

So long as we're alive,  
we will always encounter contradictory feelings,  
negative with positive.

I believe this is related to our past.  
Nostalgia memories are not easy to destroy.

So long as I live I'll keep on questioning  
what I should do with it.

*Nos talgia?*

*Sayaka Abe*

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# Introduction

## MY OLD PHOTOGRAPHS

I have more than 2000 photos which I shot by myself or were shot by close friends during a period roughly 10–15 years ago. I brought them from Japan with me when I moved here, I keep them here in Holland.

Looking through the pictures I have a strong and somehow uncontrollable reaction to them. I can recognise the emotion — it's the same that is often the central feeling that I use as inspiration or starting point of my own work. Although it is strong it is vague and not easy to describe. The images in the pictures are not group family pictures, neither are they portraits or showing friends faces or the kind of pictures that people generally keep for a long time.

I wonder why I should have such a strong reaction about these quite abstract and sometimes vague images of places. I can't find a logical reason. The pictures have been kept in storage and were almost forgotten, but I knew that I could not throw them away. I feel a strong sense of familiarity and I feel as if they are a part of me, but don't know why this is.

*"Photographs are fossils of light and memory, and photographs are the history of memory."* says Japanese photographer Daido Moriyama. In my own case

with paintings for example I find it hard to find the same depth of impression as with photographs. I miss some strong and direct connection that I can sometimes have with a photograph. The colour palettes can be similar but it is perhaps the impression of the transient situation that can be felt at times in a photograph with which I can connect to on a deeper level. There are happenings in those pictures that I can't find in paintings. In order to keep the moment of changing, the passion, emotion, it must be by photograph, and without control. As Moriyama says "*There are many things I can't control.*" There should be an image lag no matter how small, the time between the shutter opening and closing, and the light passing from the lens to the film. It is similar to the seasons that are always changing, no matter how slowly.

*"My photography is rooted in my personal desires, so it is natural that it gets personal."* \*1

In my case the feeling of looking at my own collection of photos, and the emotional reaction experienced brings me more questions. Is this feeling nostalgia? If yes then how can I define nostalgia in my own personal context?

\*1 *Daido Moriyama Photographs His Beloved Shinjuku* By Jiae Kim. (Theme Magazine)  
<http://www.thememagazine.com/stories/daido-moriyama/>  
<http://www.thememagazine.com>



*Stray Dog* Daido Moriyama

# Research

**Nostalgia:** n [U] *a feeling that a time in the past was good, or the activity of remembering a good time in the past and wishing that things had not changed.*

**Nostalgic:** adj *if you feel nostalgic about a time in the past, you feel happy when you remember it, and in some ways you wish that things had not changed.*

(Longman dictionary)

## ARTISTS RELATED TO NOSTALGIA

Some examples of artists who deal with the theme or feelings connected with memories or nostalgia are for one Hans Op de Beeck (1969, BELGIUM). His work includes sculptures, installations, videos, animated films, photography, drawings, paintings, music, sound and words. His work is a reflection on the human emotional condition; our difficult relationship with time, space and each other in a contemporary environment.\*<sup>2</sup> He uses non-existent yet identifiable places and this seems to invoke a kind of universal, yet personal feeling of nostalgia in the audience.

He treats the topic in an unscientific way, to create a parallel world that echoes back to past feelings of loneliness and coldness. He uses images such a shopping centre after the war or the Burj Khalifa in Dubai (the highest building in the world).

The exhibition *Sea of Tranquillity* was presented using maquette, film, drawing and dolls of the actors of the film. There is no script used in the work. All of the film, works and images are made in a monotone colour, slow speed, and none of the characters speak any



*Sea of Tranquillity* — exhibition/2010 Hans op de Beeck

\*<sup>2</sup> *La Libre Belgique Bienvenue à bord du "Sea of Tranquillity" by Guy Duplat, 25 January 2011. (Translated by Matthias Dolder)*

words except the voice of a singer in the boat.  
*The voice stays in your memory as the only simple warm, human element. The movie leads the visitor nowhere, and leaves you with a feeling of dissatisfaction or emptiness.* \*3

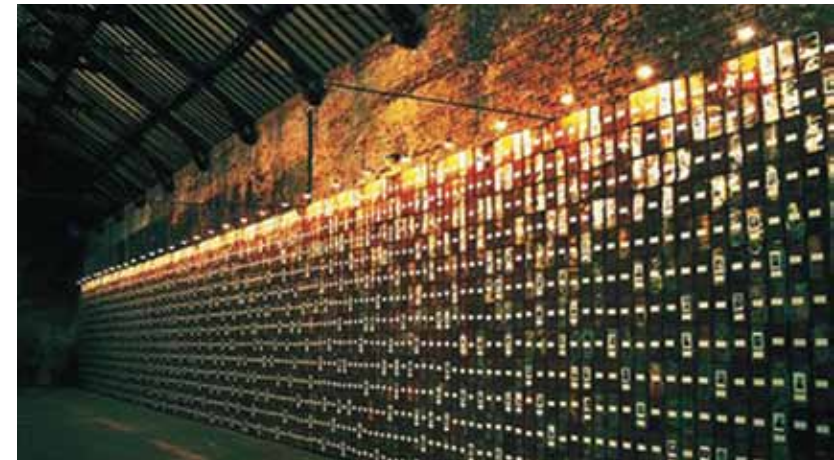
He says *“Is it too beautiful, is everything so beautiful and perfect, or do you feel this to be uncomfortable?”* Beeck gives a critique of this issue of uncomfortableness to the visitor which seems to create an echo to their own memories and nostalgic emotion.\*2

Another is Christian Boltanski (1944, FRANCE) who deals always with the subject of memories. He creates installations with light as a central element and materials such as old photos he finds in a market, second hand clothes, or old daily life objects. In his interview he said that *“there is nothing better to use than photos, more than painting. I use the material which is closest to people, and present those materials as documentation. Because everyone has their own way to look at art works.”* \*4

He doesn't want give the answer to the audience, but to leave the question with them.

\*3 *The Low Countries. Arts and Society in Flanders and the Netherlands Nocturne. The Art of Hans Op de Beeck*

\*4 Christian Boltanski interview from his documentary (1996, 52 minutes)  
<http://www.ubu.com/film/boltanski.html>



Top: *No Man's Land* (Park Avenue Armory, 2010) Middle: *Monument Canada* (Selections, 1988 from Duke Magazine) Bottom: *Personnes* (Monumenta, 2010) by Cristian Boltanski



He uses the material which is closest to the person central to his work.

I can only imagine that nostalgia itself is a very personal feeling related to our own histories, different from person to person with each person having different perceptions about it and different catalysts that can trigger it. My personal feelings of my own past, specifically the feeling when looking at my photographs is a strong feeling of familiarity with, but not simply a longing for the past. Neither do I feel that it is not a yearning to that time, it is for me a positive feeling. It is a feeling that can come at other times too, with a familiar smell, taste or a combination of specific kinds of colour and light. Many different kinds of light in fact, especially the strong bright white light from nature, the orange/pink/blue light at sunset and warm coloured light of the evening with long shadows. My fragments of memories are becoming more clear and meaningful when triggered by those natural elements.

#### A FIELD OF VIEW CLOSE TO THE HUMAN EYE

I took the collection of photos using a manual film camera, a NIKON FE, which my father gave me when I was young. Even though it was an old camera the condition was very good. I started taking photographs with 35mm colour film; Fuji 200 iso, 400 iso and Kodak, Konica film also. After trying many different combinations of camera settings and types of film I found that Konica was my favourite. The colour palette had a particular attraction for me, specifically the colour range of bright blues, reds, purples and pinks.

I shot everything from this period using Konica film and just one lens, a 50mm. I recently discovered that the 50mm lens on an SLR is said to give a field of view very close to what the human eye perceives <sup>\*5</sup>. This is an interesting point because these pictures trigger my feelings in a way that seems as if those images are really reflections of what I saw or what I chose to see with my own eyes at that moment.

\*5 <http://www.photosig.com/articles/585/article>

The human eyes and brain are connected and what a person sees or chooses to see is almost certainly connected with what the person is most connected to or interested in. The person somehow chooses unconsciously, specifically in the case of an instant or instinctive snapshot. They are not planned and come from an intuitive reaction, unlike a studio photograph, and the result is captured in the image.

Which kinds of images are contained in the pictures?

They were shot as simple snapshots of places, for example landscapes taken at different kinds of angles. They are out of focus at times on purpose, sometime they show the same landscape at the same angle, one is focused and the other is out of focus, a shadow and a colour reflection within the shadow, water drops, a body part of a person within a landscape. You can recognise abstract lines, colours, forms and light. Looking at them it's hard to judge sometimes where and when or in what situation the pictures were taken, even for me.

I decided to open the box containing all these pictures once more and start to archive them in order to try to understand what this feeling I have towards them is.

It is not so simple or straightforward to understand what is in these pictures and how I could organise them. They are ambiguous and the feelings I experience looking at them are so wide, excited and somehow untouchable for me. It is complex. Therefore I simply started instantly choosing and dividing them. I chose around 40 pictures. By colour, shapes, situations etc I divided them into 12 groups.

Out of the 12 groups I picked up one or two words for each archive. The words that came to me were: Pair, Door, Sky, Sharp, I am out, Not looking at the camera, Standing/table, Gates to another space, Ambiguous/fuzzy/blurry, Reflection, Colour in shadow, Unknown.

Out of those archives I picked up 10 photographic series.

## IMPRESSION OF 10 PHOTO SERIES

I

They look almost the same but in the focussed image there is a black shadow in the top right of image. The camera angle of the two is slightly panned to the right and left, meaning that the windows position is also different. The small differences between the two give me the sense of a slight time lag. The time while I was adjusting the focus. The time while I changed the camera angle from left to right. An un-symmetric image.

~

The blue sky gives me an easy and open feeling. I like the time lag between the two because I am loosing focus on the figure in the picture to adjust the subject. I don't have the same unexplainable emotional feeling from the focussed image; in fact the focussed image seems emptier of feeling compared to the unfocussed one.

I



Two similar pictures of the top of a building one is in focus, the other unfocussed.

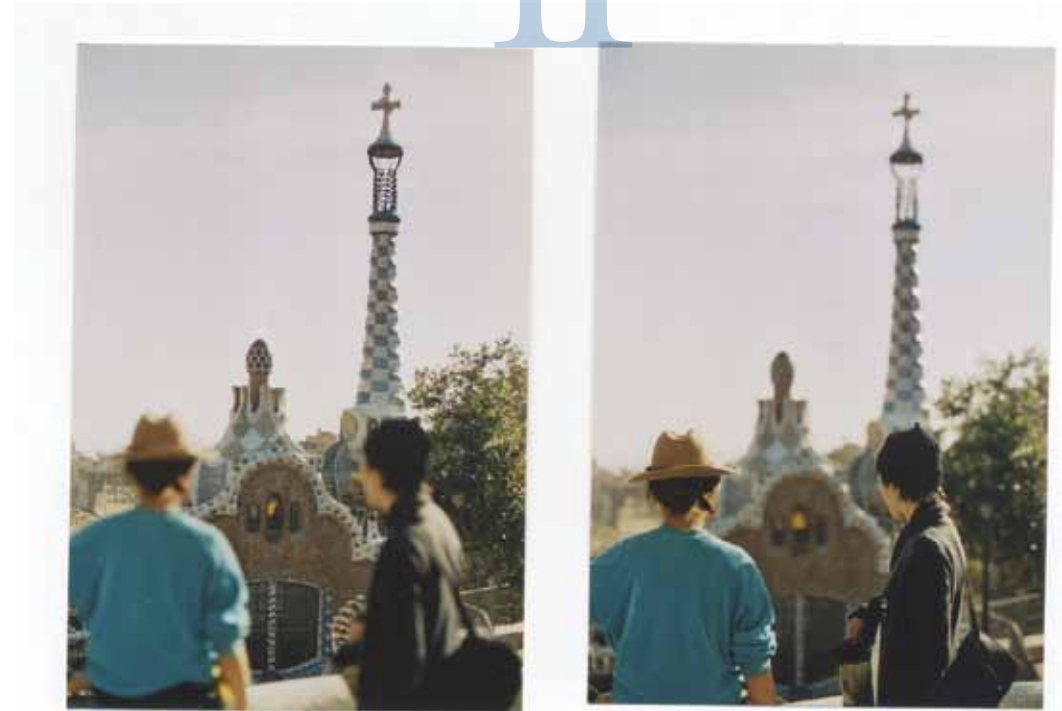
## II

I have a similar reaction with the feeling of there being a time lag as with the first. One is focused on the two people in the front of picture, the other one the focus is shifted to the back of the picture. There's an extended time between them.

~

I feel such strong emotions, a painful pessimism and sentimentality, with the un-focused part of the images in the pictures. In the first the buildings are a patchwork of colour, it is nice to see and it is not so clear what it is anymore. In the second the people in the picture are un-focused, they are confused to look at. I feel comfortable with the elements such as the warm natural light, vivid blue colour. Together it is striking to see the differences of my emotions to two pictures with such small differences.

## II



A pair of photos with two buildings and two people standing back.

# III

The brown colour is spread out, there is a distinguished light in the shadow of colours, everything is out of focus except the shadow at the table.

~

The brown light is the most emphasized part of the whole image, and the part which I feel most strongly and touched towards. This represents what I saw with my own eyes and not just what I watched through the camera. It is somehow cosy, I like the shadow very much and feel appreciation for the fact that the picture could catch the moment of the shadow.

# III



A cup and a shadow

# IV

The car is leaving to... There is nothing standing straight in the picture. The light is distinguished and there is a white coloured sky.

~

My feeling I would describe as *Aishuu*, a kind of melancholy but not a feeling of depression, it's a comfortable melancholy, relaxed, satisfaction for having caught the image in the picture and a remembering of the situation by seeing it again. The elements in the picture such as the reflection on the road, the warm coloured lights give me a slightly lonely feeling. I also felt shocked that I had forgotten the feeling I had at that time.

# IV



A road with a colour and reflection on the water  
(phenomenon, moment)

# V

This is a picture of myself, taken by a close friend, therefore I have never seen the whole image. Sunlight, a shadow, a vivid blue, a weak yellow figure (myself).

~

I can easily reflect upon myself in this situation. The warm light around the plants makes me comfortable.

# V



A weak blue figure (myself) in a green field

# VI

I was surprised with the mysterious background, I don't remember the landscape well. The person in the picture is myself so obviously it is somewhere that I have been but I do not remember it. The colour spreads out into the air as if melting. There is yellow in the field.

~

The yellow figure makes me helplessly emotional, the yellow colour makes me optimistic but the half transparent face, hair and clothes give me a strange unsettled feeling.

# VI



A weak yellow figure (myself)



# VII

The colour is very distinguished, there's a deep and strong combination of colours. There are unclear images in the reflection from something. I can see that the shadow is from a neon sign.

~

The red is mysterious and somehow sinister and makes me feel afraid. The colour has associations for me of strong passion, emotion, abnormal, blood, sexy, slutty. The combination with black reminds me of late 80's TV dramas in Japan. At the time I was around 8–10 years old and wasn't allowed to watch TV. I had a big curiosity but I was told that it isn't good for you. I trusted this and had a bad feeling about it, but sometimes I sneaked in to watch it. What shocked me at that age were aggressive images, conflicts between people, murder, fighting and violence etc. I felt scared and felt uncomfortable with the heavily made up women with bright red lipstick. The red colour gives me a feeling of bad reputation. I feel isolated when I see this picture again.

# VII



Colour reflected on the water

# VIII

A landscape, mixed colours between brown and red, green and white.

~

At first sight I like the combination of fresh green and brown colours. After this I feel slightly guilty when I look at the image carefully, because the hand is not mine and I was taking a picture of someone else's food. But again I feel comfortable with the mixed warm colours.

# VIII



A meal at the table and one hand

# IX

I am an observer. There's a distinguished colour, especially the white light.

~

This scene with harsh bright lighting brings me a kind of longing because I am not part of the group there. There is nobody who I know in the picture however it is not about loneliness, sadness or alienation. The atmosphere of the image; cosiness, sitting, warm and relaxed brings me back to my good old days. I feel warmth for my past yet at the same time feel there is a big distance from that time. Some things never come back. Some things are over and I can never reach again. I feel a strong sense of conflict with this feeling.

# IX



In a food stall, people eating with a warm atmosphere

# X

The distinguished bright white light gives a strong impression at the door and post box and some other spots, the white light reflecting in the space. Blurring lines, the shadow is almost disappearing in to the white light.

~

There is some connection between in and out, the white light at the door gives an undertone of mystery. I feel positive, I see the connection to another space, but I feel that there is more possibility to go through the spilled white light which you don't see in the picture physically. The picture is about past and about the moment which never comes back but I feel this picture to be also about potential as well as sentimentality.

# X



Corridor

## REFLECTION OF 10 PHOTO SERIES

After this investigation, to try to summarise first of all there are positive emotions. Easy, open feelings, of comfort, satisfaction, appreciation, neither sadness nor alienation, a kind of cosiness. I see that there are also negative emotions however, such as discomfort, shock, loneliness, fear, strangeness, isolation and a strong sense of struggling. I am not sure about sentimentality if it is a negative or positive feeling, but it is a word I would use to describe a common feeling I have from most of these pictures.

I can clearly recognise that the elements of colour in the pictures give a particularly strong connection to my own memories, more so than the clearly focused images. Sharp images are similar to words for me, they are somehow too concrete and rigid.

The colours and out of focus images bring me a flashback to fragments of memories more easily and smoothly. These elements in the pictures trigger an emotion, and this emotion triggers a further echo of memories of myself in that time. Whether or not every person can give the same definition of nostalgia in a personal context or not, I have to recognise that the concept of nostalgia is the one that fits best my

relationship and reaction to the photographs which I chose.

*The moment of nostalgia is not just a memory defined by one part of the journey. It's a sensory perception consolidation and there are many things at play in forming those memories and other memories formed around the events. \*6*

The feeling is constructed around stories, many conditions; there is not simply a particular one thing to remember. Nostalgia Memories are not so easy to destroy.

*Nostalgia paints a picture of a positive tone and self-relevant emotion that is often associated with the recall of experiences involving interaction with important others or of momentous life events. \*7*

*"An interesting characteristic of nostalgia is that it implies both negative and positive emotions simultaneously", as mentioned in Nostalgia \*7, most of our life's narratives contained negative as well as positive elements. In my case the memories echoed by those photos are happy, however even sad memories turn to a positive reflection on myself.*

\*6 *Decoding Nostalgia — The Incredible Power of Memory! Invoke your Happiest states instantly! Unlock your first memories! By Jerrico Usher. <http://hubpages.com/>*

\*7 *Nostalgia: Content, Triggers, Functions. Jamie Arndt, University of Missouri © 2006, the American psychological association*

The negative part of the pictures is that when I look at them I have a great feeling of regret or shock, because I realise that I am loosing memories, memories of happy experiences. This is not so much to do with the original images in the picture necessarily; it is the echoes I receive from the photographs.

I feel guilty when I look at the pictures because I am suddenly dragged back to the past and surprised that I have forgotten so many rich experiences, and the emotions of that time. It makes me realise that I am loosing the memories from the past and because of this I am at the same time losing those original and pure emotions.

Is this still in the realm of nostalgia?

From this negative feeling comes another. I love my past and I don't want to forget all those happenings, but at the same time I don't want to face to them because I know that this time has already passed and will never come back. Because of this I don't want to let myself connect to those feelings and emotions so deeply. If I allowed myself then how could I still at the same time keep looking forward in my life and face to the future? I realise that I try to avoid them, probably unconsciously. These are contradictions in myself. On the one hand

I would like to remember all the happenings and emotions but on the other side I avoid to keep them present in my consciousness. I think that this is the reason I have kept those pictures for such a long time without doing anything with them.

# My

# Works

CONNECTING THE NOSTALGIA EMOTION  
TO THE PROCESS OF MAKING WORKS

I think that through this unconscious mental contradiction my experience of nostalgia becomes different to the dictionaries one in that I somehow can't allow myself to experience the sense of longing for the past, which seems deeply connected with the original meaning of nostalgia. The process of making works somehow becomes a way of simultaneously preserving yet releasing myself from the past.

One work was particularly deeply connected to my childhood memories. Growing up each year I spent the summer and winter holidays at my grandmother's house which was far from where I lived. My memories of my grandmother from that time were specifically connected to my school vacations. It made the time very special, the memories were always fun, safe, colourful and to me always had an association with bright white light. I very much enjoyed helping her and the family business. Now she is 93 years old and recently began staying in bed almost all day long. She became a closed person to me and she is near to finishing her life now. Encountering the fear of losing her and such a big part of my past made me afraid also to forget all those positive memories,



*GM House*  
(2010)







including the unconscious ones, I needed to transform them concretely in order to preserve them.

I began to transcribe her and her life into another form. I spent time together with her, eating, taking a walk or sitting by her bed. I started to create a copy of her by drawing her in her space. I decided to copy her room into a 3D space which became my installation work *GM House* (2010).

The process of making was a very important way to recall those memories of my childhood before everything became overshadowed by how she now appears. Pencil drawing was the best way to transform physically the memories from my mind to the visible. The textile space with its bright natural light allowed me to preserve the memories of the past feelings and my emotional association with the place. The white light brings me an echo to my past. This is the same as with some of the 10 photo series. The daylight, strong spotlights from the food stall, blue sky and the brown shadow on the table. An important element of the work is light, because it triggers the memories. I think that through the work I was able to preserve those emotional memories in another form while at the same time releasing them from my everyday consciousness and even subconsciousness.

This process was related to specific personal memories however I'm also interested in dealing with a more universal kind of nostalgia. I recognise that I can experience a similar nostalgic emotional response to the work of others, and that my work can deal with the subject of nostalgia emotions even when the subject of the work has no direct connection to my own personal history such as with my grandmother.

An example of this is *Vertel me iets over jouw Zuiderzee*. This is an installation with sound in the old village house in the Zuiderzee museum.

The work has the Dutch Zuiderzee (south sea) as its starting point. It used to be connected to the sea but Dutch people transformed it into a lake to protect their life from the troubles of the water, now it is a lake called the IJsselmeer.

After spending many days taking long walks by myself around different areas, I noticed the most unexpected thing was that my emotions were changing all the time while walking. For example feelings of surprise or comfort which are quite basic emotions, but also fear of being unsafe and worry from being in unknown areas, it was the first time to feel such emotions since arriving in the Netherlands. The feeling of excitement mixed with worry echoed back to that time 7 years ago when I arrived here. The isolation and loneliness also echoed to my childhood when I used to play by myself. I realized

# *Vertel me iets over jouw Zuiderzee (2011)*



*Enkhuizen (Koos Krul, 1980)*



Working process (Andijk, the Netherlands, November 2010)



Working process  
(Urk, the Netherlands,  
February 2011)



Working process (A3 paper, laser-cut)



that the richness and strength of the sounds from the area were affecting me and producing an emotional change and also triggering a kind of nostalgia in me. My hearing became amplified and I wondered if I knew this feeling already but had forgotten it because of getting used to being around the noise of urban life.

As part of my research I also spent time talking with old Dutch people from the area. In their stores there was a strong sense of nostalgia. I could feel a deep connection to the Zuiderzee from them, even though it doesn't really exist anymore.

I decided to collect the sounds from the area; it is the sounds which make up the main part of the work.

I wanted the work to be an invitation for the audience. By experiencing the installations nature space I wanted to give the chance to the audience to re-collect their own memories and feelings related to the Dutch nature.

As the final part of this research I would like to finish with this theme of nostalgia. It is again about my own childhood memories. The work starts with one specific condition which makes me nostalgic.

“There is one kind of weather which makes me helpless. It's the cloudy, but not completely cloudy kind. It has a little bit of blue colour and some cloud, the warm and dry wind passing by my body. I feel lonely and missing something but I don't know what it is. This happened many times while in my hometown.”

While being back there again where I spent my childhood till my teenage years, certain memories flash back unexpectedly — when seeing old furniture, drawings, plants in the garden and old clothes. These images come back to me like a strong bright white light. They are re-constructed. I feel that I am losing the pureness of mind which I used to have and it brings me a strange and guilty feeling. I don't want to keep this feeling but I'm not able to let it go so easily. If I could transform it from within myself to outside physically, maybe I wouldn't need to carry this nostalgia with me anymore?

# Mobiroom (2011)







美術部 展覧会

1971年 10月 10日

Watercolor (水彩画) 100枚

Chalkboard (黒板) 100枚

Chayra (茶屋) Living Design

Handwritten notes in Japanese

おもしろいものがけ

新 好きだなとわかったソウル

たのもつふん

フォトグラフィ

1971年 10月 10日

ART UNIVERSITY

ART UNIVERSITY

So long as we're alive,  
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I believe this is related to our past.  
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So long as I live I'll keep on questioning  
what I should do with it.

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