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# Wu Wei in Chuang Tzu as Life-Systematic

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Wu wei (non-doing) in Chuang Tzu is expressed in story-bits reflecting life-slices. They are life-systematic, not random, not having a system. One; Chuang Tzu is a dragonfly over the pond of life, dotting the water of daily ongoing without dotting it. Two; the dotting is dot-sayings that yarn life's concrete bits into story-coherence. Three; Chuang Tzu dots and struts around to let others say, and life-coherence appears. Four; life-coherence is a life-family of concrete bits, a thread of many life-fibres twisted together. Five; Chu Hsi and Chuang Tzu have dot-sayings that draw readers into making systems of their own to attribute them to Chu and Chuang Tzu. "System" is then a verb, to let-make systems, weaving out a system beyond system. Six; this system-beyond is expressed in spontaneous flexuous story-nets to cipher comprehensive/systematic life. Seven; being flexibly systematic expresses the inexpressible One Poem of life. All this while, Chuang Tzu has been winking at us, letting us spin out all the above. That is tacit wu wei—of living "happily ever after."

THE ANCIENT Taoist sage Chuang Tzu (399–295 B.C.) single-handedly, albeit unwittingly, produced that vast, rich and subtle tradition of Chinese literature—poetry, prose poems, fiction, essays, history-as-literature, analects, epistles, epitaphs (the list goes on),<sup>1</sup> and sired unawares "Zen" (along with Buddhism and Shintoism), the deep multicultural undercurrent.

A little phrase above, "albeit unwittingly," is significant. It is synonymous with "wu wei (non-doing)" to bespeak how Chuang Tzu lived it, a central notion of his. Nothing refreshes and fascinates us into chuckling happiness as does his wu wei, which he gives in story-bits to awaken us into *being* life-systematic unawares. Chuang Tzu thus winks casually—befitting wu wei—to let us realize how absolutely indispensable wu wei is for us not only to survive, but to thrive.

Wu wei is life-systematic to "walk Tao out" (Chuang Tzu, 2/33). We must now observe how life-systematic wu wei is in seven points below that "walk" out wu wei.

1. Chuang Tzu is a dragonfly silently hovering over the pond of life, dotting it without dotting it. He dots the pond lightly with story-bits, and ripples of our fascination arise to charm us into reflecting on what all this amounts to. The ripples silently spread, while the dragonfly lightly flies away, nowhere to be seen. It is in the aftermath that we realize the whole situation as being life-systematic, in the overlapping intertwining spread of the ripples.

Now, the above poetic description of Chuang Tzu fits him, for poets are more poignantly precise than mathematicians who are inspired by poets if not a sort of poets themselves. This essay follows Chuang Tzu's responsible poesy, neither spinning out deadly analysis nor wallowing in poetic license. Chuang Tzu is the poet par excellence in China, having single-handedly carved out the tradition of Chinese aesthetic sensibility. To describe him requires a poet's sensitivity.<sup>2</sup> He is a boor who demands statistical precision against poetic poignancy.

In order to forestall a misunderstanding that all this is a poet's imprecise exuberance used to shun responsible coherent explanation, however, let us consider what "being life-systematic" can mean in Chuang Tzu.

2. To construct a tight analytical system *out* of life is one thing; living systematically, being systematic *within* life, is quite another. A system constructed out of life is meant to apply to life, and must be so applied. Such "application" can only amount to an imposition—however much modification we make here and there to the system in the name of "abstract objectivity" and "precision." Imposition on our life ends up damaging us who live our life. The only system that damages no life is one that manifests in the living itself, as it were, which yet is contingent, to wit, haphazard and spotty to our literal mind. Things concrete are dotted/spotty but not random/arbitrary. At least Chuang Tzu's storytelling so indicates, for stories yarn life's concrete bits into story-coherence, and the yarn is a "system" that always flexes/changes to fit life's contour in order to do life the least violence.<sup>3</sup>

No wonder Chuang Tzu has no analytical "system" but is systematic in life's concrete organic coherence. Such life-systematicity is dotted as concrete bits of life are. This observation explains how Chinese writers write. Take, for instance, Chu Hsi (1130-1200), reputed to be a system-builder, a Chinese Aristotle.<sup>4</sup> From his scattered sayings people pick and pull bits into "a system" for him.<sup>5</sup> Yet Chu left us only scattered analects. *What* system is it if he wrote none down? How are we to know it? Moreover, does he who is our teacher need our help? Wouldn't "systems" others built for him hurt his "system," if any? Queries such as these make us realize that Chinese dot-sayings<sup>6</sup> remain dots, not arbitrary, not an explicit logical system, and yet they are systematic. Being "systematic" here can only be understood as being reflective of life's coherence, as life talking via Chu to express/exhibit itself as coherent/systematic.

3. Talks can say something; they can also let others say it. Collingwood (1939) said that statements are "answers" to unstated "questions" (pp. 29-43). Questions let someone else say things. The Chinese writers dot their sayings—in aphorisms, analects, stories—as open questions that do not say but let readers freely say/answer.

Openly, ambiguously,<sup>7</sup> Chinese sayings dot/strut around to let others say systematically, not as dotted/open questions, and life coherence appears between dot-saying-questioning and systematic-saying-answering.

4. What does such life-coherence look like? Wittgenstein (1958) saw two of its shapes/senses, mutually coherent, of being "systematic" as being "coherent"—"family resemblance" and "spinning a thread" (p. 32e). Since both are parts of human life, one natural, another artful, both can be taken to cipher life's "systematic" coherence.

4.1. The *first* variety of organic coherence is for a system to become a "family" of what it describes/represents; it shows what it describes as a family. The "system" has the physiognomy of what it presents. An example is Chinese sagely dot sayings above as tacit "questions" that form a family coherence with the readers' commentaries as answers. Another example is J. Tanizaki's adumbration of shadows as where we are at home, in his *In Praise of Shadows* (1977)<sup>8</sup> that takes on a shadowy style, rambling as shadow to follow shadow as it flickers/follows the thing of which it is a shadow. Japanese "*in'ei*" may be "shade of shade," "penumbra,"<sup>9</sup> to wit, umbra of umbra. Tanizaki may be trailing Chuang Tzu's ironic penumbra/umbra dialogue-in-queries below:<sup>10</sup>

Penumbra asked Umbra, "Then, you strolled; now, you stop; then, you sat; now, you stand. Why such no-independence?" Umbra said, "Have I what-I-wait-on to be so? Has what-I-wait-on what-it-waits-on, again, to be so? Do I wait on snake's scales, cicada's wings? How would I know why so, how would I know why not so?"

Shadow is here reprimanded by *its* shadow, the penumbra, as lacking in independence. Likewise, Tanizaki's *In Praise of Shadows* "penumbrates" shadows in their very physiognomy that it depicts, itself disappearing<sup>11</sup> in the shadows that disappear in the thing of which they are shadows. Tanizaki's praise of shadows has a family resemblance to shadows themselves, being organically "systematic" with shadows; shadow-physiognomic.

4.2. The *second* variety of organic coherence is likened to the spinning of a thread, where "we twist fibre on fibre,...overlapping...many fibres" (Wittgenstein, 1958). It is notions that are spun



into threads of family resemblance, and "thread" and "family" cipher being systematic.<sup>12</sup> Since notions are separate as they condescend into a "concrete system," such a coherent system is a composite. Such a concrete system is a contingent composite of loose condescended fibre-bits of thread or separate individuals in a family. This is why/how Tanizaki "rambles" (see Appendix). By nature such a rambling cannot be of one piece, totalistic and totalitarian.

5. Such is the concrete system Chu Hsi has woven, but how could he weave, or write, a system by not writing it? The answer is *wu wei*, in four points.

5.1. One; we could say that Chu has a no-system system, an invisible meta-system, which inspires others to build their own systems and to rightly attribute them to Chu.

5.2. Two; we could say that Chu has no system, but is nevertheless systematic. All his dot-sayings suggest a system, which draws readers into making systems of their own and attributing them to Chu. To the question: Whence then is Chu's individual peculiarity, the answer must be that Chu lived Chu-coherently, Chu-systematically. "System" is no longer a noun but becomes "systematic"; an adjective, an adverb, in fact; then "systematize," a verb, for life *is*, and Chu's dot-sayings reflect such living/being systematically. In Chu's manner, to *let-make* a system, then another, is the way life goes on, in others' individualities. I once took Chuang Tzu's words as metaphors of no-metaphor, meta-metaphors that let-metaphor (Wu, 1990, p. 501, Index, "metaphor(s), metaphorical"). Chu unwittingly followed Chuang Tzu. In fact, all Chinese writers are systematic; they are such meta-metaphor-ers, such meta-system-izers.

5.3. Three; scholars such as Wang Yang-ming, Tai Chen, and Ito Jinsai criticized Chu as being too abstract and metaphysical. They accused Chu of mistakenly attributing Chu's own "system" to Confucius', who had no system, no metaphysics.<sup>13</sup> The truth of the matter is that Confucius inspired Chu's system-making, or rather, Chu's meta-system-making. Confucius was meta-systematic; his was a meta-meta-system as was Chuang Tzu's. No wonder both Confucius and Chuang Tzu could achieve the name of "Chinese Paragons" with their scattered volumes.

5.4. Four; in other words, the Chinese writers asymptotically approach a "system" forever *beyond* reach. Writers are imbued with a system-beyond-them, as the poet has one poem-beyond-words of which all his/her poems speak, and as the musician has one music-beyond-sound of which all his/her compositions sing.<sup>14</sup>

6. Now, this system-beyond, poem-beyond, and music-beyond ciphers being comprehensively systematic as life itself.<sup>15</sup> This originates in the rhythm-route of feelings, of the heart/mind perceiving, and of our own understanding understanding itself. It is a fresh look back at *whatever* the sensibilities of life's heart/mind have been undergoing. Such a "system" amounts to a story, as mentioned above, that life freely spins to understand itself, and so it is as spontaneous, flexuous and open-ended as life itself, a life-net that flexes with life to capture itself. This is in contrast to the traps, the boxes of categories trying vainly to capture the winds of actuality. Harper (1977) said:

One of the oldest and most deeply ingrained of Japanese attitudes to literary style holds that too obvious a structure is contrivance, that too orderly an exposition falsifies the ruminations of the heart, that the truest representation of the searching mind is just to "follow the brush." (Afterword, p. 45)

This attitude is Chinese as well as Japanese, and does not necessarily oppose "concision and articulation,"<sup>16</sup> as Harper (1977) would have us believe, for the following of the brush of life can concisely/precisely paint/articulate life's undergoing of understanding "life"—itself and its beyond—without trappings of technicalities. To undergo self-understanding self-grasps to naturally grow beyond itself, to become *comprehensive*.

Our heart/mind goes from self-realization to comprehensiveness this way. We realize that we find logical coherence by discerning a familiarity between one thing and another.<sup>17</sup> This metaphorical discernment enables one fibre-notion to cohere, entwine, with another, for us to take these notions to form a family to belong together. Such family-discernment goes on as life goes on, and thus life-understanding tends to comprehensiveness.

Being comprehensively systematic naturally arises out of being organically systematic, which

implies growing in understanding *beyond* its cocoon of knowledge *now*. Neville (1977) said:

I, on the other hand, praise the power of systematic thinking to come at things from many angles, relativizing any one perspective, and taking responsibility for not identifying any representation wholly with what it represents. Abstract and systematically criticized representations allow us to engage realities with a genuine sense of humility. (p. xvi)

I agree, and add, importantly, that such “relativizing” need not go via systematic abstraction for such abstraction. Lacking the protective participation, oversight, and guidance of concrete growing, life risks narcissistic fascination with its own beauty of categorical scheme.

Again Neville (2001) says:<sup>18</sup>

[A] composite and comprehensive approach is to extend understanding in new directions, creating new bridges between cultures and expanding each culture...a system in the ancient sense of looking at its topics from every angle imaginable...in the sense of being as comprehensive as possible, looking at things from as many theoretical and cultural perspectives as possible. As our common teacher, Paul Weiss, said, system in this sense is the only protection against dogmatism. (pp. xi-xii)

That is “systematic” as “comprehensive.” It grows out of being organically, concretely, and life-nimble “systematic.”

7. These meditations on being systematic have two important spin-offs. 7.1.: They elucidate what wu wei is. 7.2.: They let us—and aid us to—live happily ever after.

7.1. Things now fall into place. Being flexibly, coherently, and comprehensively systematic is the One Poem Heidegger claimed no poet could write, being so comprehensive. Chinese people dare, however, to ex-press such a One Poem as dots hinting a beyond-system. Collingwood (1939) said that statements are answers to unexpressed questions. Chinese sayings *are* these tacit questions. They are dots to express unexpressed questions to “draw out” answers, each in its own coherent systematic manner. Tao is the wu that wu wei’s, the “bright/black hole” that draws in to enable life; birthing, birthing, without ceasing, in a variety of systems, one after another.

Explications of “wu wei” above are themselves some of the systems among others that wu wei evoked. The Chinese heart/mind is so life-concrete as to pull such a meta-supra-systematic stunt on Heidegger, ex-pressing the inexpressible One Poem, and on Collingwood, dotting questions that are not spoken. “Wu wei” is their way of executing such dots on such “One Poems” and “questions.”

To see how being systematic in life is wu wei, we must turn to concrete China. This is the Chinese art of thinking and expressing; it is an ever-disarmingly simple art of leaving things unsaid to leave readers alone, let them go home, and think for themselves; for telling exhaustively is impossible and counterproductive. My story starts your steps in *our* boots over rocky ground, and Tao, the concrete universal, or rather, transversal, we thus co-walk out (Chuang Tzu 2/33). Storytelling, journals, and analects are the Tao of co-systematic living, concrete co-thinking, being systematic in life in China, Zen, and Tanizaki, spreading all over.

7.2. Now, have we noticed? Chuang Tzu has been so far winking at us with his stories, one after another. He did nothing, said nothing—to let me do the explaining. I did nothing, either, to let you understand it. That is being systematic in life—tacitly, in a wu wei fashion. “O what a beautiful morning! O what a beautiful day! Everything’s going my way!” sings an Oklahoman, a nobody! He is fit! That’s wu wei.

All the above amounts to this. I agree with Buddhism and medical science that I die daily. Now, if I die daily, every day that I live is a miracle, and this miracle cuts deeper, embracing suffering.<sup>19</sup> Some days deeply dissatisfy me, but precisely this suffering corner of my life can occasion my partaking of the Beyond, as Bonhoeffer<sup>20</sup> and Buddha did. *Here*—this life-occasion—is a miracle, as the example below shows.

I saw a young man, tall, gawky and hairless, standing by the roadside with me waiting for the bus. He was not smiling, not crying, looking not up, not down, staring and not staring, pensive, profound, deep in thought, standing nowhere. I talked to him and he talked back, quietly, slowly. I thought he must know how and when he would die, being wiser than we who are unaware of *our* coming death—and then I felt something strange.

We are all terminal patients as he is, as Buddha reminds us, for we will all die sooner or later, so what else is new? Well, perhaps this is why Chuang Tzu said (2/52) that the baby just born and died has lived longer than the longest-lived of men. Why then don't we live *happily* ever after as babies who died and men who lived? After all, long or short, life is better and deeper than can be enjoyed and/or suffered. In joy and in suffering, I am grateful for this possibility, this privilege of breathing joy without joy, for ultimate joy is no joy (Chuang Tzu, 18/11). "Everyday is a good day," Zen says. *This* is life's miracle.

What miracle? Well, Chuang Tzu<sup>21</sup> begins his book with the Northern Dark, where there is a Big Fish called "K'un," which can mean "fish roe." The name may say that the "Big" implicates (can mean) a bit, the small, and a bit (roe) contains the big (can grow). Small is beautiful because it is big, and big is beautiful because it is small. Then K'un changes into a Big Bird, "P'eng," which can mean a bunch of friends. It "rages" up out of the water far into the blue sky. It takes three months to prepare for foods to fly to the Southern Dark region. Such Big Above far beyond the below small! Unexpectedly, however, small birdies down below here chitchat to laugh at P'eng, "What does he think he is doing?" Again, the big implicates bits, and bits contain the big. The big and bits go beyond each other and hold each other.<sup>22</sup> The beyond is inside. That's life loafing, that's miracle, just fooling around.

Now we realize that *being* systematic in this manner is *beyond* making/doing a system, a wu wei. This is being systematic in life manifested everywhere in the indescribability of doing-without-doing (wu wei) in Zen (indirection), Tao (Great Tao declares not), awakening (butterfly dreaming), psychology (counselor-client intermothering-healing), writing (self-shaping and sharing), and the ineffable list goes on.

Being systematic makes "sense." Being life-systematic makes sense, real, comprehensive, approachable, and unreachable—as wu wei. Wu wei is a beyond-system, a tacit system, a system of no system. It is a strange anti-"black hole," the Bright Black Hole, mysterious and dark (*hsüan, ming*). The shady roomy dark gives birth to white light (Chuang Tzu, 4/33), to let others do without "doing it yourself." Non-doers are let-doers, more

than conquerors, for letting many others do is surely more powerful than doing alone. Let-do darkly sucks life to enable it, to shine forth to prosper together.

*Need more be said?  
The wild, the desert, calls,  
"Return!" and "Go!" and  
Opens us to the wild-circle—in us and out.  
Wildebeasts wordlessly roam, with  
Birds, big and small, hooting, chirping,  
Beating time, beating no time.  
Music of the wild opens the wild.  
We all return. We all go out.  
All are up and about  
In swamps that sustain,  
In rivers they meander. And  
Soon enough, far in the South,  
The dusk hugs Misty Mountains, and  
Birds fly in pairs home to their nests.  
So much is here, for nothing is here,  
Aloud in stillness, beyond words.  
Non-sense just stays,  
Being systematic beyond sense.  
We simply return, one and all, and the wild  
opens.  
In Wu Wei.<sup>23</sup>*

## Appendix

WE FIND theme-bits in Tanizaki's *In Praise of Shadows* (1977) (though the author himself does not say this) thus—home-building, fixtures (pp. 1-2), shoji (2, 20, 21), lighting, heating (2-3), toilet (3-6), paper (6-8, 9-10, 21-22), science (7), jade (10, 15, 30), shadow (10-11), sheen of old, glow of grime (11), hospital, restaurant (12), lacquerware, ceramics (14), soup (15), foods, rice (16), building (17) as a variation of shadows (18) to exist for shadows (19), inkwash painting (18, 20), shoji (thinnest), alcove (darkest) (20), silence, music (9, 15, 20), light becomes shadow (20) and serves shadows to calm us (22), gold glitters in dim room (22), Noh (23-28), skin (23-24, 31-34), puppets (28), women (28-30), Japan vs. the West (30-31), teahouse (34), modern wasteful Japan (35-37), old man complaining in his dotage (39).

Amazingly, shadows thus appear in his rambling/trailing of them, not of "his brush" (45). Why can he not describe shadows? For description throws light, and shadow disappears. Shadow is best adumbrated indirectly in a "shadowy" (40)



manner. Tanizaki embodies and executes wu wei. Likewise, the present essay proceeds in a Tanizaki-esque manner, in wu wei. The beauty of it is that it was not preplanned this way, for such a way cannot be planned. It evolves all by itself, life-systematically. Wu wei is life-systematic, loafing as life itself.

### Notes

1. Personally speaking, without him, I would not have been able to survive as a poor plodding writer.
2. Martin Buber is a rare genius who did pull off this stunt of presenting Lao Tzu's and Chuang Tzu's profound obscurity with his own profound obscurity (Buber, 1957, pp. 31-58), despite our dispute about whether Buber's mystical profundity matches theirs. The description is unmistakably Buber's with a Taoist touch. That's all we can say, and that speaks well for Buber who followed, as well as for Chuang Tzu who enabled.
3. For stories' historical magnificence and abiding power, see Erdoes and Ortiz (1984, pp. xi-xv); Este (1999, pp. ix-xxx), and Wu (1990, p. 506, Index on "story," "stories").
4. Another Chinese Aristotle is of course Hsün Tzu.
5. For recent examples, see Ching (2000) and Kim (2000).
6. On Chinese sayings as dotted see Wu (2001, p. 664, Index, "dot-pragmatics").
7. "Ambiguity" means to walk-around. Western dotters, such as Emerson, seem not to ask but to say.
8. Incidentally, Tanizaki's attachment to shadows that shelter/reveal things and a shadowy comforting toilet may originate in motherly shelters.
9. "Penumbra," as partial umbra, came from the fact that penumbra is at the edge of umbra to define umbra. I take penumbra to mean, then, the umbra of umbra as umbra is shadow of a thing that defines the thing. As umbra is shadow to a thing, so penumbra is shadow to a shadow.
10. This dialogue (2/92-94, my translation) precedes the "butterfly dream" that ends Chapter Two. Chuang Tzu has *penumbra*, umbra of umbra, nudge umbra to see umbra wavering. What subtlety of adumbration! (cf. Wu, 1990, p. 505, Index on "shadow").
11. Wu (2001, pp. 615-640) suggests that the true pedagogue disappears in the subjects taught.
12. Wittgenstein took those two senses to be mutually coherent/twisted/threaded, and people follow him in taking both as one coherent whole, but we can also see them as two separate notions inter-cohered.
13. On Wang Yang-ming, see Chan (1963); on Tai Chen, see Chin and Freeman (1990); on Ito Jinsai, see Huang (2000).
14. Whitehead (1978) said, "Words and phrases must be stretched towards a generality foreign to their ordinary usage; and however such elements of language be stabilized as technicalities, they remain metaphors mutely appealing for an imaginative leap" (p. 4). Artur Schnabel (1991) said that the music "is better than it can be played" (p. 10). Heidegger (1971) said that every thinker is a poet who has only one poem, itself uncomposed, out of which and of which all other poems speak (p. 160). The *Chuang Tzu*, the *Analects*, and the *Tao Te Ching* are Chuang Tzu's, Confucius', and Lao Tzu's uncomposed poems to evoke many composed ones.
15. After all, family resemblance and thread spinning are two phenomena of our daily common life.
16. See "precision" in Wu (2001, p. 669, Index on "precision").
17. On the inner intricacies of metaphor-process, see Wu (2001).
18. I apologize for quoting from Neville to illustrate how an honest dialogue can inter-elicite insights—and dialogue is personal and life-systematic as question-and-answer is. This is how, in China, writings come out as "analects."
19. Chuang Tzu has much to say on suffering, as in his Chapter Three. See Wu (1990, pp. 281-359).
20. Similar ideas appear loosely in Bethge (2000, pp. 15-16).
21. See also Wu (1990, pp. 69-76; 86-90; 492, Index, "bird"; 496, Index, "fish").
22. The entire Chapter One of Chuang Tzu goes on like this to show how the Big and the bit inter-contain, inter-thread. The beyond is outside, and so in life the outside threads inside and the inside, out.
23. I freely combined bits of Chuang Tzu, T'ao Ch'ien, and Edward Abbey (1968), three Nature poets of wu wei.

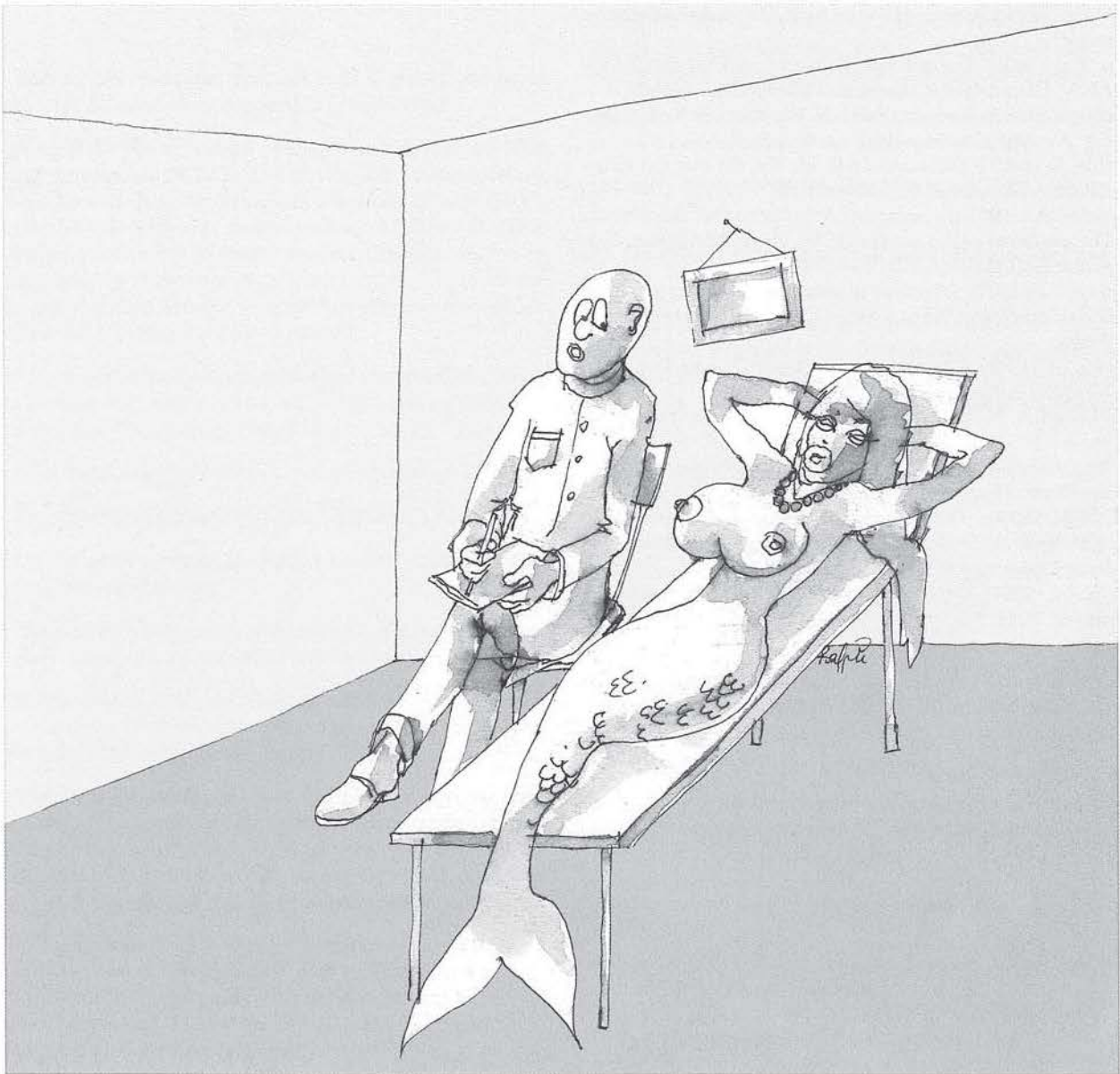
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*Hmm... tell me more about these oceanic feelings.*