The very last moment a building stands is always striking. Along with the collapse of bricks and stones, the various scenes of life compacted inside tremble with the earth and soon come to an end. Day after day, the skin of the remains loses luster, turning into a lifeless skeleton. Ruins, as we usually call them, show the powerlessness of humanity before death and replacement. “Is this what we live for?” writes Annie Dillard, in “Transfiguration,” “is this the only final beauty: the color of any skin in any light, and living, human eyes?” (399). She ponders the meaning of her life’s work, as I ponder the meaning of the last moment of a building. Under her guidance, I gradually realize something does remain when people silently stand before the ruins to cherish the past. It seems these concrete relics arouse our cultural memory, even magically preserving it in a state of timelessness.

I was once witness to the finality of my own old community. The grainy and mottled cement backdrop of its wall was like the skin of an old man, dyeing all surroundings a gloomy color. All the people withdrew from the warning line like a colony of ants, silently waiting. Suddenly a shouted order pierced the sky. Accompanied by a loud thud, the old houses collapsed into pieces under smoke like a dismembered giant disappearing from the horizon. I saw Aunt Wang hold her sons’ hands tightly and lean against her husband, sobbing; I saw the Zhangs hurriedly carry their pecan-wood wardrobes onto the trucks, babbling about the future; I saw old people say goodbye to their friends, some of whom they would never encounter for the rest of their lives. For a long time after the crowd dispersed, I kept my despairing eyes fixed on the dismal ruins. The sun emerged and coated them with gold. As my vision became hazy, the ruins melted into a glaring entity. It seemed to be releasing the light itself, forty years’ sorrow, hope, dreams and memories. I heard my grandma murmur beside me: “All things should have an end.”

We know nothing in the world does not end, whether a building, a person, or even the life of a moth. In “Transfiguration,” Annie Dillard feels
exhausted and enters the mountains to read, hoping the solitude can aid her creative passion. She meditates on the burning of a moth in flames, considering such a transformation as an illumination of her own writing, a rekindling of her dried passion, rather than the physical finality of this insect’s life. Thus, she suggests that death can be transformative.

At the very moment this big golden moth flaps into the fire, “stuck, flamed, frizzled, and fried in a second,” its spectacular skeleton, its shadow enlarged on the wall, the sizzle sound, and even the soul smoke fill Dillard with rich empathy (399). She imagines it as an “immolating monk,” “a hollow saint,” and “a flame-faced virgin gone to God” (399). It keeps burning for two hours, serving to let Dillard reflect on her own sacrifice for and dedication to her career as a writer: “I have two hands, don’t I? And all this energy . . . I’ll do it in the evenings, after skiing, or on the way home from the bank” (399). She is wild with joy as her once dried well of ideas becomes full again. This is how “transfiguration” works: death is not a set destination but only a certain form of ending. Life changes into another form and keeps itself alive.

Even though I have not witnessed such a scene, Dillard’s flaring words jump out from the paper, catch my eye, and become part of my own story, enlightening my thoughts and ideas. Can something ugly be transformed into something sublime because it is gone? I gazed at the ruins of my old alley community, whose discolored tile and weathered stones could not be called particularly beautiful from an aesthetic standpoint. But the ruins brought out memories of its glorious days. For decades, these alleys were the background of the whole city, a hybrid of Gothic, Romanesque, Renaissance, and Baroque architecture combined with the traditional Chinese courtyard dwelling. People from all occupations gathered here, forming friendships that lasted for three or four generations. Nowadays, most alleys have been demolished in the city’s frenzy to modernize, and even mine, an oasis of serenity amid chaos, is doomed to be removed. This “final beauty,” the last moment before collapse, takes root in my heart. When the seeds blossom, they shall definitely turn into something else.

Many people have this realization when their context changes. In “Lost in Translation,” Eva Hoffman comes across a similar form of “finality” with the death of her old cultural identity (176). Her family decided to move out of Poland in 1959 permanently, due to post-war conditions and the shortage
of food. Hoffman’s only knowledge of her destination, Canada, came from a book which described a Canada of “majestic wilderness” and “freedom” (177). Her mind was initially filled with fears. The war pushed her “out of the happy, safe enclosures of Eden” and brought heartbreak and suffering to her childhood (177). However, her life changed for the better in the years following her immigration. Hoffman received a scholarship, was appointed as professor in many institutions of higher education, held the post of editor at the New York Times, and won many awards. Traumatic memories were transformed into literary inspiration, endowing her with her unique writing style.

As an immigrant, Hoffman was never alone. For so many people exiled from Poland to other corners of the world during that phase of history, after a baptism of time, life was no longer only an individual’s joy and sorrow. Instead, with the end of their old identities, their shared experiences transfigure into something bigger—a collective memory of the immigrants’ life. The Poland they knew no longer exists, but its people, for generations, carry and preserve it. None of its history will be forgotten.

This is what Dillard seems to suggest at the end of “Transfiguration.” She writes: “When the people leave I never blow the candles out, and after I’m asleep they flame and burn” (400). Through Dillard’s rekindled enthusiasm towards her career, the moth will keep burning and continue to “exist” even once Dillard is gone. By writing the memories of the end of her life in Poland, Hoffman preserves her story and adds it to the immigrants’ collective memory. In this way, things keep transfiguring throughout the course of history, from one generation to another, unceasing. When we write and share our stories, we approach immortality and our memories live on. My grandma said: “All things should have an end.” It’s true. But sometimes it’s not.

The replacement of the old by the new is a constant in the world. As urbanization accelerates, we are doomed to lose our old alley, which could not keep up with the times. However, such “death” can also be transformative. Watching the explosion of my alley became my personal inspiration and part of my story. For my community, the ruins now represent a memory shared by a specific group of people. We will tell the story of our old community to our children and grandchildren. Thus, for the whole city of Shanghai, that story will become a public memory. Despite the passage of
time, every citizen will remember that we have had a history of alley communities, our everlasting cultural treasure.

It’s incredible but true that a massive city’s history can be known through one small group of people like us, or even one ordinary woman. In “Portrait of a Londoner,” Virginia Woolf tells the story of the city itself through the metaphor of a typical cockney named Mrs. Crowe. Woolf writes that

to know London not merely as a gorgeous spectacle, a mart, a court, a hive of industry, but as a place where people meet and talk, laugh, marry, and die, paint, write and act, rule and legislate, it was essential to know Mrs Crowe. It was in her drawing-room that the innumerable fragments of the vast metropolis seemed to come together into one lively, comprehensible, amusing and agreeable whole. (119)

A mart, a court, a drawing room. . . . People themselves give life to these places. People are the best carriers of history. We instinctively desire to visit ruins so that we can review memories again and again. Whether of trivial life affairs, like the death of a moth in “Transfiguration,” or big historical moments, like the war in Hoffman’s “Lost In Translation,” the stories we tell show us different perspectives on life. These individual perspectives converge and transform one person’s history into a larger cultural memory, each story ingrained perfectly in the evolving community. For my old community, my grandma is a Mrs. Crowe. My neighbors are countless Mrs. Crowes. And in the future, I will definitely become a Mrs. Crowe.

Shanghai itself will not keep my old community, the Shikumen alley, alive forever. Every day, change gives way for things new and fresh. Many times I return to the place where my old community was located. Forests of high-rises often block my view of the sunlight, but I still have a strong feeling about those ruins. Perhaps the lights I saw in the last moment of my old community were not from the sun. Perhaps they are the lights of the ruins themselves.

Traveling, I see other ruins in every corner of the world—the Parthenon in Greece, the Ayutthaya in Thailand, the Coliseum in Italy, and the Old Summer Palace in China. . . . They were very splendid once but through time they continue to dim. As a person living in the 21st century, I can still sense the luxurious pleasure of the old emperors, the suffering of the people, the
old wounds of the wars, and the rise and fall of different empires from an intimate distance. The light of the ruins reveals a breathtaking final beauty. Ruins show the powerlessness of humans against change, but preserve the cultural history of the countless people who have visited them. They are not endings. They begin at every moment.

WORKS CITED

