Chapter Four
Crossing the Border via Laughter

The characters in my novels are my own unrealized possibilities. That is why I am equally fond of them all and equally horrified by them. Each one has crossed a border that I myself have circumvented. It is that crossed border (the border beyond which my own ‘I’ ends) which attracts me most. For beyond that border begins the secret the novel asks about. The novel is not the author’s confession; it is an investigation of human life in the trap the world has become.¹

--Milan Kundera

Named “the Border,” the final comic part of The Book of Laughter and Forgetting not only pinpoints vicissitudes of characters but also consolidates Kundera’s main concern in his writings—to cross the border. Tamina has crossed borders twice; for the first time, Tamina struggles against her fragmentary memory of her lost husband by leaving the provincial town, and the second time is her futile escape from the island of children. After the death of Tamina, we find the character Jan, for whom the “border [is] his lot from the very beginning” (BLF 298), strives to differentiate the border from its camouflage in a comic way. However, what heels Tamina’s death, for Banerjee, is

the comedy of the last act unsettles our emotions by compelling us to watch the games played by brand-new characters in whom we have invested very little feeling. Yet all the emotional power of the novel is

¹ The quotation is from “Part Five, Lightness and Weight,” The Unbearable Lightness of Being, p 215.
concentrated in this jarring contrast between the sixth and seventh movement (Banerjee 185).

Following Jan’s daily routine, we experience the everyday practice of the border, such as the ambiguous relationship between sacrilegious laughter and serious lovemaking, or the hat and the coffin.

Besides, this novel does cross the limits of genres. In The Art of the Novel, Kundera mentions his terrific pride after accomplishing “Part Three, the Angels” for discovering a new way of constructing a narrative. That text is composed of the following element: (1) the anecdote about the two schoolgirls and their levitation; (2) the autobiographical narrative; (3) the critical essay on a feminist book; (4) the fable of the angel and the devil; (5) the narrative about Eluard flying over Prague (Art 76).

Through the juxtaposition of these varying elements in this novel, Kundera thinks that “they illuminate and explain one another as they explore a single theme, a single question: What is an angel? That question is the one thing that holds them together” (Art 76) is revealed. In Misurella’s words, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting basically is “a diverse mix of characters and biblical references, a varied combination of literary forms—essay, autobiography, and fantastic tales—all held the mixture together with the persona of the narrator and the unifying themes of memory and loss” (Misurella 19). Thus, as we approach this novel, we find the borders erected for characters and for the art of the novel.

Three Jans

Characters are made to fulfill authorial unrealized possibilities, as Kundera reminds us. Being expected of all kinds of possibilities, a fictional character might overcome unconquerable tasks, take unimaginable adventures, or cross the unreachable border where the author could never find the shortcut. In The Unbearable
Lightness of Being, Tomas was forced to fictionalize an inexistent editor to protect the editor who published his article of Oedipus from being a political prisoner. Facing the secret police, Tomas depicted a face diametrically opposed to his friend, and was proud of his quick-minded imagination. Keeping his wits about one, Tomas’ fictional editor reminds us Kundera’s characters that “are born of a situation, a sentence, a metaphor containing in a nutshell a basic human possibility that the author thinks no one else has discovered or said something essential about” (ULB 215). However, Tomas certainly had no idea whether there was a tall man with long black hair and a big chin did work in the publishing house until he stunningly met his fictional character. Although Tomas intended to save his acquaintance from the political persecution, another character might be trapped by the coming maltreatment. This genuine and sham character is liable to cross over the border where Tomas protects his acquaintance.

There are three men named Jan who live on and transgress the border in Kundera’s writings. The first Jan, an actual one, is mentioned in “Esch Is Luther” for his name, which has become the synonym of radical patriots. Facing Russian occupation of his motherland, Jan Palach chose self-immolation as the most violent protest in Wenceslas Square. His death, for Kundera, “come[s] from a terrible elsewhere” is apocalyptic. However, it is “an act [that] is moral if it can serve as an example for everyone,” (Kundera 266) Kundera further questions whether this act is imitable. Indeed, Jan Palach’s death is both the devoted performance and the extremely representation of patriotism for crossing the border of life. Out of his self-immolation, Jan Palach is related to Jan Hus, who was burned as a heretic in the fifteenth century and is remembered hereafter. From fallaciously relating Jan Hus to

---

2 Jan Palach (Aug. 11, 1948-Jan 19, 1969) was a Czech student who committed suicide by immolating himself in Wenceslas Square to protect that the Russian government ruined the temporary liberalization promoted by Alexander Dubcek during Prague Spring.
Jan Palach, we find the first Jan has outlived so far and transgresses the border of transient life.

Kundera analyzes the repetitive interrelationships of characters and takes Hermann Broch’s *The Sleepwalkers* as an example in “Esch Is Luther.” Rather than directly describing the character Esch, Broch said, “Esch was a rebel. He was a rebel the way Luther was” (Kundera 268). For this description, Kundera regards characters can cross over the textual limits while deliver their continuous values at the same time; he finds “a character is no longer conceived as an inimitable uniqueness but rather as a locus of continuity, as a window which gives out on man’s distant past” (271) from Broch. But, if Esch is Luther and Jan Palach is the Jan Hus of today, our base concern to transgress the limited border of life appears. Carlos Fuentes reveals this same concern in the end of *Terra Nostra*, for “[a] life is not sufficient. Several existences are needed to make up a person,” and alludes to the Cabalistic belief that “[e]ach child born at each instant reincarnates each person who dies at each instant” (271). As several existences make a round character, Esch shares the same past as Luther and Jan Hus revives out of Jan Palach.

The second Jan exists to fulfill the lie of border crossing. Being the brother of the redhead girl, Jan is but a supporting actor; notwithstanding, he is the only one to be named in *Life is Elsewhere*. To evade Jaromil’s jealous suspicion, the redhead girl made up a story of her brother Jan, who secretly planned to cross the border, to conceal her illicit affair. It was a serious lie, since the girl knew that “[t]he youth [Jaromil] had been mortally insulted and she realized that only an excuse of equally

---

3 More discussion of Broch’s *The Sleepwalkers* could be consulted in “Notes Inspired by *The Sleepwalkers*” in *The Art of the Novel*.
4 In *Life is Elsewhere*, characters are not named conventionally. “Jaromil” means “he who loves the spring” and “Maman” sounds as “Mama.” Other characters have no names, but are called as their characteristics, such as the redhead girl, the middle-aged man, or the pretty young filmmaker. Xavier is a fictional character in Jaromil’s writings, and Jan’s name is firstly mentioned when the redhead girl tells a lie.
mortal gravity could mollify him” \((Life\ 277)\). To realize “an excuse of equally mortal gravity,” Jan, being described as the one who took “his stand on the other side of the barricades” and was Jaromil’s “personal enemy,” \((Life\ 255)\) was going to cross the border the day after tomorrow. However, both the redhead girl and her crafty middle-aged lover had no idea that the innocent yet absolute poet Jaromil would turn in the girl and Jan to the police. Three years later, the redhead girl returned from the prison, as no one knew whether Jan, who both appeared from and was trapped by a mortal lie, had ever crossed the border. It is an example when an absolute joke turns bitter.

Compared with the other two Jans, the third Jan is too sophisticated to be stuck by the limited border of life. Border for him is not only a lasting concern but also an everyday practice. When Jan was thirteen, he had found the limits of female body “endowed with the overly simple trinity of one sex organ and two breasts” and regarded it as “erotically deprived” \((BLF\ 298)\). Thus, Jan fantasized the nonterrestrial creatures that possibly contain unlimited erotic zones and was aroused by his fancies. As “[h]e dreamed of a creature with a body offering ten or twenty erotic areas instead of that impoverished triangle, a body offering the eye totally inexhaustible sources of arousal,” \((BLF\ 298)\) the virgin Jan knew he would never be exhausted with a female body with unlimited sexual zones.

From childhood on, therefore, he had lived within sight of that mysterious border on the other side of which female breasts were merely soft globes hanging from the chest. That border was his lot from the very beginning. At thirteen, the Jan who dreamed of other erotic areas of the female body was as aware of it as the Jan of thirty years later \((BLF\ 298)\).

When Jan was a thirteen-year-old virgin, he found the border of female body exhausting and would rather indulge in his own fantasy of the nonterrestrial creatures
with limitless sexual organs; thirty years later, still obsessed with the idea of the border, Jan seized any possible chance or negligible breakthrough to transgress the boundary. The only difference is that, this time, Jan experiences the border of female body in the genuine yet laborious lovemaking rather than in his lonely fantasy.

**The Border**

From the Jan who futilely crosses the border to the Jan who physically experiences the border, the existence of the border is a recurrent issue in Kundera’s writing. Before approaching the border within or beyond the text, it is urgent to identify the border, since it varies in different texts. In *Life is Elsewhere* and *Farewell Waltz*, the national border determines the fates of characters who are forbidden to transgress;\(^5\) in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Tamina faces the border of life as Jan is obsessed with the varying sexual border; in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, characters realize the author’s unfinished craving for crossing the border. However, as Kundera defines the word “border” in his “Sixty-three Words” in *The Art of the Novel*, it is the sentimental annotation from Jan’s favorite mistress, who loves her life but holds it on a thread in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* that is given. It goes as

> [i]t takes so little, so infinitely little, for someone to find himself on the other side of the border, where everything—love, convictions, faith, history—no longer has meaning. The whole mystery of human life resides in the fact that it is spent in the immediate proximity of, and even in direct contact with, that border, that it is separated from it not by kilometers but by barely a millimeter (*Art* 123, *BLF* 281).

---

\(^5\) In *Farewell Waltz*, Jakub planned to leave Prague for America, and his last five days in Prague weaved the setting of this novel. Unlike hapless Jan, whose whereabouts remains a mystery in *Life is Elsewhere*, Jakub successfully crosses over the national border for his new life.
Little does this definition reveal the dark side of the border, but it does indicate how easy it is to cross over the border. For Jan’s lover who recognizes her will to live “was spun from the threads of a spiderweb,” (BLF 281) she had to adjust herself carefully from falling from the web, since she believed that what meant here might be meaningless on the other side of the border. Jan agreed with his lover for the meaningless beyond the border and madly loved her when he was thirty years old. But the third Jan possesses one concise dictionary where the definition of the border is far from that of his beloved woman and Kundera thirteen years later.

Being neither like the dissatisfied student who fails to approach his mistress, nor like the celibate Lermontov who despises love and woman, Jan repetitively crosses the physical border while verifies his definition of the border in his concise dictionary. When he was still a virgin, he had been bored with the border of the simple trinity of female body and yearned for nonterrestrial creatures with numerous sexual organs. Though he becomes a master womanizer heavily relying on personal experiences to cross the border, Jan sometimes finds his measurement dysfunctional. Since

[e]very man has two erotic biographies. The first is the one people mainly talk about, the one consisting of a list of affairs and passing amours. The other biography is undoubtedly more interesting: the procession of women we wanted to have but who eluded us, the painful history of unrealized possibilities. But there is also a third, a mysterious and disturbing category of women. These are women we liked and were liked by, but women we quickly saw we would never have, because in relation to them we were on the other side of the border (BLF 282).
Even when one is as sophisticated as Jan, would flush for his failed flirtation when facing the women on the other side of the border. On the train, the beautiful and curious woman reminds Jan his repetitive flirtations ineffective and the existence of the border.

**Repetitions**

In Jan’s concise dictionary, the border is defined as “the maximum acceptable dose of repetitions” after being frequently verified. Jan enjoyed in practicing his border theory on strangers by repetitive lines and indicative gestures, and he was the kind of person who “always knew how to strike a spark swiftly between himself and any woman” (*BLF* 283). Though Jan is a master flirt, he finds it ridiculous when all the meaningful lines and repetitive gestures become ineffective and redundant. The first sight he saw the woman opposite to him, Jan knew she was on the other side of the border. Unlike other prey, this beautiful young woman alertly stared at Jan as if she had known him long and knew all these old tricks. Failing to recall her name, Jan “press[ed] his hand firmly against the top of her skull, gently push her head back, and then gaze into her eyes” (284). It was Jan’s habitual craft, even he forgot

> [h]ow many times in his life had he put his hand on a woman’s head and said: “Let’s see how you’d look like this”? That imperious touch and sovereign gaze would at once reverse an entire situation. It was as if they contained in germ (and retrieved from the future) the great scene of his full possession of her (*BLF* 284).

But the woman returned her gaze on Jan, without the slightest arousal. As

Jan suddenly saw himself through the young woman’s eyes. He saw the pitiful pantomime of his gaze and gesture that stereotyped gesticulation emptied of all meaning by years of repetition. Having lost its spontaneity, its natural, immediate meaning, his gesture suddenly
made him unbearably weary, as if six-kilo weights had been attached to his wrists. The young woman’s gaze created an odd field around him, increasing the weight tenfold (BLF 284).

When Jan’s old tricks are no longer enchanted, we find the border that denotes “the maximum acceptable dose of repetitions” ambiguously reveals.

As Jan regards that the border means “the maximum acceptable dose of repetitions,” the image of the border frequently occurs to him. Even though Jan relies on repetition to measure the border, he knows that “[w]hen things are repeated, they lose a fraction of their meaning. Or more exactly, they lose, drop by drop, the vital strength that gives them their illusory meaning” (BLF 295). Jan had attained the comic show of repetitions. It was the show of serious repetitions on the stage: an actor counted slowly from one to one hundred with incredible concentration, or he repeated the same waltz rhythm oom-pa-pa at the piano for one hundred times. Facing the exaggerated repetitive performances, the audience smiled from ear to ear, or further, they laughed while fell off their seats. But why do people laugh when watching a repetitive show? To answer this question, we allude to Eagleton’s interpretation of repetition in “Estrangement and Irony,” since

[e]very time something is repeated, it loses part of its meaning; the unique, however, is a romantic illusion. This is the contradiction within which Kundera struggles, which can be rephrased as an unrelaxable tension between too much meaning and too little (Eagleton 30).

The performance gradually decreases its authentic meaning as it is repeated. As the comic actor repeats the monotonous act for one hundred times on the stage, his performance turns meaningless and comic for the audience. From his performance, Jan finds the acceptable maxim of repetitions, because “when you cross the border, laughter fatefully rings out” (BLF 296).
Jan practices his recognition of the border with his body, and he crosses the bodily border after repetitive sexual activities. When Jan was younger, he had an affair with one of his married friend. They seldom met each other, so they both seized every possible meeting to warm each other. Ironically, their short meeting always followed the conventional procedure, to embrace, kiss, then undress each other. Except for one time when Jan found it scarcely to continue their repetitive acts: his partner looked at him, smiling.

She looked at him and was unable to hold back a smile. It was a nearly tender smile, filled with fondness and understanding, a shy smile that sought to forgive itself, but a smile unquestionably created by the glare of ridiculousness that had suddenly flooded the entire scene (BLF 291). Though this tender smile was filled with fondness and understanding, it created the distance between aroused Jan and his mistress as it ridiculed their hastiness for the coming sexual activity. To continue their lovemaking without laughing, Jan had to evade his mistress's understanding smile to keep the action going on. Since he realized he was only a hairsbreadth from bursting into laughter.

But he knew that if he did, they would no longer be able to make love. Laughter was there like an enormous trap waiting patiently in the room, hidden behind a thin, invisible partition. Only a few millimeters separated physical love from laughter, and he dreaded crossing over them. Only a few millimeters separated him from the other side of the border, where things no longer have meaning (BLF 291-2).

What Jan had to endure was demonic laughter that would deride and ruin the coming intimacy. To disperse the idea of laugh, Jan turned to “touch the body whose warmth would drive away the devil of laughter” (292) immediately.
When Kundera faces a character identifying the border by repetitive lovemaking, he indicates that it is a wishful thinking to fathom the border by repetition. Relying on personal experiences, Jan regards “the border is a line that crosses a man’s life at a specific point, that it marks a break in time, a particular second on the clock of a human life” (*BLF* 297). This is the reason why he almost laughs when he detects his mistress’ understanding smile; at that moment, the border reveals after the maximum dose of their repetitive coitus. But, Kundera has a different definition of the border, since

> [t]he border is constantly with us, irrespective of time and our stage of life, that it is omnipresent, even though circumstances might make it more or less visible […]. Since Jan defines the border for himself as the maximum acceptable dose of repetitions, I am obliged to correct him: the border is not a product of repetition. Repetition is only one of the ways of making the border visible. The borderline is covered with dust, and repetition is like a hand whisking away dust (*BLF* 297-8).

The border, no product of repetition, is always there. Jan’s favorite woman, who holds her life on a spiderweb, knows the border is ubiquitous and believes it takes so little, barely a millimeter, to cross the border where everything no longer has meaning. Jan’s repetitive lovemaking, in Kundera’s point of view, merely is to whisk away dust covered on the borderline.

**The Glass House, the Totalitarian Island**

After sitting into Raphael’s red sport car, Tamina is given the possibility to cross the border of the small town in the west of Europe and the border of life. Before meeting Raphael, Tamina recollected her past memories of her dead husband from time to time, but she gradually found her vision dimmer and reproached herself for the intolerable forgetting. Even though she was obsessed with her irretrievable past,
Tamina was stuck by her monotonous life, in the limited bar and the small provisional town. As she becomes more and more frustrated of her unreliable and fragmentary memories, Raphael and his red sport car appear as deus ex machina and the magical chariot, picking Tamina to “[s]ome place where things are as light as the breeze. Where things have lost their weight. Where there’s no remorse” (BLF 224). But Tamina has no idea that her destination is an island where Andre Breton’s surrealist ideal of living in a glass house is strictly practiced.

Blending varying genres, “Part Six, The Angels” is a variation of the angelic theme of the novel; besides, it gradually reveals Tamina the road to the border of the angelic world, where things have no weight. We can approach the sixth part from both ways. For the breakthrough in forms, in The Art of the Novel, Kundera mentions that “Part Six, The Angels”

is composed of (1) the oneiric narrative on narrative on Tamina’s death; (2) the autobiographical narrative on my father’s death; (3) musicological reflections; (4) reflections on the epidemic of forgetting that is ravaging Prague. What is the connection between my father and Tamina undergoing her torment at the hands of the children? To invoke the Lautreamont phrase that the surrealists loved, it is “the encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on the dissecting table” of the same theme (Art 76-7).  

Like “Part Three: the Angels,” the sixth part of this novel breaks the convention of genres by seaming four diverse narratives tight. Kundera defends his aesthetically derived concern by alluding to Lautremamont’s statement that beauty could be found at the random juxtaposition of two unrelated objects.

---

6 In Life is Elsewhere, this dictum of Lautremont is written as “the beauty to be found in the random meeting of an umbrella and a sewing machine on an operating-room table” (Life 42).
Though Kundera takes the ready-made surrealist dictum to support his aesthetics, he disapproves some radical surrealist statements, such as Andre Breton’s claim of living in a glass house. Rather than believing in the future transparent harmony, Kundera worries that the glass house would turn to be a totalitarian miniature. Little does he hide his fear and repugnance of the totalitarian world, Kundera said,

[t]otalitarian society, especially in its more extreme version, tends to abolish the boundary between the public and the private; power, as it grows ever more opaque, requires the lives of citizens to be entirely transparent. The ideal of life without secrets corresponds to the ideal of the exemplary family: a citizen does not have the right to hide anything at all from the Party or the State, just as a child has no right to keep a secret from his father or his mother. In their propaganda, totalitarian societies project an idyllic smile: they want to be seen as “one big family.” (Art 110)

However, the worst is, people who romanticize totalitarianism seldom instantly realize its evil, because they are firstly enchanted by the idyllic smile from the glass house before losing their privacy inside. Admittedly, totalitarianism has its dual aspects, since

[it] is not only hell, but also the dream of paradise—the age-old dream of a world where everybody would live in harmony, united by a single common will and faith, without secrets from one another. Andre Breton, too, dreamed of this paradise when he talked about the glass house in which he longed to live (Roth 78).

It is hard to blame Andre Breton’s passionate surrealist claim, as one’s perspective would determine a glass house the hell or the paradise. Compared with people from
the totalitarian countries, Andre Breton is but an idealistic outsider who lives in the west of Europe. On the contrary, being an expatriate, Sabina’s repugnance for her totalitarian homeland is instinctive. From the paragraph in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, we know that

> for Sabina, living in truth, lying neither to ourselves nor to others, was possible only away from the public: the moment someone keeps an eye on what we do, in involuntarily make allowances for that eye, and nothing we do is truthful. Having a public; keeping a public in mind, means living in lies. Sabina despised literature in which people give away all kinds of intimate secrets about themselves and their friends. A man who loses privacy loses everything. Sabina thought *(ULB 109).*

From Andre Breton’s nostalgia to Sabina’s repugnance, the glass house exhibits varying reactions among outsiders and insiders. Out of its transparent duality, we should perceive it as the Janus head: standing on the peripheral, outsiders find the paradisiacal images reflected on the surface, while people in the glass house should never throw stones.

After crossing the border of the island, Tamina seemingly steps into a glass house where children all play the same game and hide no secrets from one another, and she has no idea that she is going to spend her last life on this totalitarian island of children. Accepting Raphael’s invitation, Tamina would like to end her continuous self-reproach for forgetting her dead husband and to leave her stuck life. But the collective life on the island finally ended her indecisiveness. She did not come to the island voluntarily, so she was not allowed to leave the island at will. After arriving at the island, she was allocated to the group Squirrels and was forced to obey all the rules of life as others children. Tamina tried to disobey the rule of the game once, but
was instantly intimidated by “the children’s nascent hostility in the air” (BLF 240). Not to be the only alien among children, grown Tamina reluctantly participates in children’s world. To “identify with them she has to give up her privacy,” (240) Tamina plays all their games and follows the rules, sleeps together, even goes to the bathroom with them, but she is always the public focus out of her adult sexuality which “makes her a queen who rules over those with hairless groins” (241). Curious children easily find limitless pleasure when observing Tamina’s body; they circle her, touch her mythical trinity, and watch her quiver of arousal with concentration. These children approach Tamina as if they are crossing the limited border of the playground, and they naively take everything as granted, for example, to regard Tamina as theirs. Tamina loses both her privacy and subjectivity as those who are under the totalitarian rule on this island of children.

However, children’s repetitive games wear out Tamina’s trauma of bereavement or self-reproach for fragmentary memories, but what remains to exhaust her endurance is children’s excessive need. In the beginning, two groups of children compete to win her favor, trying their best to please Tamina. As her presence disrupts the equilibrium between the two groups, Tamina becomes the target of all blame, being pinched or beaten by children, who abuse Tamina with innocent smiles and no sense of guilt. To analyze Tamina’s misery, Kundera said,

> [h]er misfortune is not that the children are bad but that she is beyond their world’s border. Humans do not revolt against the killing of calves in slaughterhouses. Calves are outside human laws, just as Tamina is outside the children’s laws. It is Tamina who is filled with bitter hatred, not the children. Their desire to hurt is positive and cheerful, a desire that can rightly be called joy. They want to hurt anyone beyond their
world’s border only in order to exalt their own world and its law (*BLF* 255).

There is no question that Tamina’s presence threatens the authority of children on the island. To insist their collective rightness, children turn to hurt the person beyond their border. It is Tamina’s sexuality that differentiates her from those children still wet behind ears or crowns her the queen, but it is also her sexuality that makes her suffer. Though Tamina has known this, “she never again will enter their world, but she is careful not to find herself outside it either. She tries to stay right on the border” (255). Even so, for these children, adult Tamina stands as the border that invites their transgression, and, is a questionable victim of the glass house.

If we regard the glass founded on the house as the visible border circumscribed the island, then Tamina’s tragedy is unsurprisingly recognizable. Deterred from the glass, outsiders find the transparently harmonious scene enchanting, while they forget that it is the transparency that makes the house desirable. Andre Breton’s nostalgia for the glass house is an example. On the other hand, those who escape from the glass house seldom romanticize the transparency of the totalitarian world, and besides, they would never be back. Being an expatriate writer in Paris, Kundera regards that “[t]his doctrinaire passion for the reducing of man is the evil that anyone who comes from “over there” has learned to detest the most” (Kundera 558-9). Coming from a world where thought-control is strictly practiced, Sabina knows that life in the glass house means no truth but lying in the eyes of the public. After crossing the border of the island, Tamina drowns herself in the water, leaving the children’s totalitarian island behind forever. Both Sabina and Tamina have recognized the true life inside of the totalitarian world, and they know how fearful it is when one no longer has his privacy, no longer to be himself.

---

7 This quotation is from “1968: Prague, Paris and Josef Skvorecky.”
In the interview with Philip Roth, Kundera confessed that he differentiated a non-Stalinist from a Stalinist by a humorous laugh. He said he had “learned the value of humor during the time of Stalinist terror,” since only a humorous laugh could function as “a trustworthy sign of recognition” (Roth 78). But humor is wanted in the glass house or on the island where it is the totalitarian authority determines the harmonious illusion. For Kundera’s attitude against Stalinism, Eagleton said it “is interesting precisely because it refuses to fall back upon an unquestioning romantic idealism of the individual, indeed its carnivalesque impulse presses any such romantic idealism to the point of absurdity” (Eagleton 29). From the lyrical young poet Jaromil in *Life is Elsewhere*, we perceive the archetype of “an unquestioning romantic idealism of the individual.” Jaromil, like Eluard, seriously dances in the angelic circle to welcome the totalitarian rule before he is able to puncture the harmonious illusion. Even though Jaromil’s faith in the absolute authority is respectful, Kundera always deflates the zeal of totalitarianism into the absurdity, such as turning Jaromil’s grand initiation into a farce with a girl he finds unattractive.

The myth of romantic idealism is penetrated by the “carnivalesque impulse”—laughter in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. Eagleton thinks laughter would lead us to transgress “hairthin border which distinguishes ‘angelic’ meaning from the demonic cackle of meaninglessness” (Eagleton 29), since humorous laughter cackles “meanings” in the angelic world. Sarah has known the secret of laughter and mocks the absurd scene in the classroom, so does Jan, who repetitively crosses the border via laughter. Admittedly, it is the demonic and carnivalesque characteristic of laughter, which inverts the conventions or punctures the ideology. With one humorous laugh, we effortlessly cross the border where our faith and convictions no longer have meanings; with one humorous laugh, we find the absurdity of living in the transparent house or the horror of life on a totalitarian island.
Grotesque Angels

Although we find the transparent harmoniousness in the house enchanting, the childish games on the island interesting, or the magic circle of the public square inviting, we perceive the carnival disorder with no carnivalesque essence among them. With regard to incomplete carnival in mentioned locations, it is the absence of carnivalesque laughter that decides the unsurprisingly paradox. Given that we hear only angelic laughter there, we refer these places to the angelic world without hesitation. Kundera has long known how to differentiate a non-Stalinist from Stalinist believers by humorous laugh, just as we can easily identify the devil from angels by carnivalesque scorn-laughter. However, as Tamina accepts Raphael’s invitation to the voyage, she is invited to one angelic island, which is closer to the ring dance in the public square than carnival in the marketplace.

During her fantastic final route, Tamina totters across varying ordered games among angelic children. Indeed, children on the island are naïve and extraordinarily happy, but, rather than the carnival crowd, their carefree innocence reminds us more the surrealist who longs to live in the glass house or those of the dancing circle. These people have one thing in common: they laugh seriously as to approve this meaningful world. They are thus named the angels, partisans of divine creation. Children are too easily stereotyped as angles out of their innocence, which is not stained by the past yet. For Husak, children are the future because they have no past, but, for Kundera, this same reason confirms “the whole secret of the magical innocence of their smiles” (*BLF* 257). Within their growing bodies, children extend their magical innocence to the extreme, without being stained by the past. As the children grow mature physically, their precocious, magnificent innocence appears dissymmetrical. This dissymmetry reminds us the exhibiting grotesque body, which is “is a body in the act of becoming” (*RW* 317) in carnival.
Grotesque angels exhibit themselves beyond the limit of their young age and small bodies. The dissymmetry between their growing mature figures and stable mentality always shocks Tamina. The ferryboy was the first grotesque angel whom she had confronted. On the way to the island, as Tamina rowed the boat, the ferryboy turned on his radio and writhed to the beats of electric guitar. Tamina found it hard not to feel repulsive since “the child was swiveling his hips with flirtatious adult movements she found obscene” (*BLF* 231). The ferryboy expresses his innocence by writhing obscenely as exhibiting his lower stratum in carnival, where Tamina has never expected to participate. But this ferryboy is only one of the angelic children. As people exhibit grotesque body images in the marketplace, grotesque angels express their magic innocence to its extreme in “[t]he large, tiled bathroom” which is “at the centre of children’s lives and secret thought” (240). Out of her adult sexuality, Tamina becomes the competitive target between two groups of children. Children try to win her, to please her, and satisfy their curiosities with this female body at their disposals. Tired of these insatiate children, Tamina escapes from their party and hides behind the tree to witness carnival of these grotesque angels. She finds

[t]hey are behaving with the provocative flirtatiousness of adults, thrusting their hips back and forth as if imitating coition. The obscenity of the motions superimposed on the children’s bodies does away with the opposition between obscenity and innocence, purity and vileness. Sensuality becomes absurd, innocence becomes absurd, vocabulary decomposes, and Tamina feels nausea: as if her stomach were hollow (*BLF* 258).

Grotesque bodies realize the transgression of carnival in the past, but grotesque angels transgress in a different way on the totalitarian island. In carnival of Rabelais’ time, grotesque bodies firstly transgressed the physical limits of individuals
by displaying the lower stratum or obscene parts, then the borders of the official system, challenging the divine creation. Akin to the grotesque body, Bakhtin takes figurines of senile pregnant hag which represents “pregnant death, a death that gives birth” (RW 25) as a stereotype of “the birth of generation after generation, a never-ending succession that fills the gods with fear (RW 367).” This is the essence of the grotesque body which transgresses its physical limits yet frightens the creator God. On the other hand, as grotesque angels straighten their thin limbs or swivel their tiny hips to imitate coition with their innocent smiles, Tamina finds the “the terrifying weight of lightness” (BLF 259) stuck in her stomach and is definitely frightened.

Crossing the Border

Both inherited the unusual sense of folk humor from Rabelais, Bakhtin and Kundera recognize the importance of the occasional carnival and understand the inverse power of the borderline, though they approach it in different ways. As Bakhtin focuses on the liberation brought by carnivalesque laughter, Kundera believes demonic laughter is prior to angelic one. When Bakhtin finds the rare carnival does provide people a laissez-faire sphere to suspend the hierarchy and social norms, Kundera reminds us the puncture between the official system and the folk culture is always there but only covered with dust. For the importance of the rare carnival, McLemee indicates that, “[t]raditionally carnival is the last blowout before Lent: a time of excess, when the prohibitions on carnal satisfaction are abolished and popular creative energy is given full expression in the form of costumes, masks, songs, dances, puppet shows, etc” (McLemee 17). That is, carnival provides a world beyond the border for people to be themselves. Bakhtin thinks that “[t]he most intense and productive life of culture takes place on the boundaries of its individual areas and not in places where these areas have become enclosed in their own specificity” (qtd. in McLemee 17) reveals the importance of the border for all. Kundera believes the
hairthin border is ubiquitous but covered with dust; only by a demonic laugh, we can cross the border. Being a master who pursues border and border crossing, Jan leads us to jump over the border by his demonic laughter.

I. The Hat on the Coffin

The hat magically prompts the theme of this book twice: the first time for forgetting, and the second time, laughter. In Kundera’s short dictionary, it is defined as “magic object” (Art 130), and indeed, it both plays as the prompt of the past memories and the prompt of the punchline in the funeral. Jan participated that funeral; it was Passer’s funeral. It was a windy day. When speaker addressed to the dead, a gust of hysterical wind had blown away Papa Clevis’ hat and dropped it on the ground. As Papa Clevis hesitated whether he should pick up his hat by passing through the crowd, the wind had taken his away nearer to the grave, and finally dropped it on the coffin. The speaker was too concentrated to detect what had happened. But Papa Clevis’ hat just fell on the top of the coffin, carefully covered the head of the dead.

“[A]s if the deceased, in a futile desire for dignity, had not wanted to remain bareheaded during that solemn moment,” (BLF 302) but all participants “had to live through the horrifying battle against laughter” (303) after witnessing this scene. They found the scene laughable “as if Passer, with his indomitable vitality and optimism, was trying to stick his head out” (303). It is the hat that disturbs the solemn funeral. Or, more specifically, the border between the sacred and the mockery is not as distant as we have expected, since the hairthin border is always there, covered with dust. Once the hat leads us to cross the border, the solemnity appears ridiculously meaningless.

8 “Hat. Magical object. I remember a dream: A ten-year-old boy is standing at the edge of a pond, wearing a big black hat on his head. He throws himself into the water. They pull him out, drowned. He still has the black hat on his head” (Art 130-1).
9 In February 1948, when Klement Gottwald harangued to Prague citizens in Old Town Square, his comrade Clementis took off his fur hat to cover Gottwald’s baldhead. This historical moment is photographed. Four years later, Clementis was charged traitor and hanged; he was soon deleted from all the pictures.
II. Barbara’s Party

If in Passer’s funeral, we are convinced by Kundera’s revised definition of the border which is “constantly with us, irrespective of time and our stage of life, that it is omnipresent, even though circumstances might make it more or less visible” (*BLF* 297), the following repetitive coitus in Barbara’s villa seemingly strengthens Kundera’s point. This incredibly ordered debauchery reminds us the bodily transgression in carnival. Every move was under the command of “Field Marshal Barbara” who watched “her gymnasts closely to see if they were following her demonstration” (304). Participants exhibited their bodies and performed sexualities under Barbara’s watch as doing acrobatics on a stage without footlights where no one was superior to others. Field Marshal Barbara timed every couple, and did not allow “her guests to pair off and hide away somewhere” (304). She carefully made sure everything is under her control, like “a clockman who [had] to keep moving the hands of his clock himself” (305). Finally, one girl was allocated to Jan, as Barbara and a bald man folded together nearby. Ironically, both groups proceeded according to Barbara’s clock without lag. So,

> each couple was a mirror image of the other. The two men caught each other’s eye, and Jan saw the bald man’s body shaking with laughter. And because they were united, united like an object and its reflection in a mirror, one of them was unable to shake without the other shaking as well […]. They were at once looking at each other and avoiding each other’s eyes, because they knew that laughter was as sacrilegious here as it is in church when the priest is elevating the host. But from the moment that comparison passed through both their head, their only desire was to laugh. They were too weak. Laughter was stronger. Their bodies were seized by irresistible convulsion (*BLF* 307).
Their sameness and repetitive movement led both Jan and the bald man to the passage to the border. After crossing the border, Barbara’s command appeared ridiculously meaningless and her clock stopped. What followed were Jan’s demonic laughter, which full of scorn and derision, mockery and consciousness.

“Don't think you can pull on me what happened at Passer’s funeral!”

“I’m sorry,” said Jan; and he laughed and the tears ran down his cheeks (308).

Jan had no choice but being kicked off from Barbara’s party.

Nonetheless, though Barbara’s party is seemingly progressive and liberal, it essentially realizes a totalitarian orgy that is absolutely under one authorial control. About the collective sex, Eagleton mentions that “[t]he image of ungainly naked bodies crowded into a single space stirs Kundera to debunking laughter, but it is also for him the image of the concentration camp”(Eagleton 30). The crowded concentration camp is horrible, but one carnivalesque laugh can lead the sufferer to the passage of the border. From “Part One” to “Part Seven,” from Mirek of Prague to Jan in Paris, the moving route of characters always begins from this side of border to the other side as Kundera’s. However, even so, no one can promise or is promised a better life after reaching the other side of the border. This is what David Evanier concludes for the ending, by saying,

When Kundera crosses the border to the West, he finds sadness and emptiness in the lives of the youth-obsessed culture, the “liberated” lifestyles that render sex an empty ritual devoid of personal contact and communion. The “progressive” are the objects of his scorn, a scorn softened by experience and a knowledge he cannot impart to them. The book concludes resonantly with another group of Westerners yearning
for a circle: progressive nudists discussing “the hypocrisy of a society that cripples body and soul.” (Evanier 298).

Evanier thinks as these progressive nudists circle to discuss the issue of “the hypocrisy of a society that cripples body and soul,” another “progressive” circle is inevitably shaped. The final scene ends as,

... a man with an extraordinary paunch developed the idea that Western civilization is going to perish and that humanity will finally be liberated from the enslaving burden of the Judeo-Christian tradition. These were the phrases Jan had heard ten, twenty, thirty, a hundred, five hundred, a thousand times before, and those few meters of beach soon turned into a lecture hall. The man spoke, all the others listened with interest, and their bare genitals stared stupidly and sadly at the yellow sand (BLF 312).

When we seemingly cross one border, we will confront another one covered with dust soon. Yet, this conclusion means no impossibility to cross the border, but it reminds us how to transgress it by demonic laughter. This is how Jan has punctured the superficial solemnity of the funeral or has debunked the ridicule of the totalitarian sex party.

**Agelasts**

Who is the agelast? Inheriting Rabelais’ legacy of humor, both Bakhtin and Kundera would painstakingly define or redefine the agelast, whom is the least like by their master. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin said an agelast is “a man who does not know how to laugh and who is hostile to laughter” (RW 267). In *The Curtain*, Kundera mentions that “agelast” is “a neologism Rabelais coined from the Greek to describe people who are incapable of laughter, who do not understand joking. Rabelais detested the agelasts, because of whom, he said, he came close to “never
writing another iota” (Curtain 107). The most typical agelast in Rabelais’ novels is Friar Tappecoue, who refuses to lend vestments for sacrilegious diablerie, but finally dies in the hands of the carnival crowd. In The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, we still detect the appearance of the agelast at poets’ night in Writers Club in “Part Five, Litost.” Ironically, this agelast is an incorrigibly lyrical poet nicknamed as Petrarch. Facing his sarcastic friend Boccaccio who doubts his love affair, Petrarch defends himself by saying,

Laughter, on the other hand, is an explosion that tears us away from the world and throws us back into our own cold solitude. Joking is a barrier between man and the world. Joking is the enemy of love and poetry. That’s why I tell you yet again, and want you to keep in mind: Boccaccio doesn’t understand love. Love can never be laughable. Love has nothing in common with laughter (BLF 199).

In Petrarch’s perspective, laughter is nothingness but love means all. It is his ignorance of laughter that is ascribed to him an agelast.

In other words, agelasts do not laugh and have no sense of humor at all. But it is humor that is treasured best among Rabelais’ legacies. Kundera defines “humor” as “the divine flash that reveals the world in its moral ambiguity and man in his profound incompetence to judge others; humor: the intoxicating relativity of human things; the strange pleasure that comes of the certainty that there is no certainty (Art 32). There is no question that those who have no sense of humor do not know what they have missed. However, it is worth knowing to distinguish a humorist from an agelast, since Kundera said, “[u]nless we understand the agelasts we cannot understand the comical. Their existence gives the comical its full dimension, shows it to be a wager, a risk-taking, it reveals its dramatic essence” (Curtain 108). Standing aside the agelast, we find the presence of humor.
Papa’s Understanding Smile

It is Papa’s final understanding smile that proves he is still on the living side of the border. Banerjee considers that “[a]t the borderline between life and death, father and son share a moment of laughter” (Banerjee 182). After Papa seriously deceased, Kundera accompanied him for his final gallantry. Even though as the doctor said Papa’s brain had been deteriorating, Kundera was sure he found Papa’s eyes open wider. After hearing Husak received the title of Honorary Pioneer from TV, Kundera sneered.

And Papa started to laugh. He laughed to show me that his brain was alive and I could go on talking and joking with him.

Husak’s voice reached us through the apple trees: “Children! You are the future!”

And then: “Children, never look back!”

“I’m going to close the window so we don’t have to hear any more!” I winked at Papa, and looking at me with his infinitely beautiful smile, he nodded.

A few hours later, his fever suddenly rose once more. He mounted his horse and rode it for several days. He never saw me again (BLF 239).

Papa’s humorous laughter was seemingly derived from “the divine flash” (Art 32) that lightened the hairthin borderline between the deterioration and the lucidity, between death and life. By laughing, Papa showed his superiority over Husak while assured Kundera that he was still on this side of the border.