

TOM BOTTOMS

Venetian Mirror,
Restaurant "Al Peoceto Risorto," 2012
Oil on canvas, 36 x 48 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST. PHOTO: RR JONES.

POTTER WICKWARE

The Day of 17

Zhi never lost his temper. If you took something away from him, he didn't get angry or upset. He might be sad but soon he'd forget. He made trouble that summer at Woods Hole when he took the people's bicycles, but Vivian was able to smooth it over.

The professor had an uneasy feeling in his throat. He paused on his way to the elevators and turned toward the fourth-floor restroom. As he pushed open the door, he suffered a spasm of coughing. With some effort, he broke loose a ridge of phlegm that had built up somewhere below the soft palate. He cradled the substance in his tongue and proceeded to the sink and spat.

Zhi's vocabulary topped out at about fifty words. He reached his peak in speech at eighteen months. When he learned a new word he forgot one he had learned before. The psychologists called it turnover of words.

The professor stood in front of the mirror, breathing heavily. His hooded eyes blinked slowly back at him. His forehead gleamed in the fluorescent light. Sparse strands of hair marked off his scalp in sectors, like the carapace of an old tortoise. His hearing aid began to squeal. A postdoc entered and approached one of the fixtures. One of Finley's people. The professor looked away and rinsed his mouth and spat again as he controlled his breathing.

Teachers were supportive, but there were no friends. There were people he liked, but none whom could have been called friends. Vivian taught him how to ride a bicycle. She took him to the long sidewalk at the beach and ran behind him in case other cyclists or pedestrians

came along because he didn't know how to use the brake. It was such an accomplishment when he learned how to brush his teeth. No physical problems, the tongue too big for the mouth, heart trouble, nothing like that, as with Down's.

The professor exited into the corridor. A centrifuge moaned from one of the labs. A freezer alarm beeped. Bergson's poster pinned up in the announcement case caught his eye. Tau plaques. Derivative stuff. A pair of students approaching from the lobby made room for him. Bergson's people. He ignored them.

Oh, my poor boy. An accident. Undoubtedly it was her negligence. But one is yoked to a wife for life. Ah, success is a bitter thing.

Passing the conference room he heard Finley's voice from behind the partly open door. The professor peered in past the jamb. Finley was speaking to a group in the room, students, not all of them youngsters, one a man in his thirties. People take a long time to find themselves in this culture, settle on a life aim. Time is a luxury they think they can afford.

Finley, with wild hair, in a tweed jacket and hiking shorts, was holding forth. "The catalytic base, the direction of water attack, the role of the substrate . . ." The man had been on beta-lactamase for years. Someone in the rear of the room, behind the door, said something the professor couldn't make out. But in reply, Finley's voice began to vibrate in a higher register.

"It's like a Christmas tree covered with ornaments! You shake it here and it shimmers over there!"

There was a low murmur of laughter. Certainly the man had mastered the skills of charisma, of public relations.

"Every day when you come to the lab it's like working your way inside a big Christmas stocking!"

Yes, and how do you support it? A twinge prodded the professor under the breastbone, but he suppressed it. Things have a way of taking care of themselves, he could imagine Finley answering. The results will speak for themselves, a generation later. Or maybe not.

The professor had been against Finley, against advancing him to associate. A man like Finley might fit in at a state school. Not here. It was not the quality of his science, which was mediocre, to put it kindly, that kept him here and helped him advance. No, it was his personal skills, his

interactive skills. His charm. He had the defect of making the work sound too easy. That it was “fun.”

As if in direct rebuke came Finley’s voice from the room, “Otherwise where’s the beauty, where’s the joy? Otherwise it’s all just abstract vocation, driven by the pursuit of grant dollars.”

Happy-go-lucky: an Americanism the professor had picked up. He pushed down a black feeling and moved on. Finley’s hair rolled down off his collar like a TV actor’s, wavy and too thick for a man of his age. Was it possible the man wore a wig? Laid back, another Americanism. Everyone an equal! The Latin janitors, the Cambodian UPS man, the Filipino security guard on the first floor! An affectation! Equals only because he is convinced he is superior! And on what grounds?

Oh, if he had been with us when the PLA drove the KMT across the Strait. Then he would know. Running dogs, they called us. If he had he been with us. The interminable journey, trains packed with soldiers, the fraction of possessions salvaged by the parents lost or abandoned, the six-year-old younger brother riding under the seat or on the overhead luggage rack, he would know. The long march from Huashan to Taipei. To Berkeley. To Princeton. To Raritan. To San Francisco.

Why do they hate me? I know why: My pronunciation. That I say “ongly” for *only*. The time I said “piss stop” for *pit stop*, attempting to be colloquial. I saw the smirks on their faces, their superior insider confidence. One must always remember that this is a racist country. Racial profiling is prevalent. They try to make one feel like an outsider. Yes, I am an outsider! A citizen of the world, not limited to a place or group. Beyond a place or a group. It was, for me, earn a PhD or be a waiter in a Chinese restaurant, and no middle choice! Make a friend of hardship and live with it!

They say they are for diversity, the hypocrites. Narrow, spiteful people who gloat to see a worthy man lose face in spite of his hard work, single-minded determination, and adherence to standards. They are indulged people! Life is too easy for them! They are too rich! They never had to struggle! Applied scientist, they scornfully said. Drudge. Coolie. The looks they directed at me, starting with my first car in Sacramento. Well, of course, I was a new driver! Don’t think I didn’t register these insults, of course I did! And regarding those who feign not being able to

understand my accent, they are against the Chinese. The world’s finest culture. Yet they look down on me. One of them tried to do me harm in the department, as a matter of fact, an adjunct professor now gone, when I was up for tenure, with the mocking phrase *affirmative action*. I understand that code! A slander! Even if I came from industry, even if my career path was nonstandard, our work advances the field! My appointment is deserved!

The professor had observed Finley’s family pictures one day when they used his office to interview candidates. The images were stuck to the partition next to his desk: His wife, a fleshy woman with a lopsided smile. Himself, a long-haired youth at some long-ago antiwar rally. A family gathering, a sprawl of people and clutter of casserole dishes and soccer balls, a manically grinning child with jam smeared on its face crowding into one side of the frame. His ex-wife along with the wife! Grandchildren! A girl underwater, age eleven, blowing bubbles. Two girls from Latin America. Guatemala, was it? What did Finley have to do with them? It was all indicative of the man’s lack of focus. Why is he here if not focused? Seven grandchildren! He brought one of them to the lab in person one day, a girl of fourteen, her midriff exposed, the straps of her undergarment showing, her face painted in eye shadow.

His head bowed in contemplation, the professor drew near the elevator lobby at the far end of the corridor, and then—careful! Here came Bergson. The professor almost walked into him.

“Hello, Xiaoming.” Bergson gave him a sharp look, “You look down today, Xiaoming. You okay?”

The professor looked up, practically in tears. “Seventeen, Henry.”

Bergson looked at him, blank faced.

“My son,” the professor blurted out. “He died at seventeen. On the seventeenth of the month. Today is the seventeenth anniversary. I’m going to pay my respects this afternoon.”

“That’s a sad errand, Xiaoming.” Bergson seemed about to extend his hand just as a car came. The professor nodded and forced a smile. He entered the car and descended to the ground floor. He exited the car and walked across the quad to the parking structure. Oh, a hard thing. Some years, lately most years, he had not made this pilgrimage, but today was the day of seventeen.

At the memorial park south of the city, at a mountain under the flight path of the airport, was the Garden of Celestial Contentment. It was across the road from a crenellated wall with a portcullis, the entrance to a European enclave. Across the road was a monument company and next to that a golf driving range. The professor passed between the pair of white dragons that flanked the gate of the Garden of Celestial Contentment. Vivian was waiting, her figure small in the cold, damp wind. Behind her was a wall with heroically proportioned vestal virgins or goddesses in bas relief, their garments wind-pressed against their torsos. He walked with Vivian to Zhi’s tomb. A jetliner rumbled overhead.

Many of the tombs were equipped with a little hearth in front of the headstone, with drilled holes to hold flowers and joss sticks. At some, the people had placed food offerings. On one hearth were a few chicken bones, gnawed clean. Next to Zhi’s tomb was an onyx-black monument. Obsidian. Beads of water formed in the foggy wind and rolled down the polished face. A family called Chen. Zhi’s tomb was polished reddish gabbro. His photograph was etched into the stone. His open, vacant face smiled out at them.

Vivian had brought plastic tulips. She removed them from her bag and placed them in one of the holes in the hearth. They were bright red and yellow. The joss sticks wouldn’t light at first, but she had a butane cigarette lighter and eventually they ignited. The smoke blew away in thin streams toward the Chen tomb. And she had brought moon cookies and kiwis. Zhi liked kiwis. Vivian sliced them with a folding knife and placed the slices with the moon cookies on a paper plate on the hearth in front of the tombstone. Normally the professor disapproved of such superstitions but today he acquiesced. Next from her bag she produced a picture of a bicycle. Not with a boy riding it, but a schematic of a bicycle, as if copied from a catalog. She placed it on the hearth. The wind threatened to blow it away. The professor took a few coins from his pocket and placed them on the corners of the paper to hold it down. Vivian lit it with the lighter. It burned with a pale flame and soon began to turn black and curl in on itself.

Our papers have been mostly in *JBC*, a respectable but very middle journal. And *Molecular Microbiology*. Never *Cell*, *Science*, or *Nature*. Not even *Genes & Development*.

The glycosome work came to nothing. The proteasome work had already been done in mouse and worm. With the RNA work we are part of a huge herd chasing the same quarry. And who will sweep my tomb?

“You could have brought a picture of shoes,” the professor observed. “He was so happy when he learned to tie his shoes.”

A weakening line of orange crept out to the edge of the blackened paper and slowly expired. “Tying one’s shoes is actually a quite sophisticated maneuver.” The professor cleared his throat. Vivian was looking down and he couldn’t see her face. He placed a hand on her shoulder. For a moment they leaned into each other.

Potter Wickware is author of *Crazy Money*, a memoir of Alaska in the 1970s; *I’m Still Here*, a novel; and coauthor of *The Human Cloning Debate*, a bioethics text. His reportage has appeared in *Nature*, *Nature Biotechnology*, *Nature Medicine*, the *New York Times*, *East Bay Express*, and other journals. His short fiction has appeared in *Catamaran Literary Reader*, the *Berkeley Monthly*, and elsewhere. He lives in Northern California.