



On Lions, Fish, Birds, and Other Moral Characters

Or: What is a Counterstory and What Does it Counter?

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Over the past 2 years, I have found a question afoot in my work as a narrative therapist. As someone proudly proclaiming an identity as a “narrative” therapist for a bit longer than the past 2 years, one might think that I should have stumbled over this question far longer back. But not so. The question was brought to me by David Epston and it asks, “what is a counterstory and what does it counter?”

This question stopped me cold. For many days, I was unable to go about my therapy work in my usual manner, which, for me, meant that I was unable to write the therapeutic poems to my clients after our conversations. -You have to understand the whole of my hubris: not only had I been calling myself a “narrative therapist,” but had also claimed to be a “burglar of problem stories” by way of my poetry-writing, inspired by T.S. Eliot’s idea of a poems’ chief work to divert the attention of “the house-dog” while the imaginary burglar goes about their business.

But now I sat in my office and the empty pages that were supposed to be filled with words from my therapy conversations were looming white and expectant in front of my restless mind, asking me, “what’s it going to be, you, shall we change then?” Reluctantly, I stepped off my well-worn tracks and gave myself over to the sweetness of supervision by this question. Here is the account of the supervision:



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Do you remember how Michael White once commented about therapists “loitering with the intent to commit a crime?” (Epston, D. Personal Communication). With the arrival of David’s question, I knew that my days of comfortable “loitering” (without the last part of that quote) had come to an end.

“The most powerful therapeutic process I know is to contribute to rich story development”, Michael White wrote (White, 2004). But what is a “rich” story and what poverties is it meant to redress? In other words, what does a “rich” story have the power to counter? And if I, in my work as a therapist, was meant to do more than “loiter” around “riches,” what might I do?

Stéphane Breitwieser, one of the most prolific art thieves of our time, who has admitted to stealing 239 artworks and artifacts from 172 museums, would advise: “focus. Note the flow of visitor traffic and memorize the exits. Count the guards. Are they sitting or patrolling? When do they rotate shorthanded to eat? Check for security cameras and see if each has a wire. Work in the daytime, with no violence, no dash to a getaway car. Be friendly at the front desk. Buy your ticket, say hello. Perform your work like a magic trick, sometimes with the guards in the room...” In other words, Breitwieser tells me to study the scene and the space, and all those that come and go through it.

So then, imagine: Imagine that my work as a narrative therapist were akin to the work of an accomplished and studious and intelligently focused art thief. Imagine that there were artifacts, scrolls, historical letters, paintings, sculptures, tools, portraits and objects of immeasurable power and precious value wrongfully held by owners, operators, and guards at museums and galleries and other privileged spaces all over the world. Imagine it were my job to return these pieces to their rightful owners, my clients. Imagine that the owners and operators and guards were the problem stories and the dominant or Master Narratives and ideologies that held the master pieces of our clients’ lives captive and hostage in plain sight. And imagine the beauty of the master pieces, whether they be pieces of art or artifacts, - imagine





standing in front of them and studying them, and knowing all at once that here it is, the wonder and heartbreak and grace under pressure of a human life. Imagine I cannot sleep until I find a way to remove the screws and release it from its base or frame to give it back to the person who painted, shaped, wrote, and formed it in the first place. And imagine that throughout, I was listening attentively for the sound of the guards' shoes on creaky wood, marble, or carpet.

Returning to the central question of what a counterstory counters, the summary of my learning so far is thus:

1. Stories take rich and powerful root in our souls, for triumph or ruin, for our freedom of options or the foreclosing capture of our movement in the world, for homecoming or lonely alienation, for our felt trustworthiness or our public stripping, for the imaginative expansion of our horizons, or the congealment of our futures, for our confusing corruption or our moral clarity.
2. In the great story-telling venture of therapy, not all "problem stories" are created equal. The problem stories that do not seem to yield easily are backed up by the by the usual "low-hum of the patriarchal choir" and by the misogynist, neoliberal, self-seeking, failure-promoting, medicalizing, queer-suspicious, racist, ableist and difference-loathing Master Narratives of our time. Master Narratives provide individuals the ideological backing to give themselves permission to remove or grant "access" and "entry," to allot or withdraw "speaking rights," to confirm or revoke "credibility," to respond with care or with discipline, to show regard or suspicion for persons or particular groups of persons. Master Narratives inform our tacit assumptions and our every-day treatment of people by providing us the "paths of least resistance" in our thinking that conform to our training in the cultural norms of our time. Master Narratives, - the guards -, are thus the great "story stealers" for all stories that do not conform to favoured norms of our cultures.
3. It follows, then, that we must pay close attention to the selection of





“alternative stories” as to their power and riches and tenacity to counter Master Narratives.

In this paper, I will attempt to answer the question of what a counterstory counters from a few different angles. A philosophical angle with the help of Hilde Lindemann Nelson, a fabled angle with the help of Ivan Krylov, and lastly but most significantly, from the angle of my position next to Zhen Zheng, who generously humoured and joined me in the discovery of these ideas in her life.

As a foreshadowing to Zhen’s character, - guess what she said to me at one of our early meetings when I was labouring to describe to her the intentions of any counterstorying ventures (without talking about robberies or artworks of any kind at that time).

She quietly heard me out, and said, in her usual keenly astute manner (she had just returned from a study-trip to Paris): “what is this. Are you wanting to take me to Louvre?”

Yes, Zhen. Let’s you and I go and rob the Louvre.

Not all problem stories are created equal.

With help from Hilde Lindemann Nelson (2001), I have been studying the guards who watch over and patrol the precious and powerful pieces of artwork, the most breathtaking of our clients’ stories. Lindemann Nelson describes the guards as “Master Narratives.” Master Narratives, she says “infiltrate our consciousness: damage is inflicted when the person accepts the dominant stories of who they are or take the dominant norms as the unstated standard against which they are to measure themselves” (p. 126) She also speaks about the “real effects” of constriction and boundedness: “There is a disconcerting lack of appreciation of the very real ways in which powerful people’s representations of who we are can constrict our freedom of movement” (p. 53). When “powerful people” invoke Master Narratives and tell particular stories of us that define who we are and how we are to be and that are seemingly backed up by every representative of our culture, it





isn't so simple to re-describe, refuse or re-frame those stories.

In looking back over my years of writing poems for my clients, I saw that I had sometimes staged very beseeching protests of the trespasses and denials that my clients had suffered in their lives. Together, we had organized many a "demonstration" with articulate banners outside the museum doors, and we had managed to annoy the guards, which had always caused rambunctious laughter and a sparkle for my clients. I will not denounce my early efforts, as laughter is always a fair beginning and a gift reserved for free spirits. But I am clear now that we could go beyond a spirited demonstration and protest!

What if particular kinds of problem stories (especially the ones who don't appear to quit), are such because they intermingle and breed with Master Narratives to not just "damage identities to make them incoherent or painful" (p. 106) but literally hound out people, out of town (maybe out of University to a treatment facility far out of the city) out of their knowledge, out of their lived experience, out of their imagination, out of their bodies, out of their spheres of action and what they most value in their lives. And if this is true, we need counterstories that can resist such effects, not any kind of alternative stories will do, they have to be counterstories that are in direct relationship to the Master Narrative, maybe live at the heart of the Master Narrative, and therefore have the power to counter them.

Not all alternative stories are created equal

With the help of a fable by Ivan Krylov, I took a measured look at what stands to be lost in the face of the pressure and damage of Master Narratives. In the following fable, the riches are a nightingale's songs. This fable hopefully illuminates what a Master Narrative is and what it does, and what a counterstory is and what it does.

A Donkey (in the original, an Ass) happened to see a Nightingale, one day, and said to it,



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'Listen, my dear. They say you have a great mastery over song. But I trust my own standards only, and I have long wished very much to hear you sing, and to judge for myself as to whether your talent is really so great.'

*On this the Nightingale began
And through her cadences she ran
How tender and most soft
Anon her voice she raised aloft
She whistled in a thousand ways
Chanted and cajoled the ways of our days
She sobbed and cried soft sorrows into being
And cooed tenderly at the time that is fleeting
She trilled and warbled a steady shower
Of tiny notes over tree and flower
And murmured to all the promise of the reeds
To enchant us to the beauty of our deeds.*

At once, all listened to the favourite singer. The breezes died away, the feathered choir was hushed, the cattle lay down on the grass. Scarcely breathing, the shepherd reveled in it, and only now and then, as he listened to it, smiled on the shepherdess.

Then the Ass, bending its head towards the ground, observed, 'It's tolerable. To speak the truth, one can listen to you without being bored. But it's a pity you don't know our rooster (in the original, our cock). You would sing a great deal better if you were to take a few lessons from him. He has a voice that really keeps folks quite awake.'

Having heard such a judgment, the Nightingale hung its head in sorrow and took to its wings and flew far away.

The Master Narrative, the dominant story invoked by the authority of judgment bestowed upon the donkey, is a stock plot of what a bird ought to do in this world, the kind of song that is valuable, productive, and effective in our world. Apparently only one kind of song counts: the one of the rooster, that serves a utilitarian purpose that everyone immediately understands: to





keep people awake.

What can the nightingale say against this judgment of her character and her purpose in the world? It isn't so easy for the Nightingale to argue, is it? With what right do we think we can count on the Nightingale to eloquently defend herself and say "yes, but what about the cooing, and sobbing, and chanting and warbling, what about the reeds and the smiles of the shepherd?"

It isn't so easy for people to defend themselves against stock plots and judgments that are widely recognized and accepted.

And think of the effects of the donkey's judgment upon the Nightingale's song: "she hung her head in sorrow and took to her wings and flew away." Is she hounded out of town, the way Lindemann Nelson described? -Behold the power of the Master Narrative: to make someone an outcast in one fell swoop, with incoherent, untrustworthy or perhaps inferior purposes in life.

We can only hope that wherever the Nightingale flew off to, another world was possible for her, another story that might effectively counter the foolishness of the donkey and his judgment, another story that might love the Nightingale back to her life and song. And this other story better be prepared to speak truth to power, it better address the Nightingale's song directly, and not get sidetracked with some other alternative story about her pretty flying skills. We cannot stop at trying to distract or console the Nightingale with alternative stories about her feathers or flying, when she has been so hurt about the judgment about her song and confused about the standards she was measured against. No, the Nightingale's counterstory has to be precisely about her song, and it has to restore her warbling and cooing and sighing back to her and unmask the stupidity, arrogance, and baseness of the comparison against the rooster.

To summarize, here is my learning from the supervision session by David Epston, Hilde Lindemann Nelson, and Ivan Krylov:

1. Counterstories are identity-constituting stories that have a necessary





relationship to Master Narratives

2. The relationship is one of resistance
3. Master Narratives resisted are those that are generated by oppressive forces within an abusive power system and which impose an identity that marks its members untrustworthy
4. Counterstories set out to repair the damage that has been inflicted on an identity by an oppressive Master Narrative
5. Counterstories aim at freedom of agency (Lindeman Nelson, 2001).

A Lioness, A Killer Whale, A Phoenix: Zhen's Story **A practice example of counterstorying work**

I met Zhen at a women's group I was facilitating with colleagues. I quickly came to know Zhen as a philosopher (in fact, a straight A student of philosophy) and a story teller with the capacity to move. Here it is, one of the definitions of a "moral character: a person with the capacity to move others" (Epston, 2018, p. 18) And never mind that she moved *me*, but she moved the women in the group.... here are some excerpts of our conversations reflected in my usual poetry format of how the other women responded to Zhen's presence and her stories:

*"Zhen's passion to fight
lights my fire..."*

*"When I listen to Zhen,
I make up my mind:
Somewhere between Zhen's determination
And the constraints of my life
I decided to be brave..."*

*"Zhen, I have heard you speak of defying this
And it does something to me:
I want to rise up and fight this.
Purposefully, intentionally, consciously:"*





Rise up, like stand up..."

Can you already hear the first notes of a nightingale setting up to sing here? Someone is lighting fires, causing bravery and an intentional sense of rising up, for the women in the group.

So naturally, I was a bit curious. Who are you? Who is this woman? Who can inspire women at a women's group, that can so easily become a

*Garbage bin of sadness
Or a little factory of life-skill production
They can so easily lose
All contact to real people.*

*I wish to be part of a group
Where something happens each week
That makes us feel
Like we can survive the time in-between.*

These are Zhen's words as she is reflecting on her experiences of therapy groups. Just who is this woman?

In short order, I came to learn some things about this woman and her life. I came to learn that quite aside from her inspiring ways and her astute observations, her very life, the fact that she is alive today, is a bloody triumph of the human spirit. I will not belabour all the details of what Zhen has been up against in her life, but a few words will do: as first daughter of 2 girls born in China to a woman of limited means, Zhen was abandoned at a young age to live with her grandparents. At times, Zhen's grandparents treated her kindly, taking pride in Zhen's academic successes and urging her along to claim a space in the world. Zhen remembers how her grandfather taught her to ride the bike by running along side her and how her grandmother announced her stellar grades to the neighbours. However, Zhen was also the recipient of vicious physical abuse at the hands of her uncle, and of sexual exploitation by the men in her life.





At age 13, Zhen begged her mother during a visit to take her with her to the city and promised that she would not be a burden in any way, and that she only wished for a safe place to sleep and study, but mom could not oblige her. Zhen had to wait more years until she could escape, and at the first opportunity, escape she did. She met her future husband, and they moved to the city and later to Canada.

Here are some transcriptions of Zhen's words about these relationships and her discernments about the matter of love in my usual poetry format:

Three Stories of Love

“My grandmother did not love me
 Because I am a girl.
 My grandfather loved me
 -And it is *complicated*.
 I envy a love without complications.
 But also:
 I would like to say that I too
 Am a complicated person.
 So
 I don't care what kind of love it is
 As long as it is love.
 I realized this when my grandfather
 Sent me money
 Because I said: “I want to get educated.”
 I realized this when my grandfather
 Sent me money
 To buy alcohol
 Because he found out I could not sleep at night.
 What this means to me is that he supported me
 In *whatever* I wanted.
 He loved me so much
 He didn't judge me.





Love isn't dependent
 On being a good student,
 Being a good person,
 Love means...
 I no longer judge this person morally."

"...As you are speaking
 I am thinking of my husband.
 When we came to Canada,
 We were very poor,
 So we cut each others' hair.
 You see, these days he can afford a hair-cut,
 But he still insists I cut it
 Even though I never improved at it!
 So from time to time he will look at me
 And say "I need a haircut."
 And then he sits down in the bathroom
 And I start clipping away
 And the snow falls outside the window
 And he grows very quiet
 And all you can hear is the clipping of the scissors
 And a closeness
 Between husband and wife
 That is beyond any words."

"I am a Martial Artist
 In a world full
 Of ballroom dance.
 The foxtrot is a beautiful dance
 With its polite





Steps and rehearsed gestures.
 I watch them and marvel
 -Only I can't dance it.
 If love is a dance
 And only a dance
 May I ask
 With a respectful bow
 And raising my eyes to meet your eyes
 My opponent, my teacher, my student, my friend
 Can love be a fight?"

I wonder, do you hear a nightingale now, dear reader? And if you do, let me tell you how this nightingale met some donkeys and roosters. Or asses and cocks, if you will.

Zhen went to University here in Canada. She embraced University life, the learning, the reading, the grappling with ideas with an unsurpassed passion. Her mind was soaring, and she made great friends in the form of professors and other students as well as Michel Foucault, Martin Luther King, Virginia Woolf, and Vincent Van Gogh. Many students and professors delighted in her ways of thinking and expression, and she quickly became a straight A student of philosophy. The remnants of the effects of the terrors of her old life sometimes visited her to cause anxiety when she was studying and writing exams. In addition, Zhen's particular-ness in wanting to express herself well, and her refusal to be held captive by the constraints on her language and ideas by her ESL status, meant that she needed some accommodations at University for taking a longer time to write essays and exams. But no problem, right?

Wrong. For continued successful study despite some obstacles, Zhen relied on academic accommodations, and this in turn meant that she continuously needed medical doctors to sign notes regarding her need for accommodations and some cooperation between doctors and her professors. And in those exchanges regarding her accommodations, it





became clear that not all professors and not all doctors were in favour of anyone being a Martial Artist, especially in our Canadian ballroom dance kind of context.

Here are some examples of exchanges between Zhen and her doctor during these times in Zhen's own words in my usual poetry format.

I am sitting with the question:

“do you have significant difficulties 95% of the time?”

And I look at my doctor

Who wants me to check something off.

I say:

“I have a better idea.

Let's write on the form:

Please send detective to live with this person

To find out about her 95% of the time.”

-But he didn't think I was funny.

Who knows what it is like when I feel so down about myself

After an appointment.

When I ask myself: why did I say these things to him?

Don't I know

There are those who are waiting for me to make a mistake

And use my words against me?

I went in there feeling high, feeling good

And told him “I don't need this help anymore”

He said I had manipulated him.

It hurt a lot.

I refuse the word “manipulate”

I am Strategic.

Soon there weren't just letters that were about giving a student more time with her assignments, soon there were professional words for what was wrong with Zhen, and these words grew into stories about her identity that





were printed in official files. A reputation was born.

Zhen is not a Martial Artist, she is a trouble-maker.

Zhen is not astute and respectful and witty in questioning power, she is paranoid.

Zhen is not determined, she is obsessing.

Zhen is not innocent in her wish to engage with ideas, she is manipulative.

And might these stories about Zhen's character and her efforts in life have something to do with Master Narratives? One of the Master Narratives that is informing these stories is a story about appropriate behavior for women, and in particular, women who are not white. In Zhen's own words, the requirements for women, and women of colour, in the medical and academic settings sound something like this: *"Be simple, be happy, be pleasant, be charming, be pretty, be sexy, be positive. Say 'I'm sorry' and 'thank you.' Don't question, don't point out bullshit, don't use the word 'bullshit', don't ever ask 'why?' Don't question rules, don't try to insist that you have ideas and ethical positions and an interest in all matters political and philosophical and that you enjoy debate. And most definitely, don't be complicated. And for heaven's sake, don't talk back when the men make pronouncements about you."*

Do you know what happens to women, and in particular, women of colour, who refuse these standards of "ladylike" behavior? Zhen was perfectly aware of how others might perceive her unladylike behavior, and that she was "courting persistent misreading" (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. 26) by her refusal to accept these mainstream standards of how a lady should behave.

There is another Master Narrative here, and it comes to us delivered straight from the Bible of normal and abnormal behavior. Zhen was given diagnoses.

The story that started growing was that Zhen's thoughts aren't "real," they are psychotic, her emotional responses aren't "real," they are manipulative, her iron determination to succeed in University isn't "real," it's too intense,





her way of engaging deeply with ideas and arguing about them isn't about her intelligence, it is treatment-resistant. In short, Zhen's character and actions could be summarized as expressions of these disorders.

These stories were delivered to Zhen in writing, and I had the dubious pleasure to read some of these assessments. One memorable example that diagnosed Zhen with Psychosis based on a Rorschach test came with this pronouncement: "Zhen is not fit to be a University student." What does this sound like to you? How about: "There is a disconcerting lack of appreciation of the very real ways in which powerful people's representations of who we are can constrict our freedom of movement" (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. 53).

Or: "Identity is a question of how others understand what I am doing, as well as how I understand what I am doing. If other people perceive my actions to be those of a morally trustworthy person, then they will permit me to act freely. Both others recognition that I am a morally responsible person and my own sense of myself as a morally responsible person, then, are required for the free exercise of moral agency" (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. 22).

Here she was, this woman whose intelligence and academic competence were not in dispute by anyone, and who still faced an assault of questioning of her "fitness" to be part of the University community because of something far murkier: her "ways of engaging" with people in power and the fact that she did not conduct herself demurely or otherwise appropriately enough in these engagements. Her doctors did not appreciate her questioning of her diagnoses, her research into the origins of words, her passion to point out the flaws in the University system that served to silence and oppress her, and her insistence on continuing to debate the questions and assessment tools that were held sacred by the professionals involved.

What could any of us do, when Zhen's personal problem story became so intermingled with Master Narratives that were widely circulated as a reputation, that she stood to be hounded out of town, to be





excommunicated from University, to be disciplined, treated, and quarantined against her will by the power of a Master Narrative?

At the women's group, we had already witnessed her telling of some alternative stories, and we had immortalized her "protests" of her treatment by powerful others in the form of outsider witnessing responses as well as letters and poems. Her stories of protests had been deeply moving and inspiring of all of us and had changed the course of other group members' lives. And yet, Zhen returned to her life each week as well as more encounters with the identity-damaging narratives that were circulating about her, and she was barely holding on. Week after week, she was re-telling stories of her exchanges with doctors and professors, crying, and asking: "is this me? Is what they are saying about me true? Sanni, what does the word 'manipulative' mean, what does it mean when he says, 'you Zhen are the common denominator in all your problems?'"

Here is Zhen's own summary of the effects of this treatment of her:

*...In my pain, I am a teacher.
But this gift has been dismissed by so many
Who say I am broken as if I did something wrong
Who say I am broken as if I were an old car.
I looked into this black hole and the black hole looked back at me
And my humanity started fading out
Under the pressure to forge a tuna can mind.
But I am not a car and I read their report
And I cried...*

Lindemann Nelson reminds us why verdicts of our mental states ("medical gaslighting") may be particularly difficult to resist: such verdicts may be "evidence-resistant precisely because the person no longer trusts herself to exercise her moral agency competently, because she no longer regards herself as mentally competent" (Lindemann Nelson, 2001, p. 31).





It was at this point where I thought that maybe staging “demonstrations” in the form of “protest poems” to the guards at the museum was not enough. What if there were a way to tell a story about her “ways of engaging” with powerful people that could contest their verdicts of her, or at least sow some suspicion of their assessments of her character, and perhaps even restore her interest in her own actions and efforts that had been so maligned?

We tried to tell a counterstory. Not an alternative story that would be about some aspect of Zhen’s life that wasn’t under assault like her marriage, but a counterstory that would strike at the heart of the Master Narrative about her engagements with her doctors and professors. We prepared meticulously for this endeavour: I read and reread all the poetry that I had written for Zhen, sifted through all the metaphors that she had come up with, and all the stories she had told about her life, her struggles, and her ideas in her own words on power and on loving interactions with others.

Below are 3 excerpts of this counterstorying interview that my colleagues Tom Carlson and Tiffany Saxton and I conducted and videotaped, and subsequently showed to Zhen. In this interview, Tom and Tiffany are interviewing me “as Zhen” (which is reflected in naming me “Sanni’s Zhen” in the transcripts). The entire interview takes place in the landscape of a metaphor Zhen herself had used to describe her relationships with those people who had some power over her, like some doctors, psychiatrists and professors: she called them “the white-maned lions.” This interview was well-prepared for in terms of my knowledge and use of Zhen’s own unique dictionary, and yet entirely unrehearsed and spontaneous in our wondering aloud about Zhen’s ideas and motives and her moral character in her interactions with said lions. Please have a read.

Excerpt 1

Sanni’s Zhen: I remember once making a joke to Sanni at group about being a little cat and going up to the lions cage and



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rattling it and running. But there was something about the women's groups, I told them later, that because of the way they heard me, because of the way my words meant something to them, that I don't think I'm a little cat. I said maybe I've become a lynx [Tom laughs slightly].

Tom: Is a lynx a bit more than a cat?

Sanni's Zhen: Yeah. I'm not a kitten. I've been taught to apologize all my life for the way I am. I don't know if it's okay to be a lynx, it feels like it's okay [appears really emotional and tearful at this point as she finishes her sentence].

Tom: In the groups it's okay to be a lynx?

Sanni's Zhen: Yeah.

Tom: Mm-hm. And is it okay right now?

Sanni's Zhen: It's okay right now.

Tom: Did you have a sense as Tiffany was reading that poem, did you have a sense of perhaps yourself being a lynx a bit more than a kitten?

Sanni's Zhen: Yes. [smiles as she answers]

Tiffany: I'm curious about what makes for lynxness? [Both Tom and Tiffany chuckle slightly]

Tom: Versus catness or kittyness?

Tiffany: Yeah! What grows a kitten into a lynx?





Sanni's Zhen: What grows a kitten into a lynx? I think it happens unseen. I think it happens by way of practice, and I think it happens – one cannot do it alone. We can never become the lynxes of our stories. We need others. I need others to see me and to tell me you do not have to apologize for having grown in that way. Maybe even laugh and delight about the lynxes ways. But if the lynx always just tries to be a kitten that's kind of – to shrink back into a kitten. That's terrifying. The punishment of that hurts.

Excerpt 2

Tom: Have these white maned lions with their power of their words and their pens forgotten that they are white maned lions? Have they forgotten in the sense that they expect to be treated by others like little cats without claws? What happens when you protest against the white maned lion?

Sanni's Zhen: What happens is they show their teeth, they snarl, and they throw insults at you when you're walking away already. -Not all of them.

Tom: Some of them?

Sanni's Zhen: Some of them.

Tom: Do they get upset at you when you try to treat them as a big cat?

Sanni's Zhen: Yes.

Tom: Yeah, if they are upset at you for treating them like a big cat as maybe they should be treated, do they expect you





to treat them in soft ways, subordinate ways – not subordinate, but just accept whatever they deliver you?

Sanni's Zhen: They want – yes – they want deference.

Tom: Deference – yeah. So because they're lions what does that mean in terms of how you should be with them and how they should be with you?

Sanni's Zhen: We could have this – it said in the poem *not* a dirty fight, but we could have this encounter. We might roar at each other. Show off and enjoy it. Enjoy each other. We could be in each other's company in respect.

Tiffany: Is that your hope behind and maybe intention behind treating the big lions as the big cats that they are?

Sanni's Zhen: See the thing is, the lions are in a cage. They're not free. I am. But I am. I can go. I can leave. I can come back, but they stay put. So in a way -- I think about the little cat that might come after me or has to sit there and hold their paws all nicely and say please and thank you or cross or open their legs, whatever the lions wish. And that's why I do it, I do it for them, for the little cats - but a part of me, a part of me is brave enough to think that if the cage bars could just be shown, not just to the women, to the kittens, who have to consult them but also to the lions themselves.

Tom: Even to the white maned lions?

Sanni's Zhen: Yes! Could they be free? Could they come out? Could this be a different world? - But lions do not like it when you point out that they're in a cage and that I am a free.





- Tom: Do you know what this cage is that they are in these lions? What is the cage kind of keeping them from maybe?
- Sanni's Zhen: The lions have a human soul, but they've forgotten.
- Tom: Is that what cage is?
- Sanni's Zhen: [Nods head in agreement] They hide behind structures and systems and hierarchies and rules. They pretend that all those things are life, but they are the bars of the cages and we can be so much more than that.
- Tom: Is that why you keep going back, so that they might somehow, that their humanity might be restored to them in some way?
- Sanni's Zhen: [Becomes tearful] Yes.
- Tom: And not only will they stop hurting other kittens, but that they will stop hurting too?
- Sanni's Zhen: Yeah. It's a fake caged life made up out of letters and systems, hierarchies, rules. I don't think we were meant to live like that.
- Tom: In cages?
- Sanni's Zhen: Yes. Boundaries, they love that.
- Tom: Have they tried to put you in a cage?
- Sanni's Zhen: Yes.





- Tom: Your whole life have they tried to put you in a cage?
- Sanni's Zhen: Yes.
- Tiffany: Has it been a cage built for kittens or was their consideration of the bigger cat that might one day come?
- Sanni's Zhen: Nope, they did not see me coming. [Tiffany and Tom laugh heartily]

Excerpt 3

- Tiffany: A life of more honor, an honorable life? Is that the kind of life that you've been living Zhen, is a life of honor, not just for others, but for yourself as well?
- Sanni's Zhen: [tearfully] I don't know how else. I can't quit.
- Tom: You can't quit being, living in a way that honors life?
- Sanni's Zhen: Yes (quietly).
- Tom: Humanity?
- Sanni's Zhen: [nods head in agreement] That's why I couldn't sign the behavior contract. How do you sign –
- Tom: Is there no honor in that?
- Sanni's Zhen: No [shakes head readily]. How do you do these things?
- Tom: You have not been willing to give up your honor?





- Sanni's Zhen: Yes.
- Tom: Even in the face of threats? We might remove you from school if you don't dishonor yourself?
- Sanni's Zhen: [nods head in agreement] I guess I never knew that [almost whispers, speaks very low]
- Tom: You never knew that that's what you were doing.
- Sanni's Zhen: Yeah. I thought I was just angry.
- Tom: You thought you were just angry when you decided to refuse?
- Sanni's Zhen: [nods head]
- Tom: Is this something that goes so against what you believe in life, what's important to you, that you couldn't bear to dishonor yourself?
- Sanni's Zhen: Yeah. My signature on a page like that would go against everything.
- Tom: In the same way that you can't bear to see lions dishonor themselves?
- Sanni's Zhen: Yeah. They write up those things the lions.
- Tom: But you still go back to them and offer them their honor?
- Sanni's Zhen: Yeah. Love is complicated.





Tom: Because love is complicated [smiles greatly].

Counterstories are stories that define people morally and are developed for the express purpose of resisting and undermining oppressive Master Narratives (Lindemann Nelson, 2001). In our interview, we attempted to undermine the Master Narrative of how Zhen ought to behave as a woman, and the Master Narrative of how her actions are manifestations of mental disorders with the hope that the counterstory of her responses to the white maned lions may allow Zhen some freedom to dissent from the interpretation and conclusions that the Master Narratives had invited in her life.

I have been unwilling to dishonour myself, I have been unwilling to dishonour other kittens, I have been unwilling to dishonour even the lions. Love is complicated. People are complicated. I am complicated. Will you not fight and dance this life with me, in a spirit of mutual respect and honour? I bow to you, as a true Martial Artist in this world.

I was very nervous to show Zhen this videotape. Zhen was tearful and quiet through the viewing of the videotape and declining invitations to comment in the moment in favour of watching the recording in full and keeping her own counsel. She later recounted how she had driven to a motel together with her husband for a business trip immediately after viewing the recording. She said that she found herself hesitating to take her usual sleep medication at night, because “I wasn’t sure yet what this was, but I have a feeling I want to stay awake for it.” Shortly thereafter, Zhen requested (and received) a full transcript of the interview, as she is, of course, most in her element when she can interact with a text rather than a videotape, and she brought this highlighted and annotated transcript to our follow-up meetings. Zhen immediately grasped the heart of the interview, the idea of “restoring a person’s honour.” She researched the meanings and origins of the words “restoring” and “honour” in dictionaries and my colleagues and I negotiated these meanings together with her in many follow-up meetings.





In one of these early meetings she exclaimed to my colleague Loree Stout: “I don’t know if they know this, but they can have a political effect.” Zhen had gone and insisted that both the full transcript of the interview as well as some letters that my colleagues and I had written to her be included in her medical and academic files. She said “There is now a radical difference in the accounts of who I am, an idea of me as a character in the Cuckoo’s nest, and a counter-idea of me as a lioness, and I can bring these ideas together in my file, and this will force whoever reads my file, to consider, to question, to use their critical thinking skills to ask themselves – why are these accounts so different?”

Shortly after these initial conversations, and Zhen’s pouring over the transcript of the recording, we set up a meeting with Zhen to interview her about her thoughts. This is the unedited beginning of a transcript of this conversation with Zhen:

Tom: So we have been trying to do this with everybody, Zhen, where we could have a conversation today that is more focused on research. We maybe don't normally have these kinds of conversations but we are really trying to look at, - the best we can - some of the effects of the IWP interview. We are asking you to help us understand some of the ways the interview works. The way it influences you. And I will ask questions that will help with that.

Zhen: I keep thinking about it. So I told Loree how the interview really influenced me in my life I knew something was there but before I wasn't seeing it clearly because I don't know *what it is*. I know it's profound. I'm just trying to speak up more about it.

I keep thinking there is University Zhen and then the Zhen I saw in the interview. My whole life has been actually been about University Zhen, all of my goals. But I had this





idea that maybe University Zhen was missing something...

Can I tell you an example: So I was with my professor a few days ago. He said to me "Zhen you are a University student. At the University, we respect "rational." He used the word *rational* and he told me very clearly "we as a university, we only respect rational decisions." And then I kept thinking "Is this something different? He is talking about a rational Zhen, but I am thinking about what feels authentic to me."

We were actually talking about a philosophy paper I need to hand in and I was asking for an extension because I also need to write my human rights application. So the professor is telling me "uh, Zhen. I want you to make a rational decision, you have a paper to write and this is a contract between you and the university. You have a contract, you need to be rational and we want you to prioritize the essay because of the deadline."

So I told him, "okay, but intuitively, I want to prioritize my human rights because it's *more important* for me. Because all my heart is, -I'm very intuitive toward justice." And he said "No, Zhen. Your decision to prioritize human rights is irrational and we do not respect irrational. Why? Because we know you have mental disorders." -Actually, I appreciate the professor, I am close to him and he knows me very well. He said--"Because I know you, the decision to prioritize your human rights case is because of your having anxiety, because of these disorders."

You know, I became University Zhen because I wanted to deepen or widen, or enhance my autonomy. I went to





University to learn knowledge, to learn how to be rational, how to engage in critical thinking. Because I thought that would be the way to enhance my autonomy. But now I just keep thinking there's a difference. But what is it? What's different? And I had this epiphany—or maybe it is a kind of ...transcendence. It is my conclusion now that it doesn't matter. *I still have my autonomy*, it doesn't matter if the university says "you are irrational. I don't give you autonomy, so you don't have autonomy."

I claim that it doesn't matter if I'm "irrational" or "rational" in another's eyes, especially Western eyes. I still have my autonomy, my own "rational." The University says we don't respect the decision by the irrational state. *We don't honor that*". But I say "I claim [said with force as she pounds fist into hand] you must honor me."

Because I think my autonomy is about the ability to have self-regard, self-direction—and to have the ability to make decisions because they are *good for me* [pounds fists to emphasize each word]. My decisions --*they are mine*. Not because they are imposed by the state, or by psychiatry, or the university—and then I have imposed them on my mind – the decisions, *they are mine*.

Tom: They are yours.

Zhen: And what is more important is that not only am I making decisions, but I have the freedom and the capacity to *act* [pounds fist] on it. To do something about it, not just I think about what is good. This interview helped me to realize that I claim, that my decision must be respected, honored.





It doesn't matter if it's irrational or rational. First of all, who has a say in what is irrational? I don't believe psychiatry knows more than me. And secondly, if I say as long as I can remember, I have always been in this state, the OCD, what was it, the anxiety, the dissociating...*If I am always* in this state, then *that it is my state*. And I don't need to be fixed or cured from my state. So I learned something, but I am not sure if I can articulate it.

Sanni: So are you saying that in some way in this recent conversation with this prof, are you saying how you are noticing how something different has come to you, I suppose, in a very *real* conversation. And because of remembering a different Zhen, that then you could claim something in this way? Is it possible that, on this day of this argument with this prof you saw Zhen interacting from a different place, altogether?

Zhen: I don't need to be, I don't need to be *fixed*. I don't need to be *cured* in order to make a good decision, so the decision can be accepted, can be honored by others. This is about my claim to make a decision for myself. My decision is good solely because it is mine.

Tom: It's because the decision belongs to you? When you were watching the interview, was that in some way revealed to you? That you already have this autonomy? That you already don't need to be fixed? When you were watching the interview and later reflecting on it was this like a revelation?

Zhen: Right, to reveal--something already in me. The revealing what is already there, but was forgotten.





- Tom: There is a philosopher who talks about this phrase "moral character"--
- Zhen: "moral character" [repeats Tom's words thoughtfully]
- Tom: --this is your, the character that has always been with you. This enduring character that has always belonged to you, that's--that is your autonomy that you're talking about, right? This so-called irrational Zhen, um, this person who rises up, right?
- Sanni: A lioness.
- Tom: --a lioness, right. That--that's always been there. But all that came to you like a revelation, like "Ahh!" this is who I am?
- Zhen: Right
- Tom: Is that what it felt like for you, Zhen?
- Zhen: Right, it is a revelation because I have been--how do you say--under the school bullshit too much.
- Tom: The school bullshit? [Laughs]
- Zhen: I think by reading the interview and by seeing really what is different. What does the different mean to me, I thought about it. That is, I *truly* understand what is autonomy.
- Tom: Does the interview and thinking about it all the while afterwards--because you've been thinking about it a lot,





right? Has it given you a capacity to act? To act on your own behalf?

Zhen: Yes, to *demand*! [said with force]

Tom: To demand--

Zhen: Their respect. To *demand*—that they honor me even though my decision comes from so called irrational state. *I demand you must honor me.*

Tom: yeah, yeah. And have you been like--I'm just curious how that happened, and I'm wondering if you were kind of in some way wrestling with wanting to embrace this difference? And somehow, in this moment, with the prof you realized you have the capacity [slaps hands as Zhen had done before] to act. To demand respect. To have your own, as you said, "the ability to have self-regard" right "to have self-direction".

Tom: Did seeing the interview help you claim respect for yourself? Your own respect.

Zhen: Yes. Yes, because before I always thinking, that there was something wrong with me--I needed to be fixed. I needed to be cured--I need—treatment. So I can be respected. And now I say, I don't need to be fixed.

Tom: Mhm. I already am. Is that one of the things that was revealed to you? That, you did not need to be fixed? You are, you are well enough as you are. In the so-called irrational--version of your life, right?

Zhen: And that I claim this so called irrational state. I claim that,





this is my state. I think they are using, how do you say-- paternalistic interference, right? The husband, the father the doctor the professor, the “paternals” always say "Zhen I want you to be rational, because it's *good for you*--We have to interfere, *we want to fix you, we want you to be cured, because it's good for you*"

- Tom: Yeah
- Zhen: I want to say, "bullshit!"
- Tom: Yes, right. Is it, is it rational to want to claim your rights as a person?
- Zhen: Yes. It is rational to claim, this is my right. *Regardless* whether I have OCD, depression, I have anxiety, I have dissociation—regardless whether I am female, *regardless* it is rational, I claim my right. I have this epiphany!
- Tom: Yes, that is an epiphany.
- Zhen: You know, before I always knew my life. But by watching this interview I knew this is my life but --I revisited my life for the first time.
- Tom: Wow. That--that's a philosopher statement too, Zhen.
- Sanni: There is such beauty in this sentence, Zhen, I don't know if you realize--to revisit something, we have already visited, right? To revisit--we are revisiting--you're putting language on its head by saying "I revisited my life for the first time"--
- Zhen: Yes. *It became so real to me*





- Tom: It became real. Yes. Yes.
- Sanni: Zhen, do you think this practice is worth doing, for this reason that I can somehow bring it to life, how badly I would like to tell people what their lives mean to me.
- Zhen: Yes. Yes, it is like this. It is like, you people always say "you are superwoman, you can move the mountains" And it is good to hear it, and maybe I believe that. But this is *like I really move mountains*---you know what I mean?
- Tom: Yes. Did you see yourself moving mountains?
- Zhen: Right. I saw myself move mountains. I keep telling myself, "I can move mountains, I can move the mountain"
- Tom: So in this interview, you saw yourself acting in ways that actually did move mountains.
- Zhen: Yes
- Tom: And then you--
- Sanni: *Remembered.*
- Tom: --You remembered.
- Sanni: And revisited--the moving of mountains.
- Tom: That you could move mountains. You became a witness to your capacity to move mountains.
- Zhen: Yes I--I claim to be a, how do you say-- I claim to be a fish--I will explain why that is--





- Tom: [laughs] Okay
- Zhen: --because you know the university is like the factory, assembly line—They say "come to the university! Come to the university! We open your mind! But they pulled my mind, like a fish, they pulled me into a tuna can. And then they said "we are good. Come to us, we are good. We open your mind" But I want to say "*I don't want to be a tuna can! Even though you can open the can. I want to be a fish!*" I want to be a freely swimming fish in the ocean. I don't want to be a canned--tuna can in the factory.
- Tom: People are convinced that they have open minds but they are inside a tuna can?
- Sanni: Zhen for me this is the most surprising thing, because remember what we talked about. Pretty much the whole year at the women's group we talked about the metaphor of the water, and of safeboats and your feeling how you were always drowning. And holding on, but almost drowning. But how come you're a fish now!
- Tom: A fish freely swimming around!
- Sanni: What happened?
- Zhen: Thank you! Thank you, I remember the metaphor in the group. I was always saying how I am struggling with the water. And some people were my safe boats that I could hold on to.
- Tom: I have--the crazy idea-- were you struggling to swim and Sanni and Loree were the graspable form. But afterwards,





you became the graspable form. And you could swim freely, without a life boat.

Zhen: I think I've become a killer whale.

Sanni and Tom: [laughing at Zhen's metaphor]

Sanni: Not just any fish either

Tom: You're a *killer whale*.

Sanni: This is the most surprising twist to the metaphor. Because before, we spent an inordinate amount of time trying to imagine different things, like swimming into the harbor and resting. And I remember there were rest points, and there were these fake banana peel donuts--things that always kind of, caved in on you. And then there were the safe boats. But there was always this person with this sense of exhaustion, like how exhausting it was--to stay alive. To not drown. But would you have guessed that this metaphor would change so dramatically? That--would you have guessed it at the time that you might have become, in a year's time--

Tom: A killer whale. [softly, with reverence]

Sanni: --a killer whale.

Tom: Swimming freely.

Zhen: I realized, during--during this week, I am a killer whale.

I watched Zhen pound her fist into her hand every time she said the words "I claim" during this interview. I was moved beyond words about the poetry of





the repeated “I claim’s” and remembered the Savage’s famous series of “claims” to Mustapha Mond, the controller of the Brave New World in Aldous Huxley’s dystopian universe.

Zhen taught me an invaluable lesson about any counterstorying ventures: their goodness can only be judged by a person’s spontaneous claim of their masterpiece once it is taken down and returned to them from the museum wall.

Here is the poem that grew out of this interview with Zhen, and reflects on her series of claims:

And so I sat down with a lion
 -A likeable lion-
 And he said to me
Zhen, be rational
We cannot respect irrational.
There is a name for the irrational
And it is called Mental Disorder.

I might have said
 “I’m sorry. And thank you.
 Thank you for helping me.”
 But I knew something was there.
 I knew something was different.
 Sanni’s Zhen and Zhen’s Zhen joined forces
 And out came my words like a great surprise
 I never prepared for.

I. Claim.
 I claim autonomy.
 I claim my decision.
 And more.
 I claim my ability to make a good decision.





I claim my ability to recognize my state.
 I claim my ability to have self-regard.
 I claim freedom.
 I claim my capacity to act.
 I claim brilliance.
 I claim good ideas.
 I claim all that I have lived
 And have yet to live.
 And, my dear lion,
 There is more:
 I claim your respect for me.
 I claim them all.

Against all the paternalistic interference
 And their foolish pride in offering to open
 My tuna can mind
 And their invitations to discipline my identity

I claimed my lived experience.
 I turned my lived experience into a living thing.
 Sanni's Zhen's belief in me turned into a living thing.
 I travelled into this Zhen's future
 And you know who I became
 What is it!
 What is this!
 A killer whale swimming freely in the ocean.

I have struggled with water for years now
 Barely hanging on to safeboats
 Struggling alongside the banana peel donuts
 Always almost drowning.
 But this week
 I turned my own metaphor into life
 I became a graspable form





I became a killer whale
 Swimming freely
 Descending upright among the staring fish.
 And who could have known
 That this was possible.

The very next day
 I quietly handed in my human rights application
 And it now has been stamped and received.
 What change of fortune
 What surprise
 Is coming for me now
 I don't know.

But I have seen a glimpse of my form
 In the mirror
 After my eyes adjusted.
 I am not a tuna can mind.
 I am a killer whale
 Swimming freely.
 I claim what I see.
 This is all I have
 But this -
 Turns out to be a very great deal.

Dear Reader,

Who is this woman and what is her masterpiece we set out to steal from the Louvre?

Is she a philosopher? Is she a story teller? Is she a student? A moral seer in relation to power? Is she a bloody survivor?

Is she a nightingale, a kitten, a lynx, a lioness, a tuna can, a killer whale?

Is she a lover, a dancer, a Martial artist?





“I claim them all,” she said, upon their return to her hands.

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