Flight and fall of the free will

Once, playing in a snowbank, the boy found himself looking into the silver eyes of a squirrel. Years later, the squirrel lay half-conscious on the ground, the thick coat of which made the gray winter drabness more obtrusively gray. The squirrel's eyes, black eyes, like seven pairs of winter's stars stared at him.

The block before he had seen four and following his father's head to trace the features of the broken wing, he would, in the process, see the reddish down of the shrunken belly.

Finally, he stopped. The squirrel seemed half with a small stick he took from the side of the street. Whether or not the bird judged him disapprovingly from the after-life, he could not tell. The eyes revealed only shadows.

Had this squirrel entered the night's snowstorm, leaving its home and venturing into the darkness, finally succumbing after a long journey? Or had it calmly surrendered to the bitter cold ever one morning bright with ice, falling to the icy river, and from there to the branches that now fell from the trees? In his afternoon, drifiting to sleep as he watched water drip from the icicles outside his window, the boy dreamed he was such a bird. But he could not remember, upon waking, the specifics — only the uncertainty of how closely connected flight was to the human will.

Once, sking the crone of snow from the top, had run into the daughter of a middle-aged man who was once his teacher. He thought the song that once only let its own heart sing.

The boy's mother told him that the man had suffered a nervous breakdown, divorcing his wife. This had made her search for greater things in the world, to see things as they were.

Thinking years later about what he had seen, the boy — now a young man — wonders about such a choice, for he now faces many choices, regarding the practical and philosophical aspects of life. He doesn't make one of them.

What makes us human, he says to himself, is our freedom of choice. This is our freedom of flight. If I cannot choose, if I cannot act, then I am no longer human, he says. Yet there seem to be many pressures, especially the pressures of the force that makes his youth, to do that, to use the external circumstance, to perhaps guide his life, to control his actions.

Omniously, long ago, the piano teacher had made a conscious choice in marrying her wife. Yet the even so casual separation of the piano teacher that had marked the fragmentation of eternal silence — barely audible. It was the silence that had brought their lives together. When the young man walks along the icy river, he thinks of Jesus fasting and being deep in the soul. He thinks back to his dreams. He wonders: Did the morning squirrel ever struggle to fly, or did it fall passively?

If life means the freedom of choice, and death means its extinction, why do we settle for passing our days in that half-way station of inertia, of indolence, of inertia?

Column/Thomas H. Huang

Flight and fall of the free will

By Thomas H. Huang

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