian Magic would always be a mom-and-pop sort of store in a jar and that he would never sell his company secret to a multinational conglomerate and that this befits the balm that Alexander the Great was preserved in after his death.

The Egyptian was the most polite man my father or I had ever met, and his politeness suggested that he had at least two selves, both of which seemed endless: the one he appeared to be in public, and the one he was before taking on a second name. It was this split between such indiscernible personality traits that made him resemble who he was—and probably, as my father insisted, Ronald Reagan too. And so, in a way, he came to resemble my father, who also was not so much a self composed of dutiful opposites as much as an ointment of objects, many of which were minor or boring or vivid or perfumed or dying, and yet they were all a kind of glacial salve for the unpleasantness of life that makes life resistant to repetition. Politeness was a salve that took the form of a

repetition for the Egyptian, and politeness was the bit of mortality that my father lacked, which I suppose is why he and the Egyptian became such good friends and took such pleasure in one another's company, for it was the Egyptian's politeness that always triggered enjoyment in my father and in the subsequent memories I have of the two of them. And so, in the middle of what was probably my father's depression, from his late sixties to his death, I was always surprised, and then a few moments later I would be surprised again, seeing the Egyptian in a natural foods store with his Louis Vuitton bag and his fingernails painted a brackish red, or when my father and I would run into him in a café on one of the Pharaoh's frequent trips to Santa Barbara, or when my father and I would look at his photographs and guffaw to each other at night, sitting in my father's apartment in Santa Barbara and watching TV, when one of us would fall asleep, and on waking, the other one of us, usually my father, would say, "The Pharaoh is talking like Ronald Reagan," and we would laugh and laugh for no reason.

I did not understand this beautiful laughter then, or how the medium of love functioned as a kind of historical omission in the life of a family like ours. Of course, love is just one of the many general mediums in which a family's history and its memories take place. I pick up the photo of the gifts on a table; they are participating in a moment that will come much later. In a family, a photograph is a general, highly obsessive thing that makes no distinction between what is a family and what is not, and between what is living and what is not. In a family, love is mostly something you forget in order to remember at some later point. And as anyone who has fallen in love can tell you, love is the best medium for forgetting the many things in the world that do not need remembering.





Coda  
(1970–1975)

BIBLIOGRAPHY B

66 This is the most or second-most seminal period of my reading life, and this bibliography reflects the interval. Non-reading is a form of reading and it characterizes that period known as adolescence. An interval arises and closes around a family and its objects, which unfurl in time, like childhood libraries, vending machines, toaster ovens, poetry by James Wright and Mark Strand, American muscle cars, Appalachia, flea market photos, stones from a patio, and a liquor cabinet.

The list consists of many books not read at the time, a few read later, and many which I told other people, later, that I *had* read in high school. In other words, the bibliography is a fictional excuse for the feelings I still carry with me. Lies occur in adolescence, and the multi-volume books attest to this fact.

*The dean of Cold War historians*

29. GADDIS, John. *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941–1947*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000. First published in 1972.

The president of Ohio University, John Calhoun Baker, hired my father to run the graduate program in ceramics at Ohio University, in what was and still is the middle of Appalachia, with its abandoned coal fields and hardscrabble towns. Baker, who was a tall, soft-spoken man, grew up

poor in eastern Pennsylvania. Unlike American politicians and more in the vein of certain French socialists—known as elephants because they live so long and develop tough skins with age—Baker understood the perfect necessity, while speaking on foreign issues or educational reform or gardening, of referring to other intellectuals while in the middle of a conversation or sentence—“Huntington, Machiavelli, Baverez, Hegel, Jaurès, Sollers, and Seneca”—and in this way, meeting him was like an appointment with a talking encyclopedia. Baker was extremely fond of my mother and father, and when my father became the dean of the fine arts school, we would spend a good portion of our summer in Chatham, on Cape Cod, where the Bakers had a summer house and where the Monomoy Theatre Company and the OU theater department put on a summer stock of mostly musicals. *Hello, Dolly!* was the first musical I saw, and my parents insisted, to my chagrin, that I wear an all-white linen suit to the opening night.

Late in the '70s John hired a historian named John Gaddis, who would write the book that Baker had wanted to write, and it was Gaddis who would complete a soft network being slowly assembled in adolescence, a threadlike system of clockworks, phone calls, dates, protocols, political upheavals, cheap LPs, worker collectives, Soviet documents, Audubon field guides, typewriters, narratives, social bonds, institutions, philatelic albums, the Cold War, and poetry books that was being assembled throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1990s (the 1980s are missing). The book was *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War*.

27. KENDALL, Carol. *The Gammage Cup*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1959.

8vo. over 7 3/4 by 9 3/4. Blue cloth boards, stamped in black.

68 Carol Kendall, who we called Siggy, lived across the street from our house on Forest Street, the first my parents owned. When Siggy died, I sent an email to Curley and to her younger sister, Gilly, who I played with endlessly as a child and who is now a professor of Renaissance studies and Shakespeare at Smith College, which my mother graduated from in 1949:

I still very much remember that house on Forest Street, playing with Gillian and of course your parents and especially Siggy, who meant a great great deal to us as a family. When I think of Ohio and Athens, and I do often now that I have Ahn, I of course think of the Kendalls, biography, Shakespeare, growing up, and the humor and intelligence and kindness of your parents. Our family would all be very different had we not met yours. I am still grateful for having gotten to know them and you. Your parents were extraordinarily special to us, they changed us, and no doubt all whom they touched and came into contact with.

I remember those lovely Thanksgiving and Christmas Eve dinners—I don't think we would even have eaten a turkey without them and certainly my father would not have loved the Dallas

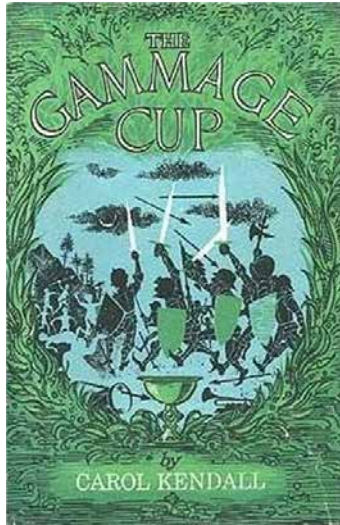
Cowboys with such fervor, or Beefeaters Gin, or countless other things. And I still remember, brightly, that little toolbox Siggy and Gillian filled with so many very lovely tools and compasses and trinkets and gave me one Christmas. And last week Maya showed me this jump rope that she had as a child and I thought to myself, surely that was a gift from the Kendalls.

69

The Kendalls brought us American football, Louis XI and Richard III, and turkey, and more than anyone, showed our parents how it was possible to be simultaneously American and Chinese. Siggy took my mother's Chinese language classes at Ohio University, and when we lived on Forest Street and we went over to their house, Siggy had written Chinese characters on paper and taped them to toasters, refrigerators, and everything else. And so, she learned Chinese.

Gilly's father, Paul Murray Kendall, died on November 21, 1973, in Lawrence, Kansas, and when my mother passed away in 2013, Gilly wrote to tell me how much she loved my mother. She added that in November 1973, a few days after Paul's death, a turkey had been delivered to their doorstep, a gift from my mother, 600 miles away.

Siggy gave me a number of books when I was a child, most of them purchased in England and Kenya, where they had lived before, and many of the books, listed below and throughout this bibliographical work, were my favorite books in elementary school. And beyond. Before my mother died, I asked her how Maya and I had come to attend Putnam Elementary School, a free-form, gradeless school where each student worked at her own pace out of a small index card box, in collaboration with numerous student teachers. My mother said, simply, "Siggy." And that was all I needed to hear.



10. BRAUTIGAN, Richard. *Trout Fishing in America*. New York: Laurel Editions (Dell), 1967.

Mass-market paperback. Front cover missing.

As the Gang of Four song goes, “The problem with leisure, what to do for pleasure?” On the back cover of *Trout Fishing in America*, I find three blurbs for a book I did not read till the week after my mother’s death, and this will be my second encounter with the non-reading of the things of the world, extensions of chronology, and delayed florescence that surround the death of someone one loves. Philosophical equivalent to fishing for trout in America: Spinoza’s treatise “On the Rainbow” (tossed into the fire).



The only thing I read of this book in high school were the blurbs:

“Mr. Brautigan submitted a book to us in 1962 called *Trout Fishing in America*. I gather from the reports that it was not about trout fishing.”

—The Viking Press

71

“Reading *Trout Fishing in America* won’t help you catch more fish, but it does have something to do with trout fishing.”

—*Fly Fisherman: The Magazine for the Complete Angler*, volume one, number four

“A slender American classic.”

—*The Times Literary Supplement*

11. MISHIMA, Yukio. *Death in Midsummer: And Other Stories*. New York: New Directions, 1966.

4to. Inscribed: “Julia C. Lin. 1972.” Notes in red pencil throughout.

My mother’s copy. Read obsessively in high school. My mother, a professor, had multiple copies of many of her textbooks, and this book, aside from Camus’s *The Stranger* and Sartre’s *Nausea*—read for an Existentialism course I took at OU my high school senior year—was my favorite book in the months before I left for college. I don’t know where my copy of this book is, and so I

have my mother's, marked throughout in red pen and red pencil with her teaching notes and annotations.

72

That same summer before I left for college, my mother purchased a Waring Ice Cream Parlor at a garage sale and I read Mishima and ate fresh strawberry ice cream for the first time, with berries from plants my father had grown by a rock cliff outside our front door.

A photo of the cliff appeared in a Zillow ad for our house in 2010, which I considered an extraordinary bit of serendipity, though the strawberry and black raspberry bushes that we planted had died. In one of Maya's interviews about her memorial for Vietnam veterans, she mentions this early rock wall, and how she, Gilly, and I chiseled the friable surface of the wall, comprised of slats of sandstone and shale we extracted from the mossy cliff and then placed in little Matchbox cars to drive along the cliff's dwellings, parking garages, and roads we had created. This is the wall where the occasional copperhead would surface. My mother hated it when we played there.





## Acknowledgments

My thanks to Shiv Kotecha, Pradeep Dalal, and Deirdre O'Dwyer at Creative Capital for unending editorial support; to Robert Hamburger, Gordon Tapper, and Ethan Bumas for their invaluable comments and guidance on revisions; to Maya for always believing; and to Ahn and Clare for extravagant amounts of patience, humor, and love.

© Tan Lin, 2022

Cookie Jar 1 | Home is a Foreign Place

Published by The Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant, New York

Edition of 2,000

Editors: Pradeep Dalal and Shiv Kotecha

Project Coordinator: Julie Evanoff

Copy Editor: Deirdre O'Dwyer

Design: Studio Remco van Bladel

This book is typeset in Eldorado Text Light and printed on Munken Lynx Rough, 100 gsm. Printed and bound by De Raddraaier SSP, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, any other information storage and retrieval system, or otherwise without written permission from the publisher.

Every effort has been made to trace copyright holders and to obtain their permission for the use of copyright material. The publisher also apologizes for any errors or omissions and would be grateful if notified of any corrections that should be incorporated in future reprints or editions of this book. Unless otherwise noted, all images © the author.

The logo consists of a rectangular box with a thin black border. Inside the box, the text "The Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant" is printed in a small, black, sans-serif font, arranged in four lines.

The Andy Warhol  
Foundation  
Arts Writers  
Grant

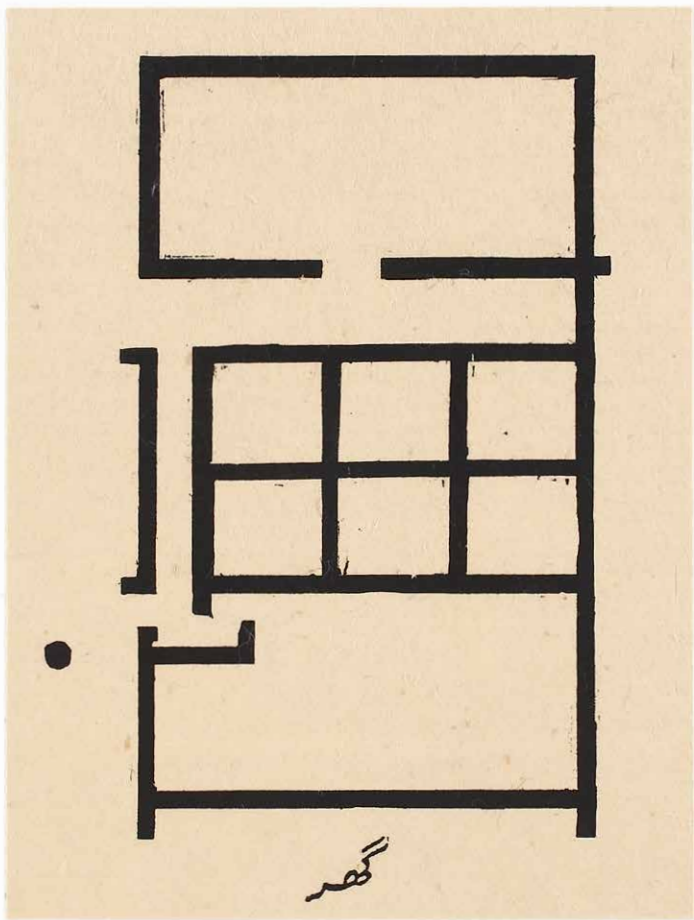
The Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant

15 Maiden Lane, 18th Floor

New York, NY 10038

[cookiejar.artswriters.org](http://cookiejar.artswriters.org)

Tan Lin is the author of twelve books. The current work is excerpted from his forthcoming novel *Our Feelings Were Made by Hand*. He lives with his family in New York City, where he tends roses and mosses on a terrace.



۱۱۷

Home

Zarina 99

Front cover: Zarina, *Home*

from the portfolio *Home is a Foreign Place*, 1999

Portfolio of 36 woodcuts with Urdu text printed in black on

Kozo paper and mounted on Somerset paper

Edition of 25 and 5 Roman Numeral sets

Image size: 8 x 6 inches (20.32 x 15.24 cm)

Sheet size: 16 x 13 inches (40.46 x 33.02 cm)

© Zarina; Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York.

Photo: Farzad Owrang



*Cookie Jar*, a pamphlet series of the Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant, gathers five new pieces of writing by grantees that take on home as the unruly site of inheritance, memory, and imagination. In “Ejecta,” Ari Larissa Heinrich reflects on artist Jes Fan’s melanin sculptures and the geology of metaphoric language. Tan Lin’s “The Fern Rose Bibliography” is a meditation on the loss of his parents through an olfactory exploration of his family’s books. M. Neelika Jayawardane’s “This is not the correct history” questions the evidentiary nature of documentary photography foregrounding the slippery ethics of reading images of the decades-long civil war in Sri Lanka. In “He Brought a Swastika to the Summer of Love,” William E. Jones closely reads the fascist iconography in the films of Kenneth Anger for their prescient, unnerving connections to our contemporary political moment. In “Racial Chain of Being,” Shaka McGlotten updates the chart of representations that was Donna Haraway’s provocation in “A Cyborg Manifesto,” in the process forging connections between familial legacy, Black radicalism, and the classroom.

In her masterwork *Home is a Foreign Place* (1999)—from which we borrow the title for this volume and cover image for this volume—artist Zarina wrote, “The titles of my work always come to me before the image. Language ties my work together. Urdu is home.” Titled *Home*, this is the first of thirty-six woodblock prints that recall the artist’s childhood residence in Aligarh, India. Even a partial list of Zarina’s titles—*Threshold*, *Courtyard*, *Shadows*, *Fragrance*, *Despair*—reveal how the viewer is invited into the sensorium of Zarina’s elusive idea of home. The essays in this first volume of *Cookie Jar*, varied in scope and approach, illuminate the interior landscapes associated with home. Collectively, they demonstrate the fearlessness—and the tenderness—with which writing may yet encounter art.

—Pradeep Dalal and Shiv Kotecha



© 2022 The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc. / Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Andy Warhol spent his weekends scouring flea markets, thrift stores, and estate sales for specific items like Navajo blankets, watches, and cookie jars. He collected 175 unique cookie jars in his lifetime, which depicted homes and animals, bodies and faces. When Claude Picasso asked Warhol in 1972 about his fascination with cookie jars, Warhol responded, “They’re time pieces.”

[cookiejar.artswriters.org](http://cookiejar.artswriters.org)

The Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant