

## Author's Note to a Canadian Colleague

You may be aware that Norman Bethune was married and divorced twice in his life, both times to the same woman. Before their first marriage, Dr. Bethune promised his future wife that, though their union might make her life “a misery,” it would “never bore” her. Both marriages were childless.

Almost five years after his second divorce, he said farewell to all his lovers and joined the communist cause in China, “making light of travelling thousands of miles” as his great friend, Mao Zedong, put it. Dr. Bethune never anticipated that this would be a road from which he would never return. Nor did he ever imagine that his relationship with China would turn him into an icon.

Dr. Bethune became one of the most idolized foreigners in China, ranked closely behind the four great revolutionary mentors—Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin. And, unlike his previous marriages, his marriage to China blossomed and bore fruit. As a “noble-minded” man, a “pure” man, a man who displayed “an utter devotion to others”—as his great friend famously described him—this Canadian doctor posthumously begot tens of millions of children with his spirit, rather than his semen, at the other end of the earth from the nation of his birth.

We are all Dr. Bethune's children, the madwoman once said to me. Thirty years have passed since that day, and I still tremble at the memory, for she had identified what all members of my generation have in common.

I've long wanted to write the story of Dr. Bethune's children, but I have always hesitated. I knew the facts but felt unable to explain them. I feared that the cruel limits of reality would confine my imagination and restrict my freedom of expression, so I waited, deferring the re-emergence of the past and postponing the realization of what it had meant.

Then I heard that the madwoman had died. This saddened me—I felt sorrow for her son, Yangyang, especially—but it also inspired me. In that moment, reality and imagination became one, and I now knew how to tell the story of Dr. Bethune's children.

Most of us are still alive and living in China, some in positions of great influence. But the three of his children who appear in my novel are exceptions. Two are no longer living, each having died an unnatural death for reasons related to their spiritual father. Yangyang committed suicide just before the end of the dark period in China's past known as the Cultural Revolution, while Yinyin died as one of the “accidental casualties”—this was the government's term—on another grim day, June 4, 1989. I am the only survivor of the three, and I fled China in the early 1990s, taking these memories of pain and loss with me. My journey took me in the opposite direction from that of the legendary doctor. I reached Vancouver via Hong Kong and eventually settled in Montreal, a city Dr. Bethune lived in for eight years. I've been here ever since, inhabiting the past and the present, both of which are haunted by the spectre of Dr. Bethune.

I came across a farewell note in Dr. Bethune's papers addressed to his last lover, the artist Marian Scott. “You see, Pony, why I *must* go to China,” his note begins. And this, to me, is the great mystery in his life—and in the lives of all his children. Why *must* Dr. Bethune go to China? Why *must*? Through my writing I was starting to understand this mystery, which could not be approached in any other way.

My dear colleague, we write in different languages, but this *must* is our shared inspiration. It is sure to stimulate the same surprise in both of us, allowing our imaginations to transcend the boundaries of language and discover a wider and stranger space for literature.

China and Canada have Norman Bethune in common, and *Dr. Bethune's Children* can become

part of both our collective memories. This is the reason I am writing this book, a book for China and Canada to read—and read together.

*A scholar of Chinese history, I am now living in Montreal. My research on education in the Japanese-occupied territories in China prior to World War II has been well received, and some of my newspaper columns have attracted some attention. My Montreal Gazette article on Dr. Bethune, in particular, prompted people to rethink this extraordinary figure, who is fading from popular memory both in Canada and in China.*

*A few months ago, a publisher in Beijing invited me to write Dr. Bethune's biography, saying he wanted an "authentic" biography based on papers I had read in the Norman Bethune archive. This biography was planned for release on November 12, 2009, the seventieth anniversary of Dr. Bethune's death.*

*I accepted the publisher's proposal to work on the biography, but I took exception to his insistence on authenticity. I think there must be bias in every biography. To a great extent, a bias, or even a lie, is a form of authenticity in a work of literature. I pointed out in my Gazette article that the Norman Bethune "archive" can be divided into two parts, one of which is preserved in China and the other here in Canada. The Chinese part is derived from the famous memorial by Mao Zedong, which all the "children of Dr. Bethune" learned to recite. It finds a source in the power of the imagination. Dr. Bethune's Chinese archive is more authentic to Chinese readers than the archive preserved here at McGill University—and it's more meaningful, as well. Dr. Bethune's Chinese papers are part of Chinese history, part of Chinese culture, part of the modern Chinese mindset. Instead of exaggerating the superficial contradictions between the two archives, I believed that, in the biography I was about to write, I should seek to discover the inner links between them, in which a kind of historical authenticity is concealed.*

*Even though my philosophy of history was unfathomable to my publisher, he respected my creative freedom. He anticipated that my bias and the Dr. Bethune archives on which I was about to draw would bring the biography great success.*

*The first two months of preparatory work led to some good results, and I had soon completed a third of the research. I was so satisfied, so gratified, that I was not aware of the coming of winter. But winter did come, as I discovered when I heard my neighbour's moans in the wee hours one night. My neighbour is a gorgeous Lebanese woman. Her boyfriend was transferred to Hong Kong three years before. She visited him in Hong Kong in the summer, and he came to Montreal on vacation in the early winter. They enjoyed making love in the middle of the night, a sensitive time for me, when I was almost ready to fall from fragile slumber into deep sleep. Her moans of pleasure lasted a long time, exciting me physically but depressing me mentally. They evoked in me a dejected homesickness. I bemoaned the absurdity of my existence.*

*I knew that this would continue, night after night, and that the result would always be the same. The next day, all day long, I would be in a daze, incapable of focusing on my research and writing. I tried to reset my circadian clock so that I could get a sound sleep, inured to my neighbours' behaviour, but it didn't work. What I thought of as my neighbours' remarkably robust "combat capability" eventually defeated me. Classic symptoms of depression soon appeared. I began to lose my passion for the biography. I lost my appetite. What's more, I started to suffer auditory and visual hallucinations. One night, not long after I went to bed, a sharp pain shot*

*through the back of my head, towards the right side, followed by another stabbing pain, and then another, even more intense. It was a migraine. Soon my neck got so stiff I couldn't turn my head. I struggled to get up and put on my clothes, and then dragged myself toward the Jewish General Hospital, two kilometres away.*

*Sitting in the Emergency waiting room, I could still hear my neighbours' wild moans, which gave me sadness of a very particular kind in the intervals between the stabs of pain from my migraine. Beset by hot and cold flashes, I felt I was drifting away from the present, away from life, away from myself.*

*I was distracted me from my neighbours' moans when a shabby old woman in ragged clothes walked into the waiting room, dragging a little cart filled with empty bottles and old newspapers behind her. I thought she looked familiar, but I couldn't place her. She walked toward the reception window, as if in her own world, speaking neither English nor French, muttering a slew of what seemed to be profanities at the hospital employee behind the window. The employee didn't even lift her head. And that didn't bother the old woman at all. She turned back and went on cursing to the air for a while before dragging her little cart away.*

*"She loiters here every day, that mad old woman," I heard the employee explain in a loud voice through the window to an approaching patient. Another throbbing pain assaulted the back of my head, again on the right-hand side. I strained to turn my neck to look towards the entrance of the waiting room, where I'd last seen the old woman as she walked out.*

*It couldn't be. Was I imagining it? I closed my eyes in shock. I realized I wasn't asking myself this question. I was asking Dr. Bethune, who had just appeared before my eyes. His spectre had started visiting me two months earlier and would look at me with a lost expression, making me hesitate between belief and doubt. I always closed my eyes.*

*Now an intense impulse squeezed the pain of out my head. I wanted to talk to him, to tell him everything that we, his children, had experienced, everything to do with the impact he had had on our lives. It had been nearly forty years since I first heard his name, and this was an impulse I had never felt before. Yes, there he was in front of me. I could see his expression clearly, even with my eyes closed. He looked so much like the portrait stuck on the wall of my elementary school classroom. "Can you tell me where I've seen that woman before?" I asked softly.*

*This was the first time I'd addressed him directly, in the second person. I had known about him for forty years, and I had always felt a connection with him, but I had never felt as close to him as I did at that moment. Using the second person gave me a deepened sense of intimacy. I was excited, thrilled. A miracle followed: the pain in my head stopped, just like that. Memories of the past flooded in. I had so many things I wanted to say, to tell him, but I wanted to address him directly. Biography or some other form of writing about him suddenly seemed so distanced, so inauthentic. I had to speak to Dr. Bethune face to face, to write to him as you. Only in this direct, personal manner could I present our mysterious yet magnificent relationship.*

*I walked out of the waiting room, full of gratitude. My steps were light. I felt a sense of clarity. I had changed completely from the man who came into the waiting room. I wanted to get home as quickly as possible.*

*I just wanted to get back to my apartment, turn on the computer, open up a new file, and save my memories on the hard drive. I wanted to start talking to you.*

*It is November 18, 2007. So many years have passed. "Dear Dr. Bethune. . . ."*

## A Foreign Country

Dear Dr. Bethune, I have just returned from the hospital. On my way home, I swung into the supermarket at the corner of Côte-des-Neiges and Queen Mary.

You're probably wondering what a supermarket is. There will be many more unfamiliar words that may be obstacles in the way of your understanding my story. I will do my best to avoid such obstacles, but there's no way I can avoid all of them. I've been wondering if I should stop and provide a simple definition every time such a word appears, but I think this would be impractical, disrupting my train of thought and our conversation. In fact, most of these unfamiliar words will not stand in the way of your understanding. And etymology will guide you. A supermarket, for example, is obviously a kind of market. Context should help, too. To make it easier for you, I will make a list of all the new words, a custom dictionary you can consult if you get stuck.

It has been nearly seventy years since your departure, which is long enough for a language to change dramatically, not to mention a city. Yes, I live in Montreal now, but it is certainly not the same Montreal as the city you lived in. The buildings, the streets, the residents' complexions and languages, people's memories and desires—all are very different from the ones you once knew.

The differences between the two cities with the same name have also been accentuated by your departure and my arrival. Nearly seventy years ago, when you left Montreal, you had become a well-known figure here, but you had not gained national recognition, let alone international fame. You became a legend in your home country because you left and never came back again. And my arrival in Montreal bore witness to the legend you had created. Montreal is a city of migrants, and I am one of the myriad foreigners who live an expatriate life here. Though one of many, I am still special, because of you. I came here because of you, because of your presence in China, because of your experience in China as a foreigner. Sometimes I feel I am just your reflection, wavering on the river of time. Were this city not your city, I would not be here now—no way. I remember the farewell note you sent to your “Pony,” the note you wrote after boarding the passenger steamer bound for China. I can highlight our connection by imitating your sentence structure. “You see, Dr. Bethune, why I *must* live in your city?” I am one of the countless children you begot in China. You are the father we all keep searching for.

I sometimes wonder if I am the only one who came to this city because of you. The special connection between us often makes me imagine your life in this city—operating on a patient, delivering a political speech, painting a self-portrait, even making love to your anxious wife or one of your various lovers. And I imagine you reclining on a comfortable sofa reading *Red Star Over China* by Edgar Snow. (Who now remembers Edgar Snow?) I know it is this book that stimulated your interest in my country and inspired you to join the revolutionaries trapped in the barren northwest after the Long March. I imagine how you pictured your life as foreigner in my country. Did the China you had imagined conflict with the China you found in reality? You were reborn in my imagination. This is very significant to me, since it was you that made me come to this city. One day, when I was sitting in a bookstore, the expression on your face as you were packing up to leave Montreal appeared to me. You certainly did not know that you would never come back to Montreal. No worry or anxiety showed on your face. I imagined you putting the famous typewriter into a shabby crate.

Dear Dr. Bethune, let me tell you why I went to that supermarket. It wasn't just to make an ordinary purchase. I rushed to the dairy shelf and reached down for a two-litre bottle of whole milk. I checked the expiration date on the seal and then walked toward a cashier. I will tell you why this ordinary purchase mattered a lot to me. Before writing to you, I have to admit, I was not

in a good frame of mind. In fact, I was feeling disappointed. My disappointment had nothing to do with the purchase itself. I felt disappointed because . . . I will tell you the reason in good time. I believe that you will understand why, which will again demonstrate the special connection I have with you and your city.

I am writing to you, finally, like a volcano about to erupt. I have so many things to tell you. I need to transfer them from my brain to my computer. There's another term that you have never heard before. I am not sure whether you can guess from the Chinese translation what this is. The literal translation of computer into Chinese is "electrical brain." You're probably still confused. OK, you can think of it as a typewriter. Of all the possessions you left to posterity, your typewriter is the one I find most touching. As a foreigner in China, you could not live without your typewriter. Through it you could communicate with the world far away from you and overcome your loneliness. The typewriter understood your language and thoughts. In fact, only your typewriter could understand. You can think of this "electrical brain," this new machine I am using to talk to you as a kind of typewriter. (By the way, the phrase "new machine" reminds me of the substitute teacher of the Physiological Hygiene class I took in high school, which is one of the stories I want to tell you.)

About an hour and a half ago, I sat down at my desk and switched on my "typewriter" to write to you. Why is it necessary to switch it on? This phrasal verb hints at the difference between my "typewriter" and the one you used when you were in China on the front line of the war against Japan. You lived in China for about twenty months, the loneliest time in your life, as I now know. You wrote many letters to your comrades and friends in Canada on your typewriter, but you only received a few replies. You also used the typewriter many times, to write to your great friend, our Chairman Mao, as I learned from his well-known memorial to you. The memorial also mentions that he replied to you just once. Just once! And he never knew whether you received his reply or not. Did you get it?

Yes, my "typewriter" needs to be switched on to function. Now that I'm writing to you, I realize I will be more disappointed even than you were, because it is impossible for me ever to get your reply. I want to write down all of the things that we children of Dr. Bethune experienced. I know, had it not been you—had you not gotten on the passenger steamer in Vancouver on January 5, 1938, had you not walked into that historically significant cave dwelling at the end of March, had you not been sent to the front line in May, had you not cut your finger in November of the following year, had you not departed from the world due to infection, had your death not startled your great friend, and had he not published an eight-hundred-word memorial a month after your death—then we, your offspring, would not have experienced all the things we have experienced. My life would not have been like this. Our lives would not have been like this.

You may still be wondering about my "typewriter," which can only be operated after it is powered up, switched on. At the loneliest time in your life, electricity was hundreds of miles away. This was your own choice. You chose privation over civilization, believing that your choice would prove to be the road to progress. I know that when you were in China, you performed surgery under kerosene lighting. Your eyes started aging, and despite the light of your lamp, more and more of the world fell into shadow.

You may also be surprised to learn that my "typewriter" has a certain degree of intelligence, which is why it is called an electrical *brain*. With its intelligence, my "typewriter" knows that I am writing a letter now. A considerate query just popped up on its screen. (Yes, this "typewriter" has a screen, like a television, another device you may not have heard of before). The question on the screen is: "Are you writing a letter?"

“Yes, I’m writing a letter,” I tell my “typewriter,” “but it’s to Dr. Bethune, an outstanding surgeon, a staunch revolutionary, an unsuccessful artist who kept on pursuing women without ever finding love, a fighter who couldn’t communicate with his comrades, a loner who kept on writing letters but never got a reply, a foreigner who wanted to go home but had to die before his dream could come true.” A sudden wave of emotion makes me pause. “He passed away almost seventy years ago. For me, he’s a spectre that appears every now and then. How can you help me write my letter?”

Dear Dr. Bethune, I can’t follow chronological order in my narrative of the past. I can’t complete a true biography of your life just by using the papers in your archive. All the things I want to tell you are fragments of memory, some of them vague, like tombstones on which the epitaphs have mostly been effaced. All I can do is present my memories in fragmentary form, hoping that, as a great surgeon, you will know how to suture the pieces together into a life, my life, which represents the lives of all your children.

Dear Dr. Bethune, we both settled in a foreign country. I know I will die in your country as a foreigner, just as you died in mine. Your death was a big deal, “more weighty,” as your great friend emphasized, than Mount Tai, while mine will be as light as a feather. But, no matter how weighty our deaths were or will be, death is our common homeland, the place we will ultimately meet.