Brush Talks

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Elephant in the Jungle: A Typhoon in Four Acts

by Brian Kuhl

I.

One Sunday evening late that September, I checked my e-mail and a subject line jumped out at me: "Typhoon!!!!!" The message, from one of my students, read, "Brian, Have anyone told you that there will be typhoon at midnight and tomorrow? Look out for it! Have a good evening!"

I was seven months into teaching English at a university in rural Hainan, my own private Peace Corps. The early days had not been easy; I hadn't studied the language and knew very little about the culture. I practiced my Chinese in the market, mostly numbers and the names of vegetables. And Chinese practiced their English on me, especially local teens and kids shouting the ubiquitous "Helloooo?!" It had seemed like a taunt somehow, reminiscent of Maugham's line from his travels in China: "Rude boys cry out at the foreigner in a shrill and scornful voice." But were they really being rude? It was hard to tell. And was I supposed to reply each time? Ignoring it felt impolite, so I usually just nodded. I only liked hearing it from my neighbor, Liang Yifan, who emphasized the first syllable ("HELL-o!") and to whom I always returned the greeting with a smile. He was four and lived next door with his grandparents.

I had already heard of the storm from a colleague. Alice, an outgoing Brit who called our campus outpost "the bloody jungle," had phoned to tell me the university would be closed the next day. Our supervisor had told her to get any necessary provisions that night, as businesses throughout our little campus village would be closed as well. Alice, who loved nothing so much as a crisis, declared that the campus was "in lockdown." She was off to the small supermarket nearby and would come round with some water for me later. Arriving about ten-thirty, in a state of mild excitement, she explained that she had the new teachers at her apartment for the night.

"I'm better than George W.!" she exclaimed, referring to Hurricane Katrina, which had hit New Orleans just weeks earlier. The new teachers were an older couple from New Zealand who had been staying temporarily at the campus guesthouse since they'd arrived. They had no cooking facilities and the water would be turned off, so Alice had invited them to her place. She advised me to draw a few buckets from the tap for washing and flushing the toilet later. I offered her some of my food, but she said they had everything they needed. They'd be all right—she had picked up several cartons of cigarettes and lots of beer. "It will probably last us tonight," she said, laughing. "Well, back to the refugee center!"

Alone again, I went online to search for news. The typhoon's name was Damrey, a Khmer word meaning "elephant," and was the most powerful storm in thirty years. It would make landfall overnight on the eastern coast of the island and charge west toward us all the next day. Flights had been canceled, seaborne trade stopped, all fishermen ordered back to port, I read. Then the apartment went dark. Only my laptop screen, on battery power, provided a faint glow. I shut down the computer and prepared for bed. In the bathroom, I discovered that the water had already been cut off, and I hadn't yet drawn any buckets of water. I was caught a bit unawares; the storm was not any worse than our normal tropical storms at that point, yet things felt different, even disorienting. It was not yet midnight.

II.

I WOKE UP AT EIGHT, made coffee, and sat down with a book. It was eerily peaceful, even with the howling wind. The only other sound was faint piano music from one of the apartments below. I was productive in the quiet morning and had the whole day ahead of me. After finishing my coffee, I surveyed the situation a bit from my windows. The ground floor apartment on the corner had the most damage. The thick skin of a metal awning had broken free in the middle, crashing up and down like a cymbal. When I looked out later, it was gone. And a papaya tree by the walkway had snapped in half, its top end lying across the entrance to our building. Damrey was now shaping up to be a bit more destructive.

My friend Lily, a Chinese teacher in the English Department, called mid-morning to see if I had heard about classes. I asked if she had enough food, and when I learned she had only some cookies and bananas, I invited her to dinner. She hesitated, but we agreed to talk again that afternoon. Before we hung up, I asked her how to say "Do you need water?" in Chinese so I could check on Yifan's family across the hall. "He calls me his foreign uncle, so I should look after them."

Just before noon, I went across to my neighbors' door. I put two large bottles of water in my open doorway in plain view and pointing range. I set my package of candles on the arm of the wooden sofa just inside. And I took my dictionary in hand as a security blanket. The inside door was closed, and so was the outer metal gate, behind which a sheet acted as a curtain. I reached in around the sheet and gently knocked; the thin door rattled a bit on its hinges. No answer. I knocked again, louder this time. Yifan's grandfather soon appeared.

Ni hao, we greeted each other.

You mei you shui? I began, forgetting Lily's suggestion. I had asked the more general question "Do you have water?" He turned to his wife, and I instantly feared he thought I was asking them for water instead of offering it. I reached for my bottles and the grandmother came to the entrance. "Do you want some?" I asked in Chinese.

She shook her head and put up her hand to indicate no. *You shui,* she said. "We have water."

Bu yao? I made sure, trying to employ the polite insistence I had observed in the Chinese. I produced my package of candles. Again she said she had them. *Xie xie*, she said, as she gave me the polite fist-in-hand gesture of thanks.

I tried to say what I had practiced, my equivalent of "If you need it, I have it." But I confused *yao* (need) and *you* (have)—and stopped abruptly. During that first year in China, I often forgot what little Chinese I knew when forced to use it in the moment. I felt foolish. But we had understood each other more or less. We each said *xie xie* and she closed the door. Strangely, little Yifan had not appeared like he usually did, and I missed his cheery "HELL-o!"

III.

I SPENT THE AFTERNOON reading, drinking tea, and going over my students' work for class the next day while I had the daylight. The rain had let up at times, but the wind was a constant. Things were still rattling around under my window. The first-floor neighbors who lost their awning had tracked it down, and it now lay on the ground of their small courtyard under a heavy circular object, to prevent it from taking flight once again. In mid-afternoon, the noise outside stopped. It became still. Eerily still. I thought the typhoon might be winding down early, but half an hour later it was howling once again. Perhaps the eye of the storm had passed. The wind lashed more fiercely than ever, and the lychee trees along the road behind my building bowed and bent this way and that, their tops swirling violently as if in a blender.

Alice called about this time to check in. They were all fine, she said, just going stir-crazy. She told me she'd call our supervisor in the English Department later to ask about the next day's classes. If I didn't hear from her, we'd be having class. I then called Lily just after four o'clock to ask about dinner. She hadn't thought much about it. The little takeout place near her had opened briefly for lunch, she said, but ran out of food. I asked her again if she wanted to come over. "Will I trouble you?" she asked. No. We then went round a bit over my wanting to come pick her up, but I said I'd be there in half an hour.

Lily had been coming to my literature class that semester, as she planned to take the entrance exam for a graduate program in English. Back at my place, she pulled out that week's reading—William Carlos Williams's short story "The Use of Force"—from her coat pocket and we reviewed the questions she had. Then we started dinner, my version of a Chinese stir-fry. It wasn't very authentic, but Lily was game to see what this foreigner would come up with. The natural light was dimming by this time, and I lit two candles to cook by. Lily stood at the wall by the sink, and we chatted about food in our respective cultures as I chopped and prepared.

It was quite dark by the time everything was ready. We brought the candles into the living room and talked some more as we ate. In the past, Lily said, it was polite for guests not to finish the dishes but to leave leftovers. People were poor and it was not right to eat all they had. But that was changing, as people had more money these days. I asked about Spring Festival and, while we ate the last of my Dove dark chocolate, she told me how her family typically spent the holiday. When she finished, the sound of the wind filled the apartment. She looked out the window at the moving shadows and said, "I think the trees must be sad." Then, after a pause, "I must go now. It's dark."

Again Lily didn't want me to accompany her, but I did. It was a bit hairier out in the dark, and debris covered the roads. I left her at the gate to her building, under the watchful eye of the guard in the little office, who was still there despite the storm. Back home, I sat down to do some writing. My shortwave radio provided a little news on CRI English and Radio Singapore before I changed the station to one with a child singing softly in Chinese. I wrote for a while by candlelight and then turned in. Damrey raged on.

IV.

Morning light came gradually, through dreary gray skies. Lying in bed on this tropical island, I felt just as I had on long-ago winter mornings back in New England when I knew it hadn't snowed quite enough to cancel school. Since Alice never called, I assumed there were classes. I only had one morning class, but my lesson called for something I hadn't been able to print out. I got up and checked: still no power or water.

I rode my bike to class, passing lots of downed branches and debris, as well as several trees that looked as if they had been trampled. But the road behind my house had already been cleared and swept mostly clean, which surprised me. My students arrived on time or just a few minutes late. I think most were glad to get out of the dorms, and only a couple were absent. I told them I had broken my first rule of teaching: Never go to class in the morning without taking a shower. Then

I taught them the word *grungy*. We had most of my planned lesson, but instead of the activity I couldn't print out, I asked them to write a journal entry in response to two questions. *What did you do during the typhoon? How did you feel?*

After class, I dropped off my bag, grabbed my camera, and headed back out for a quick tour of campus on my bike. The morning had been cool, but toward noon the sun poked through and warmth began to return. Everyone was out cleaning up—workers, students, local residents. The last group might have been most effective, old men and women who regularly scoured every surface for firewood before most storms even ended, squirreling it away in storage units or under tarps on the roof. They bundled up twigs and shouldered limbs to shuffle home with. Turns out the bloody jungle was bloody efficient.

Back home, I had more coffee and began reading my students' journal entries. I worked all afternoon, stopping only for a lunch of noodles. Some students wrote about being bored all day in the dorms, while others were excited to have a break from classes. Most struggled a bit to express themselves in the mysteries of English grammar, but the meaning came through. The boredom of being cooped up trumped the boredom of classes for one girl, who concluded, "During the typhoon, I realized that go for classes is not boring but a happinessly thing, and life is the most important thing on the world." They played cards, read books, listened to music, and sang with their classmates. A Lakers fan who had adopted the name Kobe for English class wrote, "The storm was crying loudly. I felt that all the things in the room were trembling. Is [it] that they're frightened like us?"

Some thought of the local villagers and the larger meaning of the storm. A boy called Jarry wrote about himself and his classmates, "We were happy on typhoon coming, but peasants were crying. They [had] no water, no food, and their house might had been damaged. We didn't offer help to them but laughing. What we had learnt in university? Did we just to get scores and take certificates?" A girl called Sweet wrote that she had gained courage from her roommates during the worst of the storm and resolved to be less timid in the future: "Yesterday it was my first time to undergo the typhoon. I hate the bad weather, but on the other hand, I had learnt something that not included in books."

This is what had kept me going during the difficult early months there: my students. From the start, they had been kind, curious, responsible, and enthusiastic. They looked after me in a sense, helping to translate and showing me the best places to shop. In class, they could be formal, applying the rigid and rote ways of learning they were used to. It was in the journals I used for my writing classes that they let their guard down a bit and I came to see them as individuals. Yet their entries about the typhoon could have been written by young people anywhere: a blend of bold and fearful, inspired and reflective. Above all, they had banded together to get through it.

One of my more cerebral students was Enze, a name he invented from the given names of two Chinese leaders he admired, [Zhou] Enlai and [Mao] Zedong. His journal entry pondered the power behind the storm:

> During the typhoon, I was recording the time in my diary. It's the first time I met it. So I was excited. It made me know of Nature. I was writing my feelings. In my opinion, the typhoon was the symbol of strength. It was terrible and so perfect. He destroyed everything just for giving a birth to everything. He blowed so strongly that it seems horrible. I liked it and I laughed and I screamed. I sang in high voice in order to honour it. In my opinion, life could lost in it, but we can't only have bittery [bitterness]. We should think of human's behavior. What we can do is not to defeat the nature, but is cooperating with it.

After dinner that evening, I went back out on my bike as dusk came on. The air was fresh and cool as I rode down past the little supermarket and along East Lake to the village center. People gathered in restaurants that had generators, eating a late dinner or just having a snack. It looked cozy and full of camaraderie. I returned home to quiet and darkness and was in bed by eight. I knew it was too early, that I wasn't really tired, but I wanted to just lie there in the darkness until I fell asleep.

With no electronic distractions, my mind seemed unusually active. I lay awake for a long time, thinking about the past months and all I had experienced. Things were improving: I had a good friend in my fellow expat Alice, a least one

Chinese friend in Lily, and great students. And who knows? Maybe the shouts of "Helloooo!" had no meaning, but were just an example of the goofy Chinese humor I had caught glimpses of. Maybe I had been applying what Lin Yutang called the "stupid honesty" of Westerners, taking everything too literally. I did not know then that I would spend nearly seven more years in China—and it would change my life—but I did feel as if I had somehow turned a corner.

The middle school not far from me held night classes, though without electricity little studying could be done this night. Instead the students sang together in the dark, their voices drifting through my windows. I had just dozed off when I heard my refrigerator kick on and saw a glow on the wall from outside. The boy who lived on the first floor let out a whoop. And just as quickly we were plunged back into darkness. Groans followed. Ten minutes later, the power came back for good. The students in the school cheered and applauded like mad. I got up and stood at the window to listen to them, as lights in the building opposite slowly flickered on and burned blue through the tinted glass. ☯