

EXCERPT FROM

DR. BETHUNE'S CHILDREN

BY XUE YIWEI, TRANSLATED BY DARRYL STERK

Dear Dr. Bethune, I have just returned from the hospital. On my way home, I swung into the supermarket at the corner of Côte-des-Neiges and Queen Mary.

You're probably wondering what a supermarket is. There will be many more unfamiliar words that may be obstacles in the way of your understanding my story. I will do my best to avoid such obstacles, but there's no way I can avoid all of them. I've been wondering if I should stop and provide a simple definition every time such a word appears, but I think this would be impractical, disrupting my train of thought and our conversation. In fact, most of these unfamiliar words will not stand in the way of your understanding. And etymology will guide you. A supermarket, for example, is obviously a kind of market. Context should help, too. To make it easier for you, I will make a list of all the new words, a custom dictionary you can consult if you get stuck.

It has been nearly seventy years since your departure, which is long enough for a language to change dramatically, not to mention a city. Yes, I live in Montreal now, but it is certainly not the same Montreal as the city you lived in. The buildings, the streets, the residents' complexions and languages, people's memories and desires—all are very different from the ones you once knew.

The differences between the two cities with the same name have also been accentuated by your departure and my arrival. Nearly seventy years ago, when you left Montreal, you had become a well-known figure here, but you had not gained national recognition, let alone international fame. You became a legend in your home country because you left and never came back again. And my arrival in Montreal bore witness to the legend you had created. Montreal is a city of migrants, and I am one of the myriad foreigners who live an expatriate life here. Though one of many, I am still special, because of you. I came here because of you, because of your presence in China, because of your experience in China as a foreigner. Sometimes I feel I am just your reflection, wavering on the river of time. Were this city not your city, I would not be here now—no way. I remember the farewell note you sent to your "Pony," the note you wrote after boarding the passenger steamer bound for China. I can highlight our connection by imitating your sentence structure. "You see, Dr. Bethune, why I *must* live in your city?" I am one of the countless children you begot in China. You are the father we all keep searching for.

I sometimes wonder if I am the only one who came to this city because of you. The special connection between us often makes me imagine your life in this city—operating on a patient, delivering a political speech, painting a self-portrait, even making love to your anxious wife or one of your various lovers. And I imagine you reclining on a comfortable sofa reading *Red Star Over China* by Edgar Snow. (Who now remembers Edgar Snow?) I know it is this book that stimulated your interest in my country and inspired you to join the revolutionaries trapped in the barren northwest after the Long March. I imagine how you pictured your life as foreigner in my country. Did the China you had imagined conflict with the China you found in reality? You were reborn in my imagination. This is very significant to me, since it was you that made me come to this city. One day, when I was sitting in a bookstore, the expression on your face as you were packing up to leave Montreal appeared to me. You certainly did not know that you would never come back to Montreal. No worry or anxiety showed on your face. I imagined you putting the famous typewriter into a shabby crate.

Dear Dr. Bethune, let me tell you why I went to that supermarket. It wasn't just to make an ordinary purchase. I rushed to the dairy shelf and reached down for a two-litre bottle of whole milk. I checked the expiration date on the seal and then walked toward a cashier. I will tell you why this ordinary purchase mattered a lot to me. Before writing to you, I have to admit, I was not in a good frame of mind. In fact, I was feeling disappointed. My disappointment had nothing to do with the purchase itself. I felt disappointed because . . . I will tell you the reason in good time. I believe that you will understand why, which will again demonstrate the special connection I have with you and your city.

I am writing to you, finally, like a volcano about to erupt. I have so many things to tell you. I need to transfer them from my brain to my computer. There's another term that you have never heard before. I am not sure whether you can guess from the Chinese translation what this is. The literal translation of computer into Chinese is "electrical brain." You're probably still confused. OK, you can think of it as a typewriter. Of all the possessions you left to posterity, your typewriter is the one I find most touching. As a foreigner in China, you could not live without your typewriter. Through it you could communicate with the world far away from you and overcome your loneliness. The typewriter understood your language and thoughts. In fact, only your typewriter could understand. You can think of this "electrical brain," this new machine I am using to talk to you as a kind of typewriter. (By the way, the phrase "new machine" reminds me of the substitute teacher of the Physiological Hygiene class I took in high school, which is one of the stories I want to tell you.)

About an hour and a half ago, I sat down at my desk and switched on my "typewriter" to write to you. Why is it necessary to switch it on? This phrasal verb hints at the difference between my "typewriter" and the one you used when you were in China on the front line of the war against Japan. You lived in China for about twenty months, the loneliest time in your life, as I now know. You wrote many letters to your comrades and friends in Canada on your typewriter, but you only received a few replies. You also used the typewriter many times, to write to your great friend, our Chairman Mao, as I learned from his well-known memorial to you. The memorial also mentions that he replied to you just once. Just once! And he never knew whether you received his reply or not. Did you get it?

Yes, my "typewriter" needs to be switched on to function. Now that I'm writing to you, I realize I will be more disappointed even than you were, because it is impossible for me ever to get your reply. I want to write down all of the things that we children of Dr. Bethune experienced. I know, had it not been you—had you not gotten on the passenger steamer in Vancouver on January 5, 1938, had you not walked into that historically significant cave dwelling at the end of March, had you not been sent to the front line in May, had you not cut your finger in November of the following year, had you not departed from the world due to infection, had your death not startled your great friend, and had he not published an eight-hundred-word memorial a month after your death—then we, your offspring, would not have experienced all the things we have experienced. My life would not have been like this. Our lives would not have been like this.

You may still be wondering about my "typewriter," which can only be operated after it is powered up, switched on. At the loneliest time in your life, electricity was hundreds of miles away. This was your own choice. You chose privation over civilization, believing that your choice would prove to be the road to progress. I know that when you were in China, you performed surgery under kerosene lighting. Your eyes started aging, and despite the light of your lamp, more and more of the world fell into shadow.

You may also be surprised to learn that my "typewriter" has a certain degree of intelligence,

which is why it is called an electrical *brain*. With its intelligence, my “typewriter” knows that I am writing a letter now. A considerate query just popped up on its screen. (Yes, this “typewriter” has a screen, like a television, another device you may not have heard of before). The question on the screen is: “Are you writing a letter?”

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