

Day and Night

1. I hear these bones getting old. I hear the wind die. My upstairs neighbour's knees crack as he exercises. Birds are stirring. Trees yawn in the dwindling night. I hear ocean.
2. I have my own recording Angel, whom I imagine in others, awake or asleep – mostly asleep. Angel etches my Gantt chart, spiking the months as if to capture time. Together we craft an email, attaching section reports on Bougainville and Dili with our divisional return: summaries of a region, risks assessed, accounts opened and closed. Fingers type to refine language. She undangles modifiers and repairs infinitives. Pushing a button each morning we trigger the encryption macro together – a pause after logging on, tea-pursed lips awaiting diagnostics and the scroll of virus scans. Up pops a logon ID. We put in our password. I hit Enter. Could do it in her sleep. Or mine. We're day and night, co-dependent. Whether I dream Angel or she me is hard to say.
3. In extreme circumstances she will spread spirit to redeem from despair. Everyone deserves but few identify their Angel. Most know only a sense of waking followed by the climb of feet and hands from bed. Take my supervisor, the section head, Dr Bahn. Not his real name. Bahn seems to munch toast, rinsing his scalp then queuing outside for a bus to breathe another morning's fumes. Cricket pitches dry from restricted watering, dying so that he may wash. In our office no one thirsts, sheltered from civilian rules and freedom of information. Coffee flows unaffected as sea. Amid air filters we read, or seem to, striped with paragraph illumination, faces speckled in the matrix of embedded image, reflecting no outside light, only death-throes of a fluorescent tube. In shuffles Dr Bahn, for whom we brew programs and hypertext. To others he could never admit the existence of an Angel. Wings of one bird, they would shadow each other, flapping this walk: no telling the dancer from the dance. One would not undress the soul, lacking access to all areas. But Bahn has no wings.
4. Along passageways my colleagues nod or ignore, imbued with the culture of evasive quietism that passes for fellowship. Our hands carry papers and files to meetings, balancing our mugs of tea. I drink but no longer taste. There is disconnection in me, a sundering of the senses. Men are wearing white shirts and microfibre suits: women too. Everyone wears a pass. It is my fancy that at least one may be sharing secrets with an inner Angel, who treads in her soundless heels. Without a faculty for self-ridicule I might inhale the madness – unless I have, and cannot tell. Dr Bahn must long ago must have cauterised laughter. I detect no Angel in that brow large as a lantern, in the yellow pipe-smoker's teeth: a man of mere flesh, deaf to any cackle within. Could Bahn even imagine Angel? A dual self would imperil his norms. Behind the face of orthodoxy I am at

liberty to snigger. The man assumes he has my measure, twirling a ballpoint as he talks. Angel could dance on the head of that pen.

5. At his desk Bahn reserves space for a phone that seldom rings, next to his white computer and black trays. The puff-chested man articulates jargon while a clip-pass barcodes him amid the static of data. Some doors wouldn't open if he were to try. He will never try. Less amused recorders scan a ledger of comings, goings, withdrawal and deposit times, every keystroke and gesture. Unlikely to possess my inner resources Bahn is ignorant of how it feels to stand in rice fields, witnessing birds flying wild as the wind. I feel sure there's no Angel speaking inside, consummating their interdependence like the kiss of tidal river at a bank. On such sterile essence no Angel can feed. Bahn cannot perceive. He knows only whole numbers. But without Angel I would long ago have imploded, unable to digest the weight of code and conundrum. I have licked moisture from her dew-pearled leaves, subsisting in wilderness. Bahn could not nurse such feelings.
6. An only child I used to nurture a guardian angel, aurora-crowned Good Witch of the North. In adolescence I worshipped poseur prefects and teachers, unknowing guide-guardians, though I couldn't see their limits. Later I slept with a man – lecturer and prophet – a fell spirit who spurned me. A tiny life was ripped from inside, which I'd neither sought nor christened. Moist with madness my grief shrank and dried to a hard patina. Behind a comradeship mask I counterfeited my career, ascending to the level of trade delegation, then special assignment, finally a salaried expatriation, cultural attache.
7. In another realm I met a lover who became protector, according me privilege as his wife. Xhang isn't his true name. He didn't know my double-face, though we shared seven years, and a boy child – Xu isn't his name. Rain, famine, then the purges. Neighbours evaporated, suddenly no longer helping at our school or the well. Nobody made a comment, only sidelong glances, fearing a doorknock. Arrests fell like hailstorm. Delivering my boy, I gave birth in secret to Angel too: pure love, impervious to state removal – a son for Earth, a daughter for sky. She's one with me. I won't desert her, as I had to abandon Xu: grief that will not heal. Yet my Angel has stuck, despite bouts of interrogation, and rape by a soldier that I hadn't the power to denounce. Angel forgave, cleansing, and lifted me to air. Recently in a white shaft, tongues of light licked me laser-clean from clinical doubt. Angel gripped my hand. From investigation she remains safe. No exorciser harms her. Questioning will break my sanity before I sing her name.
8. Daily upon waking I blink at rooms of motel hue. Either autumn leaf nuzzles my window, shedding gold feather, or spring blooms without noise. Birds wheel, circling fine calligraphy. I tread a half-life of survivor guilt, recalling swan flocks formation-flying over our village: in my kitchen the blind remains down so I won't see children in a playground, lawns arid as a Party official's tear duct. For years I've perished in

fragments; after surgery only partly recovering, silhouette sabotaged – two lumps removed then an entire breast, half my mothering organ. No longer able to fly, I would perish in the wild. The loss of smell and taste may be from post-operative trauma, or a fast of the heart. Beyond words, I taste only breath, dangling single-pinioned, hole-shaped in a picture where I used to pose.

9. Time compresses on my spreadsheet: a taskbar icon. I trawl the Web via a Mandarin search engine, combing for Falun Gong, Uighurs and the Middle Kingdom. What immortal hand or eye spins this cryptogram and math? Lacking windows, my colleagues only imagine the sun beating outside. Surely even Bahn yearns for fresh air sometimes. Could a pink dawn linger in his recall, from the morning after he became a parent, having spawned life? Perhaps clouds swallow the day when he left behind a six-year old, later lost to manhood. Authorities of another nation would insist that separation was a matter of mutual safety. Bahn might even ingest the lie, commemorating birthdays and calling to a void of night.
10. Others of my calling are less fortunate. Lacking Angel, they cannot rise on draughts of air to touch bridge and crowns of a starry maw. We sing our counterpoint aria – light and dark, foul and fair – partitioning what can't be uttered or heard. Not a flicker do I betray, though it's stuffy inside.
11. To escape this building one tunnels down corridors, past one-way glass and technocrats in dress code of metallic tie and rimless glasses. A sun must pulse today. Taking my lift to the ground, I taste only absurdity. Bahn's tongue may enjoy wine and garlic but it lacks proficiency with Malay or Pinyin. In that other dominion my tongue rasped in frost-thick night, where a tempest could rip eaves. Here we lick ice cream, saluting not officials but flies. Paste sandwiches on my tongue could be chicken or chaff. I'm not downcast. I don't squint as ultra-violet showers me to the t-cells. Standing vigil over lawns an oxidised brigadier indicates the Shrine. Above him airliners slice cloud, on vectors for another world. I lunch at my moss-fur table with a noise symphony. Tastebuds touch tea on a divide between wish and set-back, as if trying to swallow lychees despite a toothache. Angel won't unlock the silent throat.
12. A younger woman rests by a tree, watching birds and cloud. Might she observe me too, fancying herself a recorder? Dr Bahn would say that suspicion visits easily. Grey-eyed idiot savant, christened Ernest in a mother's fit of nominative determinism; he often refers to distrust as the *sine qua non* of our trade. Distrusting for decades, skilled in secrets piled high as a depot of proscribed works; Bahn abets the state with homeland safeguards, a faux angel imposing prophylaxis via filament-thin rationalisations and a computer. Yet he could not fish to save himself. There wouldn't be steel in him to strangle a fowl's neck. I doubt his capacity even to bathe in cold water or work without superannuation. Bahn couldn't knife a robber at his son's school or adjust to a decade of ostracism. His education would be of no use there. I can't share empathy with his tumescent Euro-centric attitudes. Unlike him I've nothing left to

lose, so I can muse on the possibility of documenting. I might broadcast, publish on-line or release a confessional dairy to repudiate vows of silence – were it not for Angel. She cautions. Even now I cannot be sure whether my son is being watched: a man perhaps in some position of authority. I dare not write. *Never love*, our dictum should read. *Love weakens. Love will bleed.*

13. Above me and around are seagulls cawing *Why this city?* They mock. True, Canberra would have been logical, or Alice Springs. But having ached for the ocean after years inland with a spouse and son, speaking alien words for 'reed' and 'egg', a heart reared on the boom from breakers cannot but yearn. Connections of upbringing may soothe, just as trams reassure these crests and turrets of my citadel, complying in their orderly predestined shuffle up and down a boulevard where gulls peck at the debris of lunch wrappers. There is a satellite dish, signalling the heavens as it upstages my view of a cathedral: many impulses aimed at one sky. On a recent New Year's Eve that saucer would have beamed millennium farewell songs even to lands not honouring the birth of Christ. Many sons would have looked into TV glass horizons, beyond moraines of collective farming and bicycle, past plains more bountiful with people than food. In time the hardliners will die off. Then citizens may travel, even migrate. But I can't. And letters were expressly forbidden.
14. This woman by the tree defies my imagination. Her I cannot imagine in a farewell aria on a shore facing the tide incoming. For such a one the sand spirits would not dance in their breeze. Nor can I see that smock inflate like a bellying sail. For her no surf will chill the ankles, rising to waist and neck until a body is consumed by ocean, head thrown back in song. I pity such clay feet. Angel and I will soar, obliterated in the sea mouth, never to have bared our self.
15. She is smoothing back her fringe with a finger, kicking off shoes. Flies bejewel that hat. Not for this woman a size-sixteen blouse and steel-wool hair. Short of forty, she won't celebrate birthdays alone in a restaurant savouring hardly a bite, nor bear witness to a tumour staining her CT scan. Beyond that tiny recording range she has no scope for fields where labour is hard, where sisters chafe in cotton jacket and rope sandal, their beauty ashen from toil. The woman doesn't see, charting no provenance of shadow, suffering no boot heel from ice or hunger. Like Bahn she fails to conceive her Angel, incapable of perceiving Accusing Spirits with their razor questioning technique and threats to the safety of her love. The woman will not don a red marriage scarf, nor abandon the gem of her womb: manumission and maiming in a single act. And in her mortal month she will make no incantations on a beach, to wail at blizzards and beg the black sand to gulp her down. She can be no Angel. Instead she lounges on this sward of green where trams pass, inconsiderate of tectonic plates scraping below us to determine continents without regard for political theory. She could be a lawyer or staff trainer, twisting other people's ideas, or a public recorder thriving on the commonplace. Or it might be cover. Sustained by dissembling skill the woman could balance

on a knife-edge of discretion with candour, some field operative teasing information by squeeze and compromise. No matter her calling, she cannot reach heights that Angel and I have flown, diving in and out, shadow merging with object. Never can she learn our tension: droll, anodyne, a cleansing tang to our risk-taking. Yet flavour of the body is hers, while I taste only through Angel, munching futile sandwiches and pouring a last drop of tea.

16. Xu cannot find me, unlikely ever to gain clearance. And perhaps on a need-to-know basis, nothing matters. Records turn to dust, even in digital form, the memory detail surviving only when attached to affection or hate. I will go to an ether identity-shredded. As for this woman on the lawns, she must have been a girl once. Did she attend dancing classes yet never receive a ball invitation? Did a married Politics lecturer impregnate then abandon her? Though she cannot imagine herself into me, we might share humanity. Her mother could have been a neurotic sparrow; pecking and fluttering even as that hair turned white, old fingers still jabbing blame. And her father might have retreated into shades of mental unreality, unable to see past the length of his own sentences. So she may yet take a job with Foreign Affairs, winning a promotion to Trade, then the offer of academic work in an exotic country on an exchange program... No, that angel won't fly. Such a woman could not wing selves of masquerade, or clutch terror in her breast. Falling to temptation she would speak, allowing some gesture or glance to slip. Silence, the vocation, must shield as it soothes. This woman would risk travel, and thereby jeopardise her son. Blessed by limitation, she will probably never experience weapons up close, held at gunpoint for questioning until her husband arrives and she can be released. Instead she'll marry and live behind bricks, writing quotidian copy, chit chattering, dying conviction-free. Forces of entropy will unmake her, crazing those surfaces with age, crumpling the skin. Mushroom-freckled and vein-diaphanous she will gaze into a feverish light of evening. As she snakes towards final liberty the woman may perhaps flicker for an instant as light sheets down. But then nothing. Just a cold feast of maggot and worm. Her colleagues will expire in road accidents, in the line of duty or of old age. Not I.
17. With Angel may I pass beyond religion and race, and officials baying falsehood. Cuffs sand-caked nightly, I croon incantations on a littoral, lungs swollen in sea breath: my freedom the obverse proposition to chaos. Our supervisor, Dr Bahn, can phrase only strategic terms like 'axis tension' or 'the nub of statecraft', enfolding temporal truths: our armed forces' inadequacy against a threat of foreign invasion, our UN flag flapping useless as a lone wing. Bahn seeks evidence of subversion to justify our agency not publicly accountable. He inhabits mere form, which even this woman on the lawns can do. He possesses only words. A bullet or phial of smallpox could bring him low. He'll do little more than sound a warning for hijacked jets plummeting, born of fundamentalism unquenchable. He may lengthen a few lives by his alert, prevent some bloodletting amid the random doom. But corpses continue piling up, from above resembling red cloaca or wine-dark pools. Drying to plague and

starvation, they leave survivors to stoop the neck for a short-term conqueror. Better a quick cleansing by Agni, fire-god and patron saint of downsizing, or grimly reaped. These won't be my concern. Too late to meet someone on a temporary visitor visa. He'll find no one by that name.

18. Picking up lunch wrappers I've almost approached the woman. She's no angel fallen or a soul keening to surf nightly, less than a cry on shore, lost in sea winds. Hers is a single recorder view. Complexions change: anamorphic picture or postcard in 3D. Dimension-limited, she fails. Rising to depart, she leaves no taste but disappointment. Walking swells in the lawn, as if treading ploughed ridges, I make for a zebra crossing. Soon upstairs, I'll self-seal, reprising my narrative without windows to write for Bahn; populating his data cells. He won't look up, tongue preoccupied with darting a mint around that mouth.
19. At liberty I sip neutral brew, waiting for my computer to idle. Presently the screensaver manifests. Sunset. A woman walks a shore, perhaps to scribe her name in sand, shuffling as though aware her every movement is watched. The shadows dog her, promising to leave no bruises, yet unable to guarantee her son's safety, confirming only that she will experience new truths in sleep deprivation. An ocean twitches. Beach angel whispers thoughts into the gloaming where prayers are pixels to blow away when a mouse moves and reality resumes. Behind the dream of waves a new e-mail chimes. I turn down the contrast and brightness. Together we drain into colours of sea.