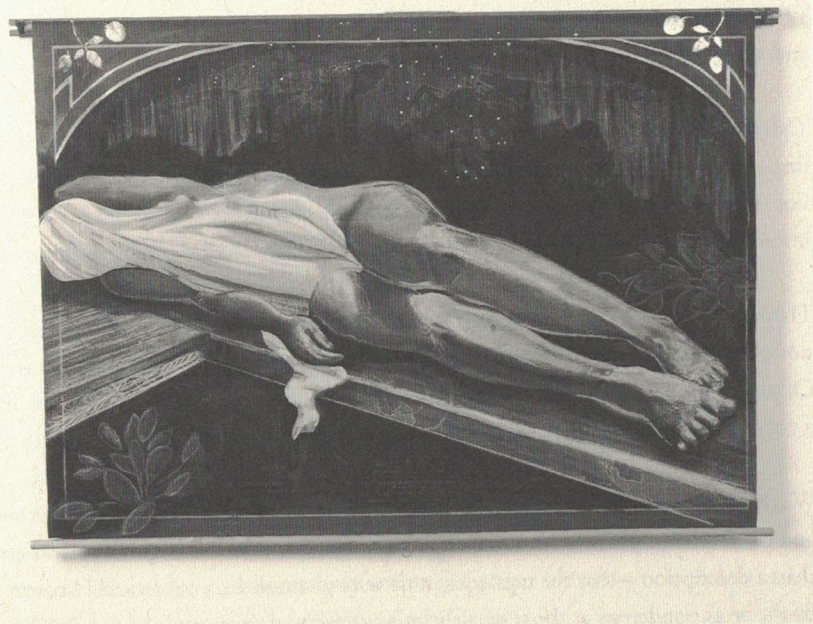




Aino

THE JADE DRAGON

Tim Lehnert

"You really like the sweet and sour, don't you, Mr. O'Hare? That your favourite."

"Sure is, Julian," said my father, rubbing his belly.

Julian Wong, the Jade Dragon's proprietor, always recalled my dad's gustatory particulars. Wong would also produce a Molson for my father before we'd even opened our menus, and inquire about a cocktail for the lady. My mother, who rarely drank, would order a tropical, primary-colored concoction, and this would place her in a relaxed and giddy mood. She never challenged my father's dominion over the Jade Dragon's bill of fare, or his ability to order on the family's behalf.

At the time, there were no other 'ethnic' restaurants in town, and only a handful of fast-food and family places. We frequented none of them, as my father judged my mother's cooking superior to their offerings. That left the Jade Dragon as the go-to place for a meal out: its maroon banquettes, oversized tasselled menus, and miscellaneous South Seas flourishes representing a touch of the Orient in small-town Ontario.

Yin to Mr. Wong was Mrs. Wong, who stood at the cash register near the restaurant's front door, answering the phone and dispensing take-out orders. She was a small woman, and more traditional in her dress than was Mr. Wong. Unlike her husband, she was not expansive, and rarely made eye contact. She would look down at a customer's bill, announce its total severely, and demand "Cash or credit?" This was the 1980s, and the customer's 'charge card,' along with the carbon-papered slip, would be placed in the machine, and with great effort, and considerable satisfaction, Mrs. Wong would grasp the device's black plastic handle and drag it from one side to the other, leaving the imprint.

On the ride home from the restaurant, my father would imitate Mr. Wong's accent. When we were young, my sister and I thought these performances were hilarious, "flied lice" and such. My mother, however, frowned on these impressions—her tropical drink having by such time worn-off—and she would tut-tut my father. Once I became an adolescent, it was embarrassing that my father found such things amusing.

"If Mr. Wong is your big buddy, how come you make fun of him?" I asked.

"I'm just kidding around," said my father. "I admire the guy, he came here without a pot to piss in, now look at him. Guy works seven days a week. Nobody does that anymore." In my father's books, not only was Julian Wong a helluva nice guy and a brilliant cook, he was also a smart businessman and a paragon of discipline and

industry. I found Julian Wong irritating: he was a suck-up who validated my father's self-satisfied conservatism.

At that age, I was very taken with honesty and authenticity, or at least my perceptions of such. "The Jade Dragon doesn't even serve real Chinese food," I told my father. "It's what Canadian people *think* Chinese food is."

"Well, it says 'Chinese Food' on the sign, and Julian Wong looks plenty Chinese to me," my father replied.

"Fortune cookies are fake. They don't exist in China."

"You seem to enjoy them plenty. And we're not in China, so don't worry about it."

When I was sixteen, the Jade Dragon and its proprietor fell further in my estimation. I took the train to Toronto for a day-trip to visit my cousin Siegfried, a U of T student. Our family didn't live much more than an hour from Toronto, but we never went. My father disliked the traffic, and a friend of his had had his car broken into while watching a hockey game at Maple Leaf Gardens. "You can keep it," was my Dad's mantra about Toronto.

Siegfried met me at Union Station, and we took the subway to campus and walked around the Annex. Siegfried wore a pea coat, desert boots, and black stove-pipe jeans. He smoked cigarettes, spoke of anthropology seminars, and had authored poems destined to appear in the next issue of the university literary journal, which he called a "rag." He represented the apex of urban, bohemian, sophistication.

"You can eat anything in Toronto," declared Siegfried. "What's your pleasure?" My mind went blank. I couldn't fathom the options that 'anything' implied.

"Chinese?" I answered.

"Done. Let's go to Chinatown."

It was a short walk, and Siegfried quickly chose a restaurant with Chinese writing in its fogged-up window. I wasn't sure if he knew the place, or had picked it at random. We took a table for two along the wall. There was a briny, fishy smell, and most of the customers were Chinese. Periodically, they barked orders at the waiters, all of whom appeared harried and distracted, and not inclined to massage the egos of their patrons.

Our waiter was a young man who spoke English poorly. He handed us menus—large, worn, single sheets of paper with writing in Chinese and fractured English. I had assumed Siegfried to be an expert who would guide us through the experience, but soon realized that he was out of his depth. The waiter brought tea and impatiently took our orders, which we stumbled over. Our food arrived quickly, and didn't seem like what we had asked for, but neither of us was sure. Perhaps the waiter had confused our order

with another table's, or had misunderstood us. Or, maybe we had not read the menu correctly.

I didn't want to be revealed as a neophyte in the world of authentic Chinese food, and Siegfried likely didn't want to lose face either, so after a brief discussion and some sidelong glances at the more appetizing dishes that had been placed in front of our neighbours, we ate what we were given. I enjoyed what seemed to be pork dumplings, but a fishy gelatinous substance was hard to stomach. I ate it anyway, thinking that leaving food on the plate would be bad form. I settled the bill—for some reason, Siegfried assumed I was treating—and left a handsome tip. We exited the restaurant, and Siegfried bid us enter a nearby market, where we looked at pickled things in jars, as well as various roots, spices and tinctures.

Siegfried and I parted in late afternoon, and I took the subway back to Union Station without him. I felt very much a city person, and eyed my fellow TTC riders with fellowship. On the train ride home, I turned the afternoon in Chinatown over in my mind, reliving and savouring it.

After this outing, the Jade Dragon struck me as particularly fraudulent and middle-class. I preferred the kind of restaurant where one did not know what one was eating, and the waiters didn't care. The North American concept of 'customer service,' which Julian Wong embraced so fervently, was an affront to me. I now passed my time at the Jade Dragon in horrified fascination, watching Mr. Wong create his magic. The man was a polyvalent multi-tasker: simultaneously greeting people coming through the door, producing cocktail orders, and inquiring if patrons were enjoying their meal. When I went to the washroom, I passed the kitchen door as it swung open, and glimpsed Julian Wong in a rare moment of repose, leaning on a greasy metal shelf, smoking.

What turned out to be my final visit to the Jade Dragon occurred on the occasion of my seventeenth birthday. At the request of my parents, Mr. Wong fried a banana and ice cream at our table. "The flame go high for the birthday boy," said Julian Wong. I was mortified, particularly as a girl in my biology class was seated nearby.

"This is wonderful," said my mother, having just downed her second cocktail and much taken with Mr. Wong's display of alimentary pyrotechnics.

Earlier that evening, I had observed Mr. Wong circulating about the restaurant, stonily commanding his underlings. When we'd left, I mentioned Wong's abruptness to my father, and also looked askance at the desert performance. "Is there anything that you won't complain about?" my father demanded. "When I was your age, I would have been tickled pink with that banana and ice cream routine. We didn't get anything like that, ever."

"That was cool, when the flame was blue," my sister chipped in.

"And just for your information," continued my father, "Julian Wong is running a business. He's the boss, and that means he has to take charge. What should he do, give those girls he has working for him engraved invitations so that they'll fetch someone another Coke?"

"No," I replied. "I'm just saying Julian Wong isn't all he's made out to be." My father was getting angry, I could tell by the way he was driving, intermittently speeding up and then slamming on the brakes when he reached a light. My mother told him to calm down, and asked that I continue the conversation at home, if at all.

"Who makes Julian Wong out to be anything, anyway?" my father asked in a fake calm voice as he swung the car into our driveway. "He runs a Chinese restaurant, and does a damn good job of it, as far as I can tell."

I had run out of ammo, and fell back on one my mother's sayings, the kind she liked to deliver when she was trying to be mysterious and thoughtful. "There's more than meets the eye."

"What's that supposed to mean?" my father asked.

I didn't have an answer.

I didn't attend the family's next outing to the Jade Dragon. I had an essay to write, and stayed home and ate a frozen pizza. My parents and sister returned in good humour—obviously I had not been missed—and brought me a take-out container of moo goo gai pan. "Don't do me any favours by eating it," my father said. "I'm happy to take it to work tomorrow for lunch." I thanked my dad, and meant it. I'd mellowed a little by this time, and could see the end of my high school career, and with it my departure from our town, on the horizon. Plus, phony or not, and like I'd ever admit to it now that I was a connoisseur of Asian cuisine, I had always enjoyed the Jade Dragon's food.

It seemed that my family's relationship with the Jade Dragon would continue forever. I couldn't remember a time without the Jade Dragon, and assumed that while I might move on, Julian Wong and his restaurant would always be there. Not so.

The following month, my father arrived home at his usual time and stood at the kitchen counter, keys in hand. My mother was at the stove, and my sister and I at the table, eating an early dinner. My dad was making the clicking sound with this tongue that he did when he was nervous or uncomfortable. We all looked at him, but he did not meet our gaze, and instead eyed the cutting board. "Julian Wong shot his wife last night," he said, still looking down.

I instantly assumed that Wong's wife was dead, but that was not the case. She had been struck in the shoulder, and was taken to hospital where she was operated on.

My father, who had learned of the story from a coworker, said that the shooting had occurred in the Jade Dragon kitchen. We drilled him with questions, but he had few answers. My mother suggested that perhaps the whole thing was a rumour or ill-conceived prank, and that we shouldn't go jumping to conclusions. We ate dinner in silence.

A story in the *Chronicle* the next day reported that Jet Wong, 54, had fired a gun at his wife, 50-year-old Mei Git Chu. The incident had occurred just after midnight in the family home—not the Jade Dragon as my father had stated—with the couple's two adult daughters and a nephew present. Jet Wong had surrendered himself to police when they arrived, and was taken into custody. It took me a moment to realize that Jet Wong and Julian Wong were the same person.

In the days following the news, my father was quiet on the topic, and I waited before asking him why he thought Mr. Wong had done it.

"You never really know what's going on with people. He was drunk. The guy made a nice life for himself, then threw it all away."

"If his life was so nice, why would he shoot his wife?" I asked.

"Don't know. Turned out to be a crazy Chinaman, I guess."

The Jade Dragon was closed for a few days after the incident, but then reopened. Mrs. Wong returned to work after a month of recuperation. "How can she face people?" wondered my mother. "Just go on like nothing has happened."

There was no way we could return to the Jade Dragon, it had been permanently stained. It was uncomfortable just to drive by. The whole ritual of the place had been bizarrely and irrevocably altered. Who could possibly assume Mr. Wong's role? How could one enjoy the sweet and sour ribs knowing that Mr. Wong had fired a bullet into his wife?

Six months after the shooting, the Jade Dragon closed. Perhaps the restaurant's newly acquired notoriety did it in, or, absent Mr. Wong, it wasn't being run properly, or the family wished to move on, no one knew.

There was a trial at which Mr. Wong's wife claimed the shooting had been accidental, that Mr. Wong was fooling with his gun and had discharged it by mistake. At sentencing, the defense presented Mr. Wong's unimpeachable record to that point, and argued that he had come to Canada with nothing and built a successful business. Moreover, Wong was very remorseful, and his incarceration would be a burden to his family, particularly his wife, who wished to put the whole unfortunate episode behind her. All true, but still, Mr. Wong had come within a few inches of killing this very wife, and it wouldn't do for him to get off scot-free. Ultimately, Julian Wong received a light jail term, and the prevailing sentiment was that justice had been served. In retrospect, the notion that the shooting represented an isolated moment of madness on Wong's

part—rather than an exclamation point on a pattern of domestic abuse—seems unlikely, but that's the way it was received at the time.

Not long after Mr. Wong was arrested, and before the Jade Dragon's closing, my father switched our allegiance to Samurai, a newly-opened Japanese steak house. He said that it was "much healthier," and that "you can see them cooking the food," a point that suddenly seemed very important to him. Just like that, my father was a Samurai man, proclaiming fidelity to an operation "run by pros, people who really know what they are doing." Samurai was near the highway, and that was another factor. Big-box stores and large suburban-style restaurants were opening off Route 137, and fewer people wanted to drive the four kilometers to an increasingly forlorn downtown, of which the Jade Dragon had at one time been an anchor.

Jettisoning the Jade Dragon was just one of a number of "new beginnings" my father undertook at that time. In addition to "eating right" and "walking for health," my father revealed that he had been taking his relationship with my mother "in for a tune-up," that they had been seeing a therapist. This shocked me, not that I thought their marriage was so wonderful, but that my father was using the word "relationship," and had submitted to marriage counselling.

Amidst all of this change, which included some home remodelling in anticipation of my vacating my bedroom when I left for university, Julian Wong and the Jade Dragon were never mentioned. It was as if the place hadn't existed, like we had not celebrated almost every birthday dinner there since I could remember. And a few years later, the Jade Dragon was literally erased, as it and an adjacent watch repair store were razed to accommodate a Shoppers Drug Mart and parking lot.

If ever I brought up Julian Wong or the Jade Dragon, my father seemed annoyed, as if my doing so was a reproach. I learned only that Mr. Wong was at Tollcross Detention Centre, and that his family had left the area for Toronto. What were they doing there? Did Wong plan on opening another restaurant when he got out of prison? Where? In our town, or somewhere else? And why would he shoot his wife, anyway? I wanted to write Mr. Wong, but didn't see how I could do so without a return letter coming to the house and being flagged by my parents. Instead, I called Tollcross from a pay-phone downtown and inquired about visiting hours. I imagined Wong's family visited him in jail, but wondered if any of his former patrons did.

Two weeks later, I told my parents I was going to Toronto for the day to see an exhibit at the ROM for a school project. Instead, I boarded a different train, one that stopped in the town on whose outskirts Tollcross was located. I took a cab from the station, and entered the facility, which was newer than I'd expected, but no less scary. The floors were concrete, the walls cinder block, and I had to show my ID before being

buzzed in. There were forms to fill out, one of which asked 'relationship to prisoner.' I checked 'friend,' as no other category applied.

It was almost an hour-and-a-half after my arrival at Tollcross that I was shown into the visiting room. It was spare, and the tables looked like the ones in our cafeteria at school, except the chairs were bolted to them. It was also loud, and periodically there would be an announcement over the speakers. Most of the visitors were women, and one had two small children with her, which was depressing. We were on the second floor, and through the thick glass windows I could see the prison yard, and the highway beyond it.

There was a door on the far side of the room from which Julian Wong, led by a guard, emerged a few minutes after I sat down. He wore a blue prison outfit and looked like he'd lost weight. The guard told me "no touching" as Wong took the seat opposite me.

"Why you come here?" asked Mr. Wong. I looked down, as if my lap would reveal the reason for my visit. I hadn't thought through what I wanted to say, I'd somehow assumed that once I was at Tollcross, conversation would take care of itself. It occurred to me now that Wong might not know who I was. He probably recognized me, but beyond that was doubtful. I don't think I had ever said more than a few words other than "please" and "thank you" directly to him.

"My father is Paul O'Hare," I said. "We used to sit in a booth near the front."

"I remember," said Mr. Wong. "You got a sister too."

"That's right, Simone." I don't know why I said her name, but I did. We sat in silence. Mr. Wong pushed air through his lips so that it made a low whistle.

"How come your father didn't come?" asked Mr. Wong. I lied and said that he was working.

"How's the food?" I asked.

"Not so bad," said Mr. Wong, "but you only eat at the meal time. You don't decide when you going to order." I wasn't sure if the order remark was meant as a joke, but if it was, Julian Wong wasn't laughing.

"Also, I lose the weight," he said, pointing at his stomach. I couldn't tell if he thought that was a good thing.

"Yes," I said noncommittally. I was at a loss. "Do you remember what we used to order?" I asked in desperation.

"Your father, he eat sweet and sour rib, your mother, she change sometime, but she get chicken a lot. Your father like the Molson beer." Wong seemed pleased to be able to convey this information, almost like he was back in his element. Maybe he wasn't a sycophant I thought, just a guy with a tremendous memory who loved his work.

"That's right," I said. "My dad loved the ribs. I liked the egg rolls."

"Kids like the egg roll," Wong said. This made me feel very juvenile, but it was true, both Simone and I had enjoyed the egg rolls.

"I went to a Chinese restaurant in Toronto," I said, hoping to impress. "The menu was in Chinese. The food was different."

"What province they come from? Food change in China depend on the province. Not like here. Canada's same everywhere."

"I don't know where they are from."

"All the food I make in the restaurant I learn in Canada, not China."

"Really?"

"Here, every meal you get the meat. When I grow up, we didn't get meat much. Eat a chicken was a special thing. When I move to Canada, I work in a restaurant in Windsor. I learn everything about Chinese food from that time." Julian Wong looked almost happy as he described his early immigrant days.

"You ever tell my father that?" I asked.

"Customers not interested in such kind of thing," he said.

I nodded, and looked out the window at the prison yard, reflecting that I would be leaving here shortly, but Julian Wong would be staying. "About what happened, you know, why you are here ..."

"That was accident," said Julian Wong. "Everything about that said in the court. I don't need to tell you."

"Of course, sorry, I just . . ." I hadn't planned on asking Wong about the shooting, it had just come out.

"You go to the high school?" Wong asked evenly. I replied that I was graduating soon, and that next year would be attending university.

"Study hard," said Mr. Wong. "Make your parents proud."

"I'm not sure what I'm going to major in," I said, as if Wong had asked me.

"I got to get back," said Julian Wong.

"Of course," I said, "I have to go myself. I took the train."

"Say 'hi' to your family for me," said Julian Wong.

"I'll do that," I responded. "My father was sorry he couldn't come today."

"I understand," said Mr. Wong. He sat for a few moments, then leaned closer to me, "Maybe next time," he said, "you bring me the menu from the restaurant in Toronto and I explain to you."

Before I could respond, Julian got up and walked toward the door where the guard stood. He gave me a little wave as he departed.

FOUR POEMS | *Peter Richardson*

A BOULEVARDIER'S MARSH NOTES

I knew they could hibernate on a single diving breath taken in late November, that their heart rates begin to plummet the moment they hit muddy bottom,

but I didn't know there was this eager aquatic shuffle performed in late April, a dance in which he circles her, his helmet-sized shell tapping hers as he sets

about quelling first-date doubts in the four-foot-wide cove sheltered by alders.

Hard not to love that paddling tour of the premises he makes on speculation.

She periscopes her head up once he goes topside, her claws bracing in silt.

They champion this position for longer than I am willing to stand gawking

in wet sneakers under dripping hemlocks. Maybe I should set down roots

with stopwatch and camera, ignoring the joggers on the path behind me.

There must be a whole Turtle Kama Sutra which escaped me till today when a flash of afternoon light broadcast what turned out to be those

ripples whose authors continue to knuckle down in fertile disregard of what rumbles by on the county two-lane above this amphitheatre of whoopee.