

“FRAGMENTS OF CHINA: Under an azure sky — more letters to Lychee.”
(July, 2013 to July, 2014, from various places.)

Dear Lychee ,

Over the course of the past month, I have been unable to lift up my eyes from the ground, and look around me, or look up at the sky. Everything has become unfamiliar to me, and I am a stranger and foreigner in my own land. It was always this way, but being with my father, reading, doing things on my land in Maine state made it easier to forget or ignore this fact. Now, this year, there are no illusions — I have now become a stranger to almost everyone I knew here, and to myself. Therefore, I am planning to spend my year away from China in various places.

I spent some time in Maine state, tidying up two years of neglect on my forest land. The sea-parcels I had sent from Altai were unpacked; I paid my 2013 land-taxes; the grass around my container-home was cut down; a riot of tree-saplings growing on the terrace in front of the garage building was hacked down, restoring to me the use of the terrace; the long grass in the big field was mowed. I paid the next year's fees to the man who watches the land when I am away in other places. I put my archives in a better order (but, alas! That is a never-ending job). I want all my writing to be copied, filed away, hard-copied (in a few cases), an up-loaded onto my web-site. Lychee, I am in an “autumn” mood and I want to “set seed”, while I have energy, imagination, motivation, and funds. I want everything ready for a long journey, but I do not know what that journey will be. Once all this archiving has been done, and I have done some travelling, I will be able to draw a line between the past and the future. Then...I will contemplate what to do next. I want a clear order in my life, and this is my way of doing it. If I have a certain order in my life then it is easier to deal with the fog of meaninglessness and depression.

The time in Maine state was short, as usual. It was not easy to appreciate the natural beauty of the land, and its quiet charm, as my mind was somewhere else. Perhaps in September, when I am next in Maine state, I will spend a day or two exclusively with my land, and not deal with anything else— not papers, or errands, or worries, or projects, or people... whatever! The land is austere, but it waits patiently to share its charm.

I hope my father's affairs will finally come to a close this autumn. Perhaps, it will happen. I was not involved in the paperwork, but watched it from a distance. Many people are waiting for “closure”, the end of one era, and the chance for another to take its place.

I had only been back home for ten days, when I decided I could not bear it here anymore and wanted to go out, to wander again. This should not surprise you, Lychee. As you know, I had to go out of XJ for my “5 years in, one year out” break — although for me, it was four years. This should give me a lot of time to finish off old projects, and do new ones— and travel. Out of the “fog of confusion” came an old idea— go back to Lisbon, in Portugal, and study Portuguese language for one month. Slowly, I warmed to this idea, made reservations, found a Lisbon “pei xun, xue xiao” (training school), bought tickets, and packed my bags. Now, as I write to you, I am in the airport, waiting for the flight out.

Portugal has always been one of my favorite countries. It has a charm all its own; the land is very beautiful; its history is most impressive and adventurous. I have always liked to be there, and enjoy the flow of life around me. If I can speak some simple Portuguese language, then I can travel in certain other countries—like Mozambique, in Africa. Language is one of the keys to travel—they help to make me more independent, and do what I want to do.

So, Lychee, I am about to jump out into the unknown again, and I feel better already. Every time I come home here, I see that nothing much has changed: family attitudes are the same; old and sad memories persist; attitudes, old disagreements and social prejudices are like bath-tub stains which remain, year after year. Remaining in the sad past makes parts of my body feel ill; going away makes me feel better, to a degree. Recently, someone asked me, “What do you consider your home—the U.S., or China?” (This question reminds me of an earlier question — “Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar?”) Well, I answered that person “My home is my suitcase.” For me, the American mandate is simple— life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. How I weave that fabric is my affair! It takes effort to break out of the inertia of one’s birth-culture, the “social-gulag” of those around you who call you “stranger”, and who hold foreign values (foreign to me, that is). All I can do is pack my bags, and leave!

Anyway, Lychee, that was the brief introduction to this part of “Fragments of China”. From now on, I hope to give you an account of happy things—mostly while travelling, or writing, or holed-up in some obscure retreat! That is why this section is called “Under an azure sky”. As usual, dear earthly muse, it is dedicated to you!

Some days have gone by, and I am in Lisbon. As always, leaving the home-ground took an act of will and courage. My feet gave me pain, I felt slow and “sluggish”, and others asked me to “stay home, and see a doctor.” No way: you know me well, Lychee! In Madrid airport, I hobbled around, from chair to chair, like an invalid tramp.

However, that is over, for now. I am in my room at the Lisbon Hostel, which is right in the old district of Lisbon. I bought new shoes (for Lisbon is very much a “walking city”), found out the building where I will have Portuguese language classes, learned the route between hostel and school, got some books (including a Portuguese translation of an English novel I already know), and found out where the local grocery store and restaurant are. Now, I am ready for one month of living in Lisbon.

This is the third visit to Portugal. It is one of my favorite places, along with Burma and Kyrgyzstan. Lisbon is steeped in history, charm, nostalgia, beauty, quiet civilization, and manners. The people are polite and cultured; as I write this on a table in the breakfast room of my hostel, the other diners are keeping scrupulously quiet. There is no “noise-pollution” here, as in many other cities; there are the sounds of Portugal, charming the ear and the soul.

The Lisbon Hostel exists in an old building—maybe 18th Century, or after? The people who come here are mostly in their 20’s—active, touring Europe and the world, fun-loving, and unquenchably full of energy. Lisbon has a famous reputation for its night-life—parties, dancing, “fado” music, and nocturnal “walkabouts”— and the young people all take full advantage of it. Yet, as I watch the young generation of Europe— the “twenty-somethings”— living life a little on the wild side, I see the core values of their parents very much alive and in evidence; they hold

parties very late into the night, but they hold long and socially intelligent conversations. They remind me of “sheep in wolves’ clothing”. I wonder: are the pleasures of youth just an illusion, a cover-up for “the school of being an adult, in disguise”? Since I am “the big boy, who never really grew up”, the unfolding events around me catch my attention. In summer, all of Europe becomes an enormous playground, as families, and the young, fun-loving “twenty-somethings” go from city to city, cross-pollinating like mad, re-defining Europe and youth every day, getting the maximum out of life, and on their parents’ credit card. I live a solitary, almost shabby life, and still the money flies away! (How do they do it, and why don’t I? That is a mystery.)

Much of Lisbon’s architecture comes from after 1755, when a 9.0 earthquake destroyed most of the city. The rooftops are tiled in earth-red, terracotta tiles; painted in cream-white, light green or blue, yellows, built of white limestone are the walls. The sidewalks are cobbled in small white or black stones; the surface of the older sidewalks are smooth and polished, from so many walkers. Old Lisbon has a charm and elegance I have not seen anywhere else. The newer parts of the city, and everywhere else, just seems to float away and cease to exist in the mind. As someone else has said, the city’s character changes with the light. At different times of the day it looks very different. It so happens that my dorm room window overlooks the Tagus River, and a magnificent view. Who needs to go outside and see things: It is already here, at already-packaged moments.

To be honest, I have not gone out much, but have stayed inside, writing Portuguese words on the cards I made in Altai. Over the course of the day, I write in different parts of the hostel, depending on where it is cool, or light. I keep to myself, while everyone else pursues life, conversation, and relationship-building. If I have Portuguese questions, the receptionist helps me.

Twice a week, I go to the language school. The classes they assigned to me were much too high-level for me, so I converted my small-group class hours into fewer one-to-one tutorial hours, where the pace is more suitable. I prefer to learn this language at my own pace. Slowly, I am becoming more able to make a few sentences.

A month has flashed by, and I am on the plane going back to the U.S. So, I will write in retrospect...

For most of the month, I stayed in a six-bed dorm room. On some nights, there were other guests; on others, I was alone. Beyond the barest minimum of comments, I barely spoke to anyone but lived in my own, withdrawn world, where other people had as much meaning as shadows in the corner. The rooms had high ceilings, polished wood floors, good quality modern windows for shutting out the sounds of the city, and heavy wooden window-shutters, for shutting out the harsh light of noon. Under the bed was a rolling drawer, into which I put the entire suitcase and the day-bags (one for daily-use things, and one for study materials. The floor’s bathroom for the men was somewhere else on the floor, as were the women’s.

On most nights, I could not sleep, as my mind was full of too many things! Thus, I often gave up trying to sleep, and lay on the bed, waiting for the new day. The first faint grays of dawn-light came through the cracks between the heavy wooden window-shutters. I got up, shaved, and went to the hostel’s computer area. Access was free and 24-hour, so I used the

computers a lot. It is very pleasant to be able to write letters or notes, or do research on many topics, without restrictions, or the slow pressure of seeing one's money bleed out by the minute. The breakfast hall opened at 7:30, and I liked to eat the same food each day. Next to the hall was a cook-it-yourself kitchen, with two large refrigerators for one's food. I never cooked, and ate simple food, like brown bread, fruit, tinned fish, salad-spinach, soy-milk, and similar things.

After breakfast, I used the table as a study desk, and began work. Since the correct pronunciation of the Portuguese language is very difficult, I chose to focus my attention on: making language flash-cards (from the phrase-books I had with me); buying useful learning materials from the shops in Lisbon (C.D.'s, DVD's, books, bilingual tourist or museum pamphlets, and maps); learning how to navigate around Lisbon on the public transport; learning how to buy food in the markets, or restaurants, or "pastelaria" cafés (which are so much a part of life in Lisbon). Fun things, like going to museums, or parks, or botanical gardens, or one day-trips, were "fillers", to be used, when it was too hot to study, or when I was just too tired to study anymore.

After breakfast, I went to the garden of the hostel, carried a table and a chair into a corner, and began to work. I stayed until most of the shade had gone; I knew it because my head became hot. Then I did something else.

I am glad that (this time); I did not focus on conversation. One month was not enough to get a decent return from such effort. When dealing with a new language, I like to slowly and passively absorb my surroundings.

The staff at the Lisbon hostel were all very kind. They helped in every way, as the days followed each other, and became weeks. As for me, I became a "flash-card junkie", and spent a lot of time making my language grow from having done this. While the "twenty-somethings" played, and danced, and partied, and re-defined European youth culture, had dinner parties and enjoyed Lisbon, I sat in a corner doing cards, and "whatever" else, and wandered about the hostel, the local neighborhood, and parts of the city like a lost soul. It is my way, Lychee. Nonetheless, I slowly picked up the very beginnings of basic Portuguese. Now I can say some basic sentences and get around at a basic level. At the beginning, I thought, "A few key words and phrases are enough, for this new language", but now, I want more. So, I hope to come back to Lisbon again —and soon! This is a cool city.

On many occasions, I was just happy to "exist", to "be" in Lisbon, with no thought for the next day, or anyone around me. There is "eye-candy" everywhere and a "pastelaria" café on every street corner!

Lisbon is a city to forget oneself in, to rebuild one's life, to prepare to grow old and die, to drench oneself in "saudade" (Portuguese melancholy), to listen to fado music, to ride on the very romantic electric street cars and trams, to drink ice-cold mineral water quickly so that the gas bubbles tickle your hot and dry throat, to look out over the stable yet always changing kaleidoscope of tiled rooftops, to see the Marques of Pombal's urban vision become reality, to nibble "bacalhau" (cod and potato rissoles) whenever you feel like it, to walk up and down the cobbled streets in a daze, to wander through a park or sit on a park bench, to marvel at Portugal's antique and well-oiled glory and more. For me, if there is an ideal place on the earth, it is surely

Portugal. (Next, come Burma, and then Kyrgyzstan.) I spent much of my time in the Beira Alto district of Lisbon, near to the Praca do Camoes, and Chiado, but there were many other places to wander about in, and enjoy. In Lisbon, the real museum is the city itself! I also visited the outlying community of Belem four or five times; there was something about that place that "brought me back for more"; it was peaceful, antique, and very nostalgic.

Sometimes, to break the nostalgia and the "same-same" flavor of life around the hostel, I went on day-trips—to Sintra, Setubal, Cascais, and a town across the river. Most of these places were "so-so" and touristy, but nevertheless, I was able to find little pockets of charm, interest and pleasure. Setubal gave me a chance to visit a bookstore and some useful study books. Cascais showed me a quiet and shaded back-alley, near to the sea. It was noon and I was hot and sticky. The sea-breeze blew down the alley so I just stood there, enjoying the coolness and forgetting my worries and disappointment. Cascais also gave me "pressed figs, with almond cakes". They made me think of similar gifts, at the time of David and Abigail. A few days later, back in Belem, I munched on the second fig cake, more slowly and thoughtfully than is my habit. In Sintra, I walked up the wooded hill to "the Moor's castle", past trees filled with the singing of cicadas, past a small and dripping fountain built into a wall, to the old stone towers, and the cool stillness of the castle's re-built water cistern. In a city which was very expensive, and which often bit away my money, the town across the river gave me a one-euro sandwich.

Lisbon took, in terms of expense, but it also gave: magnificent views, "Hami-gua" melons cut up on a plate, the black and white sidewalk cobblestones, the constantly changing aspect of the city under different hours of the day's sunlight, cold lemon tea from a certain café, the alleyways at night in the Alfama district with the sounds of a lone water fountain mixing with the faint sound of someone singing "fado" music a few streets away. There were tourists everywhere, and little vignettes of life being played out every-where, on every street corner, along every street. The whole world, it seemed, was in Lisbon — one of the early and great cosmopolitan cities of the world, and still going strong.

However, I apprehended it, as if in a dream, for my mind was constantly roving—now here, now elsewhere, never really at rest, except when exhausted. In fact the hostel staff suggested I take off a day and do nothing— just have a rest. I was drunk on flash cards, and they exhausted me. Yet, in spite of all this, Lisbon was always there—ever patient, every beautiful under the changing light, ever willing to share a hidden detail to the one who was willing to pause, and look for it.

Thus, it continued for about four weeks. Sunday was my day-off, a time away from the flash-cards, when I went to Belem by local train or tram, just to wander the parks or the museums, or have soup and pastries at "A Padaria Portuguesa". Slowly, I came to feel better in my mind and body. The inability to walk slowly went away; hobbling became normal walking. (I attribute that problem to having walked bare-socked in a house full of cats, which I am allergic to.) I lost track of the passing days; only each day's cycle of predictable activities engaged my attention. I used the Internet a lot, to correspond with my Zhi Da friends, and others, to read the BBC news, and explore new ideas. It was like the net-bars in Bangkok, but free. The "twenty something" music in the hostel was a nuisance, but I learned to tune it out; my mind was living

in a world of grammar and flash-cards. It was a reality (or, an unreality) that fitted perfectly with the distant, almost abstracted rooftop views of Lisbon. Perhaps, if I came back, I would do it all again, but with different study materials.

How distant China feels! At times, I wonder if I will return there. Will the doors of opportunity finally close? Or will I be chasing opportunities in other countries, doing new things?

After these four weeks, I took a side-trip, to Switzerland and Germany, to see some old friends. I wanted to settle some business with one of the friends, too. I was gone for about ten days. Switzerland and Germany are very different from Portugal, so the contrast was good for clearing my mind.

Then I came back to Lisbon, spent four more days there, and then returned to the U.S. I hope to use the next few weeks finishing up old writings, and getting it published. The forest home in Maine state needs a little more care and organization. I must pay my bills and translator/ typist fees. Then, I hope to go out again. The “bucket-list” is calling out for more attention, and I am minded to do some more things....

It is now middle-October, and a lot of water has “passed under the bridge”. As far as I am concerned, only two things of interest took place— (a) a visit to my land in the deep forest of Maine state, and (b) some more writing. The rest was pretty worthless to me. Usually, when I go to my land, it is to bring up yet more baggage, and find places to put it inside the steel shipping containers. Very, very rarely do I go there with the intention of actually “enjoying” it: I do not know how to do that. Like my father—and our common archetype, the “Flying Dutchman” — I do not know how to rest, to “chill-out”, to “let go” and have a rest. So, much of what I do is very “product-oriented”. I very much doubt that I will ever reach the point where I am able to “enjoy” that land, for its own sake; since I have reached this fundamental realization, I accept this state of affairs, and do other things. It makes life simpler. However, I did reach a different threshold. After storing the objects and filing the papers, I felt that, for the first time in 9 ½ years, I had my physical, “infra-structure” life in place. (Here, I specifically refer to “objects” in my life!) Since I am a very obsessive-compulsive person, a perfectionist, and a hoarder, this “day of arrival” was very significant for me: I never imagined that I would ever see it. Well, it came, and for now, I am happy about that. Yes one’s life is never really “in order” but when the essential, foundational elements of one’s “physical infra-structure” are settled and in place, it is a comfortable thing. Under future, ideal conditions, all I need to do is pay the annual land-tax, have the fields cut once a year, and pay the “land-observer” and talk with him. Of course, the reality is never quite like that, but for now I am happy. I can go out and do other things in my life. Cash is short, and although there will always be “fantasy projects” for my land, I do not want to do them. I also did a lot of writing—in this case, typing up and editing the “Letters to Lychee, from exile.” It was a long job, and hurt my neck a lot; it took about 14 full days of time. Now I am glad it is done; however, I am a bit hesitant to put it on the web-site, since the content is controversial. I will sit on it for some more time, and then publish it quietly. This was a good time to type it up—I had nothing else to do, and the similar, psychological condition of “being home from China, back in exile” made re-visiting this text worthwhile. In any case, this task was

certainly on my “bucket-list”; it gave a purpose to the otherwise meaningless days of autumn, and my life then. There was very little from that time which interested or attracted me. Lychee, I have reached the point in my life where I have no more roots at home: I have become a complete and existential stranger to everything I see and experience here—all of it. This is far, far deeper than a mere case of “reverse culture-shock”, or “back-at-home blues”. I have come to a point where I have become an existential stranger to my own home-culture, my roots, and my family—but then again, I always was. Maybe I just didn’t realize it. My basic unawareness of how to navigate my own culture got me in trouble in a number of ways—and one of them was almost very serious. It was a shock, and something of a wake-up call for me. Now, I am thinking about what I should do about it, for societies typically destroy those who do not “fit in”.

To be blunt, Lychee, I am thinking of immigrating to another country—quietly, legally and soon.

Probably, nothing will actually happen as I need my current “infra-structure” to survive. I am 51, my health is not too good, and my energy-levels are consistently low. However, I have reached the point where I want to go out, and stay out. Living here, I have nothing but “anomie”. As for almost everything I do with my time (while in my home-culture), most of it has to do with either my own, inner life, or with “foreign things.”

This latter point has come to the attention of quite a few of my relatives, and almost all of them look down on me for it. Now that my father is dead, why go through the charade of “coming back, to re-acquaint”? In truth, when I do come back, it is to pick up supplies and sustenance, and turn right around, and go back out! There is only one place in my home-culture where I feel somewhat “in-place, and positionally secure”, and that is on my land, and in the nearby village, in Maine state. At least those people let me be “semi-anonymous”, and able to “do my own thing” on my own land. In Massachusetts, such a thing is socially impossible.

I am in mid-life crisis. For now, I must tie down as much of my former life as possible, and work on my “bucket-list” ruthlessly, and reach a point of secular organization and stasis. I pointedly use the word “stasis”, and not “fulfillment”: to me, they are two very different things; one can be mostly achieved, but the other is never realized.

So, Lychee, when I finished the typing, printing and copying of that book, I packed my bags, and went right back to Portugal.

This time, I went to the Azores Islands, which are a part of Portugal, but with “autonomous region” status. There are nine islands, each with their own distinctive character. After spending two days on the main island (since that was where the main airport was, for the Boston to Lisbon flights), I went to the smallest island, Corvo, and stayed there for one week. It was just the sort of place you would expect me to visit!

Corvo is very much an “end-of-the-world” sort of place. It is very small, only has about 500 or fewer people, and is alone in the middle of vast ocean spaces (along, with one other island, Flores). In the winter, very few tourist visitors come here. The land is hilly, the fields are small and enclosed by grey stone walls, there are many hydrangea hedges growing next to or from within the walls, and there are many cows. Most of the tourists who come here are very serious bird watchers. These people travel all over Europe (and beyond), have enormous

cameras for long-range photography, and are very much an elite, global fraternity. What struck me the most about them was their total enthusiasm for their chosen way of life. Perhaps, for them, their job was little more than a way to raise money for their bird-watching trips. Over the years, they had been to many places; some had returned to Corvo Island many times. They came from many nations, but used English to discuss all aspects of bird-watching. Their first observation of me was, "You are not a bird-watcher", (question, or statement, I am not sure), and from then on, I was on my own. This suited me fine, since I wanted to be alone.

Over that week in Corvo, I went out on walks, to be alone within the harsh, almost Celtic landscape of hills, small fields, and stone walls. If the weather was bad, I stayed low; if it was a little better, I went higher, up towards the "caldeira" of a long-extinct volcano. Inside the "caldeira", a large bowl of land, were two small lakes, and a lot of wet, boggy ground. Even here, in some of the most out of the way parts of Corvo Island, the settlers of long ago had put up walls and made grazing fields for their cows. It was a very windy place. It took up to two hours to walk up to the top from the hotel. Sometimes I walked on the other two roads, alone in the stark, largely de-populated landscape. Only a handful of farmers persisted, raising cows for milk, for local Corvo cheese.

On one day (fortunately with lighter winds), I took the small inter-island boat to the only other island in the "Western group" of the Azores. Flores Island is about three times bigger than Corvo Island, and it has much more settlement. Still, by the standards of the rest of Europe, it is a remote, sparsely settled place. I liked Flores, because there are many more paved country lanes, which go many places on the island. This makes day-walking much easier. Although the landscape in the Azores is extremely beautiful to look at, up-close it is hard to walk on: the Azorean "bocage" of stone walls /hydrangea hedges/steep slopes slow a walker down considerably; moreover the stone walls look very fragile, ready to fall down, should one try to scramble over them. In the high-country, the ground is a minefield of hummocks, pot-holes, and boggy ground. The land seemed to say, "Gaze on me from afar, and be amazed; walk on me, and I will soak your feet, and break your ankles". So, I decided that Flores Island was best enjoyed through day-walks, with someone dropping me off and picking me up at predetermined spots, and through using the paved or gravel country lanes only. Flores Island would also be a good place to "disappear", and write a book, or think.

To survive psychologically on Corvo Island, one has to stop worrying about "how can I get off the island, and return to the world I left behind a few days ago?" One needs to accept the world of Corvo Island for what it is. One must learn to accept having one's familiar paradigms of time and life frozen, and replaced by something very different. All of the former voices must be silenced, or they will transform the "bio-sphere beauty" of Corvo Island into a place of alienation and horror. Make no mistake: it is the modern world which is messed up and out of equilibrium, and not a "wasted day". It takes work and patience, before one can believe this.

On one day, there was not much to do, so I walked near the coast, and watched the surf, pounding the rocks. The wind was gusting up to 70 mph, so I had to take care not to be blown over. The swell in open water became bigger and bigger. Near the rocks, the top of the waves turned into "shaving cream froth". I liked letting the violent wind blow away my inner thoughts

—I wished they really could. Nonetheless, as I came back to the hotel, I felt better. I should do it again.

Lychee, although I like to be in the Azores by myself, I do not see how I could ever do this kind of holiday with any other person. Stripped of all of the most familiar props of society, all that a travelling pair has are the scenery, and each other. How would one survive, socially?

Once again, it is night, and I am taking refuge in my hotel room, and solace with my writing. I cannot bear to interact socially with another person. Outside, the wind is strong, and the air heavy with salt; when I breathe the salty air I want to cough. I have no feelings of China. Everything else seems so far away, so much a life apart, something untouchable. I think that the Azores are a place one could return to many times, especially when one wants to be away from other people. The Azores are the perfect place to indulge in "saudade" (that is, Portuguese melancholy and nostalgia). Sometimes, the wind blows hard, trying to throw me over; sometimes, all is still, and I look up to see if the sky is still there. Here, the days of the month have no meaning; there is only day or night, clear or rainy. On the appointed day, the airplane came back, and returned me to Ponta Delgada, on Sao Miguel Island. There, I stayed a few days, visiting the boiling-water springs, the warm-water bathing pools, and the Terra Nostra Park at Furnas. I like to visit geo-thermal places, anywhere, as they are very interesting to look at. The gardens at Terra Nostra reminded me of the gardens at Bogor, in Java. Botanical parks are like the jungle—but without the tigers....which is why I like them. At some point in the future I would like to return to Furnas for a week or two, and do the following: look at the boiling-water springs; taste all the different mineral waters; soak in the warm-water bathing pools; wander all the obscure footpaths in the Terra Nostra botanical park; look at the steam coming out of the fumaroles; think about many things; write. Furnas is "my kind of place"!

I went back to Lisbon, but I was very restless in spirit and wanted to move on. The staff at the Lisbon Hostel were very helpful, and helped me get a ticket to Casablanca, in Morocco. Thus, a day or two later, I moved on, and dropped into a whole new environment. I was a little nervous, but I felt the promise of the new opportunity.

It is a month later, and I am back in New England. This account is written in hind-sight, as I had no wish to write while I was on the road. Instead, the landscape of Morocco became like a big book, and I "read" it avidly.

Although I have not yet been to see Turkey, which I hope to do, I consider both Morocco and Turkey as the "half-way" countries, on the edges of the Middle East, up against Europe, and for now, a relatively safer way to experience the Muslim world. In Morocco, I was not disappointed. It has mountains, desert, date-palm oases ... and they still speak French! So, for me, it was the perfect place to go to. Americans can visit for 90 days, without needing a visa. The roads on the main bus lines are very good, the CTM bus company is excellent, and the CTM/private buses service a wide area of the country. This was a "bus-tour" holiday: for three weeks, I spent most of my time on buses, or hanging out near various bus stations, which have attached cafés.

I did very little "typical tourism", like the "normal" tourists do. I have reached a point in my life, Lychee, where I just do not want to deal with other people. All I want is to sit on the

bus, look out of the window, and watch the world go by. Whenever I dealt with other people, I got embarrassed, or got cheated, or ended up in futile outcomes. This was almost all my fault; except for a few "bad eggs" in the markets, the Moroccan people were very kind and friendly. I like to wander around Morocco very much. However, I prefer to do so alone for I find "holidays and community" to be an unacceptable mix!

I liked the lower-end, business hotels—soul-less places with dubious fixtures, and views onto the back side of the next building. For "community", I had the chatter of families in the neighboring rooms; if there was a large family nearby, I could hear the parents dealing with their kids, like happily overworked honeybees. Here, I liked to be alone, but vaguely and indirectly surrounded by a variety of other people—strangers—who were doing their own things. For my meals I typically chose a seat in the back table, in a corner. I sat, looking into the corner, and not into the room.

I noticed a pattern, which had been going on for some time. On the bus, or even on some airplanes, the seat next to me was empty. I visited various places, which normally had many people, but when I was there, they were almost empty. I wandered everywhere, alone. The world I had sought to have alone through my efforts and manipulations was now given to me, alone. The process had now become automatic. Here is the secret: avoid the community of those who know you, and move on the fringes of those communities where the people do not know you, and where you are a stranger, a foreigner, someone who is just "passing through". One could wander through a densely-populated nation, and get close to almost nobody.

So, I liked Morocco, and its landscape. The route was as follows: Casablanca—Tangier—Chefchaouen—Al-Hoceima—Nador—Oujda—Bouarfte—Figuig—El Rachidia—Ouarzazate—Marrakesh—Fez—Rabat—Casablanca—Agadir—Essaouira—Sadi—Marrakesh—Essaouira—Casablanca—Beni Malal—Casablanca. It was a very long and comprehensive route. Of all the places I liked Chefchaouen and El Rachidia the best.

Chefchaouen is a town in the Rif Mountains, in the northern part of the country. The buildings in the old, walled-in part of the town were white-washed in a shade of blue, giving it a very distinctive appearance. It is easy to get lost in the narrow lanes of the old town, but as the travel guide-book says, that is part of the fun. Many of the homes in the old town have been turned into guest-houses. They are very pleasant to stay in, because they have a certain "original and authentic" feeling to them. I would like to go back to Chefchaouen again, hang out at the same hotel, let the world flow by me at "Moroccan speed" (instead of trying to rush through every corner of the country at my speed), and enjoy the place.

As for Rif Mountains, they are very beautiful. It is a land of olive trees, wide panoramas, and pleasant skies. Many settlements are found half-way up the mountain slopes, with the rocky crags and grazing areas above, and the olive groves and cultivated areas below. It has a Mediterranean feel to it. There are many, many olive trees! This was my first time to look carefully at olive trees, and make them a part of my mental life. The roads wander here and there, following the contour-lines, rather than going directly from A-to-B. This area is great trekking country. No wonder, during the period of the Spanish and French colonial tenure, the Rif was

prime “bandit country”. If you want to understand a people, study the land, for from the land, the people’s traits can be discerned.

The other place I liked was El-Rachidia. Like Ouarzazate, it is a “desert springboard” town—a place one comes into from the desert, or where one regains a certain sanity and communal equilibrium. I like the desert, but there is also a painful emptiness to it, so I like to have somewhere “to come back into”— if only to the fringes of human society around the bus stations. Antoine de St. Exupery liked Ouarzazate as a “watering-hole” while doing his mail-runs, and perhaps I will like El-Rachidia as a place to operate out of, should I come back to Morocco, which I hope.

For me, running all over this country was about “covering ground”, and in a sense, “marking lamp-posts”; however, it was also about seeing which places were interesting, and worth coming back to for a more intentional and careful examination. All around the “desert loop” (the two roads between Ouarzazate and El-Rashidia), there are mountain villages, date-palm oases, large sand-dunes, the “stony desert”, and beautiful, sun-painted scenery at dawn and dusk. This part of Morocco is a real “desert playground”. However, to enjoy it, one has to take life in a more unhurried fashion, and not be lured by the call of the next destination.

In Morocco, there are many, many cactus plants. They grow wild, or are used to fortify the back side of a farm house, or become hedges around a field. They are even planted in a grid, as an anti-desert barrier between the outer edges of the farmland, and the beginnings of the “stony desert”. Many of the cactus bear fruit which is sold as “street-food” in the bazaars. To enjoy this wonderful fruit, bring plenty of small-change coins, and look for a vendor. He will partially slice the skin and half open the fruit for you. All you have to do is reach out your hand and pull away the central pulp from the skin. These fruits are really delicious. Before you have finished the third bite of your fruit the vendor has cut and partially opened another, and is waiting for you. The larger, more common of the cactus fruit is a shade of yellow. The smaller, less common variant is very purple; the juice will stain your fingers and clothes, so it must be eaten with a toothpick. If I lived in Morocco, I would visit the cactus vendors regularly! I often thought about ways this bountiful natural resource could be used, for many of the fruits could not be harvested, and they fell to the ground, and rotted.

As with many other countries which I visited, I did better with those places which were not “tourist sites”, but which were the normal venues of daily Moroccan life. As a tourist, an outsider, someone “outside the system”, I was able to appreciate Morocco by observation, and not by direct, social interaction. Besides, I am somewhat socially awkward, naïve, and incompetent. Besides, just as surely outside houses of religion you will find beggars, so too around tourism sites, you will find rip-off artists. Thus, I did not do very well in the established places of tourism, such as Marrakesh and Fez. I think the best views of a country come from “outside the norm, or against the flow”, or “out of season”, or “in the wrong place/at the wrong time”. November in Morocco is somewhat low-season, and is much easier to have much of the country to oneself. Off-season travel is actually quite fun! You will not find me “on the streets of Rio” during Carnivale, but early in the morning, in the ashen depths of Lent, when almost

everything is shuttered up—then you will find me. Foreign tourists are few, and the hotels are not full. One thing, however: always follow established bus routes!

By the time the three weeks were over, I had covered many of the principal routes in the country (not the “southern part”). Next trip, I hope to do the south, and the rest of the north.

It was a lonely time, within and without. I did not want to do any “at the moment” writing (like I did during the third trip to Burma). I read little. Instead, the land itself became my book. I studied the grand sweep of land from the bus windows, and the small dusty details in my run-down hotel-room. I took delight in small things—something eaten on the street, or something noticed in passing. I called those students back in China whose numbers I could remember. It never “clicked” in me that Morocco was a good place from which to call China. The idea came to me to bring some phone numbers, but I did not do it. Oh well...next time?

For the first time, I used a “sheet sleeping sack” (to protect my skin in certain dubious bed-sheets, at certain run-down hotels). It was a very successful addition to my baggage. However, many other things I brought were worthless. The next time I go out, I will have to “vet” my baggage much more carefully, and take a much smaller bag, to force my behavior!

During this trip, I also noticed more early signs in the degradation of my health. I almost fell over on a number of occasions—and at those times, I was not running or jumping, but moving about slowly. For me, the signs of approaching winter are very plain to see. I can imagine you, Lychee (and many others, too), saying to me, “Get a woman, who will look after you!” No, Lychee, I do believe I will find such a person at all. I would rather continue to “work on my bucket-list”, and wander the face of the earth alone, as I am able, until even that is taken from me—which will certainly happen. Of this, I have no doubt whatsoever.

Lychee, I travelled in Morocco on my terms, alone, and for the most part, it was successful. I am glad I went! The Moroccan people were kind to me, and they “let me be”. What more could I ask of them? Speaking French was a real advantage for me, as was my past experiences running around Niger, and southern XJ. Morocco is an Arab/Berber nation, with a French administrative “overlay”—and it is this overlay which makes all the difference. I hope that Morocco’s favored position in the region will continue for a long time!

In time, I flew back to Lisbon, on the “Victor Lazlo flight”. I rested in Lisbon for a day, picking up some more books and DVD’s for my Portuguese language study. I especially liked to get known English-lit-works, translated into modern Portuguese, since I know the plot and the “way of thinking”. Raw Portuguese books are too much for me! At least, with the translated works, I can guess and muddle my way through parts of the text. Then, I took a bus up north, to visit the town of Braganca.

Ever since I visited the Viceroy home of the Braganca family in Goa, I have wanted to go to Braganca town itself, and have a look. The bus ride up to Tras-os-Montes province was long, and I gazed dully out of the window. Now, so much of the Portuguese landscape has been over-developed, I think. When one looks out over a wide panorama of land, the signs of “town-sprawl” over the countryside is plain to see. However, by Tras-os-Montes, the wide open spaces reassert themselves and the landscape is aesthetically pleasing once more. The Dukes of

Braganca chose their “home-turf” very well—backed up against the mountains, and the frontier with Spain, at the extreme north-eastern corner of the Portuguese road network.

Looking out over the silent and brooding hills north of Braganca, from the warm comfort of the bus station’s waiting room, I felt more in my element.

My hotel was in the “middle zone”, between the 19th century part of the town, and the 17th and 18th century parts. It was easy to walk around Braganca. Winter was near, but not quite arrived, and vendors were roasting chestnuts in the market squares. Like the Moroccan cactus-fruit, the chestnuts of Tras-os-Montes are really good. The vendor sprinkled salt the size of coarse sand into the paper funnels. Again, it was the “low-season”, and there were almost no tourists on the streets. The historical district of the town was very quiet. The economic troubles in Portugal have caused many people to try and sell their homes; on many streets, I could see “For Sale” signs in some of the windows. The shop-keepers eagerly awaited any business to come through their doors.

The streets up to the old castle were cold, almost empty, and sprinkled with leaves. Perhaps, during the summer, the area would have been softer, greener, warm with the conversation of the people, but now everything was frozen with the melancholy of approaching winter. The wooden gates to the ancient walled, “inner city” were long gone away. The cobblestones no longer rested flat on the ground, but over time had tilted, making an uneven surface. A flock of pigeons fed voraciously on choke-cherries from a large cherry tree, while a local cat stalked and re-stalked them. From the top of the castle walls, I looked out over the northern hills. It was very much “my kind of day”. After looking around, I sat in a local café, next to the stove, and watched the cat trying to get his pigeon. I wondered where the Braganca nobles lived, after they left the castle for more modern homes.

Braganca town was very beautiful in its pre-winter austerity, but I was too melancholy to appreciate anything much. The time for returning home was coming soon. As the last afternoon light faded, I walked outside the walls, and looked at the olive trees, their ghostly-silver forms, the sheep-cropped grass in between them, and the darkened woodland on the far hills. The air was cold, but I was glad to be here, alone, looking at the olive trees, while letting my mind wander. Yet at the same time, I was restless in spirit, and wanted to move on, even if I did not know where to go. I walked the darkened streets back to the hotel.

I returned to Lisbon, bought some final “translated novels”, walked the cobbled streets, and ate local snacks. In all this, I was trying to remember “things Portuguese”, down to the last drop. I returned home, to another time of “in-between limbo”.

During these times, I feel “out of place”. I am a stranger in a land that never knew me. What must it have been like for the exile, sent away to Siberia for twenty years, and then obliged to return to the place he came from? The streets and buildings are vaguely and dimly familiar, as in a troubled dream from long ago. The ways of the people are not familiar at all; the merest deviance from their accustomed habits draws stares, and from some, even condemnation. Only the trampled and sodden leaves, and the wind in the branches are familiar. This is why the exile come home likes “nature encounters”, on the edge of society, for they are familiar, universal, and do not condemn. Above all they do not condemn. I talk with the most marginal of people, and

live my life on the margins of society. The only place I feel at ease is at my place in Maine state—in the forest, and in the local village. There, it is quiet, uncomplicated, and safe. If I seek refuge, it is in classical novels that have nothing to do with the present age, or language books, or the forest, or my containers, or "somewhere else" in another country. Relating to people, and especially those who know me, is more and more difficult. Lychee, I am very glad I do not have a "wife, kids, and associated baggage"! I would go crazy.

I went back again to my place in Maine state, to drop off this year's writing (for archiving), and Portuguese-language books/DVS's/CD's (for the language library). Having stored everything away, I was able to move on to something else with an empty suitcase and a dear mind. Why hold the cares of the world, when a big steel shipping container can do it for you instead? For me, they make life simple.

As usual, I slept at the village guest house, and got rides to and from the container-home. It was very cold, as I filed away papers, ate lunch, and looked at various other rooms. The pale sun was weak, and unable to warm the walls. At night, it would be dangerously impossible to be there! Obviously, my place is not a winter place. As the afternoon sun went down behind the trees, it became darker and much colder. I imagined wolves walking about in the dark and silent spaces outside.

Now, I am starting to think about building a small cabin for winter living, with heat, water, electricity, and lots of insulation to keep the cold out. Maybe in a few years, there will be such a place, but for now, I must wait. I lack money and a clear purpose for building.

I have now had this land for almost ten years. Most people are uncomprehending, incredulous, skeptical, or critical; they will most likely remain so indefinitely. As for me, I am still happy I bought this land. Yes, I made many mistakes throughout the building process, but I am still glad I have a "global crash-pad". It still fulfills the intention I had for it. For me, "home" is whatever suitcase I am carrying; "home-base" is where I store my baggage and acquisitions slated for oblivion; the world itself is a playground equipped for a lifetime of exploration. "Home", in its usual socially-accepted sense, has very little functional meaning for me. Here is the metamorphosis: family became foreigners; children became students; a home became a small apartment anywhere; one's local neighborhood became the whole world; friends became strangers on a bus; "well-off" became threadbare; social restrictions became the open highway leading anywhere; dinner parties became hurried street-snacks; one language became seven languages; being "dysfunctional" in one place became "useful" in another place; having nowhere meaningful to go became having many new places to go. All of this, and more, came to pass because this place in Maine state gave me a "pied a terre" from which to venture forth into the world, and try many things.

Lychee, I hope that your home and your family will give you more of what you want to extract from life! A home should be a haven or a springboard, but not a place of oppression or a prison.

There are a few more days to go before the next departure. I try not to think too much of where I am going, lest everything blow away, as a dream. Everything is fragile; no gift or opportunity is forever. Ahead, lie the next cluster of projects; behind, lies the past, with its

achievements or failures; to each side, there lie distraction and disaster, which are always there, even if I cannot see them. This life of wandering has been a real gift, with many varied and interesting events and places and people—but it is a very fragile eco-system. Sometimes I fear this way of life will come to an end, and never come back. So, I am glad I did what I did with what I was given, and hope to do a lot more, as I can!

Lychee, a lot of time and distance (but not much experience) has gone under the bridge since the last entry. I am now in Yogyakarta, in Java, staying at one of my "watering holes". I came here to discuss three projects with some local friends, to try and get my visa for Indonesia extended, and to have a rest from my ceaseless wanderings.

Going back... I arrived in Bangkok, visited my usual places, stocked up, sent off heavy parcels, wandered my usual haunts, and ate the usual snacks in the usual places. I have seen a slow and steady decline in the viability of the "backpacker's quarter" in Bangkok over the years—from economic decline, assisted I think from outside—but this year, the effects of slow extinction were plain to see. The backpacker's quarter in Banglamphu, with its many colorful characters and myriad shops and alleys looked very different this year. Of course, the protests taking place this year do not help, but I do not consider them to be the real reason for the slow extinction of backpacker tourism in Bangkok. There are other players...In short, the microcosm of restrained chaos, a sort of all-year-long "carnivale", a place of refuge for the world's wandering global misfits (myself included) who are safe among their own kind, the place we all thought would last a thousand years, year after year, is beginning the slow decent into extinction. I say again: I think it is an assisted and organized extinction. Banglamphu has been the "unsinkable aircraft carrier" for at least two generations of Western youth trying to "hustle the East", a place where visas, onward tickets, and papaya shakes were easy to come by, and where everything was "same-same"...but not for much longer, I think. All I will say at this point is this: (a) I am glad that this refuge was available to me in my 40's, as a sort of "global touch stone" to come back to each winter, at the height of my annual depression, and (b) I will try to continue my visits, even during the "bad seasons", for as long as I can hold out, for I am reluctant to pull up stakes, and seek a global base / forward operating post elsewhere in Asia. I like it here too much, most of all because it is familiar, tried, and well-worn. I like to come back to a place with no real surprises.

In Bangkok, I avoid the elites—of any group—because they know me as one of them, failed to evolve, and I distrust them at first sight, and probably always will. They are the lions of the Serengeti, driving me the cheetah off my own kills. Instead, my constituency is the urban proletariat who I happen to visit for my incidental, but also habitual day-shopping. They call me names like "Mister!" or "Mr. five-dollars", or else flash a smile of recognition or a nod that does not require the burden of language. (Besides, Lychee, the more I flirt with my languages—now up to seven—I have decided that languages were developed in order to exclude any members of the "social out-group", and not to bridge the nations.) They also know who, and what, I am, and I know the moment of re-connecting for a minute would never happen, if I did not buy something. This is why I have a wide-ranging trap line, that follows my own needs of the day (i.e., snacking, cold drinks, and petty shopping); all is very carefully set out and executed. So

far, no one has tried to subvert this fragile and transitory, semi-social, or asocial eco-system I have built up for myself.

However, even global wanderers like me need to have somewhere to rest and re-charge, before heading out again. I have long flirted with the idea of buying or renting a very small condo, or apartment in Bangkok as a place to retire (or “semi-retire”) in. During this visit to Bangkok, I started to walk around other neighborhoods, and to see some real-estate brokers. So far, I have decided that buying a place is not the best way. However, it is now possible to “rent” a room that looks like a room in a business hotel for a long time—such as one year! One place offered such a room for about \$7,000 for one year. Of course, getting a visa for such a move is a question I do not know how to answer, yet. If I could live in Bangkok for a year, with no job to pander to, or visas to worry about, I could see if I liked it. At this point in my life, I would like nothing better than to live in semi-detachment from society, read books, do some writing, wander in the temples, travel around parts of S.E. Asia, and have as little to do with society as possible! This is the social contract I look for, and I hope to find it in Bangkok. There are some other places, but I am not sure they are available for me. I do not think that China is willing or able to give me such a way of life, so I must leave.

Well, enough of this talk, Lychee... You know me well enough by now!

I left Bangkok, after eight or ten days of indulging in “marginalia” (i.e., doing nothing), and went back to Kuala Lumpur. Back in October, 2013, when I bought my air-tickets, I bought the “exit from Thailand” ticket to Kuala Lumpur, in Malaysia, as I wasn’t really certain where I wanted to go; I had vague ideas of going to Indonesia, but my choice was not settled. So, here I was in Kuala Lumpur for two days. Once again, I was in the hot, run-down “backpacker’s quarter”, which I had long ago “picked over”, waiting for the next flight to Indonesia. So, I went to a restaurant that cooked a good dish of skate’s wing (like a sting-ray), and I sat at the very back of the restaurant, while everyone else was dining “al fresco”, out on the street, totally immersed in the bedlam of a busy Bukit Bintang hawker’s market on a sweat-flowing evening. They “notched up” or else enjoyed their experience; I said my goodbye to it, fully expecting that I would never see Kuala Lumpur again. Lychee, these days, I do not know what, if anything, I will see again, so I sample, observe, and take accordingly. Perhaps I was not so much saying good-bye to Kuala Lumpur, as farewell to a good dish of skate’s-wing. (The idea of eating it anywhere else is a form of heresy, for me.)

Soon, I passed through Kuala Lumpur, and flew to Banda Aceh, on the north-western end of Sumatra island in Indonesia. It was here that this trip really began.

For some reason, Sumatra island has been very high on my “bucket list”. I wanted to pass down the entire length of the island, and later mark the route on an old map. Call it vanity if you will. So, I did... I flew into Banda Aceh, stocked up on small bills and the pleasant feeling of pacing up and down in an air-conditioned room alone, and moved out the next morning. The journey took about ten days, with six stages, before reaching Jakarta, on Java island.

It was a long, hot, sweat-soaked journey, even on buses with good air-conditioning. There are two ways to “do” Sumatra: (a) the roads along the west side, which are very hilly, and which have most of the tourist and surfing attractions, or (b) the road along the east side, which

is flat, and is largely devoid of any tourist attractions. Naturally, I chose the “tame” route, over the “wild” way. The road passed through land which had largely been logged, stripped, and then re-planted with rubber trees and oil-palm trees. Where the topography was too forbidding in places, the land was spared conversion. Since most of the route went through relatively flat land, and since the oil-palm trees were taller than the bus, it seemed I was passing through a 2,000 km. tunnel of palm trees, interspersed with rubber trees. At the many villages and towns, the throng of street hawkers and motor-scooters came right up to the roadside. Getting through any small town was slow. Each journey was very long, slow, mind-numbing, and sweat-drenched. I stayed in Medan, in Pekanbaru, in Jambi, in Palembang, and in Bandar Lampung for two or more nights—not because I wanted to visit any local tour-sites, but because I needed to rest body, and mind, have my laundry done, and collect any available tourist or hotel brochures for a colleague back at Zhi Da. It was an experience of very intense isolation. There were however, a string of kind people along this route—waiters, tour-site guides, a hotel boss and his English-speaking wife, attendants at a “phone-bar” (for calling home), attendants at bookstores, and others. Of material comfort, I liked the sour-sop ice-shakes, blended with no sugar. I saw many Nat. Geo. Specials on T.V. in my hotel room, for I did not dare venture out after dark. I often read some books I had bought at the Bangkok backpacker’s bookstore. My e-mail was cut off in Malaysia, so I lived without it (to a point). Life without e-mail I like, but life without the telephone is harder. Throughout, the travel funds bled away. The “tropical grand tour” is no longer a shoe-string affair, and besides, it seems that many tourist sites the world over look and feel the same as each other. As for many of the young backpackers, I have less of a feeling of escapism, adventure and exploration, as of “a finishing-school for the new global elite”, dressed like semi-scruffy world-wanderers, but practicing their home-society’s tight ethic on each other, and on readily-available “social cannon-fodder”. There are no longer “innocents abroad” — only fools, or hunter-killers abroad. They can be seen at any of those enigmatic places where the swallow-like global backpackers congregate.

Needless to say, the route I made through Sumatra almost guaranteed that I would see no foreigners. Indeed, I like to travel to off-season, out-of-fashion places, the way “contrarian” investors choose their stocks. It doesn’t always work, but it works enough for me.

These days, I travel the way a soft-fruit picker harvests the fruit before a thunder storm... rushing to pick the best fruit as quickly as possible! Now, I can look at a regional map of S.E. Asia, and realize that there are few places I really want to go to. “Been there, done that...Now, it is time to move on to another region.” The only thing which remains is the method of travel: avoid the famous tour sites, and work the major bus-routes or train-lines. It is time to move on to a new area. However, I remain the same, working the fringes of a given society, as well as the fringes of my personality. I am still unable to truly know what I want, then articulate it to others, then actually get what I want. It is the classic “dyslexic orders the same hamburger at the same restaurant, as he cannot do otherwise” paradigm, gone global. To make matters worse, I can now sometimes notice the pre-cursors of what can only be described as “senior moments”. Nonetheless, living on the fringes of the world’s run-down and neglected quarters suits me, for there, the imposition of home culture is but a distant memory.

The streets of a typical town in hot Sumatra are noisy, full of motor-scooters and snarling traffic, and smothered in noise-pollution and exhaust gasses. Much of the food is likewise smothered in palm oil, from deep-frying. One's ears are likewise smothered in noise—the cars, hustlers, and the psychotic soul-riffs of the shouters. All they bear witness to is a complete wasteland, in all dimensions. However, Lychee, this same panorama is played out in many different corners of the world—albeit, with different social settings. Even in the imaginary world of the Internet, there is also the recurring motif of “Eden robbed, and the users short-changed, and the original dream subverted and perverted”—save for the new elite, who have learned to build new and unseen castles and strongholds in or outside the new wasteland.

Each time you eat a donut, or some food with “partially hydrogenated oil” in it, and feel its unmistakable grease on your tongue and palate, think of Sumatra, and similar places!

A bar of soap, or a pint of palm oil for cooking cost XYZ dollars, but what does it cost in terms of detained lives, and man-hours (or woman/child hours)? I would like to know: how many bars of soap, or pints of palm oil, does one acre of palm-plantation yield? I have seen many agricultural operations, the world over, from the bus windows, but here in Sumatra, I had a sense of “not too much final product, for a lot of input”. Let us call it “life-guzzler” (rather than “gas-guzzler”, of cars). Once again, the group is wasting the soul and life of the individual. When I write this, I am not really trying to draw attention to the palm-oil companies, or Sumatra, but to something much bigger, of which the palm-oil companies and Sumatra are only “incidental bit-players”. And yes, I do wash my body with soap, like everyone else. The sight of “detained lives” is very, very grim, and makes one think.

This trip was full of little incidents that served to remind me, as one of my college profs. once said, that a day's life was an illustration of how one lived out one's entire life. Time and time again, I made wrong decisions—mostly small—and sat at the table looking at them. I was “ripped off” by a taxi driver, and let him get away with it. Ultimately, the loss of a mere 20 cents makes no difference, but I knew that silent resignation, and complaint alike were futile: I was a fool, whichever way I chose. I looked upon my failure to choose aright at every level of life, most of the day long. I asked for “tea, with no sugar” and got it with sugar. I ordered dishes at the restaurant, and later realized I didn't like them or never really wanted them. I lost hundreds of thousands, even millions—but at least they were Indonesian rupiahs, and not U.S. dollars! (\$1.00 = 12,000 Rp!) However, the “inner message” is clear—even though no one got hurt—that I am a fool. My one consolation, Lychee, is that I had no children to pass this on to! I never really learned to know what I want/know how to ask for what I want/get what I want. This is why I have always liked Asia: life is cheaper; foreigners are by default excluded from the group, therefore fools have nothing to lose, since they have lost it already; the Asians (thus far) are innocent of western hypocrisy and “political correctness”, and all of their despicable tributaries; there are many, many interesting and varied things to see and do in Asia. Were it possible, I would like to live in Asia for many more years!

Finally, I left Sumatra and crossed over to Java island. At the time I thought I would not return to Sumatra again, since it seemed so “seamy”; however, the west coast “tourist-trail”, all the way up to Banda Aceh again, calls me, and I know I will be back there at some point. I

stared over the water at Krakatau volcano, thinking of 1883. Actually, before getting on the bus and ferry, I hired a motor-cycle driver to take me to the Krakatau Monument in Bandar Lampung (city). This monument was made of a shipping buoy that was carried inland by the tidal wave in 1883. The trip was a “wild goose chase”, but we finally found the monument. I was surprised at how many people did not know where it was. I scanned it briefly from the back of the motor-cycle, and then asked to go back to the hotel, and the bus. I spent a few days in Jakarta, to get my clothes washed, visit the National Museum again, buy some more books and maps, and emotionally “shut down” Jakarta as a stopping place. By now Bali island has become the center of gravity for my wanderings in Indonesia. It is time to leave the old places!

Lychee, one of the real reasons for coming to Indonesia was to visit the book-translator (for the book “Sentences and Paragraphs”), as well as the book-illustrator (for the poem/children’s book “The Bluebird and the Cat”); both were successful, so far. The rough drawings were done. The translation was done. I hope the next steps work well. Once those projects were done, I wandered the usual haunts of Yogyakarta, ate the same dishes in familiar hole-in-the-walls, bought some more maps, and waited for the day when I needed to show up at the Immigration Police office to get my tourist visa renewed. Once that was done, I moved out in a hurry. Like Jakarta, the city of Yogyakarta ceased to become a “center-of-gravity” for traveling. In the future, it will become Bali, Makassar, Ambon, and Kupang. Some years ago, I would never have even thought about going there; now, they are logical places to go.

Indonesia is one of the world’s best (and last) global playgrounds. I have almost never been “carded”, save at the airport, and when checking into a hotel. Sometimes, the hotel boss just took my money, gave me the key to my room and that was it! I can drift about to my heart’s content—look at the passing scenery from the bus window, eat “unmentionable” food at the look-pick-choose restaurants, live in my own inner world where almost no one will disturb me, enjoy a virtually limitless supply of “eye-candy” of all kinds, and more. Yes, Indonesia is a great place to wander around. Yet back home, Indonesia is looked upon with suspicion and perhaps fear. However, it is worse for people like me who do go to places like Indonesia, and are then looked at askance by the conventional and the unimaginative, “Why would you go there?” Well, I do go there for the same reason that Lawrence wanted to go to Akqaba: because it pleases me. I require no other reason or justification to go to Indonesia, again and again.

Indonesia is like 25 countries, all under one roof. For the record: it should be “one roof”. It is a place where one can see the same thing, but at different times or under some different conditions, and like it one time, or dislike it later on. Here, I think of some examples, but in the end, there are many examples.

I do not like the “calls to prayer” as they are often shouting competitions between multiple loud-speakers. It is not enunciated, semantically useful language—it is noise. However, last night, for the 4:30 am “wake-up call to prayer”, one man sang alone, to a city hidden under the starless night and a blanket of rainclouds. I think that everybody lay on their beds, and listened to him. For a few minutes, one man shared the poetic stage with the nightingales. I listened, and then returned to my restless sleep.

I do not like the rain and the damp for they make me stink all the more! However, the rainy season is a good time for me to travel, for there are relatively fewer foreign tourists in the area. It is also good to write when it is raining hard outside, and one is safe and dry inside. Sometimes it is most tiresome to stop and talk with passers-by, who are just being friendly, and want to practice their English; at other times, I want to have a “free-talk” class with college kids, and thus recreate the “free-talks” I had with you Lychee, and your classmates. All roads lead back to Urumqi, in one way or another these days.

I wander through these parts of Indonesia as in a dream, where a day has but a basic form and action: night or day, the three meals, another hotel room, a different road, the next chapter in the book I am reading. All else has been air-brushed out of my consciousness, or else intrudes from time to time, to trouble me. To be honest, I wish I could continue this wandering, planned yet rootless way of life for quite some time longer. Of course, money is the limiting factor. I neglect my pennies, and bemoan my lost pounds. I am constantly updating my travel objectives, on the “floating map” of my imagination. Travel dreams come and go, and often depending on budget concerns. Yes, in terms of travel routes (not “travel destinations”!), I want it all, but I realize such is not possible, so I pick and choose from a set list of dreams in an evolving smorgasbord of reality. Such are the demands and pleasures of travel. Of course, traveling alone, with no other person nearby, makes life much easier!

I left Yogyakarta, flew on to Bali, changed planes, and went on to Maumere city, on Flores (island). Like Portuguese Flores in the Azores, Indonesian Flores is really pretty. The aim was to work my way back west to Bali island, going overland through Flores, Sumbawa, Lombok, and Bali—and then return to Bangkok. (The Alor Islands, West/East Timor, and Sumba can wait for another trip.) There is only so much that one can do in Indonesia, in seven weeks. Flores island, from Larantuka in the east to Labuan Bajo at the western end, is about 400 km long. The island is very volcanic, mountainous, green and lush with very beautiful scenery. The Trans-Flores Highway, which is about 670km long, is as wide as Apple Street in Essex, and winds its way along the contour lines. Building that country lane was a labor of love. One could just blitz the whole route in two mind-blowing days, but I chose to do cross the island in a leisurely two weeks, with many stop-offs and side trips. I was very tame, and spent most of my time in the neighborhood of my hotels; in fact, there is enough raw adventure, geography and culture in Flores island to fill an entire Type-A adolescence. Very quickly, Flores became my new favorite part of Indonesia. There was a destination (Labuan Bajo, and the uncertain boat-crossing to Sumbawa), but no real hurry to actually get there.

Upon arrival in Maumere; I planned to go to Larantuka, at the eastern end of Flores island, have a look, and then begin the long trek west. The hotel boss at Maumere thought I was crazy, saying there was nothing to see in Larantuka. Actually, there was. Larantuka became a promising teaching base (for ESL teaching); I had a very fruitful talk with the local tourism officer; he introduced me to two local English teachers, and we had a good “free-talk”. It was one of those “miracle days”. I went back to Maumere. Then, the next stop was the drive-through village of Moni, with its exquisite late-afternoon/early-evening light over the rice fields. Nearby were the volcanic craters of Kelimutu—the “paint pots”, on account of the brightly

colored crater lakes. I had another “free-talk” with a local English teacher. At Ende, I drank coconut milk, and melted handfuls of ice against my forearms, to crash-cool myself. At Bajawa, I visited a local hot-spring, and soaked my feet in the warm water. At Ruteng, I visited the limestone cave of the Flores “hobbit”, and had more “free-talks”, this time with local college students.

Who knows what will happen in Labuan Bajo, as I have not yet arrived there...

The past two weeks were really not that spectacular; some would call them tame, boring and unimaginative, and maybe they were. However, it was what I wanted: running up and down volcanoes, or into “traditional villages” did not appeal to me. However, let me say that Flores is an extreme sport/ adventure tourism paradise. I just wanted to be quiet, and make my own little experiences. For example: I craved sour sop (fruit) again, but a local restaurant said there was no sour sop. So I got a motor-cycle taxi to take me to the new market outside town (a great idea!), and there, I found one of the last of the season’s sour sops. It was big, ripe, soft and messy, and just ready to make my mouth and fingers messy. (As Susan would say, a happy wolverine’s fruit-party.) There are times when one must actively disbelieve the locals, and just go out, or see for oneself! This was one such occasion. For some reason, sour sop became the fruit of choice during this trip to Indonesia—even though I ate it rarely. As for papaya, I will wait for Bangkok.

Lychee, it is now about three weeks later, and I am in Bangkok, but I crave lemon juice and soda water more than papaya: such is the influence of the sour-sop. I chose to spend about ten days in Bangkok—to “melt down”, make calls, and get ready for the next round of travel. More on that later.

After Ruteng came Labuan Bajo, at the western end of Flores island. Labuan Bajo is a jumping point for the ferry to Sumbawa island, and to Komodo island. The ferries were not running so I had to fly back to Bali island, spend a few days there, go back to Sumbawa island by air, and continue the overland-and-ferry route to Bali island. Call me “over-purist”, but not (quite) mad: I wanted that line on the map.

Bali’s tourism has been intentionally developed—some would say, over-developed. The narrow roads are now choked with traffic: (a lot of SUV’s, too), since so many people want to visit. There are Balinese Hindu temples everywhere—from large complexes of buildings, to front-yard shrines. Here, religion is inextricably woven into the fabric of society. I have never seen religion permeate and occupy the host society as much as in Bali—not even Burma comes close. For the visiting tourist, everything appears magnificent, but at what cost! The time and labor burden of maintaining social and religious society is almost beyond imagination. In Bali, art is a way of life. Art is a normal and everyday affair, not a transcendent realm of a few. Now, people from all over the world come to Bali, and like water-hyacinths, they are everywhere.

Could Bali’s success as one of the world’s major tourist destinations overload its ability to survive?

After a few days, I flew to Sumbawa island, and looked at the landscape from the bus. Sumbawa is not really a tourist island—the tourists pass on through. There is much less visible money here. While camped out in Bima city and Sumbawa Besar city, I kept largely to myself. After dark, I did not dare to wander around, save to the local mini-shop or restaurant. Food was

either the Indonesian variant of chop suey, or the Javanese “rice, with pick-and-choose.” Chicken is big in Indonesia, and gnawing on tough but organic chicken legs/thighs was always a pleasure. I also liked using a tennis-racquet shaped “bug zapper” to hunt any mosquitoes in my hotel room. Sometimes, I also used my shower slippers, to kill off the cockroaches. Where there is no good T.V., or when the light is not good enough for reading, there is always mosquito-hunting before bed-time.

After only three days, I crossed over to Lombok, traversed Lombok, and took the next boat to Bali. The ferry port at Bali was called Padangbai, and I camped out there for a few days. If there had been no Bali—Lombok ferry, Padangbai would be no more than a minuscule fishing hamlet; however, it had all the regular trappings of a way station on the “backpackers’ migratory circuit”. Needless to say, I ended up in a guesthouse for people in their 50’s and 60’s. I like quiet!

Lychee, this brings me to the issue of “getting older”. It was Ouambo the Gourma beekeeper who warned me (even back in 1984), “If you do not marry and have children, you will die like a dog.” (How true, but first I wish to live and roam like a dog.) You, and many others have “suggested” I find “someone to look after you”. Ah, how foolish I have been, to remain alone! However, I was happier to be “foolish”, and live, and roam the earth, alone. However, there have been consequences. Over the past few years, but more so now, I have noticed many sure and undeniable signs of “getting older”. To wit: I sometimes want to fall over for lack of balance, when I stand up from my bed; crossing the road confuses me, sometimes; I have much less energy and motivation; I find navigating common social obstacles much more daunting; I am at a higher risk for reacting to a social event or situation on impulse, and making a social fool of myself; there are other “signs” as well, but these will suffice. So, maybe in ten years or less, Ouambo’s predictions will be proven correct. This new reality translates into an altered way of traveling: I like to wander the less familiar routes by bus, staying at grubby hotels, but I do it in stages, with breaks, and much more cautiously. Call it “semi adventure, in slow motion”. It seems to work.

So, I camped out in Padangbai for a few days. I hired a motorcycle driver to take me around some “inner country”, away from the usual Bali tourist sites. For the first trip we flogged the somewhat under-powered motor-scooter up the steep volcanic slopes of inner Bali, in search of basket making workshops that made chicken cages from lengths of split bamboo. The standard cage for an Indonesian rooster is round, and only big enough for a bird to stand up in and flap its wings. These cages can be seen everywhere. However, for the rooster, they are little more than “oubliettes, in full view”. I wanted to ask the basket weavers if they could make a new design of cage, but using the same weave. The new design would have the shape of a WW2 Nissen Hut, it would be 2m x 1m x 1.5m, and it would have no floor. Thus, the chickens would have a “chicken-tractor” cage, to devour weeds, seeds, worms and bugs, on the garden growing-beds, in a controlled fashion. It so happens that one of the Balinese “spirit houses”, (for placing daily offerings to the local spirits), looks just like what I wanted to build—although the “spirit house” is much smaller. I wanted to try and made a prototype, to see if such an idea would work. This pleased both the motorcycle driver and me, as running around the back-country of Bali

looking for village-level bamboo basket workshops was more interesting and adventurous than the “same-same” activities of contemporary, mass tourism. In short, we crafted our own day’s activity!

It so happened that, in addition to being a safe driver and a good oral translator, the guide was able to take my idea and synthesize it into a locally contextualized and developed message, far above and beyond my initial words. He was the ideal field worker. He drove us to a small and hidden village, not far from his own village, to a workshop that made split bamboo products, and especially the “oubliette” rooster cages. I said very little, for the driver was in full form. Intuitively, I knew what he was saying, even though I did not know the language. The workshop boss looked at the concept-picture, and discussed it gravely with the driver before approving it. However, one of her workers, who also had a picture, sat nearby and thought very deeply about this new design for a chicken cage. Something big was slowly stirring in her mind—her silence and her intense look of concentration made that obvious. If anything ever comes out of this crazy project, years later, perhaps it will come from her, and not the other players, and not me. The driver agreed with the workshop boss on a price for one prototype cage, I payed, and we left. The driver agreed to report to me by e-mail at some later point in time.

For the second trip, this time on a real motorcycle, we did a “loop” of the eastern half of Bali island. It took about half a day, and made me very “saddle-sore”. The roads in Bali are in good condition but in places the traffic flow is clogged—there are too many private cars. As for the public transport by “bemo” (minibus), it is sporadic; besides, the minibuses only depart when they are full. Thus, hiring a motorcycle and driver is the best option. We did the eastern “loop” of Bali, and were back in Padangbai within six hours. If one can get away from the crowds, and disappear into the green, cloud-wrapped back country of Bali for a few hours, then it is very pleasant. There is no shortage of beauty in Bali. The more one can get away from other people, and be confronted by the massive, volcanic countryside, the better. This was hard, because there were always people somewhere.

I never really learned to relax on the days I was not on the road. Thus, most days assumed the strange and paradoxical form of “busy doing marginal things; got nothing done; tired and worn out”. However, I did not worry, because no one there knew me. In a few days, I would move on. As long as I was passing through, from somewhere to somewhere, I was just another vagrant tourist in Bali; I was lost in the crowd, of no real interest to most of the locals, apart from a day-tour or two. However, as a little time went by, and the mildew of experience began appearing, then the local’s social perception, expectation and behavior invariably changed. I think that many people in the “golden lands of travel” do not like the outsiders, but put up with them because of money. So for me, there are the following conclusions drawn, and also questions: to be socially anonymous, keep on moving. Society cannot tolerate the drifter, but along the “swallow migration routes”, followed by the foreign tourists, being a drifter is considered normal. (They think you will return to your social gulag at the end of your ten-day annual vacation—why should they know otherwise?) The moment experience kicks in, or a pattern is discerned, and then comes trouble. No one should see what the others see; no one should know the “big pictures” of your life, or your travel strategy. The second point is

something of a corollary of the first; how can one find locals (at those vital strategic points throughout the “swallow-tourist migration route”) who one can see again and again, and remain socially accepted? Travel alone can be very lonely, for relations with many locals are constrained by money, and relations with one’s own kind are influenced by those social prejudices one left home in the first place to get away from! Mobility, anonymity and separation from community are the oxygen of social freedom. It is a delicate balance that the true global traveler needs to be aware of, and maintain. The “herd” will never allow this.

After leaving Padangbai, which I came to like somewhat, I zipped through Denpasar, went to the western end of the island at Gili Manuk, and then went along the northern coast up to Lovina. (It was the west “loop” route.) At Bili Manuk, I was told there were no more mini buses that day for Lovina, so I hired another motorcycle driver, ate a quick lunch, and left. I have reached a point where, having been cheated so many times, I don’t care: I just do it. I flew down the highway, under a sky darkening with heavy rain clouds, with the sounds of the wind in my ears. (So this is what Snoopy heard, over Flanders.) We reached Lovina, found a hotel with rooms, and the driver went back to his family with 200,000 rupiahs (about \$18) in his pocket. For him, it was an afternoon’s successful income. These people sit for hours and hours, even days, for the chance of a hire. In Bali, it is very hard to earn money. This driver was very good, and very honest in his dealings.

That evening was typical of this seven week trip in Indonesia: string up the laundry line to air out my stinky clothes, carry out “search-and-destroy” patrols for mosquitoes in the room, using the tennis-racquet “zapper”, look for dinner at a plank-wall road side stall. Then the fun began. After dinner, I still wanted something more to nibble, so I went into another roadside shop, dimly lit up with 25-watt bulbs and pointed at some very hard-core, local sausage. The boss cut it up, and I ate. His two children came out, and soon, the “Hello Mister! How are you? Where are you from?” routine became a real English class, like in Altai (on the good days), but infused with the “je ne sais quoi” of Ouambo’s family hearth in 1984. One kid was really motivated, and clever as well; the other, being younger, was more shy but also motivated. The father and a grandmother looked on. If I do retire in Indonesia (hopefully in Flores), I hope to open a “hedgerow school”, with ultra-earnest students in the class. Obviously, the father was pleased with how a sausage-snack became an impromptu English class. It was a “teachable moment”.

The next day, I went back to Denpasar city, to the former guest house, and layed up for three or four days. By now, I was ready to leave Indonesia, and go back to Bangkok. I snacked on “street goodies” incessantly, slurped on coconut juice, bought last minute items, picked up maps and books, sent a fourth parcel of tourism brochures to a colleague at Zhi Da , and waited for the plane. I walked the ultra-backpacker “strip” at Kuta, and the quieter, paved beachfront pathway at Sanur, but I found no solace there, save at two restaurants. The one at Kuta had an ice-cold ginger syrup and soda water, and the one at Sanur had an enormous coconut (and the boss let me float ice-cubes in the coconut juice). As you can see, Lychee, I do like simple things. Naked, over-the-top luxury never really interested me, but the simple things usually do. So, this

trip was defined by sour-sop, and coconut juice. They became the travel-essence that flavored the entire journey.

Flores was my favorite place—and most of all, Larantuka and Ende. In time, I would like to return there and settle down, have my own “hedgerow school” for English, and write curriculum. Now, my eyes are on Sulawesi island, as the next place in Indonesia to go to. Sumatra is worth a second trip. I would like to wander in East Timor, as well as West Timor and the Alor Islands. Indonesia is certainly one of the world’s greatest travel-playgrounds! For now, I have had enough of Indonesia, but I know the desire to return will come.

If I were to immigrate to another country, and start a new life, Indonesia would be a candidate...but alas, at 51! It is too late to do that, but retire? Maybe.

Now, Lychee, I am back in Bangkok. There is always an inner smile in my heart, after I leave the airport, and the taxi is passing through the darkened-by-night or crowded-by-day streets, and I recognize a certain place. I am home again, because for me, Bangkok is the global traveler’s way-station, become home. In some ways, Bangkok is a “virtual home”, a state of mind. It is a place, for all its noise, clamor, congestion, where I can find a certain measure of familiarity, peace-and-quiet, predictability and “same-same” and respite from my other activities. “For better or for worse”... this year, there is civil unrest in Thailand, and it is doubly important to maintain my annual presence here, through shopping, maintaining my supply-lines, and just being here.

This time is an interlude. Behind, the seven weeks in Indonesia. Ahead, the next set of journeys. For now, all I can do is try to rest from my “denied exhaustion”, catch up on the usual snacks and pit-stops, buy the next tickets, and wait. I try to achieve everything, but lacking strategic and inner motivation, do little. At night and in the day, my dreams trouble me. It must be ‘mid-life crisis’: I review my many past failures, but am still determined to forge ahead with my crazy projects, so long as resources and ambition hold out. Life is not an unlimited universe of choices and opportunity, but rather a “bucket-list” of limited and diminishing dreams, ambitions, mentoring projects, and travel objectives. Ambition is sluggish; hope is very low, physical energy becoming more and more depleted. I am more and more interested in trying to complete old projects, rather than start new ones. Sometimes I think “Why go back to teaching? Far better to continue travelling, and never look back!” However, in later moments of reality, I decide that would not be a strategically prudent move. So Lychee, if all goes well, expect me back in Zhi Da, for a fourth tour.

Two ongoing trends bother me. One: my mental energy, awareness and “sense of wisdom” are slowly slipping away. Two: I am getting very little return for what I put into life. In actual life, as in the spending of money, I am spending one dollar, while everyone else seems to get the same result for 30 cents or less. I bleed money, and time, yet live a half-pauper, in terms of what I should be “getting out of life”, day by day.

I received an e-mail from the bamboo chicken cage man in Bali island. He said the workshop people were not able to make the cage and what should I do? To keep things simple, I said, just keep the money...no problem. From an engineering and materials point of view, I have no doubt the “bamboo chicken-tractor cage project” can work. The problem is social, and maybe

also cultural. It boils down to my social incompetence, cultural “tunnel vision” on their part, as well as my physical and communication absence... and maybe some excuse making on their part. It is hard to get people to think outside their cultural/conceptual envelope, but it is even harder to get them to act. No problem! I plan to revisit the issue, the next time I pass through Bali island, and camp out in Padangbai. Rather than ask the workers to change the standard-issue “rooster oubliette” into a “chicken-tractor”, I will go to those other bamboo workers who make the small, front yard, Nissen-hut shaped, woven bamboo “spirit houses”, and ask them, “Please make me a bigger version of what you already know how to make”. I will tell them nothing about chickens. Perhaps I will make one myself. Even if I am silly, I want to have a try, and have one proto-type cage made up, because it pleases me. I lack the social skills, and probably always will, so I will focus on what I can do—have an idea, build one or two proto-types, and then leave.

After the “rest-period” in Bangkok (which was really a time of directionless brooding), I moved on to Vietnam. It was a short side-trip, to finish off unfinished travel destinations. I had thought, “Visit Dien Bien Phu”, and have a closure. As it was, I found that I liked Vietnam, and wanted to come back again. So much for closure...

Lychee, I am tired of writing basic travelogues: I have been criticized for saying the same thing, over and over again. Yet here, I will focus on a few details which make Vietnam interesting. The trip itself was simple enough: Hanoi—Dien Bien Phu—Lao Cai—Hanoi.

In Hanoi, it was often raining, a very fine rain even finer than drizzle. The people of Hanoi called it “rain dust”. As in the film “Blade Runner”, the rain was a constant presence, only here, it was dust. The local people chose to ignore it and carry on with their daily life, but for me, “rain dust” made the thronged and convoluted streets of Hanoi very “noire”, and very romantic. Hanoi at any time is a great city to wander about in, but when the “rain dust” is falling, it is a summons to the streets, with an umbrella.

It is five in the morning. I leave my hotel, walk around the corner to another hotel, and wait for a ride to the bus station. The streets and alley are dark, save for a few threshold lights. All doors are barred shut. Only a few riders on motorcycles are out and about. The “rain-dust” sifts down, forcing me onto the small areas sheltered by the door-way awnings. The moment is pure “noire”, but my mind is distracted, and I lose it. If I return to Hanoi, I should get up at four on a wet night, and walk the dark and silent streets, observing the moment. No one else is welcome to come along.

It is mid-afternoon, around Hoan Kiem Lake. The sky is heavy, and grey, and the “rain-dust” is almost a drizzle. I try to feel the moment, for the footpath around Hoan Kiem is one of Asia’s top promenades. I see Hanoi as a series of impressions; nothing in itself stands out, but the overall effect is pleasant. One could return to Hanoi again and again. Now that I have found a hostel single-bedroom for five dollars per night, and the size of a modest walk-in wardrobe, I have the ability to enjoy the “rain-dust” of Hanoi again, and not rush on....

It is another day, on a cool morning, in Dien Bien Phu. A motorcycle taxi driver is taking me around the major battle-sites of 1954. After sixty years of peace and urban growth, the large and sprawling battle-site is disappearing under trees and buildings, and life. Perhaps it is better

that way. That day, I drank out three coconuts. I bought a small flashlight, re-visited the bunker of A-1/ “Eliane” fortress, went deep inside, turned off the light, and stood there in the intense darkness. All I could hear were the hundreds of mosquitoes, their whine amplified in the hard concrete tunnel. It reminded me of another tunnel, which I entered with a candle and a box of matches, almost thirty years ago. I was alone, until some other tourists came down.

Lychee, these days I often connect things I see around me now, with far distant memories. For me, this is a sign of closing down my life. Perhaps it is because I am once again in a state of exile (from Urumqi), but it is also part of a larger existential picture.

Now, Lychee, I am in Taiwan. It is my first visit. For many years I wanted to come here and have a look, but I was afraid of being scolded. Now since I am full of “fin-de-siecle”, I don’t care. The TRA rail network gives this journey structure (a circle), and the countless 7-Eleven convenience stores give me sustenance. Without 7-Eleven, I would go hungry. These stores are the haven for all socially illiterate, rootless, “ronin” individuals, who have no place anywhere else. I subsist on the triangular rice-balls (“onigiri”, or “fan-tuan”), and on the Ceylon Milk Tea. It is a niche that I am permitted to occupy; I dare not probe into anywhere beyond passing observation. Yet I am happy to observe, and be silent. So far, I like the concrete landscape of Taipei the most. Perhaps I belong more in the city, with its parks and botanical gardens (“the jungle, without the tigers”...or feral dogs), than I do the countryside. With a foreign city, a good metro, parks to walk in, 7-Eleven shops to eat and drink in, and ultra-cheap hostel rooms, with a washing machine, why look elsewhere?

It is a month or so later, and the three weeks in Taiwan have taken on some perspective. So far, of all of the various places I visited since last December, it has become my favorite. Taiwan suits my wandering, “urban-ronin” temperament perfectly. Already, I am thinking about how I can return for more wandering. Migratory birds have their winter resting areas, and in this respect, Taiwan is mine.

In April, I wandered in northern Luzon island of the Philippines, and in Sabah province of Malaysian Borneo. In this time of scheduled travel, I waited as patiently as I could for the flight to Bangkok.

Lychee, the feelings of “fin-de-siecle”, of impending personal collapse, of the confiscation of dreams, are all very present and constant in my mind. In large part because of this, I have been aggressively pursuing travel routes in S.E. Asia. Although one can never really say, “I have seen all of this area” (a silly vanity, indeed), I have been able to cover the principal routes of interest to me. There remains Sumatra (the west coast road), Sulawesi, around Timor and the Alor Islands, Okinawa to Osaka, Taiwan (again), Kyoto, the Japanese alps, a general revisit of Japan, Saigang Division in Burma, Hanoi, a revisit of parts of Laos and northern Vietnam, Singapore for two weeks of urban wandering, and Bangkok again and once again—and that is it. At that point, one reaches a watershed in my life. I believe that the 50 or so years in between 1970 and 2020 represent the best period in world history—since the “Pax Mongol” of the 14th century—for global travel. I also believe this “honeymoon period” of travel will come to an end—and soon. One only has to look at the Tokugawa Edict of 1635 for a precedent! Therefore, I consider myself very, very lucky to have been alive and operational in this period!

For the past few years my life has followed a “bucket-list” mentality and “putting my house in order”. I do not regret my never having my own family—it would have been a horror, a disaster. I wish I had done more travel, and carried out more of my “crazy idea” projects, and perfected my status as a wandering social isolate. I am very glad I bought my land in Maine state. I am glad that my very minor writings have been posted on the internet; when the website is finally shut down, I shall accept the inevitable, and lie down under the dust of slow oblivion. At least I made some effort with my writing, and the land.

I want to consummate my “bucket-list” so much, that I often do not wish to continue teaching English in Urumqi! I would far rather be a “wandering ronin”, moving throughout Asia, for everything of interest to me can be found here, in great abundance.

It is another week later, and Bangkok languishes in the torpor of tourist “low season”, and the humidity of the rainy season. As in any water hole in the Serengeti, the lack of any foreign tourists has made the tourism-related sales people more desperate by degrees, and pushy. This is especially true of the tailors. On one occasion, one street front sales-man for a tailor shop said don’t go to his shop for your clothes: come to my place. If I look at myself in the mirror, I see that many of my own clothes were made by these Burmese tailors. However, I have reached a certain “saturation point”, and do not want to have any more clothes made up. As I walk the lanes of this small part of Bangkok, my trap-lines, I try to concentrate my spending on just a few of the vendors: the papaya and watermelon lady, the pomegranate juice lady, a certain book shop, my travel agent, a phone call and internet center, and a few others. It is low season, in the land of “same-same”.

Every few days it rains heavily, but it takes an effort of willpower to walk to the window and look out. Motivation is low, Lychee, but after many weeks on the road, why shouldn’t it be? However, after a few days of being in Bangkok, I feel better, and ready for the next round of travel. Zhi Da has said I can come back to them, so the “tooth-pulling” ordeal of visa-application will begin soon. Thus, time left for travel is too short!

Now, it is time to move on to the next phase of travel: three weeks to finish Sumatra, and Bogor Botanical Gardens, and two weeks in Singapore, doing “urban exploration”.

As usual, the first day in a new or a re-visited place is a time to change money, scrounge “small bills” for use with vendors, make mistakes, get the froth of depression out of the cooking pot, and work out the details of one’s travel route. It is not a bad thing to linger at the start-line for a few days, so as to “size up” the new landscape. I am in Medan, in Sumatra of Indonesia, and plan to travel down the western route, from Medan, to Bukittinggi, to Bengkulu, to Bandar Lamphung, and on to Jakarta in Java. Travel, like going on pilgrimage, requires an act of effort to get moving. Once started, it becomes easier. As usual, I am alone, and I like it that way. However, I have noticed that I get more “no’s” than before; still when the “yes” answers come, they are sweeter. Today, about three hotel reception-desks would not let me use the phone to make my next hotel reservation, but on the street I met a group of five college students (who were looking for a foreign tourist to practice spoken language with), and one of them made the call for me. This made me feel better.

In order to keep myself safe in the dark evenings, I have cloistered myself in the hotel rooms. Over time, this has added up to a lot of “solitary confinement”, and I suspect this is having very much of a cumulative effect on me. There is no one to have real and meaningful talks with. Even the occasional phone-call to ex-students in China is not enough. However, there is a part of me that likes it that way. After all, that is one of the reasons I came out to S.E. Asia! More and more, I am happy to just “disappear”. However, that too has its price, for more and more people have buried me psychologically. Oh well....

Lake Maninjau is one of those iconic backpacker get-away spots, found all over S.E. Asia. It is a lake in a volcanic caldera—a big one, for the country lane following the lake shore is about 60 km. long. It used to welcome many foreign tourists, but now there are fewer visitors. Of all the guesthouses here, I like the Pillie Homestay the best, as the second floor overlooks both the lake to the west, and rice-fields and the caldera rim to the east. The breeze is good, and the “eye-candy” limitless. One could spend weeks here, quite apart from the rest of the world, and re-charge one’s mental batteries. Since it is the tourist low season, I am quite alone in the guesthouse, which I like very much. For a brief moment, it is possible to forget one’s origins, one’s context, and one’s situation. Out on the lake, the local people do fish farming. The sun is strong, so I sit on the lake side in the morning, and on the mountain side in the late afternoon. Each side has its own unique set of characteristics and breeze-currents. Over the lake, beauty is writ large: blanketing clouds of rain overwhelming the far wall of the caldera, silent lightning at night, and the thick walls of vegetation on the far side. From the afternoon vantage point the view is closer, more detailed and intimate; a farmer raking the rice stalks into a pile and burning them, a red shirt standing out in a profuse variety of rice-field browns and yellows, the burning piles resembling miniature smoking volcanoes. The sound of the waves lapping the shoreline under the balcony is constantly soothing, broken only by un-muffled motorbikes, or the call-to-prayer from the loud speakers. It is the waves that hold everything together. Thus, on the shores of Lake Maninjau, it would be quite easy to forget the rest of the world, and its complications. Yet, they are always there: waiting; very patient; silent by night and whispering by day; implacable as werewolves. It is the waves that help me to remain calm. If one is able to enjoy the static pleasures of Lake Maninjau, it is pure “lotus-eater country”, and one can paint oneself into the landscape oil painting.

After three days on Lake Maninjau, I returned to Bukittinggi. It was the low season, and there were very few tourists on the ground. People often said “Hello, Mister! Where are you going?” Quite a few—usually a group of students—would walk up to me and “assume-ask” me if they could have their picture taken with me. (I hope I will never photograph the ostriches at the zoo, or watch children trying to feed them popcorn.)

One morning, I visited a scenic spot on the edge of town. It overlooked a gorge, called by the locals “the Grand Canyon of Bukittinggi”. It was here that the Japanese had sited their regional H.Q. in WW2; deep underground were many tunnels. It reminded me of the underground H.Q. tunnel complex at Corregidor. I wandered the tunnels alone, bumping into school field-trip groups, and silent couples, imagining the place. It would have been a very big H.Q. The ghosts of memories were silenced by the faint cries of merriment and jostling from the

school field-trip groups, coming down the dimly-lit tunnel. Alone, it would have been terrifying; in company, it was banal. I went up.

Overlooking the gorge was a steel-and-concrete observation tower. It offered an unparalleled view, so I went up and enjoyed the view. It was as any picture-perfect gorge should be on a peaceful morning—the winding river, rice-fields and bamboo groves artfully traversed by a narrow lane to the other side, the large open spaces. However, there was no peace for me, Lychee! I took out a snack, and within three bites the monkeys came running up the steps. I put on my “dominant male” look and stamped my feet (something I am not used to), and they ran off... but they knew me, and waited. A little later on, a teenager came by with a BB gun, and the whole troop of monkeys hid in the deep brush. Later, other people came, to have their pictures taken, joke, play “touch-tag” with one of the immature male monkeys, or to chat—but almost nobody stopped to commune with nature. Some of the students saw me up in the tower and they came up asking me if they could have their picture taken with me. For some, it was a bit of a trophy, like swatting the monkey before it could swat back (and that monkey was quick). Others were too shy, so I invited them to have their picture taken with me; these were the ones who got the “free, English mini-lesson”. All I really wanted was to be left alone, to look at the scenery in peace.

It grew cloudy, then darkly cloudy. As the first raindrops fell, the monkeys below went into cover. Soon, a wind blew up, and the rain became stronger. One by one, the students left, asking me to leave the tower, which was open at the sides. However, I had chosen the relatively sheltered side of the platform, twenty feet up, and I was going nowhere. I let the rain drive the students away, one by one, and by the time I was alone at the top of the tower, the wind was up and I was happy. It was a typical rainy season thunderstorm, with some lightning, and pelting rain, with my semi-sheltered area becoming smaller and smaller, and I was happy and determined to indulge in hard-core isolation. Still even at the height of the storm, it was hard to jump off into the abyss of isolation (in a figurative sense, that is), and thus immerse myself completely in the experience. In some ways “my bird can’t fly”.

I travel, not to arrive, but to depart; to observe, and not to talk; not to fuse with the lives of others, but to be as alone as possible. Contact with other people is a by-product, a derivative of my life as a traveler. Lest you (the reader, not Lychee) think me savagely selfish, remember this: many of those same, smiling faces I meet on the way would not hesitate to take things from me, were they in sufficient need. We play to each other, in the margins between “the fellowship of the crowd”, and indifference. This is the traveler’s reality.

I took a day-trip to Harau Valley, went down to Bengkulu by night-bus, saw Fort Marlborough while in Bengkulu, and then went by shared minivan to Bandar Lampung. Thus, I finished the second transect through Sumatra. Here, travel is influenced by long bus-rides over very windy, hemmed-in roads, to far-flung “places of interest”. Most of the western tourists who come to Sumatra are of the “adventure/eco-tourism” type—they go surfing, go for jungle-treks, climb volcanoes, swim in rivers and lakes, live for a while (like anthropologists) among the people of the deep forest. They are usually couples or travel-couples, or small groups. I was alone, very “tame” in my ambitions, afraid to get “jungle-muddy”, not very fit, and influenced by

my necessary evening curfew. Nonetheless, I observed many things. I read the usual modernist books—Woolf, Conrad, Buchan Le, Carre, Greene— while alone in my hotel room, or while waiting for food or a bus. I had no camera, and that was a liberation. Apart from informing a few people of my vague whereabouts, I was happy to drop off every radar-screen, and just exist “somewhere in Sumatra”, quite alone. It is a fragile existence in a large and volcanically unstable part of the earth.

While on the shared minivan ride from Bengkulu to Bandar Lampung, somewhere before the village of Krui, there happened one of those events that are emblematic of Indonesian people, and which mark them out for greatness. It was about 10:00 pm, we were in the forest, and passing through a hamlet of a few shops and scattered houses.

It was raining and the darkness was heavy. A truck ahead of us was stuck in the mud, and blocked both lanes. Soon, this bottleneck would fill up with cars and trucks, and make things worse. I remembered a similar situation many years ago in Qinghai in the Tangula Shan part of the road between Amdo and Golmud. The road was blocked, many drivers took a “me first” solution, and quickly filled up both of the oncoming lanes. We sat there for about 24 hours, before a military truck convoy passed through, and bulldozed order into the traffic chaos. Here, the drivers and some passengers solved the problem, and fairly quickly; keep the oncoming lanes open, call up a huge, snorting ten-wheel truck; pull the stuck vehicle out of the mud; clear out all the other vehicles, one by one; re-open the road. I have always believed the Indonesians have a “can-do” /problem-solving approach to life, but here I saw it first-hand. What a difference between those two events!

I camped out in Bandar Lampung for two days, waiting for the ferry to Java. On the Internet news, I read of trouble in your city, Lychee—and my work-site! I wonder if I will be able to come back at all, and carry on with my normal life teaching English. Brush-fires are smoldering all over Asia (and elsewhere), and the moment for everything catching fire is very possible. I am now thinking of other things to do, should Urumqi close down.

Once again, I have been looking at Indonesia, and wondering “Could this be a suitable place to retire to?” This country has all the raw ingredients for the kind of lifestyle I like to follow. I will have to ponder these things carefully. Perhaps too soon, all other choices will be denied to me, and I will end up in a “gulag” of someone’s making, or in exile.

For the next few days I stayed in Bogor, which is about 60 km. south of Jakarta. In the colonial days, Bogor was chosen as a site for botanical gardens, and for agricultural research into cash crops. Today, the gardens have been surrounded by the ever growing city. These gardens are very beautiful, well laid out, and pleasant to wander about. They require enormous amounts of annual maintenance, and in many places, the irresistible forces of the jungle are slowly taking over. They were built under the strong combination of Dutch perfectionism, the power of absolute dictat, and a ready supply of manual labor. Why, the very footpaths were made out of rounded river stones, very carefully arranged on end, one by one, into a floral design! There were many miles of such footpaths, as well as paved lanes. These gardens, which are still used by the Indonesians for their agricultural research, are flocked by the locals on weekends or

holidays. However, on certain days, or when it is raining, certain parts of the gardens take on the stillness of the remote jungle—but without the tigers.

Naturally, it was at these times, when Asia's uncountable masses are elsewhere (in pursuit of social congregation and the opiate of noise), that I sought out or discovered the forgotten and quiet corners of a place. One such place used to be a row of long beds, with all sorts of specimen plants arranged in order, according to some 19th century's concept of plant taxonomy. However, those "wee specimens" were now fully-grown trees, showering the garden with their fruit. Everything was dim and quiet. I walked up and down most of the pathways systematically, not so much observing as absorbing the "feel" of the place. The skies clouded over; I could not see it, but I knew it, as the understory of the forest became even dimmer. The rain came down—and heavily. At various points along the footpath I could see some dry patches, where the rainfall did not wet the earth. I opened my umbrella, hung my bag around my neck, and stood very still, watching the forest get wetter and wetter. To all intents and purposes, I was alone in the jungles of deepest Borneo—although I knew the shopping malls of Bogor city were only ten minutes walk away. To be honest, Lychee, I do not like the real jungle, as it is hot, sticky, full of biting and stinging insects, full of inconvenience and danger, and very cruel. No, I prefer the "false jungle", the "jungle, without the tigers", such as in Bogor.... The rain streamed down through the leaves and onto the ground. I remained very still, as the umbrella was small.

After the rain stopped, I continued to walk around that part of the park, looking at everything. Sometimes, I used the act of walking around not to see or learn new things, but as a kind of "walking mantra", so as to forget my existence, and do as much thinking as possible. To a certain extent, I was able to forget my mind—but only for a short time. Over the past few years, I have done more and more of this "courtyard walking, in circles or rectangles", as I realize that travel for me is less about arriving and seeing, as about leaving.

The next day was sunny—and also a holiday—so the crowds came out in force. (I am glad I visited the quiet, woody areas when it was raining!) On three occasions, I was approached by "she-wolf packs" of college students, eager to run down and engage some foreign tourist in English conversation. They worked in groups of five or six girls, with a few non-verbal boys for escort, and a video-recording cell phone, to share their exploits with their English teacher. It was a good strategy, as the Indonesians are very much a "can-do" people, and there were many foreign tourists walking about in the Bogor Botanical Gardens. I talked with two such groups, then left the gardens, as I was tired now of seeing people. (I wanted the forest, alone.)

After two days, I went to Jakarta, to the same seedy, standby hotel, and rested, and waited for the next flight. On one day, I visited the old Dutch capital of Batavia, now rather run down and seedy, save for a few survivors of the once magnificent grand buildings. Among the semi-shanty were some restored, 18th Century warehouses, which I visited. I found a large, second floor space, which in the days of VOC's ultra-monopolistic spice trade would have been some of the most jealously guarded real-estate in the Dutch Empire, and piled to the roof with sacks of cloves and of nutmeg, but was now silent and empty. The room was about 70 m. by 10 m., and built with enormous hardwood beams and wide planks. I walked the floor-space quite alone, for half an hour. How strange (and good) it is to be able to find these specks of solitude, right in the

midst of such enormous populations! I am thankful and glad that, over the years, I have been able to find “the right place, at the right time”, while living in Asia. Solitude is a precious thing.

I prepared to leave Indonesia again. This was the third trip. I was tired, worn out and hot, and I wanted to go out. However, I knew I wanted to come back again; I have plotted out five more trips. Indonesia remains one of the world’s great travel-playgrounds, and I hope it always remains so! At this point, all I wanted to do was to close down Jakarta as a transit, city (good luck!), and move on elsewhere.

I went to the Jakarta airport very early, so as to avoid the notorious rush-hour traffic jams, and waited for the next flight, to Singapore, and a very different from of travel. I say “different”, because Singapore is quite different from anywhere else in S.E. Asia—or even all of Asia. I will talk about this more later on, Lychee, but for now, suffice to say that two weeks tramping about Singapore would require a very different approach than the usual remote and dingy places I visit. Thankfully this all worked out.

The most important factor was to operate out of a cheap and safe hostel. Hotels in Singapore are brutally costly. However, one can find relatively cheap hostels, usually in “Little India”. The second factor was to get an EZ Pass for the MRT (subway), and base one’s travel plans around the subway stations. Third: eat like a tramp, and try to drink only tap water (I failed this one!) Then fourth: visit “your own Singapore”, and not the offerings expected of you. For me, this meant walking in obscure parks, the malls (they are so big, and deliciously air-conditioned), and the sidewalks. All this was free.

So, over the course of twelve days, I systematically visited places of interest to me, beginning with certain areas on the outer edge of Singapore Island, and working inwards to the central urban core. Surprisingly, I was able to cover a lot of ground. Singapore expects its visitors to eat like gluttons, spend like profligates, and then “shop, drop, and get up and shop again”—and most of the visitors do just that. Except me, and a few others...or so I imagine, for at the end of those twelve days my money was reduced!

I like Singapore very much. It has unlimited “eye-candy”, for wherever one looks, there is something beautiful to look at. The desire for order and well-organized city planning affect every aspect of life here. It is an earthly utopia for the obsessive-compulsive, (like me). Everything works—although I admit there is a huge army of migrant labor workers that builds, maintains, cleans, polishes day and night to keep the city running...and run it does. The MRT station of Dhoby Ghaut is one of the world’s ultimate crossroads, especially during rush hour. In fact, seeing the unquenchable flow of people on escalators going up or down made me afraid, for it seemed in one brief flash of a second like an allegory of the Final Judgment, in a universe comprised of i.t.-girls, office workers, migrant labor, and tourists. Singapore does not run on roads, but on escalators, making the malls and MRT look like space stations.

The malls were entire ecosystems, vast tunnels and tracts of air-conditioned bliss, that would die instantly were the electricity to be cut off. Since it was so hot outside, I often walked in the malls, just to be walking, and to watch the world go by. I would do the circuit of one floor, go up one floor on the escalator, and do the next floor—and so on up. Then I would go to

another mall. So, rather than merely observe Singapore, I absorbed the city. Every incident or detail taken in was taken in within one or two seconds.

If the malls were the cool mountain pastures, and the open air spaces the deserts and danger zones of over-heating, then the 7-Eleven convenience stores were the oases of snack foods, cold drinks and chill air. I drank, and then lost it all in sweat twenty minutes later. In fact, I learned to “drink up” before going into a cool mall, rather than before going out into the hot outdoors, so as to cheat the sweating process.

Nonetheless, I walked some of the parks—the ones near an MRT station—and followed the mall tunnels. There, I saw yet more of Singapore’s carefully arranged “eye-candy”, seeming never to end, down to the last flower-bed.

For me, the most enjoyable societies are the ones which allow me to just be there and observe, and which do not expect me to participate. (That, in a nutshell, is why I will always favor Asia over the west.) Singapore was at once a museum, a laboratory, an urban park, a grand social experiment, and a technically successful apogee of development. So many nations lust after the figurative grail of “development”, but in my eyes, only places like Japan, Switzerland, Finland and Singapore have come close attaining it well. The others are just decrepit dowagers covered in paste, or would-be “arrivistes” puffed up in name brands, or homely girls happy with what they have in their life.

Yet at times, Singapore’s glory seemed so fragile. Remove all the menial workers, turn off the power, break some windows, reject the monolith—and what would happen? I will tell you Lychee: the reason I came to Singapore was to see it while it was intact and magnificent, while I was fit and able to travel, and while I was free from the bitterness and cynicism of old age that appreciated nothing. So, for twelve days, I was able to get up, take the MRT somewhere, wander about semi-aimlessly, drink cold drinks, see it all, shower, and sleep.

I stayed at a hostel for the backpacker type. More than once, I thought about the hostel in Lisbon. I slept in a six-bed dormitory (S\$28 per night) with people who came and went at every hour of the day and night. Some were quiet and considerate, but some others acted without a care in the world for the others in the room! One man held a business call at 4:00 am, while all the others were sleeping...Mornings at the breakfast room were interesting. It was the 21st century’s digital version of the Serengeti water-hole, with all the animal tribes represented and reinterpreted. The major people-groups present—Malay, Chinese, “Western”—kept pretty much to themselves, with almost no visible reference to people outside their group. Naturally, I sat in a corner, eating my store-bought brown brad and banana mush, soaked in the hostel’s milk and tea, and tuned out everybody. By now I must have cast a sight, for my travel-clothes were becoming quite worn on the edges.

I am glad that I stayed at this hostel in Singapore’s “Little India”, as it allowed me to save a lot of hotel money, and get down to the central task of walking about the city, and observing the “glorious utopia” of glass, concrete and escalators, in vast malls. However, the nightly returns to the hostel showed me vividly how much of a stranger to “community” I am (and always was): the new, “Z”- generation is about as unfamiliar to me as aliens. My answer: return to the desert, the mountain peak, the forest; move on to the next city, to somewhere people do not know me,

and will not bother me. However, there have been other consequences. All this solo travel and enforced curfew at night has had some of the effects of long periods of solitary confinement.

I really like Singapore, and would like to return—and maybe focus on the “normal” tourist sites! Lychee, I hope you will be able to go to visit Singapore one day. However, do it sooner than later, as “things change”.

Next, I went back to Bangkok, for another rest stop between trips. This time, I needed it. I have become quite frayed around the edges from all this moving about, change of scene and culture, enforced isolation, and having fewer and fewer funds. Also, now that the application process for one more tour at Zhi Da is under way, the pressure of anxiety is building up. On some days, while in Bangkok, I was very listless, and had little motivation to reach out and do something. Life in the backpacker’s quarter was very economically stagnated, on account of the civil travails the country is going through. Again, think of the water-hole during the height of the dry season. The economic troubles could be seen, felt, heard. However, when the rains came (a flood of cash-happy tourists), I do not want to be there, but in some other distant wasteland.

One other thing, Lychee. The prospect of returning home, the gauntlet of visa-chasing, and picking up the pieces from times past is proving to be daunting. However, it is a necessity—the money is almost dry!

So, Lychee, I began the fourth and final trip—to Vietnam (once again). The firm and clear image is of the last child ready to leave home. I took the bus out of Thailand, passed through Laos quickly (a few days in Vientiane), and arrived in Vinh, in Vietnam. Then I took a train to Hue.

Hue is a really cool place, and is worth future visits. This is where the Vietnamese imperial dynasty of Nguyen built its palaces, its citadel, and its mausoleums. In a sense, the Nguyen monuments at Hue are a smaller version of what the Ming Dynasty did in and around Beijing in the 15th and 16th centuries. The Nguyen lords had a good sense of how to site a city, how to build their palaces on a grand scale, and how to use proportion and placement. As a result, walking about the old citadel, the Thien Mu pagoda (the best I have seen), and the mausoleum of Minh Mang was very pleasant. The view of the Perfume River from the walls of the Thien Mu pagoda compound was postcard perfect. In the distance the mountains invited exploration. On this, the third visit to Vietnam, I was already mapping out the travel route of the fourth visit.

Each time I visit a new city, I need a few days to get used to the local surroundings, the shops, some prices. Invariable, I make mistakes of many kinds, especially judgment. I am often “bad company”, and need to be left to my own devices. I did not want to listen to anyone, so I wandered about the local neighborhood, to see where the small “pho”-noodle curbside snack-restaurants were, and to visit many of the nearby banks (to get small bills, for use in the remote areas). These are relatively “safe” activities to follow, as one gets used to a new area. In this manner, I also went to the main Hue post office, to send out post cards. For me, using the national post office to send post cards and heavy sea-parcels is something I want to be able to do in many of the places I visit. It is a form of competency that I want, even if it is old-fashioned.

(However, the “modern” competencies related to computers, the Internet, and cell-phones do not interest me much.)

The next two weeks passed quickly. I went up to Hanoi, and then re-visited the northeast (Halong, Tien Yen, Lang Son, Cao Bang, Hang Pac Bo, Ban Gioc and Nguom Ngao, Thai Nguyen, and back to Hanoi). I became very tired and full of aches and pains—especially from sitting, white-knuckled, on the back seat of a motor-scooter going over fairly long distances—and needed a good rest. So, when I got back to Hanoi, I stayed put for one week, and visited the remaining sites in or around Hanoi. It was enough.

Lychee, I am spending the last two days in Hanoi at a “better” hotel—that is “better” than the rough-and-ready backpacker joints I usually go to, to save money. Before I leave a country, I want good laundry-service, A/C, a connected bathroom, and some peace and quiet! In Hanoi, I can get this for \$21 per day. (The “backpacker” rooms range from \$5 to \$8 per night.)

Vietnam is certainly worth one more visit, but not now: some time needs to go by, before the “travel-hunger” returns, and I am ready to go. For now, I am content to mull over the possible route, places to visit along the way, as well as to load up on small-change (for the remote areas). It is a time for thinking, and putting the journey as a whole into perspective.

On the last day in Hanoi, I barely left the hotel. I am afraid to go back to the old places, but I must. The price of having an interesting career in XJ is having to pass through the toothpaste tube every five years. It is now that time in the cycle. I try not to think about Plan B, because I want to follow Plan A. However, I have many ideas. I do not know how to describe this period of extensive travel to others, as it is so much outside the norm of what most people do with their life. I fear the envy, the criticism of others who say, “Most of us do not have the opportunity to do what you are doing.” However, Lychee, I believe that having had such an opportunity, and not having taken it is the worse sin. For those who say “Have you gotten the “travel-lust” out of your own system? Are you ready to be normal?” I answer, “My appetite is barely whetted. I have only just begun”. Indeed, if I did not like XJ so much, I would be off on another project or journey within a month! There is so much more to do.

Over these seven months, I covered a lot of ground, and achieved most of my travel objectives. However, much was left untouched: in this respect, S.E. Asia remains unconquerable, a fount of discovery and amazement, a place to come back to again and again. With S.E. Asia, one can never say, “Been there, done that”. In a sense, for me there are no countries, only the “loops” and “lines” of migration-routes, and these are determined by geographical constraints. Moreover, my social inabilities, and the early curfew effectively kept me away from the “human interaction” elements of travel. I spent a lot of time locked up in my hotel room—but I am actually glad it happened that way. If I had gone out and about, and tried to meet other people, there would have been trouble.

Of all the places I visited, only one stands out far and above all the others: Taiwan. I should be quite happy to go back there again, and again, to wander about and to see all the “eye-candy”, the scenery, the land, and not travel, but just exist.

Oh Lychee! I still have not really found a resting place in S.E. Asia—although of the candidates (Burma, Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore) it seems the best place to retire in is Flores,

in Indonesia. I have no firm place, only lily-pads, for short visits only. Perhaps “a resting place” is not something I should be asking for, at this point.

I am glad that I did almost all of my travel alone, and on my own terms. Every day-tour with a local tour/travel company, to “local sites”, was less than I had hoped for. Partly, I am not able to articulate what I want, or get it; partly, the “tourist system” is geared to standardized, mass production with no ability or desire to think out-side the box. If one asks a tourism worker about something outside the razor-thin span of their job responsibility or duties, they cannot, or will not give an answer or a solution. So, I made my own travel decisions, outsourced, took my unorthodoxy to new levels, bid over/around/behind what was offered me, and tried to manage my travels on my terms. This upset quite a few people: too bad for them all!

I saw the younger Western tourists doing many of the things that I was “supposed” to be doing, but was not. These included the following (and more): drawing out plugs of money from ATM’s, in areas easy to spy on; playing on the Internet, in very, very unsecure net-bars or backpacker hotel lobbies; carrying very heavy backpacks; trying to appear footloose and fancy-free, but the absolute prisoner of their neo-conformist, tribal sub-culture, or their peer groups; constantly connected to wherever they came from via their cell phones; processing S.E. Asia into their paradigms; and more, much more. My manifesto to my constituency is this: consider me dead, until I get back home. Only a very small core-group hear from me, while I am on the road. Thus far, I like traveling this way.

During this time, I refined, ordered, systematized and put into practice many of the travel and baggage ideas that I have held in my mind for many ears. Today, much of my gear is customized, tailor-made, or bought from an obscure little shop that no one knows about. Should I write down all of these ideas and share them? I think not, as I have found that my life as a wandering soul often arouses envy, disapproval, and criticism from many people. If I share my field-craft, it will be with others who are like me!

Lychee, I am at a crossroads point in my life. I wish to resume my old life at Zhi Da, and continue where I left off. However, if I am refused, then I wish to disappear into the vast and empty corners of the world. This may sound a strange paradox, but both remote Patagonia, or the busy shopping malls of Singapore can be a “vast and empty corner of the world”. The secret lies in how one mentally shuts out the humanity, freezing it into “mental eye-candy”. Besides, I prefer to see places like Patagonia from the comfort of the government ferries or the buses. I am not an action hero!

So, now I am back in Bangkok—the ultimate “base-camp” city—having one last rest and recovery before going back home. It is time. The money has all but run out; I am depleted; there are things back home which need to be processed. I wish to bring certain things to closure, so new chapters can begin. Nothing is guaranteed, but now there are many things beckoning me. I languish on my hotel bed, feeling “blue” from thinking about the flecks of reality waiting for me back home. Time never softens these things—they lie waiting, like deadly fungus spores in the dust of a pharaoh’s tomb. Over the weekend, I lay on my bed in the hotel’s shoebox room completely unwilling to get up, go out, and face life in any form. When I did go out for meals, I scoured each of my snack-places for something interesting to eat—not because I was hungry, but

to stock up on final memories of Asia. How vain I am, and foolish! Every new impression tries to squeeze out the old. Even one's dreams are attacked.

Lychee, I wonder when you will get this section of "Fragments of China". As you can see, I have been to many places—more than I usually do in a given year. Yet throughout this year, you have been an inseparable part of my wanderings, my observations, my thoughts, and above all the editing that influences my writing. You are able to understand the things I do and see, partly because you know my character, and partly because you are able to run over the world's great spaces in your mind—a mind open to every description. You are unique!

Over this year, I barely looked up at the azure sky, but I felt the sun and the land it painted, in gallery after gallery of "eye-candy". I will always admire S.E. Asia and Morocco, but as for Portugal, it is forever glorious!

