

## **Lao Tzu at the border.**

By Christopher Kelen

for my brother, Steve  
with thanks to Chad Hansen

Endless, the series of things without name  
On the way back to where there is nothing.  
*Tao Te Ching*, Chapter 14

One of the privileges of fiction – usually too obvious to mention – is that of not having to tell the truth. In fact it's more than a privilege, it's a responsibility. If all you do in a story is tell the truth, tell that is what is already known and verifiable, then you don't have a story at all. Or rather you might have a journalist's story, but you don't have a story in the fictional sense.

Is the writer of fiction dishonest then? One is inclined to hedge the question. Dishonest is a word that carries a heavy moral load and it implies a certain amount of black and white distinction. When you say someone's been dishonest, you're already implying that they might have been honest. In other words you're already in the realm of the hypothetical, which is exactly where fiction happens to be. Rather than chase the tail any further, let's just say that it's not necessary to consider the writer of fiction as dishonest, and that if one *were* to consider the writer of fiction in that light then the same pall would need to be cast over anyone who had ever imagined things as other than they are--would need to be cast over anyone who had ever used what the Romantics called the faculty of the imagination.

The hope of the fiction maker is usually to get to deeper truths by portraying people we haven't *exactly* met, events which haven't *quite* happened. The idea that truth is 'layered' is one many black and white thinkers would like to resist. It is nevertheless fundamental to the principle and to the pleasure of fiction.

How, as Danté put it, to furnish the beautiful lie revealing the truth? The methods are many and various and these are what the art of fiction is all about. One such method is anachronism: putting together places and events which shouldn't or couldn't under normal – true – circumstances, have come together. The cannons in

*Hamlet*. Shakespeare was happy to meet the historical contexts of his dramas half way. Perhaps in doing so he was merely acknowledging that in practice this is difficult to avoid. We are creatures of our own times and conditions; when we touch the past we can't help but remake it in our own image, or at least to some extent...

In the dim mists of the past where record runs into legend, one can perhaps be forgiven for running the characters of one dynasty or kingdom into those, from our point of view, proximate. When one deals with characters who may already be fictional or mythical, characters whose deeds are done and yet remain open to interpretation, then one's licence is even further enlarged. On the basis of this train of fictional reasoning, I hope that the reader will indulge the liberties I have taken with the truth below.

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Legend has it Lao Tzu wanted to leave China. It's not difficult to speculate as to why this may have been so. He might have had any number (or any combination) of good reasons to get out of the Middle Kingdom. The difficult job for philosophy's chroniclers is to narrow his range of possible motives. If we knew with any certainty why it was the great sage felt he had to leave China, then light might be cast on many of the original mysteries of Daoism, a system of belief widely regarded as inscrutable by observers east and west.

Such at least was the resignedness of the conventional wisdom on Lao Tzu and the *Tao Te Ching* until the recent discovery of the still little known text you see translated below. The torn and incomplete scroll is purportedly in the hand of one of the border guards who had been expressly charged with the duty of preventing the sage's leaving China, but who apparently was persuaded to his doctrine in the course of his encounter. Even since the publication of this fragment there remain scholars who continue to doubt the historical veracity of some details. Still others maintain the old skepticism that there ever lived a sage named Lao Tzu. I leave it to the reader to judge whether tales of this nature may be constructed from fragments of truth and figments far otherwise, or whether rather their verisimilitude gives credence to the belief they inspire.

Lao Tzu you'll recall is famous for a great many sayings, these not necessarily in the four character style of later received wisdom. The first of these which I transliterate here

*dao ke dao fei chang dao*

*ming ke ming fei chang ming*

one might regard as the most translated – or rather the most widely interpreted, the most contentious – lines of thought which ever came from one language into another. Lao Tzu – whether you regard him as historical personage or confabulation – was certainly a character of great profundity and as well a character of profound influence on that fifth and more of the world's population which has for the last two and a half millennia found itself under the spell of a 'Confucian Heritage'. As in the case of Jesus and Buddha, we have to guess at the man and the life hidden behind the text and the interpretation and the doctrine and dogma that came after. Even a man of Lao Tzu's originality and insight can be reduced to cliché of the desk calendar variety: 'the road of a thousand *li* begins with a single step.'

This is a story about the single most difficult step Lao Tzu took on his journey out of China. It is told in the voice of one charged with the duty of preventing the sage from taking that step.

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The Old Master (Lao Tzu) had wanted to leave China because of the unbearable pressure brought upon him by the moralists (Confucians). We were sent to the pass for this reason, that we might guard it bodily against his passing, and that, schooled in the truths of the Great Master (Confucius or Kungzi), we might gently dissuade him from passing beyond the world, and at once learn how he had fallen into error. We were easily guided and provisioned *en route* because disciples of the tall man (Confucius) were everywhere. In the kingdoms we passed through there seemed to be few men who had not sat at the master's knee.

Our mission was to return to the capital with the sage or failing that, with a record of his wisdom set down in his own hand. The Old Master was long known to

have magical powers; who could say how he might evade us? Though he was rumoured rarely to speak, his oratorical powers were legend. Who had met him? The tall man had, or there were none to contradict him if he said he had, and he did say so. We brothers had been chosen for the task of apprehending the Old Master because we had long training and experience in the arts of magic and in resisting evasive speech and seductive inducements, and because as brothers we thought with one mind. When one of us slept the other would be wide awake. No one could slip between us when we were charged with the duty of watching. Our orders were the emperor's. The emperor was unsure how dangerous or how valuable this man might be, to him, or indeed to someone else. He must be watched, not lost. The emperor had samples of the sage's calligraphy and would trust nothing written in another hand to represent the sage's truth. There had at that time recently been many famous cases of forgery. Our motive, as you must know, was pain of death should we fail. Should we succeed, the eternal gratitude of the kingdom would be ours. The wisdom of the Old Master would be preserved, harnessed for the benefit of the empire.

Days and months we had followed him – staying out of sight and out of earshot where possible – as he lumbered through the western provinces, *li* by slow *li* on his laborious ox. His progress – and ours – had been erratic, confused. Often he would appear ahead of us when we were sure we had moved into the lead and when we were sure that he had no way around our path. Was his progress magical – like of that of the sacred tortoise in the western legend – or was it merely the case that at his prodigious age the seer had an intimate knowledge of these parts which were foreign to us? Had he been in these strange places before, even in remote antiquity? Perhaps it was the case that he never slept. But then neither, between us, did we. Or did we? A thousand years might pass in the blinking of an eye, might it not? His hours were not the ones we knew.

At last we came to the pass he could not avoid: the way from the world you might think it, but to the people we encountered on our way there, the pass was just a rumour. What they saw on their western horizon, or never saw but had heard told, was a wall of stone none passed, an impenetrable mountain fastness.

A maze of ridges leads to the pass. But the pass itself is unmistakable. It cannot be missed should you, that is, survive through the maze of stone to come to it. Years it

might take you and the only noodles you'd eat would be the ones you'd carried with you on your back. Time and again, tracks turn back on themselves, away from the only true passage. There's no way around the pass itself though. Not even Lao Tzu can bluff his way through a solid rock face. The ridges rise so high above us the sun can only be seen for a few minutes each day.

To the pass we came and there we waited.

Picture the scene if you will. We are within hours of him, ahead now, but alert always, having lost his trail so many times before. Should we lose him here, should he pass us... – but it is impossible! – then we must follow him into the perilous void beyond. Our fears are founded in what no one knows. Such is the heart/mind with which we attend what will be.

The Old Master comes sidling up to the border on his fat ox, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Squat, slow steps of the beast, like he's a peasant and he does this every day. As if he were making his way to a neighbour's farm. But this man is no farmer, and our fear is that the world is about to be broken, its limit taken down. There was no silk road then, by land or by sea. China was the world, you can imagine how difficult it is leave the world. Remember the cautionary tales? O soul come back! The north is full of ice, the sea boils in the south, monsters mountain high to the east and in the west the moving sands stretch away for thousands of *li*. These were tales told to keep you at home, as if there were in every direction a limit to what humans might endure.<sup>1</sup> Even since then very few have passed beyond the borders of the kingdom.

Indeed, we were at one of the limits foretold in the poem. It was thunder's chasm to which we had come, the chasm in the west, the eyrie of certain malevolent deities, or so we had been schooled by all who directed our steps, all that is except for the Old Master. To him we had not yet spoken. Yet neither could we believe that he had been unaware of our movements behind and before him. The moment of the encounter was upon us.

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<sup>1</sup> The poem referred to is Chu Tzu's 'The Summons of the Soul'.

Now we know there are other worlds, we didn't know then. The word 'border' is misleading here because this moment is the invention.

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The Old Master comes slowly through the pass. These eyes the eyes of a farmer, an ox. But we know, he knows. He sees us, sees through us. When I say 'us', I do not mean that he saw us both. Our strategy was to avoid that possibility by never appearing before him together. He was to think we were the one man, the one guard. We were to intimidate him with our vigilance, our ferocious mien, by the glint of halberd, by the thickness of our beards. So we were commanded and so the empire would appear invincible. Vain hope that was! Before ever we set out from the city, he must have known we were brothers, known the story of our family back beyond its beginnings, known all.

The first words, do we trust our recollection of them? We had been warned about the 'wordless teaching'. The first words are ours. They are as commanded. Do we understand even them?

'Great Sage, Old Master. Kungzi says you are a great teacher. Mozi says great teachings must not be wasted. The emperor commands us that you must not leave this world without recording your *dao*. And so – though we are worthless and your way is great – yet we must detain you.'

'So the kingdom has got underneath me.'

We were prepared for tricks, his riddle could not move us. We were silent till he spoke again.

'Fine words demanding words, these.'

'You must write your *dao* before you pass. So we are commanded.'

'The way that can be told is not...'

We ask him if it his intention to pass beyond us, but he will not answer. Which way is he headed? But again, 'The way that can be told is not...'

'What is it you mean when you say this?'

'The names that can be named are not...'

'Can you write this, in your own hand?'

‘The names that can be named...’

He was, after these first moments, convivial with us, disarmingly so. Nothing I write now can capture his manner. He spoke of the things about us, with us. What he said made easy sense. He spoke of the road as any wayfarer might, of the way he and we had come. That night he cooked a tiny fish in our honour, mine or my brother’s, I can’t remember. Whenever we asked him to write, the riddling resumed as it had begun. Or, it seemed like riddling to us. It seemed to us he wanted to go on and that there was nowhere ahead. We thought he was weak in the head. He said, ‘In *dao* the only motion is returning.’ Then why should he set his face into the nothing, into deaf stone?

But then he was our friend, companion of the way, a man as I am, more knowledgeable in the world, having come farther, yet a man. A fund of stories. There were times we laughed loudly in the first days. We did not mean to show disrespect, there were times we thought he was joking, had to be.

He would have written nothing had we not insisted upon the gravity of our commission. And yet one feels now there was no need of insisting on what he already knew. He wrote for us a line at a time. After each line we would have questions. We wanted to get to the truth of his meaning. But each question – each word we spoke – led us further from... truth, from where it was we wished to be. How much must we bring back to the emperor? How many characters would suffice? How long is a man’s *dao*? Ridiculous, all ridiculous questions. What choice had we but to pursue them?

Of course the document left at the border consists of what was written in the hand of the sage, none of the dialogue was recorded until now<sup>2</sup>. Nor were the comments and explanations, the interpolations, unwillingly given by the Old Master.

The talk and the scribble, the fire under the pot, the pot filled miraculously as if out of air. There were I think months of this. At least the ice grew round us, the ice melted away. For weeks at a time we would feel our knowledge growing. But what was this knowledge we were coming into now? Words and more words.

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<sup>2</sup> Editor’s note: We now, in what survives as the *Tao Te Ching*, have only fragments of what was undoubtedly a much longer work in antiquity.

‘Words and things, words and things,’ he would roar at us. ‘You wish to know why it is I avoid the use of words? Words regulate the roar of things! How could that be wise or well? Things that can be spoken are already said...’ And so on. It would not be possible for me to recover the discussion in any detail. Expect from this account no more than some of the memorable points of the encounter, delivered by one whose understanding is yet – and shall remain – feeble.

Words I think he meant were only as useful as what they could bring about in the world. Knowledge as we understood it was only of words. *Dao*, his *dao* was what had brought him. How could that be spoken? A memory or a set of directions is not the way. The way is in steps left behind. To look for it is to seek the beams of the burnt house in its ashes.

And what could he hope to achieve by standing here talking to us through a blizzard, pretending with us, I now understand, that two were one, when he knew all along. He was a shrinking man, a man dwarfed by his years. There seemed to be less of him each day. We were young then, our halberds were heavy, we were several times his size, or so we felt. Why should he stand here with us dealing out words when words were nothing to him, when only – so he schooled us – only a practical purpose could justify their use?

We had furnished him with inkstone, brush, paper. A folding table and stool we provided for him. Of course we kept the chapter he had written each day. And yet, many times we imagined we would be best to start again. Had we left the pages with him, would he have destroyed them, left them to the tearing winds? This was a risk we could never run, because doom would overtake us should we return empty handed. Besides, the seer was so frail: were he not, as rumoured, immortal, then any day might be his last, and likewise any stroke of the brush. All that he wrote was precious, the palace scholars would interpret it later.

Truly we believed to begin that this place would mark his passage from the world. Daily we expected that he would vanish before our eyes. Would he turn to ashes? Would he rise and fly from us, fold silver wings high over the dark cliffs? These were

mere fantasies and yet each of these notions was right in its way. He would go and with it his *dao*. What if the palace scholars were to sift through his words and whisper to the emperor that the *dao* was not there, was lost, would have to be cut from our flesh? And so daily we begged him to write what he meant. And so daily he obliged us.

So slight and yet speaking, he would shield his eyes as if the sun were there, as if he could see through the walls of stone which held us. He would shuffle his feet. Later, when we brothers spoke we could confirm with each other, that listening to him, we felt we were always looking at him sideways, we were always shifting our footing to follow his meaning. It retreated as we approached, *dao* – what *dao* did he mean?

*Dao*. Where was it? It was everywhere. How could we follow it? What difference would it make? How can you follow where you have already been? You might as well follow the air, follow nothing. Is *dao* something or nothing, a thing or the source of things. Every day we placed upon him the same demand to interpret. Every day the same answer, ‘I’ve said what I can; there’s nothing more. To mystify it increases mystery. You need to know *dao* to interpret *dao*.’

‘*Dao, dao*. Is it one or are there many *daos*?’ he would say. ‘How did you get here? That was only one way. Where you will go is also only one way. But that is a way you cannot follow – because you cannot miss it. You have many to choose from, but none is constant except the one you will choose.’

This we could confirm with him, so duplicitous were we. ‘Through the maze there is a way.’

‘Then how is it you did not see me come? Was there one step that brought you, brought me?’ He rarely answered with questions like this. ‘Each of us comes by a different way, such is our love. Your family field is in weeds while you stay.’

‘But my brother...’ I might have said. I said nothing. Whether in questions or in answers, in bold statements or in asides, his words – it seemed to us then – had many meanings, and so his meaning seemed obscure, wise beyond our ken, wide of our understanding. When we shook our heads he knew where we were lost. ‘More than one is never none,’ he would say.

Could there be an unchanging *dao*? He confided in us when we asked that he hoped to meet another sage, a mortal/immortal man of a thousand lives – not a man – but one who has been before, will come again. He was worried that there might be impostors. Might he himself be one? When, in the first days, we had told him of our mission, he had asked us why we would risk everything to return to face judgement, when here we were safe, free? Were we not satisfied with who, with what, we were? Here we had paused in time and nothing could harm us. It was obvious to us then our work was unfinished, our mission yet incomplete. Would we know more if we travelled back? Weren't we learning more just by going nowhere? One felt clumsy to argue at times like this.

But we never ceased to dog him with questions about *dao*. To these he spoke of presence, of the here-and-now. 'There isn't even one step is there? I catch the arrow in my hand. That's what words do. Do they? Can they? Where is the illusion? Heaven's way is like the bending of the bow.'

And we would ask again after his meaning. And patiently, so patiently, he would return with, 'Always more words you're after. You want to understand, but you want words and words lead you further and further into error.'

We would protest at this that we wished for the true words, the words that would guide us. That, he would say, was not their *dao*. Where were the words once they were spoken? It was at such cues as this we would ask him to write. Then the stool and the table would be prepared for him. And still the sideways glance, still we would shift our ground, as we listened, as we read.

Where were words once gone? In other minds, in other mouths, so we thought. Were they not constant in their function between us? The border – this border between world and not – he would tell us it could be forward half a *li*, back some paces. But we would look into the solid rock and nod our heads, uncomprehending. Yet he went on insisting his only purpose with words and names was to make things, to make things happen. Should we abandon names then? He never said so but told us to abandon knowing. How could we know how not to know? He merely raised his eyebrows until that seemed to be all there was of him. 'To know when one does not know is best,' he said. We felt like fools then. Still, we would ask him how things should be, what to do, how to do it. But everything 'depended' with him. Without circumstances there could

be no way. Words and the ways they told could never be immutable. We had been asking him as we might have asked the tall man. We expected tricks – irony, paradox – where the words merely were what they were. Inadequate perhaps, but with no more magic than any words have. We had tricked ourselves with expecting more. It was what was not there that confused us.

Even the words on the paper he gave us, he told us would shift with the wind. We stared hard at them then, as if our eyes could fix them. The words meant what they meant when he meant them, but in another eye, another mouth, surely they would mean otherwise. How could words mean in a town or a palace how they meant here in this cleft between rocks, between worlds. The words he said were less constant than the sky. We would look up when he spoke thus and see that high above the cliffs the pale firmament was all in changes.

It is true there were times he would write in the rain and the characters would be washed from the paper just as soon as they were formed... I was ashamed to admit that I could remember nothing of what was lost in this way... The sun would dry these sham traces of thought. How inconstant the world we would think then. How much less constant the way of words, the naming of the world and all it consists in.

We were dizzy now, dizzy with the arguments, with his sideways bird glancing at us. Sometimes we felt we were becoming birds ourselves. *Dao* was something we might peck at. We knew then that knowledge was how to do, neither more nor less. We had not yet learned how to need not to do, how to abandon ourselves, by abandoning knowledge. And yet we had begun to know how little we knew. The lessening had begun.

Then he was gone, vanished as we knew he would. But neither of us saw the vanishing. Too simple a paradox. Or was he gone? We must wait. And in the waiting time we persuaded ourselves this was a trick, or rather that it wasn't, but that he would return, that his absence would then make sense, that if we began down the mountain through the maze of stone that he would be standing back at the pass, his bird's head tilting us sideways to listen, dizzying us with his words. So we believed, so we

imagined. He could not have gone on so he must have gone back. Did we believe that? Was he with us still, now merely invisible?

We waited a full month and then we finally resigned ourselves to our fate. We would return to the capital with all of his words. By these we would be judged. Heroes or criminals we would be, or both by turns, who could tell? The scholars would know, so we reasoned. If Lao Tzu were back in the capital then we would be returning with a record of his *dao*; others might pursue him for whatever detail or interpretation we had failed to glean. All would be well. If not, well, had we not proved that the kingdom was big enough to contain him?

And so we started down the mountain, just as we had come, together, alone. We remembered the turnings of the maze though it had been an age since our arrival. We knew though that the way back is never the same, for instance it's always more rapid returning. But everything was familiar. Or so it seemed, before we knew we were lost.

We had come without losing our way. And now... Was that because his spirit had guided us before, was now leading us astray? Months had passed now since the pass, since our setting out. Was he back at the court, back at the pass? Was our failure – were even our deaths – old news? And then, when we had given ourselves up for lost, we found the tracks of his ox again. The tracks led us from the mountain. When we came out of the maze at last the village at the entrance was no longer there. Instead, we were met with a strange writing neither of us recognized. Was this his spell, the magic of which we had heard but never seen practised?

And now, out of the mountains, we see the sun is setting in the east. We gasp at this demonstration of the power of *dao*. He has turned the world around. Now we are walking on the floor of heaven. In the villages and towns we come to, no one can understand us. Nor can we follow them. Have so many centuries passed since we went into the mountain? Should we stop to learn the language? In every place it is different. The people too have changed. Their skins are different, everything. Perhaps time has passed backwards; people eat with their hands.

A full further month of travel into stranger and stranger lands it takes us to know what we hadn't known, to recognize how simple *dao* is, his, ours. He hasn't turned the world round, only us. East is still east, west west. Our *dao* is onward, direction the same. West is where we've been headed this last month and more. No one will praise us or doom us, no one will know us. We are in India. His sideways bird manner had turned us around.

And so we begin to ask ourselves, what kind of limit was this border. You cannot go on forever to keep up with one man. Had we not chosen this place thinking it already was something we had made it: border or end of the world?

When we come to the court of the Buddha, the Old Master is already gone.

We sat down at the feet of the Great One. That is where I have left my brother. Long before the scriptures ever came to China, he was disciple, bodhisatva, arhat.

I went on. I have not found the Old Master, I no longer pretend I am pursuing him. Some of his words we left at the border. Some I have with me still. The terrain on both sides of the border is much the same, I now know. We had found our way out of the maze following the tracks of his ox on into the west.

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What am I but a chronicler? I am enrolled in the classes of Epicurus now, an old man and much younger than me. I have learned of the soul, of mind's quiet. I spend my life finding words when I should find my way from them... I am pursuing...what? The *dao*, not *the*... a disappearance. There are bodies and there is a void. The soul's knowledge is sensation. Should I dedicate myself to passing beyond this limit? Nothing comes from nothing, nothing passes there. I will stay here in the city of the goddess.

*Editor's note:*

The last fragments of the journal are mere poetry:

the city is white, of heaven torn

the dawn pink marble

the moon's horns, the star held

I have lost count of the sandals that brought me

sturdy hours I spend in love of wisdom, of the getting there, *dao*

the atoms in every thing; the soul, its stillness

but we have wives here too

from birth yet pleasure

ever dissolving

constant, inconstant as the wine dark sea

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The final fragment breaks off here.

The translator notes the notorious unreliability of certain of the terms, their inadequacy to deal with the nuances of classical thought. Foremost among these inadequate terms are philosophy and truth. To replace them with more effective glosses would however have the effect of rendering the text unintelligible to the modern reader, and so they are retained.