

Disclaimer

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A Summer of Freedom's Night Dream: A Reflection on Suffering in Hong Kong's 2019 Pro-democracy Movement

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Every muscle feels sore, and joints leach pain every step I take. Slapped my hand on the doorknob and entered my bedroom nearly at the crack of dawn after a dismal long day out. Not able to think anymore, I collapsed on the bed and fell asleep.

I cried.

I looked around the room,

Walls covered in an unrealistic shade of white.

Your crying face projected onto and

Flickered around the room's chalky walls.

The image of

Pale, thin plastic tie

Around your wrists, held against will,

Tears running down your face and

Your gas mask.

Why have you fallen?

I cannot remember clearly.

Nor can this city give you an answer.

I stood for you,

I tried my best to protect you, and failed,

From those who only bring suffering.

Is there nothing I can do

To break this destiny?

There was nothing in the room, yet irregular shadows span across its cold walls. An old Chinese man and a man in a distressed Ancient Greek robe opened a door and came in. Was there a door in the room anyway? I was never aware of it. They stared at me for a while and said in sync, breaking the awkward silence, “It’s destiny.”

The music of the people is

Air breathing through

Humanity’s handcrafted bamboo pipes.

The music of the land is

Wind crashing through nature,

the Earth’s millions of cracks and holes.¹

The music of the heavens is

The same wind. But

¹ Paraphrase of “地籟則眾竅是已，人籟則比竹是已。”(陳鼓應 98)

Flowing through existence,
Passing through each and every specific
Hollow trunk, Jagged channel, Grainy rock
Making each and every specific sound.²
Designated? Just the way it is.

Suffering cannot be avoided.
These things will come,
Even when muffled in silence.³
The murderer of Laius,
Has been here all along.⁴

If this was destiny all along, then there must be no way to defy it. Being born into this society, at this time of all times, many are granted a duty and purpose. Yet, the consequences of carrying through one's belief are unavoidable. "I understand ... but", I murmured to myself. Losing your loved ones and even people you never knew ... is agonizing. The Chinese man seemed to feel my thoughts and looked towards me. He separated his lips and words flew out of his mouth, "Are you in pain?"

You are a fish. Just like your friend.
A fish like everyone in this city,
Swimming through the white mass of
Smoke and terror.

2 Paraphrase of “吹萬不同，而使其自己也，咸其自取，怒者其誰邪！” (98)

3 Paraphrase from Sophocles (341).

4 Paraphrase from Sophocles (450–451).

In the Northern seas, so distant
 You will never know about.
 There are fish as well. But
 Not even your city's skyscrapers can compare,
 Size up to many thousand kilometres.
 And occasionally they fly,
 Gigantic fins morph into wings.⁵

When a fish swims in the big sea,
 Pushes forth a small white fringe, at most;
 When the terrifying Northern fish swims,
 Tornadoes break through the landscape.⁶
 Sweeping away tight knit families,
 Unidentified bodies,
 And scars an entire generation.

When you can see the Northern fish,
 What is a fish to you?

I'm stunned by pain, thinking of the suffering of our generation, and generations in the past, and generations coming. Is my loss of one friend incompatible, compared to the many more losses? If I were examining society with a bird's eye view, maybe yes. But to consider one's personal pain and emotion, no. One friend lost, can be followed by two, three,

5 Paraphrase of “北冥有魚，其名為鯤。鯤之大，不知其幾千里也。化而為鳥，其名為鵬。”(陳鼓應 91)

6 Paraphrase of “水擊三千里，搏扶搖而上者九萬里。”(91)

eventually millions more lost. This cannot be the solution to suffering. The heights of knowledge can allow us to view events differently, and understand better why certain events happen, but should never be used to cover up pain. Suffering is not a tangible matter, able to be compared and cancelled out for its insignificance. That was when the Greek men turned to me, exposing the two pools of blood, replacing what should have been two eyeballs, in his eye sockets.⁷ Terrifying, but I looked at him sternly as he started to talk.

For the ill-fated ones,
Fate will leap no matter what,
from the furthest peaks:
Ones out of your wildest imaginations
And your broadest knowledge.
Just to push and shove and force you
Into the deepest depths of ill-fortune.⁸

“Tragedy cannot be avoided and will occur no matter how it is avoided.” He said. The city’s citizens could and have migrated and left. Some convinced themselves of a new identity; some returned, hoping for the best. But the tangled curse laid in the city’s past will only persist. Standard for pain cannot be lowered further and further every time faced by adversity. The deep depths of ill-fortune is well-preserved, regardless of how many times pain is dismissed.

7 Idea of appearance of Greek man is referenced to how Oedipus gouged his eyes out with Jocasta’s golden brooch. (Sophocles 1265–1270)

8 Paraphrase from Sophocles (1300–1302).

Facing the undeniable truth of pain, is there anything we can benefit from it? I questioned myself, and the two men in front of me. The Chinese man paused a bit to think, while brushing his stereotypical ash grey goatee softly. He then said calmly, “One must detach from suffering.”

It takes everything to become a saint.
 Forget about yourself,⁹
 All the happiness, sadness, anger and needs.
 Desires chains you down
 As you drown in emotions,
 Unable to struggle through the mud.
 True liberated spiritual freedom
 Comes separated,
 from all concepts and matter in the world.

It takes everything to become a saint.
 Build up your knowledge like a mountain,
 Better than the foolish little birds¹⁰
 Laughing at the grand vulture,
 So you never become them.
 And shield yourself from suffering,
 By learning and seeing the worse monster,
 If the Northern fish ever attacks.

9 Paraphrase of and an extended idea of “至人無己，神人無功，聖人無名。”(陳鼓應 94)

10 Paraphrase of and an extended idea from “斥鴳笑之曰：「彼且奚適也？我騰躍而上，不過數仞而下，翱翔蓬蒿之間，此亦飛之至也。而彼且奚適也？」”(93)

“The tragic events in destiny cannot be changed but we can change the perspective we view it with to minimize suffering. Therefore, the more perspectives we gain, the more freedom we have.” He said as his goatee is finally arranged to his liking. Letting his words sink in, I realized the core of his ideology was based on emotional detachment. I cannot picture what being human is without emotions, even if that is harmful or not constructive to ourselves. “On the basis of not segregating emotion, more suffering can occur in the search of knowledge and truth.” Said the Greek man.

Whatever may come, let it burst forth!¹¹

Suffering is a heavy tuition to be paid

In the lesson of chasing self-will.

Call me with all the slurs you'd like,

But at least it was the truth.

Flushed away and torn, but satisfied,

As I try to swim against the current of destiny.

“What is the value of suffering to me? What is freedom as well?”, my brain is swollen and aching as these questions drilled through my consciousness. Is freedom the ability to see though pain in facing misery or is it the ability to seek the wanted but cold, hard truth, despite any painful consequence? Seeing their two perspectives on suffering, you can see how much variation there is to this question. It can be thought as a harmful thing to be avoided, or the matter-of-fact price to pay for one's destiny defying will. As I was reasoning out this question, they both turned to me and asked,

¹¹ Sophocles (1076).

“You never knew why your friend was arrested though, did you? If the truth will scar you, will you ever want to know?”

They exited the room for a brief while as I closed my eyes and thought. Will I be able to face whatever the truth it is, behind the pain of losing a friend, and their pain losing a future and freedom. The consequences are dire.

The men entered the room with an old-fashioned black-white television, handed me a remote, and left the room again. Probably will not return.

I was given a choice.

To be protected by ignorance,

Or crash into the painful catastrophe

Brilliantly scripted by fate,

But be able to find the truth.

What is freedom?

Assuredly, I pressed the tiny triangle
on the remote. Play.

Free to run away

From the green and blue,

Clothed demons.

I was beaten by black batons

With red streaks all over my body.

I touch my dried wounds.

Ouch.

Her yellow helmet and pink gas mask

Turned back to face the camera.
Crashing through the violent crowd.
Shoving everyone off me.
Took my place, active but involuntarily.

I cried. Again.
Feeling like the most painful pain.
A thousand bullets penetrating and fracturing,
Every muscle, bone and nerve.
A million tear gas canisters,
Exploding inside my head.

Yet, the only thing I would want is revenge.
Or the motivation to go on, some may say alternatively.
Not to drown in sorrow and gouge my eyes out,
Not to seek the opposite of suffering.
As I take better care of myself and my emotions,
The motivation to commit further shall be fostered.
Not giving mercy to the enemies but
Thankful to all sufferings endured,
For it pushes one to persist.

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Teacher's comment:

HO's story shows a deep and passionate reflection on current conditions of this city. She introduced two contrasting perspectives on suffering, to see whether it is a harmful thing that should be and can be avoided (Zhuangzi), or the price the will against destiny should pay (Sophocles). Surprisingly, the story ends with a martyr spirit that goes beyond the Stoic spirit of Zhuangzi and Sisyphusian heroism of Oedipus. Between spiritual detachment and passive heroism, the protagonist in the story chose to fight and revenge, not out of the will blinded by fear, but out of love and clear-vision of life and suffering. (CHENG Wai Pang Damian)