Young Writers Award - 2006 winner

Thoughts while night travelling
by James Halford

West to east

When I look up from my desk, I see a single photographic negative, scissor-spliced from the roll. It's pinned between a child's drawing and a poster of Mao defaced with a moustache, like some squashed, brown entomological specimen. The photograph was lost long ago, but the negatives remained forgotten in a draw. When I finally rediscovered them, I hacked them to pieces and hung this single image on my wall. It reminds me of a certain period of my life. Sometimes – not often, but more often than I care to admit – I take it down, hold it up to the light and remember.

Let's just call him the Doctor. He sits beside me at the table, a grinning colossus with an arm around my shoulder and a tumbler of cheap Chinese firewater in his fist. Once a professor of literature at Trinity College Dublin, by the time we see him in the photograph he's been reduced to the less lofty status of an English language teacher in China. He's in his early fifties, about double my age, and seemingly three times my width across the shoulders. Before he was an academic or an emigre, he was a schoolboy boxer. From his appearance in the photo it's clear he has kept in good shape. When I look at the square-jawed brawler from Belfast staring out of the image, I recall his voice. It had a musical lilt that didn't fit his appearance and certainly didn't fit his behavior. Immediately after the photograph was taken, I remember him lifting his shirt. There was a line of ugly red gashes leading down his flank. "I wouldn't have my youth back," he said "not with the fire in me now," quoting something I hadn't read, but should have. And at the line of his pants, I noticed the imprint of human teeth.

The Doctor owned and managed a language school in the industrial west of the Chinese capital. There were five of us with him that night, all young, male English teachers. None of us spoke Mandarin, or cared terribly much about local culture. We screwed our students and drank too much and didn't know what we wanted to do with our lives. Our table was one of two dozen on the pavement outside the restaurant. It was littered with empty dishes and pint glasses, its surface slick with slopped beer and cooking oil. We'd had dinner to celebrate my completion of a one year contract at the school. I had a decision to make. The Doctor had asked me to work for him for another year, but I hadn't yet made up my mind. Meanwhile he was not about to let the night pass quietly.

"Look at you, Fin. You sex starved little wastrel," he said. "You're too young for all that, boy. Come out with me tonight. I'll find you a nice girl."

There was a surreal quality to those simmering summer nights in Beijing. The air was so thick with fumes you almost had to chew it. Objects loomed eerily out of the smog: an old man selling live crickets in bamboo cages, another in a blue-boiler suit carrying a decapitated pig over one shoulder. The government had recently shut down a local steel factory, as part of the drive to improve the city's air for the 2008 Olympics. Ever since the factory closed, there had been large groups of jobless men standing on the street corners. They waited for something to happen, staring at us through the haze.

When I started at the school I quickly discovered that the Doctor was no ordinary boss. The day of my first class, he told me to meet him at a local kindergarten at eight in the morning. I was to observe him teaching for the first hour, then take over for the second. But at half past eight, he still hadn't arrived. Thirty Chinese toddlers stared at me, unblinking, while I waited. Finally he burst through the kindergarten's pink saloon doors, a coffee in one hand and a cigarette in the other.

"I'm sorry Fin," he said. "To be honest with you I'm completely mashed. I haven't been to bed. I came straight from the club." He arranged the children in a ring and stood at the center, bellowing English words at random.

"Elephant!" cried the Doctor.

"*El-phan!*" repeated the children.

"Abacus!"

"*Ab-cu!*"

"Autumn!"

"*Au-m!*"

"No that wasn't right!"

"*No-tha-wa-rite!*"

"Stop repeating me!"

"*Sto-rep-eng-me!"*

He gave up and began distributing plastic fruit. All the children had been designated English names at the beginning of the course, but privately, the Doctor had also given them appellations. Gammy-leg Martha was given a bunch of grapes, cross-eyed Rob a melon, snot-nosed Rose a banana. He towered over them and roared.

"Rob, do you have a banana?" Rob echoed:

"Banana."

"I'll banana you in a moment," said the Doctor, turning to the next child. "Martha, do *you* have a banana?" The girl burst into tears.

"Oh, stop your sniveling child," he said. "Now Rose, you're a good girl. Don't let me down. Do *you* have a banana?" Rose considered the question carefully. She was the star student, occasionally capable of remembering entire sentences.

"Rose," repeated the Doctor more slowly, "do you have a banana?" She shook the yellow fruit at him and confidently met his gaze.

"No, I don't," she said. The Doctor was a scholar and a poet once. How had he come to this?

Three rounds of rice wine after the main course, he slammed both hands down on the tabletop and let out a belch like a clap of thunder.

"Come on, come out with me. My friends are Negroes and Frenchmen. There'll be girls from all over. Black ones and yellow ones and ones with perfect little bottoms." His eyes were two greasy green saucers. "Are you coming or not?" We clambered into a pair of waiting taxis and headed east toward the bars, the brothels, the embassies, the foreigners and the money.

Alone with me in the cab, the Doctor changed the topic.

"What are you reading at the moment, Fin? You're a bookish type, aren't you? What have you got underway?"

"Some Chinese poets, Tang dynasty."

"Grand, grand.' He stared at the ceiling of the vehicle, trying to remember a line of verse, then intoned solemnly like a priest: "What kind of man am I? A lone gull floating between Earth and sky."

"Who's that?" I asked.

"Oh, one or other of them. I don't think Chinese writing's up to much really. Have you read any Joyce or Beckett?" He took out his phone, ignoring my reply and began texting his girlfriend. Books were no longer interesting to him. His library had remained in Dublin when he'd separated from his wife five years earlier. Since he moved to China he hadn't read anything at all.

We soon arrived at the Bus Bar, a converted vehicle emblazoned with an oversize Heineken logo. The Doctor's girlfriend, Jeng Yi, was there to meet him, clad in tiny black leather shorts and red heels. Although her name was not difficult to pronounce, we all called her Jenny. It seemed fitting since she had thoroughly renounced everything Chinese about herself. Jenny was a Beijing girl, 19-years-old, who'd picked up reasonable English through a lifetime in the company of western men. She was a non-person in the eyes of the Chinese authorities (enforcers of that far-sighted and benevolent population control measure known as the one child policy). Her parent's second daughter, she was both unwanted *and* illegal. For the sin of being born second, the law denied her a national identity card, a document that was essential for education, health care and employment.

The Doctor had come to her rescue, in a sense. He had found her working as a dancer in a dubious nightclub, and had given her a job answering the phone at his school. This act of charity came at a price, however, for he often came to work proudly displaying bruises and scabs from their love-making. He told us that he'd bought Jenny for his own personal use, training her to bite, gouge, flay and scratch him, in accordance with his wishes. Showing us the markings in her presence seemed to be part of the ritual and thrill.

Bob Marley was playing inside the dark bar and the air was full of sex and smoke. Before the others had even arrived, Jenny and the Doctor melted into the crush of bodies on the dance floor. Someone tugged at my arm from behind. A little girl had hold of my wrist. Burns disfigured her face and she had half a dozen plastic-wrapped flowers clutched to her chest. Wherever you found drunk foreigners in Beijing, you found cripples and street kids selling flowers. The girl wouldn't release me until I agreed to buy a rose. Her grip was surprisingly firm. I found that she clung on no matter how hard I grappled with her. We moved through the crowd in an absurd, crab-like dance, hypnotised by the flickering strobe and the shadows awrithe on the wall. Navigating my way to the men's toilet by the smell of piss and shit, I pushed the door open with my free arm. A moth was smashing its body blindly against a bulb. In the cubicle, I gave her one good crack in the mouth with my elbow and she slid whimpering to the floor. What kind of man am I? A lone gull floating between earth and sky.

On my way back through the crowd, I saw Jenny dancing, her back to the Doctor. His hand was down her pants and I threw up on the floor, bodies pressing on all sides. I discovered outside that someone had taken my wallet and that I couldn't pay for a taxi home. Taking a bicycle that was leaning against the wall, I rode west.

East to west

Beijing is vast, but easily navigated, laid out in a grid formation with one wide boulevard running all the way along its east to west axis. I knew the names of the neighborhoods well, because the main street follows the subway line. I rode slowly through Chaoyangmen, Jianguomen, Wangfujing and Tiananmen, trying to conserve energy for the long cycle from one side of the city to the other.

At Fuxingmen, I stopped. Before the Communists knocked down the old city walls this was the site of the southwest gate.

Now there was nothing dividing the inner city and the endless grey sprawl to the west. I went into an Internet café which was packed full even at this time of morning. Young men were playing video games, transformed into marines, mercenaries and medieval princes. There was snot and cigarette ash on the floor, bloodletting on every screen. But I wasn't there to play games. I took my credit card from my breast pocket. Thankful that it wasn't in my stolen wallet, I booked a ticket home on the next available flight, in just less than a week. On a reckless impulse, I went to a search engine and typed "press freedom China," "peasant revolt China," "anti-Japanese riots China" and "Tiananamen 1989 China." Error messages appeared each time and I left quickly without paying. The culture of restriction sometimes seemed an all-enveloping force, like the smog in the air.

By the time I'd cycled to the military museum in the city's west, the sun had risen at my back. It was shrouded in a mass of cumulonimbus and factory filth that signaled rain was approaching. A few weeks earlier when I visited the museum, I saw a man sit his son in the seat of a restored anti-aircraft gun. He spun the grinning boy around, urging him to shoot down Japanese planes. Riding a little further west, I passed the cemetery for the war dead. Looking at the stones among the sad, ancient cypress I couldn't help thinking of the young men in the Internet café who died digitally a hundred times over without consequence. I pedaled harder, hoping to reach my apartment before the storm broke.

Beijing has been troubled by drought for centuries, but over the last few years it has been subject to sudden downpours. The government have found a way to create artificial rain. During dry spells they launch moisture-releasing canisters into the air, and torrential storms ensue. Soon, rain came down so heavily, that I was forced to take shelter. I found myself outside the kindergarten where, many months ago, I'd taught my first class. There I called the Doctor to tell him I was leaving.

"Now tell me honestly, Fin. Did you go home with anyone last night?" he asked immediately.

"No."

"Of course you didn't. Well, I'm in the hot tub now with a couple of lovely wee things, all creamy and soaped up. I wanted to ask you, will you be back next term? I bet you'll be back. You're a good lad. Read yourself some Whitman, Fin: 'The teaching is to the teacher and returns most to him.'" The kindergarten teacher had seen me through the window and was gesturing for me to come in. I hung up, went inside and never spoke to the Doctor again.

Great, bilious, artificial clouds blacked the sky. Snot-nosed Rose was wailing and Gammy-leg Martha shrieked like a banshee.

"They're scared," said the kindergarten teacher in English, a little pale herself. We had the difficult task of calming thirty hysterical three-year-olds in a storm. I grabbed an armful of scrap paper and threw it to the floor. I gave them crayons, got down on my knees and began scribbling.

"Draw the storm," I said. "Go on. Like this. Draw the storm." And the children attacked the paper. Too young to represent what they saw outside, they drew how it made them feel – the shape and texture of fear.

Afterwards, Rob came and hugged me around the waist, a chubby kid with a crew cut and huge, bulbous eyes. My elbow throbbed guiltily where it had struck the girl in the nightclub. I imagined the Doctor, myself and Rob standing oldest to youngest in a line. "The teaching is to the teacher," the Doctor said. But what had he taught me and what had I handed on to this little boy? Rob held up his picture. From where I sit now, I can see it on my wall, next to the negative of the Doctor. The page is slashed horizontally with crimson and violet. There are clusters of color like neurons, like networks of stars. Densely woven as spider's web, gruesome as the crucifix. It is like a cave painting, like the work of some primitive. Outside, I saw that the rain had finally cleared the air of smog. Gutters overflowed in the drenching sun, and I thought that too often the old shape the young in their own vile image.