Dear Friend, From My Life I Write to You in Your Life

FROM A Public Space

1. My first encounter with before and after was in one of the fashion magazines my friends told me to subscribe to when I came to America. I duly followed their advice—I had an anthropologist's fascination with America then. I had never seen a glossy magazine, and the quality of the paper and the printing, not to mention the trove of perfumes waiting to be unfolded, made me wonder how the economy worked for the magazine to make a profit, considering I paid no more than a dollar for an issue. My favorite column was on the last page of the magazine, and it featured celebrity makeovers— hairstyle and hair color, for instance—with two bubbles signifying before and after. I didn't often have an opinion about the transformation, but I liked the definitiveness of that phrase, before and after, with nothing muddling the in-between. After years of living in America, I still feel a momentary elation whenever I see an advertisement for weight-loss programs, teeth-whitening strips, hair-loss treatments, or even plastic surgery, with the contrasting effects shown under before and after. The certainty in that pronouncement—for each unfortunate or inconvenient situation, there is a solution to make it no longer be—both attracts and perplexes me. Life can be reset, it seems to say; time can be separated. But that logic appears to me as doubtful as traveling to another place to become a different person: altered sceneries are at best distractions, or else new settings for old habits. What one carries from one point to another, geographically or temporally, is one's self: even the most inconsistent person is consistently himself.

2. A few years ago I was about to go teach a class when an acquaintance, who lived across the country in New Hampshire, called my office. She had traveled to a nearby city. I talked to her for no more than two minutes before telling my husband to go find her. He spent twelve hours with her, canceled her business appointments, and saw to it that she flew back home. Two weeks later her husband called and said she had jumped out of her office on a Sunday evening. He asked me to attend her memorial service; I thought for a long while and decided not to. Our memories tell more about now than then. Doubtless the past is real; there is no shortage of evidence: photos, journals, letters, old suitcases. But we choose and discard from an abundance of evidence what suits us at the moment. There are many ways to carry the past with us: to romanticize it, to invalidate it, to furnish it with revised or entirely fictionalized memories; the present does not surrender so easily to manipulation. I don't want the present to judge the past, so I don't want to ponder my absence at her memorial service. We had come to this country around the same time. When I told her that I was going to quit science to become a writer, she seemed curious, but her husband said that it was a grave mistake. "Why do you want to make your life difficult?" he asked.

3. I have had a troublesome relationship with time. The past I cannot trust because it could be tainted by my memory. The future is hypothetical and is to be treated with caution. The present, what is the present but a constant test: in this muddled in-between one struggles to understand what about oneself has to be changed, what to be accepted, what to be preserved; unless the right actions are taken, one seems never to pass the test to reach the after.

4. Last winter, during a difficult period, I went to a program for those whose lives had fallen apart. Often someone would say—weeping, shaking, or dry-eyed—that he or she wished to go

back in time and make everything right again. I wished too that life could be reset, but reset from when? From each point I could go to an earlier point—warning signs neglected, mistakes aggregated—but it was useless to do so, as I often ended up with the violent wish that I had never been born. I was quiet most of the time, until I was told that I was evasive and not making progress. But my pains were my private matter, I thought; if I could understand and articulate my problems, I wouldn't have been there in the first place. Do you want to share anything, I was prompted when I had little to offer. By then I felt my hope had run out: I saw the revolving door admitting new people and letting old people out into the world; similar stories were told with the same remorse and despair; the lectures were on the third repeat. What if I were stuck forever in that basement room? I broke down and could feel a collective sigh: my tears seemed to prove that finally I intended to cooperate. I had only wanted to stay invisible, but there as elsewhere invisibility is a luxury.

5. I've been asked throughout my life, What are you hiding? The question baffles me because I don't know what I'm hiding, and the more I try to deny it, the less trustworthy people find me. My mother used to comment on my stealthiness to our guests. A woman in charge of admission at the public bathhouse often confronted me, asking what I was hiding from her; nothing, I said, and she would say she could tell from my eyes that I was lying. One hides an affair if one is unfaithful in a marriage; one hides a misdeed—people hide to make things not difficult for themselves. But reticence is a natural state; it is not hiding. People don't show themselves easily and equally to all. There is a distance that comes with being reserved, but it does not make one feel lonely the way hiding does. Still, that distance must be hard for other people: it can invalidate the importance of others; hiding, however minor, can be blamed on the one who hides.

6. There are five time zones in China, but the nation uses a unified time—Beijing time. When the hour turns, all radio stations sound six beeps, followed by a solemn announcement: "At the last beep, it is Beijing time seven o'clock sharp." This memory is reliable because it does not belong to me but to generations of Chinese, millions of us: at seven o'clock, the beeping and announcement were amplified through loudspeakers in every people's commune, school, army camp, and apartment complex. But underneath this steadfastness, time is both intrusive and elusive. It does not leave us alone even in our most private moments: in every thought and feeling about life time claims a space. When we speak of indecision, it's an internal deadline that we're afraid of both meeting and not meeting. When we speak of moving on—what a triumphant phrase—it's what we pack up so we can carry on. And if one seeks kindness from time, it slips away tauntingly or, worse, indifferently. How many among us have said that to others or to ourselves: if only I had a bit more time . . .

7. One hides something for two reasons: that one feels protective of it, or one feels ashamed by it; and then it's not always the case that one can separate the two possibilities. If my relationship with time is difficult, if time is intrusive and elusive, could it be that I am only hiding myself from time? I used to write from midnight to four o'clock. I had young children then, various jobs (from working with mice to working with cadaver tissue to teaching writing), and an ambition to keep writing separate from my real life. When most people were being ferried across the night by sleep, unaware of time, unaware of weather, I felt the luxury of living on the cusp of reality. Night for those sound sleepers was a cocoon against time; for me, I wanted to believe, it was even better: time, at night, was my possession, not the other way around.

8. A few years ago I visited Beijing for the first time in ten years. A friend came to see me, and we talked about her real estate investments and our old schoolmates, and then half an hour after she left my parents' apartment, she called: she hadn't wanted to mention it in person, but a boy who had been close to me when we were teenagers had committed suicide, along with a lover. My first reaction was wonderment, that my friend would wait until we were out of each other's sight to tell me. My next reaction was still wonderment, as though I had always been waiting for this news. Our dead friend had had an affair, and both he and the woman had gone through difficult divorces but had been ostracized as adulterers. "It'd have been better had he gone to America," my friend said. Why, I asked. In college he had already been doing well as a self-trained designer—often he would mail, along with his letters, cut-out ads from newspapers and magazines: brand-name garments, imported mints, cashmeres. He was someone who would have made a good life in the country's developing economy. My friend sighed. "You're the only one more impractical than he was. You should know this is not a country for dreamers." My friendship with the boy existed largely in correspondence. It was a different era, thoughts and feelings traveling by mail, urgency conveyed by telegrams. My family did not have a telephone until I was in college; e-mail came much later, when I was in America. I still remember the days when the engine of a motorcycle disturbed the quietest night—only a telegram announcing a death or a looming one would lead to such an intrusion. Letters, especially those bearing too many stamps, carried the weight of friendship. I can recall only a few things in those letters: a crush on the girl sitting next to him in class; a Chekhovian political satire he wrote, featuring Gorbachev and an East German general and a pistol going off in Act 3—this was in 1988, and communism still retained its hold in part of Europe; it was in that year too that we last saw each other. But I do remember that before he had found an outlet for his artistic obsession and sent those profitable ads, there had been endless car models he dreamed up, designed, and named carefully; there had also been odd assortments of pistols, rifles, spacecraft, and household appliances, as well as abstract graphics: all the drawings were meticulously done, sometimes in their fifth or sixth drafts, and their details used to fill me with awe and impatience. Perhaps when I say I was expecting his suicide, it's only memory going back to revise itself. There is no reason an artistic and sensitive boy could not grow into a happy man. Where and how things went amiss with him I do not know, though even as a teenager, I recognized his despondency when the production of his play earned him jeers, and a special exhibition of his car designs estranged him from his classmates. He was the kind of person who needed others to feel his existence.

9. A dreamer: it's the last thing I want to be called, in China or in America. No doubt when my friend in Beijing used the term, she was thinking of traits like persistence, single-mindedness, willfulness, and —particularly—impracticality, which she must have seen plenty of in me. Still, that one possesses a dreamer's personality and that one has dreams does not guarantee that one knows how to dream. The woman in New Hampshire and I, and many like us, came to this country with the same goal— to make a new life here. I wouldn't call it a dream, not even an ambition. She had followed the scientist's path and had a secure job at a biomedical company. I had drifted away, choosing a profession that makes hiding less feasible, if indeed I am a habitual hider. I don't wonder what my life would've been had I stayed in China: not leaving had never felt like an option since elementary school. For a decade there had been a concrete after ingrained in everything I did: the day I arrived in America I would become a new person. But there is the possibility that I might never have taken up writing. Had I stayed a scientist, would I have turned out differently: calmer, less troubled, more sensible? Would I have stopped hiding, or become better at it?

10. A few months before my friend's suicide, he had found me on the Internet. In his e-mail he told me about his divorce, and I told him about giving up science for writing. He wrote back, "I congratulate you: you've always been a dreamer, but America has made your dream come true." Recently someone pointed me out onstage as an example of the American dream. Certainly I have done that too, putting myself on a poster of before and after. The transformation, however, is as superficial and deceitful as an ad placed on the back of a bus. Time will tell, people say, as though time always has the last word. Perhaps I'm only resisting that notion as I've resisted those who want the power to have the last word about others.

11. I would have liked to be called a dreamer had I known how to dream. The sense of being an imposter, I understand, is a natural feeling that occurs for many people, and those who do not occasionally feel so I find untrustworthy. I wouldn't mind being taken as many things I am not—a shy person, a cheerful person, a cold person—but I don't want to be called a dreamer when I am far from being a real one.

12. What I admire and respect in a dreamer: her confidence in her capacities, her insusceptibility to the frivolous, and her faith that the good and the real shall triumph and last. There is nothing selfish, dazzling, or preposterous about dreamers; in everyday life they blend in rather than stand out, though it's not hiding. A real dreamer must have a mutual trust with time. Apart from feeling unqualified to be called a dreamer, I may also be worrying about being mistaken as one of those who call themselves dreamers but are merely ambitious. One meets them often in life, and at the center of their ambitions—smaller than dreams, more commonplace, in need of broadcasting, and dependent on the recognition of this particular time—are their trivial selves. If they cause pain to others, they have no trouble writing off those damages as the cost of their dreams. Timeliness may be one thing that separates ambitions from real dreams.

13. The woman in New Hampshire was neither a dreamer nor an ambitious person. She had hoped for a solid and uneventful life in an American suburb, but loneliness must have made her life a desert. My dead friend in Beijing was ambitious because he understood his talents; he had dreams too. I must have been part of his dream once—why else would he have written if not seeking kinship with another dreamer.

14. I came to this country as an aspiring immunologist. I had chosen the field—if one does not count the practical motives of wanting a reason to leave China, and having a skill to make a living—because I had liked the working concept of the immune system: its job is to detect and attack nonself; it has memories, some as long-lasting as life; its memories can go awry, selectively or worse, indiscriminatingly, leading the system to mistake self as foreign, as something to eliminate. The word immune (from the Latin immunis, in- + munia, services, obligations) is among my favorites in the English language, the possession of immunity—to illnesses, to follies, to love and loneliness and troubling thoughts and unalleviated pains—a trait that I have desired for my characters and myself, knowing all the same the futility of such a wish: only the lifeless can be immune to life.

15. One's intuition looks for immunity to two kinds of people: those who confirm one's beliefs about life, and those who turn one's beliefs into nothing. The latter are the natural predators of our hearts, the former made into enemies because we are, unlike other species, capable of not only enlarging but also diminishing our precarious selves.

16. I had this notion, when I first started it, that this essay would be a way to test—to assay—thoughts about time. There was even a vision of an after, when my confusions would be sorted out. Assays in science are part of an endless exploration: one question leads to another; what follows confirms or disconfirms what comes before. To assay one's ideas about time while time remains unsettled and elusive feels futile: just as one is about to understand one facet of time, it presents another to undermine one's reasoning. To write about a struggle amidst the struggling: one must hope that this muddling will end someday.

17. "But what more do you want? You have a family, a profession, a house, a car, friends, and a place in the world. Why can't you be happy? Why can't you be strong?" These questions are asked, among others, by my mother. There was a majestic mental health worker in the hospital where I stayed, who came with perfect lipstick, shining curly hair, and bright blouses and flats of matching colors. "Young lady," she said every time she saw me, "don't lose that smile of yours." I had liked her, and liked her still after she questioned my spiritual life. I could see that the godless state of my mind concerned her, and that my compliance made me a good pet project. "Don't mind her," my roommate, a black Buddhist, said. "She's from an evangelical background." I don't, I reassured her. Being preached to did not bother me. Then I had a difficult day. At dinnertime the majestic woman asked, "Young lady, why did you cry today?" "I'm sad." "We know you're sad. What I want to know is, what makes you sad." "Can't I just be left alone in my sadness?" I said. The women around the table smiled into their plates: the good girl was having a tantrum. 18. What makes you sad? What makes you angry? What makes you forget the good things in your life and your responsibilities toward others? One hides from people who ask these unanswerable questions only to ask oneself again and again. "I know you don't like me to ask what's brought you here," in the hospital my roommate said. "But can you describe how you feel? I don't have words for how I feel." I had several roommates—another revolving door—but I liked the last one. Raised in a middleclass African American family in upstate New York, she was the only adopted child among six siblings. She married for love, but on her wedding day she realized she had made the mistake of her life. "For the whole first dance he didn't look at me once," she said. "He looked into every guest's face to make sure they knew it was his show." By the time she told me the story, her husband was overweight, paralyzed by strokes, and blind from diabetes. She took care of him along with a hired nurse; she watched TCM with him because he remembered the exchanges in the old movies. Still, she said she was angry, because the marriage, his illness, everything in their life was about him. Had she ever thought of leaving him, I asked. She said she had throughout the marriage, but she would not. "I don't want my children to grow up and think a man can be abandoned in that state." Yet she had tried to kill herself in the farthest corner of Target's parking lot—an abandonment of both her husband and her children. But this I did not say, because it was exactly what many people would say to a situation like that. One has to have a solid self to be selfish.

19. There is this emptiness in me. All the things in the world are not enough to drown out the voice of this emptiness, which says, You are nothing. Perhaps I am only hiding my nothingness from people. I worry that they have been deceived by me: the moment they see my nothingness they will leave me. This emptiness doesn't claim the past, because it is always here; it doesn't have to claim the future, as it blocks out the future. It's either a dictator or the closest friend I've ever had. Some days I battle it until we both fall down like injured animals. That is when I wonder, what if I become less than nothing when I get rid of this emptiness? What if this emptiness is what keeps me carrying on?

20. On another day my roommate said she noticed that I became quiet if she talked about Buddhism with me. “I don’t mean it as a religion. For instance, you can try to meditate.” I didn’t explain that I had read Buddhist scriptures from the age of twelve to twenty-three. The teaching of nothingness in those texts—for the longest time they were the most comforting words, because they diluted the intensity of that emptiness. My father taught me meditation when I was eleven. Imagine a bucket between your open arms, he told me, and asked me to listen to the dripping of the water into the bucket and, when it was full, water dripping out from the bottom. “From empty to full, and from full to empty”; he underlined the words in a book for me. “Life before birth is a dream, life after death is another dream. What comes between is only a mirage of the dreams.”

21. My father is the most fatalistic person I’ve ever known. In a conversation last year he admitted that he had not felt a day of peace in his marriage and expressed his regret that he had never thought of protecting my sister and me from our mother, who is a family despot, unpredictable in both her callousness and her vulnerability. But the truth is, he tried to instill this fatalism in us because it was our only protection. For years I’ve been hiding behind that: fatalism, being addicted to, can make one look calm, capable, even happy.

22. I read Katherine Mansfield’s notebooks when I was having difficulties last year. “Dear friend, from my life I write to you in your life,” Mansfield wrote in one entry. I cried when I read the line. It reminds me of the boy from years ago, who could not stop sending the design of his dreams in his letters. It reminds me too why I do not want to stop writing: the books one writes—past and present and future—are they not trying to say the same thing: dear friend, from my life I write to you in your life. What a long way it is from one life to another: yet why write if not for that distance; if things can be let go, every before replaced by an after.

23. It’s not fatalism that makes one lose hope, I now understand. It’s one’s rebellion against fatalism; it’s wanting to have one’s time back from fatalism. A fatalistic person cannot be a dreamer, which I still want to become one day.

24. “The train stopped. When a train stops in the open country between two stations it is impossible not to put one’s head out of the window and see what’s up,” Mansfield wrote at the end of her life. This is the inevitability of life: the train, for reasons unknown to us, always stops between a past and a future, both making this now look as though it is nowhere. But it is this nowhere-ness that one has to make use of. One looks outside the window: the rice paddies and alfalfa fields have long been the past, replaced by vineyards and almond groves. One has made it this far; perhaps this is enough of a reason to journey on.