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LU XUN

The Real Story of Ah-Q and Other Tales of China
The Complete Fiction of Lu Xun

THE REAL STORY OF AH-Q AND OTHER TALES OF CHINA

LU XUN is one of the paradigmatic figures of twentieth-century Chinese literature, celebrated during and since his lifetime for his powerful diagnoses of his nation's social and political crisis, and for his contributions to reinventing the vernacular as a literary language. Born in 1881 into a scholar-gentry family in Shaoxing (south-east China), he was thoroughly schooled as a child in China's classical literary heritage. After abandoning in 1899 the orthodox Confucian path of studying for the imperial civil service examinations, Lu Xun read widely in translations of foreign literature and applied himself to Western science, first in China and then in Japan, where he began training as a doctor. Intensely troubled by his country's weakness in the face of foreign imperialism, at the age of twenty-five he decided to give up medicine for a career in literary and cultural reform. In 1918, the forceful iconoclasm of his first short story in vernacular Chinese, 'Diary of a Madman', helped propel him to the centre of the New Culture Movement of the late 1910s – modern China's pivotal moment of westernizing cultural revolution. The two volumes of short fiction he produced between 1918 and 1925, *Outcry* and *Hesitation*, won broad acclaim for their highly crafted portrayals of a China in a state of spiritual emergency – of its superstition, backwardness, poverty and complacency. Like many radical intellectuals of his time, Lu Xun began to look leftwards after the rise to power of the repressively right-wing Nationalist Party in the late 1920s. Despite his public commitment to Marxist literary ideals and his posthumous canonization by Mao Zedong, Lu Xun's final years were spent mired in squabbles with the Chinese Communist Party's representatives of ideological orthodoxy. When he died of tuberculosis in 1936, he bequeathed to modern Chinese letters a contradictory legacy of cosmopolitan independence, polemical fractiousness and anxious patriotism that continues to resonate in Chinese intellectual life today.

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PENGUIN BOOKS

PENGUIN CLASSICS

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3

(a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland

(a division of Penguin Books Ltd)

Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia

(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)

Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, North Shore 0632, New Zealand

(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

www.penguin.com

This translation first published in Penguin Classics 2009

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ISBN: 978-0-14-119418-9

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank particularly Bonnie S. McDougall for her meticulous reading of the Introduction and translation; the text has been enormously improved by her clear-sighted literary and linguistic revisions. I am extremely grateful to Vicki Yuyun Chiu and Saiyin Sun for further invaluable recommendations and corrections; Saiyin Sun additionally made available her doctoral thesis on Lu Xun, which contained important new insights into Lu Xun's personality and behaviour through the 1920s. I owe many additional thanks to Tommy McClellan for allowing access to teaching notes that shed invaluable light on important points of detail in stories such as 'The Real Story of Ah-Q'. Sarah Coward carried out a superbly sharp-eyed copy-edit of the manuscript, of which I am most appreciative. I would like to thank also Robert Macfarlane and Thelma Lovell for their very helpful comments on the Introduction and translation. I have benefited greatly from access to earlier translations of Lu Xun's work, especially the versions by Gladys Yang and Yang Xianyi and by William Lyell, both of which have frequently helped to clarify ambiguities in my understanding of the text. Both their translations tackle the stylistic and linguistic challenges of finding an English idiom for Lu Xun with an admirable combination of rigour and creativity that I have tried hard to emulate. All errors and infelicities that remain are, of course, my own.

Chronology

1881 Born Zhou Shuren in Shaoxing, south-east China.

1884 Following its defeat of the Chinese navy, France asserts control of Indo-China.

1893 Grandfather imprisoned (on suspended death sentence) for corruption in the civil service examinations.

1894–5 China defeated in first Sino-Japanese War.

1896 Father dies after consistent misdiagnosis by Chinese doctors.

1898 Leaves home to study at the Jiangnan Naval Academy in Nanjing. Returns briefly to pass the first, district level of the civil service examination.

Influenced by reformist intellectuals such as Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, the Guangxu emperor issues a series of radical, reforming edicts (the ‘Hundred Days’ Reforms’). The conservative empress dowager Cixi responds by putting the emperor under house arrest and executing some of the leaders of the reform movement.

1899 Transfers to the School of Mines and Railways in Nanjing. Refuses to return to Shaoxing for the second and third levels of the civil service examination.

1900 Foreign (mainly Japanese, Russian, British, American and French) troops enter Beijing and bring to an end the Boxer Rebels’ siege of the foreign legations. The Qing government agrees to an indemnity of 450 million taels of silver (c. £67 million).

1902 Graduates and leaves China for Tokyo on a government scholarship; begins studying Japanese language.

1903 Cuts off his queue – the long braid that the Manchu Qing dynasty forced all Chinese men to wear as a public symbol of their submission to Manchu rule

after 1644. Completes his first translation, of Jules Verne's *De la terre à la lune* (from Japanese).

1904 Leaves Tokyo for medical school in rural Sendai.

1905 The Qing government abolishes the old-style civil service examinations.

1906 Abandons medical studies. Returns to Shaoxing to take part in a marriage arranged by his mother. Soon after, returns to Tokyo without his wife but with his younger brother Zhou Zuoren.

1907 An attempt, with Zhou Zuoren, to launch a new literary magazine, *New Life*, fails.

Qiu Jin, a female revolutionary, is arrested and executed in Shaoxing for an alleged plot against the Qing government.

1908 Publishes 'On the Power of Mara Poetry', acclaiming the power of the individual literary genius to awaken a nation.

1909 Translates with Zhou Zuoren and publishes a two-volume collection of foreign fiction, which barely sells. Returns to China and begins teaching physiology and chemistry at the south-eastern city of Hangzhou.

1911 Writes his first short story, in classical Chinese, 'Nostalgia'. The Qing dynasty is toppled by republican revolution.

1912 Sun Yat-sen briefly becomes the first president of the new Republic before ceding leadership to Yuan Shikai, a former Qing general.

Disappointed by the aftermath of the Revolution, Lu Xun leaves the south-east to take up a job in the new Ministry of Education in Nanjing, then Beijing, where he absorbs himself in antiquarian research.

1913 'Nostalgia' published in the journal *Short Story Monthly*.

1915 The progressive journal *New Youth* is founded by Chen Duxiu. The Japanese government serves Yuan Shikai with their Twenty-One Demands, asserting greater Japanese economic and political sovereignty over areas of Manchuria and Mongolia.

1916 Yuan Shikai dies, soon after widespread resistance to his attempt to declare himself emperor breaks out. Military and political control of China lapses into the hands of warlords. Cai Yuanpei becomes chancellor of Beijing University, assembling about him many of the key intellectual players in the New Culture Movement.

1917 An attempt by Zhang Xun, a local military governor, to restore the Manchu dynasty is swiftly defeated by warlords.

Qian Xuantong, an editor of *New Youth*, asks Lu Xun to write something for the journal.

1918 His first vernacular short story, 'Diary of a Madman', published in *New Youth* under the pseudonym Lu Xun.

1919 Sets up home in Beijing with his mother, his wife, his two brothers and their Japanese wives.

On 4 May, violent anti-imperialist demonstrations and strikes break out in Beijing in protest against the decision at Versailles to award Japan territorial concessions in north-east China.

1921 'The Real Story of Ah-Q' serialized.

The Chinese Communist Party is founded in Shanghai. Sun Yat-sen forms a Nationalist Party government in Guangzhou. The Beijing government establishes the vernacular as the national language for textbooks.

1922 Completes his first collection of short fiction, *Outcry* (published the following year).

1923–4 Publishes his pioneering *Brief History of Chinese Fiction*. Following estrangement from Zhou Zuoren, moves out to a separate residence with his mother and wife. Takes various teaching posts in Beijing colleges while still working at the Ministry of Education.

Sun Yat-sen forms a United Front between the Nationalist Party and the Communist Party, in exchange for Soviet financial and military aid.

1925 Publishes a collection of essays, *Hot Air*. Begins a love affair with Xu Guangping, a former student.

Sun Yat-sen dies of liver cancer. Violent anti-imperialist protests break out across Chinese cities after British-directed police in Shanghai kill eleven demonstrators demanding the release of Chinese students imprisoned by the British. The Nationalist–Communist alliance launches the Northern Expedition, winning a series of victories against warlords in southern and eastern China. Major writers of the New Culture Movement begin to convert to Marxism.

1926 Publishes his second collection of short fiction, *Hesitation*. Several of his students are shot and killed by Beijing's warlord government in a peaceful demonstration. He leaves his job at the Ministry of Education after publicly attacking in print his minister. Lu Xun and Xu Guangping leave Beijing that summer to take up teaching posts in Xiamen (south-east China) and Guangzhou, respectively.

1927 Joins Xu Guangping in Guangzhou; from there they move together to Shanghai. Publishes a volume of prose poetry, *Wild Grass*, and two further volumes of essays, *Unlucky Star* and *Grave*.

Chiang Kai-shek, Sun Yat-sen's successor as leader of the Nationalist Party, launches the White Terror against the Communist Party, beginning a nationwide purge of left-wing activists.

1928 Publishes another volume of essays, *That's That*, and a volume of reminiscences, *Dawn Flowers Picked at Dusk*. Begins reading and translating

Marxist literary criticism. Quarrels publicly with members of the literary left.

1929 Xu Guangping gives birth to Lu Xun's only son, Zhou Haiying.

Establishment of the Jiangxi Soviet in south-east China.

1930 Makes inaugural speech at the founding of the League of Left-wing Writers, confirming his commitment to revolutionary, proletarian literature.

Chiang Kai-shek launches his encirclement campaigns to destroy the Communists in Jiangxi.

1931 The Nationalist government executes five Communist writers, one of whom is a friend of Lu Xun. As the prelude to the 1937 outbreak of the second Sino-Japanese War, the Japanese establish an independent state (Manchukuo) in north-east China.

1932 Publishes two further collections of essays, *Three Leisures* and *Two Hearts*.

1933 Publishes his correspondence with Xu Guangping, *Letters between Two*, and a further collection of essays, *False Freedom*.

1934 Publishes two further collections of essays, *Quasi-Romance* and *Mixed Accents*.

Eighty thousand Communist troops break out of Chiang Kai-shek's encirclement of Jiangxi in the south-east, to embark on the Long March to Shaanxi in the north-west.

1936 Publishes his last collection of fiction, *Old Stories Retold*, and a further collection of essays, *Fringed Literature*. Quarrels openly with the Communist literary leadership in Shanghai. Dies of tuberculosis in Shanghai.

1937 Three-volume essay collection, *Pieces Written in a Semi-Concession*, published posthumously. Mao Zedong proclaims Lu Xun the 'saint of modern China'.

Introduction

Lu Xun (1881–1936) was born into the fading world of late-imperial China, his childhood spent within the high walls of a traditional Chinese compound – amid the courtyards, gardens, bridges and winding alleys typical of the mansions of provincial grandees. One of the better families of the humid south-eastern town of Shaoxing, his clan had for centuries prospered on the profits of landowning, pawnbroking and government; and through Lu Xun's early years he and his elders staunchly upheld the social and intellectual orthodoxies of the empire. In 1871 his grandfather Zhou Fuqing had – to the beating of six gongs – received the honour of appointment by the ruling Qing dynasty to the Imperial Academy in Beijing, the pinnacle of the civil service. As befitted the son of a respectable gentry family, Lu Xun was schooled in the cultural archaisms of the Chinese classics. Near the start of his first short story, 'Nostalgia', he evoked the tedium of a teacher's Confucian drone, allowing his schoolboy narrator to fantasize about his tutor falling ill and dying overnight – just to preserve him from another day spent reciting *The Analects*. In 1926, Lu Xun resentfully recounted from four decades' distance how his father once forced him to recite from memory thirty lines of *The Outline of History* (a school primer of the ancient Chinese past) before he was allowed to sail off to watch a gaudy local temple procession: 'To me, it was all so much gibberish,' he remembered, contrasting the intellectual pedantry of the classroom with the liberating extravagance of China's popular folk traditions: his illiterate nurse's stories of ghosts and demons lurking in the back garden; the phantasmagoria of local operas; the bizarre, monstrous illustrations of the mythological compilation *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*.¹

His grandfather's triumph notwithstanding, the young Lu Xun's domestic landscape bore traces of the stagnation and decline broadly apparent through the

society around him. Since the early years of the nineteenth century, the vast Qing imperium had been visibly showing the strains of rampant population growth (generating an acute land shortage, rural destitution and rising food prices) and endemic government corruption. A string of domestic rebellions ensued, which the overstretched state suppressed only by substantially decentralizing power and initiative to local elites and militias. The weakness of the ruling dynasty was in turn exploited, and compounded, by opportunistic European, American and Japanese imperialists. Since the defeat of the first Opium War of 1839–42, Chinese politicians had been struggling to make sense of a new world order in which the Qing's cultural self-assurance was confidently challenged by alien aggressors scornful of Confucian civilization. Late-Qing China was a country in identity crisis, battling to reconcile the traditions of imperial government and society with the ways of gunboat diplomacy and the modern world.

Lu Xun's own family life seems to have been inflected by a certain *fin de siècle* melancholy: the clan compounds scattered with lonely older wives neglected for younger concubines, and lethargic males – Lu Xun's father included – stifled by failure in the fiercely competitive civil service examinations (the tests of Confucian orthodoxy that controlled the paths to wealth and social success). In the main courtyard of the mansion in which Lu Xun grew up, a mound of broken tiles commemorated the repairs made to the house after the fourteen-year-long Taiping Rebellion, the most serious of the nineteenth-century revolts that undermined Qing authority. Adjoining was the 'ghost courtyard', into which were sunk the graves of the many who had died during the appalling violence.

In 1893 the gentility of Lu Xun's early years faded into impoverished disgrace when his grandfather was imprisoned for seven years (on suspended death sentence) for attempting to suborn a civil service examiner. Over the following three years, as Lu Xun's father destroyed his health through a weakness for liquor and opium, the costs of ruinously ineffective medical treatment – together with the bribes necessary to buy the grandfather a stay of execution – undid the family finances. In 1896, after ingesting a series of quack prescriptions from traditional Chinese doctors (sugar cane thrice exposed to frost, monogamous crickets, drum-skin, ink), Lu Xun's father died of an asthma attack.

By 1899, after a half-hearted attempt at the civil service examination, Lu Xun had turned his back on the Confucian system of education that seemed to have led China (and his family) into disaster, permitting the country to be 'carved up like a melon' by foreign imperialists. (A year before his father's death, China had suffered the humiliation of military defeat against Japan, a country that the Middle Kingdom had always viewed as a cultural tributary.) Instead, he committed himself to Western learning – English, political science, natural sciences, geology and mineralogy – at

new-style academies in Nanjing, one of the major east coast cities. His mother wept at his decision, he recalled, 'which was natural enough, because back then a Confucian education was still the route to respectability. Only the utterly desperate, society deemed, stooped to studying Western sciences. By following the course I had fixed upon, I would be selling my soul to foreign devils, only intensifying the contempt in which we were already steeped' (p. 16). A distant uncle of Lu Xun's charged with keeping an eye on him in Nanjing even instructed him to change his name, presumably to avoid further disgracing the clan through his dubious career choice. In fact, for all their suspect veneer of foreign novelty, these institutions seem to have been rather restrained in their modernizing zeal: a swimming pool originally built to teach aspiring naval officers to swim was filled in and converted into a shrine to the God of War after one of the students drowned in it.

Beginning the reading habits of a lifetime, Lu Xun immersed himself in the mass of translations generated by the late-Qing literary press – of novels (by Dickens, Rider Haggard and others), of Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics* – and in the nationalist sermons of the leading reformist intellectuals of the day, Yan Fu and Liang Qichao. It was Yan and Liang's sense of a modern, international world that threw late-imperial Confucianism into a provincial, complacent light, convincing Lu Xun and others like him that China was no longer the centre of the civilized world, but one nation among many struggling for survival in a global system dominated by the West. For the time being, Lu Xun replicated Liang's utilitarian visions for saving China through science, technology and constitutional reform: 'A glorious future unfurled in my mind,' Lu Xun later recalled of his Nanjing years, 'in which I would return to my homeland after graduation and set about medicating its suffering sick – people like my father, to whom Chinese doctors had denied a cure. In times of war, I would become an army doctor, all the while converting my fellow countrymen to the religion of political reform' (p. 16).

Dissatisfied with the training he had picked up at the Nanjing Academy ('climbing a mast a few times did not qualify me as a sailor'²), Lu Xun, like many ambitious and patriotic young men of his generation, decided to leave China to study Western science overseas, enrolling in a Japanese medical school in rural Sendai. In 1906, at the close of a biology lecture in his second year, one of his teachers showed the class a slide depicting a scene from the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5, part of which was fought on Chinese territory disputed by the two nations. A crowd of Chinese apathetically watched while one of their compatriots was beheaded by the Japanese as a Russian spy. 'Though they were all of them perfectly sturdy physical specimens,' Lu Xun later remembered in the Preface to his first short-story collection,

every face was utterly, stupidly blank. The man tied up, the caption informed us, had been caught spying for the Russians and was about to be beheaded by the Japanese as a public example to the appreciative mob.

...I no longer believed in the overwhelming importance of medical science. However rude a nation was in physical health, if its people were intellectually feeble, they would never become anything other than cannon fodder or gawping spectators, their loss to the world through illness no cause for regret. The first task was to change their spirit; and literature and the arts, I decided at the time, were the best means to this end. And so I reinvented myself as a crusader for cultural reform. (p. 17)

A few months after this Damascene moment – the most famous conversion in modern Chinese literature – Lu Xun abandoned his medical studies and began a career as self-appointed literary physician of China's spiritual ills.

Lu Xun was not alone in identifying literary culture as the key to China's survival. By 1902, the reformists Yan Fu and Liang Qichao had begun to prize vernacular fiction as an essential vehicle of political enlightenment. While bemoaning the degeneracy of Chinese writing – 'Chinese novels teach us either robbery or lust' – Liang commented that in Western countries 'a newly published book could often influence and change the views and arguments of the whole nation. Indeed, political novels should be given the highest credit for being instrumental in the steady progress made in the political sphere in America, England, Germany, France, Austria, Italy, and Japan.'³ Why, Liang asked, were the Chinese at present superstitious, avaricious, obsequious, heartless and crafty? 'All because of our fiction.'⁴ Traditionally scorned by scholarly elites as a disreputably popular form beyond the orthodox Confucian pale of classical history and poetry, vernacular fiction was now speedily promoted up the literary hierarchy. 'If one intends to renovate the people of a nation,' Liang enthused, 'one must first renovate its fiction.'⁵ Previously the preserve of a small, overeducated elite, literature was now recast (by another small, overeducated elite) in a utilitarian, collective mould. Lu Xun's vocational epiphany, with its powerful evocation of the lone, enlightened intellectual pledging to transform the benighted Chinese masses, was mired in the uncertainties of this new nationalist vision: in a combination of high-minded contempt and patriotic sympathy that he would later shape into a fictional oeuvre of ingenious moral ambiguity.

For more than ten years, however, Lu Xun's personal ambitions for regenerating China through writing foundered: a magazine, *New Life*, failed before it had produced its first issue; only forty-one copies were sold of a one thousand five hundred print-run of translations of new European fiction; and a Romantic manifesto proclaiming the writer a demonic midwife to a nation's rebirth was read by almost no one.⁶ He discarded his first short story in 1911, too dissatisfied even to give it a name. It was his brother Zhou Zuoren (himself destined to become a celebrated essayist and literary scholar) who entitled it 'Nostalgia' and guided it

towards publication two years later. After returning to China in 1909, Lu Xun meandered through a number of unsatisfactory teaching posts in his native province. Initially enthusiastic about the 1911 Revolution that brought to an end some two thousand years of imperial rule, he soon grew disillusioned with the warlord regime that swiftly took over local government, and escaped to a post in the new Ministry of Education in Beijing.

Lu Xun would later write of these years as a search for ‘intellectual narcotics’ to soothe the disappointment of his radical hopes (p. [18](#)). Returning to traditional literati pursuits, he bought old books, edited classical texts, researched pre-modern Chinese fiction and reconstructed ancient tombstone inscriptions. He also began drinking heavily, a habit that stayed with him for the rest of his life. But through the years of Lu Xun’s early failures and self-imposed exile from the world of cultural reform, the contradictory principles of his later literary personality emerged. Patriotism battled against his disgust for a diseased China; an early belief in the power of the crusading literary genius was corroded by a self-mockery at the futility of his own demagogic impulse; and an evolutionary hope for the future remained in thrall to the ghosts of the past.

By 1916, the new Republic had regressed into authoritarianism, when the president (and former Qing-dynasty general), Yuan Shikai, tried to have himself crowned emperor. Following his death later that year, his subordinates divided the country into personal warlord enclaves and began battling each other for overall control. Taking advantage of China’s post-revolutionary chaos, the Japanese government had in 1915 served Yuan Shikai with their Twenty-One Demands, asserting greater Japanese economic and political sovereignty over areas of Manchuria and Mongolia; after a few months of negotiations, Yuan capitulated. Four years later, the British, French and Americans at Versailles rewarded Japanese naval assistance in the First World War with a large slice of north-east China. Indignant Chinese youth responded by plunging into the protest of the May Fourth Movement – a surge of nationalism named after the violent anti-imperialist demonstrations of 4 May 1919.

The intellectual backdrop to the turmoil of 1919 was already in place by 1916, with the formation of a group of progressive scholars and writers at Beijing University and at the editorial board of *New Youth*, the flagship journal of May Fourth enlightenment. Abandoning the moderation of earlier reformers who had searched for a reconciliation between modern Western and traditional Chinese values, *New Youth*’s editor-in-chief, Chen Duxiu, and his associates challenged China to move in a radically new direction. The basic task, proclaimed Chen, was ‘to import the foundation of Western society – that is, the new belief in equality and human rights. We must be thoroughly aware of the incompatibility between

Confucianism and the new belief, the new society, and the new state.’⁷ Their project was to clear out – by means of thoroughgoing westernization – the horrors of traditional China (‘hypocritical, conservative, passive, constrained, classicist, imitative, ugly, evil, belligerent, disorderly, lazy’) and replace them with the dream of a ‘sincere, progressive, activist, free, egalitarian, creative, beautiful, good, peaceful, cooperative, industrious’ new nation.⁸

At the centre of this New Culture Movement lay far-reaching calls for a reformed literary style that would represent and speak directly to the masses. ‘Down with the ornate, obsequious literature of the aristocrats – up with the plain expressive literature of the people!’ shouted Chen Duxiu. ‘Down with the stale, ostentatious literature of the classics; up with the fresh, sincere literature of realism! Down with the pedantic, obscure literature of the recluse; up with the clear, popular literature of society!’⁹ The new literature was to be infused with individualism, paradoxically to serve the collective good: ‘What I would like most to see happen to you is a true and pure form of egocentrism,’ another celebrated reformer, Hu Shi, approvingly quoted Ibsen, ‘one that can sometimes give you the feeling that your own needs are the most important thing of all and that nothing else matters... If you wish to serve society, the best way to do it would be to put some effort into yourself.’¹⁰

In 1917, Lu Xun was roused from his despondency by a request from Qian Xuantong, an old friend and one of Chen’s co-editors on *New Youth*, to produce something for the magazine. ‘“Imagine an iron house:”’ Lu Xun gloomily argued back, ‘“without windows or doors, utterly indestructible, and full of sound sleepers – all about to suffocate to death. Let them die in their sleep, and they will feel nothing. Is it right to cry out, to rouse the light sleepers among them, causing them inconsolable agony before they die?”’ ‘“But even if we succeed in waking only the few,”’ Qian replied, ‘“there is still hope – hope that the iron house may one day be destroyed.”’ ‘He was right;’ Lu Xun relented. ‘[H]owever hard I tried, I couldn’t quite obliterate my own sense of hope’ (p. 19). His first work of vernacular fiction, ‘Diary of a Madman’, resulted.

In content alone, ‘Diary’ reads as a neat propaganda piece for the anti-Confucian rebellion of the 1910s and 1920s: a forceful attack on traditional China, constructed as the journal of a provincial who believes he has made a terrible discovery – that the Chinese have for centuries been ‘eating people’ – and who, as a result, has been confined as insane by his family. But the formal complexity of the story makes it far more than a work of agitprop. Through the claustrophobic surrealism of his premise, through labelling (in the diary’s pompous classical Chinese Preface) his visionary narrator a madman, Lu Xun produced a profoundly unsettling denunciation of China’s past and present: a howl of despair at a civilization incapable of diagnosing its own state of crisis.

‘Diary’ challenged norms in its use of language as well as in its form and message. Lu Xun’s short story now declared to readers that the new vernacular fiction could serve sophisticated and intensely serious purposes. (Though Lu Xun was an early advocate of literary reform, his first attempt at fiction was in classical Chinese, hovering between the traditionalism of its language and the modernism of its ironic first-person narrator.) A few years after being offered to an untutored reading public, the elliptical experimentalism of ‘Diary’ had helped win Lu Xun acclaim as one of the leading literary rebels of the New Culture Movement: with its assault on tradition, its foreign inspiration (derived from Gogol’s story of the same name), and its skilful manipulation of narrative voice.

‘Diary’ began a two-volume oeuvre of realist fiction, *Outcry* (1922) and *Hesitation* (1925), twenty-five stories that ranged across the central social, political and cultural issues of Lu Xun’s time, and created characters who swiftly rooted themselves in the national imagination. In both his fiction and essays (a form at which he also excelled), Lu Xun distinguished himself from less disciplined contemporaries through the controlled craftsmanship of his narratives, his critical intelligence, and the sardonic humour that overlays his recounting of even the blackest episodes. The traces of Lu Xun’s cosmopolitan reading habits (in Chinese, Japanese and German translations) are in evidence throughout: in a lofty command of satire picked up from the Polish Sienkiewicz; in an eerie symbolism refined by his translations of the Russian Andreiev. ‘Read no Chinese books,’ he once advised China’s youth. ‘Or as few as you can. But read more foreign books.’¹¹

Lu Xun publicly regarded his fiction as a kind of cultural medicine, designed to draw the poison out of the Chinese national character. ‘As for why I wrote fiction,’ he reflected in 1933, ‘I still uphold the principle of “enlightenment” of more than a decade ago. I think it must “serve life” and furthermore reform life... Thus my subjects were often drawn from the unfortunates of this sick society; my aim was to expose the disease so as to draw attention to its cure.’¹² And many of the stories collected in *Outcry* and *Hesitation* are, on one level, straightforwardly obsessed with China’s predicament. Lu Xun’s favoured narrative tone of supercilious irony appears designed to advance his stories’ therapeutic aspirations: distancing the reader from the people and events described, bolstering our faith in the objectivity of our literary doctor. Lu Xun’s early fiction is a search for subjects, situations and forms (character sketches, reminiscences, parodies, dense symbolic realism, melancholy nostalgia) by which to represent the national emergency.

Ever-present – in the boorish inhumanity of the drinkers in the Universal Prosperity Tavern, for example, or the bestial gurning of the villagers in ‘Diary of a Madman’ – is the Crowd, a collective illustration of China’s moral bankruptcy. Within years of his creation, Ah-Q – Lu Xun’s most extended denunciation of the

idiotic, able-bodied everyman – had begun to enter the language as expressive shorthand for every imaginable blemish on the national character: its obsession with face; its superiority complex; its servility before authority and cruelty towards the weak; its conceited delight in ignorance. (According to one account, Lu Xun chose the Roman letter of his hero's name for its resemblance to a blank face with a pigtail – an all-purpose signifier for Chinese manhood.) Lu Xun's mock-biography seems determined to channel the reader's contempt at the abject Ah-Q: in the narrator's facetious struggles to fit his subject into the parameters of respectable historiography; in the sardonic chapter headings; in the convolutions by which Ah-Q takes his 'moral victories'.

But Lu Xun's complexity as a writer goes beyond the bitterness of his vision of China; beyond a self-righteous condemnation of the backward Chinese masses. At the heart of the catechisms of *Outcry* and *Hesitation* lies a string of unreliable narrators who transform his stories into shrewdly crafted vehicles for casting doubt on literature's ability to shoulder the political burdens it had taken on at the start of the century.

Modern Chinese fiction was, from its inception, compromised by the motives of its inventors. In their calls for a 'realist' literature to save the country, intellectuals such as Chen Duxiu envisioned a kind of fiction that would both diagnose and cure the sickness of modern China. The New Culture Movement was aiming not so much for a distanced grasp of reality as for an instrument with which to reform it. Almost as soon as they seized upon realism as the key to China's survival, Chinese writers began to soften their concept of mimesis, fearing that an 'excessive' stress on objectivity might prove 'destructive'. 'Merely to criticize without interpreting can cause melancholy and deep sorrow,' counselled Mao Dun, one of the period's leading exponents of literary realism and naturalism, 'and these can lead to despondency.'¹³ (This was an anxiety that Lu Xun admitted to sharing, writing regretfully in his Preface to *Outcry* that 'I often stooped to distortions and untruths: adding a fictitious wreath of flowers to Yu'er's grave in "Medicine"; forbearing to write that Mrs Shan never dreams of her son in "Tomorrow", because my generalissimos did not approve of pessimism. And I didn't want to infect younger generations – dreaming the glorious dreams that I too had dreamed when I was young – with the loneliness that came to torment me' (p. 20).)

The relationship between the (implicitly) intellectual, upper-class narrator and the lower-class protagonists that realist literary texts favoured soon became troubling to May Fourth writers. Quite apart from the difficulties of developing sufficient familiarity with a labouring milieu to write convincingly about it, such writers had to ponder awkward issues of narrative distance: how to prevent realism's aura of objectivity morphing into contempt for the suffering masses for whom they felt

instinctive sympathy. A self-confidence in the writer's ability to doctor the nation (through a Europeanized literature incomprehensible to the Chinese masses) collided with an acute sense of intellectual guilt and a self-loathing urge to erase bourgeois authorship with a literature 'of the people'. Lu Xun's genius lay in his grasp of this paradox: in his ability both to express a critical vision of reality, and – through his handling of narrative form and perspective – to expose the limitations of China's realist manifesto.¹⁴

To see this in action, we might return to 'The Real Story of Ah-Q'. Our condescending biographer, we realize, is a thoroughly compromised man who slips between the various worlds that he parodies: the flatulent Confucian literary tradition; the new learning; the parochial Weizhuang; the cannibalistic crowd. He can, as he pleases, keep his distance as an observer and yet gain privileged access to Ah-Q's thought processes. When Ah-Q leaves Weizhuang for the city, our supposedly omniscient biographer unconventionally stays behind and waits for his subject to return before taking up the story again, merging himself into the ranks of the villagers. 'I wrote "The Real Story",' Lu Xun once recalled, 'with the intention of exposing the weakness of my fellow citizens – I did not specify whether or not I myself was included therein.'¹⁵ Throughout, his narrator's satirical stance is made possible only by his mastery of the written word – by his collusion in an authoritarian literate tradition that delights in terrorizing illiterate plebeians, and that in the final courtroom scene at last crushes Ah-Q's nerve. In Lu Xun's grand finale, the reader himself – richly entertained over some fifty pages by Ah-Q's idiocies – is drawn guiltily into the execution's bestial audience: into its 'monstrous coalition of eyes, gnawing into his soul', ogling the horror of Ah-Q's ritual sacrifice (p. 123).

Time and again, Lu Xun pulls this trick, drawing himself and his audience into his crowds of numb spectators. In 'A Public Example', the narration pans across the mob, leaving the reader a spectator of dehumanized surfaces. But it is in 'New Year's Sacrifice' that he most unsettlingly implicates the intellectual narrator, the crowd and the reader in the violence of literary voyeurism. In telling the story of a peasant woman's persecution to death by bad luck and social circumstance – the kind of material that would lend itself nicely to a Communist morality tale – Lu Xun averts the plot's melodrama through framing her tale to expose the failures both of Confucian society and of the story's progressive narrator, unable to bring a shred of comfort to a desperate beggar-woman near the end of her life. In a deliberate repetition of the account of the tragic death of the woman's son, Lu Xun forces his readers to join Luzhen's callous listeners, allowing us first to 'chew deliciously' on her sorrow then to share the townspeople's sense of boredom, 'spitting it out in disgust' as dregs (p. 174). Recycling a device deployed at the end of 'Upstairs in the

Tavern' and 'The Loner', the story ends with an incongruous exhalation of relief by the narrator, his spirits lifted by the recital just passed – a jibe at the moral cheapness of catharsis.

'It is true that I dissect other people all the time,' Lu Xun once wrote. 'But I dissect myself far more often, and far more savagely.'¹⁶ (It cannot be accidental that his anatomizations always take place in transparently autobiographical landscapes: in Luzhen, a fictional version of his birthplace, Shaoxing, and its satellite villages; or in Beijing, Lu Xun's adopted hometown between 1912 and 1926.) In his movement between irony, despair and hope, and with his talent for diagnosis but refusal to prescribe, he engineered a meditation on the ethics of reading and writing – and laid bare the dilemmas of China's modern literature.

Lu Xun's outward radicalism through these years stood at curious odds with his conservative private life. In 1906, he had submitted to a loveless marriage arranged by his mother. Although the match was possibly never consummated, for years he kept up a façade of marital cohabitation, and supported his wife financially throughout his lifetime. For all the energy that he expended on attacking Confucian values, he was himself a devotedly filial son, setting up home in 1919 with his mother, his wife, his two brothers and their Japanese wives. (He enjoyed an especially close relationship with his essayist brother Zhou Zuoren. Returning to Japan in 1906 after his marriage, Lu Xun took back with him not his new wife but Zhou, enabling them to embark upon various ill-fated early literary collaborations.) Several of the lighter pieces in *Outcry* and *Hesitation* offer snapshots of the extended family's intriguing menage: the eccentricities of his sister-in-law's rabbit rearing in 'A Cat among the Rabbits', the household's trickle of bohemian visitors in 'A Comedy of Ducks'. On his arranged marriage, though, Lu Xun publicly maintained a stolid silence.

In 1923, however, Lu Xun and Zhou became mysteriously estranged from each other, the older brother moving his mother and wife out to a separate Beijing residence. Although neither brother convincingly explained the causes of the rift, Zhou's Japanese wife accused her brother-in-law of making sexual advances at her. (Through the 1910s and early 1920s, Lu Xun may well have remained largely celibate; according to one account, he refused to wear padded trousers through Beijing's bitter winters in order to freeze out his sexual frustration.¹⁷

Whatever the truth behind the split, within another couple of years Lu Xun had found emotional solace in, at last, a meaningful romantic attachment: with Xu Guangping, a former student who would give birth to his only son in 1929. Conjugal happiness seems rather to have blunted his creative impulse: while the seven years from 1918 to 1925 produced two short-story collections and a darkly

surreal prose-poetry sequence, *Wild Grass*, his remaining eleven years yielded only one further volume of fiction. Domestic pleasures did little, however, to temper his professional and personal belligerence. Throughout his working life, he had a habit of falling out with colleagues and acquaintances, abandoning most of his teaching jobs and publishing projects a few months after beginning them. Having somehow survived at the Ministry of Education for fourteen years, he was forced out in 1926 after a noisy vendetta against his minister. Though capable of generously mentoring younger writers, he could also violently overreact to perceived criticisms or slights. One analysis of his correspondence estimates that the fingers of one hand would not be needed to count the number of Lu Xun's peers that he managed to be consistently kind about.¹⁸ After 1925, his instinctive spikiness was further sharpened by paranoid suspicions about gossip over his adulterous liaison with a woman sixteen years his junior (divorce from his arranged marriage was, apparently, out of the question). When Xu Guangping was expelled for radical insubordination on her Student Committee, Lu Xun saved some of his most chilling public vitriol for her college principal, whom he denounced – with perplexing misogyny, given the sympathy he expressed in his fiction and essays for Chinese women – as a withered, twisted widow, stirring up slander about his beloved.¹⁹

As the middle years of the 1920s firmly established Lu Xun as a literary celebrity – through his polemical essays and editing of prestigious literary magazines – he energetically kept up his profile in aggressive quarrels with writers, scholars and politicians. China's new-style, post-May Fourth intellectuals were much given to temper and melodrama: one noted writer, Yu Dafu, considered drowning himself after his proficiency in German was questioned by a rival; when one of Lu Xun's poems was rejected by a newspaper's editor-in-chief, a junior editor (and promoter of Lu Xun's work) slapped his boss in the face and resigned. Lu Xun's abundant capacity for grudges (eleven years after a Beijing professor criticized him for failing to acknowledge a source, Lu Xun was still publicly sniping at the 'lying dog' who accused him of plagiarism) did little to cool this overheated world.

While China's fractious literati squabbled, the country was embarking on a further bloody phase of its intermittent twentieth-century revolution. In 1923, the Soviet Union brokered – and financed – an improbable United Front between the young Chinese Communist Party (founded in 1921 by the New Culture luminaries Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao) and the right-wing Nationalist Party. By helping to defeat the warlords who had carved China up among themselves, the theory went, the Soviets would drive forward the national bourgeois revolution which would in turn provide a launching pad for Communism. But in 1927, with the Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek on the brink of taking the great urban prizes of Shanghai and Nanjing, and

with the Communists becoming, in Chiang's eyes, unacceptably radical in their efforts to mobilize against landowners and businessmen, the alliance ruptured. On 12 April, he set an armed force of some one thousand men at Shanghai's labour unions; one hundred unionists were gunned down at a single protest rally alone. Later that year, forces rallied by the Communists were similarly massacred in Changsha, Wuhan, Nanchang and, finally, Guangzhou, where leftists, quickly identified by the dye marks left round their necks from their red kerchiefs, were drowned in bundles of ten or twelve in the river by the city.

'I am terrorized,' wrote Lu Xun in the immediate aftermath, temporarily paralysed by the horror of it. 'A kind of terror I have never experienced before... I have nothing to say... What is to come, I do not know, though I fear it will be no good.'²⁰ Other radicals responded by plunging leftward into a romantic Marxism that claimed a central role for literature as the 'vanguard of the Revolution', recasting the revolutionary intelligentsia as proletarian warriors against the right-wing bourgeois oppressors. Through sheer force of will, they preached, the enlightened writer could 'approach the spoken language of the worker and peasant masses... Overcome your own petit-bourgeois qualities; turn your back on the class that is soon to be abolished. Start walking toward the ragged mass of workers and peasants!... By so doing, you can ensure final victory, you will achieve outstanding merit, and you will not be ashamed to call yourself a warrior.'²¹

Although their protestations betrayed the left's anxiety to find a role for the literary intellectual in an era of violent proletarian revolution, they provided few practical insights for those concerned about the uses of literature in a context of national crisis. If the Europeanized vernacular of the New Culture Movement had been, as political thinkers now set about declaring, 'a waste of time' with regard to popularization, how was the elitist written word to represent, reach and reform the undereducated masses?²²

Enraged by the cheap opportunism of the Marxist converts – whom he accused of posturing in revolutionary coffee houses, of being drunk on their own slogans – Lu Xun began by pointing out the 'divergent paths of literature and politics'. Some claim, he wrote,

that literature has a great part to play in revolution; that it can be used, for instance, to propagandize, encourage, spur on, speed up and accomplish revolution. But to my mind, writing of this kind lacks vigour, for few good works of literature have been written to order... During a great revolution, literature disappears and there is silence for... all are so busy making revolution that there is no time to talk of literature... Some writers today use the common people – workers and peasants – as material for their novels and poems, and this has also been called people's literature when actually it is nothing of the sort, for the people have not yet opened their mouths.²³

Yet after three years of translating and reflecting on Soviet literary theory, Lu Xun had taken his own leftward turn, as if – caught between two unappealing alternatives

(the arrogance of the extreme left wing and the vapidness, as he intolerantly saw it, of a universalistic humanism) – he decided to select the lesser of two evils. In 1930 he embraced his ideological change of direction with oddly simplistic resolution, declaring that ‘our pioneering young intellectuals have raised a battle-cry’.

Our proletarian literature will continue to grow, because it belongs to the broad masses of revolutionary toilers; and as long as the people exist and gain in strength, so long will this revolutionary literature grow.

‘Now, in China,’ he resumed the following year, ‘the revolutionary literary movement of the proletariat is, in fact, the *only* literary movement.’²⁴ Lu Xun witnessed at first hand the brutality of the Nationalist White Terror (in which close personal friends and associates were executed); perhaps he thought, like Western European converts to Stalinism in the 1930s, that Marxism was the only credible weapon against global fascism. An ambivalent choice forced on him by circumstances, Lu Xun’s conversion can also be read as the natural outcome of his earlier fiction’s undercurrent of intellectual guilt. For by throwing in his lot with the Communist establishment, Lu Xun submitted to an authoritarian literary principle whose final logic would be to annihilate not just literary freedom, but the very category of the author. It is hard to believe that a commentator as clear-sighted as Lu Xun – who had, after all, predicted only three years previously that a real revolution would obliterate literature (a prediction largely borne out in Mao’s post-1949 Republic) – could not see past the soft focus of Shanghai Marxism to the tyranny of Maoist socialist realism. Perhaps amid the disunity of the early 1930s, Lu Xun was unable to glimpse even the possibility of an absolutist Party line on literature.

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We can infer Lu Xun’s doubts about this revolutionary aesthetic from his own creative contribution to it. Through and beyond his embrace of a literature of the ‘broad masses of revolutionary toilers’, Lu Xun continued to shelter in Shanghai’s urbane foreign concessions: enjoying family life, browsing favourite bookshops, hosting dinners, going to Tarzan movies. While he called for the intelligentsia to ‘branch out’ against their own class, to become as one with the proletariat, while he helped aspiring writers of proletarian origin and encouraged the development of alternative media (films, lectures, drama, woodcut illustrations) to popularize cultural and political messages, he channelled most of his own literary energies into vituperative essays that he deployed as ‘daggers, or spears’ in the ideological contretemps fizzling within the ranks of Communist literati during the early 1930s.²⁵ Though in 1935 he sent a congratulatory telegram on hearing of the conclusion of the Communist Long March in Yan’an, he declined the Communist Party’s invitation

to write a long novel set in the rural revolution, pleading a lack of knowledge (ignorance that he did not make any attempt to remedy).

Far from promoting a revolutionary future, his fiction in these years retreated deep into the Chinese past. In 1935, he completed the eight reworkings of ancient legends that made up his last collection, *Old Stories Retold*. A gentle counter-perspective on Chinese history spiked by moments of contemporary satire, *Old Stories* is a final expression of Lu Xun's career-long migrations between present, future and past. 'I cannot shake off the ancient ghosts that I carry on my back,' he revealed in 1925 – six years after he had triumphantly announced that 'the road of life is progressive, ever ascending the infinite hypotenuse of a spiritual triangle; nothing can obstruct it'.²⁶

While preparing – in the quietude of his post-1911 depression – his two-volume *Brief History of Chinese Fiction* (one of the first attempts to privilege this previously denigrated form with a general scholarly history), Lu Xun developed a fascination with the fictional resources of the Chinese past: not only novels and stories, but also unofficial histories, biographies, romances, legends, myths and fables. In his academic research, essays and late fiction, China's wider literary heritage came to offer Lu Xun a buffer against both the stolidity of late-Qing Confucianism, and the socio-political concerns of his own time.

But even as Lu Xun looked backwards, his thoughts seem to have returned restlessly to the present, in thinly disguised contemporary intrusions on to his ancient fictional landscapes: the parody of the anti-romantic critic in 'Mending Heaven'; the clash with Feng Meng (a stab at a disciple-turned-literary antagonist) in 'Flight to the Moon'. 'And so I began the slippery descent into facetiousness – the arch-enemy of literary creation,' Lu Xun wrote in his Preface to the collection. 'I still hate myself for it.' A few lines down, however, he contradictorily attacked himself for indulging his creativity too much, for his trivial delight in extrapolating 'one tiny scrap of a fact... into a story of sorts', rather than toiling to produce a work of historical substance (pp. 295–6). *Old Stories Retold* is a curious miscellany: an escapist regression from the Marxist wrangles that consumed him in his final years, periodically shanghaied by provincial jibes.

Considered as creative attempts to re-imagine the mythical resources of the Chinese past in the modern short story, two of the earliest pieces are perhaps the most successful.²⁷ 'Mending Heaven' (1922) meditates fantastically on the irreconcilability of nature and civilization, painting the goddess of creation and her universe with lush, languorous strokes, in contrast with the swarming pettiness of her human creations. 'Forging the Swords' (1926) builds a brief Song text into an extended, baldly surrealistic exploration – stripped of all mimetic realism – of the grotesque mechanics of the impulse to revenge, of the alienation of the rebel, and of

the gawping sycophancy of the crowd. While the remaining stories do not sustain the intensity of these first two pieces, they entertain us with an irreverent gallery of character and material, enlivened by flashes of wit. ‘Flight to the Moon’ reworks the heroic Yi the Archer as a henpecked husband and inadequate hunter-gatherer, while ‘Taming the Floods’ mocks the ivory-tower pomposity of academe.

Despite the tones of self-loathing in which Lu Xun described his periodic lapses ‘into the quicksands of facetiousness’, as often as not his contemporary references can be easily interpreted by the general reader as universal satires (pp. 296–7). The sermonizing critic in ‘Mending Heaven’, for example, underscores the story’s intended divergence between primeval freedom and the fussy strictures of society. Scattered throughout are reiterations of broader themes – confrontations between the individual and the collective, and between the individual and authority (‘Forging the Swords’, ‘Picking Ferns’, ‘Leaving the Pass’) – cut loose from the local particulars of the earlier, realist stories. Through it all, Lu Xun reserves the right to poke fun as and when he chooses. Favourite targets are the philosophical inadequacies of his intellectual heroes: the toothless, quietist Laozi, defeated by the problem of heaving his ox over the city wall; the righteous Bo Yi, undone by his own indiscretion; and the ebulliently conceited Zhuangzi, lecturing ghosts on their deficient understanding of death.

On 19 October 1936, Lu Xun died of tuberculosis in Shanghai, still mired in quarrels with the leadership of the League of Left-wing Writers, and especially with Zhou Yang, the literary politico who would become Mao’s cultural tsar after 1949. ‘Hold the funeral quickly,’ he set out in a mock-testament written a month before his death. ‘Do not stage any memorial services. Forget about me, and care about your own life – you’re a fool if you don’t.’ And finally, a message regarding his son: ‘On no account let him become a good-for-nothing writer or artist.’²⁸

In perfect disregard of Lu Xun’s instructions, the writer was swiftly adopted by Mao Zedong – who would within twenty years crush into socialist realism the sardonic irreverence that defined Lu Xun’s legacy to Chinese literature – as ‘the saint of modern China’. ‘[H]e knew how to fight back against the rotten society and the evil imperialist forces,’ Mao lectured school-children in 1937.

In his last years he fought for truth and freedom from the standpoint of the proletariat and national liberation...

Lu Xun was an absolute realist, always uncompromising, always determined... an outstanding writer... and a tough, excellent vanguard in the revolutionary ranks.²⁹

Since Mao commandeered Lu Xun for his revolution by focusing on his late leftward turn, an entire Lu Xun industry has blown up on the Mainland: museums, plaster busts, spin-off books, dedicated journals, plays, television adaptations, wine brands. During the Cultural Revolution – Mao’s decade-long war on the Western

influences that Lu Xun had worked so hard to introduce to China – anyone the writer had criticized in his prolific speeches, essays or letters risked persecution. In the feverish commercialism of post-Mao China, entrepreneurial developers even created a tacky theme park offering tourists the ‘Lu Xun experience’ – the chance to meet actors hamming it up as the author’s most famous characters (Ah-Q, Kong Yiji and so on), to gamble in traditional wine shops, and generally to savour the darkness of pre-Communist ‘Old Society’.

Somewhere within the Communists’ oversimplification of Lu Xun into an exemplary Servant of the People lie seeds of biographical truth: in his anxieties about the moral responsibility of the writer in an era of traumatic social transformation. (As early as his 1920 short story ‘A Minor Incident’, his periodic fits of intellectual self-loathing found expression in utterances regarding the moral superiority of the masses.) ‘Head-bowed, like a willing ox I serve the children,’ Mao triumphantly quoted out of context one of Lu Xun’s late poems (‘Self-mockery’) in his ‘Talks at Yan’an’ – the 1942 sermon that defined the principles of literary orthodoxy for the next three decades – exhorting his audience of ‘literary and art workers’ to ‘learn from the example of Lu Xun and be “oxen” for the proletariat and the masses, bending their backs to the task until their dying day’.³⁰ The voice of self-doubt that transformed so much of his fiction into remarkably open texts speaks through his later essays, in which he returned repeatedly to Promethean images of agonized self-sacrifice: ‘I have stolen fire from other countries to cook my own flesh,’ he wrote of his efforts to translate turgid Marxist theory. ‘If it tastes good, those who chew it may get something out of it, and I will not have sacrificed my body in vain.’³¹ Lu Xun hesitated between a commitment to literature, both for its aesthetic and political potency, a sense of intellectual helplessness, and a patriotic moral principle that eventually drove him to Marxism to remedy the inequities of Chinese society. It is this compound of literary prestige, integrity and self-distrust that made him – once he was safely dead, of course, and unable to fight back in one of his vicious essays – such an attractive trophy for the Communist revolution.

But Mao’s glorification of Lu Xun erased the writer’s complexity, and tried to consign his critical impulses to the dustbin of history. Turning, in 1942, on contrarian writers within the Communist ranks who continued to argue for freedom of expression, Mao again appropriated Lu Xun:

Living under the rule of dark forces and deprived of freedom of speech, Lu Xun used burning satire and freezing irony... to do battle; and he was entirely right. We, too, must hold up to sharp ridicule the fascists, the Chinese reactionaries, and everything that harms the people; but in our Communist bases, where democracy and freedom are granted in full... our style does not need to be like Lu Xun’s.³²

Already in 1928, members of the revolutionary left were repudiating Lu Xun’s ironic realism as a relic of the 1910s. Announcing the ‘bygone age of Ah-Q’, the

critic Qian Xingcun (who would go on to become a pillar of the post-1949 academic establishment) lambasted Lu Xun for his individualistic pessimism, his uncertainty about a vague, golden future, and his failure to ‘transcend his age’:

At best, his works touch upon the present; but there is no future... We can see the self-will, suspicion, jealousy and the obstinate refusal of the petit-bourgeois class to admit mistakes... He is neither satisfied with reality nor maintains hope in his ideals... What about the so-called bright side of life?... The Chinese peasants of the past ten years have long since lost their resemblance to the naïve peasant masses of Ah-Q’s time... The age, and the technique of ‘The Real Story of Ah-Q’ are dead! Already dead!... This violent, stormy age can only be represented by a writer... who stands on the front line of the revolution!³³

Every one of Lu Xun’s close leftist disciples from the early 1930s was purged after 1949; Mao himself is said to have admitted, in one of his flashes of honesty, that Lu Xun would ‘either have gone silent, or gone to prison’ if he had lived on through the political violence that the Great Helmsman unleashed from the 1950s onwards. Until the post-Mao thaw in cultural life, Lu Xun’s left-wing idolizers struggled to reconcile the writer’s spiky individualism with the political correctness of his official cult. Statistical sophistry neutralized *Wild Grass*’s nine undeniably dark poems with its eleven revolutionary ‘clarion-calls for battle’. Ah-Q’s loathsomeness was blamed on contamination by the evil landlord class, and the surreal violence of ‘Forging the Swords’ rationalized as a ‘healthy struggle against feudal oppression’.³⁴

Over seventy years after his death, Lu Xun continues to generate controversy in China. While his short stories are still trotted out in high schools as orthodox denunciations of the evils of feudalism, in 2007 the beginnings of a Lu Xun withdrawal from textbooks began, partly to make way for escapist kung fu texts. Perhaps the intention was to vary the literary diet of the Chinese young; or perhaps to redirect their impressionable minds from Lu Xun’s dark introspection towards a more exuberant self-confidence. Perhaps also it was an attempt to discourage the youth of today from Lu Xun’s inconveniently critical habits. One of the excised works was a bitterly sad 1926 essay written to commemorate a female student killed by government forces in a peaceful demonstration; this has prompted commentators to suggest the present Chinese government is anxious to suppress anything that might encourage public memory of the bloody 1989 repression of civil protestors around Tiananmen Square.³⁵

Among the younger generations of a post-Mao China in which consumerism has largely replaced Communism as the state-ordained religion, it is probably fair to say that Lu Xun has swung out of fashion as Dickens has done in Britain, even while both writers continue to enjoy an unassailable position in their nations’ respective literary canons. Writers who emerged into the 1990s market economy tend to ignore, puzzle over or sneer at Lu Xun’s astringently serious vision of literature. In

‘Rupture’, a 1998 survey polling the cultural opinions of a new, hedonistic and individualist post-Tiananmen generation of writers, the ‘saint of modern China’ was contemptuously dismissed as ‘an old stone’, and the state literary prize named after him was referred to as a ‘dressed-up pile of shit’.³⁶

Nonetheless, his literary legacy continues to exercise a clear, if often unacknowledged, influence on every new generation of rebels. It can be sensed, perhaps, in the unofficial post-Mao inquiry into the collective madness of the Cultural Revolution; in the re-examination of the Maoist countryside by the groundbreaking ‘Roots-seeking’ authors of the 1980s; and in Chinese intellectuals’ and writers’ continuing struggle for freedom of expression. Even a post-Tiananmen novelist such as Zhu Wen, mastermind of ‘Rupture’ and leader of the 1990s avant-garde, is prone to an obsession with a heartlessly congested society that seems to have trickled directly down from Lu Xun. The two writers share both a bleak vision of the China that surrounds them and an ability to alleviate the oppressive effects of pessimism through the use of irony.³⁷

More generally, Lu Xun’s paradoxical brand of nationalism (a passionate attachment to, yet disgust with, China) still retains a powerful hold over Chinese consciousness. Even as China prepared to host the 2008 Olympics – global confirmation of China’s euphoric twenty-first-century resurgence – Lu Xun’s self-critical patriotism seemed to be epidemic through Beijing. While the capital bubbled over with a desire to showcase the achievements of the post-Mao economic miracle, government and civilians alike worried about the city’s ‘spiritual civilization’, waging mass education campaigns to eradicate bad public habits (spitting, littering, sloppy personal hygiene) that might offend sensitive foreigners.

Lu Xun’s life, work and afterlife are a testament to the creativity, cosmopolitanism and intellectual independence of twentieth-century Chinese culture, and to the uncertainties and constraints imposed upon it. Though too often he allowed his own creativity to be derailed by an uncertain temper and provincial infighting, though he subjected his own responses and actions to an almost paralysing self-scrutiny that prevented him from moving beyond short fiction to the novel, he at least succeeded in never falling silent – reading, thinking and writing through exceptional political, social and personal upheaval. For his tonal control, his restless experimentalism and his passionate seriousness of purpose, Lu Xun deserves his accolades; and still has much to teach his contemporary counterparts.

NOTES

- [1.](#) Lu Xun, 'The Fair of the Five Fierce Gods' and 'From Hundred-Plant Garden to Three-Flavour Study', in *Lu Xun: Selected Works*, trans. Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, 4 vols. (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1985), I, pp. 374–9 and pp. 389–95.
- [2.](#) Translation adapted from William Lyell, *Lu Xun's Vision of Reality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 50–51.
- [3.](#) Liang Qichao, 'Foreword to the Publication of Political Novels in Translation', in *Modern Chinese Literary Thought*, ed. Kirk Denton (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 72–3.
- [4.](#) Liang Qichao, 'On the Relationship between Fiction and the Government of the People', in *ibid.*, p. 80.
- [5.](#) *Ibid.*, p. 75.
- [6.](#) Lu Xun, 'On the Power of Mara Poetry', in *ibid.*, pp. 96–109.
- [7.](#) Quoted in Jonathan Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: Norton, 1999), pp. 303–4.
- [8.](#) Quoted in Marsten Anderson, *The Limits of Realism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 27.
- [9.](#) *Ibid.*, p. 28.
- [10.](#) Quoted in Lydia Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture and Translated Modernity – China, 1900–1937* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 79.
- [11.](#) Quoted in T. A. Hsia, *The Gate of Darkness: Studies on the Leftist Movement in China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968), p. 148.
- [12.](#) Quoted in Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Voices from the Iron House: A Study of Lu Xun* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 58.
- [13.](#) Anderson, *The Limits of Realism*, p. 42.
- [14.](#) My reading of Lu Xun here is heavily influenced by the incisive analyses of Marsten Anderson in *The Limits of Realism* and of Lydia Liu in *Translingual Practice*.
- [15.](#) Quoted in Liu, *Translingual Practice*, p. 70.
- [16.](#) Quoted in *ibid.*
- [17.](#) Bonnie S. McDougall, *Love-letters and Privacy in Modern China: The Intimate Lives of Lu Xun and Xu Guangping* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 25. My section on Lu Xun's personal life is indebted to McDougall's work on Lu Xun's letters, and to Saiyin Sun's Ph.D. dissertation, 'Beyond the Iron House: Lu Xun and the Chinese Literary Field

in the 1920s' (Cambridge University, 2009).

- [18.](#) McDougall, *Love-letters*, p. 72.
- [19.](#) Ibid., p. 41.
- [20.](#) Translation slightly adapted from Lu Xun, 'Reply to Mr Youheng', in *Lu Xun: Selected Works*, II, pp. 346–52.
- [21.](#) Cheng Fangwu, 'From a Literary Revolution to a Revolutionary Literature', in *Modern Chinese Literary Thought*, ed. Denton, pp. 269–75.
- [22.](#) Qu Qiubai, 'The Question of Popular Literature and Art', in *ibid.*, p. 419.
- [23.](#) Lu Xun, 'Literature of a Revolutionary Period', in *Lu Xun: Selected Works*, II, pp. 334–41.
- [24.](#) Both quoted in Lee, *Voices*, p. 143.
- [25.](#) Ibid., p. 124.
- [26.](#) See, respectively, Hsia, *The Gate of Darkness*, p. 148; and 'Random Thoughts (66) – The Road of Life', in *Lu Xun: Selected Works*, II, p. 54.
- [27.](#) Here, my reading is influenced by Lee's judgements in *Voices*, pp. 32–7.
- [28.](#) Translation slightly adapted from Lu Xun, 'Death', in *Lu Xun: Selected Works*, IV, p. 314.
- [29.](#) Mao Zedong, 'On Lu Hsun', available at <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-6/mswv627.htm>.
- [30.](#) Mao Zedong, 'Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art', in *Modern Chinese Literary Thought*, ed. Denton, pp. 458–84.
- [31.](#) Translation adapted from Lu Xun, '“Hard Translation” and the “Class Character of Literature”', in *Lu Xun: Selected Works*, III, pp. 75–96.
- [32.](#) Mao, 'Talks', pp. 479–80.
- [33.](#) Qian Xingcun, 'The Bygone Age of Ah-Q', in *Modern Chinese Literary Thought*, ed. Denton, pp. 276–88.
- [34.](#) See Lee, *Voices*, pp. 214, 211 and 36 respectively.
- [35.](#) Arthur Waldron, 'So Long, Lu Xun', available at <http://www.commentarymagazine.com/contentions/>.
- [36.](#) See Zhu Wen comp., 'Duanlie: yi fen wenjuan he wushiliu fen dajuan' ('Rupture: one questionnaire and fifty-six responses'), *Beijing wenxue* 10 (1998), pp. 19–47.
- [37.](#) See, for example, Zhu Wen, 'A Boat Crossing', in *I Love Dollars and Other Stories of China*, trans. Julia Lovell (London: Penguin, 2007), pp. 91–147.

Further Reading

LU XUN'S WRITINGS IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION

Lu Xun: Selected Works, 4 vols., trans. Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1985). A wide-ranging collection of fiction, prose poetry, essays and letters, including selections from the three collections translated in the present volume.

Diary of a Madman and Other Stories, trans. William Lyell (Hawai'i: University of Hawai'i Press, 1990). Contains translations of Lu Xun's first short story ('Nostalgia') and first two collections of fiction, *Outcry and Hesitation*, together with an informative biographical essay.

Letters between Two: Correspondence between Lu Xun and Xu Guangping, trans. Bonnie S. McDougall (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2000). An edited collection of the letters exchanged between Lu Xun and Xu Guangping.

STUDIES OF LU XUN AND MODERN CHINESE LITERATURE

- Anderson, Marsten, *The Limits of Realism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). A pioneering study of modern Chinese realism, with particularly thought-provoking comments on Lu Xun's use of the unreliable narrator.
- Chou, Eva Shan, 'Learning to Read Lu Xun, 1918–23: The Emergence of a Readership', *The China Quarterly* 172 (December 2002), pp. 1042–64. A discussion of the process by which Lu Xun gained his canonical status among contemporary readers.
- Daruvala, Susan, *Zhou Zuoren and an Alternative Chinese Response to Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000). A study of Lu Xun's brother, with incisive observations about the canonical status of Lu Xun.
- Denton, Kirk, ed., *Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writings on Literature, 1893–1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996). An anthology of key essays and polemics of modern Chinese literature, including three pieces by Lu Xun and invaluable scholarly introductions by the editor.
- Foster, Paul B., 'The Ironic Inflation of Chinese National Character: Lu Xun's International Reputation, Romain Rolland's Critique of "The True Story of Ah Q" and the Nobel Prize', *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 13.1 (Spring 2001), pp. 140–68.
- Goldman, Merle, ed., *Modern Chinese Literature in the May Fourth Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977). A useful collection of essays on modern Chinese literature, including three articles on Lu Xun.
- Hanan, Patrick, *Chinese Fiction of the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004). Includes an important exploration of Lu Xun's fictional technique and foreign influences.
- Hsia, C. T., *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971). For years after it was first published, the leading critical reference work on twentieth-century Chinese fiction.
- Hsia, T. A., *The Gate of Darkness: Studies on the Leftist Movement in China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968). A thorough account of, among other things, Lu Xun's disputes with the literary left wing in the early 1930s.

- Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Voices from the Iron House: A Study of Lu Xun* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987). An intellectual biography of the writer.
- , ed., *Lu Xun and His Legacy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). A key collection of critical essays.
- Liu, Lydia, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture and Translated Modernity – China, 1900–1937* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), especially Chapter Two. An exploration of the ways in which modern Chinese writers and thinkers translated ideas about modernity, with an interesting discussion of Lu Xun and ‘The Real Story of Ah-Q’.
- Lyell, William, *Lu Xun’s Vision of Reality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976). A colourful biography of the writer, with detailed discussion of his realist fiction.
- McDougall, Bonnie S., *Love-letters and Privacy in Modern China: The Intimate Lives of Lu Xun and Xu Guangping* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). A highly informative insight into the private thoughts and emotions of Lu Xun and his common-law wife.
- and Kam, Louie, eds., *The Literature of China in the Twentieth Century* (London: Hurst, 1997). An essential critical reference work on modern Chinese fiction, poetry and drama.
- Pollard, David E., *The True Story of Lu Xun* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2002). The most recent English-language biography of the writer.
- Spence, Jonathan, *The Gate of Heavenly Peace: The Chinese and Their Revolution 1895–1980* (New York: Viking, 1981). A very readable account of modern China’s intellectual and literary revolutionaries, with extensive discussion of Lu Xun.
- Wang, David Der-wei, *Fictional Realism in 20th Century China: Mao Dun, Lao She, Shen Congwen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992). A wide-ranging survey of representative writers of modern Chinese realism, with an introduction focused on Lu Xun.
- Yue, Gang, *The Mouth That Begs: Hunger, Cannibalism, and the Politics of Eating in Modern China* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999). Features a chapter on Lu Xun and cannibalism.
- Consult also the thorough primary and secondary bibliographies on Lu Xun at the online Modern Chinese Literature and Culture Resource Center, available at <http://mclc.osu.edu/>.

A Note on the Translation

The complete fiction of Lu Xun, as translated here, has been arranged by order of publication of collection, beginning with the stand-alone short story ‘Nostalgia’, and followed by *Outcry*, *Hesitation* and *Old Stories Retold*. Within each collection, I have followed the author’s original sequencing. Throughout, I have translated from the versions included in the 1982 Renmin wenxue edition of Lu Xun’s *Complete Works* (*Lu Xun quanji*; Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe), as this version is widely accepted as having corrected the errors appearing in earlier editions, and is thoroughly and usefully footnoted by its editors.

In an attempt to enhance the fluency of the text, I have kept use of footnotes and endnotes to a minimum, and where background information that Chinese audiences would take for granted can be unobtrusively and economically worked into the main body of text, I have taken that option. A translation that, without compromising overall linguistic accuracy, avoids extensive interruption by footnotes and endnotes can, I feel, offer a more faithful recreation of the original reading experience than a version whose literal rendering of every point dictates frequent, disrupting consultation of extra references. Where I have judged that a fuller background explanation would be of help, however, I have included this in endnotes; I have used occasional footnotes to gloss specific questions of language.

In a very few places, where the density of cultural-linguistic reference is so great as to make prolonged explanations necessary in the English (such as the disquisition on traditional biography in ‘The Real Story of Ah-Q’, and the punning exchange in ‘Taming the Floods’ on Yu’s name and the composition of Chinese ideograms), I have slightly simplified a handful of lines in the original Chinese. I have also on occasion simplified the nomenclature used in the original: where more than one name is given for a single character (in accordance with the Chinese tradition of

giving individuals extra, literary pseudonyms), I have tended to use only one name, to reduce readers' confusion.

Chinese is, of course, very different from English, and to find literary equivalences for Lu Xun's style and usages has been a constant challenge. One habit of his that has given me regular pause throughout the translation is his frequent, deliberate use of repetition; at times, I have judged that – due to the gap between English and Chinese literary conventions – to recreate a repetition precisely may strike the English reader as uncomfortable and inelegant, and I have therefore occasionally decided to reword. Throughout, I have aspired to produce a version of Lu Xun that tries to explain – to readers beyond the specialist circle of Chinese studies – his canonical status within China, and make a case for regarding him as a creative stylist and thinker whose ideas about literature can transcend the socio-political circumstances in which he wrote.

A Note on Chinese Names and Pronunciation

In Chinese, the surname always precedes the given name: Lu Xun, therefore, has the surname Lu and Xun as his given name; his brother Zhou Zuoren has the surname Zhou and Zuoren as the given name.

According to the Hanyu Pinyin system (used in this translation, except for the surname ‘He’, which I have written as ‘Ho’ to reduce confusion in English), transliterated Chinese is pronounced much as in English, except for the following:

VOWELS

a (as the only letter following a consonant): *a* as in after

ai: *I* (or *eye*)

ao: *ow* as in how

e: *uh*

ei: *ay* as in say

en: *on* as in lemon

eng: *ung* as in sung

i (as the only letter following most consonants): *e* as in me

i (when following c, ch, s, sh, z, zh): *er* as in driver

ia: *yah*

ian: *yen*

ie: *yeah*

iu: *yo* as in yo-yo

o: *o* as in fork

ong: *oong*

ou: *o* as in no

u (when following most consonants): *oo* as in food

u (when following j, q, x, y): *ü* as the German *ü*

ua: *wah*

uai: *why*

uan: *wu-an*

uang: *wu-ang*

ui: *way*

uo: *u-woah*

yan: *yen*

yi: *ee* as in feed

CONSONANTS

c: *ts* as in *its*

g: *g* as in *good*

j: *j* as in *job*

q: *ch* as in *chat*

x: *sh* as in *she*

z: *ds* as in *folds*

zh: *j* as in *job*

NOSTALGIA

A green parasol tree, around thirty feet high, towered outside the gate to the family home, every year hanging heavy with large clusters of nuts. Hoping to bring them down, children would hurl stones into the branches, the occasional missile sailing through the canopy to land on my desk, at which point my teacher – whom I respectfully knew as Mr Bald – would stride out to give those responsible a scolding. A clear foot in diameter, the leaves would wilt in the summer sun before springing back – like a fist opening out – in the resuscitating night air. At this point in the day, after drawing water to scatter over the overheated ground, our family's old gatekeeper, Wang, might gather up a battered old stool and head off with his pipe to swap stories with my amah, Li. And there they would sit and chat, deep into the night, the darkness interrupted only by sparks from his pipe.

While they were out there enjoying the cool of one particular evening, I remember, my teacher was enlightening me on the principles of verse composition – my task being to come up with a poetic match to a given subject. To his 'Red Flower', I tried 'Green Tree'. Objecting that the tonal patterns were not consonant, he told me to go back to my seat and think again. Not yet nine years old at the time, I had not a clue what tonal patterns were; but since my teacher did not seem about to share his mature wisdom with me, I returned to my desk. After a long, fruitless ponder, I very slowly opened out my fist and slapped it resonantly against my thigh, as if I had swatted a mosquito, hoping to communicate to my instructor the extent of my mental discomfort, but he continued to take no notice. On and on I sat, until he at last drawled that I should approach – which I smartly did. He then wrote down the characters for Green Grass. ' "Red" and "flower" are level tones,' he explained, 'while "green" is falling and "grass" rising. Dismissed.' I was bounding through the door before the word was out of his mouth. 'No hopping and skipping about!' he

drawled again. I carried on my way, although more sedately.

The parasol tree was out of bounds. In the past, whenever I had made for Wang, badgering him for stories of the mountain people, my teacher (who, I may have already mentioned, was bald) would follow close on my heels. ‘Wicked child, stop wasting time!’ he would glower. ‘Had your supper? Then go back inside and finish your homework.’ A moment’s hesitation would bring his ruler down, hard, on my head the next day: ‘Wicked, lazy, stupid boy!’ Since my teacher was fond of settling scores in the classroom, in time I chose to avoid the tree. Experience had taught me that the next day would bring me little joy, unless it was a holiday. If only I could fall ill of a morning, then recover of an afternoon, thereby winning myself a half-day’s reprieve; or if my teacher could sicken and – ideally – die. But if neither of these optimal outcomes resulted, I would have no choice but to return to Confucius the following morning.

And there I found myself, the next day, suffering another lecture on *The Analects*, my teacher’s head swinging from side to side as he glossed each and every word. He was so shortsighted he was almost kissing the book, as if he wanted to gobble it up. I was always being accused of not looking after my books: of leaving them in a state of disastrous disrepair less than half a chapter in. Well, they didn’t stand a chance with my snorting, dribbling teacher – their chief instrument of destruction – blurring and mangling the pages far more efficiently than I ever could. ‘Confucius says,’ he was saying, ‘that at sixty his ears were obedient to the truth – that’s “ear” as in ear that you hear with. By seventy, he could achieve his heart’s desire without breaking the bounds of social morality...’ The exegesis was lost on me, because the characters were obscured by the shadow cast by his nose. I enjoyed only a privileged view of his radiantly bald head perched over the page – as a reflecting surface it had none of the clarity of the ancient pond in the back garden, offering me a blurred, bloated, clumsy image of my face.

As time dragged on, my teacher seemed to be deriving unholy enjoyment from the exercise, agitating his knees and giving huge nods of his head. My patience, by contrast, was wearing thin. Although the lustre of his pate succeeded in holding my interest a while, soon even that began to pall, and I began to wonder how much more I could stand.

‘Mr Yangsheng! Mr Yangsheng!’ A strange, blessed voice, shrill with desperation, came from outside the gate.

‘Is that Yaozong?... Come in, come in.’ Looking up from his disquisition on *The Analects*, my teacher walked out to greet his visitor.

I had initially been flummoxed by my teacher’s inexplicably respectful attitude towards this Yaozong – one of the Jins, our neighbours to the left. Though the family was very well-off, he went about in old, ragged clothes, and never ate

anything but vegetables, so his face was brown and puffy as an out-of-season aubergine. While he always made a great fuss of me, Wang never made much effort with our miserly neighbour. ‘Hoarding money’s all he’s good for!’ he would often say. ‘And as we never see a penny of it, why should we waste our breath on him?’ It didn’t seem to bother Yaozong, though. He wasn’t half as quick as the old man: whenever Wang was telling his stories, Yaozong just mumbled vaguely in response; he never really understood what they were about. My amah told me his parents still kept him on a short leash, and never let him go out into society – so he could keep up with only the most vacuous conversation. If talk turned to rice, he would be able to grasp only that bald fact – he couldn’t distinguish between the glutinous and the non-glutinous varieties. If it then moved on to fish, he couldn’t distinguish between – say – bream and carp. When he didn’t understand something, you needed to add a great welter of footnotes, most of which he wouldn’t follow either, and which you’d then have to retranslate even more obscurely, generating yet more puzzlement. Since incomprehension was the inevitable result, making conversation with him was never particularly rewarding. To the astonishment of Wang and others, however, my teacher treated him with peculiar deference. I drew my own, private conclusions: I knew that, having failed to generate a son by the age of twenty, Yaozong had hurriedly acquired three concubines. It was around this time that my teacher became a staunch defender of Mencius’s dictum that there were three ways of betraying a parent – of which dying without descendants was the vilest – and promptly invested thirty-one pieces of gold in a wife for himself. His excessive respect for Yaozong was presumably down to the younger man’s virtuosic show of filial virtue. Wang’s unschooled intelligence was no match for my teacher’s bottomless erudition; small wonder he had not plumbed the depths of my learned friend’s thought-processes. I myself had settled upon this explanation only after days of bemused pondering.

‘Have you heard?’

‘Heard?... Heard what?’

‘The Long Hairs are coming!’

‘The Long Hairs?... Ha! Impossible.’

Yaozong’s Long Hairs were the Hairy Rebels to my teacher – the Taipings¹ to the history books, perhaps. Wang called them Long Hairs, too – he told me he’d been twenty-nine when they came by these parts. As he was over seventy now, it must have been more than forty years ago, so even I knew it was impossible.

‘I heard it from Mr San at Hexu – any day now, he said...’

‘Mr San?’ My teacher – who worshipped the great Mr San as a god – paled and began pacing around his desk. ‘He must have got it from our revered magistrate. Perhaps we should be on our guard.’

‘Maybe eight hundred of them, they’re saying. I’ve sent one of my servants to

make further inquiries at Hexu. To find out when they're actually going to get here.'

'Eight hundred? Impossible. Maybe they're just bandits or local Red Turbans.'

My teacher's power of reason had won out – he knew they couldn't be Taipings. Though it hadn't yet dawned on him that Yaozong was incapable of distinguishing between different breeds of outlaw – bandits, pirates, White Hats or Red Turbans were all Long Hairs to him. So my teacher's new hypothesis was entirely lost on Yaozong.

'We should be ready to feed them. The guest hall in my house is too small to fit them all in, so I've asked to borrow the Zhang Suiyang Temple for the other half of them. Soon as their bellies are full, they'll leave us alone.' Despite his dimness, Yaozong had at least gleaned from his parents the art of welcoming invading armies with food and drink. Wang had told me that Yaozong's father had met the Long Hairs: he had flung himself on to the ground and begged for his life, knocking a big red lump up on his forehead. But he managed to stay alive, at least – and ingratiated himself by running a kitchen to keep them fed, turning a healthy profit on the proceeds. After the Long Hairs were defeated, he managed to get away from them and return to Wushi, where he gradually succeeded in becoming comfortably off. Yaozong's current plan – of winning them over with a single square meal – was nothing to his father's ingenuity.

'Rebels always come to a bad end,' my teacher pronounced. 'Look through *The Simplified Outline and Mirror of History*² and see for yourself – they never get anywhere... Or hardly ever. Fine, give them something to eat. But, my dear Yaozong, don't get your own hands dirty – let the village headman take care of it.'

'Quite, quite! And could you write out an Obedient Subjects notice for us to paste on the gate?'

'No hurry – there'll be time and enough for that sort of thing if they do come. One more respectful piece of advice, my dear Yaozong. While you don't want to get on the wrong side of people like this, you mustn't get mixed up with them either. Back when the Hairy Rebels were up in arms, sticking up notices of submission didn't guarantee anything, and after the bandits fled, anyone who had surrendered suffered at the hands of government soldiers. Let's forget about it until they're about to reach Wushi. Right now you should concentrate on finding somewhere safe for your family to hide – not too far away, though.'

'Excellent, excellent, I'll go over to the temple right now to tell the priests about our plan.'

And so Yaozong left us, exclaiming with admiration at the advice he had received; though it was uncertain how much of it he had actually understood. People used to say that my teacher was the cleverest man in the town of Wushi – and with reason. He could have survived, unscarred, through any time, in any place. Since the great

creator Pangu cleaved heaven and earth in two, unleashing tireless cycles of bloody chaos and orderly peace, dynasties have waxed and dynasties have waned. And yet, through it all, my teacher's family – alone in the empire – seem never to have been doomed to political martyrdom or to lose their lives in following rebel causes, left to flourish in tranquillity up to the present day, to preach the wisdom of Confucius (who, let it not be forgotten, by the age of seventy could achieve his heart's desire without breaking the bounds of social morality) to ungrateful wretches such as me. If one were to try to explain such a phenomenon in evolutionary terms, one might infer my teacher had inherited this mighty talent from his forefathers. I later came to believe, though, that he had picked it up from books. For how could Wang, Li and I – for all our own hereditary resources – possibly compete with the intellectual profundity that he had brought to bear on the afternoon's dilemmas?

Off Yaozong went, but class failed to resume. Looking rather troubled, my teacher now said he too was going back home, and that I could take the rest of the day off. I bounded joyously off to the parasol tree, undeterred by the summer sun overhead. For once, the territory beneath its canopy belonged to me, and me alone. Before long, I caught sight of my teacher hurrying off, a large bundle of clothes under his arm. In the usual run of things, he returned home only for special festivals or for the New Year, invariably taking with him his multivolume crammers on writing eight-legged civil service examination essays. Today, extraordinarily, he'd left the whole set standing solemn guard on his desk, taking instead the clothes and shoes he stored in his battered old trunk.

Out along the road, I saw ant-like swarms of humanity on the move, their faces covered in terror and confusion – some burdened with possessions, others empty-handed, all running away, Wang told me; most of Hexu seemed to be heading for Wushi, and vice versa. He'd seen trouble like this before, Wang went on, there was no need for us to panic. Li, who had gone round to the Jins' to ask for news, reported that next door's servants hadn't yet left, but that she'd seen a crowd of (she supposed) concubines gathering up powder, rouge, perfumes, silk fans and clothes into suitcases. To the concubines of the well-to-do, flight – it seemed – was a spring outing, for which lipstick and kohl were bare necessities. Being rather too busy just then to make further inquiries of the Long Hairs, I headed off to catch flies, which I subsequently used to tempt ants out of their mounds, trampling them first to death before pouring water into their nests to highlight the deficiencies of their flood defences. All too soon, the sun slipped behind the branches of the tree, and my amah called me to dinner. How had the time passed so quickly, I wondered. On a normal day, I would still have been suffering the torments of poetic consonance, as my teacher grimaced wearily at my efforts. After dinner, Li took me outside. There, as ever, was Wang, enjoying the cool evening air. Unusually, however, tonight he had a

great crowd gathered open-mouthed about him, as if transfixed by some demonic creature. Under the bright moonlight, their exposed teeth looked like rows of decaying bone dice.

‘Back then,’ Wang pronounced, in between draws on his pipe, ‘the doorman here was an idiot by the name of Zhao – Fifth Uncle Zhao they all called him. Soon as he heard the Long Hairs were coming, the master told everyone to run away. “Once the master’s gone,” reasoned our man Zhao, “who’s going to protect the house from robbers if I don’t stay on?” ’

‘Fool!’ my amah interjected, forcefully demonstrating her contempt for the idiocies of our sage forefathers.

‘Old Mrs Wu, the cook, wouldn’t go either, over seventy she must have been – just holed herself up in the kitchen. For days, she heard nothing but the tramp of footsteps and dogs howling – she must have been scared out of her wits. Then even that stopped – the whole place was silent as the grave. One day, she just made out – still far off in the distance – the sound of a vast army approaching, till at last she heard them passing by the wall of the courtyard. In another while, several dozen Long Hairs burst into the kitchen, waving knives about, and dragged her outside. “Where’s the master, old woman?” they seemed to be shouting (she could barely make them out). “Where’s his money?” “Great king,” she replied, bowing, “my master has fled. I’ve eaten nothing for days – give me some food, I beg you. I don’t know anything about his money.” “Hungry, are you?” one Long Hair laughed. “Try this!” Then he hurled a round object at her, so matted with blood it took her a moment to realize it was Zhao’s head...’

‘Didn’t she die of fright?’ Li screeched again, as the rest of Wang’s wide-eyed audience let their jaws hang a few degrees wider.

‘When the Long Hairs knocked at the door, Zhao wouldn’t open up. “The master’s away!” he shouted back at them. “You just want to loot the place!” Then the Long – ’

‘Any more news yet?’ My teacher was back. After a moment of panic, I saw his expression had lost its usual note of severity, and dared to hold my ground. If the Long Hairs really did come, I now thought, they might throw his head at Li, freeing me from *The Analects* to dedicate myself to ant-drowning.

‘Nothing... After the Long Hairs destroyed the gate, Zhao came out and got a proper look at them – terrified he was, then they – ’

‘Mr Yangsheng! My servants are back!’ Yaozong shouted as he re-entered the compound.

‘And?’ my teacher asked as he walked up to him, his shortsighted eyes bulging unnervingly. Everyone turned towards Yaozong.

‘Mr San says it’s all lies about the Long Hairs, it’s just a few dozen refugees passing by Hexu. A refugee... a refugee’s like a beggar – like the sort of beggar my

family gets all the time.’ Anxious his audience might not understand the term ‘refugee’, Yaozong exhausted his linguistic resources in attempting a definition – and barely filled a sentence in the process.

‘Refugees! Ha!’ My teacher burst into laughter, as if mocking the stupidity of his former panic, and sneering at the refugees’ deficient ability to inspire fear. Everyone else joined in – compelled by my teacher’s mirth.

Having received Mr San’s intelligence, the gathered company scattered with a buzz of chatter. With Yaozong also gone, quiet returned to the parasol tree, leaving only Wang and a handful of others. ‘I must go and tell my family the good news,’ my teacher said, after pacing out a few circuits. ‘I’ll be back first thing tomorrow.’ And off he went, this time taking with him his essay-writing primer. ‘So your homework’s going to do itself, is it?’ were his parting words to me. ‘Back to your books! Stop wasting time, wicked boy.’ Feeling persecuted, I silently fixed my gaze on the light in Wang’s pipe. Its flickering glow – as Wang puffed away – reminded me of an autumn firefly sunk into grass. Busy remembering how last year I had stumbled into a pond of reeds while trying to catch one, I stopped worrying about my teacher.

‘All that fuss about the Long Hairs,’ Wang nodded, leaving off his pipe. ‘They were terrible to begin with, but they came to nothing in the end.’

‘Did you ever see them?’ Li quickly asked. ‘What were they like?’

‘Were you one?’ I wanted to know. When the Long Hairs were about to descend on us, my teacher had left; the Long Hairs, I therefore reasoned, were a force for good. And since Wang was always kind to me, I further deduced, he must have been a Long Hair himself.

‘Ha-ha! No, never... Mrs Li, how old would you have been back then? I must have been in my twenties.’

‘Only ten. And my mother took me off to hide in Pingtian, so I never saw them.’

‘I fled to Mount Huang... When the Long Hairs got to my village, I happened to be away. My neighbour Niusi and two of my cousins weren’t so lucky. They got dragged out on to the Taiping Bridge, had their throats slit, then were pushed into the water and left to drown. Niusi was strong as an ox: he could carry nearly three hundred pounds of rice a quarter of a mile – they don’t make them like that any more. It was near twilight by the time I got to Mount Huang. Up at the summit, the sun was still caught on the treetops, but night was falling on the rice paddies at the foot of the mountain; it was getting dark. When I got to the foot of the mountain, I looked behind me and calmed down a bit as soon as I saw no one was coming after me. But there didn’t seem to be a soul on the mountain – it was lonely out there on my own. I pulled myself together a bit, but when it got properly dark, the whole place was silent as the grave – except for a kind of crrr-crrr-crrrr-wour-wour-wour

sort of noise – ’

‘Wour-wour-wour?’ My question slipped, almost involuntarily, out. Mrs Li gripped my hand to stifle any further interruption from me – as if speaking my mystification aloud would bring calamity down on her.

‘Just a frog. And then an owl – sends a shiver down your spine, an owl’s hooting... In the dark, you know, Mrs Li, a tree looks a lot like a man... Look again, and it’s a tree, ha! When the Long Hairs were on the run, people from our village chased them out with spades and hoes. There were only about a dozen of us, against a hundred of them, but none of them stopped to put up a fight. After that, there was the daily treasure hunt – that’s how Mr San from Hexu made his pile.’

‘Treasure-hunting?’ Yet again, I was mystified.

‘Whenever we were about to catch them up, the Long Hairs would throw bits of gold, silver or the odd jewel back at us to slow us down – so that we’d stop and fight over them. I got myself a beautiful pearl, big as a broad bean, but before I had time to count my blessings, Niu’er came and bashed me over the head with a club and ran off with it. I’d have been a rich man, otherwise – though never as rich as Mr San. Around this time it was, Ho Goubao, Mr San’s father, went back home to Hexu and found a young Long Hair, his hair tied back in a queue, lying inside a broken closet – ’

‘Bedtime,’ Mrs Li ruled. ‘It’s starting to rain.’

‘Not yet!’ I protested. It was like being tantalized by a cliffhanger at a chapter’s end – I had to hear right through to the end of the story. My amah wasn’t having any of it.

‘Bedtime! Up late tomorrow and you’ll get a taste of your teacher’s ruler.’

Fat drops of rain tapped down on the great leaves of the plantain tree in front of my window, like a crab pattering over the sand. I lay on my pillow, listening to the sound gradually fade away.

‘Ow! I’ll work harder, I promise...’

‘Bad dream? You woke me up from mine... What was yours about?’ Mrs Li was by my bedside, patting me on the back.

‘Oh... nothing... What about yours?’

‘About the Long Hairs... Tell you about it tomorrow – go back to sleep, it’s past midnight.’

Winter 1911

OUTCRY

PREFACE

When I was young, I too had many dreams, most of which I later forgot – and without the slightest regret. Although remembering the past can bring happiness, it can also bring a feeling of solitude; and where is the pleasure in clinging on to the memory of lonely times passed? My trouble is, though, that I find myself unable to forget, or at least unable to forget entirely. And it is this failure of amnesia that has brought *Outcry* into existence.

For four years of my childhood life, I divided my time between the pawnshop and the pharmacy. Which four years it was, I forget – all I remember is that the top of my head reached exactly up to the counter in the pharmacy, while in the pawnshop it was twice my height. I would push clothes and jewellery across the latter, take the money contemptuously slid back at me, then make my way over to the former – to buy medicine for my chronically ill father. Back home, there was still work to be done, because our doctor seemed to have built his substantial local reputation on prescribing the most elusively exotic adjuvants: winter aloe root, sugar cane that had survived three years' frosts, monogamous crickets, seeded ardisia... Most of them were excessively difficult to get hold of. And still my father went on sickening, day by day, until finally he died.

I think it's true to say that any once-comfortable family that falls on hard times sees soon enough what the world really thinks of it. And so I made up my mind to enrol in the Naval Academy in Nanjing: to go in search of different people, different paths. My mother was left no choice but to scrape together the eight dollars I needed to cover my travel costs. Though she said that I should do as I please, she still wept, which was natural enough, because back then a Confucian education was still the route to respectability. Only the utterly desperate, society deemed, stooped to studying Western sciences. By following the course I had fixed upon, I would be selling my soul to foreign devils, only intensifying the contempt in which we were already steeped. I was also imposing upon her long separation from her son. But I had no time for such misgivings. When finally I arrived at the Naval Academy, I made many new discoveries: natural sciences, mathematics, geography, history, drawing and physical education. Though physiology was not on the curriculum, we caught glimpses – as wood-block prints – of works such as *A New Treatise on the Human Body* and *Essays on Chemistry and Hygiene*. When I compared what I remembered of the diagnoses and prescriptions of our traditional doctors with what I had come to learn of modern medicine, it gradually dawned on me that

practitioners of Chinese medicine are – intentionally or otherwise – conmen. I began also to feel a powerful sympathy for those they had deceived – both the sick and their families. The translated histories I read, meanwhile, informed me that much of the dynamism of the Meiji Restoration¹ sprang from the introduction of Western medicine to Japan.

Thanks to the rudimentary knowledge I picked up in Nanjing, I found my name subsequently fetching up on the register of a medical school in rural Japan. A glorious future unfurled in my mind, in which I would return to my homeland after graduation and set about medicating its suffering sick – people like my father, to whom Chinese doctors had denied a cure. In times of war, I would become an army doctor, all the while converting my fellow countrymen to the religion of political reform.

I have no idea what progress has been made in the teaching of microbiology since my time, but back then we were shown the outlines of microbes as images on lantern slides. Because lectures sometimes finished early, the teacher would make up the remaining minutes by entertaining students with slides depicting picturesque landscapes or current affairs. As it so happened that the Russo-Japanese War² was ongoing at the time, our lectures were often concluded by scenes from this conflict. In this classroom setting, I found myself obliged to echo – with my own claps and cheers – my classmates' jubilation. There came a day, though, when I suddenly found myself staring at a great mass of my fellow Chinese – a people I had long been deprived the pleasure of encountering. One stood in the middle, tied up, surrounded by a crowd of his countrymen. Though they were all of them perfectly sturdy physical specimens, every face was utterly, stupidly blank. The man tied up, the caption informed us, had been caught spying for the Russians and was about to be beheaded by the Japanese as a public example to the appreciative mob.

Before the academic year was out, I had left for Tokyo. For I no longer believed in the overwhelming importance of medical science. However rude a nation was in physical health, if its people were intellectually feeble, they would never become anything other than cannon fodder or gawping spectators, their loss to the world through illness no cause for regret. The first task was to change their spirit; and literature and the arts, I decided at the time, were the best means to this end. And so I reinvented myself as a crusader for cultural reform. The majority of the Chinese students in Tokyo at that time were studying law, political science, physics, chemistry, policing or engineering; no one had any interest in the humanities. Nonetheless, despite the prevailing apathy, I managed to search out a few comrades-in-arms. With a few other necessary associates about us, and after some discussion, we decided to begin by publishing a magazine. Since, back then, most of our compatriots had their faces still turned to the past, we were determined to take the

forward-looking title *New Life*.

But as publication approached, first those who had pledged to write for us, and then our capital, melted away, leaving only three of us, without a penny to our names. After such inauspicious beginnings, no one had any sympathy for us. Later still, fate scattered us three survivors too far from one another to meet to discuss our marvellous dreams for the future. And that is how our *New Life* ended in stillbirth.

The experience filled me with entirely novel feelings of futility and failure. In the immediate aftermath of it all, I could not explain why things had worked out in this way. But as time went on, I came to think that a lone individual will be encouraged by support, and stimulated to struggle by criticism. But indifference – being left to shout into an abyss – generates something else: a peculiarly hollow sense of desolation. It was then I began to feel lonely.

My loneliness grew with every day that passed, coiling itself like a great poisonous snake around my soul.

And though I was unreasonable enough to feel the sorrow of it, I couldn't stir myself to anger. Because the Tokyo fiasco forced me to reflect realistically on myself: that I was no hero, no demagogue capable of rousing the masses with a single battle-cry.

But I had to do something about the loneliness, because it was causing me too much pain. So I tried all manner of opiates: attempting to merge into the massed ranks of my fellow countrymen, immersing myself in study of the classics. Later still, I experienced or witnessed things that intensified my feelings of loneliness and sorrow – things that I preferred not to remember, that I preferred to bury (alongside my head) deep in the sand. But my quest for intellectual narcotics had had some effect; I had succeeded in ridding myself of my youthful ideals.

There was a three-room apartment in the Shaoxing Hostel in Beijing. The story went that a woman had once hanged herself on the locust tree in the courtyard outside. Even though the tree later grew so tall no one could reach its branches, still the apartment remained unoccupied. For years, then, this was where I lodged, copying out ancient stone inscriptions. I suffered very few visitors, and applied myself to realizing my sole ambition: to permit my life to ebb quietly away, without undue stimulation – either technical or intellectual – from my inscriptions. On summer nights, when mosquitoes hung heavy in the air, I would sit beneath the locust tree, cooling myself with a cattail-leaf fan, glimpsing scraps of blue sky through cracks in the dense foliage overhead, as nocturnal caterpillars dropped icily on to my neck.

An occasional visitor was an old friend by the name of Jin Xinyi.³ Setting his

large leather briefcase on a battered old table, he would take off his gown and sit himself down opposite me, looking as if his heart was still pounding from fear of a dog he had encountered along the way.

‘What’s the use in this?’ he asked one evening, flicking through my book of inscriptions.

‘None at all.’

‘Why are you doing it, then?’

‘No reason.’

‘I thought, maybe you could write something for...’

I knew what he was driving at. Although he and a few associates were now working on a magazine of their own – *New Youth*⁴ – so far they had been rewarded only by indifference, by neither criticism nor support. Maybe, I thought, they were feeling lonely. This is what I replied:

‘Imagine an iron house: without windows or doors, utterly indestructible, and full of sound sleepers – all about to suffocate to death. Let them die in their sleep, and they will feel nothing. Is it right to cry out, to rouse the light sleepers among them, causing them inconsolable agony before they die?’

‘But even if we succeed in waking only the few, there is still hope – hope that the iron house may one day be destroyed.’

He was right: however hard I tried, I couldn’t quite obliterate my own sense of hope. Because hope is a thing of the future: my denial of it failed to convince him. In the end I agreed to write something for him: my first short story, ‘Diary of a Madman’. And once I had started, I found it impossible to stop, rattling off poor imitations of fiction to keep my earnest friends quiet, until in time I found myself the author of some dozen pieces.

I thought I had changed: that I was no longer the kind of person who felt the imperative to speak out. Yet neither could I forget the lonely sorrows of my youth. And so I found myself issuing a few battle-cries of my own, if only to offer comfort or sympathy to those still fighting through their loneliness, and to alleviate their fear of the struggles ahead. I have no interest in passing judgement on these things of mine: on whether they are brave, despondent, contemptible or ridiculous. But since they are battle-cries, I naturally had to follow my generals’ orders. So I often stooped to distortions and untruths: adding a fictitious wreath of flowers to Yu’er’s grave in ‘Medicine’; forbearing to write that Mrs Shan never dreams of her son in ‘Tomorrow’, because my generalissimos did not approve of pessimism. And I didn’t want to infect younger generations – dreaming the glorious dreams that I too had dreamed when I was young – with the loneliness that came to torment me.

These attempts of mine are no works of art; that I understand perfectly well. And yet I now enjoy the great good fortune of seeing them collected together and passed

off as a volume of fiction. Though I feel some unease at this undeserved stroke of luck, it also brings me some happiness – that they might, at least fleetingly, find a readership.

And so I have dispatched my pieces to the printer and, for the reasons given above, named them *Outcry*.

Lu Xun

3 December 1922, Beijing

DIARY OF A MADMAN

At school I had been close friends with two brothers whose names I will omit to mention here. As the years went by after we graduated, however, we gradually lost touch. Not long ago, I happened to hear that one of them had been seriously ill and, while on a visit home, I broke my journey to call on them. I found only one of them at home, who told me it was his younger brother who had been afflicted. Thanking me for my concern, he informed me that his brother had long since made a full recovery and had left home to wait for an appropriate official post to fall vacant. Smiling broadly, he showed me two volumes of a diary his brother had written at the time, explaining that they would give me an idea of the sickness that had taken hold of him and that he saw no harm in showing them to an old friend. Reading them back home, I discovered his brother had suffered from what is known as a 'persecution complex'. The text was fantastically confused, and entirely undated; it was only differences in ink and styles of handwriting that enabled me to surmise parts of the text were written at different times. Below, I have extracted occasional flashes of coherence, in the hope they may be of use to medical research. While I have not altered a single one of the author's errors, I have changed all the local names used in the original, despite the personal obscurity of the individuals involved. Finally, I have made use of the title chosen by the invalid himself following his full recovery.

2 April 1918

I

The moon is bright tonight.

I had not seen it for thirty years; the sight of it today was extraordinarily refreshing. Tonight, I realized I have spent the past thirty years or more in a state of dream; but I must still be careful. Why did the Zhaos' dog look twice at me?

I have reason to be afraid.

II

No moon tonight; a bad sign. I went out this morning – cautiously. Mr Zhao had a strange look in his eyes: as if he feared me, or as if he wished me harm. I saw a group of them, seven or eight, huddled around, whispering about me, afraid I would catch them at it. Everywhere I went – the same thing. One of them – the most vicious of the bunch – pulled his lips back into a grin. I prickled with cold fear; their traps, I realized, were already in place.

Refusing to be intimidated, I carried on my way. A gang of children blocked my path ahead – they, too, were discussing me, their eyes as strange as Mr Zhao's, their faces a ghastly white. What quarrel could these children have with me, I wondered. 'Tell me!' I shouted, unable to stop myself. But they just ran away.

Mr Zhao, all the others I saw that morning – what was the source of their hatred? All I could think of was that twenty years ago, I stamped on the Records of the Past, and it has been my enemy since. Though he has no personal acquaintance with this Past, Mr Zhao must have somehow got wind of the business, and resolved to take up the grudge himself. He must have rallied everyone else I saw against me. But what about the children? They weren't even born twenty years ago – so why do they stare so strangely at me, as if they fear me, or wish me harm? I am hurt, bewildered, afraid.

Then the answer came to me. Their parents must have taught them.

III

My nights are sleepless. Only thorough investigation will bring clarity.

Those people. They have been pilloried by their magistrate, beaten by their squires, had their wives requisitioned by bailiffs, seen their parents driven to early graves by creditors. And yet, through all this, none looked as fearful, as savage as they did yesterday.

The most curious thing of all – that woman, hitting her son. ‘I’m so angry, I could eat you!’ That’s what she said. But looking at me all the while. I flinched in terror, I couldn’t help myself. The crowd – their faces bleached greenish-white – roared with laughter, exposing their fangs. Mr Chen rushed up to drag me home.

To drag me home. Back home, though, everyone was pretending they didn’t know me, that same look in their eyes. The moment I stepped into the study, the door was latched on the outside, as if I were a chicken in a coop. I had no idea what lay at the bottom of it all.

A few days ago, one of our tenants – a farmer from Wolf Cub Village – came to report a famine. The most hated man in the village had been beaten to death, he told my brother, and some of the villagers had dug out his heart and liver, then fried and eaten them, for courage. When I interrupted, the farmer and my brother glanced at me – repeatedly. Now – now I recognize the look in their eyes: exactly that of the people I passed yesterday.

I shiver at the very memory of it.

If they are eating people, I might well be next.

That woman scolding her son – ‘I could eat you!’ – those bleached faces and bared fangs, their roars of laughter; the farmer’s story; the signs are all there. I now see that their speech is poisoned, their laughter knife-edged, their teeth fearfully white – teeth that eat people.

I don’t think I’m a bad man, but I now see my fate has been in the balance since I trod on those Records of the Past. They keep their own, secret accounts – a mystery to me. And they can turn on you in an instant. When my brother taught me to write essays, he would always mark me up if I found grounds to criticize the virtuous or rehabilitate the villainous: ‘It is a rare man who can go against received wisdom.’ How can I guess what they are really thinking, when their fangs are poised over my flesh?

Only thorough investigation will bring clarity. I seem to remember, though only vaguely, that people have been eating each other since ancient times. When I flick through the history books, I find no dates, only those fine Confucian principles ‘benevolence, righteousness, morality’ snaking their way across each page. As I

studied them again, through one of my more implacably sleepless nights, I finally glimpsed what lay between every line, of every book: 'Eat people!'

All these words – written in books, spoken by the farmer – stare strangely, smirkingly at me.

Are they planning to eat me, too?

IV

I sat quietly a while, through the morning. Mr Chen brought me some food: a bowl of vegetables and a bowl of steamed fish – its eyes glassily white, its mouth gaping like the village cannibals. After a few slippery mouthfuls, I could no longer tell whether I was eating fish or human; up it all came again.

‘Tell my brother,’ I said to Chen, ‘that I feel stifled inside – that I want to take a walk in the garden.’ Chen left me without a word but shortly afterwards unlocked the door.

I did not move; I wanted to see what they planned to do with me next; I knew they would not relax their grip so easily. And so it proved. My brother brought an old man in to see me. My visitor approached slowly, head bowed, afraid I would catch the savagery in his eyes, sneaking glances at me through his spectacles. ‘You seem well today,’ my brother said. ‘Yes,’ I answered. ‘Dr Ho here has come to examine you,’ my brother went on, ‘at my request.’ ‘Be my guest!’ I replied. My executioner, of course! Come to check how fat I was, while he pretended to take my pulse. Presumably his fee would be a slice of my flesh. Yet I felt no fear: my nerve remained steadier than those of the cannibals about me. I held out my wrists to see how he would go about it. Taking a seat, the old man closed his eyes, held my wrists for a considerable length of time, stared blankly a while longer, then opened those terrible eyes of his. ‘Avoid overexcitement,’ he pronounced. ‘A few days’ rest and you’ll be fine.’

Avoid overexcitement! Rest! Of course: they want to fatten me up, so there will be more to go round. ‘You’ll be fine’? They were all after my flesh, but they couldn’t be open about it – they had to pursue their prey with secret plans and clever tricks; I could have died laughing. Indeed, I burst into uncontrollable roars of mirth – a laughter that rang with righteous courage. The old man and my brother blanched at the robustness of my morale.

But my boldness succeeded only in sharpening their appetites – the braver the prey, the more glory for the hunter. ‘To be eaten immediately!’ the old man muttered as he left. My brother nodded. *Et tu!* And yet I should have foreseen it all: my own brother in league with people who wanted to eat me!

My own brother was a cannibal!

I was the brother of a cannibal!

And destined to be eaten myself – this brother of a cannibal.

V

These last few days, I have reconsidered a couple of my earlier suspicions: perhaps the old man was not my executioner, perhaps he really was a doctor. But he will still have eaten people. In his *Book of...* what is it? *Herbs?*... Li Shizhen openly observes that boiled human flesh is perfectly edible.¹ He must have tried it himself.

Neither were my suspicions of my own brother unfounded. When he was teaching me history as a boy, he once told me people could ‘exchange sons to eat’ in times of scarcity; or then again, while discussing a notorious villain, he told me death alone was too good for him; that ‘his flesh should be devoured, his skin flayed into a rug’.² For hours afterwards, my heart pounded with fear. A few days ago, when the farmer from Wolf Cub Village told him about the business with the heart and liver, he merely nodded; nothing surprises him. At heart, he is ruthless; still perfectly ruthless. If sons are fodder for the dinner table, then anyone could be. I used to just let him preach at me – to let his sermons pass me by. Now, I know his lips were smeared with human grease, his thoughts only of eating people.

VI

There is darkness all around me. I cannot tell day from night. The Zhaos' dog has started barking again.

Fierce as a lion, cowardly as a rabbit, cunning as a fox...

VII

I know their ways. They do not want, or dare, to kill me openly; they fear the vengeance of the ghosts. Instead, they conspire to drive me to suicide. I see through their plans, most of them – I remember their looks on the street from a few days ago, and my brother's behaviour. Their first, fondest hope is that I should sling my belt over the beam in the ceiling and hang myself; that they will achieve their heart's desire without staining their hands with my blood – I hear their gasps of jubilant laughter already. Failing that, I could always pine away, of melancholy or nerves. Though my corpse would have less fat on it, it would still be a corpse.

They can eat only carrion. I remember reading in some book somewhere about a fearfully ugly creature called a hyena, with terrifying eyes and a fondness for dead meat, capable of chewing the most enormous bones down to a pulp. I shiver just to think of it. This hyena is cousin to the wolf, the wolf cousin to the dog. The way the Zhaos' dog looked at me the day before yesterday, he's in on it, too; and that old man who couldn't look me in the eye – but he couldn't fool me either.

It's my brother I feel sorry for. He's only human: he must feel the dread of it, and yet still he conspires to eat me. Has he become hardened over time – can he no longer see how wrong it is? Or is his conscience in pieces: does he commit his crimes in the full knowledge of their evil?

A curse on all cannibals – beginning with my brother. And if I am to turn them, I must begin with him, too.

VIII

They should have been able to see it for themselves.

Suddenly, another visitor. A young man, barely in his twenties, his features a blur – except for his broad grin. He greeted me with a nod; I found no sincerity in his smile. ‘Is it right to eat people?’ I asked him. ‘What are you talking about?’ – his smile did not flicker. ‘No one’s eating anyone; it’s not a famine year.’ I knew then that he, too, was of their number: that he too feasted on human flesh. Screwing my courage, I determined to press him further.

‘But is it right?’

‘I – I don’t understand the question. What a... sense of humour, you have... Lovely weather we’re having today.’

The weather is indeed fine, and the moon indeed bright. But I will repeat my question: ‘Is it right?’

‘No...’ he mumbled, beginning to sound vexed.

‘So it’s wrong? Then why is it going on?’

‘It’s not...’

‘They’re eating each other here and now – in Wolf Cub Village. Look here: it’s written in all the books, in fresh red ink!’

His face went a ghastly white. ‘Maybe,’ his eyes bulged, ‘maybe that’s how things have always been...’

‘But does that make it right?’

‘I’ve had enough of this. You shouldn’t be talking about it.’

I sprang to my feet, my eyes flying open. He had disappeared. I was covered in sweat. He was much younger than my brother, and yet already he was in on it with the rest of them; his parents must have taught him. And he will have taught his son; even the children stare at me like wild beasts.

IX

Craving flesh, dreading the teeth of others, eyeing each other with fear...

If only they could leave it all behind them, how easy, how comfortable their lives would become. Such a tiny thing. But they are all part of it – fathers, sons, brothers, husbands, wives, friends, teachers, pupils, enemies, perfect strangers, pulling each other back.

X

Early this morning I went looking for my brother. I found him standing by the door to the hall, staring up at the sky. Approaching from behind, I placed myself between him and the doorway.

‘I have something to tell you,’ I said, taking care to keep my voice soft, meek.

‘Go on.’ He spun round to face me, nodding.

‘A few, difficult words. Primitive men probably did eat human flesh. But their thinking changed, developed over time, and some of them stopped – they were determined to become human, genuinely human. Those who wouldn’t give it up remained reptiles, some of them changing into fish, birds or monkeys, then finally men. But they remain reptiles at heart – even today. The shame of the cannibal, brother, before the non-cannibal! Greater than the reptile before the monkey.

‘Thousands of years ago, the royal cook Yi Ya steamed his own son for his king to eat. We all know it’s been going on – since the creation of the earth itself. That revolutionary, Xu Xilin, a few years back – didn’t they eat his heart and liver?³ Then there’s the Wolf Cub villagers; and last year, I heard that a consumptive ate a steamed roll dipped in the blood of an executed criminal.

‘And now it’s my turn to be eaten. I don’t expect you to fight on my behalf, alone against the rest of them. But do you have to join the conspiracy? They’ll do anything, eat anyone: me, you, each other. Pull back from them, change – and we will all live in peace. However long it’s been going on for, we can decide to stop today, we can! I know you can do it. Why, when that tenant of ours wanted his rent reduced the other day, to start with you said it was impossible.’

As I began my speech, his lips curled back into a scornful smile. Then his eyes shone with a terrible, savage gleam. When I set to exposing their awful secrets the colour drained dreadfully from his face. A crowd gathered outside the gate, Mr Zhao and his dog among them, craning forward to listen in. Some faces remained only a blur, as if masked in gauze; on others, I saw the same bleached pallor, the same bared fangs as before – their lips distorted into smiles. I recognized all of them: the eaters of human flesh. But I knew they were divided in their thinking. Some believed that the eating of men must go on because it was how things had always been. Others recognized it for the sin it was, and yet still they ate, terrified of exposure. The more I said, the angrier they became, through their frozen smiles.

My brother chose this moment to show his true, unrepentant colours.

‘Clear off!’ he roared ferociously at them. ‘Where’s the fun in gawping at a madman!’

Another of their ingenious devices: to discredit me as insane. The plot was too

well laid; they would never change. And when the moment arrived for me to be eaten, there would be not a murmur of opposition, only sympathy for my butchers. Death by character assassination – a method tried and tested by the farmers of Wolf Cub Village.

Chen stormed in through the gate. Though they wanted to shut me up, I was not yet finished with my audience.

‘You can change! In your hearts! Soon there will be no place for cannibals in this world of ours. And if you don’t change, you will all be eaten. However many children you have, you will all be destroyed, like reptiles – by real humans, just as a hunter kills a wolf!’

Chen chased the crowd away. My brother disappeared. Then Chen coaxed me back inside. A stifling darkness hung over the room; the beams and rafters shuddered, then began to swell – piling distendedly down on me.

They pinned me to the ground; they meant me to die beneath them. But I struggled through my illusion, drenching myself in sweat.

‘Change, in your hearts!’ I gasped. ‘Soon there will be no place for cannibals in this world...’

XI

The sun will not come out, the door does not open; two meals, every day.

As I held my chopsticks, I thought again of my brother. Now I know what happened to my sister. I can see her now, in all her heartbreaking vulnerability; only four years old when she left us. I remember my mother's uncontrollable sobs, my brother's efforts to stop her. He'd probably eaten her himself, and all the crying was making him uncomfortable. If he had any conscience left...

I wonder if Mother knew.

I think she must have known, even though she didn't say a word about it as she wept – maybe she just accepted it. When I was three or four, I remember my brother telling me, as I sat in the courtyard enjoying the cool of a summer evening, that a filial son should cook a piece of his flesh for a sick parent. Mother said nothing to contradict him. If it's all right to eat a piece of flesh, then why not a whole person? But the way she wept that day; the memory of it, even now, is painful. How inconsistent people are!

XII

Further thought is painful.

I now realize I have unknowingly spent my life in a country that has been eating human flesh for four thousand years. My sister, I remember, died while my brother was managing the household. He probably fed her secretly to us, by mixing her into our food.

I, too, may have unknowingly eaten my sister's flesh. And now it's my own turn...

With the weight of four thousand years of cannibalism bearing down upon me, even if once I was innocent how can I now face real humans?

XIII

Are there children who have not yet eaten human flesh?
Save the children...

April 1918

KONG YIJI

The taverns in Luzhen were rather particular in their layout. Facing out to the street was a substantial bar, squared off at the corners, behind which hot water was always at the ready for warming up wine. Lunchtime or evening, when they got off work, the town's labourers would drift in, each with their four coppers ready to buy a bowl of warmed wine (this was twenty years ago, remember; now it would cost them ten), then drink it at the bar, taking their ease. An extra copper would buy them a bowl of salted bamboo shoots, or of aniseed beans, to go with it. If their budgets stretched to ten coppers or more, a meat dish would be within their reach. But such extravagance was generally beyond the means of short-jacketed manual labourers. Only those dressed in the long scholar's gowns that distinguished those who worked with their heads from those who worked with their hands made for a more sedate, inner room, to enjoy their wine and food sitting down.

When I was eleven, I was taken on as assistant-barman at the Universal Prosperity, at the edge of town. But the manager said I looked too dull to wait on his prized long-gowned customers, and deployed me instead around the main bar. Though I found the regulars easy enough to talk to, they were also quite capable of making life difficult for me. They would insist on watching the yellow liquor being ladled out of its jar, checking for water in the bottom of their wine kettles, hawkishly scrutinizing the progress of the kettle as it was lowered into its warming surround of hot water. Supervision as exacting as this made watering down the wine something of a challenge, and after a few days, the manager retired me from this line of work, too. Fortunately, the connection who had wangled me the position was too powerful for the manager to sack me outright; all the same, he kept my duties as tediously simple as possible – warming the wine.

All day, every day I spent behind the bar, devoting myself to this task – bored

senseless, even though I never made any mistakes. The manager had a terrible temper, and our customers weren't a particularly civil bunch either, so fun tended to be thin on the ground – except when Kong Yiji rolled up, which is why I still remember him.

Kong Yiji was the only long-gowned drinker who took his wine standing up. He was a great lanky fellow, his peaky white face pitted with scars and wrinkles and fringed by an untidy grey beard. His gown was filthy and torn, as if it hadn't been mended or washed for over a decade. His speech was so dusty with classical constructions you could barely understand him. Kong Yiji wasn't even his real name: it was the first few characters – *kong, yi, ji* – in the old primer that children used for learning to write. Kong was his surname, all right, but someone somewhere must have once rattled humorously on with *yi* and *ji* and the nickname stuck. 'Another scar, Kong Yiji?' the assembled company would laugh the moment he arrived in the tavern. 'Two bowls of wine, warm, and a plate of aniseed beans,' he would order, ignoring his hecklers and lining nine coppers up on the bar. The provocatively raucous chorus would begin once more: 'Stealing *again*?' 'Groundless calumny... unimpeachable virtue.' Kong Yiji's eyes would bulge with outrage. 'Well, that's funny, because just the day before yesterday I saw you getting strung up and beaten for stealing a book from the Hos.' Kong's face would flush scarlet, the veins on his forehead throbbing in the heat of discomfort. 'Stealing books is no crime! Is scholarship theft?' he would argue back, illustrating his point with a perplexing smatter of archaisms: 'poverty and learning, oft twixt by jowl', etcetera, etcetera. At which everyone inside (and outside) the tavern would collapse with mirth. Kong Yiji truly brought with him the gift of laughter.

Somewhere in the distant past, the story went, Kong Yiji had received a classical education, but it had never got him past even the lowest grade of the imperial civil service examination. Since he had no head for any other kind of business, he grew steadily poorer until he was on the point of having to beg for food. Fortunately, he had a good writing hand – he could have scraped by, copying out books. Unfortunately, he didn't have the temperament for this, or indeed any work, preferring drinking to all other occupations. And after a few days at any one job, he would simply vanish – along with the books, paper, brush and ink. Once this had happened a few times, the copying work dried up, forcing Kong Yiji to fall back on periodic acts of theft as his only means of livelihood. All the same, his standing in the tavern was better than most – he never fell seriously into debt. Though occasionally he might turn up without ready money, his name would generally be wiped from the credit slate within a month.

After half a bowl of wine, the flush had usually receded from Kong Yiji's face, inviting bystanders to try something else: 'Can you really read, Kong Yiji?' A look

of scorn from their victim. Next: 'How come you never managed to pass an exam?' This tended to hit home: his face would turn a defeated grey, as he launched into another incomprehensibly classical splutter. At which universal merriment would again prevail.

I could join in the fun without fear of rebuke from the manager. In fact, whenever Kong Yiji turned up, the manager was often the one doing the asking, just to raise a laugh. Recognizing that he'd never get the better of them, Kong Yiji concentrated his conversational efforts on any minors he encountered about the premises. 'Ever been to school?' he once asked me. I gave a slight nod. 'Hmmm... here's a quick test. How do you write "aniseed"?' What right did he – a beggar – have to test *me*, I thought. I turned away, ignoring him. 'You don't know?' Kong Yiji persevered, after a long pause. 'I'll show you. Don't forget it! When you get to be manager of this place, you'll need it for your accounts.' Personally, I thought I was a long way off becoming a manager; and anyway, the present incumbent never included aniseed beans in the accounts. The whole thing was ridiculous. 'Keep your characters to yourself,' I retorted sulkily. 'Anyway, it's just 茴hui, the *hui* for "return", with the grass radical on top, isn't it?' Kong Yiji euphorically tapped his overextended fingernails on the bar. 'Just so, just so!' he nodded. 'Now, d'you know all four ways of writing *hui*?' I walked off, scowling. Kong Yiji sighed – his fingernail already dipped in wine, ready to scrawl the characters across the bar – at my lamentable absence of academic zeal.

Sometimes, hearing the sound of laughter, the local children would scurry over to watch the fun, gathering around Kong Yiji. He would present each with a single aniseed bean, which they would gulp down; they would then remain implacably rooted to the spot, eyes fixed on the dish. 'Hardly any left,' an unnerved Kong would stoop to tell them, his fingers sheltering the dish. Straightening up, he would glance back at the beans, shaking his head: 'Hardly any! Are the beans multitudinous in abundance? Multitudinous in abundance they are not.' At which his young audience would scatter hilariously.

And so it was that Kong Yiji spread joy wherever he went; though when he wasn't around, we barely missed him.

'I haven't seen Kong Yiji for ages,' the manager pronounced one day, probably a little before the Mid-Autumn Festival, as he took down the slate to work slowly through the accounts. 'He still owes me nineteen coppers!' It now dawned on me, too, that we had long been deprived of the pleasure of Kong Yiji's company. 'How d'you expect him to drag himself over here?' one customer said. 'He's had his legs broken.' 'Oh?' 'He was stealing, as usual. But he must have been out of his mind to try it on with Mr Ding, the magistrate. Just asking for trouble.' 'So what happened?' 'First they got a confession out of him, then they beat the hell out of him and broke

his legs. Past midnight it went on.' 'Then what happened?' 'Well, his legs were broken.' 'I mean after that.' 'Oh... Who knows? Maybe he's dead.' No further questions; the manager went slowly back to his accounts.

Mid-Autumn Festival went by, and the wind grew colder with every day that passed; winter, it seemed, was not far off. Every day I spent huddled up next to the fire, wrapped in my padded jacket. And there I was one afternoon, with no other customers about, all ready to doze off, when a muffled but familiar voice interrupted: 'Warm me a bowl of wine.' I looked up: no one in sight. But when I hauled myself to my feet, I spotted Kong Yiji sitting at the foot of the bar, facing the door. He looked terrible: his face grey, gaunt, a thin, ragged cotton jacket over his shoulders, his legs crossed beneath him, sitting on a rush sack that he kept in place with a straw rope. 'Warm me a bowl of wine,' he repeated when he caught sight of me. 'Is that Kong Yiji?' the manager craned forward. 'You still owe me nineteen coppers!' Kong Yiji looked despondently up at him. 'I... I'll bring it next time. I can pay cash today, so make it a drop of the good stuff.' 'Stealing again, Kong Yiji?' the manager grinned, going through the usual motions. This time, however, Kong was capable of nothing but weak protest: 'Don't make fun of me!' 'It was your stealing that got your legs broken in the first place!' 'I had a bad fall... just a fall...' Kong Yiji muttered, his eyes beseeching the manager to close the subject. But by this point, he had already acquired an audience. I warmed the wine, carried it out and placed it on the doorsill. Drawing four coppers out of a pocket in his tattered jacket, he placed them in my hand. His own hand, I saw, was filthy from dragging himself along the ground. Soon enough, he finished his wine and then, amid further laughter from the assembled company, dragged himself off again.

After this, we were again bereft of Kong Yiji for an extended period of time. 'Kong Yiji still owes me those nineteen coppers!' the manager said, as the year neared its end, taking the slate down again. 'Kong Yiji *still* owes me nineteen coppers!' he repeated at the Dragon Boat Festival, in early summer the following year. At the Mid-Autumn Festival, he said nothing more about it; nor at the end of the year.

I never saw him again – I suppose Kong Yiji really must have died.

March 1919

MEDICINE

I

The dark hours before an autumn dawn: the moon had sunk, but the sun had not yet risen, leaving an empty expanse of midnight-blue sky. All – except the creatures of the night – slept. Hua Shuan suddenly sat up in bed. Striking a match, he lit the oil lamp, its body slick with grease; a greenish-white light flickered through the two rooms of the teahouse.

‘Are you off, then?’ an old woman’s voice asked. A coughing fit erupted inside the small back room.

‘Mmm,’ Shuan mumbled as he dressed, distracted by the noise next door. ‘Pass it over,’ he reached out.

After an extended search beneath her pillow, Hua Dama handed a packet of silver dollars to the old man, who tucked it, with trembling hands, into his jacket pocket. Giving the bulge a couple of pats, he lit a paper lantern, blew out the lamp and went into the other room. A faint rustling sound was followed by another succession of coughs. ‘Don’t get up, son,’ Shuan whispered, when it subsided. ‘Your mother will see to the shop.’

Guessing from his son’s silence that he had fallen back into a deep sleep, Shuan opened the door. Outside, the street was sunk in a heavy darkness that obscured everything except the ashen road before him. The lantern cast its light over his feet, illuminating their progress – one step after another. The occasional dog silently crossed his path. The air was much colder outside, but Shuan found the change in temperature refreshing: he felt like a young man again, striding further and faster, as if invigorated by a new life-force. The outlines of the road grew clearer as he walked, the sky brighter.

Thus absorbed, he was startled by the sudden, clear sighting of a T-junction in the distance up ahead. He slunk back under the eaves of a shop, leaning against its bolted door. After a while, the cold crept up on him.

‘Look at that old man.’

‘What’s he so happy about...’

Another shock: Shuan now noticed passers-by – one of them turning to glance back at him. Though the lines of the man’s face remained hazy in the fading darkness, Shuan caught a predatory, famished gleam in his eyes. Shuan glanced at the lantern; it had gone out. He patted his pocket again, to check for the robust presence of the silver. Looking back up, he now found himself among a great ghostly throng, wandering aimlessly about in twos and threes. But when he looked again, their shadowy strangeness seemed to fall away.

Shortly after, he saw a few soldiers march towards and then past him, the large

white circle on their chests and backs clearly visible even from a distance. As they passed him, he noted the dark red border on their uniforms. Then a rush of footsteps: the crowd surged forward, its units of twos and threes suddenly coalescing into a tremendous mass that pulled up and fanned out into a semicircle just before the junction.

Shuan watched them, the view beyond blocked by the ranks of backs and extended necks – as if they were so many ducks, their heads stretched upwards by an invisible puppeteer. A moment's silence, a slight noise, then they regained the power of motion. With a roar of movement, the mass of them pushed back towards Shuan, almost sweeping him over in the crush.

‘You there! Give me the money and you’ll get the goods!’ A man dressed in black stood before Shuan, who shrank back from his cutting glare. One enormous hand was thrust out, opened, before him; the other held, between finger and thumb, a crimson steamed bun, dripping red.

After groping for the silver, Shuan held it tremblingly out at him, recoiling from the object offered in return. ‘What’re you afraid of? Just take it!’ the man shouted impatiently. As Shuan continued to hesitate, the man in black snatched the lantern from him, ripped off its paper cover, wrapped it around the bread, then thrust the whole thing back. Grabbing the money, he gave the packet a squeeze then strode off, muttering ‘Old fool...’ to himself.

‘Who’s that for – who’s ill?’ Shuan vaguely heard someone ask. Whoever it was, he ignored them. His mind was now focused on one object alone, as if he held in his hands the single heir to an ancient house; all else was shut out. His only thought was to place this elixir inside his son, and enjoy its blessings. The sun was now fully risen, painting in light the road home, and the faded gold characters of a battered old plaque at the junction behind: ‘Crossing of the Ancient — Pavilion’.

II

By the time Shuan returned home, the main room at the tea-house had been cleaned and tidied, its rows of tables polished to an almost slippery shine. No customers, only his son, sitting eating at one of the inner tables, fat beads of sweat rolling off his forehead, thick jacket stuck to his spine, the hunched ridges of his shoulder blades almost joined in an inverted V. A frown furrowed Shuan's forehead. His wife rushed out from behind the cooking range, wide-eyed, a faint tremble to her lips.

‘Did you get it?’

‘Yes.’

The two of them returned to the stove and, after a brief discussion, Hua Dama left the room, returning shortly afterwards with an old lotus leaf, which she spread out on a table. Shuan opened out the lantern paper and rewrapped the crimson bun in the lotus leaf, by which point the younger Shuan had finished his breakfast.

‘Stay there,’ his mother called quickly out to him. ‘Don’t come over here.’

After firing up the stove, Shuan stuffed the jade green parcel and the torn red-and-white lantern paper inside. A reddish-black flame flared up, filling the room with a curious fragrance.

‘Smells good! What treats have you got in there?’ The hunch-back had arrived. All day, every day he spent in the teahouse, always the first to arrive and the last to leave. Today, he had chosen the corner table nearest the street. Everyone ignored him. ‘Crispy rice?’ Still no reply. Shuan hurried over to pour him some tea.

‘Come in here!’ Hua Dama called her son into the back room, where he sat down on the bench in the middle. His mother brought him a round, pitch-black object on a plate.

‘Eat up,’ she told him softly. ‘It’ll make you better.’

The boy picked it up and studied it. The strangest thing: as if it were his own life he were holding between finger and thumb. He broke it carefully open: a jet of white steam escaped from within the burnt crust, leaving behind two halves of a white steamed bun. Soon enough, the whole thing was swallowed down, its taste forgotten, leaving only an empty plate before him. His parents stood to either side, watching, an odd gleam to their eyes – as if they wanted to pour something into him, and take something out in return. His heart started to pound. He pressed his hands to his chest; another coughing fit began.

‘Go and have a nap – then you’ll feel better.’

Her son obediently coughed himself to sleep. Once his breathing had steadied, Hua Dama lightly covered him with a patched quilt.

III

The teahouse was now full. Dark circles under his eyes, Shuan moved busily between customers, filling their cups from his copper kettle.

‘Are you all right?’ a man with a grey beard asked. ‘Not ill, are you?’

‘I’m fine.’

‘Really?’ his interlocutor murmured. ‘You look cheerful enough, I suppose.’

‘He’s just busy. If his son – ’

A man with a fleshy, overbearing face rushed in, interrupting the hunchback’s diagnosis. He wore a dark brown shirt, unbuttoned and bunched carelessly at the waist with a broad black belt.

‘Has he had it?’ he shouted at Shuan. ‘Is he better? You’re a lucky man, Shuan! Lucky I keep my ear to the ground...’

One hand on his kettle, the other clamped by his side, Shuan listened respectfully, his face split wide open into a smile. Everyone else followed his example. Smiling just as brightly, Shuan’s wife – her own eyes shadowed by exhaustion – bustled out with a bowl and tea leaves. Once she had added an olive, Shuan poured on the hot water.

‘He’ll be better before you know it! Guaranteed!’ the fleshy face blustered on. ‘A miracle cure! Right? Get it hot, eat it hot.’

‘Without your help, Mr Kang – ’ Hua Dama gratefully began.

‘Guaranteed! Eat it hot. That consumption of his won’t stand a chance, not against a bun dipped in human blood!’

Paling at the word ‘consumption’, Hua Dama smiled all the more valiantly, before walking off, mumbling some excuse, to conceal her discomfort. Oblivious, Mr Kang raised the volume of his voice a notch, squeezing a further coughing fit from the Shuan boy asleep in the back room.

‘What a stroke of luck. Soon he’ll be right as rain; no wonder old Shuan can’t keep the smile off his face,’ the grey-beard echoed, approaching Mr Kang. ‘I heard it was the Xia boy – is that right?’ he lowered his voice deferentially. ‘What happened?’

‘It was Mrs Xia’s son, all right! The rascal!’ A feeling of exceptional well-being rushed through Mr Kang as he observed his rapt audience, the folds of his flesh seeming to swell with delight. ‘He threw his life away, the idiot,’ he went on, even louder. ‘No doubt about it. Didn’t get anything out of it myself, of course – not like our friend Shuan here. Red-Eye the prison guard got his clothes, while the boy’s uncle cleaned up with a twenty-five-dollar reward. Straight into his pocket!’

The younger Shuan slowly made his way out of the back room, both hands

pressed against his chest, unable to stop coughing. Walking over to the cooking range, he filled a bowl with cold rice, poured on hot water, then sat down and began to eat. 'Feeling any better?' his mother murmured, following behind. 'Still as hungry as ever?'

'Guaranteed!' Mr Kang glanced at the boy, before turning back to his audience. 'Sharp as a tack, that uncle of his. If he hadn't informed when he did, the authorities would have gone for the whole family – root and branch. Instead of which, he's made a mint! That boy – you wouldn't believe it, he even tried to get his jailer to turn against the government.'

'Unbelievable,' spat a furious-looking young man, around twenty, in the back row.

'When Red-Eye went to sound him out for bribes, he tried to talk him round. The empire, he said, it belongs to every one of us. Ever heard anything like it? Mad! Red-Eye couldn't believe how poor he really was – even though he'd known all along there was only an old mother back home. He lost his rag completely when he found out there wasn't a drop to be squeezed out of him. Gave him a couple of good slaps round the face – and quite right!'

'That would've given him something to think about.' The hunchback in the corner suddenly revived.

'Ha! Not a bit of it. He just said he felt sorry for him.'

'Sorry for hitting a fool like that?' the man with the grey beard asked.

'You weren't listening,' Mr Kang smirked contemptuously. 'The *boy* felt sorry for Red-Eye!'

His listeners' eyes suddenly went blank, their chatter fading away. His eating done, the sweat was steaming off the Shuan boy.

'*He* felt sorry for Red-Eye – crazy! He must have gone crazy,' the man with the grey beard illuminated.

'Crazy – crazy,' the man in his twenties echoed, identically inspired.

Life – and the power of speech – returned to the other customers. As the teahouse buzzed with noise once more, the Shuan boy began coughing desperately. Mr Kang strode over to thump him on the back.

'Guaranteed!' Mr Kang told him, thumping him on the back. 'No need to cough like that, Shuan my boy. Guaranteed!'

'Crazy,' the hunchback nodded his head.

IV

For as long as anyone could remember, the land beyond the western gate in the town wall had been common ground, bisected by a narrow, meandering path tramped out by the shoes of short-cutters. To the left of this natural boundary line were buried the bodies of the executed and those who had died in prison; to the right lay the mass graves into which the town's poor were sunk. Both sides bulged with grave mounds, like the tiered crowns of steamed bread with which wealthy families celebrated their birthdays.

The weather that April – the month on which the Grave-Sweeping Festival fell – was unusually cold, with buds no more than half the size of rice grains daring to peep out on to the willow branches. Not long after daybreak, a weeping Hua Dama set four dishes of food and a bowl of rice in front of a new grave. After burning some funeral money, she squatted there blankly, as if waiting for something – what, she couldn't say – to happen. A light breeze ruffled her short hair, noticeably greyer than it had been last year.

Another woman – her hair also grey, her clothes ragged, carrying an old, round basket lacquered in vermilion, from which a chain of paper money hung – approached slowly along the narrow track, pausing every few steps. Suddenly noticing Hua Dama's gaze, she hesitated, a flush tingeing her pale face, then forced herself to walk on: to a grave to the left of the boundary, in front of which she set down her basket.

The grave was directly across from the Shuan boy's, the two plots separated only by the narrow path. Hua Dama watched the woman lay out four dishes of food and a bowl of rice, weep a while, then burn her paper money. 'Her son must be buried there, too,' she thought to herself. After she had paced aimlessly back and forth, a tremble suddenly took hold of the second woman's hands and feet. She took a few unsteady steps back, her glazed eyes staring ahead.

Fearing that the woman was almost maddened by grief, Hua Dama rose to her feet and crossed over. 'Try not to upset yourself,' she murmured. 'Why don't we take ourselves back?'

The other woman nodded, her eyes still staring ahead. 'Look,' she mumbled. 'What's that?'

Looking in the direction indicated by the other woman, Hua Dama found her gaze drawn to the unkempt grave before her, its patchy coverage of grass interrupted by scraps of yellow earth. But when she looked a little closer, she shivered with surprise: across the grave's rounded peak lay a wreath of red and white flowers, clearly visible even to eyes long cloudy with old age.

Though not the most extravagant or the freshest of wreaths, it was tidily woven. Hua Dama glanced across at her son's grave, at other graves, scattered only with hardy little bluish-white flowers undaunted by the cold. She was unaccountably troubled by a sense of dissatisfaction, or inadequacy. Taking a few steps closer, the second old woman studied the wreath more closely. 'Cut flowers,' she observed, as if talking to herself. 'They couldn't have grown round here... Who might have left them? Children never play round here... my relatives haven't visited for ages... What are they doing here?' She sank deep into thought.

'Yu'er,' she suddenly cried out, her face streaming with tears. 'They murdered you! And you can't forget – you're still suffering! Is this a sign from you, to me?' She looked about her: a lone black crow stood perched on the bare branch of a tree. 'I know,' she went on. 'They'll be sorry, Yu'er, they'll be sorry they murdered you. Heaven will have its revenge. Close your eyes, rest easy... If you're here, and can hear me, send me a sign – make that crow fly on to your grave.'

With the ebbing of the breeze, the stems of withered grass now stood erect, rigid as copper wire. Her thin, tremulous voice faded away, leaving only the silence of the grave. The two women stood among the clumps of grass, staring up at the crow perched, as if cast in iron, amid the rod-like branches, its head drawn in.

Time passed. Other mourners, of various ages, appeared, weaving in and out between the graves.

Hua Dama felt somehow relieved, as if a heavy burden had been lifted from her shoulders. It was time to go, she thought. 'Why don't we take ourselves back,' she urged again, moving to leave.

Her companion sighed and began listlessly collecting together the dishes of food. After a final, brief hesitation, she slowly walked off, still muttering, 'What are they doing here?' to herself.

After a couple of dozen paces, a loud caw broke the silence behind them. They looked back, their skin prickling: its wings spread, the crow crouched for take-off, then flew off, straight as an arrow, towards the horizon.

April 1919

TOMORROW

‘Can’t hear a thing – what’s wrong, d’you think?’ Lifting his bowl of rice wine, Red-Nosed Gong made a face in the direction of next door.

‘Ah, give it a rest,’ Blue-Skinned Ah-wu muttered, putting down his own bowl to punch him hard on the back.

Back in those days, Luzhen was still an old-fashioned backwater of a place: by around seven in the evening, most of the town had locked their doors and taken themselves off to bed. Only two establishments kept their lamps burning into the small hours. One was the Universal Prosperity, where a few comrades in cups clustered around the bar to eat, drink and generally be merry; the other the home of one Mrs Shan, a young widow of two years’ standing, who lived next door. Rude economic necessity – the need to make a living from spinning for herself and her three-year-old son – also kept her up late.

But for the last few days, no spinning had been heard. Since only two adjoining establishments stayed awake into the night, only Gong and his fellow drinkers would hear any noise that was to be heard from Mrs Shan’s; or fail to hear it, in its absence.

After submitting to the blow, Gong took a great, easy slug of his wine, and began crooning a popular love song.

At this moment, Mrs Shan next door was sitting on the edge of the bed, cradling her son, Bao’er, as the spinning wheel stood silently by. The dingy lamplight illuminated the pallor beneath his crimson flush. She had drawn lots, she had beseeched the gods, she was thinking to herself; she had even given him medicine. What else was there left for her to do? The only person she hadn’t yet tried was Dr Ho Xiaoxian. But maybe Bao’er was *always* worse at night; once the sun came up, his fever would subside, his breathing get easier – it was often like that with

illnesses.

Mrs Shan was a simple, uneducated sort of a woman, the sort who didn't understand the terrifying powers of the word 'but': its marvellous ability to transform the bad into good, and to perform the same trick in reverse. Not long after the sentimental cadences from next door died away, the darkness began to pale over to the east, and the first, hopeful silver light of dawn crept in through a crack in the window, drawing the short summer night to a close.

Mrs Shan found waiting for dawn much harder than other people: each of Bao'er's laboured breaths seemed to last a year. But eventually the brightness of day overpowered the lamplight. Bao'er's nostrils, she now saw, shuddered with each intake and out-take of breath.

She let out a faint cry of terror; he looked worse than she had feared. What can I do? she thought to herself. I have to take him to Dr Ho. Although she was a simple, uneducated sort of a woman, she was capable of taking a decision. Standing up, she removed from her wooden cupboard the thirteen silver dollars and hundred and eighty coppers that daily economies had enabled her to stockpile. Pocketing them, she locked the door and rushed off towards Dr Ho's, carrying Bao'er in her arms.

Even though it was still early, the doctor already had four patients waiting for him. Four silver dollars bought Bao'er fifth place in the queue. Ho Xiaoxian uncurled two fingers – both nails a generous four inches long – and felt his pulse. Surely this man can save Bao'er, marvelled Mrs Shan to herself.

'What's wrong with Bao'er, doctor?' she asked nervously.

'His stomach's blocked.'

'Not serious, is it? He –'

'Take two of these.'

'He can't breathe properly, his nostrils shake every time he takes a breath.'

'That's because his Fire is vanquishing his Metal.'

His verdict delivered, Ho closed his eyes; Mrs Shan felt it would be rude to press him further. A man in his thirties, seated opposite the doctor, had already scribbled out a prescription.

'You won't get the first item, the Baby Life-Saver Wonder Pill,' he said, pointing at one line of characters, 'anywhere except Jias' Welfare Pharmacy.'

Mrs Shan took the prescription and walked off with it, thinking to herself. Though she was only a simple, uneducated sort of a woman, she knew that Dr Ho's surgery, the pharmacy and her own home formed the three corners of a triangle; naturally, her most expeditious course would be to buy the medicine before going on home. And so that was where she headed. The shop assistant, his warped fingernails as overextended as the doctor's, slowly read the prescription then, just as slowly,

wrapped the medicine. As Mrs Shan held Bao'er in her arms while she waited, the boy suddenly tugged on a tuft of his dishevelled hair, a movement she had never seen him make before. She was stupid with terror.

The sun was now high in the sky. Walking along with the medicine and a fidgeting child in her arms, Mrs Shan began to feel the weight of them; home began to seem ever more distant. Eventually, she sat down to rest at the threshold of one of the village's better establishments, her clothes clinging clammy to her – she suddenly realized she was covered in sweat. Bao'er seemed to have fallen asleep. Up she got, and went slowly on her way.

'Let me take him!' said a voice – remarkably similar to Ah-wu's – in her ear.

Turning, she discovered a drowsy-looking Blue-Skinned Ah-wu behind her.

Although Mrs Shan had indeed been hoping that Heaven would send down a guardian angel of some kind, her strong preference would have been for someone other than Ah-wu. But here he was, and after a few attempts to demur, she submitted. Out stretched his arm, insinuating itself down between her bosom and her child, until Bao'er was secured. Mrs Shan's breast surged with heat, the flush spreading across her face, and back to her ears.

Side by side they walked along, about two or three feet apart, Ah-wu making desultory attempts at conversation, most of which Mrs Shan chose to ignore. His gallant cravings quickly satisfied, Ah-wu soon handed the child back into his mother's arms, muttering something about some lunch engagement made the day before. Fortunately, she was no longer far from home – she could see old Mrs Wang from over the way sitting at the side of the road.

'How is he?' Mrs Wang called out. 'Have you seen the doctor?'

'Just been. You must have seen a lot of this kind of thing over the years, Mrs Wang. Would you take a look at him for me?'

'Hmmm.'

'What d'you think?'

'Hmmm.' Mrs Wang took a long, hard look, nodded twice, then shook her head twice.

It was past noon by the time Bao'er had had his medicine. Mrs Shan studied his face, which now seemed much more peaceful. Early in the afternoon, he suddenly opened his eyes, cried out 'Mama', then closed them again, as if about to drop off to sleep. Not long after, seedpearls of sweat seeped through on to his forehead and the tip of his nose, sticking to Mrs Shan's hand like glue. Frantically, she felt his chest and burst into uncontrollable sobs.

As Bao'er's breathing steadied, then stopped, Mrs Shan's sobs graduated into full-blown wails. A crowd of interested parties swiftly gathered: Mrs Wang, Ah-wu and a few others barged into the room, while the manager of the tavern loitered outside

with Gong and company. Quickly assuming command, Mrs Wang gave orders for a chain of paper money to be burnt, then relieved Mrs Shan of two stools and five items of clothing, as security for borrowing two silver dollars – the funeral helpers were going to need feeding.

The first problem was the coffin. Mrs Shan handed over what jewellery remained to her – a pair of silver earrings and a gold-plated silver hairpin – to the manager of the Universal Prosperity as surety for a coffin, to be bought half with cash, half on credit. Ever willing to help, Ah-wu stuck out a hand, too, but Mrs Wang appointed him coffin-bearer instead, to which honour Ah-wu responded by scowling and swearing at her. The manager went off on his own, returning that evening to report that the coffin would have to be made specially, and wouldn't be ready till dawn.

By seven o'clock, the hired help had finished their dinner and – Luzhen being an old-fashioned kind of a place – taken themselves off to bed, leaving only the usual hardcore of Ah-wu drinking at the bar, with Gong wailing his songs.

Mrs Shan was sitting on the edge of her bed, crying, Bao'er stretched out next to her; the spinning wheel stood silently by. When eventually her tears declared themselves spent, she stared perplexedly around her. How unreal it all was. It must be a dream, she was thinking to herself; just a dream. Tomorrow, she would wake up from a good, long rest, with Bao'er still fast asleep next to her. Then he would open his eyes, call out to her, and jump off the bed – full of life, ready to play.

Gong's singing had stopped: lights out at the Universal Prosperity. Mrs Shan went on staring, still unable to take it all in. A cockerel crowed; over to the east the darkness began to pale, the silver-white gleam of dawn creeping in through a crack in the window.

The new light gradually turned crimson; the sun was now shining directly on to the roof beams. Mrs Shan went on sitting blankly. When the banging on the door began, she started up and ran over to open it. A strange man stood outside the door, an object on his back, Mrs Wang behind him.

It was the coffin.

Because Mrs Shan wouldn't stop crying and wanting to take one last look at her son, because she refused to give up hope, the lid didn't get nailed down until the afternoon. In the end, Mrs Wang mercifully lost patience with her and yanked her away, as a confusion of hands scrabbled to fasten the lid.

Mrs Shan did everything properly. On the day of the death itself, she had burnt a chain of paper money; the following morning, forty-nine scrolls of Buddhist incantations were consigned to the flames. Bao'er had been placed in the coffin wearing his newest clothes, with his favourite toys laid on the pillow next to him – a clay figurine, two small wooden bowls and two glass bottles. One by one, Mrs

Wang ticked everything off on her fingers.

Since Ah-wu failed to show up, the manager of the Universal Prosperity hired two bearers – at a cost of two hundred and ten coppers each – on Mrs Shan's behalf, to carry the coffin to its final resting place in a pauper's grave. Mrs Wang then helped her prepare food for anyone who had moved a muscle or said a word in contribution. Slowly, the sun turned the colour it turned when it was about to slip behind the western hills, the diners all turned the colour they turned when bedtime approached, and went home to bed.

A terrible dizziness seized hold of Mrs Shan. A rest left her feeling steadier, but she couldn't shake off a sense of the utter strangeness of it all. Something had happened to her that had never happened before, that should never have happened – and yet still had. The longer she thought, the more she noticed the curiously excessive silence of the room.

Getting up, she turned on the lamp. Now the room seemed even quieter. She closed the door and returned to the edge of the bed, as if in a trance, the spinning wheel standing silently by. She looked around her, unwilling either to sit or stand: the room was too quiet, too big, too empty – an enormous void enveloping her, bearing down on her, stifling the breath out of her.

Bao'er, she now realized, was dead. She blew out the lamp and lay down; she no longer wanted this room before her. She thought, as she wept: she thought about how Bao'er had sat next to her while she spun, eating aniseed beans, his eyes wide open, thinking things through. 'Daddy used to sell dumplings, didn't he?' he had said. 'So when I get bigger I'll sell dumplings too. I'll make lots of money and give it all to you.' At that moment, every inch of cotton she was spinning had seemed almost alive with meaning. But now? Mrs Shan hadn't even begun to think about what would happen now. She was a simple, uneducated sort of a woman – as I may have already mentioned. What *could* she think about? Only that this room of hers was too quiet, too big, too empty.

But however simple and uneducated Mrs Shan was, she knew that the dead cannot come back to life; that she would never see her Bao'er again. 'Come back to me in a dream,' she sighed to herself. 'You can't be far away.' She closed her eyes, urging sleep upon herself, in the hope of catching sight of Bao'er. Her breathing rasped through the empty quiet around her.

But at last she drifted off to sleep; and the silence claimed the room. Gong and his red nose staggered out of the Universal Prosperity, working up to a shrill falsetto encore:

'Oh, my darling!... Poor you... All alone...'

Ah-wu grabbed at Gong's shoulder, and the two of them zigzagged off down the road, laughing and pushing at each other.

With Mrs Shan asleep, and Gong and his fellow drinkers gone, the Universal Prosperity locked its doors. Silence descended on Luzhen. Only the darkness remained, agitating to become tomorrow's first light, concealing within itself the howls of the village dogs.

June 1920

A MINOR INCIDENT

Six years of my life have slipped by since I arrived in Beijing from the countryside. In that time, I've come to see and hear a good deal of what might be termed matters of national importance, yet none has made much impact on me. If you were to force me to declare their influence, I would suggest they succeeded only in further blackening my already black mood – in increasing my contempt for the people around me.

But there was one minor incident: a tiny thing that began to drag me out of my bad temper, the memory of which remains with me today.

It was the winter of 1917 – the sixth year of our new Republic – the north wind scouring the city in great, fierce gusts. Early each morning, in the interests of making a living, I would take myself on to the almost deserted streets of Beijing, flag down a rickshaw (no easy task, at that time of day) and direct it to S—Gate. That morning, not long after we got moving, the wind eased, leaving before us a wide, pale road blasted clean of loose dust, and my runner picked up speed. Just as we were nearing my destination, someone caught on the handlebar of the rickshaw, and toppled slowly to the ground.

A grey-haired old woman, in ragged clothes, had suddenly cut across our path from the side of the road. Though my man had swerved to avoid her, the tattered, unbuttoned waistcoat she was wearing had flapped open in the breeze, hooking itself around the rickshaw. It was lucky the puller began slowing down the moment he saw her, or she would have somersaulted over the bar and cracked her head open.

There she lay face down on the ground, the rickshaw-puller parked by her. Certain both that the old woman was unhurt, and that no one else had seen it happen, I felt only irritation at my runner for getting needlessly involved. He would make trouble for himself, and hold me up – quite unnecessarily.

‘She’s fine,’ I told him. ‘Let’s get on!’

Taking no notice – or perhaps he didn’t even hear me – the man laid down his rickshaw and helped the old woman slowly up, holding her arm as she found her feet.

‘How d’you feel?’

‘I think I’m hurt.’

You phoney, I thought. I saw you fall, no one ever came to any harm going down as slowly as that. But since the rickshaw-puller had got us into this mess, let him think of a way out of it.

Without a moment of hesitation, the man now began to inch her forward, keeping hold of her arm. Startled, I noticed a police station – its exterior deserted after the morning’s ferocious wind – a little way ahead. He was helping her on towards its main door.

In that brief moment, a curious sensation overtook me: his back, filthy with dust, suddenly seemed to loom taller, broader with every step he took, until I had to crick my neck back to view him in his entirety. It seemed to bear down on me, pressing out the petty selfishness concealed beneath my fur coat.

There I sat, as if physically and mentally paralysed, until a policeman emerged from the station. I now stepped out of the carriage.

‘You’d better find yourself another rickshaw,’ he walked over to tell me. ‘This one’s out of commission.’

As if without thinking, I pulled a great handful of coins out of my coat pocket. ‘Make sure the driver gets these, will you?’ I asked, thrusting them at the policeman.

Now the wind had completely died away, the street was sunk in quiet. As I walked along, I was thinking – almost afraid I would turn my thoughts on myself. None of it had anything to do with me; so what had I meant by that handful of coins? Was it a reward? Did I have the right to pass such judgement? I could not answer my own questions.

Even now, I often think back to that morning. It fills me with discomfort – it forces me to look hard at myself. None of our country’s recent political or military achievements has any more meaning for me than the Confucian primers that tormented my boyhood. The only thing that has stayed with me is this minor incident, clearer in my memory than it was even in reality, shaming me, urging me to change, bolstering my sense of courage and hope.

July 1920

HAIR

Early one Sunday morning, I tore the previous day's page off the calendar.

'October Tenth – Double Tenth,' I exclaimed, glancing at the new page. 'Revolution Day.¹ It's not marked!'

And promptly succeeded in irritating one Mr N, an acquaintance a generation older than me, who happened to have stopped by for a chat.

'Good for them!' he snapped. 'Why should you care, anyway?'

Now, this Mr N of mine was famed for the eccentricities of his mood: for his habit of flying into inexplicable tempers, or coming out with views some way out of step with conventional wisdom. Whenever this happened, I was careful not to offer any encouragement, leaving him to mutter it out of his system.

'Oh, they know how to celebrate Double Tenth in Beijing. First thing, a policeman turns up and orders you to Fly the Flag! Yes, yes, officer, mumbles your model citizen, sleepwalking out to stick a faded old rag up. Then comes back out when it gets dark, takes it down and shuts up shop. Unless he forgets, of course, and leaves it up overnight. What does the Revolution mean to him? What does he mean to the Revolution? Not a thing.

'I never celebrate October Tenth either. If I did, I'd start thinking back over everything that actually happened in 1911. I can't bear it. All those old friends – young men, quietly finished off by bullets, after years of sacrifice. Or tortured in prison for weeks. Or just disappeared off the face of the earth, along with their hopes and ambitions, their corpses thrown who knows where... Mocked, abused, persecuted, their graves forgotten. No – I don't want to remember any of that. Let's try and dredge up some happy memories instead – things we can feel proud of.

'You know what I'm proudest of?' he now announced, suddenly smiling and rubbing his head. 'Since the first Double Tenth, I haven't once been laughed at or

insulted in public.

‘Remember that for us Chinese, our hair is our pride and fall. How many pointless victims has it claimed over the millennia, I wonder? Let’s start with the ancients: now, they didn’t seem to concern themselves much about hair. Look at their penal codes: decapitation saved for the most hideous crimes; removal of sexual organs next. Shaving the head was right at the bottom of the list of punishments. Though I suppose we’ll never know how many lives have been ruined over the centuries by the stigma of baldness.

‘Before 1911, whenever we talked about revolution, we’d always go back over the massacres of the Manchu conquest in the middle of the seventeenth century, at Yangzhou and Jiading. But it was just rhetoric. Back then, the Chinese weren’t really fighting for the nation. They were fighting for the right not to scrape their hair back into queues and shave the fronts of their heads.

‘But once resistance had been stamped out, and the old guard had died, the queue became a great immovable. Until the Taiping Rebels came along, letting their pigtails loose. I remember my grandmother telling me about those times – about how bad they were. If you let your hair grow, the government soldiers killed you; if you didn’t, the Taipings did. What is hair? Dead protein. But how many Chinese have suffered, or even died because of it?’

N stared reflectively up at a beam across the ceiling.

‘And I’m one of them,’ he went on. ‘When I went abroad to study, I cut off my queue – just because I couldn’t be bothered with it. But the diehards among my classmates were furious – and the supervisor the government had sent to keep an eye on us. He told me he was going to stop my grant and send me back home. A few days later, of course, he’d had his own queue hacked off and fled back to China. I seem to remember Zou Rong (remember Zou Rong – author of *The Revolutionary Army*?² Probably not) was one of the hairdressers involved. He was sent back to Shanghai for his pains, where he died in prison.

‘Within a few years, though, the family fortunes had gone to the wall. If I didn’t find myself a job, I was going to starve, so I came back. First thing I did when I got to Shanghai was buy myself a false queue – two dollars was the going rate at the time – then went on home. My mother somehow managed to keep her mouth shut about it, but the first thing anyone else I met did was to examine this new appendage of mine. And the minute they worked out it was false, they’d smirk and start plotting to turn me in to the authorities for immediate decapitation. A relative of mine would have informed on me, if he hadn’t been more afraid the Revolution might actually succeed.

‘Then I decided to come out into the open: to get rid of the thing and start going about in Western clothes. But I got insults wherever I went – idiot, fake foreign

devil, etcetera, etcetera. I tried swapping my foreign clothes for a long gown, but it only made things worse. When I couldn't stand it any longer, I added a walking stick to the ensemble. My persecutors gradually gave up after I began paying back their sartorial advice with a few sharp raps. Now, I only had problems whenever I went somewhere new – where my reputation didn't precede me.

'But the whole thing made me miserable – still does, when I think back over it. When I was a student in Japan, I once read a newspaper article about the travels of a Dr Honda around the Malay states and China. As he couldn't understand either Chinese or Malay, he was often asked how he got about. "This is the only language they understand!" he replied, picking up his stick. The whole thing put me in a fury for days – and then, years later, here I was speaking the same Esperanto. And being understood.

'The year the last emperor came to the throne – 1909, that would be – I was in charge of student affairs at my local middle school. The other teachers treated me like a leper, while the local officials watched me like hawks. Every day I felt like I was stuck in an ice house, or waiting for my own execution. And just because I had no queue. One day, though, a handful of students suddenly turned up at my room and told me they wanted to cut their queues off. "You can't!" I said. "Would you rather have a queue, then?" they asked. "Of course not." "So why can't we have ours off?" "It's not worth the trouble, right now. Just wait a bit." They flounced out, scowling, then went and cut them off, anyway.

'What a nightmare that was. Everyone was talking about it, but I had to pretend I didn't know a thing, just let them sit through my classes – the only crew-cuts in a sea of pigtails. But soon it began spreading like the plague: three days later, six students in the local teacher-training college cut theirs off, too, and were expelled that same evening. They had nowhere to go – couldn't stay at school, couldn't go home. Somehow, they got by until a month or so after the Revolution, when everyone finally stopped treating them like criminals.

'And my problems weren't over either. Even in Beijing, in the first year of the Republic, I still got heckled. Until the police cut the queues off of the people who'd given me grief. Finally, things got better – though I didn't risk leaving the city.'

For a brief moment, he actually looked pleased with himself.

'And now you idealists are making all this fuss about women cutting their hair.' His face darkened again. 'Just asking for trouble! No school will take a girl who's cut her hair; or if she's already in school, she's expelled for it. You want them to be revolutionaries – but what are you going to arm them with? You give them an education, but where are the jobs for them afterwards? Keep your hair and find a husband, is what I say – count yourself lucky if you can forget all that guff about freedom and equality. Because your life won't be worth living if you can't. What is

it that Artzybashev says in *Sheviriof*?³ You promise their children and grandchildren paradise on earth, but what can you give *them* in the here and now? A good question.

‘China will never change – never has done. Even Creation didn’t change a hair on its head. You’ve no real poison in you, so why do you insist on making enemies for yourselves?’

Realizing, from the expression on my face, that I wasn’t particularly appreciating his increasingly untrammelled harangue, he immediately fell silent, got to his feet and picked up his hat.

‘Going so soon?’ I asked.

‘Yes,’ he replied. ‘I think it’s about to rain.’

I silently escorted him to the door.

‘Goodbye!’ he said, as he put his hat on. ‘My apologies for having disturbed you. Luckily, tomorrow is October eleventh, and we can put the whole thing behind us.’

October 1920

A PASSING STORM

Translator's note: The immediate historical background to this story is the short-lived attempt in June 1917 by General Zhang Xun, a fanatical supporter of the defunct Qing dynasty, to overturn the Republic by leading his army into Beijing and returning the abdicated emperor, Puyi, to the throne. By July, the restoration was brought to an end when rival generals stormed the capital, defeated Zhang Xun and deposed Puyi.

Over the mudflats down by the river, the sun was slowly gathering in its golden rays. The parched leaves of the tallow trees on the bank seemed to gasp with relief, a smattering of mosquitoes dancing and droning below. As the clouds of cooking smoke spiralling from chimneys along the river faded, women and children splashed water on to the ground beyond their own doors, and set out small tables and stools. It was time for dinner.

The elderly and the men took their seats, wielding large plantain-leaf fans and idly chatting, while the children skittered about or squatted beneath the tallow trees, tossing pebbles. The women brought out dishes of tar-black, steamed dried vegetables and bright yellow rice, the heat billowing out of them. 'What a pastoral idyll!' gushed a pleasure-boatful of amateur poets and professional drinkers as it sailed past. 'Not a care in the world!'

If only they could have heard Mrs Nine-Pounds.

'Seventy-eight years I've lived – that's enough for anyone,' she was declaiming, batting a tattered plantain-leaf fan furiously against the leg of her stool. 'Staring down the road to ruin, we are. Fried beans before dinner!'

Charging towards the table, clutching a handful of said beans, the venerable dame's great-granddaughter Six-Pounds took in the situation at a glance and smartly diverted to the river bank. 'Old bat!' she observed at volume, diving behind a

canopy of tallow leaves, her short pigtailed making a Y in the air.

Mrs Nine-Pounds's hearing was little impaired for all her seventy-eight years – but happily the girl's verdict escaped her ears. 'The youth of today,' she went on. 'It wasn't like this in my day...'

A footnote about the idiosyncrasies of this particular village: when a woman had a baby, the custom was to nickname it by birthweight. Since she had celebrated the great milestone of her fiftieth birthday, Mrs Nine-Pounds's general sense of grievance against the world had been steadily growing: the weather was much hotter than it had been when she'd been young, she became fond of saying; the beans much harder. Everything, in sum, was wrong with the here and now. And Six-Pounds – three pounds lighter at birth than her esteemed great-grandmother, and a pound lighter than her father, Seven-Pounds – offered living proof of this irrefutable process of decline. 'The youth of today...'

Her granddaughter-in-law, wife to Seven-Pounds, slammed a basket of rice down on the table. 'There you go again,' she responded angrily. 'Six-Pounds actually weighed in at six pounds five ounces – remember? And your scales always weighed eighteen ounces to a pound. If we'd put her on proper scales, sixteen to the pound, she'd have been well over seven. And I bet Father and Grandfather weren't eight or nine pounds – their scales probably came up heavy.'

'The youth of today!'

Before she had time for a second riposte, Mrs Seven-Pounds spotted her husband emerge from a bend in the lane. 'What kind of time d'you call this?' she yelled, spinning round to face him. 'Where the hell've you been? We've none of us had dinner!'

Although Seven-Pounds still lived in the old family village, he was a man going places. For three generations, from his grandfather downwards, no male in the family had touched a hoe. Like his forebears, Seven-Pounds poled a daily boat-service between the local town of Luzhen and the city – setting out in the morning, returning in the evening. All this coming and going left him frightfully up on current affairs. No one knew better than he did where the god of thunder had struck a magic centipede dead, or where a virgin had given birth to a demon – etcetera, etcetera. Quite the celebrity, he was, among his fellow villagers. Even so, village custom held that in summer, lamps were not to be lit for dinner, and a late return home was grounds for a scolding.

Head bowed, Seven-Pounds made his way slowly over to a stool and sat down, still holding his six-foot speckled bamboo pipe with its ivory mouth and pewter bowl. 'Daddy,' Six-Pounds called out, slipping out from her hiding place to sit next to him. No reply.

'The youth of today!' said Mrs Nine-Pounds again.

Seven-Pounds slowly looked up at them all. 'The emperor's back,' he sighed.

'Well, that's all for the good,' his wife broke the brief, stunned silence. 'There'll be an amnesty, won't there?'

Seven-Pounds sighed again. 'I haven't got a queue.'

'Will he want queues again?'

'Oh, yes.'

'How d'you know?' his wife asked anxiously.

'Everyone at the Universal Prosperity said so.'

This was a blow: for the Universal Prosperity Tavern was the town's nerve centre, the repository of all news worth hearing. She glanced across at Seven-Pounds's shaved head, feeling hatred and resentment surging up inside. Just as quickly, however, despair took over: 'Eat up!' She filled a bowl with rice and pushed it over to him. 'Long faces don't grow queues, do they?'

The sun gathered up the last of its rays, the surface of the river stealthily greeting their departure with fresh, cool air. All along the mudbank, spines beaded with sweat as chopsticks clattered on bowls. Looking up after her third bowl of rice, Mrs Seven-Pounds's heart began to pound violently. Through a screen of tallow leaves, she spotted the squat form of Mr Zhao, draped in a long gown of sapphire-blue glazed cotton, picking his way across a single-log bridge and towards them.

Proprietor of the Splendid, the tavern in the neighbouring village, Mr Zhao was the only man of any distinction or education within ten miles. A celebrated fogey, he was often to be found poring over his multivolume set of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, annotated by the great seventeenth-century scholar Jin Shengtan. Give him the chance, and he would reel off not only the names of the five Tiger Generals of Shu¹ but also at least two of their honorifics. After the 1911 Revolution, he had coiled his queue up on to his head, like a Daoist priest. If there was just a bit more of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* spirit about today, he would often sigh to himself, things would not be in the pickle they were. Mrs Seven-Pounds had a pair of eyes in her head: even from that distance, she could see the gleam of his clean-shaven forehead, and the black jet of his liberated queue. She now knew for sure that the emperor was back on the throne, that queues were an essential requirement once more, and that Seven-Pounds was in mortal danger. This cotton gown was not everyday attire for Mr Zhao. Only twice had he worn it in the past three years: once when his sworn enemy, the pock-marked Ah-si, took ill; and once on the death of one Mr Lu, who had vandalized his tavern at some point in the past. And here it was again: joy for him, sorrow for his enemies.

Two years ago, Mrs Seven-Pounds now remembered, her husband had – under some undue alcoholic influence – called Mr Zhao 'a bastard'. Now she saw the

danger he was in; now her heart began pounding.

Every diner stood up as Mr Zhao rippled past, touching their chopsticks to their rice bowls, inviting him to sit down and share their meal. 'Carry on, carry on,' he nodded as he glided swiftly on to Seven-Pounds's establishment, which wasted no time in offering him fulsome greeting. 'Carry on, carry on,' their visitor smiled, taking careful note of that evening's menu.

'Delicious, delicious, I'm sure.' Mr Zhao took up position behind Seven-Pounds and opposite his wife. 'Heard the rumours?'

'The emperor's back,' replied Seven-Pounds.

Mrs Seven-Pounds beamed obsequiously, keeping close watch on their guest. 'So when will we hear about the amnesty?'

'All in due course, all in due course.' A new note of severity entered Mr Zhao's voice. 'But where, might I ask, is your queue, Mr Seven-Pounds? This is no laughing matter. Remember the Taiping Rebellion! If you kept your hair, you lost your head; lose your hair, and the head stayed on...' ²

As neither Seven-Pounds nor his wife had been to school, the profundity of this historical allusion floated some way over their heads. But they could see that if a man of Mr Zhao's wisdom was talking like this, then the situation was serious indeed; beyond salvation, in fact. They fell silent, listening to their death knells clanging in their ears.

'The youth of today,' grumbled Mrs Nine-Pounds, seizing the opportunity to get a word in with Mr Zhao. 'Always interfering with people's hair, cutting off their queues. Not like in my day. Seventy-eight years I've lived – that's enough for anyone. Those Taipings wrapped satin round their heads, red satin, all the way down to the floor it went. The princes wore yellow satin, all the way down to the floor... yellow and red... Seventy-eight – enough for anyone.'

'What are we going to do?' Mrs Seven-Pounds stood up and muttered, as if to herself. 'He's got a family to support. How will we manage without him...'

'Hopeless, quite hopeless,' Mr Zhao shook his head. 'Any book'll tell you what you get for cutting off your queue. The law can't make allowances for families.'

As soon as she heard it was written in books, complete despair seized hold of Mrs Seven-Pounds, transforming an instant later into loathing for her husband. 'Serves you right!' she screeched, threatening her husband's nose with her chopsticks. 'Didn't I say, don't take the boat in today, don't go into town, there's a revolution going on? But no, off he would go – and now look at him! His lovely, lovely black, shiny queue – off the moment he got into town. Now look at him! Let him dig his own grave – but what about the rest of us?'

Having witnessed Mr Zhao's grand entrance, everyone else in the village hastily finished their meals, then gathered around the Seven-Pounds's table. Conscious that

he had a reputation to maintain around the village – a reputation that was somewhat tarnished by submitting to such a public dressing down – Seven-Pounds forced himself to look up.

‘With hindsight – ’ he ponderously began.

‘Just keep digging!’

Until this point, Mrs Ba Yi – a widow, and a fairly decent sort – had stood by next to Mrs Seven-Pounds, holding her two-year-old posthumous son in her arms, enjoying the performance. Now, however, she decided that things had gone too far. ‘Calm down, Mrs Seven-Pounds,’ she soothed. ‘No one can read the future. I remember you saying you didn’t think he looked too bad without a queue. Anyway, we haven’t heard anything from the magistrate yet – ’

‘What are you trying to say?’ Mrs Seven-Pounds now pointed her chopsticks at Mrs Ba Yi’s nose, flushing red to her ears. ‘Rubbish! The woman’s mad! I cried for three whole days, you all saw me. Even that little wretch Six-Pounds cried...’ Which last individual had just dispatched one large bowl of rice, and was clamouring for a second helping. ‘Who asked you, anyway?’ screamed Mrs Seven-Pounds at the unfortunate Mrs Ba Yi, while jabbing at her daughter between her pigtails. ‘Slut!’

The empty bowl in Six-Pounds’s hand fell to the ground. By bad luck, it struck against a brick, cracking a great hole in it. Springing to his feet, Seven-Pounds gathered up the pieces and fitted them together. Swearing as he inspected the damage, he dealt his daughter a slap that knocked her to the ground. And there she lay bawling, until her great-grandmother pulled her up by the hand. ‘The youth of today,’ she could still be heard muttering, as they went off together.

‘Now, you’re not being fair, Mrs Seven-Pounds,’ Mrs Ba Yi angrily countered.

Up to now an amused observer of this little fracas, Mr Zhao was eventually prickled to anger by Mrs Ba Yi’s allegation about the magistrate. ‘Let her hit who she likes,’ he intervened, winding his way around the table. ‘But the army’s still coming – and it’ll be Zhang Xun, the emperor’s own general, Zhang Fei’s own descendant,³ at their head, taking on ten thousand men at a time with his eighteen-foot lance. No one can stop him!’ He bore down on Mrs Ba Yi, clenching his fists in the air, as if wielding an invisible spear: ‘No one!’

Trembling with emotion as she clutched at her child, Mrs Ba Yi turned and fled without another word at the sight of Mr Zhao charging at her, his eyes bulging, his face running with sweat. Busily blaming her for sticking her nose in where it wasn’t wanted, the assembled company fanned out to let Mr Zhao make his own exit; those who had cut off their queues then left them to grow back concentrated on ducking out of sight. Without stopping to investigate anyone else’s coiffure, Mr Zhao cut through the lot of them and vanished back below the tallow canopy. ‘No one!’ he repeated, before striding out, head high, along the log bridge.

The villagers stood there, in stunned realization that none of them – and least of all the miserable Seven-Pounds – would stand a chance against Zhang Fei. But there was also a certain pleasure in contemplating that the village bigwig was now a fugitive from the law, as they thought back to all those times he'd smugly lectured them, pipe in mouth, on doings in the city. A village council, they felt, was in order; and yet they could think of nothing to say. After a swarm of mosquitoes whined past bare arms and chests to reconvene beneath the tallow trees, the assembled company dispersed back to their respective dwellings, shut their doors and went to sleep. Still muttering to herself, Mrs Seven-Pounds tidied away the dinner things, the table and stools, then did the same.

Taking the broken bowl with him, Seven-Pounds sat down melancholically on the threshold with his pipe, forgetting to smoke, until the light in his six-foot speckled bamboo pipe (with its ivory mouth and pewter bowl) slowly petered out. Though he could sense the situation was critical, every attempt to find a solution fizzled out: 'Where's your queue? Eighteen-foot lance – the youth of today! The emperor's back. Get it mended in town. No one! All the books. Damn it all to hell...'

The next morning, Seven-Pounds got up and poled the boat, as always, from Luzhen into the city and back again, returning to the village that evening, carrying his long, speckled bamboo pipe and the rice bowl. He'd had it riveted back together in town, he told Mrs Nine-Pounds at dinner. Sixteen copper nails, it had taken, at three coppers apiece – forty-eight coppers in total.

'The youth of today,' his grandmother grouched. 'Seventy-eight years I've lived – that's enough for anyone. Three coppers a nail; it was never that much in my day... Seventy-eight years...'

Though Seven-Pounds kept up his daily routine, passing back and forth between village and town, gloom remained the keynote at home. His fellow villagers gave him and his bulletins about current affairs a wide berth, while his wife was often sourly on at him to keep digging his own grave.

One evening, however, some ten days later, Seven-Pounds returned home to find his wife in much-improved spirits. 'Any news from town?' she asked.

'Oh, nothing much.'

'Anything about the emperor?'

'Nope.'

'Nothing at the Universal Prosperity?'

'Nope.'

'I'm sure the emperor's not back. When I walked past Mr Zhao's today, he was just sitting there reading, his queue tucked back on his head. He wasn't wearing that gown of his either.'

No reply from her husband.

‘D’you think he’s back?’

‘Probably not.’

And so Seven-Pounds again enjoys the deferential regard of his wife and fellow villagers. Every summer, they dine out on the mudflat outside their door, graciously acknowledging their neighbours’ smiles and greetings. Now well past her eightieth birthday, old Mrs Nine-Pounds enjoys the same healthy ill-temper as always, while Six-Pounds’s two wiry little braids have merged into a larger, single plait. And even though her feet have now been bound, she still helps Mrs Seven-Pounds with the chores, hobbling back and forth across the mudbank, carrying her rice bowl with its sixteen copper nails.

October 1920

MY OLD HOME

After a twenty-year absence, and a journey of seven hundred bitterly cold miles, I returned home.

As I neared my destination the weather grew overcast, the midwinter wind whistling through my cabin. Through a crack in the awning, I could see a bleak scattering of villages beneath a dull yellow sky. A powerful sense of desolation welled up in me.

Was this the place I had kept nostalgically alive in my thoughts these past two decades?

As I remembered it, it was nothing like this; it was a much better place. But when I tried to recall or articulate its beauty, I discovered I held no mental image of it – no words to describe it. Maybe it had always been like this, I told myself. Even though time had not been kind to it, it was surely not as bleak as it now struck me. It was I who had changed, I reasoned; grown melancholy.

I had come back only to say goodbye. The old family house had been sold off, and was to be handed on at the year's end. I had to hurry back before the start of the new lunar year to take my final leave of the old place, before moving on – to the place where I now scraped a living.

Early the next day, I arrived at the house. In among the roof tiles, broken, withered stems of grass trembled in the wind, testimony to the old owners' inability to maintain the clan establishment. Now that most of our relatives had moved out of their apartments, the compound was quiet. As I approached the wing occupied by my own family, my mother came out to greet me, my seven-year-old nephew, Hong'er, scurrying out behind her.

Beneath her pleasure at seeing me lurked an unmistakable sorrow. But she had me sit down: rest, drink some tea. She would say nothing of the imminent move.

Hong'er, who had never met me before, stood some distance away, looking on.

Eventually, our talk turned to what had brought me here. I had rented lodgings in the other place, I told her, and bought a few items of furniture; but everything from this house would want selling, to get what we needed for the new place. My mother agreed, and said she had just about finished her packing and sold almost half of the things she couldn't take with her – it was just that her buyers were being slow in paying up.

'By the time you've rested up a couple of days and visited a few relatives,' Mother said, 'we'll be ready to go.'

'Good.'

'And don't forget Runtu. He always asks after you – I know he wants to see you. I told him when you'd be arriving, so you might be getting a visit from him, too.'

Suddenly, I saw in my mind's eye a marvellous golden moon hanging in a midnight-blue sky over a seashore planted endlessly with dark green watermelons. A boy, around ten or eleven years old, a silver chain around his neck and a pitchfork in his hand, was stabbing at a fierce-looking dog darting between his legs.

The boy was Runtu. I can't have been much older than nine when I first met him – thirty years ago. Back then, my father had still been alive, the family finances tolerably healthy and I the spoilt young master of the house. Elaborately grandiose preparations were under way for my family's turn to host an important sacrifice, one that came round only once every three decades. In the first month of the lunar year, the ancestral portraits were to be laid out on the altar, alongside piles of offerings in ornate sacrificial vessels. Because of the crowds of visitors expected to pay their respects, additional security precautions were necessary. Our family hired only one regular extra helper for busy times of the year (in our part of the country, servants and labourers fell into three categories: permanent employees, who worked for one family all year round; temporary workers, hired by the day; and those who worked their own land but took on seasonal work for a specific family at New Year, during other holiday times and at rent collection). As he was too busy to keep an eye on the sacrificial vessels himself, he told Father he'd ask his son Runtu to come and lend a hand.

I was delighted when my father agreed, because I'd heard a good deal about this Runtu. I knew he was about the same age as me, and how he'd got his name: after he'd been born in a *run*, a leap-year month, the fortune-teller had said his horoscope was short of one of the five elements, *tu* (earth). To make up for it, his father called him Runtu – Leap Year Earth. I'd also heard he could trap small birds.

I now burned with impatience for New Year, because it would bring Runtu. One day, when at last the old year had reached its end, Mother told me he had come. Rushing off in search, I found him in the kitchen, his round, sun-burnt face crowned

by a small felt hat, a gleaming silver necklace at his throat – token of his father's love for him, of the endless offerings he had made on his son's behalf to the Buddha. The necklace was to trap him in this world, to protect him from death. Though he was usually shy around company, it was different with me. As long as no one else was about, he would burble happily away, and within a few hours we were fast friends.

I don't really know what we talked about; all I can remember is Runtu happily telling me about his trip into town, and all the things he'd never seen before.

The next day, I wanted him to take me bird-trapping.

'Not today. It's best when there's been snow. Then you clear a patch of sand, prop a basket on a short stick and scatter some blighted grain. Tie some rope to the stick, stand a good long way away, holding the other end of the rope, then soon as you see a bird come to get the grain, give the rope a tug and it's stuck, under the basket. I've caught all sorts: wild pheasants, woodcock, wood pigeons, bluebacks...'

Now all I wanted was for it to snow.

'You should come and see us when it's warmer, in the summer,' he went on. 'We collect shells during the day – red ones, green ones, Ghost Charms, Buddha's Hands, lots of them. Then in the evenings, Father and I guard the watermelons; you could come too.'

'Against thieves?'

'No. If someone passing by gets thirsty, he can just pick one – that doesn't count as stealing. It's badgers and hedgehogs and *zha* we're worried about. Soon as the moon's up, you hear this snuffling sort of noise: that's your *zha*, eating melons. Then you get your pitchfork, and go over, quiet as you can...'

I had no clue what kind of a creature this *zha* was – nor do I now. For no good reason at all, I've always pictured it as a small, unusually fierce kind of dog.

'Mightn't it bite you?'

'That's what the pitchfork's for. Once you've got the *zha* in your sights, you jab at it. But they're quick and clever as anything: first it'll make straight for you, then dart between your legs, slippery as grease...'

I still had so much to discover: seashells of every colour, dangerous goings-on around watermelons... Until then, they'd just been something you bought at a fruit stall.

'We've jumping fish at the seashore, too, lots of them when the tide's in, with legs like frogs.'

What riches were to be found inside Runtu's head; he wasn't like any of my other friends. While Runtu was at his seashore, it seemed, we had all been imprisoned within the high walls of our courtyard mansions, staring up at the sky.

All too soon, the first lunar month was at an end, and Runtu had to return home. I

burst into tears, with him hiding in the kitchen, sobbing that he didn't want to go. But in the end, his father took him away. Later on, he got his father to pass a bag of shells and a handful of pretty bird feathers on to me. I sent him one or two things myself, but we never saw each other again.

The instant my mother mentioned him, this rush of memories flooded over me, resurrecting the marvellous childhood home of my imagination.

'That's wonderful!' I exclaimed. 'How... how is he?'

'Well... not so good...' Mother glanced outside. 'Back again. They say they're browsing, but they're just waiting for a chance to walk off with things without paying. Better go and keep an eye on them.'

She got up and went out; I could hear women's voices outside the door. I called Hong'er over to me, and began chatting to him: asking him if he was learning how to write, whether he was glad to be going.

'Are we going on a train?'

'Yes.'

'And on a boat?'

'Boat first, then –'

'Well!' a shrill voice interrupted. 'Aren't we all grown-up! What a moustache!'

Looking up in some trepidation, I now saw before me a woman of around fifty: high cheekbones, thinly drawn lips, hands on hips, trousered legs set angularly apart, like the limbs of a compass.

I stared blankly.

'Don't you recognize me? You used to sit on my knee when you were small enough!'

I went on staring until, mercifully, my mother came to my rescue.

'He's been away so long he's forgotten everything. You remember Mrs Yang,' she turned to me. 'She runs the bean-curd shop over the way.'

I began to remember. When I was a child, this Mrs Yang – celebrated locally as 'the Bean-Curd Beauty' – had presided over the bean-curd shop opposite us. With a dusting of powder over her face, her cheekbones hadn't stuck out so much, and her lips hadn't looked so thin; and as she was always sitting down, I'd never got to see how spindly her legs really were. Everyone used to say back then that it was thanks to her the bean-curd shop turned over such a tidy profit. But I'd never given her much thought – probably because I was still so young – and in time had forgotten her entirely. She gazed on me with aggrieved contempt – as if I were a Frenchman who had never heard of Napoleon, or an American who knew nothing of Washington.

'Forgotten? Me?' she said, a sarcastic smile on her face. 'Well, aren't we the busy, important one now...'

‘No, no... nothing of the sort...’ I struggled nervously to my feet.

‘As you’re so rich and important, Mr Xun, what do you want with all these broken old bits of furniture? You don’t want to take them with you – let me take them off your hands. Ordinary people like us – we can still get some use out of them.’

‘I’m not rich. We need to sell them so we can buy – ’

‘What are you talking about? You work for the government – I bet you’ve three concubines, and travel everywhere in a sedan car with eight carriers. Ha! You won’t pull the wool over my eyes.’

I held my ground, keeping my mouth resignedly shut.

‘The richer you are, the meaner you get; the meaner you are, the richer you get...’ She spun indignantly on her axis, and picked her way out of the room, tucking a pair of my mother’s gloves into the waistband of her trousers as she went.

Three or four days passed: a handful of relatives came to call, while I finished packing in moments snatched between their visits.

One particularly cold afternoon, as I sat drinking tea after lunch, I realized I had another visitor waiting outside the door. Looking round, I jumped to my feet and rushed over to greet him.

Although I knew straightaway it was Runtu, he bore little resemblance to the boy I remembered. He was twice the size of my childhood friend; his round, sun-burnt face was now a sallow grey, and etched deeply with wrinkles; his eyes were his father’s – puffy and red-rimmed. This was what the scouring coastal winds did to the human face, I knew. Beneath a battered felt hat and a thin padded cotton jacket, his body trembled from the cold. A paper bag and a long pipe were carried in rough, clumsy hands cracked like pine bark – again, no longer the strong, pink hands I remembered.

Though I was delighted to see him, I could think of nothing to say. ‘Runtu,’ was the best I could do.

There were all kinds of things I wanted to say: about woodcock, about jumping fish, about shells, and *zha*... But something seemed to be stopping them come out, leaving them swirling uselessly about inside my head.

He stood before me, a combination of joy and sorrow registering on his face, his lips moving but generating no sound. Eventually, deference won out: ‘Sir!’

I almost felt myself shudder with sadness – at the thick wall sprung up between us. I said nothing.

‘Come and kowtow, Shuisheng.’ He pulled the child hiding behind him forward: Runtu as he had been twenty years ago – only thinner, sallow, and without his silver necklace. ‘This is my fifth. He’s not seen much of the world, so he’s shy with company.’

Mother and Hong’er came downstairs; they must have heard voices.

‘I got your letter, madam,’ Runtu began. ‘I was so pleased to hear Mr Xun was coming back...’

‘Don’t stand on ceremony with us,’ Mother reproved him warmly. ‘You used to be like brothers!’

‘You’re too kind... I couldn’t possibly. We were children back then, just children...’ Runtu motioned Shuisheng forward again, but the child clung tightly on behind him.

‘Is that Shuisheng? Your fifth? He doesn’t know us, it’s no wonder he’s nervous,’ Mother said. ‘Why don’t he and Hong’er go off and play?’

The moment Hong’er approached him, Shuisheng relaxed and happily followed him out of the room. Mother invited Runtu to sit down, which, after some hesitation, he finally did, resting his pipe against the side of a table.

‘Just a handful of peas we dried at home, I’m afraid, sir,’ he apologized, presenting his paper bag. ‘There’s never much of anything during the winter.’

I asked how things were.

‘Hard.’ He shook his head. ‘Even though my sixth helps out now, there’s still never enough to eat... then there’s the fighting, and people always wanting money off you, you never know what’s coming next. The harvests have been bad, too. Whenever you try to sell any of it off, you pay so many taxes you end up losing money. But if you don’t sell, it’ll just rot.’

He went on shaking his head. None of his wrinkles ever moved – as if they were written on stone. He picked up his pipe and fell silently to smoking, perhaps overwhelmed by thoughts of his troubles.

In answer to Mother’s questions, he told us things were busy at home and that he had to head back tomorrow. When she learnt he had not had any lunch, she told him to go and get himself something in the kitchen.

Once he had gone out, Mother and I sighed over his situation together: too many children, famine, taxes, soldiers, bandits, officials, corrupt local potentates – they’d all taken their pound of flesh. Anything we didn’t need to take with us, Mother said, we should give him; he could take whatever he wanted.

That afternoon, he chose two rectangular tables, four chairs, an incense-burner and candlesticks and a large steelyard. He also said he’d take our straw ash (the stove in our kitchen burned rice straw, and its ashes were good for sandy soil). The day we left, he’d come back with the boat to take everything away.

We chatted again that evening, about nothing in particular. He went back the next morning, taking Shuisheng with him.

We set off nine days later. Runtu arrived early that morning, without Shuisheng but bringing with him this time a five-year-old daughter to keep an eye on the boat. There was no time to talk, what with the business of moving and a constant crowd of

visitors – some come to say goodbye, some to take things away, some to do both. By the time we stepped on board that evening, the old house had been swept clean of its contents. Everything – regardless of its age, size, state of repair or desirability – was gone.

Our boat edged forward: deep blue in the descending dusk, the green mountains to either side slipped away behind us.

Hong'er and I stood by the cabin window, gazing into the twilight.

'When will we be coming back, Uncle?' he suddenly asked.

'We haven't even left yet! How come you're already thinking of coming back?'

'But Shuisheng invited me to his house...' His dark eyes widened, fixated on the prospect.

Both rather saddened, Mother and I began speaking of Runtu again. While they'd been packing up the house, Mother reported, the Bean-Curd Beauty had been round every day. The day before yesterday, she had picked out from the pile of ashes a dozen dishes and bowls, which, she declared after some discussion, must have been buried by Runtu, to take back with him when he came. Exceptionally pleased with this discovery of hers, she flew out of the door, scooping up en route a wooden trough covered over by a grille that we'd once used to prevent dogs getting at chickenfeed. The gaps between the bars were wide enough for chickens to peck their beaks through to get at the grain inside, but too small for dogs, who could only look on, furious with frustration. How she managed to move so fast, on the steep inclines of those tiny bound feet, we neither of us could understand.

Even as we put more and more distance between us and the old place – its house, mountains, rivers – still I felt no nostalgia or regret. I was aware only of the high, suffocating, invisible walls of solitude. That cherished image – of a spirited little boy among the watermelons, with his silver chain – now blurred with sorrow.

Mother and Hong'er fell asleep.

I lay awake, listening to the water lapping against the side of the boat. I knew I was taking my own course in life. And even though Runtu and I were now completely estranged, Hong'er and Shuisheng were just like we used to be. I prayed they would turn out differently to us: I didn't want them to drift like me, or to suffer numbly like Runtu – nor to anaesthetize themselves with self-indulgence, as others did... I wanted new, different lives for them, lives that we had not lived.

The instant my thoughts turned to hope, I grew fearful. When I saw Runtu take the incense-burner and candlesticks, I had secretly smiled at his worship of idols. But wasn't my own weakness for hope an idol of my own making? His wishes were immediately material, while mine were distantly vague; that was the only difference between us.

An expanse of dark green seashore hazily unfolded before my mind's eye, a full,

golden moon hanging in a midnight-blue sky. Hope, I thought to myself, is an intangible presence that can neither be affirmed nor denied – a path that exists only where others have already passed.

January 1921

THE REAL STORY OF AH-Q

CHAPTER 1

Preface

For some years now, I've been wanting to set down for posterity the story of Ah-Q, but time and again have quailed before the difficulty of the task – evidence enough that I am no seeker after literary fame. A biographer hungry for glory must find his own genius mirrored by the genius of his subject, both clinging to each other in the quest for immortality, until no one is sure whether the brilliance of the man is celebrated because of the brilliance of the biography, or vice versa. Contrast my own humble fixation – like that of a man possessed – on recording the life of Ah-Q.

But as I take up my pen to begin this distinctly mortal work, the infinite difficulty of it again deters me. My first quandary is a title. As Confucius says: 'If a name is not right, the words will not ring true.' Wise words indeed. Lives are written in a myriad forms: as official biographies of the great and good (archived within our celestial empire's dynastic histories), autobiographies, legends, unauthorized biographies, as footnotes, genealogies, biographical sketches... I have regretfully discarded them all. Allow me to dance down through the list, beginning at the beginning. What place could the life of the miserable Ah-Q have next to the glorious, official biographies of the rich and famous installed in our hallowed court histories? Autobiography? I am, incontrovertibly, not Ah-Q. If I were to call my account the stuff of legend, it could legitimately be objected that Ah-Q is no god. To 'unauthorized biography', I gave some thought: but where is the authorized version? No president has ever ordered his National Institute of Historical Research to create such a memorial to Ah-Q. True, our revered translators have rendered the great Conan Doyle's *Rodney Stone* as *Unauthorized Biographies of the Gamblers* – though I am willing to bet no official counterpart exists in Britain's National Archive. But while men of literary genius can take such licence, I have no comparable entitlement. Let us move swiftly on to genealogy: I know neither of any personal blood connection with Ah-Q nor of any request from his descendants to create such a document. 'Biographical sketch' again begs the question: where is the full-length version?

This effort of mine, I can only conclude, is the standard, official biography of the man; and yet the debased vulgarity of its content and characters causes me to shy, appalled, from such presumption. So at last, I will fall back on the formulation so often used by our nation's novelists – the very dregs of our glorious literary tradition – in their constant battle with digression: 'Now back to the *real story*.' There: *The Real Story of Ah-Q* it is. Any similarity between the present work and the unforgettable *Real Story of Calligraphy*, by Mr Feng Wu of the Qing dynasty, is entirely unintentional.

My second difficulty lies in how to start. Your average biography generally begins something like this: ‘So-and-so – whose full name was such-and-such – was born in such-and-so.’ But I have no idea what Ah-Q’s surname was. True enough, at one point it was alleged to be Zhao; but the next day, the question became fraught with uncertainty once more. The whole business reared its head, as I recall, around the time that Mr Zhao’s son had romped through the lowest, county-level stage of the civil service examination. His stomach warmed by two bowls of rice wine, his ears buzzing with the triumphant beating of gongs through the village, Ah-Q jubilantly declared to a modest audience, who smartly began to eye him with new, cautious respect, that he was a direct relation of the great Mr Zhao, and senior to the local genius by a clear three generations.

The following day, the local constable summoned Ah-Q to the Zhaos’.

‘You stupid bastard, Ah-Q!’ the honourable Mr Zhao roared, his face blotching crimson at the sight of him. ‘Did you, or did you not, say you were related to me?’

Ah-Q said nothing.

‘How dare you!’ Mr Zhao bore furiously down on him. ‘When has anyone ever called you Zhao?’

Still nothing from Ah-Q, who was starting to look very interested in the room’s escape routes. Mr Zhao charged forward again and slapped him round the face.

‘You scum! D’you look like a Zhao?’

Preferring not to argue the toss on the issue, Ah-Q followed the constable out, rubbing his left cheek. Outside, he received a second, brisk rebuke from the man of the law, who concluded by extracting from him two hundred coppers as compensation. When news of the incident got about, everyone declared that this time Ah-Q had gone too far, that he had been asking for his beating. Likely as not, he was about as closely related to Mr Zhao as he was to the emperor. And even if they *were* related, he shouldn’t have shot his big mouth off about it. After this fiasco, the question of Ah-Q’s genealogy was never revisited; his surname, as a result, to this day remains a mystery to me.

A third dilemma: I don’t even know how to write Ah-Q’s name. In his lifetime, he was generally referred to as ‘Ah-Quei’ (or that was what it sounded like, at least). After his death, when he was firmly consigned to the dustbin of history, no one called him Ah-Quei, or indeed anything at all. Since the present essay is the first attempt ever made to preserve the details of his life for posterity, the question of his name becomes a substantial and primary difficulty. After careful inquiry, I have discovered no Chinese character that corresponds exactly to the sound ‘Quei’. This Quei, then – I have induced – was it in fact *gui*? And, if so, was it the *gui* meaning ‘osmanthus flower’ (桂) or ‘noble’ (贵)? Now, if his parents had had the foresight to give him a nom de plume, and that name had been ‘Moon Pavilion’, or if he had

been born in the eighth lunar month, the *gui* of ‘osmanthus’ would have made abundant sense – for the Moon Festival falls on the eighth month, when the osmanthus blooms. But as, being illiterate and all, he had no *nom de plume* – or maybe he did, but no one knew what it was – and neither did he ever hint at the month of his birth by distributing party invitations, to settle upon osmanthus *gui* would again constitute irresponsible licence on the part of his biographer. Or again, if he had had a brother called Fu, ‘Prosperous’, then the *gui* of ‘noble’ would have had a strong parallel logic. But since no such sibling has ever been traced, such a spelling is unjustifiable. To be sure, there are other, more *recherché* characters pronounced *gui* – ‘boudoir’, ‘tortoise’, ‘salmon’, ‘juniper’, etcetera; but they all strike me as even less likely. I have consulted our local scholar and county examination laureate, the learned younger Zhao, on this question, but to my great surprise even this oracle had no light to shed on the matter, although he laid the blame for the confusion on the shoulders of westernizing intellectuals such as Chen Duxiu and his benighted journal *New Youth*.¹ It was their advocacy of the Roman alphabet, he convincingly argued, that had brought the national essence into such terminal decline that no one could fix even on the spelling of Ah-Quei. My last, desperate course was to ask a fellow provincial of mine to trace Ah-Q through his criminal record. After eight long months I finally got a reply: no such individual – by the name of Ah-Quei, Ah-Gui, or anything like it – existed. Though I had no way of finding out whether this was indeed the case, or whether my acquaintance had even looked, neither did I have any other hope of verifying matters. All of which leaves me no choice but to transcribe the mysterious Quei into the English alphabet, abbreviating it for convenience’s sake, to Q: Ah-Q.² Which compromise reduces me to the level of those reprobates in charge of *New Youth*. For this I am heartily ashamed of myself, but as the problem defeated even the younger Zhao, I fear I have no better option.

The question of specifying Ah-Q’s place of birth is my fourth difficulty. If we could be sure his surname was Zhao, we could trace him back to the province from which the clan originated. A quick glance through our old school copy of the *Hundred Surnames*³ would leave him ‘A Native of Tianshui, Gansu Province’. But as we have no reliable information about his surname, neither can we fix on his birthplace. Although he spent most of his life in the village of Weizhuang, he was often to be found in other places, too, so to term him a native of Weizhuang would hardly be historically rigorous.

My only consolation in this whole sorry business is that one syllable of his name at least – ‘Ah’* – can boast of an unimpugnable correctness. What remains to be known lies beyond the superficial capabilities of amateurs to unravel; and I can only hope that in future the disciples of a dedicated erudite such as Mr Hu Shi⁴ will hunt

out new clues, in their relentless quest to further human knowledge, thoroughly obliterating what little achievement my *Real Story of Ah-Q* may constitute.

That should do for a Preface.

CHAPTER 2

A Brief History of Ah-Q's Victories

It was not only Ah-Q's name and place of origin that were shrouded in mystery – but also the details of his early life. Because the good people of Weizhuang called upon him only to help out with odd jobs, or to serve as the butt of jokes, no one ever paid much attention to such niceties. Neither was Ah-Q himself particularly forthcoming on the subject, except when he got into arguments, viz.:

‘My ancestors were much richer than yours! Scum!’

Ah-Q had no home of his own: in Weizhuang, he lodged in the Temple of the God of the Earth and the God of the Five Grains. Neither, as the village odd-job man, did he have a fixed profession. If someone was needed to harvest wheat, he harvested wheat; if called upon to husk rice, he husked rice; if a boat wanted poling, that's what he did. If a job was likely to take a while, he lodged with his employer; but once it was over, he left. When people were in a hurry to get something done, therefore, they remembered Ah-Q – but only the odd jobs he could do for them, and not his life history. And as soon as they were no longer in such a hurry, Ah-Q – and his elusive biographical details – were quickly forgotten. ‘He puts his back into it, that Ah-Q!’ an old man once admiringly remarked, considering our hero's bare, torpidly scrawny torso – that was the closest anyone ever got to constructing a personality profile of him. Those who overheard him couldn't make out whether his eulogizer was being genuine or sarcastic; but Ah-Q, at least, was delighted.

Ah-Q had a robust sense of his own self-worth, placing the rest of Weizhuang far beneath him in the social scale. Even the village's two aspiring young scholars – the Zhao and Qian sons – he considered with haughty contempt. In time, they could both reasonably be expected to get through at least the lowest rung of the official examinations – the path to power and riches. Their fathers, the venerable Mr Zhao and Mr Qian, therefore received the village's craven respect not just for their personal wealth, but also for their sons' academic prospects. Only Ah-Q remained invulnerable to the glamour of their future promise: My son will be much richer than them! he thought to himself. A few trips into town further bolstered Ah-Q's *amour propre*, adding townspeople to his already abundant store of subjects of scorn. People in town couldn't get anything right: they said ‘narrow benches’ for the wooden trestles, three feet long by three inches wide, that the people of Weizhuang – him included – quite correctly called ‘long benches’. How stupid can people be! he thought. Or when frying fish, the people of Weizhuang cut their spring onions into half-inch lengths, while townspeople shredded them. How stupid can people be! he thought again. Though the people of Weizhuang, of course, were still village idiots: think of it – they didn't even know how people fried fish in town!

This Ah-Q of ours – with his wealthy forebears, his urban sophistication, his laudable application to his chosen career – would have been the embodiment of perfection, had it not been for his regrettable possession of a few constitutional defects. The most annoying of which was the perfidious emergence on his scalp of a number of gleaming ringworm scars. Although they were of his own revered body's making, Ah-Q felt them unworthy of him and for this reason came to view as taboo the word 'ringworm', or anything that sounded like it. In time, the scope of this linguistic prohibition steadily broadened: first to 'shiny', then 'bright', extending a little later on to 'lamp' or 'candle'. Any flaunting of the taboo – whether deliberate or accidental – provoked first the controversial scars to glow a furious red. Ah-Q would then size up his adversary: the dull-witted he would subject to a tongue-lashing; the weak he would punch in the nose. The curious thing, though, was how often – in fact, almost always – Ah-Q came off worse. In time, then, he pared his strategy down to an Angry Glare.

Another curious thing: after Ah-Q began practising the Art of the Angry Glare, Weizhuang's idlers took to provoking him with ever greater relish.

'Bit bright, isn't it?' they would remark, in deliberate surprise, on encountering him.

Cue the Angry Glare.

'Oh... a lamp!' they would shamelessly continue.

Ah-Q struggled to find an appropriate riposte.

'You're not worth a...' At moments such as these, Ah-Q's ringworm suddenly struck him as a badge of honour for which no sacrifice was too great; far superior to your average, run-of-the-mill dermatological defect. As has been amply demonstrated, however, Ah-Q was a man of exceptional prescience: sensing an imminent breaking of his cherished taboo, he said no more.

But his interlocutors wouldn't let it lie. On they went needling him, until the whole thing ended in blows, and Ah-Q's formal submission: with the seizing of his sallow queue and the robust knocking of his head four or five times against a wall. After which, his adversaries would at last depart, their hearts fairly singing with the joys of victory. 'Beaten again by that scum,' Ah-Q would stand there, thinking to himself. 'It's like a father getting thrashed by his sons. What's the world coming to...' Then he, too, would jubilantly leave the scene of his triumph.

In time, whenever something like this happened, Ah-Q began to say out loud what at first he had only thought. In this way, Ah-Q's tormentors learnt of his habit of declaring moral victory over the ashes of defeat, and added their own revisions while yanking on his queue.

'Think of it this way, Ah-Q. We're not sons beating our father – we're men beating an animal. Repeat after us: men beating an animal!'

‘Or how about,’ Ah-Q would twist his head back round, trying to protect the base of his queue, ‘a slug? I’m a slug! A slug! Now will you let me go?’

They would not, and went on to give his head the time-honoured bashing against the nearest hard surface, before swinging off, their hearts again singing with the joys of victory, thinking this time their point had been well and truly made. And yet within ten seconds, Ah-Q had set jubilantly off on his own way. He was now the top self-abaser in China, and once you’d discarded the inconvenient ‘self-abaser’, you were left with ‘top’ – ‘top’ as in ‘top in the civil service examinations’. ‘Ha! Scum!’

Once Ah-Q’s enemies had been trounced by such ingenious means, he would trot happily off to the tavern, down a few bowls of wine, crack a few jokes, start a few arguments and, victorious again, return happily to the Temple of Earth and Grain, where he would lay his head down and go straight to sleep. If he had money in his pocket, he would go off to gamble, sweatily squeezing his way in among a crowd of other chancers squatted down on the ground.

‘Four hundred on the Green Dragon!’ he would roar, louder than anyone else.

‘There... we... go!’ the banker would sing out, lifting the lid on his box, his face also swimming in sweat. ‘Heaven’s Gate wins... Evens on the Corner... Nothing on the Passage... Over here with Ah-Q’s stake!’

‘One hundred on the Passage – one hundred and fifty!’

And so Ah-Q’s money was sung away into the pockets of others, their faces equally slippery with sweat, until there was nothing left for him to do but push his way back from the front line, and watch from the back, feeling anxious on other people’s behalf. When everyone else scattered he, too, would take himself reluctantly back to his temple, appearing for work the next day with puffy eyes.

But every silver lining has its cloud, to paraphrase the proverb, and the one time that Ah-Q was unfortunate enough to win, he lost almost everything.

It was the evening of Weizhuang’s Festival of the Gods. There was opera, as usual, with gambling stalls set up near the stage. The drums and gongs buzzed only faintly in Ah-Q’s ears, as if the musicians were miles away. All he could hear was the banker’s singsong. He won, and he won again, his coppers turning silver, his silver turning into dollars – a great pile of shiny dollars. He was dizzy with euphoria.

‘Two dollars on Heaven’s Gate!’

He didn’t know who started the fighting, or why. The sounds of cursing, of blows, of footsteps blurred into a single confused roar; and when finally he clambered to his feet, stalls and gamblers had disappeared. His body seemed to hurt in various places, as if it had been hit or kicked, and people were looking curiously at him. After taking himself back, rather nonplussed, to the Temple of Earth and Grain, he recovered his wits sufficiently to discover his pile of money was gone. How was he to get to the bottom of it? Most of the gamblers that night had come from outside the

village.

That shiny pile of silver dollars! Once it had been all his – but where was it now? He tried telling himself his son had stolen it; his discontent continued to simmer. He told himself he was a slug – still no peace of mind. Now, only now, did he feel the bitterness of defeat.

And yet victory, as ever, was close at hand. His right hand soared upwards, to deliver one – two forceful slaps to the face. He then got up, his cheeks burning with pain, his good humour fully restored. Soon enough, he was perfectly convinced that he had hit someone else entirely – even though his cheeks continued to sting rather. He lay down, his heart easy with victory.

And fell asleep.

CHAPTER 3

The Continuing Story of Ah-Q's Victories

In Ah-Q's long and illustrious record of victories, it was the slap he had received from Mr Zhao that made his reputation.

'What's the world coming to?' he fulminated to himself in bed, after paying off the constable. 'Sons hitting their fathers...' Now, if someone as rich and powerful as Mr Zhao was his son... Soon enough, feeling extremely pleased with himself again, he wandered off to the tavern, humming a few lines of opera to himself – *The Young Widow at Her Husband's Grave*. Mr Zhao, Ah-Q was prepared to allow, was a cut above the rest of Weizhuang's scum.

The funny thing was that his fellow villagers *did* begin to treat him with a new respect. Ah-Q may have deluded himself into thinking it was because he actually was Mr Zhao's father; the real reason was very different. In Weizhuang, public opinion went something like this: no one took any notice if any Li, Wang or Zhang began slapping each other about. It was only when a man of reputation like Mr Zhao got involved that such an imbroglio was singled out for public approbation, with the hittee sharing in the hitter's glory. Ah-Q, it was of course universally accepted, had been in the wrong, because Mr Zhao was never wrong. How, then, to explain the new awe with which he was regarded? Perhaps – to hazard an unreliable guess at the matter – it all went back to Ah-Q's claim of blood relation to Mr Zhao. Even though he had been soundly beaten for it, maybe everyone feared there might be some grain of truth to the allegation, and the safest thing would be to mind themselves around him a bit more. Or maybe Ah-Q became as untouchable as the sacrificial beef in Confucius's ancestral temple – because the sage had once touched it with his sacred chopsticks, it acquired an aura of sanctity for his disciples.

For Ah-Q, all this was a source of pride for many years to come.

Ambling drunkenly along one spring day, he came upon an individual by the name of Wang sitting in the sunlight at the foot of a wall, stripped to the waist, busily delousing. Ah-Q's skin suddenly prickled all over. In tribute to his abundance of both facial hair and ringworm, the people of Weizhuang generally acclaimed this Wang as Hairy Ringwormed Wang. Now although – for his own delicate reasons – Ah-Q preferred not to bring up the subject of ringworm, this Wang still enjoyed his utter contempt. Ringworm, for Ah-Q, was nothing to be particularly ashamed of; it was the man's excessively hairy chops that offered grounds for true scorn. He sat down alongside him. Ah-Q would not have dared sit so carelessly next to any other of Weizhuang's idlers, but what did he have to fear from this scurvy hair-ball? That he was willing even to sit down next to him was, quite simply, an exalted honour for the wretch.

Ah-Q also took off his tattered jacket, turned it inside out and began checking it over for lice of his own. Perhaps because he had washed it too recently, or because he didn't look hard enough, after expending much time and effort he succeeded in locating only three or four. He glanced across at Wang, catching one after another and popping them between his teeth.

Disappointment quickly gave way to a sense of the tragic injustice of it all. His paltry harvest, next to the bumper crop enjoyed by the vilely hairy Wang: what an extraordinary affront to his dignity it was! He searched desperately, and yet in vain, for a couple of outsized specimens, eventually turning out a middle-sized example of the genre. He stuffed it vengefully into his mouth and bit hard down on it; and yet still the resulting crunch was nothing to the percussive effects that Wang was achieving.

'Hairy slug!' he spat, his ringworm scars scarlet, throwing his jacket to the ground.

'Talking to me, you scabby dog?' the hairy one levelled his eyes contemptuously at Ah-Q.

Even though Ah-Q had become more imperious of late, thanks to the greater portion of public respect he had grown accustomed to accepting as his due, his courage usually sank to his boots whenever he encountered his regular tormentors among Weizhuang's idling population. This time, however, he rose heroically to the occasion – was he to stand by and let someone with facial hair like that insult him?

'Takes one to know one!' He stood up, hands on hips.

'Looking for a thrashing, are we?' Wang now joined him on his feet, pulling his jacket back on.

Anticipating Wang's imminent flight, Ah-Q lunged forward to punch him. But long before the blow had struck home, Wang had grabbed hold of him. Ah-Q now staggered forward, permitting his opponent to drag him by the queue over to the wall, to give his head its customary bashing.

' "A true gentleman fights with his head, not with his hands!" ' Ah-Q quoted, his head twisted to one side.

Ignoring Ah-Q's salutary moral injunction in a rather ungentlemanly way, Wang gave Ah-Q's head five smart cracks against the brickwork, then issued a hefty push that left him sprawled over the ground at six feet's distance. Satisfied at a job well done, he walked off.

This, in Ah-Q's mental logbook of his life's achievements, probably counted as his first true humiliation. Because of the man's appalling whiskers, he had never had anything but pitying contempt for this Wang, who was too contemptible even to despise him back – much less raise a hand against him. But now here he was giving him a thrashing! Ah-Q struggled to make sense of it: perhaps it really was true what

he'd heard in the town, maybe the emperor *had* abolished the civil service examinations⁵ and the younger Zhao's success didn't count for anything any more – had his own reputation also suffered, by association?

Ah-Q remained where he was, pondering perplexedly.

In the distance, yet another of Ah-Q's *bêtes noires* was now approaching, yet another individual for whom Ah-Q felt the greatest disgust: Mr Qian's eldest son. Some time past, he had gone off to town to enrol in one of the newfangled Academies of Western Learning, then somehow gone off again to Japan. Six months later, he was back, goose-stepping like a foreigner and his queue gone with the fairies. His mother had wept inconsolably, while his wife had tried to commit suicide three times by jumping into the well. Eventually, his mother took to putting it about that 'wicked people had got him drunk and cut off his queue. Otherwise, he'd have had a top posting by now, but as it is he'll have to wait till it's grown back.' Ah-Q was having none of this, and knew him only as the 'Fake Foreign Devil', or 'Traitor'. Whenever he saw him, his stomach silently churned with invective.

It was the false queue he wore that lay behind Ah-Q's bottomless contempt for him. The wearer of a false queue was sub-human; if his wife didn't pull off her suicide on the fourth jump, she would never redeem herself in Ah-Q's eyes.

And here he was now.

'Bald... ass...' On previous occasions, Ah-Q had kept his insults safely confined to his own head. This time, however, in his furious desire for revenge against a harsh, cruel world, they crept softly out into the open.

The bald villain stormed over, a varnished walking stick in his hand. Realizing, at this instant, that another thrashing was coming his way, Ah-Q braced himself and waited. Predictably enough, a hard object cracked emphatically against his head.

'I meant him!' Ah-Q pointed to a nearby child.

Whack! Whack, whack!

This, in Ah-Q's mental logbook of his life's achievements, probably counted as his second true humiliation. Fortunately, once the rather discordant crack of stick on head had ceased, the whole matter seemed closed and his spirits began to lift. He slowly walked off, setting his great talent for forgetting – the jewel in the crown of his cultural heritage – to work for him again. By the time he reached the entrance to the tavern, he was feeling rather pleased with life.

A young nun from the Convent of Quiet Cultivation advanced towards him. She would have got a heckle out of him at the best of times, and now, with the memory of his recent humiliations fresh in his mind, was no time to hold back. Bile rose up at the memory of the day's debacles.

'Here comes my bad luck!' he thought, as he strode over and noisily spat at her.

Ignoring him, the young nun carried on her way, head bowed. Moving closer still,

Ah-Q reached out to rub her shaved scalp.

‘Bald as a coot!’ he laughed moronically. ‘Run back home to your lover-monk!’

‘How dare you...’ the nun protested, her face flushed scarlet, trying to escape.

The tavern roared with laughter. ‘Sauce for the goose, sauce for the gander!’ he quipped, now pinching her cheek, delighted his remarkable exploits were getting the recognition they deserved.

Another great roar of mirth from the tavern. Unwilling to disappoint his public, a euphoric Ah-Q gave the offending cheek another, harder twist before finally letting go.

This great struggle and ultimate victory banished all memory of the hairy Wang, and the Fake Foreign Devil; fitting revenge, it seemed, had been taken on the day’s misfortunes. The curious thing was that he now felt even lighter of heart than he had done after his second beating – so light that he was in danger of floating off into the ether.

‘May you die without descendants, Ah-Q!’ the nun could be heard sobbing, as she fled.

‘Hahaha!’ Ah-Q laughed merrily.

‘Hahaha!’ his audience joined in, with only slightly less enthusiasm.

CHAPTER 4

Love's Tragedy

There are, it is said, some victors who delight only in victory against worthy adversaries; to whom the conquest of the weak or stupid is as dust or ashes in their mouths. There are others again who, after overcoming everything and everyone in their path, when the field is strewn with the corpses of the slain, with the obeisances of the surrendered; when there is no enemy left to fight, no friend with which to celebrate – then, and only then, do they feel the desolate solitude of victory. This was not a weakness to which our Ah-Q, in his inexhaustible delight with himself, was susceptible – living proof, perhaps, of the global superiority of Chinese civilization.

See him now: walking on air after a busy day of moral victory!

This latest victory, however, did bring an unusual twist in its tail. Eventually, he floated off to the Temple of Earth and Grain, where, according to well-established custom, he should have immediately lain down and begun snoring. Inexplicably, however, this particular evening he had difficulty keeping his eyes closed. There was something very curious about his thumb and forefinger: both felt softer, silkier than usual. Had something on the nun's face attached itself to his fingers, or had her face rubbed them smooth?

'May you die without descendants!' echoed in the cathedral of Ah-Q's mind. 'She's quite right,' he thought to himself. 'I ought to have a woman. If I die without descendants, I'll have no one to offer a bowl of rice at my grave... A woman's what I need.' For in the words of one or other of the ancient sages: 'There are three ways of betraying your parents, of which dying without descendants is the most serious.' Or then again: 'Those without descendants will become hungry ghosts.' His thinking on this point was, therefore, fully in line with scripture; a pity, then, that his approach to resolving the difficulty erred on the unorthodox side.

'Woman...' he thought. 'Must... find... woman...

'Sauce for the goose...' he thought some more, '... must... find... woman!'

As to when, exactly, Ah-Q began snoring that evening, we have no reliable information. The only point on which we can be certain is that he fell asleep with that light-headed feeling of satiny smoothness still on his fingertips. 'Woman...'

Irrefutable proof that women are at the root of all evil.

The great majority of Chinese men in history would have become saints and sages had they not been ruined by women first. Just look at the Shang dynasty – destroyed by the licentious concubine Da Ji; while Bao Si performed the same service for the Zhou. The Qin dynasty, now... well, the sources aren't entirely unequivocal on this, but were we to surmise there was a woman involved somewhere, we probably

wouldn't be wandering too far from the truth. Moving swiftly on to attested fact and the Later Han,⁶ it was of course yet another concubine, Diao Chan, who led Dong Zhuo to his death.

Until this point in his career, Ah-Q had been blessed with a character that was rigid in its uprightness. Although we have no way of knowing whether he had ever received personal moral guidance from any celebrated spiritual authority, he had always strictly upheld classically ordained prohibitions concerning the segregation of the sexes, and rejected – with righteous bile – the conduct of heretics such as the young nun or the Fake Foreign Devil. All nuns, as he saw it, were having affairs with monks; any woman walking the streets had designs on strange men; any man or woman in conversation, wherever they were, must be up to no good. He was always disciplining them with his Angry Glare, or with a few sentences of penetrating criticism; if there was nobody else about, he would cast a pebble at them from behind.

Yet here he was, at the age of thirty – the year in which Confucius enjoined men to 'stand firm' – losing his head, in a thoroughly un-Confucian way, over a nun. What abominable creatures women truly were; if only that nun's face had not been so bewitchingly smooth, or if it had been modestly veiled, Ah-Q would not, in turn, have submitted to being bewitched. Some five or six years past, wedged within a packed opera audience, he had taken the opportunity to pinch a woman's thigh, but her intervening trousers had protected against this debilitating light-headedness. That heretic vixen of a nun, with her shameless naked face.

'Woman...' Ah-Q went on thinking.

Ah-Q often kept women he suspected of having designs on strange men under close surveillance, but they never smiled at him. He also listened carefully to women who spoke to him; but they never tried to seduce him either. Further proof of female perfidy: they were all of them hypocrites, pretending they were pure as the driven snow.

One evening, after a day spent husking rice at Mr Zhao's, Ah-Q sat in the kitchen smoking a postprandial pipe of tobacco. In other households, casual labour went back home after dinner, but at the Zhaos', dinner was served early and exceptions occasionally made to the rule against keeping the lamps on after dinner. When the Zhaos' eldest had been revising for the examinations, he had been allowed a lamp to study in the evening. And when they hired Ah-Q for odd jobs, he was permitted a lamp to get on with his rice-husking after it got dark. And so it was that Ah-Q came to be sitting in the kitchen, taking his time over his pipe before he went back to his work.

Once the dishes were done, Mrs Wu, the Zhaos' only maid, sat down on the bench to chat to Ah-Q.

‘The mistress hasn’t eaten for two days, because the master is going to buy a concubine...’

‘Woman... Mrs Wu...’ Ah-Q thought. ‘She’s still young... a widow...’

‘The young mistress is having a baby in the eighth month...’

‘Woman...’

Ah-Q put down his pipe and stood up.

‘She’s – ’ Wu chattered on.

‘Sleep with me!’ Ah-Q suddenly rushed forward, dropping to his knees before her.

There was a moment of stunned silence before she fled the room, shuddering, her screams rippled with sobs.

After staring perplexedly at the wall a while, still on his knees, Ah-Q placed both hands down on the empty bench and propelled himself slowly back to his feet, assailed by a sense that he could have somehow handled things better. Having distractedly tucked his pipe into his belt, he decided to return to his rice-husking. At which moment a heavy object landed, with a thump, on his head. Spinning round, he discovered the village genius – the Zhaos’ eldest – standing in front of him holding a large bamboo pole.

‘You filthy little...’

Down came the bamboo again. Covering his head with both hands, Ah-Q took the weight of the blows directly on the joints of his fingers, which caused him no little pain. He rushed out of the kitchen, taking a valedictory strike to the back as he went.

‘Bastard!’ The man of letters honoured him with a touch of scholarly invective.

His fingers still stinging, Ah-Q took solitary refuge in the rice-husking room, feeling deeply unsettled by this ‘bastard’. No common-or-garden term of abuse around Weizhuang, it was a usage favoured by the well-to-do, by those with official connections. He was no longer in any mood for romance. But since the bamboo and the expletive seemed to have brought the whole matter to a close, Ah-Q set to his husking again, as if a heavy weight had been lifted from his mind. Soon, beginning to overheat from the exertion of the work, he paused to remove some layers of clothing.

As he did so, he heard a great commotion outside. Now Ah-Q loved nothing better than a spectacle and so out he went in search of it. The noise drew him inexorably to the inner courtyard around which Mr Zhao’s apartments were arranged. Although dusk had fallen, he could still make out many of the assembled company – all the resident members of the Zhao clan, including the hunger-striking lady of the house, Mrs Zou from next door, and a couple of slightly more distant relatives, Zhao Baiyan and Zhao Sichen.

‘Come on out.’ Mr Zhao’s daughter-in-law was trying to coax Mrs Wu out of the

servants' quarters. 'Don't let it upset you.'

'No one thinks the worse of you,' Mrs Zou interpolated, 'you mustn't think of killing yourself.'

Mrs Wu's response was incoherent with sobs.

'Rum,' Ah-Q thought to himself. 'What's up with her?' As he sidled over to Zhao Sichen, in the hope of learning more, he became swiftly aware of a rapid approach from Mr Zhao, who was holding a thick bamboo stick of his own. Reminded of the thrashing he had not long ago received from Zhao junior, he deduced that the present lively situation might have something to do with him. Turning to exit back to the husking floor, he found his path blocked by this new stick. Logically enough, he decided to leave by the back door, and soon found himself back inside the Temple of Earth and Grain.

After sitting there a while, Ah-Q began to feel goose bumps prickling his skin. The spring nights were still not warm enough to go comfortably bare-chested. He had, he now remembered, left his shirt at the Zhaos'; memory of the bamboo discouraged him from trying to retrieve it. At which point the village constable entered.

'Damn you, Ah-Q! Can't you even keep your hands off the Zhaos' servants? I haven't slept a wink tonight thanks to this mess. Damn you!'

On he went for a while, lecturing Ah-Q on his various misdeeds, to which the latter very naturally had nothing to say. As their meeting drew to its conclusion, Ah-Q had to tip the constable four hundred coppers – double the usual rate – because he'd been called out at night. Since Ah-Q had no cash on him, he mortgaged his felt hat, then was obliged to sign up to the following five conditions.

1. To take a pair of red candles – a pound each – and a packet of incense to the Zhaos' tomorrow, as an apology.
2. To cover the costs of the Daoist priest that the Zhaos had hired to exorcize evil spirits.
3. Never to set foot, ever again, over the Zhaos' threshold.
4. If any accident, of any unforeseen kind, were subsequently to befall Mrs Wu, Ah-Q, and Ah-Q alone, would be held responsible.
5. To abandon all hope of recovering his wages or shirt.

Regrettably, Ah-Q lacked the funds to make good his indemnity. But as, by happy coincidence, it was spring, he was able to do without his cotton quilt, which he pawned for two thousand coppers, enabling him to fulfil the demands of the peace treaty. After kowtowing, bare-chested, he found himself with a few coppers left

over, which he chose to blow on wine rather than redeem his felt hat. The Zhaos didn't burn the candles and incense right away, preferring to keep them for when the mistress of the house next paid her respects to the Buddha. Most of his tattered old shirt was recycled into nappies for the baby that was born to the younger mistress in the eighth month; any off-cuts were used by Mrs Wu for the soles of her shoes.

CHAPTER 5

Questions of Economy

By the time Ah-Q – his dues paid – made his way back to the Temple of Earth and Grain, the sun had gone down, and he was beginning to feel a slight malaise. Eventually, it dawned on him that the root cause of it all was the absence of his shirt. Remembering that he was still in possession of a ragged cotton jacket, he draped it over his shoulders and lay down. When he next opened his eyes, the sun's rays were beating down on the wall facing west. 'Damn,' he muttered to himself, sitting up.

Once up, he set out to wander the streets, as he usually did. Although he felt no particular physical discomfort as a result of the lack of clothing on his top half, something seemed to strike him as Not Quite Right with the world. From that day on, the women of Weizhuang seemed suddenly timid of him, darting into doorways on seeing him approach. Even Mrs Zou – not far shy of fifty – would take shelter like the rest of them, pulling her ten-year-old daughter in with her. 'Whores,' Ah-Q mused curiously to himself. 'Acting like Vestal Virgins all of a sudden.'

It took a little while longer, however, for this sense of Not Quite Rightness to take firm hold. One, the tavern began to refuse him credit. Two, babbling some nonsense at him, the old caretaker in the Temple of Earth and Grain seemed to be ordering him off the premises. Three, for days now – how many exactly, he couldn't quite say, but a good number – no one had hired him. To be refused credit in the tavern – this was something he could put up with; to be chased out of the temple – a temporary inconvenience; but when he didn't get work, Ah-Q's stomach bitterly complained. This, indeed, was a confounded nuisance.

When he could stand it no longer, Ah-Q was obliged to make inquiries of his old employers – except for the Zhaos', from whose gate he had been banned. But things seemed different now. A furious-looking man would always stalk out and tell him to get lost – as though he were a beggar.

Most extraordinary, pondered Ah-Q. Families that until now had always been clamouring for a bit of casual labour now seemed to have nothing going. Ah-Q smelt a rat. Further careful investigation around his old employers revealed that when there was work to be done, they now called upon another individual whose name posterity has not precisely recorded but which, using a now tried-and-tested method, we will leave as D: an impoverished runt whose position in the great hierarchy of things – as Ah-Q saw it – lay somewhere below that of the hairy Wang. Never, in his worst nightmares, would Ah-Q have dreamt that this utter weed would make off with his own bowl of rice. Now this – this was cause for fury. Ah-Q stormed off, waving his fist in the air and bursting spontaneously into song, reprising a line from one of his favourite operas, *The Battle of the Dragon and the*

Tiger:

‘I-I-I-I will thrash you with my mace, yes, I will!’

A few days later, he at last encountered D opposite the main gate to the Qians’. Eyes gleaming with antagonistic recognition, Ah-Q advanced, with D holding his ground.

‘Pig!’ Ah-Q glared, spittle flying.

‘Or how about,’ D negotiated, ‘slug?’

This pleasing show of modesty succeeded only in intensifying Ah-Q’s rage. Forced to improvise in the absence of a mace, he rushed forward to grab hold of D’s queue. His opponent left one hand protecting the base of the pigtail, while attacking Ah-Q’s own queue with his other. Although the old Ah-Q would not have been given an instant’s pause by the pathetic D, the recent hard times on which he had fallen had reduced him to a comparable physical state. Now pretty much a match for each other, for a good half-hour they remained locked in struggle, one hand on their own, the other assaulting the other’s queue, backs curved into a blue arch against the whitewashed front wall of the Qian household.

‘All right! All right!’ their audience interjected: perhaps to arbitrate; perhaps to express approval; or perhaps to stir things up a bit more.

Yet the adversaries were as deaf to their surroundings. Ah-Q would advance three paces, and D retreat as many; standstill would be reached. Then D would retake these same three steps, this time with Ah-Q retreating; standstill again. After maybe another half-hour – as there were no striking clocks in Weizhuang, it is hard to be precise on the subject; it could have been twenty minutes – their hair was steaming, their foreheads running with sweat. At the exact instant that Ah-Q relaxed his grip, D did the same. Straightening up, both stepped back and pushed their way out of the crowd.

‘Let that be a lesson to you!’ Ah-Q tossed over his shoulder.

‘Let that be a lesson to you!’ came the reply.

There was a certain lack of clarity and closure about this particular battle between the dragon and tiger of Weizhuang. Who was victor? Who was vanquished? Was the audience satisfied with the performance? No particular opinion was expressed either way. And still no one hired Ah-Q as a labourer.

One unusually mild day, when the breeze seemed to have the breath of summer about it, Ah-Q began to feel cold. Which he wouldn’t have minded on its own; it was the hunger he couldn’t stand. First his quilt, his felt hat and his shirt had gone; then his padded jacket – all sold. Now he was left only with his trousers – which he couldn’t let go – and his ragged cotton jacket, which nobody would want, except for making shoe soles. He dreamt of finding some money on the road, but never did; he dreamt of finding a coin or two in the dilapidated room he was living in, but a

frantic search yielded nothing. He decided to go out in search of sustenance.

He walked past familiar sights – the tavern, trays of steamed rolls – without pausing, without registering a twinge of desire for either. He was searching for something else; though what that something was, he couldn't say.

Weizhuang was not a big place, and soon enough he reached the end of it. The village was fringed by paddy fields busy with pale green shoots. The occasional black dot wove among them: farmers working their land. Without stopping to appreciate this pastoral idyll, Ah-Q went on; he still had some way to go, he intuited, on his quest for food. Eventually, he neared the Convent of Quiet Cultivation.

The convent's whitewashed walls emerged unexpectedly out of the fresh green fields that surrounded them. A vegetable garden was tucked inside the low earthen wall to the back. Ah-Q hesitated, glancing around him: there was nobody about. He then set about scaling the garden wall, hauling himself up on a bunch of knotweed. As the surface of the wall crumbled, Ah-Q's feet began to tremble beneath him, before he managed to scramble over via an incidental mulberry tree. Though the garden within was lush with vegetation, there seemed to be no wine or steamed rolls or indeed anything else edible in sight. A copse of bamboo lined the western wall, its shoots visible at the base, but they unfortunately needed cooking first. Elsewhere, there were bolting oilseed rape, flowering mustard greens and pak-choi that was past its first flush of youth.

Ah-Q prowled up to the garden gate, feeling a keen sense of the injustice of it all. There, however, a joyful surprise awaited him: a bed of elderly turnips. He squatted down and tugged at them. A round head suddenly popped up at the gate, then shrank back again: Ah-Q's old enemy, the young nun. Even though Ah-Q had always been scrupulous never to have the slightest respect for people such as young nuns, discretion sometimes turns out to be the better part of valour and so, after uprooting four turnips as fast as he could, he twisted off their green outer leaves, and tucked them into his jacket, just in time to greet an old nun.

'By the Buddha! What are you doing in our garden, Ah-Q, stealing our turnips!... Stop thief!'

'Me? Stealing turnips?' Ah-Q said, edging away.

'What's that under there, then?' The old nun indicated the protuberance beneath his jacket.

'Reckon they're yours, do you? Do they answer if you call them? You...'

Ah-Q broke into a run, pursued by a sizeable black dog usually stationed at the front gate; how it had found its way to the back garden was a mystery. But just as the dog's fangs snarled inches from Ah-Q's leg, a turnip happily fell from his jacket, giving the creature brief pause – just long enough for Ah-Q to scramble back up the mulberry tree, get a leg over the earthen wall, and hurl himself, together with the

surviving turnips, to the ground beyond, leaving the black dog barking up at the tree, while the old nun chanted her prayers.

Afraid the dog might be set loose on him, Ah-Q gathered up his trophies and set off, picking up a few small stones from the road as he went along; but the black dog made no reappearance. Discarding the stones, Ah-Q ate the turnips as he walked. There was nothing for him here, he thought; time to try his luck in town.

In the time it took to eat three turnips, his mind was made up.

CHAPTER 6

Rise and Fall

Weizhuang did not catch another glimpse of Ah-Q until just past the Mid-Autumn Festival. Remarking in surprise upon his sudden return, the villagers suddenly wondered where he had been all this time. Whenever he had taken himself off to town before, Ah-Q had been quick to mouth off about it. This time, however, he had kept curiously quiet, so no one had paid any attention. Maybe he had told the old caretaker in the temple. In any case, only trips to town undertaken by people of consequence – by Messrs Zhao or Qian, or the local genius – were public events in Weizhuang. If even the exploits of the Fake Foreign Devil failed to count as newsworthy, then what claim did Ah-Q have on the village's notice? Maybe that was why the old man had not broadcast the news, leaving the rest of Weizhuang society in the dark.

Yet Ah-Q seemed changed – even remarkably so – on his return from this particular trip. One evening, near nightfall, he suddenly appeared, sleepy-eyed, in the doorway to the tavern. Walking up to the bar, he pulled from his belt a fistful of silver and copper coins. 'Wine!' he barked, throwing them down. 'I'm paying cash!' He had on a new cotton jacket, his belt drooping visibly from the weight of the purse at his waist. Weizhuang lore held that cautious deference – rather than outright rudeness – was the best policy around those who acted in any way unusually. Even though everyone recognized him as Ah-Q, his possession of a new jacket meant that a reassessment was perhaps in order. Waiter, manager, drinkers and other random passers-by arranged their faces into expressions of tentative respect.

'Well, Ah-Q,' the manager began, nodding at him. 'Long time no see!'

'Reckon so.'

'Made a pile, I see... in...?'

'In town!'

By the following day, the news had spread through Weizhuang like wildfire. Everyone wanted to hear about the rise of the new Ah-Q, with his new jacket and ready cash – a story that gradually leaked out in the tavern, in the teahouse and under the temple eaves, to universal gasps of admiration and respect.

As Ah-Q told it, he had started out helping in the household of a local bigwig who had passed the provincial-level civil service examination. (An awed hush fell over his audience as this detail was revealed.) The scholar in question went by the name of Bai, but because he was the only provincial examination laureate in the entire town, no one ever needed to refer to him by his real name. For thirty miles around and about, everyone – and not just Weizhuang – thought his full name was Mr Provincial Examination. To work in the house of such a grandee was, of course, a

mighty achievement in itself. But, Ah-Q told his listeners, he got fed up with being a servant, because the revered gentleman was, to state the facts simply, a pain in the damn neck. A delicious sigh of happy regret now rippled through his audience: no one had imagined for a moment that Ah-Q was worthy of working in the household of Mr Provincial Examination; and yet to throw in such a position was still a shame.

As Ah-Q told it, he had come back because the people in town got on his nerves: with their 'narrow benches', and their shredded onions, and – a new failing Ah-Q had had opportunity to observe – the women's failure to wiggle their hips properly when they walked. But the town had its points, too. The peasants of Weizhuang, for example, gambled with bits of bamboo – only the Fake Foreign Devil knew anything about 'moh-jang' [sic]. In town, though, even the lowest lowlife were experts at the game. Pit the Fake Foreign Devil against a ten-year-old beggar from town, and he'd be mincemeat. (At which disrespect, every listener blushed.)

'Ever seen an execution?' asked Ah-Q. 'Now, that's a sight. They're always executing revolutionaries. Oh, it's a sight, a sight...' He shook his head excitably about, stars of spittle moistening the face of Zhao Sichen opposite. His listeners' wonder was now edged with dread. Looking about him, Ah-Q suddenly raised his right hand then sliced it down on to the outstretched nape of a rapt hairy Wang.

'Hwah!'

The terrified Wang pulled in his neck as quick as he could, while everyone else enjoyed a pleasurable frisson of horror. For days afterwards, Wang was far from his usual self. Neither he – nor anyone else for that matter – dared go anywhere near Ah-Q.

Although to claim that Ah-Q's status, in the eyes of Weizhuang at large, had now risen higher than that of Mr Zhao would have been an exaggeration, we would not be overstating the case to say that the two men were now, more or less, on a level.

Soon after, Ah-Q's new celebrity spread to the ladies' chambers of Weizhuang. To put this in a little perspective, there were only two serious establishments in Weizhuang – the Qians' and the Zhaos' – and so the great majority of the village's boudoirs were pretty poor sorts of places. All the same, given Ah-Q's record with women, this latest development was not far off miraculous. Whenever the local women met, they would be sure to mention that Mrs Zou had bought a blue silk skirt from Ah-Q; true, it was second-hand, but it only cost her ninety coppers. Then there was Zhao Baiyan's mother – though some said it was Zhao Sichen's mother; further verification required – who bought a child's shirt of dark red muslin, barely worn, for only two hundred and seventy-six coppers. Suddenly, Ah-Q was the man of the moment: those deficient in silk skirts wanted silk skirts; those deprived of muslin shirts wanted muslin shirts. Now, not only did Weizhuang's women stand their ground when they caught sight of him, they sometimes even called him back after he

had walked off.

‘Any more silk skirts, Ah-Q? No? Or muslin shirts, got any of them?’

Eventually, the news seeped into even the great boudoirs of the village. Excessively pleased with her purchase, Mrs Zou invited Mrs Zhao to admire her silk skirt, of which the latter spoke – in the most elevated terms – to Mr Zhao. On discussing the question at the dinner table with his learned son, Mr Zhao concluded that while the exercise of caution about the house would be advisable (as there was doubtless something fishy about this business with Ah-Q) he might have one or two decent things. It just so happened that their esteemed wife and mother was currently after a good fur waistcoat at a reasonable price. And so a clan resolution was passed, to the effect that Mrs Zou would be deputed at once to seek out Ah-Q, and a third exception made to the no-lamps-after-dinner rule.

The lamps burned, and burned; still Ah-Q did not appear. Anxiety, fatigue, resentment rippled through the assembled Zhao clan: indignation at the skittishness of Ah-Q, impatience at the slowness of Mrs Zou. Mrs Zhao expressed concern that Ah-Q was too frightened to come, because of the events of last spring. Mr Zhao batted her worries away: this time, *he* had personally commanded Ah-Q’s presence. At last, fully proving that Mr Zhao could never be wrong, in came Ah-Q, behind Mrs Zou.

‘He keeps on saying he hasn’t anything left,’ Mrs Zou reported, rather out of breath. ‘I said he should tell you in person, but he still kept on, so I said...’

‘So – Mr Zhao!’ Ah-Q took up position beneath the eaves, the corners of his mouth flirting with the ghost of a smile.

‘We hear that life outside Weizhuang has treated you well,’ Mr Zhao walked over, sizing this new Ah-Q up. ‘That’s excellent – excellent. We’ve... also heard that you’ve picked up some second-hand things along the way... Bring them over to show us, will you... just in case...’

‘I already told Mrs Zou. I’ve nothing left.’

‘Nothing?’ Mr Zhao faltered.

‘It all belonged to a friend of mine, and there wasn’t much to begin with. They’ve all been sold to other people.’

‘There must be something left.’

‘Only a door curtain.’

‘Bring it over,’ Mrs Zhao quickly commanded.

‘Tomorrow will be fine,’ Mr Zhao did not sound particularly enthusiastic. ‘But next time you have anything, show us first.’

‘We’ll pay better than anyone else!’ said the village genius. His wife glanced across at Ah-Q, to see if this had any impact on him.

‘I want a fur waistcoat,’ Mrs Zhao said.

After signalling his assent, Ah-Q slouched out so indifferently that no one could tell whether he really meant it. The whole disappointing encounter vexed Mr Zhao so much that he quite stopped yawning. His son was equally agitated by Ah-Q's attitude: We should watch ourselves around this bastard, he warned. Maybe we should tell the constable to throw him out of Weizhuang. Mr Zhao resisted the idea, wary of making an enemy of Ah-Q. As likely as not, someone in his line of business wouldn't shit on his own doorstep. The villagers had nothing to worry about; they just needed to take a bit more care at night. The learned son immediately submitted to the wisdom of the father, retracted his previous advocacy and exhorted Mrs Zou to say nothing, under any circumstances, of it to anyone else.

But when she took her skirt to be dyed black the following day, Mrs Zou spread the word concerning the suspicions about Ah-Q's character. Even though she made no direct mention of the village genius's idea, the damage to Ah-Q's reputation was done. First of all, the constable called on him to confiscate his door curtain, refusing to return it even when Ah-Q told him Mrs Zhao wanted to look at it, then demanding a monthly offering from him to demonstrate his respect for the agent of the law. Second, the villagers' attitude towards him underwent an abrupt change: although they still did not dare provoke him as they once had, although the dread generated by his execution monologue had faded, they gave him a wide berth – kept a respectful distance, you might say.

All except a handful of Weizhuang's wastrels, that is, who were determined to get to the bottom of the business with Ah-Q. Delighted to crow about his exploits, Ah-Q proudly spilled the whole thing out. He'd been, they learnt, the pettiest of petty thieves: incapable not only of clambering over walls, but also of wriggling through holes. His sole talent was to stand outside the entry point to a house and take the goods as they were passed to him. One particular night, after only one bundle had emerged, a volley of shouts broke out when their ringleader returned inside, at which point he ran through the night, out of the town and all the way back to Weizhuang, his stomach for this line of work quite gone. This story did further damage to Ah-Q's already fragile reputation. Those who up until then had kept a respectful distance for fear of making an enemy of him now discovered that he didn't even deserve their fear – that he was a thief too spineless to steal.

CHAPTER 7

Revolution

On the fourth stroke of the third watch of the night of the fourteenth day of the ninth month of the third year of Emperor Xuantong's reign* ² – the day on which Ah-Q sold his purse to Zhao Baiyan – a large boat with a black awning docked at the Zhaos'. It arrived under cover of darkness, unnoticed by the sleeping villagers, though its departure around dawn was widely noted. Persistent inquiry eventually traced its ownership back to none other than Mr Provincial Examination.

The boat brought with it great disquiet to Weizhuang; by midday, the village was in the grip of a full-scale panic. Although the Zhaos were keeping very quiet about the reason behind the boat's arrival, the gossips in the teahouse and tavern were saying that the city was about to fall to the Revolutionary Party, and Mr Provincial Examination had taken refuge in the village. Only Mrs Zou stoutly refuted this version of events, countering that the boat had contained nothing more than a few old trunks that the great scholar had wanted to store in Weizhuang, and that Mr Zhao had already sent back. Mr Provincial Examination and the younger Zhao – the proud possessor, you will recall, of a county-level degree – were not, in truth, on any kind of terms; they were unlikely to become foul-weather friends. And since Mrs Zou lived next door to the Zhaos, she probably had her ear closer to the ground on the question than most of Weizhuang.

But still the rumours flourished: although the great man of learning had not come in person, it was reported, he had sent in his place a long letter tracing out a distant family connection with the Zhaos. After careful consideration, Mr Zhao decided it wouldn't do him any harm to hold on to the trunks, and stowed them under his wife's bed. The revolutionaries, others said, had entered the town that very night, dressed in white armour and helmets, in mourning for the last emperor of the Ming, whose suicide three and a half centuries earlier had left the imperial throne open to the invading Manchus.

Revolutionaries were old news to Ah-Q: why, earlier that year, he had watched them being executed. Back then, he had had an intuition – why, he couldn't say – that these revolutionaries were rebelling against the established order of things, and that rebellion would make his life difficult; and so he had conceived a violent hatred for them. But here they were, putting the wind up even Mr Provincial Examination – a man famous for a whole thirty miles around and about. This – taken in combination with the state of dread into which the villagers, now twittering like frightened birds, had been thrown – struck Ah-Q as all rather delicious.

'Hurrah for revolution!' Ah-Q thought. 'It'll do for the whole rotten lot of them! ... I'm going over to the revolutionaries as soon as I get the chance.'

His sense of grievance against the world sharpened first by the rather embarrassed circumstances in which he had recently found himself, and second by the two midday bowls of wine he had drunk on an empty stomach, Ah-Q floated ruminatively along his way. Suddenly – by virtue of some mental alchemy – it seemed to him as if he himself was the Revolutionary Party, and all Weizhuang his prisoner.

‘Rebel! Rebel!’ he began shouting jubilantly.

The residents of Weizhuang looked fearfully at him, their newly abject terror as refreshing to Ah-Q as a mouthful of snow on a high-summer’s day.

‘Hurrah!’ he yelled again, his spirits soaring higher. ‘I take what I want, I spare who I like.’ It was high time for a few more lines of opera:

‘Tum-ti-tum, clang clang-clang!

Alas! While in my cups, I killed my brother Zheng!

Alas, alack, woe is me...

Tum-ti-tum, clang clang-clang!

I-I-I-I-I will thrash you, with my mace, yes, I will!’

Zhao Senior and Zhao Junior stood at their gate with a couple of their relatives, discussing the Revolution. Head held high, Ah-Q swept obliviously past them, still singing at the top of his voice.

‘Q, my friend,’ Mr Zhao called timidly out to him.

‘Clang clang-clang,’ he sang on, too nonplussed by the word ‘friend’ to connect it with his own name, supposing he had misheard. ‘Tum, clang, clang-clang, clang-clang!’

‘Q, my friend.’

‘Woe is me...’

‘Ah-Q!’ The village genius tried a more direct approach.

‘What?’ Ah-Q asked, finally drawing to a halt and turning to face them.

‘So, Q, my friend, have you...’ Mr Zhao faltered, ‘have you done well out of this business?’

‘Of course. I take what I want...’

‘Ah-... I mean, Q, my friend, I shouldn’t waste your time on people like us,’ Zhao Baiyan nervously ventured. ‘People like us – we haven’t a bean, you know.’

‘Haven’t a bean? You’ve always been richer than me,’ Ah-Q said, carrying on his way.

A despondent silence fell over the group. Father and son went back inside, and the two of them talked the whole business over until it was time to light the evening lamps. Zhao Baiyan went home and gave his wife the purse from his belt to hide at the bottom of a chest.

By the time Ah-Q had floated complacently back to the Temple of Earth and Grain, the effect of the wine had worn off. The temple's old caretaker was abnormally polite to him that evening, inviting him in for a cup of tea. Taking the opportunity to cadge two pancakes off him, Ah-Q ate them and asked for a candlestick and a four-ounce candle, which he lit, then lay down alone in his own small room. As he wallowed in the joyous novelty of it all, the flame flashing and leaping as euphorically as the lights at New Year, his thoughts took flight.

'Rebellion... Count me in!... When the Revolutionary Party comes by the temple, dressed in white, carrying broadswords, maces, bombs, guns, double-edged knives and hooked spears, calling me along, I'll go with them like a shot.

'That'll be a sight, when they're all kneeling before me, twittering with fear. "Have mercy, Ah-Q, have mercy!" No mercy for them, ha! D and Mr Zhao'll get it first, then his son, then the Fake Foreign Devil... Should I spare any of them? I used to think hairy Wang was all right, but not any more...

'What should I take... I'll need to see what they've got in their chests – silver, gold, dollars, calico shirts... I'll move the Ningbo bed that the village genius's wife sleeps on into the temple, then I'll go back for the Qians' table and chairs – or maybe the Zhaos'. I won't be doing the moving myself, of course, I'll get D to do it. He'll get a slap around the face if he doesn't look sharp about it. Zhao Sichen's sister is ugly as sin. Mrs Zou's daughter might be all right in a few years' time. Hmm: the Fake Foreign Devil's wife... any woman willing to sleep with a man without a queue must be a slut! The village genius's wife's got a birthmark on her eyelid... What's happened to Mrs Wu, I haven't seen her in ages... shame her feet are so big.'

Before all his plans were properly laid, Ah-Q was snoring, the four-ounce candle barely burned down a half-inch, his cavernously open mouth bathed in its fiery red light.

'Hmm? Hmm?' he suddenly cried out, looking bewilderedly about him, then lying back down to sleep once he'd set eyes on the candle.

The next day, he got up very late. Out on the street, everything looked much as it always did. After fruitlessly pondering for some while a solution to his hunger, an idea finally presented itself, and he slowly turned his steps – almost without conscious thought – towards the Convent of Quiet Cultivation.

The convent was as peaceful as it had been back in the spring, its walls still white, its gate still black. He hesitated briefly, then knocked. Hearing a dog bark inside, he anxiously gathered up a few broken pieces of brick, then knocked again – harder. Eventually, after rapping out a series of dents in the black lacquer, he heard someone approach.

Tightening his grip on the pieces of brick, Ah-Q adopted a martial posture, ready

to do battle with the black dog. But the gate opened only a crack, unleashing no beast from within. He could see no one inside but the old nun.

‘What d’you want this time?’ she asked, startled by his reappearance.

‘Have you heard? There’s a revolution...’ Ah-Q observed, rather vaguely.

‘They’ve already been,’ the old nun retorted, her eyes red. ‘Now what d’you want?’

‘What?’

‘They’ve been and gone!’

‘Who?’ Ah-Q’s astonishment was growing at every revelation.

‘The Zhao son and the Foreign Devil!’

Ah-Q froze, stupefied by the unexpectedness of it all. Seeing the wind had been taken out of his sails, the elderly nun shut the gate as quick as she could. When Ah-Q recovered himself enough to give it a shove, it refused to budge; when he tried knocking again, there was no answer.

It had all happened that morning. The moment the village genius heard, through his own channels of communication, that the Revolutionary Party had taken the town during the night, he coiled his queue on to his head and, at first light, called on the Qian family’s Fake Foreign Devil. Although he’d never had anything to do with him in the past, this was a time for pooling talents and energies in the cause of Progress and Reform. A full and frank discussion ended in them declaring themselves comrades unto death and pledging to join the Revolution. After giving the matter some further thought, they remembered there was a tablet in the Convent of Quiet Cultivation wishing the emperor ‘Ten thousand thousand thousand thousand years of life.’ Deciding, quite naturally, that this should be the first thing to go, off they rushed to revolutionize the convent. Because the old nun had tried to stop them, again quite naturally they identified her as representative of the discredited and deposed Manchu dynasty and gave her a reasonably substantial beating around the head with sticks and knuckles. After they’d gone, the nun came to, to discover the tablet in pieces on the ground, and a valuable Ming incense-burner, originally set in front of the statue of the goddess Guanyin, vanished.

All this Ah-Q found out only some time after the fact. Kicking himself for having slept through it all, he also bitterly resented their not coming to fetch him first.

‘Don’t they know I’ve surrendered to the Revolutionary Party, too?’ he wondered to himself.

CHAPTER 8

Barred from the Revolution

With each passing day, the people of Weizhuang grew easier in their hearts. Although the rumours flying about told them that the Revolutionary Party had taken the town, nothing else much had changed. The county magistrate hadn't changed, even though his official title had. Mr Provincial Examination had hung on to an official post, too – though no one in Weizhuang knew exactly what it was – and the captain of militia was, well, still the captain of militia. The only source of disquiet in Weizhuang's smooth, untroubled waters was the habit of certain, bad elements among the revolutionaries of cutting queues off – a troubling development that had begun the day after the Revolution came to town. They'd got their hands on Seven-Pounds, the boatman from a neighbouring village, who'd come out of it looking a perfect sight. Yet calm was, for the most part, preserved, because the residents of Weizhuang rarely, if ever, ventured into town; and even if they had been planning a trip, they swiftly changed their minds. Ah-Q had had an idea of going in, to look for an old friend of his, but abandoned it as soon as this piece of news reached him.

But still it wouldn't be fair to say there were absolutely no new developments in Weizhuang. Within a few days, increasing numbers of queues were coiled up on heads – the first belonging, as previously mentioned, to the village genius, swiftly followed by those of Zhao Sichen, Zhao Baiyan and finally Ah-Q. If it had been summer, such a coiffure would have been standard practice, and no one would have paid much attention. But shifting a summer convention into late autumn demonstrated considerable heroism on the part of the trend-setters – surely a sign that times were changing in Weizhuang.

'Look at the revolutionary!' exclaimed everyone who saw Zhao Sichen approach, the nape of his neck naked as the day he was born.

Ah-Q raged with envy. Although the village genius's decision to wind his queue round the top of his head was old news, it hadn't occurred to him that he could copy him. Now, seeing Zhao Sichen doing the same, he realized that he, too, could follow suit, and resolved to do so. After tucking it up and securing it with a bamboo chopstick, and a further period of hesitation, he boldly set forth into the public domain.

As he walked along, he attracted a few looks, but no comment. Soon, a feeling of niggling displeasure had evolved into a sense of serious grievance against the world at large. Lately, he had been suffering more and more from dyspepsia of the brain. His life at present was no more difficult than it had been before the Revolution: people were still tolerably civil to him, and shopkeepers never asked him to pay in cash. But Ah-Q was nagged by a sense of frustration: that things

should be different, now there had been a revolution.

It was his sighting, one day, of the ignoble D that brought his bad mood to boiling point. This D had not only coiled his queue on the top of his head, he had also – believe it if you will – had the nerve to secure it with a bamboo chopstick. Never, not even in his wildest imaginings, had Ah-Q dreamt that such effrontery – from such a wretch – was possible. No: he would not allow it! He felt a desperate urge to grab hold of it, snap the chopstick, let the queue hang back down and give him a few good slaps around the face. That would teach him to forget his place in the cosmic order of things, to call himself a revolutionary. In the end, however, he decided to let him off with an Angry Glare and a gob of spit.

The only inhabitant of Weizhuang to chance going into town in recent days was the Fake Foreign Devil. On the pretext of the trunks he was giving house-room to, the Zhao family's young gentleman of letters had thought of calling on Mr Provincial Examination, but desisted on account of the mortal risk to his queue. Instead, he penned an obsequiously ornate formal letter, and charged the Fake Foreign Devil first with delivering it to its intended recipient, and second with securing an introduction to the revolutionary Freedom Party. When this deputy returned, he collected four silver dollars from the village genius, in exchange for which the latter was presented with a silver peach, which he pinned to the lapel of his gown. This, it was put about with gasps of admiration, was the insignia of the Persimmon Oil Party.* Their local scholar was now equal in rank to a member of the imperial academy! Mr Zhao's stock rose dramatically, higher even than when his son passed the county-level civil service examination. Ah-Q now existed on a plane far below Mr Zhao's arrogant notice.

Ah-Q's general sense of grievance, therefore, was compounded by his feeling of being left out of everything. As soon as he heard rumours about the silver peach, he guessed the reason for his cold-shouldering: it wasn't enough to surrender to the revolutionaries, or even to coil your queue up on to your head. The key was to make contact with the Revolutionary Party itself. But he'd only ever encountered two revolutionaries: the first – the star of the execution he had witnessed – had long since been relieved of his head; which left only the Fake Foreign Devil. So there was nothing for it but to go and talk terms with the latter.

The main gate to the Qian mansion happened to be standing open, and so Ah-Q timidly slunk in. Once inside, he was immediately startled by the sight of the Fake Foreign Devil – dressed in black, probably foreign clothes, another silver peach pinned to his chest – holding forth in the middle of the courtyard. He had unbraided his regrown, foot-long queue, allowing it to flow theatrically over his shoulders. His fingers were curled around the stick from which Ah-Q had in the past received such salutary instruction. Opposite, standing to rapt attention, were Zhao Baiyan and

three other loafers.

Approaching softly, Ah-Q took up position behind Zhao Baiyan, trying to think of the best way to get the great man's attention. Fake Foreign Devil didn't quite sound right any more; but neither did he think Foreigner or Revolutionary would do. Mr Foreigner, perhaps?

Mr Foreigner was too busy with his own impassioned speech, however, to have eyes for Ah-Q.

'I'm an impatient man, and I was always saying to my dear friend Hong' – by whom, his listeners may or may not have been aware, he meant Li Yuanhong, one of the leaders of the Revolution – ' "Let's strike now!" But he'd always say' – here he broke into English – ' "No!" ... (That's a foreign word – you won't understand.) If he'd listened to me, we'd have pulled it off years ago. But he's the cautious type. He's on at me to go to Hubei for him, but I haven't decided yet. Such a backwater...'

'Errrr... Is... this...' Ah-Q plucked up courage to croak, during a brief détente. For some reason, at the last moment he decided against Mr Foreigner.

The four startled members of the audience looked round.

'What is it?' Mr Foreigner at last located the source of the interruption.

'I –'

'Get out!'

'But I want to join –'

'Get lost!' Mr Foreigner began waving his stick about.

'Are you deaf or something?' Zhao Baiyan and the others roared at him. 'He told you to get lost!'

Ah-Q fled out of the gate, covering his head with his hands, but Mr Foreigner did not come after him. After sprinting sixty paces, he slowed to a walk. A sense of the tragedy of it all welled up in him: if Mr Foreigner was set on keeping him out of the Revolution, he had no other path open to him. The men in white would never come for him; all his ambitions, aspirations, hopes for the future written off at a single stroke. Then there was the fear that those loafers at the Qians' might tell everyone else in the village, making him a laughing stock in front of the pathetic D and hairy Wang; though that was of secondary concern.

He felt frustrated as never before. His coiled queue now struck him as meaningless, contemptible; out of a desire for revenge, he wanted nothing more than to let it down again. In the end, though, he let it alone. After wandering through the night, he bought two bowls of wine on credit. Once he'd gulped them down, his spirits began slowly to improve, and fragments of white helmets and armour drifted back into his thoughts.

One night, strolling back as usual to the Temple of Earth and Grain after closing time at the tavern, he suddenly heard a strange kind of banging noise – one that was

assuredly not firecrackers. With his inveterate love of minding business that was not his own, Ah-Q immediately headed off into the darkness in search of its origin. He thought he could hear footsteps somewhere in front; as he listened, someone suddenly sprang out of the night. Quick as he could, Ah-Q ran after him, twisting, turning and finally stopping when the man in front did. He now saw there was no one behind them, and that he had been pursuing D.

‘What’s going on?’ a disgruntled Ah-Q asked.

‘There’s... there’s been a robbery at the Zhaos’!’ D panted out.

Ah-Q’s heart began pounding. His piece said, D disappeared. Ah-Q also made off, pausing every now and then. But he was, let it not be forgotten, someone who had been in this line of work himself: a man who could screw his courage to the sticking place. Creeping out to a turning in the road, he listened to what seemed to be a good deal of shouting. Taking a closer look, he thought he could see a great crowd of people, in white helmets and armour, carrying out endless cases and miscellaneous household objects, including the Ningbo bed belonging to the wife of the village genius. Though he couldn’t see quite clearly enough to be sure, his feet refused to carry him further forward.

A perfect peace seemed to reign over Weizhuang that moonless night – as perfect as in the time of the ancient sage emperors. Ah-Q watched until he was bored with the business: on it went, endless toing and froing, and moving of cases, objects, the Ningbo bed... Incredulous, and yet resolved to go no closer, he returned to the temple.

Locking the main gate, he groped his way to his own room through an absolute darkness. He lay down and eventually composed himself. The men in white, he concluded, had come, but not for him. They’d taken a great load of things but left none for him. It was all the fault of that Fake Foreign Devil, not letting him rebel. What other explanation could there be? The more he chewed it over, the angrier he got. ‘So I’m not allowed to rebel, am I?’ he raged, nodding bitterly. ‘So only you’re good enough for the Revolution? Damn you, you Fake Foreign Devil. Fine: rebel, then – but I’m going to inform on you! Then I’ll get to see you arrested and executed in the county town, and your whole clan with you – hwaaah! hwaaah!’

CHAPTER 9

A Happy Ending

After the robbery at the Zhaos', Weizhuang – Ah-Q included – was abuzz with a kind of pleasurable terror. Four days after the event itself, however, Ah-Q found himself being dragged through the middle of the night into the county town. Under cover of darkness, three squads – of soldiers, of militiamen and of policemen – and five detectives stole into the village and surrounded the Temple of Earth and Grain, propping up machine-guns opposite the main gate. Yet Ah-Q failed to make a dash for it. After a lengthy wait, uninterrupted by any kind of noise or movement, the captain grew anxious enough to offer a reward of twenty thousand coppers, at which two of the militiamen at last bravely volunteered. Once the vanguard had scrambled in over the wall, the forces outside rushed in to capture Ah-Q, who didn't begin to wake up until he was parked, a prisoner of the law, to the left of the machine-gun outside the temple.

It was midday by the time they reached the town. Hauled into a dilapidated old yamen, then up and down its corridors and passageways, Ah-Q was at last shoved into a small room. As he stumbled forward, a heavy, barred wooden door slammed behind him. Walls made up the remaining three sides of the room, which turned out to contain – when he made a closer survey of his surroundings – two other people.

Although a little perturbed by the morning's events, he wasn't particularly downcast, because his room in the temple had been no more uplifting to a man's spirits than the one he currently found himself in. As his new room-mates both looked to be men from the countryside like himself, he gradually fell into conversation with them. Mr Provincial Examination was, he learnt, chasing one of them for rent owed him by his grandfather; the other man didn't know what he was in for. 'I wanted to rebel,' Ah-Q replied frankly, when they asked him what had brought him here.

Later that afternoon, he was yanked back out through the barred wooden door and into a large hall, at the far end of which sat an old man, his head shaved perfectly smooth. Ah-Q wondered first if he was a monk, until he spotted rows of soldiers, together with some dozen important-looking individuals in long gowns, lined up on either side of the room – their heads either clean-shaven like the old man, or their hair allowed to hang a generous foot down their backs like the Fake Foreign Devil – all glaring savagely at him. At this point, he realized this was an encounter with Authority; his joints automatically weakened and reduced him to his knees.

'Be upstanding! Kneeling is strictly prohibited!' the men in their long gowns roared.

Even though Ah-Q had some grasp of what they were saying, he felt that standing

lay beyond him. As if now refusing to take orders from him, his body fell back into a squat, before subsiding again on to its knees.

‘Pathetic!’ the long-gowns sneered; but left off telling him to stand.

‘Confess now and save yourself unnecessary suffering. I already know everything there is to know,’ the bald old man intoned, riveting his gaze on Ah-Q’s face.

‘Confess and you will go free.’

‘Confess!’ the long-gowns echoed.

‘All I wanted to do was... to... surrender...’ Ah-Q mumbled haltingly, after a pause for confused thought.

‘Well, why didn’t you, then?’ the old man benevolently asked him.

‘The Fake Foreign Devil wouldn’t let me!’

‘Nonsense! It’s too late now, in any case. Where are your accomplices?’

‘What?’

‘The gang who robbed the Zhaos’ house.’

‘They didn’t come for me,’ Ah-Q remembered, his bile rising again. ‘They took everything for themselves.’

‘Where did they go?’ the old man pressed, even more benignly. ‘Tell us and you can go free.’

‘I don’t know... they didn’t come for me...’

The old man motioned with his eyes, and Ah-Q was dragged back off to the cell. On the morning of the following day, he was hauled out a second time.

Everything was as it had been the previous day: the bald old man at the back, Ah-Q on his knees.

‘Have you anything else to say?’ the old man said, in still benign tones.

Ah-Q gave the question some thought: ‘No.’

One of the long-gowns then took up a piece of paper and brought it over to Ah-Q, together with a brush, which he attempted to stuff into our hero’s hand. Ah-Q was scared almost witless: this was the first time in his life his hand had come into contact with a writing brush. As he tried to work out how to hold it, the man pointed at a place on the paper and commanded him to sign.

‘I... I... can’t write,’ Ah-Q confessed – ashamed, afraid – grasping the brush.

‘Just draw a circle, then!’

Although Ah-Q wanted to draw a perfect circle, his hand shook uncontrollably. So the man then spread the paper over the floor for him. Bending over, Ah-Q focused all his energies on the drawing of this circle. Afraid of looking ridiculous, he was determined to make it round, and yet that wretched brush weighed heavy in his hands, veering disobediently to one side as he struggled to make the two ends meet.

Though Ah-Q felt this melon seed of a circle had covered him in shame, the man seemed unbothered, confiscating both paper and brush. A mass of people now

shoved him back, for the second time, behind wooden bars.

He did not, in truth, feel too badly about things, this second time. In the rich tapestry that is life, he considered, a man is destined sometimes to be hauled out of places, at others to be shoved in, at others again to draw circles on paper. The only blot on his copybook was his failure to make his circle round. Soon enough, however, his heart was easy once more: only idiots can draw perfect circles, he thought. At which he fell asleep.

Mr Provincial Examination couldn't sleep at all that night, brooding over a tiff with his captain of militia. The former had argued that the most urgent task was to go after the booty, while the latter countered that someone needed making a public example of. The captain had of late been showing a distressing want of respect for the esteemed man of letters. 'Kill a chicken, and you'll scare the monkeys!' he declared, thumping the table. 'It's less than three weeks since I joined the Revolution, and there have already been a dozen robberies, none of them solved. It's making me a laughing stock! Here we are, the case solved, and you're fussing like an old woman. I've had it up to here – keep your nose out of this!' Still the discomfited scholar insisted that he would resign forthwith from the civil administration if they didn't go after the stolen goods. To which the captain responded: 'Fine! Resign!' Mr Provincial Examination failed to sleep that night; but neither, happily, did he resign the following day.

It was the morning after this spat that Ah-Q was yanked out from behind the wooden bars for the third time. When he entered the hall, the bald old man was sitting, as before, at the back of the room. As before, Ah-Q knelt.

'Do you have anything else to say?' the old man repeated his question, just as politely.

Ah-Q gave the question some thought: 'No.'

A crowd of men variously clad in long and short gowns now dressed him in a waistcoat of white calico, inscribed with a number of black characters. This, Ah-Q found sorely troubling: because white was the colour of mourning, and mourning was a deeply inauspicious activity to find yourself engaged upon. At the same time, both his hands were tied behind his back and he was hauled outside the yamen.

Ah-Q was lifted on to an open cart and some men in short jackets took their seats on either side of him. The cart immediately started up, led by a squad of soldiers and militia shouldering foreign rifles. Crowds of open-mouthed spectators thronged to either side; what lay beyond them, Ah-Q could not see. Was he on his way to an execution? he suddenly wondered. His vision began to darken, his ears to buzz, as if he were about to faint in panic. Yet he remained conscious, veering between fear, calm and the dawning sense that, in the rich tapestry of life, a man is destined sometimes to have his head cut off.

He recognized the road they were on. Why weren't they taking him to the execution ground? he wondered. He wasn't to know they were making a tour of the streets, to make a public example of him. Even if he had known, though, it wouldn't have made any difference to him. In the rich tapestry that is life, he would have concluded, a man is destined sometimes to be made a public example of.

In time, it occurred to him that this was the slow road to the execution ground; that his head was definitely going to come off. He looked despondently about him – to one side, then another – at the ant-like audience following his progress. In among the crowds, he happened to spot Mrs Wu. That's why he hadn't seen her for ages, he thought; she must have left Weizhuang to work in town. Ah-Q was suddenly ashamed of his absence of spirit: of his failure even to croak out a few lines of opera. His head whirled through the possibilities: *The Young Widow* lacked grandeur, while the 'Alas!' from *The Battle of the Dragon and the Tiger* was too plaintive. 'I will thrash you with my mace' was assuredly his best option. He tried to brandish his fist in the air but remembered that both hands were tied; 'I will thrash you' was discarded also.

'In twenty years, I shall return...' Ah-Q plucked an unrehearsed line out of his panicked subconscious.

'More!' A howl – as if generated by a pack of jackals, or wolves – started up from the crowd.

The cart rumbled on. Amid the cheers, Ah-Q turned his eyes in the direction of Mrs Wu, but she seemed too transfixed by the guns on the soldiers' shoulders to notice him.

Ah-Q looked back at the cheering crowd.

His mind swirled again. Four years ago, at the foot of a mountain, he had encountered a hungry wolf that had followed him, at the same dogged distance, all the way back to Weizhuang. Half dead with fear, only the axe he had with him had given him the courage to get back to the village. He had never forgotten the wolf's eyes, fierce and cowardly, flashing fiendishly, burning into his flesh. But the glazed eyes he was now staring into were more terrifying still: slicing into him, gulping down his words, ravenous for something more than his flesh, following him along at the same distance.

A monstrous coalition of eyes, gnawing into his soul.

'Help...'

But Ah-Q said nothing. His eyes were blind, his ears were buzzing, as if his body was scattered into so much dust.

It was Mr Provincial Examination who felt the effects of the business most keenly, because they never ended up going after his stolen property. Misery and distress for

him and his. Next in line were the Zhaos, for not only did the village genius have his queue cut off by rogue revolutionaries when he went into town to report the crime, but the family was also stung for the twenty-thousand-coppers reward offered to smoke Ah-Q out. More misery and distress for them and theirs. From this point on, they steadily began to regret the passing of the good old days.

Public opinion in Weizhuang was undivided: of course Ah-Q was a villain – he wouldn't have been shot otherwise. The verdict in town was more ambivalent: death by firing squad, the majority of them felt, wasn't a patch on decapitation. And the condemned had been a miserable specimen. In that whole extended tour around the streets, he hadn't managed to choke out a single line of opera; they had followed him for nothing.

December 1921

DRAGON BOAT FESTIVAL¹

Fang Xuanchuo has lately taken up with a new pet phrase – more a way of life than a trite little idiom. In times past, ‘it’s all the same’ was a great favourite, but – maybe because he felt it was of insufficiently universal application – ‘more or less the same’ has succeeded in his affections, and remains, up to the time of writing, his faithful friend.

Although this ordinary little aphorism has kept company with a healthy number of new laments, it has also been a source of significant consolation. Let me give an example. Whereas before he would have been enraged to see elders hectoring their youngers, he now takes the long view. When the youth in question himself has sons and grandsons, he’ll get his own back on them – so it all balances out in the end. Here’s another. Before, he would have been equally enraged to see a soldier hitting a rickshaw-puller; again, no longer. If the two of them swapped places, the rickshaw-puller would probably be doing the same. There: an uncomfortable little dilemma put happily to rest. Sometimes, seeing the direction in which his thoughts were turning, he wondered if he had lost the will to fight social oppression – was he hoodwinking himself, to escape unpalatable truths? Had he become what the Confucian sage Mencius termed ‘a man incapable of distinguishing between right and wrong’? Was it better to go on battling for change? And yet – and yet, this new philosophy of his took ever deeper root in his mind.

The first public utterance he gave to his new creed was in a lecture hall at the College of Supreme Virtue in Beijing. Probably on the subject of some historical event, he extrapolated that ‘the ancients are not that different from the moderns’; or, in the words of Confucius himself, ‘people everywhere are much the same’. Soon enough, he found himself meandering on to the relationship between students and government.

‘These days,’ he expounded, ‘everyone – and students especially – loves to hate the government. But people who work for the government are people, too, ordinary people just like you. A lot of the younger ones were students themselves once, and are they so very different from the older ones? “We’d do the same in their place,” says Mencius: and we’d say and think the same things as well... Anyway, just look at all the student associations that spring up then shut down again almost as fast – riddled with corruption, most of them. More or less the same thing. Now this is China’s real problem.’

Of his twenty-strong audience dotted about the lecture hall, some seemed depressed by what he said, perhaps because they felt there was some truth in it. Others again grew agitated: probably because they suspected him of showing disrespect to the sacred principle of Youth. A few, however, smiled, guessing that the philosophy he was expounding was one of self-defence – for Fang Xuanchuo was himself now a civil servant.

They were mistaken. Fang’s ‘more-or-lessism’ was nothing more than an expression of a new sense of grievance against the world – though not one that he had the least intention of acting on. Whether it was because he was lazy, or just utterly inert – even he didn’t know – Fang Xuanchuo had always considered himself a stoically law-abiding sort of person, the kind that refuses to take part in any kind of public protest. While his own position in the bureaucratic cosmology was not under threat, his minister could accuse him of every neurosis under the sun and still the system wouldn’t hear a whisper of dissent from him. The university could owe him more than six months’ salary, but as long as his income from his government job kept coming, he would keep his head resolutely down. And when his university colleagues banded together to demand payment of their salaries, he would – keeping his views strictly to himself, of course – think them stridently importunate. He would come to their defence (and weakly at that) only when he heard colleagues in government sniping at them. Or perhaps because he was experiencing cash-flow problems at the time, and he was the only one among them who moonlighted between academic and government service – yes, he concluded, that sounded reasonable enough, and thought no more about it.

Although he was as short of money as any of his university colleagues, he’d never joined the teachers’ union. When everyone decided to go on strike, however, he cancelled his classes with the rest of them. And he didn’t like it more than anyone else when the government said that lecturers would get paid only when they started teaching again – as if they were monkeys that needed bringing to heel with the promise of bananas. It was on the day that one of the country’s great educationalists attacked Fang’s esteemed profession for their mercenary absence of dignity, for ‘holding their lecture notes in one hand, and asking for money with the other’, that

he was at last roused to make a formal complaint to his wife.

‘Hey!’ he observed, surveying the dinner table. ‘How come there’s only two dishes?’

As neither of them had been blessed by a modern education, his wife had not been privileged to receive a serviceably dignified given name for public or private use. A more traditional sort of husband would have made do with *Taitai*, or ‘lady-wife’, but Fang was too progressive for that. ‘Hey!’ was his improvised alternative. His wife dispensed even with this nicety: as long as she was looking at him while she spoke, both understood that whatever she was saying was directed at him.

‘I’ve already spent the fifteen per cent of your salary they gave you last month.’ She stood by the table, directly facing him. ‘Yesterday, they almost refused to sell me rice on credit.’

‘They’ve started saying it’s undignified for teachers to ask to be paid. They don’t seem to understand people need to eat rice, and rice costs money. It’s not exactly a complicated idea.’

‘Quite right. You need money for rice, and rice for dinner.’

His cheeks bulged sullenly: was she regurgitating his ‘more-or-lessism’ back at him? He turned away, indicating – according to long-established marital code – the discussion was at an end.

Publicly demonstrating for the money they were owed, one cold, windy, rainy day the capital’s teachers had their heads smashed together by government soldiers on the mud in front of the Gate of New China.² To general astonishment, however, this collision yielded a fragment of their overdue salaries. With the help of this wholly unearned windfall, Fang Xuanchuo succeeded in paying off a few old debts, but still his accounts found themselves alarmingly in the red – because now the government was dragging its feet over his other salary. It was at this point that our nation’s altruistic civil servants – and especially Fang Xuanchuo, who was holding down a teaching job himself – came slowly to the realization that salaries were things that wanted chasing up. Naturally enough, Fang began to feel a greater sympathy for the plight of his academic colleagues, and when everyone else was in favour of going on with the strike, he wholeheartedly endorsed the decision (taken in his absence).

Eventually, another payment was forthcoming, and classes restarted. A few days earlier, however, the Students’ Association had presented the government with a petition: ‘If teachers don’t teach,’ the complaint had gone, ‘they shouldn’t get paid.’ Although no one took any notice of them, Fang Xuanchuo couldn’t help see the similarity with the view the government had taken earlier. Once more dancing determinedly before him, his new philosophy of more-or-lessism now made its second public appearance in the lecture hall.

While this doctrine, in its fundamentals, did of course serve the not entirely

disinterested purposes of our hero, it was a *little* more than an opportunistic justification for taking up a government post. The difficulty was that whenever he got going on the subject, he extrapolated just a little too far – into tirades about the future of China, etcetera, etcetera. All too easily, he became a fearless patriot, carrying the cares of the nation on his own two shoulders. Such is the human disinclination towards self-knowledge.

Another illustration of the principle soon presented itself. Fully occupied for a time ignoring those pesky lecturers, the government in due course got round to paying the same compliment to its civil service drones. Month upon month of unpaid salaries stacked up, until eventually a sizeable portion of those fine upstanding government employees who, in previous existences, had despised those importunately money-grubbing teachers, were pressed by circumstance into intemperate radicalism at mass protest meetings. For which they were ridiculed by a number of broadsheets. Neither surprised nor offended by the coverage, Fang Xuanchuo knew the reporters took their view only because they were still drawing their salaries. The moment the government or their backers withdrew their subsidies, they'd be on their soapboxes, too.

Given, then, that he had already expressed sympathy for the plight of his fellow academics, he very naturally approved the demands of his government colleagues. Yet still he sat in his bureau, docilely bureaucratizing, letting others go and call in the debt on his behalf. Not because he felt it was below his dignity to go in person; do not jump to such a rashly mistaken conclusion. Instead, he pleaded inexperience. He had never, he said, collected a debt in his life – *he* had always been the target of debt-collectors. Menacing defaulters, therefore, was not one of his areas of specialism. Encounters with financial authorities turned him weak at the knees at the best of times. Take their powers over purse strings away, and they became meek as Buddhist mice. But while they were still comfortably in charge, they would always scorn supplicants at their feet. He had neither the nerve nor the wish to see them himself. He could never quite decide whether this was a sign of arrogance or of a lack of backbone.

Everyone scraped by, from week to week, borrowing here and borrowing there. But life for Fang Xuanchuo was infinitely harder than it had once been. In time, everyone he had day-to-day dealings with – his servant, the local shopkeepers, even Mrs Fang – became increasingly lacking in deference. His wife had been finding less and less to agree with him about of late; often enough, she even expressed her own opinions, and was decidedly off-hand in manner. Just before noon, on the eve of the Dragon Boat Festival in early May, she took the unprecedented course of thrusting a pile of receipts in his face as soon as he arrived home.

'We need at least a hundred and eighty dollars,' she snapped, without deigning to

glance at him. 'Did they pay you?'

'Humph! I've had enough – I'm resigning tomorrow. They've drawn the cheques, but the Salary Petition Association's not giving them out. First they said they wouldn't give them to anyone who hadn't gone and complained, then they said you had to pick them up in person. Now the boot's on the other foot, they're as bad as the government. I'm not going – I don't want the money, anyway. I'm going to resign, I'm tired of having my face rubbed in the dirt...'

This rare display of indignation startled Mrs Fang into brief silence. 'Just go and pick it up,' she resumed more docilely, looking at him this time. 'No one'll think the less of you.'

'No! It's not a bonus – it's my regular salary. Payroll should just send it out like they always do.'

'But how'll we manage if they don't?... Oh, I forgot to say, the children told me yesterday the school's been after them again for their fees. If we don't get it to them soon –'

'What a nerve! So I don't get paid for teaching, but my children's teachers do?'

His grip on logic, she began to fear, was weakening. She wasn't the school principal – why take it out on her? She let the matter drop.

The two of them ate lunch in silence. After a brief postprandial sulk, he returned irritably to work.

Usually, on the eve of a public holiday, he would never be home before midnight. In he would walk, pulling a wad of crisp banknotes out of his breast pocket and presenting them proudly to his wife: 'I've been paid!' This evening, however, saw him back by seven.

'I wasn't... expecting you so...' a bewildered Mrs Fang began, trying to read his face, trying to work out whether he had indeed resigned. He didn't *look* particularly out of sorts.

'They didn't get the cheques out before the banks closed. I'll have to wait till the eighth.'

'Will you have to go and pick it up yourself?' she asked nervously.

'They've already changed their minds about that. Now they're saying Payroll's going to send them out as usual. But the banks are shut for three days over the holiday, so we'll have to wait till the morning of the eighth.' He sat down and studied the floor, taking a sip of tea. 'There shouldn't be any problem,' he eventually went on. 'I expect they'll get us the money in the end... Though I can't say it's been much fun trying to borrow money off friends and relatives. I forced myself to call on Jin Yongsheng this afternoon. First we chatted a while, and he told me how well he thought I'd behaved through the whole business, not asking for my salary, refusing to pick the cheque up myself, and so on and so forth. Then I asked

him if I could borrow fifty dollars off him, just for the next few days. He made this face, as if I'd just stuffed a handful of salt in his mouth. Then he started going on about how everyone'd been late with the rent, about how bad business was. Why don't I go and ask for the money I'm owed, he said, no shame in that. He couldn't get me out of the door fast enough.'

'No one's got any cash to spare around holiday times,' Mrs Fang murmured faintly, not sounding particularly aggrieved.

Fang Xuanchuo looked back down at the floor; *he* wasn't surprised – especially as he'd never been on particularly good terms with Jin Yongsheng. At the end of last year, he now remembered, someone who'd grown up in his own part of the country had asked to borrow ten dollars. He'd had his salary all right, and in full, but he was worried his petitioner wouldn't pay him back. He'd not been paid, he'd lied, his face contorting with distressed regret, either by the government or by the college – the spirit was willing, the bank account was weak. Then he'd sent him packing. Though he couldn't conjure up the exact expression he had worn at the time, the memory was discomforting. He shook his head, his lips trembling slightly.

But a new inspiration swiftly came to him. Tell the servant, he ordered, to go and buy a bottle of White Lotus liquor on credit. All the shopkeepers, he knew full well, would try to call in their debts tomorrow. If anyone refused credit now, they might not get a penny back the following day; and serve them right.

The bottle of White Lotus duly obtained, two swiftly downed cups brought some colour back into his pale face. By the time dinner had been eaten, his spirits were a little on the mend. Lighting a long Hatamen cigarette, he picked up a book of avant-garde poetry and lay down on the bed to read it.

'But what will we say to the shopkeepers tomorrow?' Mrs Fang had come in after him and was now standing at the foot of the bed, looking directly at him.

'Tell them... tell them to come back on the afternoon of the eighth.'

'I can't say that. They'll never believe me. They'll never agree.'

'Why not? Tell them to check at the ministry – they'll find out no one's getting paid till the eighth.' His finger, pursued by Mrs Fang's eyes, described a semicircle in the air beneath the mosquito net, then returned to the experimental poetry.

Seeing the mood he was in, she fell briefly silent, then tried changing the subject.

'We can't go on like this, we have to find some other way of getting by.'

'What else am I fit for? I don't write well enough even to be a copyist; if I joined the army, I wouldn't scrape into the fire brigade.'

'Didn't you send something to a publisher in Shanghai?'

'That publisher? The one in Shanghai? They pay by the word and don't count the spaces. Just take a look at my free verse: almost every other word's a space. I probably wouldn't get more than three hundred coppers for a whole book. Anyway,

I haven't heard anything from them for six months now. Distant water won't put out nearby fire. I can't wait for ever.'

'How about writing for one of the local papers?'

'To get into one of the decent ones, I'd have to call in a favour from an ex-student who's now an editor at one of them. And even so, it would be a few coppers per thousand words. I'd be working all hours for a pittance. Anyway, I don't have enough to say.'

'How are we going to get by after the holiday?'

'I'll go back to the ministry... Tomorrow, when the shopkeepers want their money, just tell them the afternoon of the eighth.' He made as if to return to his experimental poetry.

'I think,' she stammered out, afraid her opportunity would be lost, 'I think we ought to buy a lottery ticket on the eighth...'

'Rubbish! What an idiotic idea...'

He suddenly recalled something that had happened after his ejection by Jin Yongsheng. Walking dejectedly past a shopping arcade, his heart had leapt at a busy large-print advertisement for a TEN THOUSAND DOLLAR PRIZE. But even as he slowed down, a reluctance to part with the last sixty cents in his wallet hurried him resolutely on. Reading vexation on his face at her vulgar superstition, Mrs Fang quickly retreated, leaving her sentence hanging in mid-air. Stretching out, Fang Xuanchuo decided to leave his response equally unfinished, and went back to mumbling his experimental poetry.

June 1922

THE WHITE LIGHT

It was well past noon by the time Chen Shicheng was back from seeing the results for the county-level civil service examinations. He had set out early and begun searching for the surname Chen the instant he saw the list. Though there was no lack of Chens clamouring for his attention, none was followed by the all-important words *shi* and *cheng*. Carefully, methodically, vainly he made a second search through the twelve-page roster. By the time he had finished, he stood alone before the wall opposite the college of examinations, the crowds of other interested onlookers long dispersed.

A cold wind was ruffling his short, greying hair, as he soaked up the warmth of the early winter sun. Dazzled by its brightness, his exhausted, puffy eyes glinted strangely within his ashen face. The list now swam before him, a shoal of black circles.

With the county competition behind him, he could have tried his luck at the provincial level, soaring through the ranks of government... All the best people would try to marry their daughters off to him, worshipping him like a god, regretting their earlier, short-sighted lack of respect... He would get rid of the tenants who had rented rooms in the derelict old family house – though likely as not, they would all have deferentially moved out of their own accord, to make way for him. The whole house would be made good as new, its gate embellished with a flagpole and plaque... If he preferred to work behind the scenes, away from the cut-and-thrust of local politics, a cosseted job in the capital would be his; otherwise, he could settle for a lucrative post in the provinces... Like a tower of barley sugar attacked by rain, his glorious future crumbled about him, leaving only fragments at his feet. He turned dejectedly towards home, numb with disappointment.

When he reached the door to his house, seven schoolchildren began reciting in

chorus. His ears buzzed – as if a brass gong had just been struck next to them. Seven heads and seven queues swayed before him, black circles dancing in the gaps between them. As he sat down, they handed their homework to him, contempt written over their faces.

‘Off you go,’ he managed miserably, after a brief hesitation.

Throwing their books into their bags and tucking them under their arms, they scattered into the afternoon.

But the plague of tiny heads and black circles went on dancing before him, sometimes in chaotic freestyle, sometimes in strange, decorous formations, until they slowly faded into a single, blurred mass.

‘Failed again!’

Who said that? He jumped to his feet, the words ringing in his ears, and looked around him: no one in sight.

‘Failed again!’ the voice repeated, his ears still buzzing.

He held up his hand, counting on his fingers: eleven, thirteen, sixteen times, counting this year – sixteen times not a single examiner had known a good essay when he saw it. A pitying laugh escaped him. Fury succeeded: from the bottom of his bag, he whipped out transcribed examination essays and poems, and made for the door. But as he approached, the light shone uncomfortably in his eyes again and a flock of chickens cackled with laughter. He retreated back inside, his heart pounding.

He sat down, the same curious glitter to his eyes. Objects – a crowd of them – swam before him: his future lay before him like a crumbled tower of barley sugar, a monumental heap blocking his way forward.

The smoke from his neighbours’ chimneys had vanished into the evening, their bowls and chopsticks washed up and put away, but Chen Shicheng made no attempt to prepare a meal. The other families lodged in his house knew that whenever the examination results were published, the same wild look came into his eyes, and the best response was to shut their doors as early as possible and ask no questions. Quiet descended, then out went the lights – one by one – as the moon glided alone out into the cold night.

The sky hung over him in an ocean of blue, the occasional cloud drifting across its surface, like pieces of chalk dipped into inky water. The polished, mirror-like moon concentrated its frigid, penetrating waves of light on Chen Shicheng.

Calmer again, he paced up and down the courtyard beyond his rooms; around him, all was quiet. But turmoil suddenly returned.

‘Turn to the left, turn to the right...’ a low, urgent voice now whispered into his ear.

He nervously listened again.

‘To the right!’ the voice repeated, louder this time.

Now he remembered. In the days before his family fell on hard times, he and his grandmother would sit in this courtyard, enjoying the cool of summer evenings. He couldn’t have been much older than nine: lying on a bamboo couch, listening to her marvellous stories. Once, she told him, she’d heard *her* grandmother say that, many generations past, theirs had been one of the great local families. One of their ancestors had buried unimaginable quantities of silver beneath the floor of this very house, for a lucky descendant to find – though no one ever had. A riddle told of its hiding place:

‘Left, right, forward, back; gold and silver, sack upon sack.’

In calmer moments, Chen Shicheng had often secretly pondered its meaning, but whenever he thought he had finally solved it, doubts would begin to gnaw at him. Once, he’d convinced himself that it lay beneath the rooms rented out to the Tangs, but he hadn’t dared ask them to let him dig it up. And soon enough, his sense of certainty had begun to fail. A few scars over the floors of his own rooms recalled earlier attempts to uncover the hoard, shameful testimony to the delirious aftermath of other examination defeats.

This evening, however, the moon’s cold light enveloped and persuaded him, countering his doubts with proof – compelling his gaze back inside.

A white fan of light flickered through his rooms.

‘It must be under here!’

He strode, proud as a lion, back inside. The moon immediately abandoned him to a dilapidated old room sunk in hazy darkness, a number of shabby desks lurking in its shadows. But as he paused confusedly, his eyes slowly adjusting, the white light returned – stronger than ever, burning brighter than sulphur, finer than dawn mist – to fall on a desk by the east-facing wall.

A lion once more, Chen Shicheng strode over to the door. As he reached for the hoe propped up behind it, his hand jarred against a bony black shadow. An unaccountable fear taking hold of him, he fumblingly lit a lamp: it was just the hoe, leaning against the wall. After moving the desk, he dislodged four large, square flagstones, then squatted down to examine the ground. As on his previous attempts, the first layer was of fine yellow sand. Pushing up his sleeves, he scraped away at the sand, until he revealed black soil below. He dug as carefully and quietly as he could, but the regular thump of iron blade on earth reverberated through the still night.

Around two feet down, with still no pot of gold in sight, Chen Shicheng began to feel anxious. Then came a brittle clink, jarring his wrist, as the hoe struck a hard object. He flung down his hoe and scrabbled around in the hole, finding at its base another large, square slab. His heart thumping, he concentrated his thoughts and

energies on dislodging it; underneath he found the same black earth as before. On he dug through the inexhaustible ground until, at last, he struck against another hard object: round this time, a rusty copper coin perhaps, alongside a few indeterminate fragments of china.

He worked on frenetically, unthinkingly, his body covered in sweat, his heart pounding massively – as if suspended within a void. He encountered another strange object, shaped like a horseshoe, but brittle, flaking to the touch. Carefully, he unearthed it and picked it up. The lamplight exposed an ancient-looking bone, mottled with rot and crowned with an incomplete row of teeth. The jawbone, as he now recognized it to be, began to twitch into a ghoulish smile.

‘Failed again!’

A chill ran down him. Releasing the bone back into its hole, he fled out into the courtyard. He glanced nervously back at the room: the lamp burning as brilliantly as ever, the jawbone still mocking him. Averting his eyes, terrified, he took refuge as far away as he could, struggling to calm himself in the shadows beneath the eaves.

‘There’s nothing for you here,’ the voice needled him again through the stillness. ‘To the mountains...’

Had he heard something like this once before? He did not need to be told again; the path forward was clear. Looking up, he saw the moon was now slanting towards the west. The western hill, some dozen miles from the town, now loomed darkly before his eyes, bathed in a glittering white light.

The white light lay before him, far in the distance.

‘To the mountain!’ he resolved, with a heavy heart.

Doors and gates opened and shut; then all fell silent within the compound. Patterned lamplight flickered across the empty room and the hole in the earth, then guttered and shrank into nothingness, the oil exhausted.

‘Open the gates!’ Over by the town’s western wall, a fearful wail of hope pierced the dawn light.

At noon the following day, a corpse was found floating in the Lake of Myriad Currents, around five miles from the West Gate. When the news reached the local constable, he ordered a local to fish it out: it turned out to be a male, around fifty years old, of medium height and pale complexion, clean-shaven and completely naked. Perhaps it was Chen Shicheng. But since none of his neighbours could be bothered to go and look, and there were no relatives to identify the body, the constable was obliged to take charge of an anonymous burial himself, once a coroner from the county government had carried out his examination. There was no controversy over cause of death: corpses stripped of their clothing were always washing up; there was no reason to suspect foul play. At any rate, the coroner

proved quite satisfactorily that the dead man had fallen into the water before drowning, as his filthy fingernails – deeply inlaid with silt from the lake bed – offered clear evidence of his having struggled underwater.

June 1922

A CAT AMONG THE RABBITS

One summer, the wife of my youngest brother, who lives in the courtyard behind the main house, bought a pair of white rabbits for her children to play with.

They seemed barely weaned – both had this look of vulnerable, animal innocence about them. All the same, the moment they arrived, they pricked up their long, delicate, pink ears, noses twitching, eyes apprehensively alert. They could probably sense they were in a strange place, with strange people; that they were away from the comforting security of home. You'd have got them for no more than twenty coppers each at a temple bazaar, but as she'd sent her servant out to a shop for them, they'd cost my sister-in-law two whole dollars.

The children crowded round them, squawking with delight, of course; the compound's adults also joined the welcoming party, as did a small dog, S, who approached at a trot, sniffed at them, then pulled back, sneezing. 'S!' my sister-in-law scolded, giving him a slap round the head. 'No biting!' S retreated and, from this point on, kept his teeth to himself.

The pair spent most of their time outside, in the little courtyard at the back, apparently because they grew too fond of tearing the wallpaper and grazing on the furniture legs. They feasted upon windfall mulberries from the tree growing wild in the courtyard, leaving barely any appetite for the spinach they were given. When crows and magpies showed an interest in landing, the rabbits would arch their backs and spring forcefully into the air like balls of snow, terrifying all feathered intruders into flight. After a few such warnings, the birds kept a respectful distance. But crows and magpies, my sister-in-law analysed, were no threat – all they wanted was a few beakfuls of food. No, the real danger was a large black cat, often to be found perched on the low courtyard wall, glaring ferociously down. Happily, S and the cat were old enemies – so perhaps there was nothing to worry about.

The children were always playing with them. Confined in small, cupped hands, the rabbits would sit docilely enough, pricking up their ears and twitching their noses. But the moment an escape route opened up, they'd be off. At night, they slept in a small wooden hutch, carpeted with straw, set beneath the eaves overhanging the back window.

After a few months, they began to burrow, their front paws clawing at the earth, their hind legs kicking it away. Within a morning, a deep hole had been made. Surprised observers discovered – on more careful examination – that the belly of one of the rabbits was much larger than the other's. Much of the following day, they were busy lining the burrow with dry grass and leaves.

The discovery was general cause for rejoicing, for now there would be even more little rabbits to entertain us. For the time being, my sister-in-law prohibited the children from picking them up. Even my mother was delighted at their fecundity. Once the babies were weaned, she decided she'd ask for a couple for herself, to keep in her own courtyard.

They now lived in the burrow they had dug for themselves, emerging occasionally for something to eat. Then they disappeared altogether. I wasn't sure whether they'd moved food underground, or whether they were simply eating less. Some ten days later, my sister-in-law told me both of them had come back out. She thought the pregnant one had given birth, but all the babies had died – though the female was swollen with milk, she never seemed to go down into the burrow to feed her children. She sounded rather aggrieved by it all, but there was nothing she could do.

One warm, sunny day, so still even the leaves refused to rustle, I suddenly heard laughter. Looking over, I saw a crowd of people leaning out of my sister-in-law's back window, watching a little rabbit leaping about in the courtyard. Even though it was still much smaller than its parents had been when they had first arrived, it was already able to bound and jump. The children clamoured to tell me they'd seen another one poke its head out of the burrow, then duck back in again – presumably its baby brother.

Whenever the baby rabbit found some grass to eat, its parents would hustle over to snatch the food out of its mouth – even though they didn't then eat it themselves. When the children laughed too loudly, the little rabbit would dart nervously back underground, its parents following on behind, pushing the baby's rear in with their front paws, then sealing the mouth of the hole with mud.

There were always people around the courtyard, or stationed at the back window, observing the comings and goings.

Then the entire family of rabbits disappeared. For days, the weather remained overcast, with my sister-in-law fretting about the black cat again. They were just

hiding from the cold weather, I argued. They'd come back out the moment the sun did.

But when the weather warmed up again, there was still no sign of them. And soon everyone forgot about them.

Except for my sister-in-law, that is, who had still been in the habit of leaving spinach out for them. One day, she discovered in one of the corners of the courtyard another burrow. On re-examining the original burrow, she could just about make out a cluster of claw marks – too big to have been made even by the parent rabbits. Her suspicions about the black cat growing, she decided to investigate further. Returning to the courtyard with a hoe, she dug down, still hoping beyond hope to find the little white rabbits. All she discovered was a pile of rotten straw mixed with rabbit fur, laid out – she imagined – during the period of confinement. But not a trace of the two babies.

Anger, disappointment and sadness drove her on to excavate the new burrow in the corner. As soon as she began disturbing the earth, the larger pair of rabbits scurried out. Overjoyed to discover they had moved house, she went on digging until she discovered that this burrow, too, was lined with straw and rabbit fur, on a bed of which seven tiny, pink rabbits were asleep. Bending down to look, she saw that their eyes were not yet open.

The mystery had been cleared up, and my sister-in-law's original hypothesis proved correct. This time, to guard against further fatalities, she placed the seven tiny rabbits in the wooden hutch, moved it into her own room, then put the mother rabbit in, too, so she'd have no choice but to feed them.

Henceforth, my sister-in-law not only conceived of a violent animosity towards the black cat, but also revised downwards her opinion of the mother rabbit. The first litter, she deduced, must have contained more than the two that were killed; the others must have died because they didn't get a fair share of the milk. There was probably a good deal of truth in this, for two out of the present litter of seven were very thin and weak. Whenever she had a moment, she would hold the mother rabbit down, and give the babies equal turns against her stomach, to make sure they all got the same.

She'd never heard of anyone going to such extraordinary lengths to raise rabbits, Mother remarked; they'd broken the mould when they made her daughter-in-law, truly they had.

But the whole compound rejoiced to see the family of rabbits flourishing as never before.

Somehow, though, I couldn't quite shake off a sense of melancholy at the whole business. I would sit under the lamp, deep into the night, thinking about those two tiny creatures, their lives extinguished so anonymously, without even a warning

bark from S. Years ago, I remembered, when I was living in a guesthouse in Beijing, I'd got up one morning to discover, beneath a large locust tree, a scattered heap of pigeon feathers – the leftovers of a hawk's feast. By noon, the servant had swept the yard clean again, removing all traces of the massacre. Another time, passing by Xisi Arch, I saw a small dog close to death after being run over by a cart. But when I came back that way later, its body had been tidied away, with pedestrians passing unknowingly over the spot where a life had been ended. On summer nights, I would sometimes listen to the long whines of flies – bitten by spiders, I expect. But I soon forgot about them; and no one else ever even heard them.

Then who is to blame? The Creator, perhaps: for generating, then destroying life with such irresponsible excess.

A couple of yowling cats began scrapping outside my window.

'Xun! Did you just hit the cat again?'

'No, they're fighting each other. Why would I have hit it?'

Knowing, and disapproving, of my grudge against cats, my mother got up to investigate, doubtless suspecting me of a vendetta on account of the rabbits. I did, it is true, have something of a family reputation as a cat-hater, often lashing out at them unprovoked – especially if I caught them mating. It wasn't the act of procreation I objected to; it was their sleep-murdering screeching. They didn't need to make so much noise, I thought.

After the black cat killed the little rabbits, I felt more justified than ever in my hatred. Mother, I felt, was far too soft on them – which is why I allowed an edge of impatience into my reply.

Well, if I can't beat the Creator, I might as well join him in his little game of wilful destruction.

That black cat won't be stalking up and down that wall for ever, I resolved to myself, glancing at the bottle of potassium cyanide in my book cabinet.

October 1922

A COMEDY OF DUCKS

‘This place is so lonely,’ the blind Russian poet Eroshenko once complained to me, not long after he and his balalaika had arrived in Beijing.¹ ‘As lonely as the desert!’

Though there was probably truth in what he said, I couldn’t feel it myself. I’d lived here too many years. Spend too long in an orchid-house, and you lose your sense of smell. To me, the city was an unending babble of noise – maybe that was what made him feel lonely.

The absence of spring and autumn in Beijing – now that I noticed. The earth’s warmth had shifted northwards, people who’d grown up and grown old in the capital told me; the weather was much milder than it used to be. But I never felt we had a proper spring or autumn; winter ran seamlessly into summer, and once summer ended, winter took over.

Finding myself at a loose end on one of those nights when winter was busy ending and summer getting ready to begin, I decided to call on Eroshenko. Since arriving in the city, he had lodged with my younger brother Zuoren and his family. As it was late, the household – indeed, the whole world – was peacefully at rest. Except for Eroshenko: propped up in bed, a slight frown knitting his high forehead, his long blond hair cascading down, he was reminiscing about summer nights in Burma.

‘There was music everywhere. In the houses, in the grass, in the trees, a magical symphony of insects. Then there was the hissing of the snakes, harmonizing away...’ He slipped deep into thought, as if trying to lose himself in the memory of it all.

I didn’t know what to say. As I had never heard anything remotely comparable in Beijing, there was nothing to be said in my country’s defence – however much I loved it. Though his eyes were sightless, his hearing was excellent.

‘In Beijing,’ he sighed, ‘you don’t even hear frogs croaking.’

‘Yes, you do!’ I now managed to protest. ‘After the heavy summer rains, you hear frogs and toads everywhere, in the drainage ditches.’

‘Really?’

And within a few days, we were indeed visited by frogs: a dozen tadpoles introduced into the house by Eroshenko, and placed in the small pond in the centre of the courtyard outside his window. Around three feet long by two feet wide, the pond had been dug by my brother and intended for growing lotus. Although the lotus had never taken, the pond looked a perfect home for the tadpoles.

The tadpoles swam in shoals through the water, Eroshenko often strolling over to visit them. ‘Mr Eroshenko,’ one or other of the children would report from time to time, ‘they’ve grown legs.’

‘Really?’ he would beam.

But tending to his amphibians was only one of Eroshenko’s projects. Practising self-sufficiency had always been another of his notions: women, he was often saying, could concentrate on the livestock, while their men worked the land. He was always trying to inveigle friends to grow cabbages in their courtyards, or advising my sister-in-law to keep bees, hens, pigs, cows and camels. In time, and probably in capitulation to Eroshenko, Zuoren’s courtyard became a run-around for chicks – skittering everywhere (on and above ground), pecking at the tender young leaves that carpeted the yard.

The household would often get visits from a farmer selling chicks, and would usually buy a few. Because chicks have delicate stomachs and easily fall ill, very few reached maturity; one of them, indeed, became the hero of the only story that Eroshenko wrote in Beijing – ‘The Chick’s Tragedy’. One morning, the farmer brought along a gaggle of noisy ducklings. Just as Zuoren’s wife was sending him away, Eroshenko rushed out to investigate. Captivated by the cheeping creature the farmer released into his hands, he immediately bought four of them, for eighty coppers apiece.

The ducklings were, in truth, irresistible: tottering along in a golden-yellow phalanx, chirping away to each other. The following day, everyone agreed, someone would go out and buy loaches for them to eat. ‘I’ll pay,’ Eroshenko said.

Off he then went to teach, with everyone else dispersing to their various tasks. When my sister-in-law returned in a little while to feed them some leftover rice, she heard the sound of splashing. Running over to investigate, she discovered the four ducklings having a bath in the pond: turning upside down, probably looking for food. By the time she had got them back on to dry land, the pond water was murky with silt. When at last it cleared again, only a few tendrils of lotus emerged into view. The tadpoles, and their new legs, were nowhere to be seen.

‘Mr Airyshego,’ the smallest of the children rushed over to tell him, as soon as he returned that evening, ‘the frog babies are all gone.’

‘What?’

Zuoren’s wife now emerged, to report on the ducklings’ banquet.

‘Oh, no...’

By the time the ducklings had shed their yellow down, Eroshenko began yearning for Mother Russia, and hurried on to Chita, in Siberia.

By the time the frogs began their summer chorus, the ducklings were fully grown up – two white, two piebald – and their chirps had deepened into quacks. Though the lotus pond was now far too small for them, luckily my brother’s house was built on low-lying ground, and the courtyard flooded the moment the rains fell. And there they spent the summer – splashing, bobbing, flapping, quacking – as happy as could be.

Though summer has now given way to winter, there is still no news of Mr Eroshenko. I’ve no idea where he is now.

But the four ducks are still there quacking, in the middle of our desert.

October 1922

VILLAGE OPERA

Counting back through the last twenty years, I've seen only two Chinese operas – and neither of them in the first ten, finding myself without the desire or the opportunity to do so. On both occasions, I left early, thoroughly unenlightened by the experience.

The first time was in 1912, the first year of the Republic. I'd just arrived in Beijing, and a friend told me I should go, just for the experience – Beijing opera being the best in the country. Telling myself it would be fun, I rushed zealously off with him to a theatre. Too late to catch the start of it, I could hear the crashing of the gongs as we approached. We squeezed in, the stage in front of us flashing red and green, the audience below it a mass of bobbing heads. Gazing around us, we caught sight of a couple of empty places, but when we jostled our way over to claim them, someone started arguing with us. 'You can't sit here!' I eventually made out, my ears buzzing with the noise. 'They're taken!'

We beat a retreat to the back of the theatre, where a man with a glossy queue led us to an empty seat by a side wall. I say seat; it was, more accurately, a skimpy species of trestle – its upper surface three-quarters the width of my thigh, standing on legs twice as long as my shins. Reminded of nothing more than a medieval torture rack, I walked out, scared witless by the very prospect of clambering up.

After putting some distance between me and the theatre, I suddenly heard a voice: 'What on earth's wrong?' I turned round and discovered my bewildered friend trailing along behind me. 'Why didn't you answer when I called you?' he wanted to know.

'Forgive me,' I replied. 'My ears were ringing so much I couldn't hear a thing.'

Whenever I thought back to this curious experience, I concluded that either the opera had been abominable, or evolution had not equipped me to survive in a

theatre audience.

I forget which year my second excursion took place. It was around the time they were raising funds for the Hubei floods, and the celebrated Beijing opera singer Tan Xinpei was still alive. A donation of two dollars bought you a ticket for a charity opera at Supreme Theatre, performed by a whole galaxy of stars – of which Tan Xinpei was one. Once I'd bought a ticket, mainly to get the fundraiser to leave me in peace, some other busybody began lecturing me on the unmissable talents of the great Tan. Promptly forgetting the aural torments I had suffered last time, I found myself rolling up at Supreme Theatre – though in no small part because I'd spent so much on the blasted ticket that I felt I had to get some kind of value for money. Tan Xinpei, I learnt, would be making a late appearance, and as the theatre in question was a fairly modern building, I imagined there would be no need to fight over seats. Setting out overconfidently at nine o'clock, I soon discovered that – yet again – the theatre was packed; that even standing room was in short supply. I squeezed into the crowd, and began watching some squawking actor impersonate an old woman far, far away on the stage itself. Noting two burning paper spills sticking out at the corners of her mouth, the soldier – made up to resemble a demon – standing alongside, and the later entrance of a monk, I eventually deduced that she was meant to be Mulian's mother, waiting for her legendary Buddhist son to rescue her from the torments of hell.¹ Ignorant of which opera star was playing her, I asked a tubby gentleman squeezed in to my left for enlightenment. 'Gong Yunfu!' he tossed out, treating me to a scornful glance. Blushing at my operatic illiteracy, I vowed not to ask anything else. I watched a couple of female leads, then an old man, and a few more unidentified roles; I saw large and small choreographed fights – from nine o'clock until ten o'clock, from ten till eleven, from eleven till half past eleven, from half past eleven till twelve... And still no Tan Xinpei.

I've never waited for anything so patiently in my life; much less in such adverse circumstances – with my overweight neighbour panting to my left, the gongs and drums clanging away on stage, the gaudy banners whirling back and forth, all the way up to midnight. Suddenly, reason reasserted itself: evolution, I realized again, had not equipped me to survive in such an environment. I spun round and began shoving my way out of the crowd. The moment I retreated, I felt a fleshy presence pressing in behind me; my corpulent neighbour, I guessed, had quickly expanded to fill the new space available. Given that a return to my place was now impossible, there was nothing for it but to push on, until eventually the main exit was mine. There was little coming and going on the street outside, apart from a column of rickshaws waiting for fares from the audience and a handful of people outside the main entrance, craning their heads up to study the programme notice, or gazing blankly around them. They must be watching for the women to spill out at the end of

the performance, I thought to myself. They had a wait ahead of them, thanks to Tan Xinpei's non-appearance.

I felt refreshed, as never before, by the sharp cold air of the Beijing night.

That night, I bade farewell for ever to Chinese opera. And for years, I never gave it so much as a thought, striding obliviously past the capital's theatres as if they existed in a parallel dimension.

A few days ago, though, I chanced to spot a Japanese book – its title and author, regrettably, now escape me – about Chinese opera. The point of one of the chapters seemed to be that Chinese opera – with its noisy gongs, shouting, jumping and general talent for stupefying audiences – is far better suited to outdoor than to indoor performance. Viewed at a distance, in the open air, it has its own, easier charm. This observation struck me as something I must have felt subconsciously, though never directly, because I once saw an excellent opera in the open air. It may have been the memory of this that seduced me into my Beijing debacles. I wish I could remember what the book was called.

The opera I'm thinking of was years ago – I couldn't have been older than ten or eleven at the time. In Luzhen, it was the custom for married women – while their mothers-in-law were still running the marital home – to go back to their own parents' home for the summer. Although my paternal grandmother was in robust enough health, my mother had already taken over some of the household responsibilities, so she couldn't spend the whole summer away. The longest she could snatch back home was a few days, tucked in after a visit to the ancestral graves, when she took me off to see my other grandmother. The house was in a isolated little village called Pingqiao, on a riverside near the coast: fewer than thirty families – all farmers and fishermen – and a tiny odds-and-ends shop. But I always enjoyed these visits: everyone invariably made the most tremendous fuss of me, and I gained a few days' respite from my dusty Confucian texts.

I had crowds of friends: because I was an exotic visitor from town, the village children were given special leave by their parents from their regular chores to entertain me. When one family had a guest, the entire village took responsibility for him. Though we were all of an age, most of them were born one or even two generations above me, and since everyone in the village shared the same surname, we were all of the same, loose clan. But for the most part, we got on famously: even if, in our occasional arguments, I ended up taking a swipe at a distant great-great-uncle, no one accused me of disrespect for my elders. Most of the children – ninety-nine per cent of them, I would estimate – were illiterate.

Most of every day was spent digging up earthworms, threading them on to copper-wire hooks and lying on our stomachs on the river bank fishing for prawns. Prawns are waterborne dolts: they will happily insert a hook into their own mouths

with their own pincers. In no time at all, we would catch ourselves a great bowlful, most of which ended up in my stomach. A second pastime was herding the oxen, but they were much trickier creatures. Neither oxen nor buffalo take orders from strangers, and I was easily intimidated, preferring to follow them at a respectful distance, while my friends all laughed at me, forgetting they had ever been impressed by my knowledge of classical poetry.

But the thing I looked forward to above all else was the trip to the village of Zhaozhuang – about two and a half miles away, and much bigger than Pingqiao – to watch opera. As Pingqiao was too small to hold its own opera, every year it would chip in funds to put a production on with Zhaozhuang. It never occurred to me to ask why there had to be an opera every year – maybe to celebrate the spring, to placate the Earth God.

That year – the year I turned ten or eleven – the long-awaited day of the opera at last came around. To everyone's dismay, however, on the morning of the performance we discovered there were no boats for hire: Pingqiao had only one passenger boat that set out every morning and returned in the evening, but it was far too big for our purposes, while all the other boats were too small to be of any use. Inquiries in neighbouring villages came to nothing: every boat had long been promised elsewhere. Grandmother began sulking at the rest of the family for their lack of foresight, while Mother tried to convince her that it didn't matter; that the operas we saw in town – several of them a year – were much better than the village ones. Afraid of Grandmother's temper, Mother implored me to keep my disappointment to myself. I couldn't be allowed to go with other people, either, because she was afraid Grandmother would worry.

I was, in short, to abandon all hope. By that afternoon, my friends had all left to catch the start of the opera. I seemed to hear the echo of gongs and drums in my ears, as I imagined them sitting in the audience, drinking soybean milk.

That day, I had no appetite for fishing – or anything else much; Mother was at her wits' end with me. At dinnertime, Grandmother eventually noticed: she couldn't blame me, she said; it was no way to treat a guest. All the children who'd been to Zhaozhuang gathered after dinner, happily chattering about the opera. Noticing my silence, they all sighed sympathetically. 'What about my uncle's boat?' Shuangxi, the brightest of the bunch, suddenly piped up. 'That should be back by now!' A dozen or so of the other boys clamoured agreement, offering to escort me. I instantly cheered up. But Grandmother was still worried about my safety – they were just children. We couldn't ask one of the adults to take them, Mother objected. They had to work all day – she couldn't ask them to stay up all night, too. 'I'll make sure he's all right!' Shuangxi shouted through their misgivings. 'It's a big boat, and Xun's got a head on his shoulders. And we're all good swimmers!'

That was true enough: and two or three of the dozen could even hold their own in the sea.

Their doubts allayed, Grandmother and Mother smiled and raised no further objections. Off we went, chattering and laughing.

My spirits lifted – even my body felt somehow light with happiness. A little way from the house, beneath the moon, a boat with a white awning lay moored by the bridge. Once everyone had jumped in, Shuangxi took the front pole and Ah-fa the back; the younger boys sat with me in the middle of the boat, while the older ones gathered at the stern. By the time Mother had followed us out to remind us to be careful, we had already pushed off against the side of the bridge, retreating a few feet before gliding forward under it. Once we'd set up two sculls – two to each oar, each shift a third of a mile – we seemed to fly towards Zhaozhuang, chatting, laughing, shouting amid the burbling water, both sides of the river bank lined with dark green fields of beans.

Fresh, vegetable scents – of beans and waterweed – mingled with the mist rising off the river, hazily enveloping the moon. Far off inland, the dusky black of a mountain range rushed past the stern, curved like the spine of an iron beast coiled back to spring. Though the going still felt slow to me. After four shifts at the sculls, Zhaozhuang began to drift dimly into view: we thought we heard singing, and glimpsed torches – from the stage, perhaps, or fishermen's boats.

I was probably hearing bamboo flutes, their calming, beguiling sweetness seeming to invite me to float with them on the fragrant night air.

The torches, we discovered as they drew closer, belonged to fishing boats. And now I realized that what lay before me was not yet Zhaozhuang – directly opposite the stern was a copse of pines I'd visited last year, a broken stone horse collapsed on the ground, a stone sheep crouching in the grass. Past this wood, the boat drew into an inlet and Zhaozhuang truly lay before us.

My eyes were drawn first to the stage, looming up out of an empty common just beyond the village proper – its outline only dimly visible from afar in the moonlit night, reminding me of fantastical sketches of fairytale landscapes I had seen. The boat picked up speed, and soon we could make out the gaudy movements of figures on the stage and, on the river near by, the dark awnings of boats of opera-watchers.

'We'd best watch from here,' Ah-fa proposed. 'There's no room closer in.'

The boat slowed into the bank. As there was indeed no way of getting a closer viewing position, everyone set down their oars. The shrine over the way – set up alongside the stage to allow the gods to enjoy the performance – was closer to the opera than we were. But it didn't matter: we didn't want to moor our white awning next to all those grand black boats – and anyway, there wasn't room.

As we hurriedly moored, we saw a spear-wielding man with a long black beard,

and four banners stuck to his back, fighting with a troupe of bare-chested men. This, Shuangxi told me, was the celebrated acrobat Iron-Head. He could turn eighty-four somersaults in a row – Shuangxi had counted them for himself earlier in the day.

We crowded the stern of the boat, watching the action, but the man with the black beard had no more somersaults in him; a handful of the bare-chested men turned a few, then trooped off, succeeded by a woman who began shrilling an aria. ‘The audiences are always smaller in the evenings,’ Shuangxi went on, ‘so Iron-Head isn’t putting much into it. What’s the point in showing off to an empty house?’ What he said made a lot of sense – the audience was already looking sparse. Because they’d be up at dawn the next day, the villagers couldn’t stay up all night. Most of them had gone to bed, leaving only a scattering of loafers from Zhaozhuang and other villages roundabout. Although the boats with black awnings filled with big local families remained, none of them cared much about the opera – they were just loitering near the stage, socializing over fruit, sweets and melon seeds. Shuangxi was right: it was almost an empty house.

But I didn’t mind about the somersaults. I was waiting for a snake demon, swathed in white cloth, brandishing a staff with a snake’s head. After that, I was looking out for a pouncing tiger, all in yellow. But my patience was not rewarded: the female lead was followed by an elderly singer impersonating a young man. Beginning to feel tired, I asked Guisheng to buy me some soybean milk. ‘There’s none left,’ he soon returned to tell me. ‘I bought two bowlfuls earlier – from a deaf pedlar. But he’s gone home now. I’ll get you a ladle of water.’

Propping myself up, I watched on, without bothering with the water. I couldn’t have described what I was seeing: the performers’ faces began to blur curiously – until I was unable to distinguish one from the other. While the older members of our party chatted away, the younger ones started to yawn. Only when a clown in a scarlet shirt was tied to one of the pillars on the stage and whipped by an actor with a grey beard did everyone start to pay proper attention again – watching and laughing. It was definitely the best thing I saw all night.

But then an actor dressed up as an old woman emerged – my least favourite of all the turns, particularly when they launched into one of those static, seated arias. I glanced around at the rest of our party: they were obviously as disappointed as I was. After an introit in which the singer kept moving up and down the stage, he sat down on a folding chair in the centre. As my sense of foreboding grew, Shuangxi and the others began muttering mutinously. And yet still I patiently waited, for what seemed like an eternity. At one point, when the singer raised his hands, I was convinced he was about to get up – but back down he went, and the aria continued as before. The boat was now a mass of yawning sighs, until Shuangxi – unable to bear any more – spoke out: ‘He might go on past dawn,’ he said. ‘Might as well go back

now.' Immediately agreeing, everyone became as animated as they'd been on the outward journey. Three or four boys made for the stern to pull up the pole, pushing back against the bank to turn about. With the sculls at the ready, we set off, cursing that agonizing old woman.

The moon seemed to have hardly moved – as if we'd been watching the opera for no time at all – and once clear of Zhaozhuang, it beamed down with extraordinary brightness. When I turned to look back at the stage lights, the theatre looked just as it had done on our approach: rising hazily up from the river bank like an enchanted pavilion, enveloped in rosy mist. The music of bamboo flutes caressing our ears, I came to suspect the old woman had finally finished, but was too embarrassed to suggest we go back.

Soon we had left the wood behind us, and were moving forward at a fair clip, through the dense, midnight darkness. Our rowers redoubled their efforts, even as they debated the opera – now complaining, now laughing. This time, the water lapped more vigorously against the prow, as the boat leapt through the spray, like a huge white fish carrying a crowd of children on its back. As we powered past them, a handful of old fishermen working the night stopped their skiffs to watch and cheer.

Around half a mile from Pingqiao, the boat slowed, our rowers complaining of hunger and fatigue; it was hours since they had last eaten. Now it was Guisheng's turn to have a bright idea: the broad beans were ready right now, he said, and there was plenty of firewood on board. Why shouldn't we grab a few handfuls for a midnight snack? Everyone agreed, and the boat pulled up next to a dark field bristling with healthy bean plants.

'Hey, Ah-fa,' Shuangxi called out, jumping on to the bank and pointing at the fields. 'These are your family's, and those are Liu Yi's. Which should we take?'

We followed him on to the bank. 'Hold on,' Ah-fa replied. 'Let me go and have a look... Take ours,' he said, straightening up after a couple of minutes' fieldwork. 'They're the biggest.' With a shout of agreement, everyone scattered over Ah-fa's field, tossing armfuls of pods into the boat. Ah-fa's mother would throw a fit, Shuangxi reckoned, if we took any more. So everyone took another armful from old Mr Liu Yi's field.

A few of the older boys went slowly on with the rowing, while a few more built a fire towards the back of the boat, and the younger ones and I shelled the beans. The beans were quickly cooked, and the boat left floating on the water while we gathered round, wolfing them down in our fingers. Our meal finished, we started moving again, while those excused from rowing washed the pot and threw the pods into the river to destroy all evidence of our illicit feast. Shuangxi began to fret about having used his uncle's salt and firewood: the old man kept careful accounts and was bound to scold him for it. But after we'd talked it through, he decided not to worry. If he

started laying in to us, we'd tell him to give back the tallow branch he'd scavenged from the river bank last year; *and* tell him he had ringworm.

'We're back!' Shuangxi suddenly sang out from the prow. 'Safe and sound. Didn't I say we'd be fine?'

Looking ahead, I saw Pingqiao before me. Shuangxi was talking to someone waiting at the foot of the bridge – my mother. I moved to the front of the boat as it entered the village; once it was securely moored, we streamed off on to the bank. It was gone midnight, why were we back so late? Mother scolded, before smiling and inviting everyone back for fried rice.

Explaining we'd already had a snack, and were tired out, everyone went back home to bed.

It was almost noon before I got up the next day. As Shuangxi's uncle didn't seem to have challenged our appropriation of his firewood or salt, in the afternoon I went fishing for prawns as usual.

'Shuangxi, did you and your gang of pirates steal my beans yesterday? You squashed as many as you picked.' Looking up, I saw Liu Yi punting by, back from selling his beans, a large pile of them still in the belly of the boat.

'Yup,' Shuangxi cheerfully confessed. 'We took yours because we needed a few extra – for our guest. Stop frightening my prawns!'

Catching sight of me, Liu Yi rested his pole. 'A guest?' he said, smiling. 'Ah, excellent – excellent. Enjoy the opera, Master Xun?'

'Oh, yes,' I nodded.

'And the beans?'

'Oh, yes,' I nodded again.

'Ha! Spoken like a true man of learning!' Liu Yi gave a jubilant thumbs-up, becoming disconcertingly animated. 'Those beans of mine, they're grown from hand-picked seeds. People round here – they can't tell the bad from the good. Some even say mine aren't any better than other people's. I'll bring your mother a load more this afternoon...' He then picked up his pole and set off again.

When Mother called me in to dinner, a large bowl of boiled broad beans was sitting on the table – a present to us from Liu Yi. He'd praised me to the skies, Mother reported: 'Wise before his time – he'll come top of the examinations, top of the empire. Mark my words.' Somehow, though, they didn't taste nearly as good as they had done the night before.

Truly, I've never since eaten beans as delicious – or enjoyed an opera so much.

October 1922

HESITATION

*In the morning I started out from Mount Cangwu;
Evening brought me to the Garden of Paradise.
I would have lingered in its immortal confines,
But the sun was fast sinking to the west.
I ordered Xihe to stay the sun-steeds' gallop,
To stand watch, barring their entry into Mount Yanzi.
Long, long had been my road and far, far the journey:
I would go up and down to seek my heart's desire.*

Qu Yuan,¹ 'Encountering Sorrow'

NEW YEAR'S SACRIFICE

It's the end of the lunar year – the end told by the old and not the Western calendar – that brings a year to its proper close, as villages, towns, even heaven itself mark its approach. Flashes of lightning through heavy, grey evening clouds are answered by the dull explosions of firecrackers, bidding farewell to the Kitchen God as he departs for heaven to make his annual report on mankind. Close by, the blasts have an ear-splitting ferocity, the faint smell of gunpowder hanging in the air before the noise has died away. It was on one such night that I returned to the old place, to my home town: Luzhen. Since there was no real home left for me any more, I took up temporary lodging in the house of an old gentleman by the name of Mr Lu. As he was a distant relative of mine, the generation above me, I addressed him as Uncle. A diehard Neo-Confucian of the old Imperial College,¹ he seemed barely changed: a touch older, that was all, and still beardless. After a little polite chit-chat and the observation that I had put on weight, he launched into a great tirade against reformist politics. Though I knew his ire was directed more at old liberals like Kang Youwei² than at me specifically, as our conversation was not taking a particularly amicable direction, soon enough I found myself alone in the study.

After a late start the following morning, I called on a number of friends and relatives after lunch; the next day followed the same pattern. Again, they seemed unchanged: a few years older, that was all. Every household was frantically preparing for the New Year's Sacrifice – the elaborately reverent end-of-year ritual to welcome in the God of Fortune and to plead for good luck over the coming year. Geese and hens are slaughtered, pork bought – everything scrubbed and scoured until the women's arms, some still enclosed in bracelets of twisted silver, are soaked red. When all the cooking is done, chopsticks are stuck into the offerings and, at dawn, the bowls of food are set out, the incense and candles lit, and the God of Fortune invited to come and enjoy the feast. Once the devotions – from which women are banned – have been made, the firecrackers are lit. So it is in every family, every year, as long as they can afford to buy food for the offerings and firecrackers; and so it was this year.

That New Year's Eve, an overcast sky began disintegrating into snowflakes as big as plum-blossom petals that mingled with the smoke and prevailing bustle, adding a kind of frenzied confusion to the town. By the time I took refuge again in my uncle's study, the roof tiles were carpeted in white, brightening the interior of the room and the enormous vermilion rubbing on the wall – of the character for

‘Longevity’, written by the celebrated Daoist hermit Chen Tuan.³ A pair of couplets had once hung either side. One had fallen off and now lay, slackly rolled up, on a rectangular table; the other – an inscription by the great Neo-Confucian scholar Zhu Xi – remained in place: ‘When principles are grasped, the mind is at peace.’ Bored, under-occupied, I glanced through the piles of volumes on the table beneath the window, but found only a set – probably incomplete – of an early eighteenth-century dictionary, a collection of Neo-Confucian writings and a Qing exegesis of the four Confucian classics. I determined to leave the next day.

In truth, it was recalling an encounter of the previous day with Xianglin’s wife that confirmed me in my anxiety to be off. That afternoon, I’d been visiting a friend in the east of the town and, as I left, I spotted her by the river. As she was staring straight at me, I knew she was heading in my direction. Of all the people I met on this visit to Luzhen, she was the most changed. Hair that five years ago had been grey was now completely white. Her ashen face gaunt with deprivation, she looked years, decades beyond her true age – around forty. The expression of haunting sadness she had once worn was gone, replaced by a kind of facial paralysis; only the occasional movement of her eyeballs indicated she remained a functioning organism. A bamboo basket in one hand contained a cracked, empty bowl; the other hand grasped a tall bamboo staff, split at the bottom. She had obviously become a beggar.

I waited for her to ask me for money.

‘Back for New Year?’ she asked.

‘Yes.’

‘You’re just the person I’ve been looking for.’ A light suddenly entered her glassy eyes. ‘Someone who can read and write, who’s seen the world. I need to ask you something.’

I stood still, perplexed by the turn the conversation was taking.

‘After a person’s died,’ she spoke with a soft, secretive urgency, coming a few steps closer, ‘after a person’s died – does their soul go on living?’

Her eyes now fixed upon me: my back prickled with terror. No unexpected schoolroom interrogation had ever induced such blind panic in me. I’d never given the question of what happened to the soul after death a moment’s thought – but what was I to say to her now? Most people round here believe in ghosts, I thought, hesitating. But she seems to have her doubts. Or maybe it was hope – hope that there were ghosts, or hope that there weren’t. But which?... No point in making a person even more miserable at the end of a miserable life; just say yes.

‘Maybe... I-I think,’ I stammered out.

‘So there is a hell?’

‘Ah – hell?’ I backtracked, wrong-footed by her follow-up. ‘Hell... Well, yes,

logically, there ought to be... And yet... does it really matter?’

‘When someone in your family’s died, will you get to see them after you die?’

‘So what you’re asking is, will you see them again...?’ I knew now that the full depths of my idiocy had been exposed; that none of my hesitations or subterfuges had been of the slightest use. ‘In truth,’ I recanted, my nerve broken, ‘I don’t really know, for sure... I don’t really know much about souls, either...’

I fled back to my uncle’s house, taking immediate advantage of her failure to produce another question. I was deeply unsettled. Had I made things worse for her, I wondered, by replying in the way I did? Seeing everyone else busy with their own New Year’s Sacrifice probably made her all the more conscious of her own loneliness. But had she meant something else altogether? Had she had a premonition of some kind? If she *had* meant something else, and something happened because of what I’d said to her, then I would be responsible – to a degree – for whatever it was... But then I laughed at myself: it was just a random encounter, nothing more than that. And here I was, obsessively going back over it – no wonder certain educationalists have diagnosed me a neurotic. Anyway, I was perfectly insured with that last ‘I don’t really know.’ Even if something did now happen, it could have nothing to do with me.

‘I don’t really know’ – what a useful little phrase it is. Brave young idiots rush in to resolve other people’s doubts and uncertainties, fixing on physicians, then risking criticism if the results are less than ideal. But top everything off with ‘I don’t really know’, and you sail clear of any possible blame or reproach. Now, more than ever, I felt the indispensability of this phrase – even when my interlocutor was a beggar-woman.

But still I felt unsettled, and kept returning to it in my thoughts all through the next day, as though it were some kind of ill omen. Tediously confined to my uncle’s study, beneath a sky gloomy with snow, my feelings of unease only grew. There was nothing for it but to leave for the city the next day. I wondered if the shark’s-fin soup served in one of my old haunts, the Fuxing – always outstanding value at a dollar a bowl – had gone up in price. Although none of my old crowd was around any more, I was determined to have myself a bowlful, even if I sat down to it alone... Whatever happened, I would leave the next day.

Because things were never working out for me the way I wanted them to, I feared my encounter with Xianglin’s wife would prove no exception. And as usual I was cheated of my happy ending. Late that afternoon, I caught a few snatches of conversation in one of the inner rooms of the house. Presently, the voices fell quiet – leaving only my uncle fulminating as he strode away: ‘It had to be New Year, didn’t it... A bad lot!’

I was first bewildered, then uneasy, as if this throwaway comment of his was in

some way connected to me. Glancing out of the door, I could see no one about. When eventually the hired help came in to make tea before dinner, I took my chance to ask for information.

‘Who was my uncle angry with just now?’

‘Xianglin’s wife, of course!’ the servant bluntly replied.

‘Why, what’s wrong with her?’ I quickly pressed on.

‘She’s gone.’

‘Dead?’ I almost jumped out of my seat, feeling a sudden tightness in my chest. The colour must surely have drained from my face. But as he didn’t look up at me, not even once, he noticed nothing.

‘When did she die?’ I now asked, trying to steady myself.

‘Last night, or maybe this morning. I don’t know.’

‘What did she die of?’

‘Of poverty – what else?’ His verdict impassively delivered, he left, still without a glance at me.

But my panic was transient. Soon, I realized the thing I had dreaded was now past; that I no longer needed to dwell obsessively on the business, on my ‘I don’t really know’ or his ‘of being poor’. I became steadily easier in my mind, troubled only by the occasional twinge of discomfort. Uncle was a solemn presence through dinner. I wanted to ask about the deceased, but I knew that, though he was supposed to take the Neo-Confucian view that ghosts and spirits spring from the duality of nature, he was a man ruled by superstition. Death and disease were taboo subjects so close to the New Year’s Sacrifice. If something unavoidably came up, you could pick your way round it with allusions and euphemisms. But such skill lay beyond me, and I had to bite back my questions. The grim set to his face made me suspect he thought I had deliberately chosen this difficult moment to torment him; that I, too, was a bad lot. To mollify him, I immediately told him of my plan to leave for the city the following day. He made no great effort to keep me. Dinner was wound up in oppressive silence.

Another snowy winter’s night fell early over the town. Inside, all was hustle and bustle; outside, quiet reigned. The new flakes fell on to an already thick blanket of snow; if you listened out, you could even hear the rustle of their landing, sharpening the overwhelming sense of stillness. I sat alone beneath the yellow light of the vegetable-oil lamp, thinking about Xianglin’s wife, discarded by those she had lived alongside, like a useless plaything of which they had wearied. And yet she had left her mark: the people around her, leading their happy lives, had probably felt bewildered by her tenacious impulse to go on living. But now she had at last been swept tidily away. I didn’t know whether I believed in an afterlife or not; but if those with nothing to live for can stop living, removing their tiresome selves from the

orbit of those who are sick of the sight of them, then death is an excellent expedient – both for the person concerned, and for those who have to put up with them. I listened quietly to the snowflakes whispering against my window and slowly began to relax, as the fragments of her life that I had seen or heard began to cohere.

She hadn't been born in Luzhen. Early one winter, when my uncle was looking for a new maidservant, old Mrs Wei – a middle-woman in these sorts of transactions – brought her along to the house. Around twenty-five or twenty-six at the time, she wore a black skirt, a blue jacket and a lighter blue waistcoat, her hair tied up into a bun with a white cord. Though her face had a sallow, greenish tinge to it, her cheeks were pink. Mrs Wei introduced her as Xianglin's wife, the neighbour of one of her mother's relatives. Her husband had died, so she'd left home to look for work. Uncle frowned; my aunt knew what was worrying him – the fact she was a widow. But seeing as she had a good sturdy look, with big, strong hands and feet, and kept her eyes fixed docilely on the ground and let others do the talking for her, she seemed the kind of person who would know her place and do what she was told. And so, my uncle's scowl notwithstanding, she was kept on. During the trial period, she seemed to work harder even than the men, toiling all day without a rest. On the third day she was formally hired, at five hundred coppers a month.

Everyone called her Xianglin's wife. Though no one ever asked her what her surname was, it was probably Wei, as she had come from the village of Weijiashan – literally the 'Mountain of the Wei Family', where everyone shared the clan surname. She said very little, speaking out only when spoken to, and briefly even then. It took a good ten days to reveal she had a tyrannical mother-in-law; a brother-in-law around ten years old, who could gather firewood; and that she had lost her husband – a woodcutter, too, around ten years her junior – that spring. That was about the sum total of what was known of her.

As the days flew by, her prodigious capacity for work continued. On she went, not minding what she was given to eat, never sparing herself. Everyone said the Lus' maid worked better than a man. Single-handedly she took charge of the New Year's preparations: dusting, mopping, slaughtering the chickens and the geese, cooking through the night; no extra hired help was required. Yet she seemed content: her mouth tilting up into a smile, her face growing fairer and plumper.

A little after New Year, though, she returned from washing the rice by the river rather paler than usual. Just now, she said, she'd seen a man loitering a way off on the other bank. She was worried he was an older cousin of her husband, come looking for her. When my aunt – surprised by this string of revelations – tried to find out more, Xianglin's wife went silent.

'I don't like it,' Uncle frowned, when he heard. 'Sounds like she's run away from

home.'

And indeed she had.

Around ten days later, just when everyone was forgetting what had happened, Mrs Wei reappeared, this time bringing with her a woman in her early thirties, whom she introduced as their maidservant's mother-in-law – the late Xianglin's mother. She conducted herself with unusual self-possession, for a peasant from the mountains. After exchanging a few pleasantries, she explained apologetically that she was here to take her daughter-in-law back home. It was the busy farming season, and they were short on labour – everyone at home was either too old or too young.

'We can't stop her mother-in-law taking her back,' Uncle said.

Her wages were reckoned as coming to one thousand seven hundred and fifty coppers; the entire untouched sum – which she had kept deposited at the Lus' – was handed over to her mother-in-law, who then picked up Xianglin's wife's clothes, thanked Uncle and Aunt, and left. It was now noon.

'Where's the rice?' Aunt eventually exclaimed, her stomach reminding her it was lunchtime. 'Didn't Xianglin's wife go out to wash it?'

Everyone went off in search of the rice basket: my aunt checked first in the kitchen, then in the hall, then in the bedrooms – no sign of it. After looking unsuccessfully about outside, Uncle walked all the way down to the river, where at last he found it, sitting upright on the bank, next to a bunch of vegetables.

That morning, he was told, while he was out, a boat – its white awning pulled fully across – had been spotted moored on the river. No one knew whose it was, though neither was the question given much thought. Just as Xianglin's wife knelt down to wash the rice, two men – both peasants from the mountains, by the looks of them – rushed out of the boat. One had grabbed her, then, helped by the other, dragged her down into the boat. After screaming a while, she fell silent – probably because she had been gagged. Then a couple of women stepped on to the bank: Mrs Wei, with someone they didn't recognize. No one got a proper look at what was going on in the boat, though Xianglin's wife seemed to be lying on the deck, tied up.

'What a dreadful business!' said Uncle. 'All the same...'

Aunt cooked the rice herself that noon, while their son, Aniu, saw to the fire.

Mrs Wei returned after lunch.

'What a dreadful business!' repeated Uncle.

'What on earth do *you* want?' Aunt spat at her, as she washed the bowls. 'How dare you come back here? First you bring her to us, then you help kidnap her back! Causing all this trouble – making us look like idiots! Really – what will everyone think of us?'

'I was tricked,' the old woman wailed. 'I came back to explain. When she asked me to find her a place, I had no idea her mother-in-law didn't know about it. Please

accept my apologies – I'm too old and stupid. But you've always given people a second chance, to make up for their mistakes – I'll find you someone better, I promise.'

'All the same...' began Uncle.

And so the matter of Xianglin's wife was closed and, not long afterwards, forgotten.

Except by Aunt, who was always going on about Xianglin's wife, because most of the maidservants she subsequently hired turned out to be unsatisfactory: either lazy, or greedy, or both. 'I wonder how she is now?' she would mutter to herself, whenever she brought the subject up – meaning that she hoped she'd come back. In the first month of the next lunar year, this hope finally died.

As the month drew to a close, a rather tipsy Mrs Wei called to wish the family a happy New Year. She was later than usual, she said, because she'd been staying with her mother's family a few days. Inevitably, the subject of Xianglin's wife came up.

'Well,' Mrs Wei chattered merrily, 'things are looking up for her. Her mother-in-law came to drag her back because she'd already been promised to Mr Ho's sixth in Hojia. She got hitched a few days after they got her home.'

Aunt was astonished: 'What a thing for a mother-in-law to do!'

'You've money to spare, you would say that. Poor country people like us – we can't afford to be too particular. She's got another son who wants a wife. She needed the bride price from remarrying her daughter-in-law for the dowry. She's sharp as a tack, and tough with it. She had it all planned – got her married off in the mountains. She wouldn't have got much for her if she'd married her to someone from the same village. But it's not often you get a woman who'll marry into the back of beyond, so she got eighty thousand coppers for her. And now the younger son's married: his wife set them back only fifty thousand, and she's still got over ten thousand left, even after the wedding. She had it all planned, all right!'

'Didn't Xianglin's wife mind?'

'It wasn't up to her. She made a row, of course. But they tied her up, threw her in the bridal chair and lugged her off to the husband's house. Then it was just a case of getting the garland on her, forcing her to kneel and locking her in the bedroom. Job done. But Xianglin's wife was quite something – the fuss she made, I mean. Everyone said it was because she'd been working for an educated family. I've seen a thing or two, let me tell you. When women get remarried, some of them scream and some of them cry, some try to kill themselves, some refuse to bow at the altar, some even smash the wedding candles. But Xianglin's wife was something else. First, she screamed and shouted herself hoarse all the way to Hojia. Then after they'd pulled her out of the bridal chair, they couldn't get her to kneel – not even with two men

and her brother-in-law forcing her. The moment they let go of her, just a little bit, she smashed a great big hole in her head against the incense table. They couldn't stop the bleeding – not even with two handfuls of incense ash and two pieces of red cloth to bind it. It took every pair of hands they could muster to get her locked in the bedroom – and you should have heard her curse, my goodness...' Shaking her head, Mrs Wei looked down at the floor and fell silent.

'Then what happened?' Aunt asked.

'I heard she didn't get up the next day.' She looked back up at Aunt.

'And after that?'

'Oh, she got up after that. By the end of the year, she had a baby, a boy. He'll turn one this year. While I was at my mother's just now, a few of the villagers went to call on the Hos. They said they'd seen the pair of them – both thriving, mother and son. No mother-in-law to worry about, a strong husband, with lots of work in him; a house of their own. Things are looking up for her, and no mistake.'

Aunt stopped mentioning Xianglin's wife.

But one autumn – probably a couple of years after the news of her change in fortune had been put about – Xianglin's wife stood again in Uncle's hall. A round basket, shaped like a water chestnut, she had placed on a table; her bedding lay under the eaves. She wore the same black skirt, blue jacket and lighter blue waistcoat as before, her hair still tied back with a white cord. Her face still had a greenish-yellow tinge to it; but the pink had left her cheeks. Tears hung at the corners of eyes cast dully down at the floor. As before, she was in the company of Mrs Wei, who – her features arranged into an expression of charitable indulgence – verbosely explained matters to Aunt.

'... Heaven truly moves in mysterious ways. We all thought her husband looked strong enough for anything, but there he was – carried off by typhoid, in the prime of life. He'd shaken it off, then he ate a bowl of cold rice, and the fever came back. She still had her son, though, and she could work, chopping wood, picking tea, raising silkworms. She would have managed. Then her child was taken by a wolf! A wolf in the village – at the end of spring! And now she's got no one. Her uncle's taken the house and thrown her out. She's nowhere to go except back to her old place. She's no other ties now, and I happened to notice you were needing a new servant, so I thought we'd try our luck. Better to have someone who already knows her way around the place...'

'I was so stupid,' Xianglin's wife now picked up the story, raising her lifeless eyes. 'I knew wolves came down into the villages when it snowed, because there was nothing to eat in the mountains. But I didn't know they came in spring, too. Soon as it was light, I got up, opened the door, and put some beans in a little basket, then told

Ah-mao to sit on the doorstep and shell them. Such a good little boy, he was, always doing whatever I told him, so out he went. I was out back chopping wood and washing rice. After I'd got the rice in the pot, I thought I'd steam the beans, too. But when I called out to him, he didn't reply, and when I went out to look, all I could see was the beans, scattered all over the ground – but no Ah-mao. He wouldn't have gone to someone else's house to play. I asked everywhere – no sign of him. Then I started to get worried, and begged my neighbours to go out looking for him. That afternoon, they got as far as the valley, where someone spotted one of his little shoes caught on a bramble. This was a bad sign, they all said – looked like he'd been taken by a wolf. A bit further in, they found him, in the lair, his guts eaten away, his little hand still holding tight on to that basket...' She broke down into sobs.

Though Mrs Wei's exposition had left her undecided, tears reddened Aunt's eyes by the time Xianglin's wife was finished. After further, brief thought, Aunt told her to take her basket and bedroll to the servants' quarters. Mrs Wei sighed, as if relieved of a heavy burden. Looking much easier in herself than she had done on arrival, the returnee set out her bedroll, just as she had done in the past, without needing to be reminded. And so she resumed her career as a maidservant in Luzhen.

Everyone still called her Xianglin's wife.

And yet she seemed very different. After a few days back at the Lus', her employers began to feel she wasn't as quick as before: that her memory was much worse; that her lifeless face never smiled. Soon, Aunt began to articulate her discontent – at least in her tone of voice. Uncle had frowned when she'd rejoined the household, just as he had done the first time. But he had put up no substantial resistance to her return, given the problems they had lately had with maidservants. All he had done was offer Aunt a few quiet words of warning: however tragic someone like Xianglin's wife might seem, she would bring her bad luck with her. She could help out around the house, but she mustn't touch anything to do with the sacrifices – Aunt would have to prepare all the food herself. If it wasn't ritually clean, the ancestors wouldn't touch it.

Before, Xianglin's wife had been rushed off her feet during the all-important sacrifices, but now there was nothing for her to do. When the table had been positioned in the middle of the main hall, and the tablecloth tied down around it, she began setting out wine cups and chopsticks as she had done before.

'Put them back!' Aunt panicked. 'I'll do it!'

Xianglin's wife pulled back her hand, embarrassed, then picked up a candlestick.

'Put that down!' Aunt fussed again. 'I can manage.'

Xianglin's wife circled about, trying unsuccessfully to find something she could do, then walked dazedly off. The only task available to her that day was to sit by the stove and mind it didn't go out.

Though everyone in the town still called her Xianglin's wife, though they still spoke to her, there was no longer any warmth in their smiles or in their voices. Ignoring the change in them, she kept her eyes fixed ahead of her and concentrated on telling everyone she met her tragedy.

'I was so stupid,' she said. 'I knew wolves came down into the villages when it snowed, because there was nothing to eat in the mountains. But I didn't know they came in spring, too. As soon as it was light, I got up, opened the door, and put some beans in a little basket, then told Ah-mao to sit on the doorstep to shell them. Such a good little boy, he was, you know, always doing whatever I told him, so out he went. I was out back chopping wood and washing rice. After I'd got the rice in the pot, I wanted to steam the beans, too. But when I called out Ah-mao! he didn't reply, and when I went out to look, all I could see was the beans, scattered all over the ground – but no Ah-mao. I asked everywhere – no sign of him. Then I started to get worried, and begged my neighbours to go out looking for him. That afternoon, they got as far as the valley, where someone spotted one of his little shoes caught on a bramble. He's done for, they all said – he must have been taken by a wolf. A bit further in, there they found him, in the lair, his guts eaten away, his poor little hand still holding tight on to that basket...' She broke down into sobs.

Her story certainly had an impact on those who heard it. Men would walk awkwardly away, the smirk fading from their faces, while women exchanged their looks of contempt for sympathetic profusions of tears. Some old women – those who hadn't heard her recitation about town – would seek her out specially to hear her tragic story. When she broke into sobs, their own tears, ready at the corners of their eyes, would also gush out; then, with a sigh, they would leave, perfectly satisfied and still discussing it animatedly among themselves.

Over and over she repeated it, gathering small groups of listeners about her. But soon everyone knew it too well – from memory – and even the town's most devout old lady Buddhists were left unmoved. The moment she began, her audiences felt only irritation.

'I was so stupid – '

'Yes, yes, you knew wolves came down into the villages when it snowed, because there was nothing to eat in the mountains,' they would impatiently interrupt before stalking off.

She would stand there, mouth hanging stupidly open, watching as they distanced themselves, before moving on herself – as if she, too, were bored with her own tragedy. And yet she went on trying other prompts to bring up her story – small baskets, beans, other people's children.

'If my Ah-mao were still alive,' she'd say if she saw a child one or two years old, 'he'd be as big as that...'

Frightened by the look in her eyes, the children would tug their mothers away. Again, she would be left alone, walking listlessly off. In time, everyone learnt to tease her about this new trick of hers.

‘If your Ah-mao were still alive,’ they would ask, trying not to smirk, whenever a child happened to be in sight, ‘wouldn’t he be about as big as that?’

Perhaps it hadn’t yet dawned on her that her sorrow, having been chewed deliciously for so long, had now been reduced to dregs, to be spat out in disgust. But even she could read the mockery in their smiles, comprehending that no response was required, beyond a silent glance across at them.

Around ten days before New Year, Luzhen always turned into a hive of activity. Even with an extra man about the house, hired to help out with the celebrations, there was still too much to do at Uncle’s, so they asked a Mrs Liu to lend a hand with slaughtering the chickens and geese. Since she was a Buddhist, though, she refused to kill living things and would only wash the sacrificial vessels. Xianglin’s wife sat idly around, watching the fire, then watching Mrs Liu at work. A fine snow was slowly falling.

‘I was so stupid,’ she sighed, staring off into the middle distance, as if no one else was listening.

‘There you go again,’ Mrs Liu glanced impatiently at her. ‘Is that scar from when you smashed your head when you got married?’

She mumbled a yes.

‘Why did you go along with it in the end?’

‘What?’

‘You must have wanted it, or else – ’

‘He was too strong for me.’

‘I don’t believe you. You’re strong, too – you could have fought him off. You must have wanted it in the end, then pretended afterwards he was too strong for you.’

‘I... I’d like to see how you’d have managed,’ she smiled.

Mrs Liu’s sour frown also broke into a smile, puckering her face up like a walnut, her tiny, shrivelled pupils darting from her interlocutor’s forehead to her eyes. Discomforted by her scrutiny, Xianglin’s wife stopped smiling and looked away, out at the snowflakes.

‘You really shouldn’t have, you know,’ Mrs Liu went on, confidentially. ‘Much better if you’d struggled a bit harder, or dashed your brains out against the table. Just think about it: in less than two years, you were punished. When you go down to hell, your two dead husbands will fight over you, and then the King of the Underworld will have to saw you in two, for them both to share.’

Xianglin’s wife’s face was engulfed in terror; no one had ever said anything about

this in the mountains.

‘Best try and pay your dues as quick as you can. Go to the Temple of the Earth God and buy a threshold, to stand in for your body. Then tens of thousands of people will stamp over you, to punish you for your crime in this life, so you won’t suffer for it after you die.’

Though she said nothing, Xianglin’s wife was left deeply troubled by Mrs Liu’s advice. The next morning, she had enormous dark circles around her eyes. As soon as breakfast was over, she took herself off to the Temple of the Earth God in the west of the town, to buy a threshold. Though he wouldn’t sell it to her at first, the altar attendant eventually relented when she burst into tears. It cost her twelve thousand coppers.

She had given up talking to other people some time ago, because everyone had wearied of Ah-mao’s story. But when reports of her conversation with Mrs Liu spread about town, it reawakened their interest in her. Once again, people sought her out – but this time to discuss the scar on her forehead.

‘Why did you go along with it, Xianglin’s wife?’ asked one.

‘You might as well have not bothered smashing your head,’ someone else added, looking at the scar.

Realizing – from their smiles, from their tone of voice, perhaps – that they were mocking her, she merely stared. Soon, she didn’t even bother to turn round. Every day, she went silently about her tasks: running her errands, scrubbing the floor, washing rice and vegetables, all the while wearing on her forehead her badge of shame. As the year neared its end, she asked Aunt for her accumulated wages, exchanged them for twelve silver dollars, then requested leave to go to the western quarter. Before the next mealtime had come around, she had returned, looking more at ease with herself, her eyes less glassy. She had, she happily told Aunt, offered up her threshold to the Earth God.

As the winter solstice came again, bringing with it the sacrifice, she worked harder than ever. When she saw Aunt setting out the sacrificial objects, lifting the table into the centre of the hall with Aniu, she confidently approached, to take up the wine cups and chopsticks.

‘Put those down!’ Aunt screeched.

The colour draining from her face, Xianglin’s wife whipped back her hand, as if branded. This time, she made no move towards the candlesticks. There she stood, until Uncle told her to leave when he came in to burn incense. This – this transformed her. The next day, her eyes seemed sunken with dejection, as she crept about, more listlessly than ever. Like a mouse venturing out of its hole in daylight, she was terrified of everything: of the darkness, of shadows, of other people – even her employers. Sometimes she would simply sit, blank and stupid, as if carved out

of wood. Within six months, her hair began to grey, her memory to deteriorate further. Often, she would forget even to wash the rice.

‘What’s wrong with Xianglin’s wife?’ Aunt sometimes said to her face, as a warning. ‘I shouldn’t have taken her back on.’

But on she went, just the same, an incurable case. They decided to try to get rid of her – send her back to Mrs Wei. When I was still living in Luzhen, they were only talking about it. But I suppose, from how things turned out, they must have done it in the end. Whether she started begging as soon as she left Uncle’s house, or went back to Mrs Wei’s for a while first, I can’t say.

I woke with a start to a particularly raucous blaze of firecrackers near by. The yellow flame in the lamp next to me had shrunk to the size of a bean. Then I heard a further sequence of spluttering bangs: Uncle was making his New Year’s Sacrifice. Dawn could not be far off. Somewhere in the distance, I heard the faint, machine-gun rattle of yet more firecrackers, as a dense cloud of sound and snowflakes blanketed the town. I accepted its comfortable, torpid embrace, letting the New Year’s Sacrifice cleanse me of the doubts and misgivings that had troubled me all day. Having sated themselves on offerings and incense, the spirits of heaven and earth were lurching drunkenly about the sky, preparing to bestow joy everlasting on the good burghers of Luzhen.

7 February 1924

UPSTAIRS IN THE TAVERN

Travelling down from the north, I broke my journey south-east with a detour to the part of the country I'd grown up in. Along the way, I found myself stopping off in S—, a town some ten miles – less than half a day's travel by small boat – from the old family home, and where I'd once taught for a year. A recent snowfall had brought a chilly desolation to the midwinter landscape, and a combination of apathy and nostalgia drove me to take a room at the Luosi, a hotel that had opened some time after I'd moved on. Since S— was a small place, I tried looking up a few of my old colleagues, but they all seemed to have gone, and who knows where. I walked past the gates of my old school, but everything about it looked different; even its name had changed. Within four hours, my sentimental enthusiasm had evaporated, and I was rather regretting this unnecessary diversion.

My hotel offered room but no board, so food had to be ordered in from outside. It was tasteless when it came – I might as well have been eating mud. My window faced on to a wall, piebald with stains, to which a withered moss was clinging. Above, fine snowflakes had begun to whirl down again from a pale, leaden sky. As I had only picked at my lunch, and had no other distraction in prospect, my thoughts quickly turned to a small tavern – the Yishi – that I had once frequented, not far from the hotel. Locking my door, I immediately set off – not in search of intoxication; merely to escape the ennui of travel. Outside, the tavern looked much as it had always done: the same narrow, drab, damp façade; the same shabby sign. But inside, I recognized no one, neither the bar manager nor the waiters: I was a stranger in my old haunt. Yet I found myself climbing once more up those familiar old bannistered stairs in the corner. The narrow first-floor room was cramped, as ever, with five small tables; the only change was to the back window, its old wooden lattice newly inlaid with glass.

‘A catty of Shaoxing wine... and ten bean-curd fritters, with plenty of chilli sauce!’

Giving my order to the waiter – who had followed me upstairs – I made for the table by the back window. The room was empty, leaving me free to take the best seat, with a view down over a ruined garden below that probably didn’t belong to the tavern. I’d gazed over it many times, sometimes on snowy days. But seeing it now, with eyes used to the north of China, I found much to wonder at. A scattering of ancient plum trees were in full defiant flower, as if oblivious to the midwinter snow. Perhaps a dozen fiery red camellias were blooming amid a dense covering of dark green leaves on a tree by a ruined pavilion – there was something furiously, contemptuously bright about their contrast with the snow, which I imagined directed at me and my aimless travels. I was reminded again of the nourishing moisture of southern snow – clinging lustrously to anything it touches – so unlike the dry snow of the north, filling the air with powdery mist at the slightest touch of wind.

‘Your wine, sir,’ the waiter drawled, setting down a cup, chopsticks, a flask of wine, a bowl and a saucer.

I turned back to the table, arranged everything to my liking, and poured the wine. Though I was no northerner, I now felt a stranger in the south also – as if the dry snow of the north, and the soft, clinging snow of the south were both foreign to me. I medicated my melancholy with a sip of wine. Both wine and bean curd were excellent – my only complaint was that the chilli sauce was too weak. The people round here had never had much of a stomach for spicy food.

Maybe because it was early – still afternoon – the place didn’t have much atmosphere. After three cups of wine, the four tables around me remained deserted. Looking back over the abandoned garden, I began to feel lonely, but also unwilling to share my isolation with other drinkers. Vexed by the clatter of footsteps on the stairs, I relaxed when I saw it was only my waiter, and dispatched another two cups of wine.

At last, however, a series of footsteps much slower than the waiter’s told me another patron was on his way up. Glancing over – almost apprehensively – when I guessed he had reached the top of the stairs, I jumped up in surprise. By some marvellous coincidence, the new arrival happened to be a friend – if he would still permit me to call him that – an old classmate, and colleague from my teaching days. Though his face was a little changed, I recognized him instantly. He moved differently as well – more slowly; there seemed to be little of the speed and energy of the old Lü Weifu.

‘Weifu? Imagine – us meeting here! I can hardly believe it.’

‘Neither can I... Is it really you?’

I immediately invited him to join me; after a hesitation, he accepted. I was first

perplexed, and then saddened and perturbed by his reluctance. Beneath his characteristically untidy hair and beard, I noted, lay a long, pale, exhausted-looking face. He looked subdued, or perhaps melancholy. His eyes – overshadowed by thick, dark eyebrows – seemed to have dulled. But as he looked slowly about him, and down over the abandoned garden, they suddenly brightened with a piercing gleam I remembered from our schooldays.

‘It must be ten years,’ I began, rather stiffly, despite my pleasure at seeing him. ‘I heard a while back that you were in Jinan,¹ but I never got round to writing.’

‘Me neither. I moved to Taiyuan² a couple of years ago with my mother. When I came back to fetch her, I heard you’d moved on.’

‘What are you doing in Taiyuan?’ I asked.

‘Tutoring a family from round here.’

‘And before that?’

Drawing a cigarette out of his coat pocket, he lit it and placed it between his lips, watching the smoke trickle out. ‘Nothing much: stupid, pointless things. A complete waste of time.’

He turned the questions back on me. As I gave him a brief outline of my situation, I called for another cup and pair of chopsticks, poured Weifu what remained of the first flask of wine and asked for another two catties. I decided to order food, also. A strange, new reserve had sprung up between us, as we each ceremoniously urged the other to do the choosing. The whole order became so confused that only the waiter’s summary clarified that we had requested four dishes: aniseed beans, jellied meat, fried bean curd and dried black carp.

‘I know how ridiculous I am, coming back like this,’ he resumed, the corners of his mouth uncertain whether to force a smile. One hand went on wielding the cigarette, with the other wrapped round the cup. ‘I remember, when I was a boy, laughing at bees and flies when they returned to settle on a place they’d just been frightened off, after making the tiniest tour of avoidance. Pathetic. And here I am, doing exactly the same thing. Now you, too. Couldn’t you have flown a bit further away?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe not,’ I replied, also unsure whether to smile. ‘Why did you come back?’

‘For more stupid, pointless things.’ He drained the wine at a gulp, then took a few draws on his cigarette, his eyes opening a little wider. ‘Utterly pointless – but I might as well tell you about them.’

Returning, the waiter covered the table with fresh food and wine. Our small party seemed to bring a little life to the room – or at least the warmth of cigarette smoke and fried bean-curd. Outside, the snow began to fall more heavily.

‘You may or may not know,’ he went on, ‘that I had a younger brother, who died

aged two, and was buried round here. Though I don't even remember what he looked like, my mother has always told me we were great friends; that he was a sweet little boy. She still cries, even now, when she talks about him. Last spring, we got a letter from a cousin of mine who said the river was starting to flood his grave, and if we didn't do something about it soon, it would be under water. Mother can read, of course, and as soon as she found out, she got into such a state she could hardly sleep at night. But I had neither the time nor the money to do anything about it.

'On it dragged, until I could come south, during my annual leave, to move his grave.' He drained another cup of wine and glanced out of the window. 'You'd never get that in the north: flowers in the snow. The ground can't be frozen underneath. The day before yesterday, I bought a little coffin in town, supposing the old one would be completely rotten by now. I hired four diggers and off we went into the countryside to move the grave, bringing extra cotton wool and bedding. I was suddenly glad: glad I was about to see the remains of a little brother I had once loved so much. It was a novelty. When we reached the burial site, we found the river had indeed been eating away at the bank, and was now less than two feet from the grave, which was almost flattened from neglect. "Dig it up!" I told my men, as we stood around in the snow. It was curious hearing myself give an order – probably the most important one I'll ever give in my life. I'm not used to it, I'm too ordinary. But my diggers just set to work. When they'd dug down to the coffin, I went over to take a look. As I'd thought, it had rotted almost completely away – leaving only a few chips of wood. My heart in my mouth, I began to clear it carefully away, hoping to see my little brother. But there was nothing below – no quilt, no clothes, no skeleton. It must have all crumbled away, I thought to myself. Remembering, from somewhere, that hair is meant to take the longest to decay, I bent down to see if there was anything in the mud where the pillow would have been. Nothing. Not a trace.'

His eyes, I suddenly noticed, were pink around the rims; then I realized it was the wine taking effect. Though he barely picked at the food, he steadily drank his way through a whole catty of wine. He began to look and act more like the old Lü Weifu. After calling for another two catties, I turned back round to face him, taking up my own cup again, listening silently.

'As there was no longer any need to move the grave, all I had to do was get the ground levelled out again and sell the coffin on. Though it was bound to look odd, the store I'd originally bought it off would probably take it back, as long as I kept my price low enough. I'd get back a few coppers to go drinking with, at least. Instead, I laid out the bedding, wrapped in cotton some of the mud from where his body had originally been, placed it all in the new coffin, took it to the graveyard in which my father is buried, and reburied it next to him. Because I had the interior of

the grave walled up with bricks, I spent a great slice of yesterday supervising the workers. But this way at least, I'd achieved what I'd set out to do: I'd done enough to fool my mother, to set her mind at rest... I know why you're looking at me like that: you can't believe the change in me, can you? Don't think I've forgotten going to the temple with you, to pull the beard off the statue of the town god. I remember how we used to argue, every day, about how we were going to change China – how sometimes we even came to blows over it. Now look at me: blundering along, one compromise after another. If my old friends could see me now, I sometimes think, they'd disown me... But that's how I am.'

He produced another cigarette, placed it in his mouth and lit it.

'I can see you expected more of me – I'm not completely brain-dead. In some ways, it makes me glad, but also uncomfortable – worried that I'll let my old friends down, betray their faith in me.' He paused to take a few draws on his cigarette. 'Today, just before coming on here, I did something else pointless; but at least I did it because I actually wanted to. We used to have a neighbour over to the east called Chang Fu – a boatman. He had a daughter called Ah-shun – maybe you met her on one of your visits to the house, but I doubt you'd remember her, she would have been very young at the time. She didn't grow up into anything much: she had a very ordinary sort of face, long and thin like a melon seed, and sallow. It was just her eyes that were unusual: enormous, with very long lashes, as clear as the still midnight skies you get in the north. You don't get nights like that down here. She was an excellent housekeeper: she'd lost her mother when she was about ten, and she'd taken care of everything around the house ever since – a younger sister and brother, as well as her father. She was careful with the purse strings, and thanks to her the family finances slowly straightened out. Just about all our neighbours were always singing her praises – and from time to time even her father expressed his appreciation. My mother suddenly started talking about her as I was about to set out on my trip back – the memories of the elderly seem to reach indefinitely back. Ah-shun had once taken a fancy to a red velvet flower she'd seen someone wearing in her hair, she recalled, and had cried so much when she couldn't have one for herself that her father had beaten her. Her eyes were red for days afterwards. But no one made or sold velvet flowers in these parts, so there was no point her pining like that. Seeing as I was heading south anyway, Mother asked me to buy her a couple of flowers as a present.

'I didn't mind in the slightest – in fact, I was delighted to do something for Ah-shun. One day, the year before last, when I came back to bring my mother north, I fell into conversation with Chang Fu, who happened to be at home. He was set on feeding me a bowl of buckwheat mush – sweetened with white sugar, he proudly told me. They must have been doing well for themselves: it isn't every boatman who

can throw white sugar about in his food. Since he wouldn't take no for an answer, I thanked him, but asked for a small helping. "You scholars've no appetite for anything. Give him extra sugar!" he commanded Ah-shun, outmanoeuvring my attempt to temper the extravagance of it all. I couldn't believe my eyes when it was brought in: she'd made me an enormous bowl of the stuff – easily enough to keep me going all day. Though my bowl was, admittedly, small compared to Chang Fu's. It was the first time I'd had buckwheat, and I didn't like the taste much, even though there was obviously a lot of sugar in it. I thought I'd give up after a few mouthfuls. But I lost my nerve when I spotted Ah-shun over the other side of the room. I saw the fear and hope on her face: fear she hadn't cooked it right, hope that we would enjoy it. I knew how disappointed and embarrassed she would be if I left more than half my bowl. And so I steeled myself to finish the lot off, gulping it down almost as fast as Chang Fu. This, I think, was the first time I realized how agonizing it can be to force food down – it was as unpleasant as a bowl of tapeworm medicine mixed into sugar I was fed as a boy. But I didn't mind: because when she came over to tidy the empty bowls, I could see the glimmer of a happy smile, which more than made up for my discomfort. Even though my stomach was so painfully distended I slept awfully, tormented by one dyspeptic nightmare after another, I still wished her joy, still wished that the world would get better for her sake. But then I laughed at myself, for clinging on to the ruins of dreams I'd had in a former life, and forgot all about it.

'I'd had no idea she'd suffered so much for a velvet flower, but as soon as Mother brought it up, I remembered the buckwheat episode, and set diligently about my task. After a fruitless search through Taiyuan, I finally –'

A thick layer of snow slid off the camellia tree. No longer slumped under the weight, the tree stood upright once more, flaunting its broad, dark, glossy leaves and blood-red flowers even more proudly. The sky seemed darker, the twittering of birds suggesting dusk could not be far off. Since the ground – and any food it might hold – was blanketed in snow, they were returning early to their nests.

After gazing out of the window a while, he turned back to finish his latest cup of wine, then took a few more draws on his cigarette. 'I finally found some in Jinan,' he went on. 'I didn't know whether they were the sort she'd taken a fancy to, that she'd been beaten for wanting, but they were made of velvet, at least. As I didn't know whether she had a preference for light or dark colours, I bought a red one and a pink one, and brought them both with me.'

'Today, straight after lunch, I went to see Chang Fu – I'd stayed on an extra day specially. Though he lived in the same place as he'd always done, the house somehow seemed gloomier than before – though I may have been just imagining it. His son and his younger daughter, Ah-zhao, were standing at the gate – both grown

up. Ah-zhao looks a proper fright – not a bit like her sister. Seeing me approach, she fled back inside. I tried talking to the boy instead, who told me Chang Fu wasn't at home. "What about your big sister?" I asked. Glaring at me, he asked again and again what I wanted with her. There was this savage look to him, as if he wanted to hurl himself at me, to bite me. I beat a hasty retreat, muttering something or other. I don't like to make unnecessary trouble for myself any more.

'You have no idea how much I hate calling on people – even more than I used to. I know what a burden I am, even to myself; why should I force my unhappiness on others? But I had to see the business through now, so I eventually decided to go over to the tinder store opposite. There I found old Mrs Fa, the owner's mother, who recognized me and invited me in to sit down. After a bit of small talk, I explained why I was looking for Chang Fu.

' "Poor Ah-shun," she sighed. "She was an unlucky one – too unlucky to wear these flowers."

'I then got a minutely detailed account of what had happened. "Last year, probably around New Year it was, she'd started to look pale and thin. She'd often be bursting into tears, but never tell you why. Sometimes, she'd cry all night. In the end, Chang Fu lost his temper, told her she'd turned into a crazy old maid. Then in early autumn, it must have been, she took to her bed with a slight cold and never got up. Just a few days before she died, she finally told Chang Fu she'd been spitting blood and getting night sweats for ages, just like her mother. But she hadn't said anything – she hadn't wanted him to worry. One night, her uncle, Chang Geng, had come by again, wanting to borrow money as usual. When she wouldn't give him any he smirked and told her not to act so superior. Her father had arranged for her to marry a complete good-for-nothing – not even half the man *he* was. She was never the same after this: always sad, always bursting into tears – too shy to ask anything directly. As soon as Chang Fu found out, he told her what a fine fellow her fiancé was; but the damage had been done. She didn't believe him. Just as well I haven't long left, she said.

' "What sort of a man was her husband-to-be, she'd say, if he wasn't even *half* the man her chicken-thief uncle was? But I saw him with my own eyes when he came to the funeral: he was a very decent-looking man, very respectably turned out. He'd been a boatman half his life, he told me with tears in his eyes, scraping together money for a wife – and then she went and died. He was a good man, anyone could see that; Chang Geng had lied. Such a pity she threw her life away, believing that no-good uncle of hers... Though it's no one's fault, really, but Ah-shun's for being born unlucky."

'There it was; and my business in these parts was at an end. But what was I to do with those two velvet flowers? I asked her to pass them on to Ah-zhao. Not with a

particularly good will: Ah-zhao had fled the moment she'd set eyes on me – as if I were a wolf, come to eat her up... But anyway. Now, all I had to do was tell Mother how pleased Ah-shun had been, and the job was done. Completely pointless; but the time passes, at least. And once I've got through New Year, I'll go back to teaching Confucius.'

'You're teaching the classics?' I asked in surprise.

'Of course. What did you think – that I was teaching English? I started off with two students, one doing *The Book of Odes* and the other *Mencius*. I've just got a new one, a girl – she's studying *Classical Maxims for Young Ladies*. I don't even teach maths: not because I don't want to, but because they don't want it.'

'I never thought you'd end up teaching this sort of stuff.'

'It's their father who wants it – I'm just the hired help, I don't care. What a waste of time it all is. But I get by.'

His face was now flushed with wine – though the gleam had gone out of his eyes again. I sighed gently, then let a silence fall between us. A new gang of drinkers clattered up the stairs, a short man with a round, swollen face leading the pack. Just behind him was a much taller man, his most conspicuous feature a scarlet nose. On and on they came, until the small building trembled with the stampede. Lü Weifu and I glanced at each other; then I called for the bill.

'D'you earn enough to live on?' I asked as we prepared to go.

'Yes – twenty dollars a month. Actually, not quite enough.'

'So what are your plans for the future?'

'The future?... I've no idea. Have any of the dreams we once had come to anything? Right now, I don't know what the next day or even the next minute might hold.'

The waiter brought up the bill and handed it to me. His initial reserve now gone, my companion glanced across at me, drawing on his cigarette, and let me get on with paying.

We left together but, as his hotel lay in the opposite direction to mine, we said goodbye just outside the door. Alone, I walked off towards my hotel, refreshed by the wind and snow, a fine, white net of flakes swirling around the dusk sky, and over the buildings and street below.

16 February 1924

A HAPPY FAMILY

(After Xu Qinwen¹)

‘... whatever he writes – or chooses not to write – is an expression of the self; a shaft of sunlight blazing out from an infinite light source, not the occasional spark struck from a flint. This – only this – is the true art, written by the true artist... while I... What does it all mean?’

He interrupted his stream of consciousness by leaping out of bed. He knew what he had to do: sell some articles to sustain life. *Happiness Monthly* was his organ of choice – because they paid well. But he needed a big idea to get them interested. The right kind of big idea... What are the youth of today thinking about?... Probably love, marriage, family life – that kind of thing... Fine: family life it is, then. But what sort of thing should it be?... No, they won’t accept that. No point in sounding negative, but... A few steps took him to his writing desk, where he sat down, pulled out a piece of green-lined paper and, resigning himself to the whole loathsome business, dashed off a title: ‘A Happy Family’.

He immediately stalled and stared up at the ceiling, considering where to place this happy family of his. ‘Beijing?’ he wondered. ‘No. It’s a morgue of a city – even the air smells dead. I suppose I could put them in a high-walled compound... but the air might still get in over the top. No... Jiangsu and Zhejiang are too unstable; Fujian’s even worse. There’s already fighting in Sichuan and Guangdong. Shandong, then, or Henan? Too many bandits. Someone’s bound to get kidnapped – and there goes my happy family. The foreign concessions in Shanghai and Tianjin are too expensive... I can’t have them live abroad, ridiculous idea. All I know about Yunnan and Guizhou is there’s no decent transport there...’ And on he went, unable to think of a suitable setting. He contemplated inventing somewhere and calling it A

—: ‘Too risky. They say readers don’t like you using Roman letters to stand in for names any more. Best not chance it. But where am I going to put them? There’s fighting in Hunan, too, rents are too high in Dalian, yet more bandits in the north-east...’ On he went, frustrated by the search for a place, until he settled, eventually, back on ‘A—’.

‘Fine, A— it is. Now, back to the family itself: a husband and wife – a love match, naturally. Forty clauses in their prenuptial agreement, to make sure everything’s good and clear, and perfectly free and equal. They’re both exquisite specimens – physically and intellectually. Both graduates... Studying in Japan isn’t fashionable any more... the West – yes, they went to university in the West. The husband wears Western suits, his starched collars as white as snow. The wife’s hair is perfectly permed and set, her perfect white teeth permanently arranged into a perfect smile. But she dresses in the Chinese style – ’

‘No! Twenty-five pounds!’

He glanced involuntarily out of the window, following the direction of the man’s voice. The sun glared dazzlingly back at him through the drawn curtains. ‘None of my business,’ he turned back to the great work, ignoring the sound of bundles of wood scattering over the ground. ‘What’s that supposed to mean, “twenty-five pounds”?... Now, my exquisite intellectuals are great lovers of the arts. Except for Russian novels – they’ve always been too happy to like Russian novels... Russian novels devote far too much space to the lower classes; quite unsuitable for a couple of this sort. “Twenty-five pounds”? Shut him out. Focus. What kind of books *do* they read, though?... Byron? Keats? No, too risky... I know: they both have a passion for *An Ideal Husband*. Haven’t read it myself, but it’s a great favourite in academic circles, so I’m sure they’ll love it. They read everything the other reads... They each have a copy – his and hers. Which means there’s a total of two copies in the house...’ Conscious of a slight emptiness in his stomach, he set down his pen and held his head in both hands, like a globe hanging between two mighty pillars.

‘They’re having lunch together,’ he thought. ‘The tablecloth is snow-white; the food – Chinese food – is sent up from the kitchen. What’s “twenty-five pounds” supposed to mean? Shut him out. Focus. Why Chinese food? Westerners are always saying how delicious and healthy and progressive Chinese food is; Chinese food it is. Here comes the first dish... what should it be...?’

‘Firewood.’

He started: looking around, he found the mistress of his own household standing behind his left shoulder, her sullen eyes fixed on his face.

‘What is it?’ he snapped, resenting this interruption to the creative process.

‘We’re out of firewood – I need to buy some more today. It’s gone up from two hundred and forty coppers for ten pounds to two hundred and sixty. Is it all right if I

give him two hundred and fifty?’

‘Fine, fine, whatever.’

‘I’m sure he’s overcharging us. He claims he’s left us twenty-four and a half pounds, but I’m only going to pay him for twenty-three and a half. All right?’

‘Fine, fine, whatever.’

‘Five fives are twenty-five, three fives are fifteen...’

‘Five fives are twenty-five, three fives are fifteen...’ Faltering at the same stage of the sum, he seized his pen and scribbled a few figures out on the green-lined paper on which a single line of ‘A Happy Family’ was inscribed.

‘Five hundred and eighty coppers!’ he eventually pronounced, looking back up at his wife.

‘I’m about ten short, then.’

Pulling open the drawer of his desk, he scooped up all the coppers from inside – at least twenty or thirty in total – and deposited them in her opened palms. After watching her leave the room, he turned back towards his desk. His head now felt swollen, stuffed full of firewood. $5 \times 5 = 25$... Arabic numerals crowded his brain. He took a deep breath, then forcefully exhaled, as if hoping to expel both firewood and mental arithmetic. Feeling more relaxed, he resumed his vague thought-processes.

‘Now, what should they eat? Something just a little bit *recherché*. Sautéed tenderloin, or shrimp roe and sea slugs? Far too mainstream. It has to be the Battle of Dragon and Tiger – but what is that, exactly? I heard somewhere that it’s snake and cat – a Cantonese delicacy, served only at the best banquets. But I’ve seen it on the menu in Jiangsu restaurants, and I don’t think people eat snake and cat in Jiangsu. So it might be frog and eel – who was it who told me that? Where did I say this couple comes from?... Doesn’t matter. Everyone likes a nice bit of snake and cat, or frog and eel – wherever they’re from, it won’t stop them from being a happy family. That’s settled then: Dragon and Tiger it is.

‘After the dish is placed in the middle of the table, both take up their chopsticks at exactly the same moment, smiling, gesturing towards the food and conversing in fluent English:

‘*“My dear, please.”*

‘*“Please, you eat first, my dear.”*

‘*“Oh, no, please, you!”*

‘Both reach out simultaneously with their chopsticks, and select a piece of snake meat... No, snake sounds far too exotic – eel, much better. So this particular vintage of Dragon and Tiger is frog and eel. They each take a piece of eel, of identical size, five fives are twenty-five, three fives... Shut him out. Focus... and pop it into their mouths at exactly the same moment...’ Conscious of a background commotion – the

clatter of footsteps back and forth – he felt an overwhelming desire to turn back round. And yet, exercising remarkable self-restraint, he returned to his confused train of thought. ‘Though there’s something not quite natural about that. What’s wrong with me? Such a gift of a topic – why am I making a meal of it?... Maybe they don’t need to have studied abroad, maybe they went to a Chinese university. At any rate they’re both graduates, exquisite physical and intellectual specimens... The man’s a writer, and so is the woman – or at least, an admirer of writers. Or the woman’s a poet, and the man admires poets, and respects the equality of the sexes. Or...’ Unable to stand it any longer, he turned round.

Six cabbages had materialized next to the bookcase behind him, looming up – in a three-two-one formation – into a large, A-shaped mound.

He gave a sharp intake of breath, as a rush of hot blood flushed his face. A forest of tiny pins and needles seemed to be pricking his spine. ‘This happy family’s home must be spacious,’ he thought, banishing the needles with a long sigh. ‘There will be a dedicated storage room, for items like cabbages. The husband will have his own study, lined with bookshelves, and naturally devoid of cabbages. The shelves will be lined with books both foreign and Chinese – two copies of *An Ideal Husband* among them, of course. There’ll be a separate bedroom, with a brass bed. Or something simpler, perhaps: an elmwood bed made by reformed convicts in the factory of Number One Prison, say. Nothing will be stored beneath the bed...’ At this exact point in his thoughts, he glanced under his own bed: where the firewood had once been, a piece of rope now stretched over the floor like a dead snake.

‘Twenty-three and a half pounds...’ The sticks were back in his head again. Anticipating invasion by firewood, he got up to shut the door. But as he reached for the handle, he began to worry about seeming irritable and pulled down the dusty door-curtain instead. What a happy compromise, he thought to himself, congratulating himself on his fluent application of the celebrated Confucian Doctrine of the Mean: neither the hasty isolationism of shutting the door, nor the insecurity of leaving it open.

‘The husband always keeps the door to his study shut,’ he thought, returning to his desk. ‘In the case of queries arising, the petitioner first knocks on the door, then enters only on receiving permission from the room’s occupant – now that’s how things should be done. Even the wife knocks – even if she wants to come and discuss the arts with her husband... He’s no need to worry, she’s not the kind of person who barges in with an armful of cabbages.

‘“Come in, please, my dear,” he welcomes her – in English, of course.

‘But what about the times when the husband is too busy to talk about the arts? Does he just ignore her, while she stands outside, hammering at the door? I don’t think that would do. Maybe *An Ideal Husband* has some light to shed on the question – I

really must read it, I'm sure it's excellent. I'll buy myself a copy the moment I get paid for this article – '

Wham!

He sat bolt upright: past experience told him this was the sound of his own dear wife's hand on the head of their two-year-old daughter.

'My happy family...' he thought on, still sitting upright, hearing his daughter wailing in the background, 'put off having children. Or maybe don't have any. Life is so much tidier when it's just the two of you... or maybe I should have them live in a hotel, where everything gets taken care of for you, where a person can get on with...' After the wailing increased in volume, he stood up and made his way through the door-curtain. 'Marx wrote *Das Kapital* as his children screamed about him,' he thought to himself. 'The mark of a great man...' Going through to the kitchen, he opened the storm-door and smelt kerosene. Just to the right of the door, his daughter was lying face-down on the ground. The moment she saw him, she began sobbing again.

'There, there, don't cry.' He bent down to pick her up. 'Don't cry, there's a good girl.'

Turning round, he saw his wife standing to the left of the door, bolt upright, hands planted furiously on her hips, as if she were about to throw herself into some painful keep-fit routine.

'Why does everyone in this family want to make my life difficult? All you do is make more work for me... Why on earth did you push the lamp over? What are we going to do for light this evening?'

'There, there, don't cry,' he soothed the child, pushing that querulous voice to the back of his head. 'There's a good girl.' He carried her into his room, stroking her head. Setting her down, he pulled out his chair, sat on it, and stood her between his two legs. 'Don't cry, there's a good girl. Daddy'll play washing the cat's face.' He stretched his neck forward and stuck his tongue out towards his palms, then pretended to lick one and rub it in circles around his own face.

'Patch!' she began to giggle.

'Yes, just like Patch.' After making a few more circles with his palms, he let them drop. But then he saw she was still looking at him: tears still hanging in her eyes, above her smile. He was suddenly reminded, in miniature, of his wife, five years ago: that innocent face, those bright red lips. It was on another crisp winter's day, all those years ago, that he'd declared himself – told her he'd do anything for her, put up with any difficulty or sacrifice. She'd had the same smile on her face, the same tears clinging to her eyes. He sat, staring blankly, as if drunk.

'Those wonderful lips...' he thought.

Up went the door-curtain: the firewood was being delivered.

He snapped out of his daze and realized his daughter was still staring at him, tears in her eyes, lips slightly parted. ‘Lips...’ He glanced across at the firewood. ‘Soon enough, I’ll be getting five fives are twenty-five, nine nines are eighty-one from her, too!... The same sullen eyes...’ He seized up the sheet of green-lined paper – with its single line of text and swarm of numerals – scrunched it into a ball, then opened it back out to wipe her eyes and nose. ‘There’s a good girl, off you go and play, then,’ he said, pushing her off his knee and throwing the ball of paper, hard, into the wastepaper basket.

Almost immediately, however, he felt guilty, watching her leave the room forlornly alone. He turned back to his desk, the sound of wood grating endlessly in his ears, and closed his eyes, struggling to collect his disturbed thoughts, until a dispassionate calm returned. An oval flower – black petals around orange stamens – drifted east in front of his left eye, then disappeared, followed by a bright green flower, with a dark centre; then by a six-cabbage pyramid looming in towards him.

18 February 1924

SOAP

Siming's wife sat beneath the sun's slanting rays, her back to the north-facing window, her seven-year-old daughter, Xiu'er, next to her, pasting paper funeral money.¹ Though the sudden tread – slow, heavy – of cloth-soled shoes told her Siming had arrived home, she went on with her task, refusing to acknowledge his existence until she guessed the footsteps had at last halted next to her chair. She glanced reluctantly up, to discover him hunched over, groping inside his jacket for something lurking at the bottom of his long gown's breast pocket.

This tortuous search produced a small, rectangular, palm-green package, which he immediately handed to his wife. As she took it from him, she smelt a scent she couldn't quite put her finger on – that might or might not have been olive – and noticed the packet was emblazoned with a bright gold insignia, thronged by an elaborate network of finely wrought patterns. Xiu'er charged over to have a look, but was deftly pushed out of the way by her mother.

'Have you been shopping?' she asked, looking across at her husband.

He mumbled a yes, eyes still fixed on the package she was holding.

The green wrapper was opened to reveal another, thinner layer of paper, again palm-green in colour. The removal of this second wrapper exposed the object itself: palm-green again, smooth, glossy and hard to the touch, its upper surface covered in finely wrought patterns. The thin, second layer of paper, it was now realized, was of a translucent cream; the indeterminate scent – that might or might not have been olive – intensified.

'Now, this is good soap,' she observed as she lifted it – as carefully as one might a baby – up to her nose.

'I bought it for you.'

His eyes fell, as he spoke, on to the back of her neck, and an uncomfortable

warmth spread through her face. From time to time, she would notice a certain roughness to the back of her neck, especially just behind her ears. She'd never minded it much – it was just dirt, long-accumulated dirt. But his inquisitorial scrutiny, in the company of this green imported soap, forced a hot flush out to the tips of her ears. After dinner, she resolved, she would give herself a thorough scrubbing.

‘Acacia pods don’t always get you as clean as they might,’ she muttered to herself.

‘Give it here, Mother!’ As Xiu’er reached out to grab at the green paper, her younger sister, Zhao’er, ran in from outside. Pushing them both away, their mother wrapped the soap carefully back up in the translucent and then the green paper, until it looked just as it had done when it arrived. She then placed it on the highest shelf of the washstand, took one last, lingering look, and returned to her gluing.

‘Xuecheng!’ Siming bawled out, as if he’d just remembered something, then sat down on the high-backed chair opposite her.

‘Xuecheng!’ she joined in.

Pausing at her work, she listened for footsteps – nothing. Embarrassed by her husband’s obvious impatience, she tried screeching his family nickname instead:

‘Shuan’er!’

The second summons took immediate effect: after an approach of leather shoes, their son appeared before them stripped down to his vest, his plump, round face glistening with sweat.

‘What were you doing?’ she scolded him. ‘Why didn’t you hear your father calling you?’

‘I was just practising my Eight-Trigram Boxing.’² He now turned to face Siming, expectantly straight-backed.

‘Xuecheng, I’ve a question for you: what does *e-du-fu* mean?’

‘Well, *e-du* means “poisonous”, and *fu* is “woman”, so I make that a... “poisonous woman”?’

‘Balderdash!’ Siming suddenly raged. ‘Do I look like a woman?’

The alarmed Xuecheng took two steps back and tried standing even straighter. Although, in his considered opinion, his father walked a little like one of the funny old men in a Beijing opera, he’d never found him particularly womanly. He had, he now realized, committed a serious error.

‘D’you think I don’t understand Chinese? D’you think I need you to translate my own language for me?... *E-du-fu*’s foreign-devil talk – not Chinese. What does it mean?’

‘I... I don’t know.’ The exchange was becoming more uncomfortable for Xuecheng by the minute.

‘Well! All that money I’ve wasted on your education, and you don’t know

anything. Aren't I glad I took all that trouble to send you to a school that makes all that hoo-ha about teaching spoken English. They haven't taught you a thing. I heard this from a boy who couldn't have been fourteen, younger than you – prattling away in foreign gobbledegook, he was. You've got a nerve, standing in front of me, telling me you don't know... Go and look it up, right now!

Xuecheng respectfully withdrew, mangling a 'yes' in his throat.

'Damn poor show,' Siming fulminated on, after a brief pause. 'The youth of today. You know, before the Revolution, I was one of the most enthusiastic supporters of the new academies, with their newfangled learning. Now look at the mess we're in. All they do is preach about freedom and liberty – they don't teach them anything solid. What a waste of money. All that trouble I took getting him into one of those schools with a split curriculum, half-Chinese, half-Western. They're meant to teach spoken English! He's been there a year, and look at him: clueless. I bet they just stuff the classics down their throats the whole time. A big fat waste of time, that's what these schools are. Shut the lot of them down – that's what they should do.'

'Quite right, shut the lot of them down,' his wife echoed sympathetically, as she glued.

'No need to send Xiu'er and her sister. "Why bother educating girls?" Great-uncle used to say. I used to disagree when he was having his go at girls' schools, but I'm not so sure the old man was wrong now. Those women you see, parading along the street – they've no class at all. They even want to cut their hair off. Schoolgirls with bobs – now they are the limit.³ It's not the warlords and bandits that're the problem – it's the women who've brought the country to its knees. They need to be taught a lesson they won't forget.'

'Quite right. It was bad enough when the men were all cutting off their queues – now look at the women, wanting to shave their heads like nuns.'

'Xuecheng!'

Xuecheng hurried in, carrying in his arms a small, thick book with gilt-edged pages.

'Look,' he showed it to Siming, pointing out a place in the text. 'This sounds a bit like it...'

When he'd taken the book from his son, Siming realized it was a dictionary with tiny, horizontal print. Frowning, he held it up to the light and read out the line, squinting, that Xuecheng had indicated.

' "A mutual aid society formed in the eighteenth century." Hmm, that doesn't sound right... How d'you pronounce it?' he asked, pointing to the devilishly foreign word printed before the explanation.

'*E-te-fo-luo-si.*' Xuecheng made a diligent attempt at 'Oddfellows'.

‘No, no, it wasn’t that.’ Siming’s anger made a brusque comeback. ‘It was an insult – an insult used on someone like me. Understand? Keep looking!’

Xuecheng stood before him, eyeing him in bafflement.

‘You can’t expect him to solve your riddles for you,’ the boy’s mother intervened, beginning to feel exasperated, as well as sorry for the persecuted Xuecheng. ‘You need to give him a bit more to go on, before you send him off on a wild-goose chase.’

‘It was when I was buying soap at the Universal Profit,’ Siming sighed, turning towards her. ‘There were three students in there with me. I suppose I might have seemed a bit fussy to them. I looked at six, maybe seven kinds that were all about forty cents a bar, but I didn’t buy any of them. Then I saw another sort that was ten cents, but it was very poor quality and had no scent. So I thought I’d go for something in the middle, and settled on that green stuff, at twenty-four cents a bar. The shop assistant was one of those snotty imps with eyes in the top of their heads – he’d been sneering at me all the while. Then those damned students got in on the joke, winking at each other and talking to each other in foreign-devil talk. I wanted to open it and have a look before I paid: when things are wrapped up in foreign paper, how d’you know what you’re getting? Then, of course, the poisonous imp behind the counter wasn’t having any of it, and started spouting a whole load of rubbish at me, with those rotten students sniggering away from the sidelines. Then the youngest of them came out with *e-du-fu*, looking straight at me. They all burst out laughing – I know they were being rude.’ He turned back to Xuecheng: ‘Just look under “Insults”!’

Mangling another ‘yes’ deep in his throat, Xuecheng respectfully withdrew.

‘A fine advertisement they are for that New Culture of ours!’ Siming exploded, staring straight up at the beam across the ceiling. ‘No sense of right or wrong, these students. What kind of society do we live in? The country’s going to the dogs – we’ll all be finished unless someone does something fast... It brought tears to your eyes –’

‘What did?’ his wife stolidly cut in.

‘That girl – the filial granddaughter,’ he solemnly explained, looking back at her. ‘There were two beggars on the main street. A girl, about seventeen or eighteen – what she thought she was doing, begging at that age, I’ve no idea, but there you have it – with a blind old woman, white hair, sixty or seventy years old, sitting under the eaves of a fabric shop. Everyone was saying the old woman was her grandmother. Whenever she got given anything, she’d give it to her grandmother straightaway and go hungry herself. But was anybody giving to such a good cause?’ he glared at her inquisitorially.

She stared impassively back at him, waiting for the inevitable explanation.

‘Hmph! Not a bit of it,’ he answered his own question. ‘I watched for ages, and only saw one person give them anything – a single copper. There were plenty of people gathered around – a full circle of spectators making fun of them. “Hey, Ah-fa,” I heard one lowlife say to another, “Don’t worry about all that dirt. Reckon she’d scrub up lovely with a couple of bars of soap.” Now what kind of talk is that?’

‘Hmph,’ she looked down at her lap. ‘Did you give her anything?’ she eventually asked, after a long pause.

‘Me?... No. I only had a couple of coppers on me, I’d have been embarrassed to give her so little. She wasn’t your ordinary sort of beggar, and...’

‘Hmm.’ She slowly rose to her feet and wandered off towards the kitchen without waiting for the sentence to conclude. The dusk was thickening; it was almost time for dinner.

Siming rose also and walked out into the courtyard. It was brighter outside than in, and in one corner Xuecheng was still practising his shadow-boxing – his esteemed father’s educational legacy to him – making full use of the twilight hours, just as he had done every evening for the past half year. After granting his son a slight nod of approval, Siming took to pacing up and down the empty courtyard, his hands behind his back. Soon, the fat leaves of the yard’s one evergreen bonsai merged into the dusk, the stars glimmered out from among the white clouds – like broken tufts of wadding scattered over the sky – and darkness began. At this point in the day, Siming found himself filled with inspiring presentiments: of the great things that he would accomplish, of the war that he was about to declare on the evils of society – most notably, rotten students. His strides lengthened as his mood grew hawkish, the tramp of his cloth soles waking the hen and her chicks in their coop into frightened cheeps.

Lamplight filled the hall to summon everyone to dinner; the family responded by crowding round the table in the centre of the room. The lamp was set at the foot of the table, while Siming sat alone at the head, his plump, round face – the face Xuecheng had inherited – annotated by two fine, falling strokes of moustache, like that of the God of Wealth presiding over steaming bowls of offerings. His wife and Zhao’er sat along the left-hand flank of the table, while Xuecheng and Xiu’er lined up to the right. Five pairs of chopsticks clattered busily on bowls. Although to begin with no one spoke, there was no shortage of incident.

Zhao’er knocked over her rice bowl, spilling its soupy contents over the table. Siming glared at her until she was about to cry, then turned his attention instead to a cabbage heart that he had identified a few seconds previously. But it had already disappeared. Peering to left and right, he observed that Xuecheng’s mouth had just made room for it.

‘Found that phrase for me yet, Xuecheng?’ He looked over at his son, tucking an

unrewarding bunch of yellowing leaves into his mouth.

‘Um... not yet.’

‘Hmph. Look at you: you don’t study, you don’t listen to your parents. Eating’s the only thing you’re good for! That girl I saw today could teach you a thing or two. She might be a beggar, but she’ll go hungry for her grandmother. Students these days, you’ve no self-control, you don’t care a fig for anyone or anything. I wouldn’t be at all surprised if you turn out like – ’

‘I did have one idea, though I don’t know whether it’s right or not... Maybe... maybe they said “*A-er-te fu-er*”,’ Xuecheng made a rather sinicized attempt at ‘old fool’.

‘Yes, yes! That’s exactly what it was, exactly what it sounded like: “*Uddur fule*”. But what does it mean? You should know, you’re one of them.’

‘I... I’m not sure what it means,’ he prevaricated.

‘Nonsense! You’re lying. The youth of – ’

‘What’s wrong with you tonight?’ his wife suddenly interrupted. ‘Picking on him while he’s eating his dinner. They’re just boys.’

‘What?’ About to launch into a further diatribe, Siming noticed her sunken cheeks had a menacing bulge to them, her face had undergone a disturbing change of colour and her slanted eyes were blazing. ‘I’m not picking on him,’ he quickly changed tack. ‘I’m just offering constructive criticism.’

‘He’s not a mind-reader.’ She seemed to be getting angrier. ‘If he was, he’d have skipped dinner to go and fetch that girl of yours back home. One more bar of soap, and she’ll scrub up nicely.’

‘What are you talking about? I never said that, it was – ’

‘But you were thinking it! Give her a good scrubbing, and there’s your tasty morsel – happy families all round.’

‘What’s all this got to do with anything? Just because I remembered you needed some more soap – ’

‘What’s this got to do with anything? You bought it to give *her* a good scrubbing. Not me: *I’m* not good enough. I don’t want to bask in your saintly beggar’s glory.’

‘What on earth are you talking about? Women...’ Siming stammered, his face running with sweat – just like Xuecheng’s after a boxing practice – probably because his rice was too hot.

‘What d’you mean, “women”? You men are the problem. When you’re not bad-mouthing girl students, you’re eyeing up girl beggars. “Scrub up lovely”! You’re all disgusting.’

‘I already told you, it wasn’t me who – ’

‘Siming, old chap!’ a voice boomed out of the darkness.

‘Daotong? Be with you in a moment, old chap!’ Siming joyfully exclaimed, as if

clutching at an amnesty. 'Xuecheng, light another lamp and show Mr Ho into the study!'

The wick lit, Xuecheng led Daotong to the western end of the house, Bu Weiyuan following on behind.

'I must apologize for not coming to the door!' Siming emerged, still chewing his food, both hands clasped together in salutation. 'Could I interest you in sampling our humble dinner?'

'We dined prior to our arrival.' Weiyuan stepped forward, also clasping his hands in greeting. 'We've come to settle on a subject for the Eighteenth Essay and Poetry Contest of the Society for Improving the Fabric of Society. Tomorrow's the seventeenth – remember?'

'Heavens! It's the sixteenth already?' Siming exclaimed.

'You nincompoop!' Daotong shouted.

'If we want to get it into tomorrow's paper, we'd better send it off tonight.'

'I've already thought of an essay topic. What do you think?' Daotong fished a slip of paper out of a bundle inside his kerchief and passed it to Siming.

Walking over to a candlestick, Siming opened the paper and read out:

' "We respectfully propose that the united people of our nation petition, with one voice, our esteemed president to issue a special proclamation to the effect that the Confucian classics should be revered above all other works, and that sacrifices should be made to the virtuous mother of Mencius, in order to reverse the process of national degeneration and preserve the national essence." First class, quite first class. A little on the long side, though?'

'Don't worry!' Daotong brayed. 'I've totted it up – doesn't take us over the word limit. But what about the poem?'

Siming suddenly felt himself overcome by feelings of reverence so intense they took almost physical form. 'How about: "The Filial Granddaughter". I got the idea from someone I saw in town today. A real role model –'

'No, no, no,' Weiyuan interrupted him, waving his hands about. 'I know who you mean, I saw her, too. She wasn't from round here, I don't think – I couldn't understand a word she said, and I don't think she could understand me, either. I couldn't work out where she was from. Everyone was going on about how virtuous she was, but when I asked her if she could write poetry, she just shook her head. We need a subject who writes poetry themselves.'

'Surely we could make allowances for someone of such superior –'

'Out of the question!' Weiyuan now bore alarmingly down on Siming, presenting his flattened palm in a gesture of refusal. 'If she wrote poetry – now that might be interesting.'

'Or how about,' Siming put some distance back between them, 'we add an

explanatory note, to extol her virtues as a reproach to society. You won't believe it, but I watched for ages, and no one gave her a cent. The world we're living in – it breaks your heart –'

'Easy there, old chap!' Weiyuan invaded his personal space again. 'I didn't give her any money, either, but only because I happened not to have any on me at the time.'

'Don't take it personally, old chap.' Siming nudged him back into retreat. 'Of course I wasn't pointing the finger at you. Let me finish: they had a great crowd gathered around them, laughing at them in the most disgraceful way. The worst of the bunch were these two lowlifes who were – just wait for it – saying, "Reckon she'd scrub up lovely with a couple of bars of soap." Can you imagine?'

'Two bars of soap!' Daotong erupted into deafening guffaws. 'What're you waiting for, then? Ha-ha-ha-ha!'

'Not so loud, old chap,' Siming stammered out, his ears buzzing with alarm.

'Scrub up lovely, ha-ha-ha!'

Siming tried looking severe. 'Be serious – this is no laughing matter. Now, let's have the newspaper print these two topics in tomorrow's edition. I'm afraid I'll have to trouble you two esteemed gentlemen to deliver the text.'

'Of course,' Weiyuan readily agreed.

'Scrub up lovely... ha-ha-ha...'

'Daotong!' Siming roared.

This last remonstrance finally killed the joke for Daotong. Once they'd decided on the wording for the explanatory note, Weiyuan made a fair copy, then rushed off with Daotong to the newspaper's offices. Candlestick in hand, Siming saw them out, then returned apprehensively to the sitting room. After a brief hesitation outside the door, however, he strode in. There, he was greeted immediately by the sight of the small, rectangular, palm-green packet of soap – its gold insignia surrounded by a fine network of patterns – lying in the centre of the dining table.

Xiu'er and Zhao'er were playing underneath the table, while Xuecheng sat along its right side, consulting his dictionary. Finally, in the corner of the room furthest from the lamp, he discovered the shadowy figure of his wife on the high-backed chair, her face inscrutable in the dim light, eyes fixed on the middle distance.

'"Scrub up lovely"! You're all disgusting...'

Siming thought he heard Xiu'er mutter something behind his back, but when he spun round, her lips betrayed no movement, while Zhao'er was scratching at her own cheeks.*

Sensing he was on enemy territory, Siming blew out the candle and went into the courtyard. As he paced up and down, the hen and chicks kept on waking up to protest about the noise, forcing him to tiptoe further away. Eventually, the hall lamp shifted

towards the bedroom. He gazed at the moonlight, carpeting the ground like a bolt of white silk. A full moon nestled, like a jade dish, between the clouds.

He felt overwhelmed by sorrow – forsaken, alone, like the virtuous beggar-girl. Sleep eluded him until far into the night.

But next morning, the soap was officially deployed. He woke rather later than usual to find his wife bent over the washstand rubbing at her neck, lather massed luxuriantly up behind her ears, like the bubbles in a crab's mouth – nothing like the scanty layer of foam generated by her old acacia pods. For little less than half a year, his wife's skin took on a scent that might or might not have been olive, after which (according to everyone who smelt it) the fragrance changed to sandalwood.

22 March 1924

THE LAMP OF ETERNITY

One overcast afternoon in spring, the atmosphere in the only teahouse in the village of Goodlight clotted with tension, a faint, but persistent imperative lingering in the ears of the assembled company:

‘Put it out!’

The anxiety was not, of course, universal. Most of the villagers weren’t great ones for stepping out – and on the rare occasions they did, they would first consult the *Imperial Guide to the Seasons*,¹ to check whether the date they had in mind was deemed cosmically unsuited to exeat. And even if no such warning was issued, they would be sure to turn their steps first in the direction in which the God of Happiness was to be found, to ensure no mischance would come of the excursion. The smattering of village youth wild and spontaneous enough to resort to the teahouse in defiance of calendrical prohibition were, quite understandably, regarded as spendthrifts and prodigals by their more conservative neighbours.

And it was among precisely this community of profligates that the tension was now mounting.

‘Same old story?’ one of them – Triangle-Face, to his friends – asked, picking up his bowl of tea.

‘So I hear,’ another – Square-Head – replied. ‘“Put it out! Put it out!” – all he ever says. Eyes flashing like... flashes. Hell and damnation! It’d be the ruin of the village. It’s no laughing matter. We have to get rid of him somehow!’

‘Easy. His ancestors helped pay for that temple, and now he wants to blow out the Lamp of Eternity at the altar. So all we have to do is head into town and turn him in for disgracing his forebears!’ Kuoting heatedly joined the debate, thumping the table with his clenched fist. A lid precariously positioned over one of the bowls of tea clattered on to the table.

‘Can’t do that. Only a parent or a maternal uncle can play the unfilial card with the authorities,’ Square-Head objected.

‘And he’s only got the one uncle, on his father’s side...’ This took the wind quite out of Kuoting’s sails.

‘Any luck at mahjong yesterday?’ Square-Head suddenly shouted at Kuoting, who glared silently at him.

‘If he puts the lamp out,’ Zhuang Qiguang and his fat face now entered the fray, ‘what’ll happen to the village? I’ve heard the old folks say Emperor Wu of the Liang² lit it, and that it’s burned ever since – it’s never once gone out. Not even when the Taipings came... Bright green, it is,’ he clicked his tongue wonderingly. ‘Anyone who comes by the village always wants to take a look at it.’ Another click of the tongue. ‘It’s the best thing we have... Why’s he making all this fuss?’

‘Because he’s mad, of course!’ Square-Head witheringly replied.

‘We can’t all be as clever as you!’ Sweat began to seep out of Zhuang Qiguang’s face.

‘I reckon we should trick him again, just like the last time,’ interjected Mrs Hui, proprietor and waitress of the teahouse in question. She’d been keeping a close ear on the debate, and hurriedly steered them back on to the straight and narrow of the serious business in hand.

‘What happened then?’ a surprised Zhuang Qiguang asked.

‘He went crazy before, right, just like he has now. That was back when his father was still alive. We played a trick on him, and the problem went away.’

‘What trick? How come I didn’t know about it?’ Zhuang Qiguang sounded even more surprised.

‘Why would you? You lot were knee-high to a grasshopper back then – you didn’t know anything except how to shit and drink milk. I was younger, too. My hands used to be so white, so soft...’

‘You still are, to me,’ said Square-Head.

‘Shut your face!’ Mrs Hui was smiling beneath her glare. ‘This is serious. He was still a boy, back then; and his old man was a bit gone himself. People say that one day his grandfather took him to the village temple and told him to kneel before the Earth God, the Plague General and the Guardian of the Gate, but for some reason he got scared and refused to kneel, then ran out. And he’s never been the same since. Back then, he was just like he is now, telling everyone he met he had to put out the Lamp of Eternity. It’d bring an end to locusts and plagues, he was always saying – like it was this great public service. I reckon a demon’d got into him, and was scared of meeting the proper gods. Why else would he run away from the Earth God? That tea of yours gone cold? Here, have a bit of hot water. So: some time after that, he charged in and tried to blow it out himself. His old man loved him too much to have

him locked up. The whole village went to have it out with the father – no joy. Luckily, my late unlamented had a brainwave: cover up the lamp with a thick cotton quilt, so everything looks dark, then take him into the temple and tell him it's been put out.'

'Stroke of genius.' Triangle-Face sighed in admiration at the ingenuity of it.

'Waste of time,' Kuoting fumed. 'Beat him to death, I say, and your problem's solved. Hmph!'

'You out of your mind?' she gesticulated vigorously. 'Don't you remember his grandfather had an official rank?'

Glancing around at each other, Kuoting and the others tacitly agreed that the only course open to them was the one already tried by the Late Unlamented.

'Everything was fine afterwards.' She wiped a few specks of spittle from the corners of her mouth with the back of her hand as her delivery gathered speed. 'For years and years, he never set foot back inside the temple, or brought the whole business up again. But he went crazy again a few days after seeing the temple carnival – just like before. He passed by here around midday, set on going to the temple. You go and tell his uncle, your best bet is to play the same trick on him. The moment that lamp's put out, the whole village'll be swallowed up by the sea and we'll all turn into mudfish. Go and tell his uncle, quick as you can, or else –'

'Let's check round the temple first,' Square-Head declared, sweeping magisterially out.

Kuoting and Zhuang Qiguang followed smartly after; Triangle-Face bringing up the rear. 'Put it on my slate, all right?' he turned to say, as he reached the door. 'Those tight...'

Nodding, Mrs Hui walked over to the east wall where – beneath a drawing of a triangle – she charcoaled up another couple of short lines below a long queue of identical marks.

As they surveyed the temple, they noted several other presences: the problem himself, a couple of idle onlookers and three children.

The door to the temple was locked fast.

'Excellent!' enthused Kuoting. 'The door's still shut.'

As soon as the fearless tea-drinkers approached, the children seemed to take courage and drew in closer. Their adversary turned from the door of the temple to face them.

He looked much the same as ever: square, sallow face above the usual tattered blue gown. Only his eyes – large and elongated beneath heavy eyebrows – indicated that some kind of a situation was brewing: there was a curious glitter to his melancholic, distrustfully unblinking stare. Two stalks of rice straw had attached

themselves to his short hair – probably helped up by the children behind his back; whenever they looked at his head, they shrank back, giggling and sticking their tongues out.

Everyone stood about, exchanging glances.

‘What d’you think you’re doing?’ Triangle-Face at last spoke up, taking a step in towards him.

‘I’ve asked Mr Hei to open the door,’ he said in soft, subdued tones. ‘That lamp has to be put out. All the gods have got to go, too – Blue-Face, with his three heads and six shoulders, Three-Eyes, Tall-Hat, Half-Head, Ox-Head and Boar-Tusk – every last one of them. Once they’re gone, there’ll be no more locusts, or swine-fever, or –’

‘Rubbish!’ Kuoting snorted. ‘Put that lamp out, and we’ll get even more locusts. And you’ll end up with swine-fever yourself!’

Now Zhuang Qiguang began to giggle as well.

A bare-chested child pointed a reed at the would-be vandal, opened wide his little cherry of a mouth, and blew down hard – ‘Pow!’ – on his imaginary blowpipe.

‘Go home! Or your uncle’ll break every bone in your body!’ Kuoting bellowed. ‘Look – I’ll put the lamp out for you. Come back in a few days to see for yourself.’

Their antagonist now turned his flashing eyes directly on Kuoting, who quickly looked away.

‘You?’ A mocking smile quickly faded into resolution. ‘No thanks! I don’t need help from you lot. I’ll do it myself, right here and now!’

Kuoting sagged anticlimactically with defeat. Now it was Square-Head’s turn.

‘I’ve never thought of you as a particularly stupid person, but it looks like I’ll have to spell things out for you,’ he drawled. ‘Even if you blow out the lamp, we’ll still have locusts, and swine-fever. Stop being such an idiot! Go home and sleep it off!’

‘I know that, I know.’ His lips curled into a malicious smile, which faded just as quickly. ‘But this is the best I can do for now,’ he forcefully resumed. ‘This is the first, the easiest step. That lamp’s got to be put out, and I’m the only one who can do it!’ He turned back round and pushed hard at the temple door.

‘Now, wait a minute!’ Kuoting was beginning to get angry. ‘You live here, just like the rest of us. D’you want us all to become mudfish? Go home! The door’s not going to open! You won’t get at the lamp! Just go home!’

‘Not a chance! I’m going to put it out!’

‘You won’t get that door open!’

A pause.

‘You won’t get that door open!’ Kuoting re-emphasized an earlier point.

‘I’ll think of something else, then,’ the madman went on, rather more calmly,

glancing back at the group of them.

‘Care to enlighten us?’

No response.

‘Ha! Big talk!’

‘I’ll burn the place down.’

‘What?’ Kuoting feared his ears were playing tricks on him.

‘I’ll burn it down!’

A paralysing silence descended. Soon enough, though, our principal actors were conferring in whispers, the upshot of which was a group withdrawal from the immediate precinct of the temple.

‘Mr Hei!’ Zhuang Qiguang shouted, a few moments later, from beyond the wall round the back of the temple. ‘We’ve still got a situation out here! Keep everything locked up! D’you hear me? Keep it locked! We’ll be back as soon as we’ve thought of something!’

By which point our arsonist’s deranged eyes were busily scanning the ground, the air about him, bystanders – presumably for a firebrand.

By the time Square-Head and Kuoting had shuttled in and out of the various great houses of the village, the inhabitants of Goodlight were united in turmoil, those four terrifying words – ‘I’ll burn it down!’ – ringing in their ears. Though there were, of course, a good number of exceptions – those who remained isolated from the goings-on of the wider world. But in general, more people were infected by the tension than not, and understandably uneasy that they were about to become mudfish and the world to come to an end. There was, assuredly, a glimmering realization that only Goodlight would be affected by this global apocalypse, and yet – as Goodlight represented the summation of the entire civilized world – it amounted to much the same thing.

Soon enough, news of the affair reached the hall in which the madman’s uncle received his visitors, and in which the virtuously venerable Mr Guo – his face as gnarled as a wind-dried orange – occupied the seat of honour, tugging on the white beard sprouting from his lower jaw, as if plotting to pluck it out.

‘Out to the west,’ he intermittently pronounced, releasing his beard, ‘on the antemeridian – on which the aged Fu had his stroke – his son – said – the Earth God was – disturbed. If – by some evil – chance – catastrophe – should befall – the village – redress – will be sought – from your esteemed self... Yes, from you. And that – means trouble.’

‘Indeed,’ the master of the house mused, also tugging distractedly at the greying catfish moustache on his upper lip. ‘Retribution for the sins of the father. All his life, my brother refused to worship the Buddha. I tried to argue with him, but he took no

notice. Now what's to be done?'

'You – have – one chance – I think. Yes – one chance. Tomorrow – tie him up – take him into the city – and force him to spend the night – yes – the whole night – at the Temple of the Town God – to exorcize – the demon.'

Thanks to the great public service they were performing in spreading panic, Kuoting and Square-Head had not just (for the first time in their lives) effected entry to the hall in question – an environment of which they would not normally be considered worthy – but even found themselves sat between the venerable Guo and the master of the house, *and* being served tea. Entering behind Mr Guo, they had made their report, then concentrated on drinking their tea. Once that was done, they fell silent, until Kuoting suddenly produced an opinion.

'There's no time! A couple of us are having to keep an eye on him as we speak. The question is, what do we do *now*? If he really does burn it down – '

(Mr Guo's chin began trembling with fear.)

'If he really does burn it down – ' Square-Head reinforced the proposition.

'Then,' Kuoting finished off, 'we'll be in the soup!'

A girl with brownish hair returned to replenish their tea bowls. Kuoting fell silent again and applied himself to his tea. Convulsing, he set the bowl back down on the table, licked his upper lip then removed the lid to blow on it.

'The whole thing is a nightmare.' The master of the house rapped the surface of the table. 'He's a disgrace to the family. We ought to just finish him off ourselves.'

'I'm with you on that.' Kuoting looked up again. 'Last year, Liange Village did exactly that with someone just like him – a disgrace to the family. Beat him to death. Everyone agreed they'd do it together, at exactly the same time, so there'd be no finger-pointing afterwards. And it all worked out fine.'

'This is different,' Square-Head objected. 'Our boys are keeping an eye on him for the time being. But we've got to come up with something, and fast. What I think is...'

The two great men of the village turned their eyes respectfully towards him.

'I think we should lock him up for now.'

'Good thinking.' The master of the house nodded his head slightly.

'Good thinking!' Kuoting added.

'Good – thinking,' Guo confirmed. 'We should – go out – now – and drag him – back here. Have – a room – got ready. With – a – lock.'

The uncle stared thoughtfully up at the ceiling. 'I'm not sure I've a room going spare. And no one seems to have a clue when he'll be better.'

'Can't you – use his – own – ?' Guo asked.

'My own son, Liushun,' the long-suffering uncle's mournful voice suddenly trembled with solemnity, 'will be taking a wife this autumn. Just look at his cousin,

though: a grown man, unmarried, no profession. All he does is go mad. My brother lived out the years that were allotted to him and though he wasn't exactly a model citizen, he deserves to have a descendant to burn incense for him.'

'Of course!' the three of them chorused.

'If Liushun is blessed by sons, I think my nephew should be allowed to adopt the second of them. But... is it right to give a person's son to someone else, for nothing?'

'Certainly not!' the three of them chorused.

'I don't give a fig for that old house of his, and neither does Liushun. But would a mother give away her own son for nothing?'

'Not a chance!' his audience chorused.

He fell silent. The other three exchanged glances.

'I keep on hoping he's going to get better,' the uncle wearily resumed, after a brief silence, 'but he never does. And he doesn't seem to want to, either. I've no choice but to have him locked up – as this esteemed gentleman has just suggested – for the sake of the village, and of his father's memory. Yes, I think that would be best all round, best for his father.'

'Of course,' Kuoting wholeheartedly agreed. 'But where should we put him?'

'Isn't there a spare room in the temple?' the uncle now ponderously asked.

'You're right!' Kuoting exclaimed. 'No one's using the western chamber. And as it only has a small square window, with thick wooden bars across it, there's no way he could ever escape. Perfect!'

As Guo and Square-Head beamed their satisfaction, Kuoting puckered his lips and reapplied himself to his tea.

By dusk, the world was once more at peace, or the troubles of the last few hours forgotten, at least. All traces of the afternoon's exhilarating panic had been wiped from the villagers' faces. Though the trampled ground in front of the temple bore witness to an unusual amount of comings and goings earlier in the day, the traffic had already thinned back out. Because the gates had been locked for days, the children had been deprived for as long of their play area. Once dinner was eaten, a handful of them ran merrily inside the newly reopened courtyard, for games and riddles.

'Guess again,' the oldest was saying.

'My sail is white, my oars are red

I float across the riverbed.

On the bank I have a snack

Sing a song 'fore I go back.'

‘What can it be?’ wondered a girl. ‘Something with red oars.’
‘Look, I’ll tell you, it’s a – ’
‘Wait!’ a boy with ringworm interrupted. ‘I’ve got it: it’s a barge.’
‘A barge,’ another boy, with a bare chest, echoed.
‘A barge?’ the riddler snorted. ‘A barge has sculls. And does a barge sing? You’ll never get it, it’s a – ’
‘Wait a minute,’ the ringworm boy stalled.
‘You’ll never get it. I’m going to tell you: it’s a goose.’
‘A goose!’ the girl laughed. ‘With red oars?’
‘And a white sail?’ the bare-chested one asked.
‘I’ll burn it down!’

The children jumped then, just as quickly, remembered the village madman. Looking across at the room in the western wing of the temple, they glimpsed one hand tugging on a wooden grille, the other clawing at some bark, two eyes flashing between.

After a moment’s silence, the ringworm boy yelped and fled out of the gate, the others following behind, hooting with laughter. Turning his head as he ran, the bare-chested one pointed his reed again. ‘Pow!’ blew his cherry lips.

Stillness returned with the fall of dusk, the eternal green of the altar lamp glowing brighter than ever within the temple, illuminating the gods in their niches, insinuating its light out into the courtyard, into the darkness behind the wooden bars.

Once clear of the temple, the children paused, linked hands, and slowly made their way home, giggling a few extemporized snatches of song:

‘My sail is white, my oars are red.
I sleep upon my temple bed.
Put it out, right here and now.
Sing a song – pow-pow-pow!
I’ll burn it down! Ha-ha-ha!
Here and now, tra-la-la.
On the bank, I sing a song...’

1 March 1925

A PUBLIC EXAMPLE

All was quiet on a street in the western district of the Realm of Supreme Virtue.* Although the sun was not yet at its zenith, already the grit on the road seemed to scintillate beneath its glare, the air burning with high summer. Dogs lolled their tongues – even crows in their treetops let their beaks hang open, panting from the heat. But not all was still. Someone, somewhere was striking together two copper cups, their clear chime somehow reminiscent of the brisk coolness of sour plum juice; and yet the lazily intermittent clang of metal upon metal only intensified the torpid silence that intervened.

Then a scatter of footsteps – a rickshaw-puller rushed quietly forward, fleeing the scorching sun.

‘Hot buns! Fresh from the steamer...’ hollered a plump tenor eleven-year-old by the door to a shop, eyes squinted, mouth distorted from the effort of it all, a hoarse, sleepy timbre to his voice – as if he were mesmerized by the sultry afternoon. On a battered old table next to him sat two or three dozen cold steamed rolls.

‘Steamed buns, fresh from the...’

Then off he flew to the other side of the road, like a rubber ball rebounding off a wall. By a telegraph pole directly opposite stood two men, facing out on to the road. One was a thin, sallow policeman in a khaki uniform, a sword by his side and one end of a rope in his hand. The other end was attached to the arm of a man in a long, blue cotton gown and a shapeless white waistcoat,¹ the brim of a brand-new straw hat pulled down over his eyes. The fat boy was short enough to peep under the brim, and he met the man’s eyes – which seemed to be focused on his own head. The boy quickly looked down, to focus on the white waistcoat, but noted nothing of interest except for a few lines of text in a mixture of large and small print.

The scene instantly gathered a generous semicircle of spectators. The late addition

of a bald old man filled perhaps the pen-penultimate gap; a fat specimen with a bare chest and a red nose completed the arc. (Since this last audience member was a little more expansive than he perhaps needed to be, he took up a space that would have normally done well for two, forcing latecomers to form a second row, poking their heads between the necks of the early arrivals.)

Taking up position almost directly opposite the white waistcoat, the old man craned forward to study the writing on it.

‘Ummm... all... errrrrr... eight... and...’

Noticing the white waistcoat engaged in studying the shiny bald head, the fat boy decided to join him in his researches, though discovered nothing of particular note – a burnished expanse of skin, with a tuft of greying hair behind each ear. An ageing amah just behind him, a child in her arms, tried to squeeze forward, bringing the bald man abruptly upright again, ready to fight for his place. The text of the waistcoat lying beyond his vision, he contented himself instead with perusing the face above it: the half-nose, mouth and pointed chin on display beneath the hat.

Like another rubber ball rebounding off a wall, a small schoolboy now plunged into the crowd, one hand securing a snow-white hat on his head. But three or four tiers in, a great immovable was encountered: a pair of blue trousers, topped by a mountainous bare back, down which waterfalls of sweat were cascading. Recognizing the path directly ahead was blocked, the boy detoured to the right of the trousers, happily glimpsing some light – a space – at the end of this tunnel. But by the time he had bowed his head to burrow through, he heard a territorial splutter, and the bottom inside the blue trousers sashayed right. The space was filled; the light went out.

Soon enough, though, the little scholar re-emerged next to the policeman’s sword. Amazed by what he had achieved, he looked about him. He was surrounded by people, the man in the white waistcoat at their head, a fat, bare-chested boy opposite; behind him, a burly, red-nosed man, also bare-chested and running to fat. Now, only now, did he get a sense of the true magnitude of his earlier obstacle, and he stared wonderingly at him. Conducting his own study of the schoolboy, the plump little steamed-bun seller rotated, following the direction of the former’s gaze, and was confronted by an impressively ample bosom, both nipples crowned by tendrils of long, soft hair.

‘What’s he done?’

Everyone looked round in astonishment to discover a rough-looking fellow – some kind of worker, probably – quietly asking the bald old man for enlightenment.

The old man merely stared at him. The questioner broke eye contact, unnerved by his scrutiny; but when he looked back up, he found he was still being stared at – and by several others in the group as well. Beginning to feel like a criminal himself, he

backed self-consciously out of the crowd and slipped away. A tall man with an umbrella tucked under his arm filled the gap, while the bald man turned back round to consider, once more, the white waistcoat.

The tall man bent forward to admire the face of the white waistcoat from under the brim of his hat, then with inexplicable suddenness straightened up again, forcing those behind him to crane their necks to get a view. The mouth of one undernourished specimen among them hung open with the effort – like that of a dead perch.

Without warning, the policeman raised his foot. Astounded by this development, everyone rushed to observe it. On its return to the ground, however, all eyes shifted back to the white waistcoat. The tall man made another sally forwards, hoping to peek under the brim a second time, then a few seconds later straightened up again and scratched desperately at his scalp.

The bald man irritably noted a disturbance somewhere behind him – a grinding sound next to his ear. Scowling, he looked round to discover, just to his right, a large, tanned hand stuffing half a vast steamed bun into the mouth of a feline-looking face. Resisting the impulse to comment, he instead focused on the felon's new straw hat.

The group suddenly toppled forward like dominoes – even the redoubtable man mountain staggered a few steps – as if struck by some heavenly body. A fleshy arm, a certain match for that of the man with the red nose, extended beyond his shoulder, hand outstretched, and gave the plump boy a resounding slap.

‘Enjoying yourself are you, you little bastard – ’ a face fatter even than the Buddha hissed from behind the first fat man.

After reeling a few steps back, the plump boy recovered and, one hand pressed against his cheek, tried to dart through a gap next to the first fat man's legs. ‘What're you playing at?’ the man mountain asked, with a certain want of sympathy, shifting his buttocks slightly and closing off the escape route.

Caught like a rat in a trap, the plump boy – after a moment's transfixed panic – charged off in the direction of the schoolboy, shoved him to one side and fled. The latter also turned and followed him out of the crowd.

‘Pesky kids!’ muttered five or six members of the audience.

When peace had once more returned and the man mountain looked back at the white waistcoat's face, he discovered him staring at his own chest. Looking quickly down, he found a torrent of sweat rushing down the valley between his breasts. He brushed it away with the palm of his hand.

Yet all was not quite peaceful. Struggling for a view, the amah – the child still in her arms – bumped the nose of the rickshaw-puller standing next to her with her stiffly pointed topknot. The rickshaw-puller then accidentally landed his retaliatory

push on the child, who started wriggling to escape the tight-knit audience and screaming that he wanted to go home. After momentarily losing her balance, the amah got her footing back, then turned the child back towards the white waistcoat.

‘Look at that, hey!’ she pointed. ‘Isn’t that fun!’

Popping up into a gap, a straw-hatted head that looked like it might belong to a student placed what may or may not have been a watermelon seed in its mouth, brought its lower jaw up to crack it, and withdrew. The space was filled next by an oval face streaked with sweat and dirt.

Something had succeeded in annoying the tall man with an umbrella: twisting round to one side, he turned to glare at the dead perch behind his shoulder – presumably his hot breath was aggravating the torment of midsummer. Tipping his head back, the bald man was now finding the four white characters on a red notice pinned to the telegraph pole a rich topic for research. The fat man and the policeman were gazing askance at the sickle-point toes of the amah’s shoes.

A chorus of approval rang out. Every head turned, realizing that something, somewhere else, must have happened. Even the policeman and his prisoner stirred.

‘Hot buns! Fresh from the steamer...’ the plump boy called sleepily out from the other side of the road, head lolled to one side. Rickshaw-pullers rushed quietly forward, fleeing the scorching sun. A sense of disappointment rippled through the crowd. But then, ten houses further along, a fallen rickshaw was joyfully discovered, its puller clambering out.

The circular ranks immediately dispersed in the direction of the incident. Before the halfway point in his journey was reached, the fat man rested beneath the shade of a locust tree, while the tall man charged up to the scene, accelerating past the bald man and the oval-faced man. The passenger was still sitting in the rickshaw, while his puller stood up, rubbing his knees. Five or six spectators looked on with delight.

‘You all right?’ the passenger asked, as the puller prepared to pick his vehicle up again.

With a nod of the head, he set off once more, his disconsolate audience watching them disappear. Eventually, they lost sight of him among a sea of other rickshaws.

Peace returned to the street. Dogs lolled their tongues, panting with the heat. Beneath the shade of his tree, the fat man watched the rapid rise and fall of their stomachs.

Still holding the child in her arms, the old amah scurried along in the shade beneath the eaves of houses. His head still slumped to one side, the plump boy squinted and returned to his sleepy refrain.

‘Hot buns!... Fresh from the steamer...’

OUR LEARNED FRIEND

After a morning spent in front of the mirror, flicking through *A Textbook of Chinese History* and Yuan Liaofan's *Chronology*,¹ he began to feel that books truly were the root of all evil, and that life was most unfair.

He started by directing this new sense of universal grievance at the category of parents, who, it now occurred to him, were pretty derelict in caring for their offspring. When he'd been a boy, for example, he'd always been scrambling up mulberry trees to steal mulberries. Did his parents care? Not a jot. Of course, it ended badly, with him falling off and cracking his head open. Did they get him to a proper doctor? Not a bit of it. And to this very day, a wedge-shaped scar disgraced the top of his left eyebrow. Even though he'd grown his hair, then parted and combed it to cover the scar, it remained visible at the tip: a blot on his otherwise flawless countenance that a female student (should she – perish the thought! – happen to glimpse it) would inevitably hold against him. Heaving a sigh of complaint, he set the mirror down.

His next target was the sadistic compiler of *A Textbook of Chinese History*, with his total lack of consideration for teachers. Although there was some overlap with Yuan Liaofan's *Chronology*, there were large chunks that were very different. How on earth was a jobbing lecturer to hash the two into a single lecture? A piece of paper sandwiched between the pages of the textbook now filled him with new bile: at the teacher who had resigned halfway through the course. 'Start at Chapter Eight,' it read. ' "The Rise and Fall of the Eastern Jin Dynasty".'²

If only the swine had left him some of the Three Kingdoms, the bit just before the Eastern Jin, he wouldn't be having such trouble preparing now. He'd read all the right novels, he knew all the Three Kingdoms stories like the back of his hand: the three oaths in the peach orchard, Zhuge Liang borrowing the arrows, Zhou Yu's

three rages, Huang Zhong beheading Xia Houyuan on Dingjun Mountain, and so on and so forth – he could have talked all term about the Three Kingdoms.³ Or the Tang dynasty, he knew that, too: about Qin Qiong selling his horse, and other nuggets of reliable historical fact he had grasped from close readings of popular fiction. But no: it had to be the wretched Eastern Jin. With another indignant sigh, he took up Yuan Liaofan’s handiwork once more.

‘Ha-ha! Wheedled your way in for a peep, have you? You old fox!’

A hand reached over his shoulder and poked him hard in the chin. He chose not to honour this approach by turning round: he knew both voice and hand belonged to his old gambling partner, Huang San, who must have limped quietly up behind him. Though they were old friends – only a week ago, they’d had a big night out together (mahjong, opera, wine, women, the works) – since publishing in the *Great China Daily* his hugely influential polemic (‘On the Duty of Every Chinese Citizen to Keep Our National History in Order’) and since his letter of appointment from the Academy of Virtuous Female Talent had come through, our learned friend had begun to have his doubts about this Huang San; to suspect that he was, in fact, a rather substandard individual.

‘Sssssh!’ he hissed, grimacing under the weight of his own gravitas. ‘Can’t you see I’m busy writing my lecture?’

‘I thought you told Bo you were only after a job up at the school so you could subject the learned lovelies to a closer “examination”. Ha-ha-ha!’

‘Well, Bo comes out with all sorts of crap.’

Taking a seat next to the desk, Huang San spotted, lying half-open between a mirror and a chaotic stack of books, a large red card, which he snatched up and – eyes widening – began to read.

The services of Gao Erchu are cordially requested for tendering instruction for the extent of four hours of history a week, for which he will be respectfully reimbursed at thirty cents an hour, in exact accordance with the number of hours taught.

In solemn agreement with Howan Shuzhen, Principal of the Academy of Virtuous Female Talent.

Salutations

On the Felicitous First Day of the Month of the Chrysanthemum

In the Summer of the Thirteenth Year

Of the Republic of China*

‘“Gao Erchu”? Who’s he?’ Huang San wanted to know as soon as he’d read it through. ‘You? Changed your name, have you?’

Our learned friend honoured Huang San with a supercilious smile; he had indeed changed his name. The problem with Huang San was that he had no talents beyond the mahjong table; he'd never bothered to apply himself to the progressive disciplines of modern culture. He'd never even heard of the great Russian literary genius Gorky; how could he hope to understand the profound significance of his change of name.[‡] Yes: a supercilious smile was quite sufficient as a response.

'Don't waste your time with this rubbish, Ganting!' Huang San threw down the card of appointment. 'It was bad enough when all the boys' colleges kept on popping up – a real threat to public order. And now they're opening them for girls, too. Where will it all end? Keep well out of it, I say.'

'I beg to differ. Anyway, Madame Ho wouldn't take no for an answer.' Given that Huang San didn't have a good word to say about his new school and his watch was telling him it was half past two already – just half an hour before class – his face wrinkled with irritation.

'All right, forget it.' Ever sensitive to his friends, Huang San quickly changed the subject. 'I've turkey to talk with you: we've a situation on our hands this evening. Mao Zifu's eldest has come up from Maojia Village to get a fengshui expert to check out grave plots for him. He's two hundred big ones – that's silver dollars to you intellectuals – on him. So, we've fixed up a table for tonight: me, Bo and you. You've got to come – chance of a lifetime. We'll clean him out!'

Our learned friend muttered something unintelligible.

'You can't let us down! Now, I've still got stuff to sort out with Bo, but it's at my place as usual. The idiot's hardly out of nappies – he'll be a lamb to the slaughter. Just give me the marked mahjong tiles.'

Heaving himself slowly to his feet, our professor took the box of tiles from the head of the bed and handed it over. His watch was now saying 2.40. Huang San had his points, he thought to himself, but he knew perfectly well that he was about to start a new job, and yet he'd still insisted on coming round to badmouth the college, disrupting his preparatory train of thought. It was a jolly poor show.

'We'll talk more this evening,' he said as coldly as he could. 'I've got to go and teach.'

Casting a baleful glance at the *Chronology*, he picked up his textbook, placed it in his new leather briefcase, carefully set his new hat upon his head, then went out with Huang San. Once out of the door, he lengthened his stride, swinging his shoulders as a carpenter would his drill. Soon, Huang San had lost sight of him.

On reaching the Academy of Virtuous Female Talent, Gao handed over his freshly printed name-card to a hunchbacked old gatekeeper. Promptly invited to enter, he followed the hunchback down a couple of corridors, before finding himself in the staffroom – which presumably doubled as a reception. As Principal

Ho was out on other business, he was received by the grey-bearded Dean of Studies, one Wan Yaopu, justly celebrated under the pen-name of Altar Boy to the Jade Emperor,⁴ who had recently had a series of poems – presented as a lyrical exchange between him and a certain female immortal – printed in the *Great China Daily* under the title of ‘Consecrations at the Altar of the Gods’.

‘A-ha-ha-ha! Chu, old chap! A delight, so long awaited!’ Wan Yaopu cupped his hands in repeated salute, his knee joints bobbing perhaps half a dozen times, as if threatening to give way to a squat.

‘A-ha-ha-ha! Yao, old chap! A delight, so long awaited!’ His briefcase tucked under his arm, Gao mirrored his interlocutor’s performance.

They both took a seat. A servitor in an indeterminate twilight zone between this world and the next brought over two cups of hot water. Gao saw that the wall clock opposite was saying only 2.40 still – fully half an hour out from his watch.

‘A-ha-ha-ha! What a masterpiece that was... that... ah... “Treatise on Our Duty to the Chinese National Essence”. Oh, yes, not a word out of place. Worth a hundred readings, at the very least! A true example to the young, oh, yes, indeed! Next to you, this towering giant of letters, I am an upstart, a mere puppy, a writer of bagatelles and peccadilloes.’ After a recupping of the hands, he went on, in a lower voice, ‘Our humble poetry society, the Sacred Writing Sands of Abundant Virtue, is in daily contact with our immortal muse, who goes by the name of Flower-Heart Pearl⁵ – no doubt a flower fairy banished to the grimy world of mortals. Will you join us? She is excessively fond of exchanging poems with celebrities – and if they are progressives, too, all the better! Chu, old chap, I’m sure she’d be captivated by you. A-ha-ha-ha!’

But Gao Erchu was not excessively in the mood to expound upon questions of poetic immortality, for in the few minutes across which this exchange had taken place, he had forgotten almost every word of his scanty preparations concerning the rise and fall of the Eastern Jin. In some distress, fragmentary warnings welled up in his disordered mind – that he should preserve his dignity at all costs, that his scar should be kept obscured, that he should read slowly from the textbook, that he should gaze with cool composure upon his students. And yet, through it all, the wretched Yaopu went rumbling on.

‘... presented with a water chestnut... “Drunkenly ascending the emerald clouds on a midnight-blue phoenix” – how transcendently unconventional!... After five entreaties from dear old Zheng, we finally got our pentasyllabic quatrain... “Quoth ye not that the sleeves of scarlet brush the Milky Way”... And then Flower-Heart Pearl said... Is this your first time... This is our botanical garden.’

‘Hmm? Oh.’ Aroused from his confused thoughts, our learned friend suddenly realized Wan Yaopu was pointing something out to him. Following the direction of

his finger, he discovered outside the window a brief expanse of wasteland, on which a handful of trees were growing. A single-storey building, containing three rooms, lay directly opposite.

‘And those are the classrooms,’ Yaopu went on, his finger still resolutely pointing.

‘Ah, yes?’

‘The students are very manageable. Outside classes, they’re devoted to their sewing.’

‘Ah, yes?’ Now in substantial difficulties, Erchu was hoping beyond hope that Yaopu would finally run out of things to say; that he would be given a chance to collect himself, to return to the rise and fall of the Eastern Jin.

‘Regrettably, a few of them want to write poetry; but it would never do to encourage that. Lending a hand with the modernization of the country is one thing; but writing poetry – quite inappropriate for young ladies from good families. Between you and me, our immortal muse isn’t all that keen on the idea of female students: what’s sauce for the gander isn’t always sauce for the goose, and all that. Offends the cosmic order of things, what? I’ve had the privilege of exchanging views with her on the subject more than once...’

Hearing a bell ring, Gao Erchu leapt to his feet.

‘Sit down! Please. That’s the bell for the end of class.’

‘You must be terribly busy, please don’t let me hold you – ’

‘No, no, no! I’m not busy, not busy in the slightest! In my laughably humble opinion, promoting women’s education is in step with the way of progress and the modern world, but you have to stop things getting out of hand. Perhaps our muse’s displeasure is heaven’s way of telling us to nip things in the bud. As long as we stick to the middle road, keep everything within the bounds of reason, practise the Doctrine of the Golden Mean, and keep coming back to the national essence – then we should steer a safe course. Eh, what, Chu, old chap? Even Flower-Heart Pearl considers this a view “not entirely without merit”. A-ha-ha-ha!’

Just as the servitor delivered another two cups of hot water from the twilight zone, the bell rang again.

After bidding Gao to take a couple of sips, Yaopu slowly hauled himself to his feet and led him across the botanical garden, and into the classroom.

Gao stood, heart pounding, to one side of the lectern, the room a blur of bobbed hair. Wan Yaopu fished out a letter from somewhere inside his gown, opened it out and read it to the students, keeping his eyes fixed on the text.

‘This is Mr Gao, Gao Erchu, a famous scholar and author of the universally celebrated article “On the Duty of Every Chinese Citizen to Keep Our National History in Order”. Out of admiration for Gao-er-ji, the great Russian man of letters,

the *Great China Daily* has written, Mr Gao changed his name to Gao Erchu. The emergence of such a bright star is indeed a happy day for the firmament of Chinese letters. Now, after continued entreaty from Principal Ho, he has at last deigned to come and share his wisdom with us...'

To Gao, everything seemed to have fallen very quiet and very still: Yaopu had vanished, leaving him alone, horribly alone, on one side of the lectern. Stepping up to the podium – for there seemed no other course open to him now – he bowed, struggled to find calm within, and reminded himself that dignity was to be preserved at all times. He slowly opened his book and began to discourse on 'The Rise and Fall of the Eastern Jin'.

Could someone be – giggling?

A hot flush ran through Gao's face. He hastily looked back at the textbook: but there was the first subheading, just as he had said – 'The Partial Sovereignty of the Eastern Jin'. A classroom full of silent bobs lay beyond the book. His nerves must be playing tricks on him, he supposed; no one had laughed. Collecting himself once more, he gazed steadily back down at the book and slowly went on. To begin with, his hearing was synchronized with his voice production, but the two gradually became estranged from one another until he no longer had any idea what he was saying. By the time he'd reached 'The Grand Designs of Shi Le', all he could hear was a buzz of sniggering.

He felt an irresistible desire to glance down at his audience: the classroom was now an ocean of eyes, of dainty little equilateral triangles perched upon delicate nostrils, swirling into a single glittering mass, rushing towards him. He looked again: the eyes had transmogrified into a cloud of hair.

Terrified, he tugged his eyes back to the textbook, varying his style of delivery with only periodic glances up at the yellowing concrete ceiling, its centre occupied by a perfect stucco circle. And yet the circle suddenly came to life – expanding, then contracting dizzily. Terrified of re-encountering that dreadful ocean of eyes and nostrils, he looked back down at his book. He had now reached AD 383, the Battle of Fei River, and the paranoid hallucinations of Fu Jian.

Despite suspecting the whole room was laughing secretly at him, on he went – for hours, and hours. Still the bell refused to ring. Sneaking a look at his own watch was out of the question, in case the students saw him. After another while, he reached the 'Dramatic Rise of the Tuoba Wei', and then the chart comparing the 'Rise and Fall of the Six Kingdoms' – neither of which he had thought he'd get as far as today; neither of which topics, therefore, he had prepared.

He decided to bring the lecture to a summary close.

'We'll end here today, as this is our first class,' he stammered, after a moment's hesitation. With a quick nod of his head, he stepped off the podium and out of the

door.

He seemed to hear a great, collective squeal of laughter behind him, snorted out of that ocean of nostrils. He blundered through the botanical garden, heading in the direction of the staffroom.

His textbook slipped to the ground at an unexpected meeting between his skull and an unidentified object. Two steps back gave him enough critical distance to observe a young, slender branch in front of him, still trembling from the impact with his head. On bending down to recover the book, he encountered a wooden notice stood next to it:

Mulberry
Genus: Mulberry

Still the laughter behind him kept coming, bubbling out of that ocean of nostrils. Mortified, he ran into the staffroom as fast as he could, rubbing his bruised scalp.

The two cups of hot water were still there, although the inhabitant of the twilight zone and Wan Yaopu were nowhere to be seen. Only his new briefcase and hat seemed to shine through the gloom. The clock on the wall told him it was only 3.40.

Hours after Gao had returned home, he was still troubled by periodic hot flushes and inexplicable waves of anger. Eventually, he concluded that these new colleges were indeed a serious threat to the public order, and that they all wanted shutting down forthwith – the girls' colleges first of all. Honestly, what was the point of them all? Vanity, nothing more than vanity.

He was still persecuted by the sound of ghostly laughter. His anger redoubled, strengthening in him his resolve to resign. He would write a letter to Principal Ho that very evening, citing some terrible affliction of the foot. But what if she refused to accept his resignation? No, no: he must be strong! Look what these female colleges were doing to the very fabric of society; he must put a safe distance between himself and them. It just wasn't worth it, he now reflected.

He put Yuan Liaofan's redoubtable work away, pushed the mirror to one side and folded up his card of appointment. As he was about to sit down, it struck him that it was still offensively red, and he stuffed it – along with *A Textbook of Chinese History* – into a drawer.

This punitive act of tidying – leaving only the mirror on top of the desk – drastically neatened his field of vision. And yet something was still niggling at him – something of great spiritual import. Suddenly remembering, he pulled on his red-tasselled autumn cap, and strode off towards Huang San's.

‘So, our learned friend’s decided to come after all!’ yelled Bo.

‘Shut up!’ he scowled, giving him a smack round the head.

‘Class over? Any lookers?’ Huang San was eager to know.

‘I’m finished with the whole business. These girls’ colleges: they’re no place for decent people. Look what they’re doing to society!’

In came the Mao son, plump as a sticky rice dumpling.

‘A-ha-ha-ha! A delight, so long awaited!’ Every hand in the room was cupped in salutation, every knee joint bobbing reverently, as if threatening to give way to a squat.

‘Allow me to introduce you to Gao Ganting, I’m sure I’ve mentioned him to you,’ Bo addressed the new arrival, pointing out our learned friend.

‘A-ha-ha-ha! A delight, so long awaited!’ The eldest Mao son cupped his hands sociably in Gao’s direction, nodding his head.

Along the left-hand side of the room, a square table had been set at an angle to the wall. While greeting his guests, Huang San laid out places and tiles for them, with the help of a young servant girl. Soon each corner of the table had been marked out with a spindly imported candle and the four of them sat down.

The silence of early evening was disturbed only by the clacking of bone tiles against the red sandalwood table.

Though our learned friend had been dealt a perfectly decent hand, he couldn’t quite lose a sense of injustice. In the past, he’d always succeeded in shaking off unpleasant memories; why, then, was he allowing himself to go on fretting about the parlous state of public morality? Even the steadily mounting tiles before him failed to encourage him to see the bright side. Eventually, however, he regained his sense of happy optimism about society at large, and his mood began to improve – though not until the end of the second round, as he fast approached a winning hand.

1 May 1925

THE LONER

I

My friendship with Wei Lianshu, while it lasted, was a strange sort of affair, bracketed at its beginning and end by funerals.

I was living in S— when I first met him. His name often came up in conversations about the place, where general opinion had him down as something of an eccentric. He'd studied zoology at college but ended up teaching history at a high school. Though he kept himself to himself, he had a habit of sticking his nose into other people's business, too. He was always declaring that the family should be abolished, and yet every month he'd send his salary back to his grandmother as soon as he got it. And so on and so forth, giving the people of S— no shortage of inconsistencies to snipe at. One autumn, I happened to find myself idling a stretch of time away with some relatives who lived near Hanshi Mountain, and who, sharing the surname Wei, happened also to claim a distant relation to Wei Lianshu. They had no more insight into him than anyone else. They talked about him as if he were a foreigner – 'not like us'.

And no wonder. Twenty years after China had launched a national programme of educational reform, Hanshi Mountain still found itself without so much as a primary school. Lianshu was the only villager who had left to get an education. He was also the object of no little envy: everyone insisted he'd made a fortune in town.

By the close of that autumn, dysentery was rife through the village. Fearing for my own safety, I considered heading back to town. At that point, I heard that Lianshu's grandmother had come down with it. Because of her age, she was unlikely to pull through, especially as there was no doctor in the village. Lianshu's last-surviving relative, she lived modestly, with just a maidservant to look after her. He had lost both parents when he was a little boy, and it was this grandmother who had brought him up. I heard that, although things had been hard for her in the past, she now lived in relative peace and comfort. Probably his own failure to have a family and the solitude in which he lived contributed to his reputation for eccentricity.

Since Hanshi Mountain was more than thirty miles from town overland, and almost twenty-five by water, it would take four days to send for Lianshu and bring him back. The day after she fell ill, news of the grandmother's sickness spread through this isolated community, and a messenger was dispatched. By the early hours of that same day, however, she had breathed her last. 'Why won't you let me see Lianshu?' were her final words.

Every relative that could be rustled up – together with a number of idle spectators – now assembled. When Lianshu arrived, they calculated, it would be time to place the deceased in her coffin. Everything was ready – the objects to accompany her on

her journey to the afterlife, her burial clothes; no further preparation was required. The principal obstacle to be anticipated was this chief mourner of hers: everyone was convinced he would insist on 'modernizing' the funeral in some way. By the end of the conference, everyone had fixed upon three conditions. One, that he should wear white, the conventional colour of mourning; two, that he should kneel; and three, that Daoist and Buddhist monks should be called in to perform the proper ceremonies. In sum: that all should be done in absolute accordance with tradition.

That settled, they agreed that on the day of Lianshu's arrival in the village, they would reconvene at the family home, to battle it out with him together. The villagers eagerly awaited news; they knew that Lianshu was an unreasonably progressive type who'd converted to the foreign devils' religion. A great Manichean struggle was about to begin; or at least a spectacle of some sort.

Lianshu, it was put about, arrived in the afternoon. His first action on entering the house was to bow to his grandmother's shrine, after which the clan elders immediately proceeded according to plan, summoning him to the main hall. Having said a great deal of nothing much at all to him, they eventually got on to the main subject: their unrelenting chorus of unconditional demands for the funeral. When everything that was to be said had been said, a silence descended as everyone nervously fixed their eyes on Lianshu's lips.

'As you like,' he replied, his face unchanging.

The sense of release that this easy victory brought was swiftly succeeded by new sources of anxiety, for the unexpectedness of his response seemed all of a piece with his general foreignness. Throughout the village, the news was greeted by disappointment: 'Odd,' they all muttered to each other. 'Better go and see the lie of things for ourselves.' Since the old ways were to be followed in every detail, there would be – so it transpired – no novelty to behold in the funeral. Still, though, look they must, and after dusk the courtyard before the main hall was filled with the happy buzz of spectators.

I, too, went after first sending incense and candles as a funeral gift. Lianshu was dressing the corpse when I arrived. I observed a short, slight man, with a long face. Almost half his face seemed to be obscured by an untidy head of hair, a thick black moustache and eyebrows, with his eyes gleaming in between. There was a methodical deftness to his dressing of the corpse – you might have thought he was a professional undertaker – and he was surrounded by admiring observers. However well a thing was managed, it was always the way – around Hanshi Mountain – that relatives on the mother's side would find something to snipe at. And yet he accepted every criticism in silence, correcting the fault, no flicker of irritation registering in his face. A grey-haired old lady in front of me sighed admiringly.

The prostrations were followed by weeping, and then by women muttering

Buddhist incantations. After that came the laying-in, followed by yet more prostrations and weeping, until the coffin lid was nailed down. A moment's silence was succeeded by a general commotion of bewildered displeasure. I suddenly sensed its cause: Lianshu had failed to shed a single tear throughout the entire proceedings, remaining seated on his straw mat, his eyes flashing beneath their heavy brows.

And so the funeral drew to a surprised, sullen close; Lianshu still sat on his mat, deep in thought. But just as everyone prepared to disperse, tears suddenly began to course down his cheeks, followed by long howls – like the nocturnal howls of a wounded wolf in the wilderness, rasping with an agonized grief. Now this, at last, was a break with tradition; no one had ever heard or seen such a display at a funeral. Eventually the bewildered villagers edged forward, to try to get him to stop, until a great crowd of them stood uselessly about him. On he howled, as if paralysed by sorrow.

As the entertainment seemed at an end, everyone scattered. He went on weeping for another half-hour or so, when he abruptly stopped and set off for home, without a word to the other mourners. He had, a surveillance team subsequently reported, walked into his grandmother's room, lain down on the bed and, apparently, fallen fast asleep.

Two days passed, taking us up to the day before I was due to set off back to the town. By now, the devil himself seemed to have got among the villagers. They were saying that Lianshu was planning to burn most of his grandmother's things, so she could use them in the afterlife, and give the rest to the faithful maidservant woman who had seen her through her funeral – even let her stay on in the house for as long as she wanted. His relatives remonstrated with him till they were hoarse, but he wasn't to be dissuaded.

Motivated substantially by curiosity, I'm afraid, I made sure my way home took me past his front door, taking the opportunity to offer my condolences. He emerged wearing unhemmed white mourning clothes, his face as expressionless as before. Though I tried my best to find words of comfort, all I got in response – beyond a few grunts – was 'Thank you.'

II

Our third meeting took place in early winter of that year, in a bookstore in S—. We nodded at each other, acknowledging recognition. But the event that drew us into a more intimate acquaintance was the loss of my job towards the end of the year, after which I began calling regularly on Lianshu. Primarily, of course, because I was bored – because I had nothing better to do with my time. And also because I'd heard from other people that, even though he seemed so reserved, he had a special sympathy for those who were down on their luck. But the way of the world is fickle; people down on their luck don't stay like that for ever; and so his friendships seldom lasted. The first part of the rumour was true enough: as soon as I presented my name-card, he asked me in. His home consisted of two adjoining rooms, sparsely furnished beyond tables, chairs and a few bookshelves. Everyone said he was terrifyingly progressive in his politics, but I didn't see many new books on his shelves. Though he knew about me having lost my job, once we'd exchanged the standard pleasantries we sat opposite each other in increasingly oppressive silence. He smoked very quickly, I noticed, refusing to release his cigarette on to the ground until the butt was burning his fingers.

'Have a cigarette,' he suddenly said, as he reached out for another himself.

I accepted it and began talking a little about teaching and books, but still I felt oppressed by the occasion. Just as I was thinking of leaving, a bustle of voices and footsteps broke out by the door. Four children rushed in, the oldest seven or eight, the youngest three or four. Their hands, faces and clothes were filthy; none of them struck me as particularly appealing. But Lianshu's eyes immediately lit up as he sprang to his feet and walked into the adjoining room.

'Daliang, Erliang,' he called as he went, 'I've bought the harmonicas you wanted yesterday.'

The children surged towards him, began tooting on their harmonicas then jostled their way out again. Just out of the door, a fight mysteriously broke out and one of them began to cry.

'There's one for each of you,' he shouted as he followed them out, 'they're all exactly the same. No fighting!'

'Who are *they*?' I asked.

'The landlord's children. Their mother's dead – there's just a grandmother to look after them.'

'The landlord hasn't remarried?'

'No. Even though his wife died three or four years ago... If he had, there wouldn't be bachelor accommodation going for someone like me.' He gave a slight smile –

one without any warmth.

Though I was very keen to know why he himself had never married, I felt too embarrassed to ask; I hardly knew the man.

Once you got to know Lianshu, though, he turned out to be quite a talker. He had a great many views on all kinds of subjects – many of them startlingly acute. The most tiresome thing about him was his other guests: fashionably disaffected youths, most of them, who spent the good part of their time draped over his chairs, like indolent crabs, scowling, smoking and railing against the harsh cruel world that had turned them into ‘superfluous men’. Then there were his landlord’s children, always fighting and arguing with each other, knocking over bowls and plates, cadging cakes and sweets, till your ears buzzed with their racket. But Lianshu melted the moment he saw them: they seemed to be more precious to him than his own life. Once, when the next to youngest came down with measles, I heard he was so worried even the grandmother laughed at him afterwards – when the illness turned out not to be serious – for his excessive anxiety.

‘Children are good by nature,’ he earnestly explained to me one day, sensing my impatience perhaps. ‘It’s their innocence.’

‘Not necessarily,’ I carelessly replied.

‘You’re wrong. Children aren’t bad, like adults; they’re incapable of it. It’s only later they become bad like you say – and that’s all down to environment. It’s nurture, not nature – they start out well. They’re China’s only hope.’

‘But if children don’t have the roots of evil already in them, how come they go on to produce the fruits and flowers of evil? A seed produces branches, leaves, or fruit or flowers of a certain sort because it carries them inside as embryos. Everything happens for a reason...’ Perhaps I had had too little to do with myself for too long. I was beginning to sound like one of those government types forced out of office, who take up Buddhism in the political wilderness. I’d recently been idling my way through the sutras, and even though I didn’t have a clue about the philosophy behind them, still I rambled incautiously on.

Lianshu merely glared at me – though whether it was because he had nothing to say, or because he scorned to engage in debate with me, I couldn’t tell. After watching him silently smoke his way through two cigarettes, I sensed a revival of his earlier aloofness, and fled as soon as he drew out a third.

It took our friendship three months to recover. In part, perhaps, because the memory of the argument had faded; but also, perhaps, because he began to perceive a new menace around those little innocents of his, prompting him to reconsider my needling arguments. I’m just extrapolating from something he said around that time, after a few cups of wine at my lodgings.

‘The strangest thing,’ he observed, his face half-tilted up to the ceiling, slightly

clouded with melancholy. 'I saw a little boy on my way over here. Pointing a reed at me and saying, "You're dead!" He was so small, he was barely able to walk.'

'That's nurture, not nature.'

I immediately regretted my facetiousness. And yet he didn't seem to take offence, concentrating on drinking and, in between whiles, smoking.

'Tell me,' I clumsily changed the subject. 'You hardly ever call on other people – what's brought you out of your hole today? We've known each other over a year, but this is the first time you've come here.'

'I just wanted to warn you not to come over in the next few days. I've a couple of particularly unpleasant visitors.'

'Who are they?' His announcement surprised me.

'My cousin and his boy. Ha! Like father, like son.'

'A social visit?'

'No. They've something they want to talk to me about. They want me to adopt the boy.'

'You? Adopt a child?' I exclaimed incredulously. 'But you aren't even married.'

'They know that. But they don't care. All they want is to secure that ruin of a house on Hanshi Mountain. It's the only thing I own in the world. You know I spend my salary as soon as I get it; I've no other savings. Their sole ambition in life is to see my grandmother's old housekeeper thrown out on to the street.'

I was chilled by his cynicism. 'I'm sure they're not as bad as all that,' I tried to argue. 'They're just a bit old-fashioned. Remember at the funeral, when you were crying – they were all trying their best to comfort you –'

'They wanted me to sign over the house to them when my father died, too. So they were full of sympathy at that funeral, as well...' He stared up into space, as if thinking back over the past.

'But the real problem is that you don't have a child yourself. Why is it that you never married?' I found myself gifted with an opportunity to steer us on to a subject I had always felt curious about.

He glanced at me in surprise, then looked down at his knees and, without answering my question, applied himself to his latest cigarette.

III

Yet even in this provincial backwater of ours, Lianshu was not to be allowed any peace. Small local newspapers began launching anonymous attacks on him, while he was often the subject of gossip in local schools – the old mockery, but this time with teeth. Since I knew this intensification of hostilities was clearly the result of his recent fondness for publishing articles, I didn't take much notice. The people of S— had a particular aversion for the free expression of strong views; and once an opinion was circulating in the public domain, retaliation – most likely anonymous – was inevitable. Lianshu himself knew all this perfectly well. But when spring arrived, I heard his school principal had dismissed him. Although I allowed the news to startle me, I had no decent grounds to have expected that things would ever have turned out otherwise. I'd merely clung to the hope that my own friends would have the luck to escape the wringer of public opinion. Instead, the good burghers of S— had merely conformed to type.

In truth, I was so taken up with concerns about my own livelihood – pursuing the possibility of a teaching post in Shanyang, to begin in the autumn – I had no time to call on him. But even when I found myself with a little more time on my hands – almost three months after his dismissal – still I failed to pay him a visit. One day, though, pausing idly at a second-hand bookstall along the town's main street, I was shocked to discover – sandwiched between other books – a valuable Ming-dynasty edition of a classic historical commentary. I'd seen it on Lianshu's shelves: he was fond of books but no great collector, and it would have been one of his most prized possessions. He must have been desperate to sell it off. Had only a few months of unemployment reduced him to this? Money had always passed through his hands like water; he had no savings to speak of. I resolved then and there to go and see my old friend, picking up en route a bottle of spirits, two bags of peanuts and a couple of smoked fish-heads.

His door was shut. I tried calling out: no response. Wondering if he had fallen asleep, I tried shouting louder and rapping on the door.

'He's out!' the corpulent form of the Liang grandmother bellowed irritably out of the window opposite, her triangular eyes set beneath a mass of grey hair.

'Where's he gone?' I asked.

'How would I know?... Where *can* he go? Hang on and he'll be back soon.'

I opened the door and walked into his sitting room. I felt as if I hadn't been there for years. A scene of desolation greeted me: most of the furniture and books were gone, leaving a mere handful of foreign-looking books that the average reader in S— would have no interest in. The round table in the middle of the room was still

there, but while in the past it had always been surrounded by passionate young melancholics, frustrated eccentric geniuses and filthy, ill-behaved children, now it was peacefully overlaid with a thin layer of dust. I placed the bottle of spirits and bags of food on the table, pulled over a chair and settled down to wait, facing the door.

Soon enough, the door did indeed open, and a shadowy figure – Lianshu – slipped in. Maybe because of the dusk gloom, his face looked even darker than usual; but it was otherwise unchanged.

‘How long have you been here?’ He seemed pleased to see me.

‘Not long,’ I said. ‘Where’ve you been?’

‘Nowhere much. Just wandering.’

He pulled another chair over and sat down by the table. We began to drink and to talk about his dismissal. But he didn’t seem that interested in talking about it; it was something he’d long expected, and that he’d seen happen plenty of times before; what more was there to say? As in the past, he applied himself to the business of drinking in a fairly dedicated fashion, while tossing out a variety of views about society and history. I happened to glance at the empty shelves. Reminded of the book on the stall, I was overcome with a vague sorrow.

‘It’s so bleak in here... Haven’t you had many visitors lately?’

‘No. They keep away – they’re afraid of the mood they’ll find me in. It’s not much fun keeping company with depression. Who likes visiting a park in winter?’ He took another couple of gulps and sat in silence, thinking. Suddenly, he looked back up at me.

‘Still no news about that job of yours?’

Even though I knew he was drunk, I still allowed myself to be irritated by the question. Just as I was about to make some response, I noticed him listening out for something. Scooping up a handful of peanuts, he went out – the Liang children were laughing and shouting outside.

But the moment he went out, the children’s voices faded to nothing – they’d obviously run away. He chased after them, trying to say something, but I didn’t hear their reply. Slipping back inside, he replaced the handful of peanuts in the bag.

‘They won’t even eat my food,’ he muttered, softly self-mocking.

I forced a smile through the melancholy of it all. ‘Sometimes, I think you make life more difficult for yourself than you need to. You’re too pessimistic about people.’

He responded with another of his bleak smiles.

‘I suppose you think people only visit you – people like me – because we’ve nothing better to do, for a bit of entertainment?’

‘No. Well, sometimes, maybe. Or maybe you’re after anecdote material.’

‘Well, you’re wrong,’ I sighed. ‘People aren’t like that. You’ve spun a cocoon of loneliness around yourself. Can’t you try to see the bright side of things?’

‘Maybe you’re right. But where did I get the silk for my cocoon in the first place? And there are plenty of people like me in the world; my grandmother for one. Even though we weren’t blood relatives, maybe she passed on her destiny to me. But I’ve shed all the tears I’m going to shed for her, and for myself.’

I thought back to his grandmother’s funeral.

‘I’ve never quite understood,’ I said, ‘why you cried like that, after she’d died.’

‘No reason why you should,’ he curtly responded, lighting the lamp. ‘You and I only became friends afterwards – or maybe even because of it. My grandmother, you see, was my father’s stepmother; his natural mother died when he was two.’ He drank some more wine, finishing up a smoked fish-head.

‘Back then, I knew nothing of any of this. But a few things always struck me as a bit curious. While my father was still alive and things were all right at home, we’d hang up pictures of our ancestors dressed in the most wonderful clothes at the start of the New Year and make offerings to them. I loved gazing at their images. I remember a maid holding me up, and pointing out one of the pictures. “That’s your real grandmother,” she’d say. “Bow to her, so she’ll bless you and you’ll grow up big and strong.” I was puzzled: I already had a grandmother, so who was this other, “real” grandmother? But I loved this young, beautiful grandmother of mine, in a gold-trimmed red dress and pearl crown, just like my mother in her picture, nothing like the old grandmother who looked after me. When I looked at her, she seemed to gaze back at me, her lips curling into a smile; I knew that she loved me very much.

‘I also loved my other grandmother, who sat by the window all day slowly doing her needlework. But however hard I tried to get her to laugh, I could never coax a smile out of her. I felt she was shutting me out – she seemed different from my friends’ grandmothers. But I still loved her. Afterwards, though, we somehow became more distant with each other. Not because I was older and knew she wasn’t my father’s natural mother. I got bored with her – sitting there, day in, day out, year in, year out, working mechanically away at her sewing. But on she went, doing her needlework, looking after me, loving me. Though I hardly ever saw her smile, she never told me off, either. After my father died, when her sewing became our only source of income, she withdrew even further into herself. Then I left for school...’

The lamp faded, its paraffin almost burned up. He groped for a small galvanized iron can on one of the bookshelves and topped the fuel up.

‘Paraffin’s gone up twice this month already,’ he commented, turning the wick. ‘Life seems to get harder every day... And so it went on, until I left school and started work myself. Life became a bit easier, a bit more secure, till she got ill and had to take to her bed.

‘I don’t think her life was too bad, towards the end. She’d lived a good long time. There was no need for me to cry as well; she’d had plenty of tears shed for her – a lot of them by people who’d tried their hardest to make her life miserable while she was alive. Hypocrites!’ He laughed. ‘But somehow, at that moment, her whole life seemed to play out before my eyes – a life of diligently self-inflicted isolation. And there are plenty of people like her. Maybe I was just emotional because of the funeral, but I suddenly wanted to weep for all these people.’

‘You see me as I used to see her. But I was wrong. Because, now I think back over things, it was *me* who allowed myself to become estranged from her, as I saw more of the world...’

He bowed his head, a cigarette hanging between his fingers. There was a slight flicker to the lamplight.

‘It’s a hard thing to have no one to mourn you,’ he muttered, as if to himself. After another pause, he looked back up at me. ‘But you’ve problems of your own. I’ve got to find myself a job – and quickly.’

‘Haven’t you any other friends who can help you out?’ I felt utterly powerless to do anything either for him, or for myself.

‘A few, I suppose, but we’re all in pretty much the same boat.’

I said goodnight to Lianshu at the door and emerged into an unusually still night, a full moon shining directly overhead.

IV

My position at Shanyang turned out to be far from ideal. Two months after starting, I hadn't seen a cent of my salary; I had to cut back even on cigarettes. My colleagues, by contrast, seemed constitutionally inured to hardship and perfectly contented with their menial positions and meagre fifteen- or sixteen-dollar salaries, their thin, pale, long-suffering faces bent constantly over their work. The sight of an individual of even middling rank would yank them respectfully to their feet – proving that the maintenance of social niceties is not tied to material sufficiency. Whenever I witnessed this, I always recalled Lianshu's parting words to me. By the time I left, his finances had become even more precarious. His old reserve had started to give way to a kind of urgent desperation, and he called on me, late one night, after he learnt that I was leaving.

'Might there be anything for me, too, out there?' he eventually stammered out. 'Anything – even if it's only copying work, twenty or thirty dollars a month...'

I said nothing, startled by how low he was willing to stoop.

'I... I have to try to find a way to keep going.'

'I'll keep an eye out for you – I'll do my best.'

Lianshu's hopeless request, and my glib response to it, often returned to haunt me, pushing me to make all sorts of approaches on his behalf, but nothing came of it. There were too many people chasing too few jobs; all I ever got was the odd regretful apology, which I recycled into letters of apologetic regret back to him. My own situation deteriorated at the end of the first term. A weekly rag – *Principles of Study* – run by a few local worthies, began to publish attacks on me. No one named names, of course, but they were ingeniously worded to give the direct impression I was plotting revolution on campus. Even my friendship with Lianshu got dragged into it – as if we were part of some insidious cabal.

I kept as low a profile as I could. Outside class, I took refuge in my room, sometimes even afraid that the trickle of cigarette smoke from a crack in the window would be seen as further proof of subversion. All hope of helping Lianshu was, of course, now lost. And so it dragged on into midwinter.

Snow had fallen all day and deep into the night. Outside, the quiet was so absolute you could almost hear it. I was sitting under the shrunken flame of my lamp, imagining – through eyes closed with the boredom of it all – the busy descent of snowflakes before they banked over the ground. I thought of the place I'd grown up, of frantic New Year preparations there, of childhood, of sculpting a Buddhist saint out of snow in our back courtyard. Its black eyes – fashioned out of two fragments of coal – suddenly flashed, like Lianshu's.

‘I... I have to try to find a way to keep going,’ went the same voice in my head.

‘Why?’ I wondered.

Shaken awake by the idiocy of my question, I sat up and lit a cigarette. Opening a window, I saw the snow was falling more heavily than ever. There was a knock at the door: a few seconds later, I heard the familiar footsteps of the boarding house’s odd-job man inside the room. He handed me a large envelope, perhaps six inches long. Though the handwriting was almost illegible, I recognized at a glance the word ‘Wei’ – it was from Lianshu.

This was the first letter I’d received from him since leaving S—. I hadn’t been particularly surprised by his lack of news – I knew how lethargic he sometimes was – but I’d felt the odd twinge of resentment at his silence. Yet I had a strange feeling about this letter, now it had finally come. I ripped it open.

‘— Shenfei,’ it began, again almost illegibly.

What title do you prefer? Fill in the blank as you please.

I’ve had three letters from you since you left, but have replied to none. For the simplest of reasons: I’ve had no money for stamps. Nonetheless, you may still be interested in having news of me – news that I have finally failed. I used to think I already was a failure; now, I know I merely dabbled in the art. There once was a time when there was someone who wanted me to keep going a little longer, and even when I wanted it myself. Despite all the obstacles. Now, there’s no reason to go on, and yet I find myself still alive.

So what should I do?

The person who wanted me to go on living has been lured to his death by enemies. And who were they? No one seems to know.

How fast things change! The past six months have practically, in fact properly, reduced me to begging. But there were still things I wanted to accomplish, things I was willing to beg for, to suffer cold, hunger and loneliness for. And I wasn’t ready to be destroyed. Just because someone else wanted me to live. Now he is gone, there is no one. I don’t deserve to go on living, but neither do a great many others. And now, I want to live for my enemies. Those who wished me well are gone – there’s no one left to hurt, no one to suffer for what I do. I wouldn’t want to cause people like that grief. I’ve now done everything I used to despise, and turned my back on everything I used to believe in. There’s a wonderful sense of release, of happiness in giving up, in going over to the other side. I’ve failed – but also won.

Have I gone mad, you must be wondering? Have I become a national hero, a celebrity? Nothing of the sort. It’s quite simple. I’ve become esteemed aide to our even more esteemed local warlord, Divisional Commander Du,¹ who retains

my services at the princely rate of eighty dollars a month.

Think what you like of me, Shenfei. I don't mind.

Do you remember my old room: the room in which we first talked and later said goodbye? Now it is filled with new guests, new bribes, new flattery, new intrigues, new kowtows, new bows, new mahjong games, new drinking games, new plots and villainies; new sleepless nights and new spitting of blood...

You said in your previous letter that your new job was not as you'd hoped. Fancy becoming an aide? Say but the word! You'd probably make a decent living just as a doorman, all those guests, and bribes, all that dishonesty...

It's snowing hard here. How about where you are? It's the middle of the night: I've spat blood twice and can't get back to sleep. I remember your three letters since the autumn; I'd never thought of you as a diligent correspondent. I felt I must send you news; I wonder if I've succeeded in shocking you.

I probably won't write again. You know what I'm like. When are you coming back? If you hurry, we might yet meet; but I think it unlikely – we've taken different paths. Best forget all about me. Thank you for trying to help me – you can give up now. I'm 'fine'.

Lianshu

14 December

I wasn't shocked. After reading it once quickly, then a second time more carefully, I was left instead with a curious sense of uneasy relief. At least, I thought to myself, subsistence was no longer a problem for him. One less thing for me to worry about, even though I'd never done anything for him anyway. For a moment I considered writing back, then let the notion fade away – I felt I had nothing to say.

I did begin to forget him, just as he had instructed. But less than ten days after his letter arrived, *Study Weekly* – a local S— paper – suddenly went back into print. Though I'd never been a great reader of such publications, I glanced idly through it, since it had dropped on to my doorstep. It was full of reminders of Lianshu, of poems and essays mentioning him – 'A Snowy Audience with Mr Lianshu', 'An Elegant Gathering in the Studio of our Esteemed Aide-de-camp Lianshu', and so on. In the section entitled 'Gossip', stories in which Lianshu had previously been the target of ridicule were now relished as amusing anecdotes, designed to prove that exceptional men behave in exceptional ways.

The curious thing was that, despite all these reminders of him, and of my affection for him, his features blurred in my memory. But he haunted my thoughts, leaving me with a kind of mysterious, shuddering apprehension. Luckily, by autumn *Study Weekly* had stopped coming. At which point, Shanyang's *Principles of Study* carried

a long piece entitled 'Gossip – Fact'. Rumours about certain gentlemen, it revealed, were enjoying a wide currency among law-abiding local notables. Several names were mentioned, of which mine was one. Now, extra precautions in my daily life became necessary – permitting my cigarette smoke to escape through the window once more became unacceptably risky. Worn out by it all, I soon let Lianshu slip to the back, and then out, of my mind.

But I was still unable to hold on to my job till the end of term. At the end of May, I left Shanyang.

V

From Shanyang to Licheng to Taigu, I spent the next six months almost constantly on the move. When finally all my other options seemed exhausted, I decided to return to S—. I arrived on an overcast afternoon in early spring, as the sky hesitated over whether or not to rain. As there were vacancies in my old lodgings, I took up a room there. I had set to thinking about Lianshu on my journey back, and resolved to go and call on him after dinner. I walked along a succession of damp streets and around a succession of dozing dogs, bearing two packages containing the steamed cakes for which Wenxi is renowned, until I finally reached Lianshu's gate. It seemed very bright inside: maybe even an aide-de-camp's lodgings got to share the brilliance of their occupant, I smiled to myself through the gloom. I then noticed a strip of white mourning paper pasted diagonally across the side of the gate. The Liang grandmother must have died, I thought to myself, heading inside.

A coffin was set beneath the courtyard light, a soldier, or perhaps a bodyguard in full uniform, standing to one side, talking to a woman who looked like the Liang grandmother. A few labourers in short jackets stood idly by. My heart began to pound.

'Well, well, well, look who's back!' she shouted, turning to stare at me. 'Bit late, aren't we?'

'Who – who's passed away?' Even though I knew what her answer would be, still I had to ask.

'Our esteemed Mr Wei, the day before yesterday.'

I looked about me: Lianshu's old room was sunk in quiet, dimly lit by probably a single lamp. White mourning curtains hung in the front room. A few children had gathered outside – the Liangs.

'He's in there.' Their grandmother pointed towards the curtain as she approached me. 'After Mr Wei was honoured with his new position, I rented our front room out to him as well. That's where he is now.'

Two tables, one square, one rectangular, were set before the plain curtains, with perhaps a dozen bowls of food laid out on the first. The moment I entered the room, two men in long white gowns blocked my way, glaring suspiciously at me, their eyes bulging like those of landed fish. I quickly explained my relationship with Lianshu – a connection corroborated by the ever-present Mrs Liang. Eventually, Lianshu's keepers stepped aside to permit me to pay my respects.

As I bowed to the deceased, someone at ground level began sobbing. Turning, I discovered a child around nine years old lying face down on the straw mourning mat, also dressed in white, a hank of linen tied around his shaved head.

After a brief conversation, I discovered that one of the men in white was Lianshu's cousin, his closest surviving relative; the other was a distant nephew. When I asked to see the deceased, they did their best to turn me back, claiming that I did them 'too much honour'. In the end, though, I persuaded them, and the curtain was opened.

Lianshu lay before me, in death. And yet, the strangest thing! Despite his crumpled shirt and trousers, the bloodstains on the lapels, the hideous emaciation of his face – despite all this, his face essentially remained as it had always been, his mouth and eyes peacefully shut as if in sleep. I almost reached out to place my hand over his nose, to check whether he was still breathing.

A sepulchral silence prevailed over the living and the dead. As I retreated, the cousin approached once more to continue our exchange: his 'younger brother', he said, had suddenly passed away in the prime of life, cutting off the infinite possibilities for advancement and success that lay before him – a misfortune for the family, a source of pain to his friends. He seemed actually to be apologizing for his cousin's rudeness in having the temerity to die, demonstrating a grasp of funeral sophistry rare in countryfolk. Then the silence – the same, absolute silence as before – returned.

I felt no sadness, only boredom. Re-emerging into the courtyard, I slipped into conversation with the Liang grandmother. He would be placed in his coffin, I learnt, as soon as the burial clothes were delivered. While it was being sealed up, anyone born in the year of the rat, horse, rabbit or rooster would have to make themselves scarce (for fear, presumably, of some cosmic clash). The words gushed out of her in a merry torrent, prattle about his illness, about his last few months and about her own views on both subjects.

'He was a different man after his luck changed, you know. Strutting about, head held high. A whole load more fun than he used to be. Never used to be much of a talker – "Mrs Liang" was the most I'd get out of him. After he got his new job, though, he cracked me up – called me "old bat". When people gave him herbs for tonics, he'd just toss them into the courtyard at me. "You have them, old bat," that's what he used to say. After his luck changed, I let the front room out to him and took the side-room for myself – made sense with all those visitors he got. But he wasn't all up himself, like some people get when their luck turns. He'd often stop for a chat and a joke. If only you'd got here a month earlier, you'd have had yourself a time – drinking, chatting, laughing, singing, poetry, mahjong...

'The old Mr Wei was scared to death of the children, meek as anything around them. The last few months, though, he was completely different, always up for a lark. He was a great favourite with our four, always running off to his rooms, they were, whenever they got a chance. Oh, he was a tease: if they wanted something off him, he'd get them to bark like dogs, or kowtow. The fun we had. A couple of

months ago, when our second oldest wanted a pair of shoes, three times he had to kowtow – you could hear his head thumping on the ground. He’s still wearing them now – good as new.’

She shut up when one of the men in long white gowns emerged. I asked about Lianshu’s illness, but she didn’t have much light to shed. He’d lost a load of weight some while ago, she said, but no one’d taken any notice, because he was always so full of the joys of spring. Maybe a month ago, they’d heard he’d been spitting blood, but he’d refused to see a doctor. ‘Then he took to his bed. He lost his voice completely three days before he died. When his cousin came down from Hanshi Mountain to ask where his savings were, he wouldn’t say a thing. The cousin thought he was just putting it on, but I don’t know... Some say that people with consumption really do lose their voices near the end.

‘He was a rum one, though, our Mr Wei,’ she lowered her voice. ‘The money just ran through his fingers, he didn’t save a penny. That cousin of his was convinced he’d given the loot to us, but we didn’t get a damn thing. He threw the whole lot away – on nothing. He’d buy something one day, sell it the next, break it in the meantime. No one could understand it. There was nothing left when he died – everything was spoilt. That’s why the place looks so depressing now.

‘His problem was he couldn’t take anything seriously. I tried to tell him it was time he had a family – a man in his position could have found someone like a shot. Or even if he couldn’t get someone from a good family, he could have bought in a few concubines. Kept up appearances, at least. But he’d just laugh: “Quite the matchmaker, aren’t we? Always sticking our nose in other people’s romances.” There wasn’t a word of sense to be had out of him. Now if he’d listened to me, all that while back, he wouldn’t be lying alone in the cold and dark like he is now. At least he’d have a few people to cry for him.’

A shop assistant came in with a bundle of clothes on his back. After picking out some underwear, the three relatives went behind the mourning curtain. Soon after, the preliminaries were completed and the mourning curtain lifted, ready for the outer clothing to be added. I watched, perplexed, as a pair of khaki army trousers with a thick red stripe was followed by a jacket with gleaming epaulettes. I had no idea what rank they denoted, or in what army. His outlandish toilette completed, Lianshu lay in his coffin, a pair of brown leather shoes by his feet, a papier mâché sword at his waist. Next to his grey face – the bones protruding below the skin like sticks of wood – a gold-trimmed cap glinted.

The three relatives wept a while at the side of the coffin, then stopped and wiped their tears. The boy with the linen round his head withdrew, as did the third Liang child, probably because they had been born in cosmically incompatible years.

As a couple of the labourers heaved up the coffin lid, I moved in closer to take

final leave of Lianshu.

There he lay, under all this improbable clothing, eyes and mouth shut, lips curled up at the corners, mocking his posthumous absurdity.

The instant the first hammer stroke fell, the wailing began. Desperate to escape it, I retreated first into the courtyard and then – my feet somehow taking on a will of their own – out of the gate and along damp streets, their outlines still perfectly visible through the dusk. I looked up at the sky: the heavy cloud-cover had now dissolved, to reveal a round moon, scattering a still, frigid light over the city.

I walked faster, as if struggling – in vain – to flee some great source of oppression. Something seemed to be struggling to escape my eardrum, finally breaking free: a long howl – the nocturnal howl of a wounded wolf in the wilderness, rasping with an agonized grief.

My heart easing beneath the moonlight, I strode freely through the damp cobbled streets.

Finished on 17 October 1925

IN MEMORIAM

From Juansheng's notes

I want to try, if I possibly can, to set down here my feelings of sorrow and regret – for Zijun, and for myself.

How quiet and empty this shabby old room is, in its forgotten corner of the hostel. And how quickly time passes: a whole year since I fell in love with Zijun, since she enabled me to escape this quiet emptiness. And how unfortunate that I should now happen to return to this same room, unchanged in every way: the same broken window, the same moribund locust tree and ancient wisteria, the same square table, the same mildewed wall, the same plank bed pushed against it. As I lie on it now, alone and awake in the middle of the night, the past year seems to fade away, as if I had never lived with Zijun, as if I had never moved out of this shabby room to set up my own hopeful little establishment in Goodluck Lane.

Another thing I now notice. A year before, the stillness and emptiness about the place was different, full of expectation: the impatient expectation of Zijun's arrival. I would spring to life the instant I heard the crisp clip of high-heeled shoes along the paved road. Her round, pale, dimpled face, thin white arms, striped blouse and black skirt would swing into view, bringing me fresh leaves from the locust tree, lilac flowers hanging in clusters off the gnarled wisteria trunk.

But now, only quiet and emptiness are left. Zijun will never return – never.

When Zijun was not here, I was blind to my decrepit surroundings, dazed by the unending tedium of her absence. Nothing I tried to read – science, literature, anything – stuck. I would run through a dozen pages then realize I had taken none of it in. Only my sense of hearing remained unimpaired, as if I could pick out Zijun's

tread from every other set of footsteps passing my gate. I would think I could hear them, drawing closer, and closer – then fading into the distance, disappearing in a confusion of other footsteps. How I hated the son of the local official's factotum, his cloth soles a world away from Zijun's high heels, and the dandy next door, whose leather shoes so often tricked me into hope.

Had her rickshaw overturned? I would start to fret. Had she been run over by a tram?

I would have snatched up my hat to go out to look for her, were it not for memory of her uncle's wrath.

Then suddenly her footsteps would draw near, and nearer. By the time I had come out to meet her, she would be under the wisteria canopy, her face dimpled with smiles, safe (that day, at least) from her uncle's fury. My heartbeat would slow. We would spend a moment silently gazing at each other, then my shabby room would echo with the sound of my own voice: discoursing on the dictatorship of the Chinese family, on the need to sweep away tradition, on the equality of the sexes, Ibsen, Tagore, Shelley... And she would smile and nod, her eyes shining with childish excitement. I'd pinned to the wall a copperplate engraving of a bust of Shelley looking at his most handsome, torn from a magazine. When I showed it to her, she glanced at it, then looked down, as if embarrassed. I feared, at such moments, that Zijun had not yet freed herself of the shackles of tradition; perhaps, I later came to think, a commemorative portrait of Shelley drowning at sea, or of Ibsen, would have been more appropriate. But I never got round to replacing it – and can't think what has happened to it now.

'I belong to myself!' she calmly declared, after a moment's reflection. 'No one else has any rights over me!'

We'd known each other for six months, and our conversation had just turned to her uncle – her guardian in Beijing – and to her father, back home. By this point, I had declared all my opinions, experiences and faults, keeping almost nothing back; she understood me perfectly. For days, her words echoed in the cathedral of my mind, moving me to inexpressible euphoria – I now knew Chinese women weren't the lost cause that pessimists would have us believe, and that a glorious future would soon dawn for us all.

We maintained our usual ten paces' distance as I saw her out of the gate, that filthy old gatekeeper with his catfish beard squashing his face against the dirty window-pane. Then there'd be the face of the young dandy in the next courtyard, plastered with cold cream as usual, against the gleaming window. She walked proudly off, without a sideways glance at our audience; I returned proudly to the hostel.

'I belong to myself! No one else has any rights over me!'

My resolution was nothing to hers. What could vanishing cream and a squashed face do to this thought?

I can no longer remember how I declared myself to her. Soon afterwards, the details grew hazy in my mind – thinking back over them at night, I could recall only fragments. Within a month or two of our moving in together, even these fragments had faded into cryptic shadows and dreams. All I could remember was, a dozen or so days before the event itself, exhaustively scripting my speech: both introduction and conclusion, and an appropriate response in the case of a refusal. But when my moment arrived, none of this forethought was of the slightest use. Overwhelmed by stage fright, I fell instinctively back on the mode of delivery I'd learnt at the movies: falling to one knee and clasping her hand, tears in my eyes. I later cringed at the memory of it all, and yet, like a single lamp in a dark room, this is all that remains to me of the scene.

Zijun's response is equally a blur; all I knew was that she had accepted me. But I do seem to remember her face changing colour: to a ghostly white, then a bright crimson I'd never seen before – nor saw again. I saw joy and sorrow, doubt and surprise in her childlike eyes. She did her best to avoid my gaze, as if afraid, as if searching for an escape route through the window. But I knew I had been accepted even though I could not say how she had or had not expressed it.

While she, by contrast, remembered everything: what I had said, as if she were reciting from a favourite text; what I had done, as if a film – invisible to me – were playing out before her, recounting the scene in three-dimensional detail, in all its sentimental idiocy. She would review the episode in the middle of the night, calling me to minute account, ordering me to go back over what I'd said, correcting or adding to my responses, as if I were a substandard pupil.

As time went by, she went back over it less and less often. But whenever I saw her staring into space, lost in thought, her expression softening, her dimples deepening, I knew she was returning to it. I was terrified of her remembering my ridiculous, pathetic obeisance; and yet I knew there was no way to make her forget.

And she found nothing ridiculous in it, I knew – because she loved me, totally, innocently.

The closing weeks of last spring – those were our best, our happiest, busiest times. Once my mind had calmed back down, it began generating projects to keep my body fully occupied. Now, at last, we began to go out together: along the street, in the park, but mostly hunting for a place to live. I felt I had to be constantly ready for the looks we got as an unchaperoned couple – questioning, mocking, vulgar, contemptuous. The moment my guard dropped, I wanted to curl up into a ball; I had to bristle constantly with proud defiance. While Zijun strolled fearlessly,

obliviously on, as if through a deserted city.

Finding a place to live was no easy task: most places found some excuse or other to turn us away, while the rest weren't suitable anyway. At the beginning of our search, we were very particular – or perhaps not particular enough, as we wouldn't have felt welcome in most of the rooms we looked at. Later on, our sole concern became to find a landlord who would take us in. After seeing some twenty places, we eventually found somewhere that would do for the time being: two north-facing rooms in a small courtyard on Goodluck Lane. Our landlord was a low-ranking official of some description, but surprisingly liberal with it. He and his family – a wife, a baby girl not yet one, and a peasant-girl maid – took the main room and the apartments to the sides of the house. As long as the baby wasn't crying, theirs was an agreeably peaceful establishment.

Even though we kept our furnishings very simple, they swallowed up more than half the money I'd scraped together. Zijun sold her only jewellery – a gold ring and pair of earrings. I tried to stop her, but she was set on it, so I didn't press the issue. I knew she would be uncomfortable if I didn't let her make a contribution.

Some while ago, she had quarrelled and broken with her uncle, who had subsequently disowned her. I, too, broke with friends whose cowardice and even envy they disguised as 'friendly advice'. So we lived very quietly. Every evening, my rickshaw-puller would advance – with infuriating slowness – through the dusk, until eventually I was face to face with Zijun once more. First we would gaze silently at each other, then begin to talk – about anything, everything – before falling back into silence, perhaps thinking deep thoughts, or perhaps nothing at all. I gradually came to read her body and soul. Within three weeks, I felt I had an even deeper understanding of her: things I had thought I understood I now realized had been barriers, keeping us apart.

Zijun became more cheerful and energetic by the day. Though I soon learnt she had no love of flowers. Two potted plants I bought her at a temple bazaar withered and died after four days of neglect; I had no time for such things. But she loved animals. Maybe the official's wife gave her the idea, but before a month was out our household had expanded to four little hens, mixing in the courtyard with our landlady's dozen. The two women knew at a glance whose was whose. Then there was the grey pug, again from a temple bazaar. I seem to remember it already had a name when we got it, but Zijun gave it another – Tag. I didn't care for the name, but I still took to using it.

To survive, I would say to Zijun, true love needs renewing, nurturing, recreating. She would nod in understanding.

Those peaceful, happy nights!

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Given the chance, peace and happiness will thicken and set in the mould they are cast. Back in the hostel, we'd had the odd difference of opinion and misunderstanding, but there'd been nothing like this since we'd moved into Goodluck Lane. Now all we did was sit by the lamp opposite each other, going back over old times, luxuriating nostalgically in the pleasurable memory of reconciliation.

Zijun began to put on weight; her face glowed with health. It was a pity she was so busy around the house, she had no time to chat, let alone read or go for a walk. We often said we needed a maid.

Sometimes, on returning home of an evening, I'd catch a glimmer of unhappiness on her face, her painfully forced smile grieving me particularly. Investigation revealed its usual cause: some secret feud with the landlady, the hens the *casus belli*. But why did I have to drag it out of her? We needed a place on our own; we shouldn't have to coexist with another family.

My life slipped into a fixed routine. Six days of the week, I would travel from home to the office, and then back again. At work, I would sit at my desk, copying documents and letters. At home, I would sit opposite her, or help her light the fire, cook rice – a skill I learnt for the first time – and steam bread.

I ate much better than I had done at the hostel. Zijun was not a great cook, but she worked hard at it. The efforts she made pushed me to make equal efforts – all our joys and trials we shared equally. She worked without rest through the day, the sweat rolling down her face, her bobbed hair sticking to her head, her hands roughening with the toil.

And still there were Tag and the hens to feed. None of it would have got done without her.

I don't mind tightening my own belt, I tried to tell her, but I can't bear to see you slave like this. She gazed in sorrowful silence at me; I decided I had better say nothing, either. And still she went on working as before.

At last, the long-expected blow fell. On the eve of Revolution Day, as I sat staring into space while she washed the dishes, there was a knock on the door. When I opened it, a courier from the bureau handed me a mimeographed sheet of paper. I had a good idea of what it would say as I took it over to the lamp to read.

To: Shi Juansheng

Please be advised that the bureau chief no longer requires your services.

The Secretary's Office

9 October

I had expected something like this while we were still at the hostel: the dandy next door to us gambled with the son of the bureau chief. He would have had plenty of opportunities to gossip about me. The only surprise was that the rumours had taken so long to bear fruit. I shouldn't let it get to me: it had already occurred to me I could try freelance copying, or tutoring, or even translating, though it would be hard work. I had a passing acquaintance with the editor of *Freedom's Friend* – we had corresponded only two months before. Yet still my heart pounded. But what pained me most was how pale the once-indomitable Zijun went. Lately, her nerve seemed to have been failing her.

‘Who cares about them?’ she began. ‘We’ll find something else. We’ll...’

But she left her sentence unfinished. For some reason, her voice rang hollow to me; and the dim lamplight took an oddly gloomy cast. What foolish creatures we humans are, allowing such tiny things to worry us. We looked silently at each other, then began to come to grips with our situation. Eventually, we decided to stretch our current savings as far as we could. At the same time, I would place small advertisements for copying and teaching work and also write to the editor of *Freedom's Friend*, explaining my current predicament and asking for translation work to help me through a difficult time.

‘No time like the present – here’s to a new start!’

I immediately turned to my desk, clearing out of the way a bottle of sesame oil and a saucer of vinegar, while Zijun brought me a little light. Once the advertisement was copied out, I tried to settle upon a book to translate, brushing aside the thick layers of dust that had covered my books (unopened since we had moved in). At last, I set to writing my letter.

As I paused, wondering how to word it, I glanced back at her face, mournful in the dingy lamplight. Such a tiny, trivial thing – how could it have affected the fearless Zijun so deeply? But for some time now, she had started to seem more faint-hearted about life. The change in her began to unsettle me, and suddenly an image of my former, quiet life – the tranquillity of that shabby old hostel room – flashed before my eyes. Then the lamplight swam back into focus.

Much later, I finished the letter – a long letter. I too felt tired, as if exhausted by timidity. The advertisement and the letter, we decided, would go out together first thing tomorrow. We both stretched wearily and, without speaking, sensed the other’s strength and determination; the possibility of new hope for the future.

We drew strength from adversity. I had lived out my days in the bureau like a bird in a pedlar’s cage – given just enough rice to stay alive but never enough to grow strong. In time, my wings would be too stunted for flight even if I were ever let out of my cage. But now I had escaped and could take to the sky, before having

forgotten how to use them.

There would, of course, be no instant results from the advertisement. But translation brought its own difficulties. The book I chose I had read before, and thought I'd understood. But once I set down to work, a hundred difficulties presented themselves, and progress was slow. But I was determined to see it through, and two weeks into the work my almost-new dictionary was covered in black scrawls – witness to my application. My editor acquaintance had assured me that *Freedom's Friend* never turned away good work.

Unfortunately, there was no peace to be had at home. Zijun no longer took as much care to be quiet or considerate as she had once done. The room was always full of bowls, saucers, cooking smoke – it was impossible to settle to any serious work. Though I suppose I only had myself to blame, for lacking the means to fix myself up with a proper study. Then there was Tag, and the hens. And now the hens were fully grown up, arguments between the two households in the compound became more frequent.

And the meals – the never-ending stream of meals that had to be eaten every day. Zijun's sense of self-worth seemed tied up exclusively with the preparation of food – for us, and the animals. We ate to work, we worked to eat. Everything she had once known seemed to have been wiped out by the imperative to feed and eat, leaving her entirely insensible to how it might disturb *my* train of thought. I tried glaring at her at mealtimes, but she just chewed obliviously on.

A full five weeks it took me to make her understand that my work could not be fettered by mealtimes. Though she seemed put out, she said nothing. But my rate of work picked up: I had soon translated fifty thousand words, which, with a little polishing, could be sent off, with a couple of short essays, to *Freedom's Friend*. But the question of food was still causing me problems. I didn't mind eating cold meat and vegetables all the time; the problem was, there was never enough of them. Sometimes, there wasn't even enough rice, even though my new sedentary lifestyle had substantially reduced my appetite. Tag was fed before me, and sometimes on mutton – mutton that we hardly ever ate ourselves. He'd got so thin, she'd say, she couldn't stand the landlord's wife laughing at us.

Then the hens got *my* leftovers. Following Huxley's discourse on man's place in the universe, I eventually came to realize my own place in this particular domestic universe of ours: somewhere between a pug and a hen.

In time, though, and after much resistance from Zijun, the hens made their appearance on the dinner table, lasting us and Tag for about ten days. In truth, there wasn't much meat on them because for weeks they'd had nothing but a few grains of sorghum to eat each day. As the place became quieter, Zijun became more

melancholy – too listless even for conversation. How fickle people are, I thought!

Next to go was Tag. We'd long abandoned all hope of getting any kind of response to my advertisements, and Zijun had run out of even the tiniest scraps to coax him to sit up. With winter bearing down on us and the stove hungry for fuel, his appetite became a heavy daily burden of which we were all too conscious. We could no longer keep him.

We might have got a few coppers for him at a temple bazaar, but we couldn't quite bring ourselves to do it. In the end, I blindfolded him, took him to the western suburbs and set him loose. When he tried following me back, I pushed him into a shallow ditch.

Back home, things seemed much more peaceful. But I couldn't understand why Zijun always looked so sad; I'd never seen her so broken-hearted. Because of Tag, of course. But why was she so upset? I hadn't even told her about pushing him into the ditch.

By nightfall, her melancholy had turned into a kind of icy reserve.

'Zijun,' I eventually asked, 'what on earth's wrong?'

'What is it?' She didn't even look at me.

'You look so...'

'Nothing. Nothing's wrong.'

But her tone and body language told me she thought I was heartless. If I'd been on my own, I'd have easily made a living. My pride had prevented me from having much to do with old family friends, and since moving out of the hostel I'd neglected all my former acquaintances. If only I had a free hand, the possibilities would be infinite. Everything I was putting up with now – all the difficulties, the pressures – it was all for her, mostly. I'd got rid of Tag for her, too, but her grasp on reality seemed to grow weaker by the day, and she couldn't even see it.

I found an opportunity to hint at some of this. She nodded, as if in understanding. But none of it had any impact on her subsequent manner with me – either she hadn't understood, or hadn't believed me.

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A general drop in temperature – both in the weather, and in her behaviour towards me – made home an uncomfortable place to be. But where else could I go? Though I didn't get glared at on the streets or in the parks, the freezing wind was about to crack open my skin. Eventually, I sought refuge in the Popular Library.

There was no entrance fee, and the reading room contained two iron stoves. Even though they held only dying coal embers, the very sight of them warmed me. None of the books were worth reading – the old ones were outdated and there were hardly any new ones.

But I wasn't there for the books. I noticed around a dozen kindred spirits hanging about the place: thinly dressed, like me, and reading as an excuse to keep warm. It was the perfect bolt-hole: wandering the streets, I might bump into people I'd once known who now had nothing but scorn for me. In here, I was safe, because all my former acquaintances had other stoves to gather around.

And though there was nothing for me to read, I did have time to think. Sitting there, bored, alone, I began to go back over the past half year, over how I had neglected everything else in life for love – and first and foremost, the struggle to survive. A person must be able to live before they can love. A way forward always exists for those who are willing to fight for it. Despite all the setbacks, I hadn't yet forgotten how to flap my wings...

The room and the other readers around me gradually faded away: I saw a fisherman battling the waves, a soldier in his trench, a politician in his motor car, a speculator in a great metropolis, a bandit hero in his lair, a professor at the lectern, a political agitator at dusk, a thief at night... In all this, Zijun was nowhere. She had squandered all her courage – and for what? For Tag and an obsession with generating food. And yet she seemed no thinner, no weaker than before...

As the last, recalcitrant fragments of coal in the stove finally burned up, the reading room grew colder: closing time. I returned to Goodluck Lane, to enjoy an evening of black looks. Though I had, of late, been privileged by the occasional tender glance, which succeeded only in intensifying my suffering. One night, I remember, Zijun's eyes suddenly took on that old, childish gleam – something I hadn't seen for a long time – as she smilingly remembered something about our time back in the hostel. But I saw her expression flicker with fear. I knew that my recent indifference to her – greater than hers towards me – was causing her worry. I forced myself to talk and laugh, hoping it would bring her a little comfort. But the moment I did, my falseness echoed mockingly, poisonously back at me.

Zijun must have noticed the same thing, for her manner with me now changed, losing some of its deathly coldness, her new tenderness exposing an anxiety she struggled to conceal.

I wanted to be straight with her, but I didn't dare. Just when I'd steeled myself to say what I really thought, I'd look into those childlike eyes of hers, and force a smile instead – a smile that mocked my own cowardice, destroying my calm indifference.

It was around this time that she began reviewing our past again, compelling me to reciprocate with yet more false tenderness. My heart slowly filled to bursting with lies and falsehoods, until sometimes I felt suffocated by the oppressive weight of them all. To speak the truth required courage, my troubled mind often thought. If,

instead of reaching for this courage, I were to take permanent refuge in falsehood, I would never make a new path forward. Indeed, I may as well never have existed!

One morning – one particularly cold morning – Zijun woke up with a look of sour grievance I had never seen before; or perhaps I only imagined it. In any case, it angered me, as well as bringing a kind of sardonic amusement. How hollow she was – her high-flown philosophy, her fearless speeches, this is what they came down to. And she had not a shred of self-awareness of her own hollowness. She had not looked at a book in – I no longer knew how many months. She had forgotten that survival was the most basic imperative in life; and to survive, people needed either to march together, hand in hand, shoulder to shoulder, or struggle forward alone. But if one person is hanging off another's coat-tails – however heroically that other person battles – both are doomed.

Fresh hope, I felt, lay only in our separation; she must resolve to give the whole thing up. I thought suddenly of her dying, then immediately repented of the notion, hating myself for it. Fortunately, it was still early in the day; I had plenty of time to speak my truth. The opening up of our new paths hung on it.

I began talking to her, bringing the conversation round to our past together, to art, foreign writers and their works – *A Doll's House*, *The Lady of the Sea*. I spoke of Nora, and her courageous resolve... All this we had spoken of last year, in that shabby old room in the hostel; but now my words rang hollow. As I listened to myself, I was haunted by the image of a spiteful imp, standing behind me, mockingly parroting my words.

As always, she nodded as she listened, then fell silent. I falteringly reached the end of my speech, the lingering sound dissolving into emptiness.

'Yes, exactly.' Another silence. 'But Juansheng,' she went on, 'you seem to have changed recently. Am... am I right? Tell me the truth.'

Perceiving this as a direct blow, I steeled myself again and said exactly what I thought: how unless we followed new paths, made new lives, we were both doomed.

'You, too, can now go forward.' I stiffened my resolve, in my closing remarks. 'You've nothing to regret. You asked me to tell you the truth; and people should tell the truth. So here is your truth: I don't love you any more!... But what an opportunity this is for you: now you've nothing to hold you back...'

I anticipated some kind of violent reaction but was greeted only by silence. Her face turned a waxy, ashen colour – the colour of death. An instant later, she revived again – that childlike gleam returned to her gaze, which began darting about, like that of a needy child searching in vain for her mother. She seemed afraid of meeting my eyes.

I couldn't bear to watch. Fortunately, it was still early, and so I battled through the cold wind to the Popular Library.

There, I saw that *Freedom's Friend* had published my essays. I seemed to draw new life from the unexpectedness of it. Many paths are still open to me, I thought; but I must abandon my present one.

I began calling on long-estranged acquaintances, but only once or twice. Despite the warmth of their rooms, the iciness of my reception there bit at my bones. At night, I curled up in my own freezing room.

I felt permanently numbed by the cold, as if it had eaten into my soul. Many paths are still open to me, I thought, I haven't yet forgotten how to flap my wings... I thought suddenly of her dying, then immediately repented of the notion, hating myself for it.

In the Popular Library, glimpses of my new life often flashed before me, stretching out into the future. She had awoken invigorated with a new courage and walked out of our freezing home, her face wiped clean of complaint. I felt as if I was floating – a cloud drifting through an azure sky, over high mountains and great seas, tall buildings, battlefields, motor cars, vast metropolises, mansions, busy streets bathed in sunlight, dark nights...

This new life, I now sensed, was within my grasp.

This most insufferable of Beijing winters – we had survived it. We were like powerless dragonflies caught by a malicious child, then tied up and tortured, almost to death; and yet not quite. But after it all, we had been left sprawled weakly over the ground, the end in clear sight.

Three letters to the editor of *Freedom's Friend* finally yielded a response: an envelope containing two book tokens, for twenty and for thirty cents. The pursuit of a fee had already cost me nine cents in stamps – a whole day's food. Yet more futility. Then the inevitable finally happened.

Once winter began turning into spring, and the wind became less harrying, I spent even more of my time away from the house, wandering about; I never returned home before dark. As usual, I joylessly turned towards home one dusky evening; as usual, my steps slowed even more melancholically at the mere sight of the gate. When I went in, however, I discovered our rooms in darkness. I groped for a match, surprised by the strange sense of desolation about them.

The landlord's wife came to the window to call me out.

'Zijun's father came to take her back,' she informed me briefly.

I stood, speechless at the unexpectedness of it – as if I had just been dealt a blow to the back of my head.

'She went with him?' I eventually managed, after some time had passed.

'Yes.'

‘Did she... did she say anything?’

‘No. She just told me to tell you when you came back – that she’d gone.’

I could hardly believe it; and yet the emptiness of the rooms spoke for itself. I looked for Zijun everywhere but found only a few dismal, broken bits of furniture, no human figure concealed within their sharp outlines. Next, I searched for a letter, or any kind of note she might have left me. Again, nothing; only salt, dried chillies, flour and half a cabbage gathered in a single pile, a few dozen coins next to them. She had left me the entirety of our joint stores and savings – a solemn, silent instruction to sustain life as long as I could.

Oppressed by my surroundings, I fled into the courtyard, the dusk thickening about me. Bright light shone out of the paper windows in the main room of the house; I could hear my landlord and his wife laughing, playing with their daughter. Despite the heaviness of my heart, an escape route slowly, dimly glimmered into view: high mountains, great marshes, vast metropolises, dazzlingly lit banquets, trenches, the darkest of nights, a stabbing knife, silent footsteps...

My mood lifting, I thought of my travel costs, and sighed.

I lay in bed, eyes shut, contemplating the path I now planned to take. Before half the night was through, I could see it. A mass of food seemed to appear out of the darkness, then Zijun’s waxen face, her childlike eyes wide open in entreaty, gazing at me. When I shook myself, darkness returned.

Yet my heart was still heavy. Why couldn’t I have waited a few days longer – why had I been in such a hurry to tell her the truth? What did she have left now? A life spent in the debt of a grimly authoritarian father, despised by all she encountered; everything empty of meaning. Walking this road of life, burdened with hollowness and contempt. How terrifying! And at the end of this road: an unmarked grave.

I shouldn’t have told her the truth. For the sake of the love we had once shared, I should have smiled and told her lies for ever. Truth is a luxury not everyone can afford; to Zijun, it had brought only desolation. Lies bring their own hollowness, but they do not oppress like the truth.

I’d thought that if I told Zijun the truth, she could stride forward once more, without regret, just as she had done when we had first decided to live together. I now realized I had been mistaken. Back then, she had drawn her courage from love.

Lacking the courage to bear the burden of falsity, I set upon her the heavier burden of the truth. Now that she had loved me, she would bear this for the rest of her life, despised wherever she went.

I’d thought of her dying... What a coward I was: I deserved to be thrown aside by those who were stronger than me – whether they spoke the truth or lies. Yet she still wanted me to go on living as long as I could...

I wanted to escape the empty bleakness of Goodluck Lane. If I left this place behind me, I could imagine Zijun was still by my side, or at least in the same city; that one day, she might visit me unannounced, as she had done when I was still in the hostel.

But after none of my letters and appeals got any response, I was obliged to call on an old family acquaintance – a former schoolmate of my uncle's, and long-term resident of Beijing – whom I had not visited for several years. He seemed to know everyone in Beijing, where he was still a celebrity for having years ago competed in the Imperial College examinations.

His doorman superciliously barred my way, probably because my clothes were so old and tattered. When, eventually, I gained an entrée, I was treated no less coolly. He recognized me easily enough: he knew all about our affair.

‘Obviously, you can't stay on here,’ he stonily responded to my request for help in tracking down a new situation. ‘But where else can you go? Very difficult... By the way, that – that *friend* of yours, Zijun. She's dead, you know.’

For a while, I was too shocked to speak.

‘Really?’ I eventually stuttered out.

‘Ha! Of course. My servant, Wang Sheng, is from the same village.’

‘But... how did she die?’

‘How should I know? She's dead – that's all that matters.’

I've forgotten how I took my leave from him and returned home. I knew he had no reason to lie to me; now Zijun would never come back. She had been denied even the possibility of living out a life burdened with hollowness and contempt. The truth I had told her had determined her fate: to die unloved!

Of course I couldn't carry on in Beijing; but where else could I go?

Desolation and the silence of the grave were everywhere about me. I seemed to see the lonely darkness of all who had died a loveless death and hear their bitter, despairing struggles.

Still I expected new things – unnamed, unforeseen – to come along. Day after day, though, there was nothing: only the loneliness of the grave.

I no longer went out as much as I once had done. I spent my days sitting or lying in the cavernous emptiness of the apartment, allowing the deathly silence to eat at my soul. Occasionally, the silence would shudder into retreat, permitting new hopes – unnamed, unforeseen – to glimmer out at me.

One overcast morning, when the sun seemed unable to fight its way out of the clouds and even the air seemed weary, I heard a broken patter of footsteps and a snuffling noise. When I stared about me, the room was still empty. Then, glancing down at the floor, I found a tiny, thin animal: half-dead, covered in dust.

I looked again: my heart missed a beat, then began to pound.

It was Tag. He had come back.

I was driven away from Goodluck Lane as much by Tag's reappearance as by the obvious hostility of my landlord and his household. But where *could* I go? I still had many paths open to me, I could still see this – and sometimes I glimpsed them, felt them bifurcating before me. But still I did not know how to advance towards them.

After much thought, I decided that returning to the hostel was the only course open to me: to that same old shabby room, the same old plank bed, the same old moribund locust tree and wisteria. This time, everything that had brought me happiness, love, life was now gone, replaced only by hollowness, a hollowness that I had created with the truth.

I still have many paths open to me: I must stride forward, for the sake of living. But still I cannot think how to begin. Sometimes, I see life as a long, grey snake, crawling towards me. I wait, and I wait, watching it approach – then suddenly it vanishes into the darkness.

The early spring nights drag on as always. Sitting tediously awake, I remember a funeral I saw on the street this morning, led by paper cut-outs – of people and horses – and shadowed from the back by almost melodious wailing. How ingeniously simple and yet final the whole thing was.

But now I see Zijun's funeral, oppressive in its hollowness, snaking along a long, grey road, escorted into the void by contempt.

I hope there is a hell, where dead spirits gather. There, buffeted by the infernal roars of retribution, I will seek out Zijun, tell her of my sorrow and regret, and beg her forgiveness, before the poisonous flames of the underworld consume them in fire.

I will take Zijun in my arms once more, and beg her to take mercy on me, or whatever she will...

How hollow all this is; emptier even than the new paths before me. All I have now is this spring night, stretching infinitely out. I am alive, and must make strides towards a new life. Writing of my sorrow and regret – for Zijun, and for myself – this is the first step towards that life.

A dirge of funeral wails is all I have to bury Zijun with, to bury her in oblivion.

I need to forget, for my own sake; I must stop thinking that I buried Zijun in oblivion.

I must take the first strides towards a new life, burying the truth deep in the wound in my heart, silently advancing, guided only by the principles of forgetting and falsehood.

Finished on 21 October 1925

BROTHERS

Since there was never much public welfare to be attended to at the Bureau of Public Welfare, a handful of office workers were, as usual, gossiping about family problems. Until Qin Yitang began choking on his own pipe, obliging everyone else to fall silent until he recovered.

‘At it again last night they were,’ he eventually spluttered, still holding on to his pipe, face purple from the effort of drawing breath ‘Rowing all the way out to the front gate. Nothing I could do to shut them up.’ His lips – fringed with grey bristle – were still trembling. ‘Son Number Three’s insisting Number Five should make good the family money he’s thrown away on government bonds.’

‘It’s always about money,’ Zhang Peijun sighed, standing up from a shabby divan, his deep-set eyes shining with benevolence. ‘Why do brothers have to haggle over every last dollar? It all evens out in the end, doesn’t it?’

‘There’s not many families like yours out there,’ Qin Yitang observed.

‘We don’t fuss over details, my brother and I. It all evens out in the end. We don’t get hung up about money. It’s the only way. Whenever I see a family about to fall apart, I always tell them how we manage things. You should say something to them.’

‘They’d never listen.’ Yitang shook his head.

‘I don’t reckon your chances,’ Wang Yuesheng cut in, casting an admiring glance at Peijun. ‘They broke the mould when they made you two; I’ve never met a pair of brothers like you. The fact is, neither of you has a selfish bone in his body. A rare thing.’

‘All the way out to the gate...’ Yitang repeated.

‘How is your brother?’ Wang Yuesheng now asked. ‘Busy as ever?’

‘Still eighteen hours of classes a week, with ninety-three compositions to mark on top. It’s too much for anyone. He’s been off the last few days with a fever. Must have

picked up a cold somewhere.'

'Keep an eye on that,' Yuesheng said solemnly. 'I read in today's newspaper there's something nasty doing the rounds.'

'What's that?' Peijun quickly asked.

'Can't remember off the top of my head. But it's a fever of some sort.'

Peijun rushed off to the reading room.

'Amazing,' Yuesheng sighed admiringly to Qin Yitang, watching him go. 'You'd think they were joined at the hip. If everyone took a leaf out of their book, we'd all be happy families. It's beyond me, though.'

'He said he should make good the family money he'd thrown away on government bonds...' Yitang muttered peevishly to himself, dropping some paper charcoal into the burner.

A quiet fell over the office, presently shattered by Peijun's footsteps and voice, instructing the office boy to telephone one Dr Bodinus and have him come straightaway to the home of Zhang Peijun, at Tongxing Court. His voice had a stammering tremble to it, as if some terrible catastrophe loomed.

Yuesheng could see immediately how anxious he was. He knew that although Peijun was a great believer in Western medicine, he rarely splashed out on doctors, because he didn't earn much. But here he was, calling out the most celebrated and expensive physician in town. Going out to check on him, Yuesheng found his colleague standing white-faced by the telephone, listening to the office boy making the call.

'What's up?'

'It says in the paper there's – there's a scarlet – scarlet fever epidemic. When I – I was leaving for the office after lunch, Jingfu's face was bright red... He's on another call? Ah – ask them to telephone him wherever he is, tell him to come straight over to Tongxing Court, Tongxing Court.'

After hearing out the end of the phone call, Peijun rushed back into the office and snatched up his hat. Wang Yuesheng followed on behind, infected by his anxiety.

'If the bureau chief comes by, will you explain there's an illness in the family and I've gone to fetch the doctor?' he gabbled, nodding away in panic.

'Just go,' Yuesheng urged. 'He doesn't come in every day.'

But Peijun had already fled.

When he emerged on to the street, Peijun didn't bother even to haggle with the rickshaw man as he usually would. 'Fast as you can!' he begged, grabbing the first decent puller he saw, after cursorily asking the fare.

All was peaceful as ever around their apartment – the houseboy sitting by the entrance, playing the *huqin*¹ as always. Walking into his brother's room, his heart

beat even faster: his brother's face looked more flushed than ever, his breathing laboured. His forehead scalded Peijun's outstretched hand.

'What's wrong with me?' Jingfu asked, his eyes anxious. 'Nothing to worry about, is it?'

'Oh, no,' he stammered back, 'just a cold.'

Normally he was a great enemy of superstitious forebodings, but there seemed to be something horribly ill-omened about Jingfu's face and voice, as if the sick man himself had some kind of presentiment. Even more disturbed, Peijun immediately left the room to call softly for the houseboy, whom he had telephone the hospital again: Had they found Dr Bodinus yet?

'Yes, yes,' the houseboy said into the receiver. 'Still out, then.'

Peijun couldn't even stand, much less sit, still. And yet, in the midst of his panic, he clutched at his brother's only hope: maybe it wasn't scarlet fever. But the doctor was still out of reach... Bai Wenshan, one of their neighbours, practised Chinese medicine. Maybe he could have a go at a diagnosis. But Peijun had said so many disparaging things about Chinese medicine to him – and he might have heard him telephoning for Dr Bodinus.

In the end, he asked him to come over anyway.

The good-natured Bai Wenshan immediately put on his tortoiseshell dark glasses and followed Peijun into Jingfu's room. He took Jingfu's pulse, asked a few questions, looked at his chest then calmly took his leave. Peijun followed Bai back to his own rooms.

He asked Peijun to sit down but said nothing.

'My dear Wenshan,' Peijun broke the silence, 'what's wrong with my –'

'Red measles. You can see the spots already.'

'So it's not scarlet fever?' Peijun cheered up considerably.

'Western doctors call it scarlet fever. Chinese medicine calls it red measles.'

Peijun's hands and feet immediately went cold.

'Is there a cure?' he asked anxiously.

'Yes. If you're lucky.'

Too dazed to register what he was doing, he asked for a prescription and walked out of the room. Passing the telephone again, he remembered Dr Bodinus. This time, the hospital told him they'd reached him, but he was very busy, and the earliest he would make it over would probably be tomorrow morning. Once again, he begged them to get him to come today.

Returning to the sickroom, he lit a lamp. Jingfu's face, he now felt, was redder than ever and speckled with angry scarlet spots; even his eyelids were swollen with fever. When Peijun sat down, he felt as if he was being prickled by a carpet of needles. As the night grew quieter, each car horn seemed to sing out to him – in his

state of tensed expectation – more clearly than the last. Sometimes, he was so convinced that this, at last, was Dr Bodinus's car that he would jump up to greet him, but long before Peijun reached the gate the car would speed past. Making his way disappointedly back through the courtyard, he saw a bright moon had risen to the west. A neighbour's ancient locust tree cast its shadow along the ground, darkening his own melancholy.

A crow cawed. Nothing exceptional in that: three or four nests of them were lodged on the locust tree. But this evening, it almost transfixed him with terror. When he crept back into Jingfu's room, his heart still in his mouth, he found him lying there, eyes closed, face bloated. Yet he was not asleep: probably alerted by Peijun's footsteps, he opened his eyes; the lamplight illuminated a wretched glint to them.

'A letter?' Jingfu asked.

'N-no, just me,' he stammered. 'I thought, just to be on the safe side, I'd have a Western doctor take a look at you. To get you better faster. I'm still waiting for him.'

Saying nothing, Jingfu closed his eyes. Peijun sat by the desk in front of the window. The room was sunk in stillness, disturbed only by the laboured breathing of the sick man and the ticking of an alarm clock. A car horn sounded in the distance: he tensed again, listening to it draw nearer and nearer, until it seemed about to stop by the entrance – then rushed on. Again and again this performance was repeated, until he was able to distinguish between all manner of car-horn timbres: some were like whistles, others like the beat of a drum, others like farts. Some barked like dogs, or quacked like ducks, or bellowed like oxen, or clucked like a hen, or hooted like... He began to hate himself for having failed to note, on previous occasions, the noise that Dr Bodinus's car made.

The occupant of the rooms opposite was still out – probably at the opera, as usual, or at one of those teahouse-brothels. It was late, and the traffic began to thin out. The severe silver moonlight bleached the window paper white.

Mind and body exhausted, slowly relaxed by the tedium of waiting, he no longer worked so hard at differentiating the various car horns. Now, however, his disordered mind took advantage of the lull, insisting that Jingfu had scarlet fever, that he wasn't going to recover. How would the two families get by, if he was their sole support? Prices were always going up – even in the provinces. It would be hard enough buying essentials for his own three children, and then his brother's, too. But what about school fees as well? If he had to choose which of them he would send to school, then obviously it made sense to choose his Kang'er, the cleverest of the bunch. But then everyone would accuse him of favouritism...

And what about the funeral? There wasn't even enough money to buy wood for

the coffin. And even if they found the money, how would they get it back home? Best leave it in the public cemetery for the time being.

A patter of footsteps suddenly approached from a distance. He sprang up, and out of the room.

‘Our late emperor is in the White City...’ warbled their merry neighbour from over the way. Peijun almost rushed at him in furious disappointment, until he saw behind him the houseboy with a storm lantern, hazily illuminating a pair of leather shoes topped by a tall man with a white face and a full, dark beard – Dr Bodinus.

He flew forward to greet his precious visitor and led him to the sickroom. The two of them stood by the bed, Peijun holding up the lamp.

‘He’s running a fever, doctor...’ he muttered breathlessly.

‘For... how long?’ Bodinus drawled, hands in trouser pockets, considering the face of the sick man.

‘The day before yesterday. No, the day – the day before the day before that.’

The doctor nonchalantly took his pulse, then asked Peijun to hold the lamp higher, so he could examine his brother’s face more carefully, and to loosen his clothes, to examine his body. Finally, he rubbed Jingfu’s stomach with a finger.

‘Measles,’ Bodinus muttered, in English, as if to himself.

‘Measles?’ Peijun translated into Chinese, his voice quivering with surprise.

‘Measles.’

‘Really?’

‘Really. Measles.’

‘Did you never have measles when we were boys?’ Peijun joyfully asked his brother.

But the doctor had already moved over to the desk, forcing Peijun to leave the bedside before his brother had answered. He watched as the doctor rested one foot against the chair, drew a piece of paper towards him over the table and scribbled out an almost illegible prescription with a stunted pencil he took out of his pocket.

‘I suppose it’s too late to get it tonight?’ Peijun asked, taking the piece of paper.

‘Tomorrow will do. Take it tomorrow.’

‘Will you come back tomorrow?’

‘There’s no need. Don’t give him anything sour, spicy or too salty,’ the doctor instructed, as he headed for the door. ‘Once the fever’s gone... send a... urine sample to my clinic... for testing. Put it... in a clean glass bottle... clearly labelled.’

Stuffing a five-dollar bill into his pocket, he went on his way. Peijun saw him to his car, turning back inside once the motor started. The doctor’s car, he made a mental note, mooed like a cow. Not that this knowledge was any use to him now, he thought.

Back inside the apartment, even the lamplight had a jubilant glow to it. Peijun felt

that great things had been achieved, that peace had been restored; but at the same time, a sense of anticlimax. Handing cash and prescription to the houseboy, who had followed him back inside, he told him to get it from the Beautiful Asia Pharmacy first thing in the morning. The doctor had told him this was the only reliable pharmacy in the city.

‘Beautiful Asia! On the east side!’ he pursued the boy out of the door. ‘Don’t go anywhere else. Don’t forget: Beautiful Asia!’

The courtyard was bathed in silver-white moonlight. Now their carousing neighbour had gone to sleep, all was silent. Only the alarm clock on the table ticked merrily, rhythmically on; the sick man’s breathing was still audible but perfectly regular. Soon after sitting back down, Peijun remembered what had amused him before.

‘How come someone your age has never had measles?’ he asked wonderingly, as if contemplating a miracle.

The sick man made no response.

‘You wouldn’t remember. We’d have to ask Mother.’

Still no response.

‘And Mother’s not here to ask. So, looks like you never had measles. Well, there’s a funny thing!’

When Peijun woke up in his own bed, the sun was beaming in through the window paper, pricking at eyes still hazy with sleep. He found himself unable to move: his limbs paralysed, his back sticky with cold sweat. A child stood before his bed, face dripping with blood. Peijun was seized with the desire to strike him.*

In an instant, the child vanished: Peijun was alone, in bed, in his own room. He removed his pillowcase to wipe the sweat off his chest and back, got dressed and walked over to check on Jingfu. It must have been late: his opera-loving neighbour was up and about in the courtyard, rinsing out his mouth.

Jingfu, too, was awake, lying on the bed with his eyes wide open.

‘How do you feel today?’ his brother quickly asked.

‘A little better.’

‘Is the medicine here yet?’

‘Not yet.’

He sat down by the desk, directly opposite the bed, and studied Jingfu’s face, which was no longer as scarlet as it had been the previous day. His mind felt foggy still, assaulted by fragmentary dream sequences:

Jingfu is lying dead on the bed. He’s preparing for his funeral, heaving the coffin on his back from the great gate into the hall. They seem to be back home, in Shaoxing, surrounded by friends admiring his devotion to his brother...

He has sent Kang'er and his other two children to school, but Jingfu's children are howling that they want to go, too. Though enervated by the noise, he feels supreme power and authority concentrated within him. His hands – grotesquely swollen into huge iron paws – strike at his nephew Hesheng...

Terrified by his subconscious, desperate to run out of the room, he tried to sit still and suppress his visions. But like goose down in water, they soon floated back to the surface:

Hesheng runs in, crying, his face covered in blood, and jumps on to the ancestral altar to denounce his uncle... A crowd of faces, some familiar, some not, follow behind – they are all after him, he knows...

'I've behaved perfectly honourably. Don't believe him, he's a hysterical child,' he hears himself saying.

Hesheng is back by his side; his hand is creeping up into the air once again...

He suddenly came to, exhausted, a chill skittering up his spine. Jingfu was lying opposite him, perfectly peaceful. Although his breathing was a touch hurried, it drew regularly in and out. The alarm clock on the table seemed to tick louder than ever.

He looked about him: at the layer of dust over the desk, at the window paper, at the wall calendar announcing in an ancient script the arrival of the twenty-seventh.

The houseboy brought the medicine in, along with a package containing a book.

'What's in there?' Jingfu asked, opening his eyes.

'Medicine,' Peijun replied, shaking himself awake.

'No, the other package.'

'Don't worry about that for now. Take your medicine first.' Once this had been administered, he checked the note on the book. 'From Mr Suo. Must be that Ruskin you wanted to borrow off him, *Sesame and Lilies*.'

Reaching out for the book, Jingfu merely glanced at the cover, ran his finger along the gold text printed on its spine, then placed it next to his pillow, and silently closed his eyes.

'When I'm better,' he murmured happily, 'I'll translate a few pages, and send it off to the Culture Press, to earn us a bit of money. See if they're interested...'

That day, Peijun didn't make it into the office until the afternoon, by which point the place was thick with Qin Yitang's pipe smoke. Spotting him approach, Wang Yuesheng came out to meet him.

'Well, hello! Is he better, your brother? I shouldn't worry too much: these epidemics, they come and go every year. We were just wondering where you'd got to – but you're here now, so clearly nothing to worry about! I must say, though, you look, well, different from yesterday.'

Everything looked different, even unfamiliar to Peijun, too: the office, his colleagues. Even though it was at the same time so familiar: the broken coat hooks, chipped spittoon, the dusty chaos of files, the defective divan with Qin Yitang sprawled across it, coughing, shaking his head and sighing into his pipe.

‘At it again, all the way out to the gate...’

‘As I was saying,’ Yuesheng returned to his reply, ‘I think you should tell them about Peijun, get them to take a leaf out of his book. They’ll drive you to an early grave, or into the madhouse, if you’re not careful.’

‘Number Three’s still insisting Number Five should pay back the family money he’s... he’s...’ Yitang bent double with coughing.

‘Different strokes, different folks...’ Yuesheng tailed off, turning back towards Peijun. ‘So everything all right at home now, with your brother?’

‘He’s all right. The doctor said it was measles.’

‘Measles? That makes sense. There’s a lot of it about. The three children who live in my courtyard all have it right now. Absolutely nothing to worry about. But we all felt for you, the way you were yesterday. Now that’s what I call brotherly love.’

‘Did the bureau chief come by yesterday?’

‘Ha! Does he ever? Just mark yourself down as present in the logbook.’

‘He says he should make it good,’ Yitang went on, as if to himself. ‘These government bonds are terrible things, I don’t understand them at all. Once you’re in, there’s no getting out. All evening, they rowed, right out to the gate. Then Number Five was saying Number Three’s dipped into the family pot to send two more of his children to school. I’m so angry I could – ’

‘What a mess!’ Yuesheng remarked despairingly. ‘That’s why you and your brother are so special, Peijun. I really mean that – I’m not just saying it.’

Making no response, Peijun watched the office boy bring a document in then went over to take it from him, Yuesheng following smartly behind.

‘ “Citizen Hao Shangshan and his neighbours request that the Bureau of Public Welfare order its local branch office to arrange a coffin and burial for an unknown male corpse in the eastern suburbs, in the interests of maintaining public hygiene and welfare,” ’ he read out. ‘I’ll take care of this. You go home early – check on your brother. It’s just wonderful how you look out for each other.’

‘No!’ Peijun kept fast hold of the document. ‘I’ll do it.’

Yuesheng did not press the point. Peijun quietly moved over to his own desk, studying the document as he lifted the top of his ink box, speckled with green rust.

3 November 1925

THE DIVORCE

‘Happy New Year, Uncle Mu! Let’s hope it’s a good one!’

‘Well met, Basan! Happy New Year!’

‘Happy New Year! And to you, Aigu.’

‘Hello, Mr Mu!’

As Zhuang Musan and his daughter Aigu stepped down on to the boat at Mulian Bridge, they were met by a great clamour of greetings, some accompanied by cupped-hand salutes. At the same moment, four seats fell conveniently vacant along one side of the boat. Returning salutations as he parked himself down, Zhuang Musan propped his long pipe up against the side of the boat, while Aigu took the seat to his left, opposite Basan, arranging her sickle-pointed feet into an inverted V.

‘Off to town?’ asked a man with a face as round and pink as a crab shell.

‘No,’ Mr Mu sighed, his gloom concealed within the folds of his brown, crumpled face. ‘To Pangzhuang.’

Silence fell over the boat, as every passenger turned to look at them.

‘The old trouble, is it?’ Basan eventually inquired. ‘With Aigu?’

‘Yes. Three years it’s been going on now – it’s driving me mad. All those fights, all those meetings, nothing ever settled.’

‘So, back to Mr Wei’s, is it?’

‘That’s right. He’s tried sorting this mess out a couple of times now, but I’ve never agreed to his terms. Right now, though, all his relatives are gathered for the New Year – even Mr Qi, from town.’

‘Mr Qi?’ Basan’s eyes widened. ‘He’s going to get involved, is he? Well, I’ll be... Anyway, we taught them a lesson or two when we smashed their stove up¹ last year. Ha! That gave them something to think about. I don’t really know why Aigu’s so keen on going back, actually...’ He looked down at the floor.

‘I’m not going back for the fun of it!’ Aigu tossed her head angrily. ‘I’m going back because someone’s got to pay. That pig of a husband of mine jumped into bed with that young widow, then threw me out of my own home – think I should just lie down and take it? Then that pig of a father of his’ll play any tune his son tells him to. Well, I’m *not* going to lie down and take it! And now Mr Qi’s become bosom pals with the magistrate – does that mean he’s too high and mighty to talk to people like us? He can’t do much worse than that old fool Mr Wei, waffling on about “letting them go their separate ways”. I’m going to tell Mr Qi myself what I’ve had to put up with the last few years. Then we’ll see whose side he takes!’

Basan fell silent, fully convinced.

Quiet returned to the interior of the boat as the waves lapped against the side. Zhuang Musan reached out for his pipe and filled it.

Diagonally opposite him, a fat man next to Basan fished a flint out of his waist pocket, struck it against the tinder, and held it to the top of Musan’s pipe.

‘Much obliged,’ Musan nodded in thanks.

‘We’ve never met, but your reputation precedes you,’ the man of stature politely began. ‘Every village along the coast’s heard of you, Mr Zhuang. And we know all about your son-in-law, the Shi boy’s affair with that widow, too. Known all about it for years. Everyone was right behind you when you and your six sons flattened his family’s stove last year... You’re a big man round here, you’re friends with all the best people. You’ve nothing to be afraid of.’

‘You’re very well informed,’ Aigu enthused, ‘though I’m afraid I don’t know who you are.’

‘Wang Degui,’ the fat man hastened to inform her.

‘No – I won’t be thrown aside like a piece of old rubbish. Not by any of them – not even by Mr Qi. I’ll fight them to bankruptcy, the grave and beyond! Four times that old fool Wei tried to get me to give it up. Even Father lost the plot when he saw how much they were offering.’

‘Shut the – ’ Musan muttered.

‘I heard the Shis threw a banquet for Mr Wei just before the New Year,’ the man with the crab-shell face interjected.

‘Nothing to worry about,’ Wang Degui said. ‘People don’t lose their sense of right and wrong after one meal. If a man can be bought off with an ordinary New Year’s dinner, what would he give you after a proper feast? These educated people, they’re always on the side of justice. They’ll always speak out for the underdog – whether or not they’ve been wined and dined. Last year, Mr Rong from my own humble village came back from Beijing – he’d mixed with the best there, he’s no peasant, like us. Now, he said the one person you had to meet was this Mrs Guang, who – ’

‘Wangjia Quay!’ hollered the boatman as the boat prepared to moor.

‘That’s me, that’s me!’ the substantial Mr Wang snatched up his pipe and leapt out of the middle cabin on to the bank. ‘Excuse me!’ he nodded to those remaining in the boat.

The boat glided on in renewed silence, the water still lapping against the sides. Basan dozed off, his mouth hanging slowly open opposite the sickle toes of Aigu’s shoes. Two old women in the front cabin began muttering Buddhist chants, fingering their rosaries and glancing at Aigu, then at each other, lips pursed, nodding significantly.

Aigu stared up at the boat’s awning, probably plotting how to drive the family to bankruptcy, the grave and beyond; how she would show no mercy – to her pig of a husband, her pig of a father-in-law and all their swinish clan. She didn’t even waste her mental energy on that round-headed dwarf Mr Wei she’d already met twice. There were plenty like him in her own village – slightly darker in the face, but otherwise identical.

His tobacco burnt down, Zhuang Musan smoked on through the tar that remained, sputtering at the base of the bowl. Now they were past Wangjia Quay, he knew, the next stop would be Pangzhuang – the Pavilion of the Literary Spirit on the edge of the village was already in sight. Pangzhuang, which he had been to more times than he cared to remember, was a complete backwater, and Mr Wei a perfect nobody. He still remembered how his daughter had wept as she returned home, how disgracefully his in-laws had behaved, how badly they had treated him and his daughter. As he went back over the past, he didn’t give his usual bleak smile on recalling how he had taken his revenge on their stove. This time, everything else was obscured by the expansive form of Mr Qi, hustling his thoughts into nervous confusion.

The boat glided quietly on, the only sound the rising hum of prayers. Everyone seemed as abstracted as Zhuang Musan and his daughter.

‘It’s your stop, Uncle Mu,’ the boatman startled Zhuang’s party awake. ‘Pangzhuang.’ The Pavilion of the Literary Spirit lay directly before them.

Musan stepped ashore, Aigu following behind. Once past the pavilion, they went on towards Mr Wei’s house. Heading south they left some thirty dwellings behind them, until one more turn brought them to the Weis’ dark lacquered gate, next to which four boats, each with black awnings, were moored.

On stepping through the main entrance, they were ushered into the house itself. Two tables of boatmen and farmhands were sitting just inside the door. Glancing nervously at them, Aigu found no evidence of the two pigs.

As they were served their New Year’s dumplings in soup, Aigu began to feel inexplicably edgy. ‘Surely Mr Qi’ll still listen to people like us – even now he’s

pally with the magistrate?’ she thought. ‘Educated people are always on the side of justice. I’ll tell him the whole story, starting from when I got married at fourteen.’

She finished her soup; soon, her chance would come. Sure enough, a farmhand promptly arrived to escort her and her father across the great hall and, after one more corridor, into the guest hall.

The room was full of objects and guests – a shimmering blur of red and blue satin mandarin jackets. But she picked out Mr Qi straightaway. Though his face had the same moonlike roundness as Mr Wei’s, he towered majestically over his host and the other guests. Two narrow eyes and a scanty black beard punctuated the circular landscape of his face. Aigu was particularly struck by the ruddy shine to his bald crown and face – he must have polished them with lard, she quickly deduced.

‘Now this – this is an “anus-stopper”: used by the ancients in burials, to stop up the anus of the deceased.’ Mr Qi was wielding a long, thin object, which seemed to be made of some kind of corroded stone, rubbing it against his nose as he explained its purpose. ‘A recent excavation, unfortunately. Still quite a buy, though; no later than Han dynasty,² I would say. Look, you can still see the mercury stain...’

A number of heads clustered around to observe, Mr Wei among them of course, together with a few of the younger scions of the house, previously obscured from Aigu’s notice, like squashed bedbugs, by Mr Qi’s tremendous charisma.

She had no idea what they were talking about – and neither did she have the desire, or the courage, to investigate this mercury stain. She took advantage of this lull to look about her: just behind, she discovered, by the door, were her swinish in-laws – father and son. She honoured them with only the briefest of glances – enough to notice how much greyer and older they looked since their last meeting six months ago.

The mercury huddle dispersed, leaving Mr Wei the lucky custodian of the anus-stop, which he now sat down with.

‘Just the two of you, then?’ he turned to Zhuang Musan, stroking the stopper.

‘Yes.’

‘What about your sons?’

‘They’ve no time.’

‘This business should have been dealt with a long time ago – saved you a trip so early in the New Year. I think you’ve caused quite enough trouble. Two years, it’s been – isn’t that right? So let’s sort out this quarrel once and for all. Now, Aigu’s husband never got on with her. And his parents didn’t care much for her, either. Much the best thing they both go their separate ways, like I said before. But you wouldn’t listen to me. Now, we all know that no one’s a better judge of anything than Mr Qi – and he’s in complete agreement with me. Let’s see a bit more give and take on both sides, he’s said, and another ten dollars from the Shis, to take it up to

ninety.'

No response.

'Ninety dollars! You wouldn't get terms like that out of the emperor himself! But that's Mr Qi for you – generous to a fault.'

Opening his narrow eyes as wide as he could, Mr Qi fixed them upon Zhuang Musan and nodded.

Sensing that matters were getting critical, Aigu began to resent her father's silence. He was practically a god around this stretch of the coast – why was he holding back? Although she hadn't followed everything Mr Qi had said a few minutes ago, he struck her as a kindly sort – not nearly as intimidating as she had imagined.

'Mr Qi is an educated man,' she bravely intervened. 'He understands the situation – not like us simple country types. I've been treated wrong, and no one else will hear me out. That's why I've come here today. I entered this house like a good daughter-in-law, and left it in the same way – I never broke a single family rule. And still they did everything they could to make my life difficult, to find fault. When that weasel killed the cockerel, was it me who left the door to the coop unlocked? No – that stupid mutt of theirs had pushed it open to steal the chickenfeed. But I still got slapped, round both sides of my face, by that stupid pig of a husband.'

Mr Qi glanced at her.

'And I know full why. And so does Mr Qi – people who can read know everything. It was that wicked whore who seduced him into throwing me out. I'm his wife – carried in on a bridal chair, with all the proper ceremonies! And you don't get rid of me that easily. Oh, they won't forget me in a hurry: I'll fight them all the way, through the county courts, up to the prefecture if I have to –'

'Mr Qi knows all this,' Mr Wei looked back up at her. 'You've nothing to gain by taking this any further, Aigu. Why do you and your brothers always have to look a gift horse in the mouth? Your father understands how things are. All right, you take it up to the prefecture – then they'll probably ask Mr Qi what he thinks, anyway. Then everyone'll have their dirty linen hung out to dry, no feelings spared, you'll be –'

'I'll fight you to the death!'

'Come, come,' Mr Qi finally spoke up. 'You're still young. Let's be calm and reasonable. Peace brings prosperity – does it not? You've me to thank for your extra ten dollars – this is already over and above. If his parents are telling you to go, you don't have much choice. Whichever court you go to – the prefecture, Shanghai, Beijing, abroad – they'll all say the same thing. If you don't believe me, ask him – he's just back from one of those foreign academies in Beijing.' He turned towards a young man with a pointed chin: 'Am I right, or am I wrong?'

‘Right as rain,’ the young man reverently muttered, quickly sitting up.

Aigu felt completely isolated. Her father had nothing to say, her brothers were too scared to come, she knew whose side Mr Wei was on, and even Mr Qi had clearly crossed the room himself, dragging that squeaky runt with a pointy chin with him. And yet she resolved, amid the confusion of her thoughts, to make one last stand.

‘I can’t believe it,’ her eyes shone with disappointment and disbelief. ‘Even Mr Qi... People like us, we don’t know how things work. Father doesn’t have a clue – he’s always let us get taken advantage of. That pig of a husband and pig of a father-in-law have pulled everyone’s strings, they’ll stoop at nothing, scraping and bowing –’

‘See what I mean, Mr Qi?’ the pig of a husband now piped up from somewhere behind her. ‘See what I had to put up with? No one ever got a moment’s peace – not even the animals. “Pig” this, “pig” that, “bastard” the other.’

‘Who called you a bastard?’ Aigu shouted back at him, before turning to face Mr Qi again. ‘I’m not done yet. When did I ever get a good word out of him? It was “bitch” this, or “slut” that. After he got mixed up with that whore, he’d start laying in to my ancestors, too. You be the judge, Mr Qi –’

With a sudden shudder of fear, she shut her mouth: his eyes rolled heavenward, Mr Qi had tilted his moon-face up to the ceiling.

‘En... ter!’ A colossal imperative erupted from his scantily bearded mouth.

Her heart seemed to stop, then to pound madly again. All was lost, she now knew – as if she had fallen into an abyss through her own clumsy footing.

A man in a blue gown under a black waistcoat immediately appeared, and stood before Mr Qi, hands hanging down by his sides, back as straight as a wooden pole.

You could have heard a pin drop in the hall. Though Mr Qi’s lips were moving once more, no one could make out what he was saying – no one except the new arrival, whom it seemed to electrify.

‘Yes, sir.’ He took a few steps backward, turned and exited.

Something unexpected, Aigu now knew, was about to happen – something unexpected and unavoidable. Now she began to realize how formidable Mr Qi was – and to regret her own tactical error. She had been too blunt, too forthright.

‘Of course,’ she found herself murmuring in a tiny, thread-like voice. ‘I only came to ask for Mr Qi’s advice...’

You would have heard a second pin drop. Then Mr Wei leapt to his feet – as if startled awake by a peal of thunder.

‘Glad to hear it! So Aigu understands Mr Qi is on the side of justice and right.’ He then turned to her father. ‘Seeing as your daughter’s done all the talking for you, shall we proceed? I presume you’ve brought the wedding certificates I asked you about. Let’s have both sides.’

Aigu watched as her father delved into his waist pocket, while the man with a pole for a spine reappeared and passed a small, flat black object, shaped like a turtle, to Mr Qi. Afraid that events were taking a turn for the worse, she quickly turned back to her father, who was now taking silver dollars out of a blue bundle on a small table.

Mr Qi removed the turtle's head and poured a little something out of its body into his palm, after which the stiff-backed man took it back. Dipping a finger into his palm, Mr Qi then inserted it into each of his nostrils, which – together with his upper lip – immediately went an angry yellow. His nose twitched, as if preparing to sneeze.

Zhuang Musan, meanwhile, was counting out silver dollars. Mr Wei removed a few from an unchecked pile, and handed them to the swinish father-in-law. He then swapped the two wedding notices round, and pushed them towards the relevant parties. 'Put them away now,' he instructed. 'Make sure you count right, Mu. This is a serious business – it's a lot of money.'

A great roar notified Aigu that Mr Qi had sneezed; and yet still she couldn't stop herself looking in his direction. His mouth was hanging open, nostrils still convulsing, as he rubbed his beloved anus-stopper against the side of his nose.

Eventually, Zhuang Musan completed his laborious task of accountancy and both sides filed away their certificates. Everyone straightened up, and the tension on the assembled company's faces relaxed into expressions of relieved cordiality.

'Marvellous! An end at last,' Mr Wei sighed, seeing that the adversaries seemed ready to take leave of each other. 'Well, I think that takes care of everything – congratulations all round, an awkward problem resolved. Leaving so soon? Why not stop to toast the New Year? This is quite an occasion.'

'We'd better be going,' Aigu declined. 'Next year, maybe.'

'Thank you, Mr Wei,' Zhuang Musan and his ex-in-laws echoed, backing politely out. 'Best be off.'

'No time for a drink, even?' Mr Wei pinned his gaze on Aigu, the last out of the room.

'No, really. But thank you, Mr Wei.'

6 November 1925

OLD STORIES RETOLD

PREFACE

This slim collection has taken me thirteen long years to complete.

The first story, ‘Mending Heaven’ – which started life as ‘The Broken Mountain’ – I finished in the winter of 1922. My thinking back then was to rework various stories, both ancient and modern, into short fiction. In my first attempt, I chose the legend of Nüwa, the Goddess of Creation, smelting stones to patch the sky. I started earnestly enough, even though I had nothing new to say, just rehashing Freud into a theory of creation – the creation of both life and literature. But for some reason, I stopped halfway through to read the newspaper, where I came across an article by someone – I forget his name – attacking *Orchid Breeze*,¹ a collection of new romantic verse by Wang Jingzhi, and begging other young writers, with tears in his eyes, to avoid sinking into a similar mire of degeneration. I was so amused by the spineless treachery of it all that when I started up again I couldn’t help a little simulacrum – in classical robes – appearing between Nüwa’s legs. And so I began the slippery descent into facetiousness – the arch-enemy of literary creation. I still hate myself for it.

Resolving to nip such self-indulgence in the bud, I hid it at the back of my first short-story collection, *Outcry* – the beginning and end of my experiment.

Our esteemed critic Cheng Fangwu² chose this moment to try a few swings of his axe at the gate of the palace of pure literature. *Outcry* he dispatched with a few brutal strokes as ‘vulgarly naturalistic’; only ‘The Broken Mountain’ met with his discerning, though still reserved, approval. In truth, his denunciation not only failed to convince me; it also undermined any confidence I might have had in his opinion. For one, I delight in vulgarity. And on the subject of historical fiction: those very detailed works, stuffed with research, every fact checked, that some deride as scholarly fiction – they’re no picnic to pull off. If instead you take one tiny scrap of fact, add a bit of colour, then extrapolate it into a story of sorts: this doesn’t take much out of a person. Anyway, ‘a fish knows whether the water is hot or cold’, as the vulgar saying goes – a writer is his own best critic: the second half of ‘The Broken Mountain’ is an extraordinarily sloppy piece of work; only a fool would find anything to recommend in it. Determined not to lead readers further down the road of Cheng’s misjudgement, I respectfully parried his axe-blows by removing the piece from the second edition of *A Call to Arms*, in 1930, reshaping the volume into a monument to my beloved vulgarity.

In the autumn of 1926, I found myself living in Xiamen, in a stone building facing

the ocean, flicking blankly through ancient texts, bereft of company. Yet Weiming Press in Beijing would not let me alone, pressing for articles for their magazine. In an effort to escape thinking about the present, I recycled a handful of reminiscences into an essay collection – *Dawn Flowers Picked at Dusk* – then, returning to an old idea, selected a number of classical legends for reworking into eight *Old Stories Retold*. But by the time I had completed ‘Flight to the Moon’ and ‘Forging the Swords’ – first published as ‘Mei Jianchi’ – I hurried off to Guangzhou, where this project was thoroughly sidelined. Although I would scrawl the occasional idea down, I never had time to polish anything.

But at last it is finished. Most of the pieces are only sketches, and certainly not literary fiction. At times I base myself in historical fact; at others, my imagination roams free. And because I can’t convince myself that the ancients are as worthy of respect as my contemporaries, I’ve found myself periodically slipping into the quicksands of facetiousness. After thirteen years, I’ve not progressed beyond ‘The Broken Mountain’. But as long as I haven’t made the ancients seem even deader than they already are, I suppose this book has a flimsy justification for its existence.

Lu Xun
26 December 1935

MENDING HEAVEN

I

Nüwa started awake.

As if from a dream – but a dream she instantly forgot on regaining consciousness. All she could remember was a sense of vexation, of an insufficiency of something, and an excess of something else. A mild breeze, warm with the morning sun, fanned her life-force through the universe.

She rubbed her eyes.

A mass of green serpentine clouds wove their way through a powder-pink sky, a backdrop of stars blinking away at them. The sun blazed light over the blood-red clouds on the horizon, like a golden ball petrified in ancient lava. A frigid white moon, the colour of pig iron, hung opposite. As to which was rising, and which was setting – she paid no attention.

The ground was carpeted in pastel green; even the evergreens – the pines and cypresses – had a youthful fragility to them. Bend down far enough, and a mass of pink and bluish-white flowers, the size of ladles, drew into focus; pull back, and they swam out into a variegated mist.

‘I’ve never been so bored in my life!’ she thought to herself, springing to her feet and stretching her perfectly rounded arms, vibrant with energy, to the sky. As she yawned, the heavens responded by paling to a mystical flesh-pink, momentarily merging the goddess into her background.

She walked through the pink universe to the seashore, her curvaceous form now melting into the roseate ocean, her waist lightening to a pure white. The waves, taken by surprise, rose and fell in orderly rhythm, drenching her in spray. She shimmered palely through the water, as if about to dissolve into the brine. Oblivious to her surroundings, she knelt down, scooped up some mud and – after a little pressing and kneading – held in the palm of her hand a tiny creature, almost exactly in her image.

She exclaimed, not quite able to believe she was its author – as if it had been lying in the mud all along, waiting for her to pick it up.

All the same, the unexpectedness of it all made her happy, and on she went with her work, with a new sense of courage and joy, blowing, sweating life into her figurines.

The tiny creatures began to yelp.

She exclaimed in surprise again, and something streamed out from every pore of her body; the ground was now covered in a milky-white vapour. By the time she had recovered from her abstraction, her creatures had also fallen silent.

‘Sky! Lord!’ some began to babble.

‘My precious things.’ She stared at them, prodding at one of their fat white faces with a muddy finger.

They gurgled with laughter – the first laughter she had heard in the universe. And for the first time, her lips curled unstoppably into a smile.

She stroked her creatures as she made them. To begin with, they circled around her, but gradually they wandered further and further away, and had more and more to say for themselves, until she was no longer able to understand them. Her ears filled with clamorous noise, till she was dizzy with it.

She wearied, through all this delight: in time, she began to feel she had no more breath with which to infuse them, no more sweat to drip on to them. Her head thickened, her vision clouded, her cheeks flushed. Her joyful excitement left her: all she felt was impatience. But on she went, tirelessly manufacturing, as if she had lost all sense of what she was doing.

Eventually, a cramp in her legs forced her to stand up. Leaning against a bare mountain, she looked up: the sky was dappled with clouds, like white fish-scales against the brooding dark green below. Registering an unaccountable twinge of dissatisfaction, she reached out to pluck a wisteria vine – heavy with clusters of wondrously plump purple flowers – that stretched to the horizon from the mountainside. When she shook it, the vine collapsed over the ground, scattering lilac petals.

She dragged the wisteria this way and that, spraying droplets of mud about her. As they fell to the earth, they turned into yet more tiny creatures, similar to the kind she had already fashioned, but this time rather duller, uglier, less appealing than the early batch – with weaselly heads and rats’ eyes. But she went obliviously on, seized by a restless fascination with her task, her hands frantic with the mischief they were making. As she swung it ever faster, the vine writhed muddily over the ground, like a scalded snake. Drops of clay flew like rain, transforming into bawling little creatures in mid-air, swarming the instant they hit the ground.

Barely conscious of her actions, she flicked the branch more and more wildly, but her back, legs and arms began to fail her. She squatted down on the ground, resting her head against the mountain, her black hair spreading over its summit. She sighed, after catching her breath back; her eyes closed. The wisteria dropped from her hands to the ground, sprawling limply over the earth, as if exhausted.

II

She was awoken by a crash – the rupture of heaven and earth. Finding herself slipping south-eastwards, Nüwa tried to steady herself, but stepped into a void. She grabbed at a mountaintop to prevent herself from toppling forward.

She felt water, sand and rocks pouring down on her from behind. When she glanced over her shoulder, her mouth and ears filled with water. Quickly looking down, she discovered the ground shaking beneath her feet. Thankfully, it settled again, giving her a chance to edge backwards and find a place to sit. Wiping the water from her forehead and eyes, she began to study the situation.

All was confusion. Great cascades of water, crested with occasional sharp swells, smothered the earth – the ocean, she presumed. She waited, perplexed.

Eventually, all calmed, though the great waves still soared up as high as the mountains had previously risen; where once there might have been dry land, bone-like ridges of stone jutted out. Glancing out over the sea, she spotted a range of peaks rushing towards her, whirling about on the waves. Seizing hold of it before it could stub her toes, she discovered an accumulation of strange creatures cowering face down in the intervening valleys.

She drew the mountains in towards her, for closer examination. The ground around these beings was covered in expectorations of various substances – gold and jade dust, perhaps, intermingled with cypress leaves and fish, chewed to a pulp. One by one, they slowly raised their heads to meet Nüwa's wide-eyed stare. It eventually dawned on her that these were her very own creatures – and yet they had changed. Some had covered their bodies in extraordinary ways, while others trailed long white hairs from their chins, matted by brine into tendrils resembling elongated poplar leaves.

She exclaimed, her skin prickling with startled fear – as if she had just touched a hairy caterpillar.

‘Save us, Goddess,’ one of the hairier specimens begged brokenly as he vomited, looking up at her. ‘Save us... your humble subjects... are questing for immortality. But this catastrophe... the rending of heaven and earth... By your mercy... you have come... please save our puny lives... grant us the elixir... the elixir of life...’ Then he went in for a curious jerking of his head to and from the ground.

‘What?’ she asked, in bafflement.

Then a great many of their number followed suit, opening their mouths now to vomit, now to chant ‘Goddess, Goddess’, all doing that strange thing with their heads. The noise quickly became vexing, and she began rather to regret getting involved, as they seemed a bothersome bunch. Looking helplessly around her, she

was overjoyed to find a team of fabulous giant turtles frolicking in the ocean near by. ‘Take them somewhere safe!’ she ordered, resting the mountains on their carapaces. Nodding at her, they gathered into a shoal and swam off into the distance. But she had drawn the peaks towards her too violently, dislodging one of the white-haired creatures off his valley. Unable to climb back on or swim, he lay face down on the seashore, slapping at his face. Though there was something rather pitiful about him, Nüwa was too preoccupied to intervene further.

Heaving a sigh of partial relief, she looked back around her. The waters had receded some distance, exposing expanses of earth and rock. Yet more creatures seemed to be inlaid into cracks in the stone – some stiffly motionless, others moving about. She peered at one staring stupidly at her. Its body was entirely encased within iron plates, its face a mask of fear and dejection.

‘What’s happened?’ she asked.

‘Alas, heaven has cursed us,’ it told her despairingly. ‘When the treacherous Zhuan Xu rose up against our king, he fought back, as heaven willed. We did battle outside the city, yet heaven forsook our virtuous cause, and our forces were repelled.’

‘What?’ This, indeed, was a novelty.

‘Our forces were repelled and our king dashed his brains out against the Broken Mountain, smashing the Pillar of Heaven between earth and sky.¹ Oh, woe, woe – ’

‘That’s quite enough of your nonsense.’ She turned towards another of the creatures – again encased in iron plate, but its face beaming with triumph. ‘How about you tell me what’s been going on here?’ She now realized how various the faces of her creatures were; perhaps she would get more sense out of this one.

‘The perfidious swine Kang Hui coveted the throne of heaven. Our king fought back, as heaven willed it. We did battle outside the city, and heaven did not forsake our virtuous cause. Our forces marched to victory, while Kang Hui met his end on the Broken Mountain...’

‘What?’ she spluttered, as confused as before.

‘The perfidious...’

‘Enough! You’re both as bad as each other.’ Flushing with anger, she turned on her heel and went elsewhere in search of an answer. Eventually, she spied a creature unencumbered by iron plate: naked except for a ragged cloth around his waist and covered in bleeding wounds. Though he was busy untying another tattered piece of cloth from another, apparently rigid specimen’s waist and wrapping it around himself, his face was devoid of expression.

Supposing that he was of a different species to those encased in iron plate, she hoped finally to extract a little intelligible information out of him.

‘What’s been going on?’ she asked.

‘What’s been going on,’ he echoed, barely looking up.

‘All this trouble?’

‘All this trouble?’

‘Has there been a war?’ she tried supplying an answer.

‘War?’ he asked back.

Turning her face to the sky, Nüwa took a deep mouthful of cold air. An enormous, deep gash ran across the heaven. She stood up and tapped it, her fingernail rapping dully against it, as against a cracked bowl. Frowning, she looked pensively about her for a while. Then, wringing the water from her hair, she threw it back over her shoulders and summoned up her energy to gather reeds. The first thing to be done, she had resolved, was to mend the sky.

Day and night she piled up reeds, growing thin with the work – for the earth was no longer as it had once been. Whenever she looked up, the cracked heavens lay above her. Looking down, she found only the rotting ruins of the earth, empty of all that had once gladdened her heart.

Once the tower of reeds stretched up to the breach in the heavens, she began to look for blue stones. First, she searched for stones of a pure azure that would match the sky; but there weren’t enough of them on earth. Disinclined to use up the mountains, she sometimes scavenged for fragments in more populated parts – where she met mockery or insult, or where the stones were snatched back, her hand bitten. Soon she resorted to mixing in white stones, and when she ran out of those, she tried orange and grey, until the crack was filled. Now, when all she had to do was light a fire to smelt them together, her eyes clouded over with fatigue, her ears buzzed; she could go on no longer.

‘I’ve never been so bored in my life,’ she panted, sitting on a mountain peak and resting her head in her hands.

The ancient forest on Kunlun Mountain still burned red on the western horizon. Glancing across at it, she decided to pluck a tree to light the pile of reeds. But as she reached out, something pricked her toe.

Looking down, she discovered another of those creatures of hers, even more bizarre-looking than the others. It was copiously draped in cloth, with perhaps an extra dozen strips of material hanging from its waist, while its head was covered in some other fabric. A small, black rectangular board sat on the crown of its head, while it prodded her foot with the flat object in its hand.

There it stood between her legs, looking up at her. The instant it saw her look down at him, it hurriedly passed the flat object up to her. It was, she discovered as she took it from him, a tablet of smooth, green bamboo, inscribed with two lines of tiny black specks – finer even than the patterns on oak leaves, she thought admiringly.

‘What’s this?’ she asked, prickling with curiosity.

‘Your wanton nakedness demonstrates a failure of morality, contempt for the rites, and breach of the rules,’ the creature recited fluently, pointing at the tablet. ‘Such conduct is for birds and beasts only. The laws of the land expressly prohibit it!’

Gazing down at the board on top of his head, Nüwa smiled at her own foolishness. Dialogue with these creatures, experience had taught her, was quite impossible. Giving up on the conversation, she placed the tablet on top of the headboard, then set about uprooting a vast burning trunk from the forest fire to introduce to her pile of reeds.

She heard a strange new noise – a sobbing sound. She glanced down: the tiny eyes beneath the rectangular board held two tears smaller than mustard seeds. Because the creature’s cries bore so little resemblance to the wails she had heard earlier, she had not realized that it, too, was weeping.

She lit the fire in several places.

It did not catch instantly, for there was still some dampness to the reeds, but after much crackling, countless tongues of flame began curling out, stretching up before falling back, eventually magnifying into double-headed flowers, then into a great pillar of fire, overshadowing the glow from Kunlun Mountain. A sudden strong gust of wind bellowed the column of flame into life, spinning it round. The variously coloured stones reddened, then bolted liquidly, eternally through the crack like malt sugar.

The wind and fire buffeted her hair in all directions, the sweat cascading off her. Her body stood in silhouette against the blaze, colouring the universe – for the last time – a fleshy pink.

The fire slowly travelled up the reeds, leaving behind it only a pile of ashes. When the heaven was once more its uniform, greenish blue, she reached out to feel it.

‘I’ll try again,’ she thought to herself, dissatisfied with its uneven finish, ‘when I’m feeling stronger.’

She bent down to gather up the reed ashes, dousing large handfuls of them in the floodwaters. Billows of steam hissed up from the residual heat, spattering her body with discoloured water. Soon, the wind joined in, picking up dust and painting her in grey.

She breathed her last.

The sun blazed light over a blood-red horizon, like a golden ball petrified in ancient lava. A frigidly off-white moon, the colour of pig-iron, hung opposite. As to which was rising, and which was setting – who could tell. The exhausted shell of her body lay lifelessly between them.

All around, a silence deeper than death reigned.

III

One bitterly cold day, the ground hummed with commotion: the long-delayed arrival of the imperial guards, who had been waiting for the fire and dust to subside. A yellow axe proceeded to the left of their phalanx, black to the right. A vast, ancient banner unfurled behind them as they dodged and feinted their way towards Nüwa's corpse. Their caution was unnecessary: there was no trace of life. They cleverly chose to pitch camp on her stomach, as this was the most fertile place on her body. But then came a sudden change of heart: claiming they were Nüwa's only true descendants, they now revised the text on their banner – the ancient characters drooping like tadpole tails – to 'The Entrails of Nüwa'.²

The aged Daoist priest stranded on the seashore enlightened generations of disciples. Only on his deathbed, however, did he reveal that the magic mountains had been carried out to sea on the backs of giant turtles. And his disciples told their disciples, and so on it went, until an ambitious alchemist begged to inform the First Emperor of China, Qinshi Huangdi, who sent him off in search.

The alchemist found nothing; the emperor died. Emperor Wu of the Han dispatched his own search party – but still nothing was found.

It was probably just happy coincidence that the turtles nodded when they did – probably they understood none of Nüwa's instruction. After swimming in aimless formation for a while, the shoal doubtless dispersed to sleep, leaving the magic mountains to sink. No one has discovered a trace of them since – only the occasional island of savages.

November 1922

FLIGHT TO THE MOON

I

It is an acknowledged truth that intelligent beasts can read the human mind. The moment that its master's gate swung into view, the horse slowed its canter and, just like its rider, hung its head, letting it jolt at each step like a pestle pounding rice in a mortar.

The mansion was shrouded in evening mist, the thick black cooking smoke of dinnertime curling up from neighbours' chimneys. Straight-backed, arms hanging down at their sides, eyes cast to the ground, Yi's¹ retainers stood outside ready to greet him, alerted by the approach of hooves. Yi listlessly dismounted next to a heap of rubbish, his retainers taking from him reins and whip. Before he crossed the threshold, he hesitated, glancing down at the full quiver of new arrows at his waist, and the three crows and tiny, shattered sparrow in his string bag. Steadying his nerve, he strode in, his arrows rattling in their quiver.

The moment he entered the inner courtyard, he saw Chang'e looking out of the round window. Her quick eyes, he knew, would have spied his haul of crows. Again, his nerves gave him pause – but he had to go on. The housemaids emerged to relieve him of his bow and arrows, and untie his net bag – all smirking at him, he suspected.

'My lady,' he called out, entering her room after wiping his hands and face.

Chang'e was still staring out of the round window into the dusk sky. Slowly turning around, she cursorily acknowledged his presence with the briefest of glances. She said nothing.

Yi was no stranger to such a reception – things had been like this between them for at least a year now. He approached, as he always did, and sat down on the ancient, threadbare leopard skin over the wooden divan opposite her.

'No luck today, either,' he prevaricated, scratching his head. 'Except for the odd crow.'

'Hmph!' Raising her exquisitely arched eyebrows, Chang'e stood up and flounced out of the room. 'Crow, crow and more crow! With fried-bean noodles! Who else d'you know has to eat crow and fried-bean noodles every day, from one end of the year to the other? What did I do to deserve this?'

'My lady.' Yi quickly stood up and went after her, his voice low. 'I shot a sparrow, too – for your dinner tonight. Number Eight!' he shouted to one of the maids. 'Bring the mistress the sparrow!'

Number Eight rushed out to the kitchen – where the smells of the hunt had been deposited – then returned and respectfully presented the bird to Chang'e for her inspection.

‘Hmph!’ she muttered peevishly, giving it a glance and a prod. ‘What a mess! Did you have to smash it up like that? Is there any meat left in there?’

‘I’m afraid,’ Yi faltered, his nerve failing him again, ‘it got damaged by my arrow – it was too big for such a small bird.’

‘Can’t you use smaller arrows?’

‘I don’t have any. Ever since I shot the Great Boar and the Long Python –’

‘Is this a Great Boar? Or a Long Python?’ she snapped, turning back to Number Eight. ‘Turn it into soup!’ She then retired to her room.

Yi stood, stupidly, alone in the hall. Eventually, he slumped down against a wall, listening to the firewood crackling in the kitchen. He remembered how the Great Boar had loomed mountainously up in the distance. If only he hadn’t killed it back then, if only he’d let it be till now, they could have dined off it for a year – there’d be none of this daily bickering about food. Or the Long Python: now that would have made a lovely thick soup...

Number Two came in to light the lamps. Hanging on the wall opposite, Yi’s crimson bow and arrow (bestowed with the blessing of the emperor himself), his black bow and arrow, his crossbow, his long sword and his short sword now emerged out of the dusk. Glancing over at them, Yi looked down again, and sighed. Number Eight set dinner on the table in the middle of the room: five large bowls of white noodles to the left, two more large bowls and a bowl of soup to the right, a great dish of crow in fried-bean sauce in the centre.

Yi applied himself to the noodles, admitting to himself that he had indeed eaten better dinners. He stole a glance at Chang’e, who scorned even to look at the stir-fried crow. After half a bowl of noodles in sparrow soup, she set her chopsticks down. She was looking thinner, he thought, and paler. Was she falling ill?

By the second watch of the night, her mood seemed a little improved. She sat silently on the edge of her bed, drinking water, while Yi reclined on the wooden divan next to her, stroking the ancient threadbare leopard skin.

‘I remember shooting this leopard in the western hills,’ he reminisced in a conciliatory tone. ‘Before we were married. How beautiful it was, with its glossy golden coat.’ He thought of the feasts they’d had: when he shot bears, they ate only the paws; camels, the hump. The rest they left for the servants. Once the big game was gone, they satisfied themselves with wild boar, rabbits, pheasants – his sure aim gave them as many as they wanted. ‘I wish I’d missed a few more,’ he sighed. ‘I’ve shot everything there is to shoot. Who’d have thought there’d be only crows left, now?’

‘Hmph.’ Chang’e offered the glimmer of a smile.

‘But I got lucky today.’ Yi cheered up a little. ‘With that sparrow. I went an extra ten miles for it.’

‘Can’t you go further still?’

‘Yes, my lady. My thoughts exactly. I’ll get up earlier tomorrow. If you wake up first, send me on my way. I’m going to ride an extra twenty miles, to look for deer and rabbits... The going won’t be easy, though. There was no shortage of game when I shot the Great Boar and the Long Python. Your mother was always asking me to go and shoot the black bears prowling past her gate.’

‘Really?’ Chang’e replied vaguely.

‘And now they’re all gone – who’d have thought it? How we’ll manage in the future, I’ve no idea. I’m not so bothered about myself – that elixir of immortality the Daoist priest gave me’s my ticket to heaven. But I’ve got to see you right first... so I’ll pull out all the stops tomorrow.’

‘Hmm.’ Her water finished, Chang’e lay back languidly and closed her eyes.

The guttering flame illuminated the ruins of her makeup: her powder had slid off her face, exposing dark circles around her eyes; her blue-black eyebrows arched asymmetrically. But her lips remained as red as fire, two shallow dimples embedded in her unsmiling cheeks.

‘She deserves better than crow in fried-bean sauce.’ Yi’s face flushed with the shame of it.

II

The night passed, and a new day dawned.

Yi's eyes flew open: a ray of sunlight was slanting on to the western wall – it was well past first light. He glanced across at Chang'e, her limbs splayed in sleep. He dressed quietly, clambered off the leopard-skin divan, crept out into the hall and washed his face, while calling out to Number Seven to hurry Wang Sheng with his horse.

A long time ago, the demands of hunting had made breakfast an impossible luxury: instead, Number Two placed five wheat cakes, five spring onions and a packet of chilli paste in Yi's bag, then tied his bow and arrows on to his back. After tightening his belt, Yi stepped lightly out of the house.

'I'm going further today,' he told Number Seven as she came back in from the stables. 'I may be back later than usual. Once your mistress has woken, respectfully inform her she may have to wait a little longer for her supper tonight. Wait till after her breakfast, when she's in a slightly better mood than usual. Send her my apologies. Don't forget: my apologies.'

He strode out of the gate, mounted his horse and, leaving his men standing to attention behind him, galloped out of the village. He ignored the fields of sorghum he passed every day; there was nothing for him there, he had discovered long ago. With a couple of cracks of the whip, his horse flew on another twenty miles or so, where a densely planted copse of trees lay ahead. The animal slowed, panting for breath, the sweat coursing down its body. Some three miles later, the wood at last drew near. The place was swarming with insect life – hornets, white butterflies, ants, grasshoppers – but nothing bigger. He had hoped for a couple of foxes or rabbits, at least, but now he realized it had all been an illusion. He skirted the edge of the forest, discovering yet more dark green sorghum fields behind, and a few mud huts scattered in the distance. The breeze was warm and the sun mild; silence reigned.

'Damnation!' he roared in frustration.

Perhaps a dozen strides on, his anger evaporated. On the flat ground outside one of the distant mud huts, he could see a bird, pecking along at its feet – the very image of an enormous pigeon. Seizing his bow, he drew the string back. An arrow flew out like a shooting star.

No need for further hesitation; he had never missed a target he had set his sights on. All he had to do now was gallop off to claim his prize. But what was this? As he approached, an old woman, cradling the deceased pigeon in her arms, charged at him.

'Who the hell are you?' she screeched. 'Why did you just shoot my best black

hen? Can't you find anything better to do with yourself?'

Yi quickly reined in his horse, his heart pounding.

'A hen?' he flustered. 'I thought it was a wood pigeon.'

'You blind or something? You look old enough to know better.'

'I was forty-four at my last birthday, madame.'

'And you can't tell a hen from a wood pigeon! Who are you, anyway?'

'I am Yi the Archer.' He allowed his self-introduction to fade circumspectly, noting – as he dismounted – that his arrow had passed precisely through the hen's heart, leaving the bird indisputably dead.

'Yi?... Never heard of you,' she snorted, studying his face.

'There are some who know the name. In the time of King Yao, I shot wild boars and snakes –'

'Ha! You lie! That was Feng Meng,² and his lot. You might have been one of them – but here you are claiming all the glory for yourself. Shame on you!'

'Over the past few years, Feng Meng has been a frequent visitor to my door, madame, but we've never been hunting partners.'

'Rubbish. Everyone says it was him – why, I hear it four or five times a month.'

'But back to the matter in hand. What's to be done about this hen?'

'Compensation – that's what I want. She was my best layer: I had eggs from her every day. I want two hoes and three spindles for her.'

'Do I look like a plougher and spinner, madame? I've no money, either. All I have is these five wheat cakes, made of white flour – these are all I can give you for your hen. Look, I'll throw in five spring onions and a packet of sweet chilli paste, too. How about it?' He groped around in his string bag for the wheat cakes, reaching out with his other hand for the hen.

At the sight of the wheat cakes, she began to reconsider – but she wanted fifteen of them. After a free and frank exchange of views, they settled on a final figure of ten, to be delivered the following day by noon at the latest; she would keep hold of the guilty arrow as a surety against Yi's return. A relieved Yi stuffed the dead hen into his bag, swung back into his saddle and turned towards home. He was famished but happy: neither of them had tasted chicken soup for over a year.

As it was well past noon when he wound his way back around the woods; he tried to spur his horse on towards home, but it was exhausted, and it was dusk by the time they approached the sorghum fields. Somewhere in the distance ahead, he saw a darting shadow; an arrow suddenly swooped towards him.

Yi spurred his horse on, taking up his bow as he galloped and releasing an arrow of his own. Two arrows sparked in mid-air collision, fused into an inverted V, ascended and then fell back to the ground, their momentum exhausted. The instant the first arrows encountered each other, a second pair flew out, again clashing in

mid-air. And so it went on, through nine arrows, until Yi's quiver was empty. He now saw his enemy Feng Meng, jubilantly opposite, another arrow poised on his bowstring, aimed directly at Yi's throat.

'Ha!' thought Yi. 'I thought he'd left these parts to try his luck fishing on the coast. Still up to his old tricks, I see. No wonder that old woman wouldn't shut up about him.'

The bow, distended like a full moon, released its missile towards Yi's throat. Perhaps its archer's aim had been a little out, for it hit him squarely in the mouth. Thus punctured, Yi tumbled from his horse, which came to a halt.

Feng Meng crept over to smile upon Yi's dead face, lifting an imaginary cup of liquor to his victory.

But as he bent to look, Yi opened his eyes and sat bolt upright.

'You obviously didn't listen to a thing I said to you,' he smiled, spitting out the arrow. 'How could you have failed to learn my art of arrow-biting? Hopeless: trying to kill your teacher with his own tricks. You've got to come up with something of your own.'

'I thought you might enjoy a taste of your own medicine...' the deflated victor mumbled.

'Enough!' Yi laughed, standing up. 'You might be able to humbug old women, but you won't fool me! I'm a hunter, not a highway robber – unlike some people round here.' Glancing back down at the hen in his bag, he saw it was undamaged by his fall. He swung back on to his horse and rode off.

'Damn you to hell!' Feng Meng shouted after him.

'Hopeless. Such ill-breeding, at such a young age. No wonder he managed to hoodwink that old woman.' Yi shook his head despairingly as he rode along.

III

The sky was fully dark before the fields were behind him, and glittering with stars; to the west, Venus shone with exceptional brightness. His exhausted horse now tortuously picked its way along the whitened ridges between the fields, as the moon over the horizon began to pour out its silvery light.

‘Confound it!’ Yi fulminated, hearing his stomach loudly complain. ‘The harder I work, the more bad luck comes my way. What a waste of a day!’ He tried squeezing the horse’s stomach with his legs, but the animal just shook its rump and ambled on as before.

‘Chang’e’s going to be furious, waiting for me all this time,’ he thought. ‘At least I’ve got this hen. My lady, I’ll say, I travelled seventy miles to win you your dinner. Or would that sound too boastful?’

He gazed at the lamplight from other houses, the euphoria of success overriding his anxiety. Without so much as a touch of the whip, the horse flew into a gallop. A round, white moon now illuminating the way ahead, a cool breeze against his face, his heart grew light – lighter even than after the great hunts of the old days.

Without needing to be told, his horse pulled up next to the pile of rubbish. A foreboding that all was not well gnawed at Yi; only Zhao Fu emerged to meet him.

‘What’s happened? Where’s Wang Sheng?’ he asked.

‘He’s gone to the Yaos’ to look for the mistress.’

‘To the Yaos’?’

‘Yes, sir.’ His man took the reins and whip from him.

Dismounting at last, Yi walked in through the gate, chewing the news over. ‘Are you sure she didn’t get tired of waiting and go to a restaurant?’ he turned back to ask.

‘Yes, sir. I’ve already looked in all three of them.’

Yi went on into the house, head bowed, thinking through the possibilities. Inside, he was startled to discover the three maids gathered nervously in the hall.

‘What are you all doing here?’ he shouted at them. ‘The mistress never goes alone to the Yaos’.’

Gazing silently at him, they helped him off with his bow, his quiver and the string bag containing the hen. Yi’s heart began to pound: could Chang’e have committed suicide out of pique? He had Number Seven call Zhao Fu, and got him to check in the pond and the trees in the back courtyard. As soon as he stepped into his and Chang’e’s apartments, however, he knew he had drawn the wrong conclusion. Her room was in chaos: her chest of clothes flung open, her jewellery box missing from under the bed. This last discovery hit him particularly hard: not on account of the

gold or the pearls, but of the elixir of life that had been inside.

After making two circuits around the room, Yi noticed Wang Sheng at the door.

‘The mistress isn’t at the Yaos’, sir,’ Wang Sheng informed him. ‘They’re not playing mahjong today.’

Yi glanced wordlessly at him. Wang Sheng retreated.

‘Did you call, sir?’ Zhao Fu now appeared.

Shaking his head, Yi dismissed him with a wave of his hand.

After another few turns around the room, Yi walked into the hall where he sat down, gazing up at the wall opposite: at his crimson bow and arrow; his black bow and arrow; his cross-bow, his long sword and his short sword.

‘When did you realize she’d gone?’ he finally asked the maids, who were still standing blankly before him.

‘When I brought in the lamp,’ Number Two said. ‘But no one saw her go out.’

‘Did you see her taking an elixir? The one from the box?’

‘No. But she did ask me to pour her some water in the afternoon.’

His fears now fully aroused, Yi stood up, feeling utterly alone.

‘Did you see anything flying up to the sky?’ he asked next.

‘Oh!’ Number Eight paled, making a connection in her mind. ‘Just after I’d lit the lamp, I went out and I did see a black shadow fly over. Could that have been the mistress?’

‘Without a doubt!’ Yi slapped his knee, stood up and went out. He then turned back to Number Eight. ‘Where in the sky?’

Looking in the direction Number Eight indicated, he saw only the white globe of the moon, scattered with hazy outlines of trees and pavilions. He vaguely remembered his grandmother telling him, as a boy, about the wonders of the moon palace. Gazing upon it now, floating in a sea of deep blue, he felt the heaviness of his own mortality.

He suddenly experienced a murderous rage. ‘Bring me my Bow for Shooting the Sun!’ he roared, his eyes bulging. ‘And three arrows!’

Numbers Two and Seven brushed the dust off that greatest, most powerful of bows, and handed it – along with three long arrows – to him.

Taking the bow in one hand, the three arrows in the other, he placed the arrows against the string, drew it fully taut and aimed at the moon. Straight-backed, eyes flashing, hair and beard blowing about him like tongues of black fire, at that moment he might have been the same Yi who, all those years ago, shot the nine suns out of the sky.

As at one instant, the arrows whipped away from the bow, the action blurred with speed, their separate trajectories coalescing into a single hum. To be sure of hitting his target, Yi quivered his hand a fraction as he released the string, to disperse his

simultaneous missiles – to make three separate wounds.

The maids squealed in alarm. Seeing the moon shudder, they thought it on the point of falling, but it kept its place, glowing more intensely, more beneficently than ever, as if uninjured.

Yi cursed out to the heavens, then paused an instant; the moon ignored him. He advanced three steps; the moon retreated as many. He took three steps back, and the moon regained its ground.

Everyone gazed silently at each other.

After wearily propping his great bow against the doorway, Yi went back inside. The maids followed behind.

Yi sat down, sighing. ‘Well, I hope your mistress enjoys eternity on her own. How could she have left me like that? Did she think I was getting past it? Just last month she told me how young I still was. That the moment you start thinking you’re old, you’re halfway to the grave.’

‘Of course not,’ soothed Number Two. ‘Some say you’re a great warrior still.’

‘Sometimes, you remind me of an artist,’ added Number Eight.

‘Balderdash! But I can understand why she was fed up with crow in fried-bean sauce...’

‘I’ll go and cut a bit off the leopard skin hanging down by the wall to patch the middle,’ Number Eight decided. ‘It looks awful as it is.’

‘No hurry,’ Yi said thoughtfully. ‘I’m starving – fry that chicken with some chillies, and steam me five pounds of wheat cakes. I’ll sleep better on a full stomach. Then I’ll get another elixir from that Daoist priest tomorrow and go after her. Number Seven: go and tell Wang Sheng to measure eight pints of white beans for my horse!’

December 1926

TAMING THE FLOODS

I

The great floods had divided the lands, encircling mountains and engulfing hills. Not all Emperor Shun's subjects crowded on to summits that held clear of the water: some tied themselves to treetops, while others sat on rafts, occasionally embellished with tiny wooden shacks. A veritable idyll of adversity, when viewed from dry land.

News travelled on rafts, apprising the empire that Lord Gun, after a fruitless nine-year battle with the floodwaters, had lost the goodwill of the emperor and been banished to Feather Mountain. His son, Yu,¹ had succeeded to the poisoned chalice.

The calamity had endured so long that all the universities had been shut down, and there was no dry ground even for nursery schools, so most people were rather raw and uneducated. Except on Mount Culture: for there, a mighty congregation of scholars had gathered, their food delivered by flying chariot from the Land of Clever Tricks.² Thus liberated from anxieties about subsistence, they were able to continue freely with their academic research. Most of them were against Yu, or even refused to believe in his very existence.

Once a month, the flying chariot would announce its approach with a rush of air overhead, whirring louder and louder until it glided into view, its large flag – a gleaming yellow circle at the centre – flapping in the wind. When the vehicle hovered five feet from the ground, a number of baskets, of unspecified contents, would be dropped down. A few vertical exchanges might take place – for example:

‘Goo-mou-lin!’ (For the learned residents of Mount Culture preferred to communicate in heavily accented English.)

‘Hao du yoe toooo?’

‘Goo-loo-jee-lee...’

‘Oh-kei!’

The chariot then sped off back to the Land of Clever Tricks, leaving only the hush of applied eating and the sound of the waves crashing against the rocky sides of the mountain. Their energies replenished a hundredfold on waking from their midday naps, the scholars would drown out the sound of the breakers with their seminars and research papers.

‘No son of Gun will succeed in controlling the floods,’ one learned individual with a walking stick declared. ‘I have not only collected, but also actually examined, a vast number of genealogies of kings, dukes, ministers and rich men. Only one conclusion thrusts itself out at me: the descendants of the rich are always rich, the descendants of the wicked are always wicked. This demonstrates the scientific principle of heredity, from which we may extrapolate: if Gun was unsuccessful, his son will be equally so, because the stupid never give birth to the clever!’

‘Oh-kei!’ someone without a walking stick agreed.

‘But what about the revered father of our emperor?’ another scholar – again without walking stick – objected.

‘Granted, he was never the sharpest tool in the box. But he made some progress over the years – he wasn’t a complete fool.’

‘Oh-kei!’

‘W-what nonsense,’ another scholar stammered, the tip of his nose flushing bright red. ‘It’s all a great hoax! There is no Yu – he doesn’t exist! He’s just a worm. Look at how he writes his name: 禹, a worm 虫 in a box with a lid. What can a worm in a box with a lid do against the floods? And Gun doesn’t exist, either!’ He gave a little skip for added emphasis.

‘But Gun does exist. I saw him with my own eyes seven years ago, smelling the plum blossom at the foot of Kunlun Mountain.’

‘A classic case of mistaken identity! And Yu is most indisputably a worm. I have a huge pile of evidence to disprove his existence. Gather round and see for yourself.’

Springing valiantly to his feet, he pulled out his fruit knife, stripped the bark off five giant pine trees, made a paste of leftover breadcrumbs, water and charcoal dust, and over the next twenty-seven days wrote out in minuscule print a devastating critique definitively proving Yu’s non-existence. To read it cost ten young elm leaves or – in raft-dwellers’ currency – a shellful of fresh waterweed.

Since the floods had put an end to hunting and farming, the survivors had an excess of time on their hands, and so the critique drew flocks of visitors. For three days, tourists crowded under the pines, sighing in either admiration or exhaustion.

‘Yu does exist,’ one rustic finally objected on the noon of the fourth day, while the scholar was attacking his fried noodles.

‘He’s a worm!’ The author of the unforgettable treatise sprang, roaring, to his feet, choking on a mouthful of semi-masticated noodles, his nose purple with outrage.

‘Don’t waste your breath arguing with him, Mr Birdbrain,’ the scholar with a walking stick intervened, setting down his bread. ‘All peasants are idiots. Produce your genealogy,’ he ordered the rude nonconformist, ‘and I’ll show you your ancestors were all idiots.’

‘I’ve never had one.’

‘How I loathe you grubby plebeians, muddying the crystalline waters of scholarship!’

‘W-we don’t need to see his genealogy to prove I’m right,’ Mr Birdbrain went on, even more angrily. ‘I’ve plenty of letters of congratulation from other scholars commending me for my erudition – I have them with me here.’

‘I still think we should check his genealogy...’

‘I told you, I don’t have one,’ the idiot said. ‘Things being as they are now, it would take weeks, if not months, for your friends to send in letters of verification. More inconvenient than a Daoist rite in a snail shell. Look, let’s not be too literal about the business of names. Take yours, Birdbrain, 鸟头. Are you a man, or a birdbrain?’

‘The disrespect! The insult!’ Mr Birdbrain was now so enraged that his ear lobes glowed purple. ‘Let us both go before a judge, this very afternoon, and settle our differences in a court of law. If he finds against me, if I turn out to be a birdbrain indeed, I’ll lose my head for it. If he finds for me, you’ll pay in the same coin! Hold on, let me just finish my fried noodles.’

‘As you, sir,’ the countryman phlegmatically replied, ‘are a learned scholar, you will surely know that it is past midday – a time when hunger tends to creep up on people. And how bitterly inconvenient it is that the stomachs of the stupid grow empty exactly as do the stomachs of the wise. Please accept my profuse apologies, but the fishing of waterweed calls me. Once you’ve filed your suit, I’ll return forthwith to give myself up.’ He hopped on to his raft and, scooping up waterweed with the help of a net bag, floated off into the distance. The crowds slowly thinned, while Mr Birdbrain returned to his fried noodles, his ear lobes and the tip of his nose still purple, and the genealogist with a walking stick went on shaking his head.

Yet serious question marks remained, over whether Yu was a man or a worm.

II

Yu, it began to seem increasingly likely, was indeed a worm.

A good half year trickled by: half a year in which the flying chariots of the Land of Clever Tricks had been and gone eight times, in which nine out of ten of the raft people who had read the writing on the pine trees had caught beriberi; but still no word of the new official sent to manage the flood waters. Only after the tenth delivery by flying chariot was it reported that Yu did, in fact, exist: that he was indeed the son of Gun and had been appointed Imperial Minister of Irrigation; that three years ago he had set out from Jizhou and was shortly headed for these parts.

Only the faintest tremors of excitement were felt. So many groundless rumours had already circulated that no one took much notice any more.

This time, however, it seemed the reports were to be believed. In another ten days, almost everyone was saying the minister truly was about to arrive. One of the raft-dwellers, out fishing for weed, had seen the government boats with his own eyes; a black-and-blue lump on his head – bequeathed by a stone projectile a soldier had thrown at him for not getting out of their way fast enough – corroborated the claim. He became quite a celebrity afterwards, his raft almost sinking beneath the weight of visitors desperately jostling to see the bump. Even the scholars called him in to interview and, after much scrupulous research, concluded that the protrusion on his head was indeed a bump. Finding his previous position now untenable, Mr Birdbrain ceded the field of textual inquiry to others and took himself off somewhere else to collect folk songs.

Some three weeks after the bump to the head, a great fleet of wooden boats arrived, each with twenty imperial soldiers at the oars, thirty warriors with spears standing guard on deck, pennants fluttering at stern and helm. As they approached the mountaintop, a respectful welcoming party of dignitaries and scholars lined the crags. After a substantial delay, two corpulently middle-aged senior officials emerged from the largest boat, thronged by an entourage of around twenty soldiers draped in tiger skin, and allowed themselves to be escorted to a stone building at the summit.

Following careful inquiry, everyone – land- and sea-dwellers alike – eventually understood that these two individuals were special investigators and not Yu himself.

Seated in the middle of the stone building, the senior officials ate some bread, then began their investigation.

‘Things aren’t as bad as they might be,’ the academics’ representative – an expert in the Miao dialect of western Hunan – began. ‘No one’s starving. Every month, bread falls from the sky; and there’s no shortage of fish. They taste a bit muddy,

mind, but they're rich in oils, Your Eminences. The lower classes mindlessly stuff their faces all day long on elm leaves and seaweed – both of which offer ample nutrition, as they're not labouring with their brains. We've tasted them ourselves: an unusual, acquired kind of taste, though far from repellent – '

'And don't forget,' another intellectual – this one an expert on ancient compendia of Chinese herbs – took up, 'elm leaves are crammed with vitamin W, while seaweed's full of iodine, just the thing for scrofula. They're both desperately health-giving.'

'Oh-kei!' agreed another scholar. The officials stared at him.

'And as for potables,' the learned herbalist went on, 'they've far more than they could possibly ever need. Granted, the water round here's a bit muddy, but nothing a touch of distillation won't sort out. I've shown them how to do it more times than I can remember, Your Eminences, but they're just too stubborn to follow my instructions. That's why so many of them are ill – '

'Anyway, didn't they bring the flood on themselves?' a local dignitary in a long, reddish-brown gown, his beard sculpted into five points, interjected. 'Before the waters came, they were too idle to maintain the dykes, then afterwards, they were too lazy to bail the water out again.'

'I blame a general decline in public intelligence,' smirked a literary historian at the back with a long, pointed moustache – an expert in the ancient essay form. 'I scaled the Pamirs, the winds of heaven gusting about me. The plum trees were in flower, the white clouds flying, the price of gold rising, the rats sleeping. I saw a young man, a cigar in his mouth, his face veiled by the mists of savagery... Ha! They're all hopeless cases.'

'Oh-kei!'

And so it went on, for hours and hours, the senior officials taking diligent note. As the conference drew to a close, the scholars were asked to compile a report, ideally with detailed recommendations for post-flood rehabilitation measures.

The officials then boarded their boat again. The following day they did not conduct any public business, pleading exhaustion. The day after that, the scholars invited them to visit an ancient parasol-shaped pine on the summit, followed by an afternoon fishing for yellow eels round the back of the mountain, which kept them richly entertained till dusk. The day after that, the officials again declined to conduct public business, pleading more exhaustion. On the afternoon of the following day, they summoned a representative of the lower classes to an audience.

The process of choosing such a representative had commenced four days previously. Since no one had ever met a government official before, no one had been willing to volunteer. The majority choice was the man with the bump on his head, the argument being that he had personal experience of civil servants. Though

the bump had by now subsided, it suddenly began to throb again, as if it had been jabbed with a needle. 'I'd sooner die!' its owner sobbed. He was then ambushed day and night by petitioners pressing upon him his duty to accept the task for the public good, and denouncing him as a selfish individualist grinding the glorious traditions of China into the dust. The more excitable of their number shook their fists at him, accusing him of sole responsibility for the floods. Eventually worn down, he concluded that sacrificing himself for the common weal was probably a marginally more appealing prospect than fleeing across the boundless ocean on a wooden raft. And so, on the fourth, momentous day, his agreement was won.

For which he was awarded with universal acclaim, and even envied by the more fearless of their number.

At first light on the fifth day, he was dragged over to the shore, to await the official summons. When it came, his legs began to tremble. But he had given his word and so, with tremendous resolution, two enormous yawns and eyes puffy from lack of sleep, he dizzily boarded the boat.

And how extraordinary it all was: neither the soldiers holding spears nor those dressed in tiger skins beat or insulted him, instead allowing him free passage to the central cabin. There, he found himself in a room wondrously carpeted with bear and leopard skins, hung with crossbows and arrows, and stacked with bottles and jars. Eventually, he composed himself enough to note two immensely corpulent officials sitting directly opposite. He didn't dare examine them too closely.

'Are you the Representative of the People?' one of them asked.

'They made me come,' he replied, keeping his eyes fixed on the pattern of the leopard skin – rather like mugwort leaves, it occurred to him – over the cabin floor.

'So – how are things?'

He maintained a baffled silence.

'Are you managing?'

'Not too badly,' he muttered, giving the question some further thought. 'Thanks to Your Eminences. We're getting by... muddling through...'

'What are you eating?'

'Well... leaves... waterweed...'

'Can you digest them?'

'Oh, yes. We're used to eating anything. A few of the younger ones make a bit of a fuss – the youth of today, eh? – but we just give them a good thrashing.'

The great men burst out laughing. 'We've found ourselves an honest fellow,' one said to the other.

'We've ways and means,' the Representative burred on more confidently, bucked up by the praise. 'Waterweed, for example, makes a lovely smooth green soup, while elm leaves go best in a good thick broth. You mustn't strip all the bark off

trees in one go, or you won't get new leaves on the branches come spring. If, by the great grace of Your Eminences, we could catch some yellow eels – '

But by now the Eminent interest seemed to have dried up. 'Just compile a report, ideally with detailed recommendations for post-flood rehabilitation measures,' one of them interrupted, after two brisk yawns.

'But none of us can write,' the man nervously confessed.

'None of you? Have you no ambition at all? In which case, bring us examples of everything you eat!'

Still fearful, but happy, he retreated, rubbing the bump on his head, to disseminate the Eminent instructions to those waiting back on the shore, in the treetops and on rafts. 'Remember!' he boomed, 'this is for the eyes of our superiors! It must be done hygienically, carefully, properly!'

The lower classes set feverishly to work: washing leaves, cutting tree bark, fishing for waterweed; while their Representative constructed a wooden box for the offering. After sanding down two wooden boards – one to seal the casket, the other intended as a plaque for his raft – that very night he went up the mountain to ask the scholars to inscribe the first 'Longevity as Enduring as the Mountains, Happiness as Deep as the Ocean', and the second 'The Great Hall of Honesty' – to commemorate the singular praise the officials had honoured him with. But they would write only the first.

III

Our two officials returned to the capital around the same time as most of the other investigators, leaving only Yu still out in the field. After a few days' recuperation at home, their colleagues organized a welcoming banquet in the Ministry of Irrigation, setting up three funds to cover the costs – Happiness, Prosperity and Longevity – to which the minimum acceptable contribution was fifty large cowrie shells. Guests arrived throughout the day, and by dusk the company was gathered, the torches lit in the courtyard, the beef sitting fragrantly in cauldrons, the smell wafting out to the noses of the guards by the gate, and everyone's mouths watering. After three toasts, the assembled Eminences began to speak of the scenery around the rivers and lakes that they had passed through, of the reed flowers like snow, of the sludge like gold, of the fat yellow eels, the slippery green waterweed, and so on. After some progress towards inebriation had been made, everyone produced the local delicacies they had collected, all of which were contained within delicately worked wooden caskets, their lids inscribed with a miscellany of calligraphic styles. Soon, a heated debate began over the artistic merits of each inscription until, just short of blows, it was decided that one reading 'Country and People, Blissful in Peace and Prosperity' should be the winner – because not only was the calligraphy cursive to the point of illegibility, and therefore blessed with a spirit of ancient simplicity, but also its message was so impeccably orthodox that the imperial historians should record it for posterity.

Once judgement had been passed on China's incomparable artistic heritage and discussion of cultural matters thus brought to a temporary close, the contents of the boxes themselves were then broached. No one could fault the exquisite presentation of the cakes, but perhaps because everyone had drunk a little more wine than they strictly needed, disputes began to proliferate. From one, a nibble of pine-bark cake drew the highest praise, causing him to threaten to resign the next day, to abandon himself to the simple pleasures of the hermit's life. Another argued that, by permitting his tongue to be stung by the coarse bitterness of cypress-needle patties, he had amply shared in the trials of the lower classes and that a minister's lot was no easier than a ruler's. Others again rushed forward to bear the sampled delicacies away, proposing that an exhibition should be held to raise money, and that too many teeth-marks in the exhibits would detract from the quality of the display.

Suddenly, there was a commotion outside. A burly crowd of ragged, weather-beaten beggars seemed to be charging the barriers around the ministry. With a bellow of outrage, the guards crossed their gleaming lances to block the way forward.

‘What on earth are you doing?’ their leader, a tall, thin, uncouth-looking fellow with rough hands and feet, shouted back at them. ‘Don’t you know who I am?’

After peering at him through the dusk, the guards stood respectfully upright, straightened their spears and let the throng pass, obstructing only a breathless woman right at the very back, dressed in a dark blue gown of homespun cloth, a child in her arms.

‘Don’t you recognize me?’ she snapped, wiping the sweat off her forehead with her hand.

‘Of course we recognize you, Madame Yu.’

‘Well, why aren’t you letting me in, then?’

‘These are sensitive times, Madame Yu. This year, they’ve started segregating the sexes, to encourage moral hygiene. Women and children are barred from every government department – not just you, not just here. We’re only obeying orders.’

After a moment of astonishment, Madame Yu spun around, her eyebrows arched. ‘May you die by a thousand swords! What’s your hurry? You went past our door without even bothering to look in on your family! What’s so marvellous about working for the government? Just look at your father: worked all his life then ended up in exile. And what happened to him there? He fell into a pond and became an enormous turtle! Heartless brute! By a thousand swords!’

Her noise was rapidly superseded by fresh uproar in the main hall of the ministry. As the savage crowd rushed in, the banqueters’ first instinct was to flee. But when they saw the rude new arrivals were unarmed, they held their nerve and took a closer look. Their gaunt, weather-beaten leader the officials recognized as Yu; the rest, as his retinue.

Everyone smartly sobered up, and retreated to their seats with a rustling of robes. Yu made straight for the head of the banquet table. Perhaps out of natural swagger, or perhaps because his joints were inflamed, he did not fold his legs under him but sat with them stretched out in front of him, exhibiting to his eminent subordinates the bare soles of his enormous feet, along with calluses the size of chestnuts. His retinue sat to his left and right.

‘Did Your Eminence get back today?’ one of the bolder banqueters respectfully inquired, edging forward on his knees.

‘Come a bit closer!’ Yu ordered, ignoring the question and addressing the assembly at large. ‘What did you learn from your investigations?’

On their kneeling progress forward, the senior officials glanced surreptitiously at each other, before seating themselves below the ruins of the feast, surveying the nibbled pine-bark cakes and the conscientiously gnawed ox-bones. There was something very uncomfortable about the view before them – and yet they did not dare order the cooks to clear it away.

‘Begging Your Eminence’s pardon,’ one official finally said, ‘things didn’t seem too bad – in fact, they seemed very good indeed. There’s plenty of pine bark and waterweed, and an overwhelming abundance of potables. The lower classes are all good, stolid salt-of-the-earth types – quite used to it all by now. World-champion sufferers, I might even say, sir.’

‘Allow me humbly to present a plan for raising funds,’ another official offered: ‘an exhibition of *recherché* survival foodstuffs. We are preparing also to invite an exotic barbarian *mademoiselle* to give a fashion show. All funds will be raised from ticket sales alone – there’ll be no extra audience collection. We’ll get more people in that way.’

‘Very good,’ said Yu, with a bow in his direction.

‘But our most pressing task is to dispatch a flotilla of large rafts to bring the academics back on to dry ground,’ a third official spoke up, ‘while sending representatives to the Land of Clever Tricks to reassure them of our regard for high culture and request that their monthly material aid should now be redirected to the capital. Here is the report we commissioned from the scholars, which really makes terrifically interesting reading. Now, their view is that culture is the lifeblood of a nation, embodied in its scholars. So as long as culture survives, China will also survive, all else being of secondary importance – ’

‘They think that China’s population is too large,’ the first official said, ‘and that the path to peace and prosperity lies in a moderate reduction. The common people, after all, exist in the most benighted state of ignorance and emotional superficiality, possessing not a scrap of the profundity that wiser minds project on to them. Subjectivity is the key to judging men and their times. Take Shakespeare, for example...’

‘Confounded nonsense!’ Yu thought to himself, then went on aloud, ‘I have undertaken my own investigation and now know that the previous method – damming – was fundamentally flawed. In future, we will channel the water. Any views from the floor?’

A silence fell over the room, the colour draining from the faces of the officials. Many of their number suddenly felt the need to call in sick the next day.

‘That was the way of Chi You, the ox-horned giant, with his army of demons!’³ a courageous young official gasped indignantly.

‘I would humbly and stupidly presume to suggest that Your Eminence reconsiders that view,’ a white-bearded, white-haired official valiantly protested, careless of the consequences for his personal safety – as if the very fate of the empire rested on his own intervention. ‘Damming was the method tried and tested by your own late lamented father. A filial son should hold to the way of the father for three years after his death, and it is not yet three years since your esteemed progenitor ascended to

heaven.'

From Yu – nothing.

'Think of the trouble he went to!' another grey-haired official, the adopted son of Yu's uncle, went on. 'Borrowing the Never-Ending Earth from the Emperor of Heaven. Even though it made him no friends Up There, he did reduce the flooding a little. No: the old ways, it would seem, are the best.'

Still nothing from Yu.

'Your Eminence, I think, would be best to finish what your father failed to accomplish,' a corpulent individual, his face slick with sweat, boomed patronizingly, assuming from Yu's silence that the majority view would carry the day. 'On with the family way – redeem the paternal reputation. Perhaps Your Eminence has not heard what people say about your late lamented – '

'In summative essence, the virtues of damming have been proven the world over,' the white-haired old official broke back in, nervous that his oversized colleague had provoked Yu. 'Any other technique would be dangerously modern. And that was the whole trouble with Chi You – and his army of demons.'

'I know, I know.' Yu smiled faintly. 'Some say my father turned into a brown bear, others that he turned into a soft-shelled turtle with three legs. Others again say that I am hungry only for profit and fame. Let them say what they like. I have investigated the lie of mountain and march, consulted the people and assembled facts. My mind is made up. Channels are the way of the future – this is my last word on the subject. My colleagues here are of the same mind.'

He motioned to left and right. The officials – white-haired, grey-haired, trimly handsome, corpulently sweaty, and corpulent but not sweaty – considered the line of thin, swarthy beggarly creatures to either side of him: still, silent, impassive, as if cast in iron.

IV

Time passed quickly indeed after Yu's departure, and life in the capital grew steadily more prosperous. First, the rich started to wear pongee; next, oranges and pomelos began to appear in the larger fruit shops. After that, the better silk emporia took to displaying openwork linens, while society banquets now featured decent soy sauce, shark's-fin soup, and chilled sea slug in vinegar. Later still, the wealthy acquired bearskin rugs and fox-fur jackets, while their wives flaunted solid-gold earrings and silver bracelets.

Stand at the gate to one of the grander mansions, and you would be greeted by endless novelties: a cartload of bamboo arrows one day, a batch of pinewood boards the next. Sometimes, curiously shaped stones would be heaved in for artificial mountains in rockery displays, or fresh fish for the morning porridge. Shoals of giant tortoises, over a foot long, would be carted off to the imperial city, packed into bamboo cages, their heads shrunk back into their shells.

'Look at the big tortoises, Mummy!' children would yell, rushing up around the cart.

'Get lost, you little brats! These belong to the emperor! Touch them and you're dead!'

News of Yu's doings also proliferated with the influx of luxuries into the capital. Below the eaves of houses, in the shade of roadside trees – everyone was discussing him: how he turned into a brown bear at night and set about dredging the Nine Rivers with his teeth and claws; how he had begged the heavenly army, led by its heavenly generals, to capture Wu Zhiqi, the monster who had stirred up all the floods in the first place, and imprison him beneath Turtle Mountain. No one spoke any more of the achievements of the venerable Emperor Shun and his line; public opinion would, at most, spare the hopeless Crown Prince Danzhu a dismissively critical mention.

For weeks, months, years, reports of Yu's imminent return to the capital had been circulating. Every day a crowd would gather at the city gates, trying to catch a glimpse of his retinue's flags. And yet nothing. But the swirl of increasingly credible rumours seemed to be bringing him ever closer. And one morning – as the sun hesitated over whether to appear – he entered the imperial capital in Jizhou through the heaving ranks of the assembled masses. His arrival was announced not by flags and banners, but by a tremendous beggarly entourage. A great lanky fellow near the back, with callused hands and feet, tanned face and brownish beard, jostled his way through the throng on slightly bowed legs, holding in his hands the large, black, pointed jade tablet of imperial appointment. 'Excuse me, excuse me,' he

repeated over and over, all the way up to the imperial palace.

Outside, the people joined in choruses of acclamation, their voices swelling like the mighty billows of the River Zhe.

The venerable Shun, now weary with old age, sat nervously on the dragon throne. He stood politely as soon as Yu entered, to salute his celebrated minister.

‘Enlighten me,’ the emperor eventually said, after his minister Gao Yao had padded the occasion with a little small talk.

‘I have no knowledge to impart,’ Yu brusquely replied. ‘My only thought has been to work. To work tirelessly.’

‘Tirelessly?’ asked Gao Yao.

‘The flood waters ran high,’ Yu said, ‘encircling mountains and engulfing hills; the people were inundated. Where the road was dry, I travelled by cart; on water, I travelled by boat. I sledged over mud and climbed mountains on sedan chairs. On every mountain, I cut down trees to make paths, and with the help of Yi found meat and rice for everyone to eat. I drained the water from the fields into the rivers, and from the rivers into the seas, and with the help of Ji found everyone supplies of food, despite all the difficulties. Where one area felt a scarcity, I made it good from parts that knew abundance. I moved the people to better, safer homes. When peace returned, your subjects began to live decently again.’

‘Well said, well said, indeed!’ Gao Yao applauded.

‘An emperor,’ said Yu, ‘needs to act with caution and calm. Conduct yourself with conscience and Heaven will smile upon you.’

Heaving a sigh, the venerable Shun placed the running of the empire in Yu’s hands. Any discontent he felt, he should voice directly – there should be no sniping behind the retired emperor’s back. ‘Don’t turn out like Danzhu,’ he sighed again, after receiving Yu’s agreement, ‘loafing about, boating on dry land, making trouble at home. He’s never given me a moment’s peace – I’m sick of the sight of him.’

‘I left home four days after I was married,’ Yu answered. ‘I’ve never been a father to my son, Ah-qi. But that is how the floods were tamed, the empire divided into five regions, each two thousand miles square, and then into twelve provinces all the way out to the coast. I have appointed five governors – all good men, except for the Youmiao.⁴ Keep an eye on him!’

‘The empire is indebted to you,’ the venerable Shun commended him.

Both Gao Yao and Shun bowed their heads in deference. After dismissing his court, the old emperor commanded his people to learn from Yu’s example; to disobey constituted a criminal offence.

The news initially generated tremendous panic among the city’s merchant population. Happily, though, some of the great Yu’s puritanism became diluted after his return to the capital. Although he cared little about food or drink, he was capable

of ostentation in his performance of sacrifices and rites. And though he remained none too particular about his day-to-day clothes, at court or on official visits his outfits were always immaculately assembled. As a result, the succession had little impact on market conditions, and soon even men of business were recommending that everyone should emulate Yu and proclaiming the excellence of the venerable Gao Yao's new laws. And so peace and prosperity returned: even the beasts of the kingdom danced for joy, and phoenixes descended to join the fun.

November 1935

GATHERING FERNS

I

The past half year, peace had deserted even the Old People's Home, with a number of its residents acquiring a taste for whispered confabulations and scurrying about. Only Boyi held himself aloof from it all. As summer ended, his sole concern was to protect his aged bones from the chill of autumn – perching himself on the front steps and basking in the sun all day long. Even an approaching patter of footsteps did not persuade him to look up.

‘Brother!’

He immediately recognized Shuqi's¹ voice. Always a scrupulous observer of rank and form, Boyi stood before looking up and gestured at his younger brother to sit down next to him.

‘Bad news,’ Shuqi breathlessly informed him – a slight quaver to his voice – as he sat down beside him.

‘What's wrong?’ Finally turning to look at him, Boyi saw that Shuqi's face was a shade paler than usual.

‘Surely you heard about the two blind men fleeing the King of Shang's court?’

‘Yes, I think I remember San Yisheng mentioning them a few days ago. I didn't pay much attention.’

‘I called on them today. They're the court musicians – Grand Master Ci and Junior Master Qiang. They've brought an enormous number of instruments with them. A few days ago, they held an exhibition – everyone's been talking about it... But it seems the army's on the move.’

‘Waging war for the sake of a few musical instruments,’ Boyi ponderously observed. ‘This is not the Way of the sage kings.’

‘It's not just about music. You must have heard about the King of Shang's cruelty – how he cut off the feet of a man who crossed a freezing river at dawn, to see if there was something special about his marrow? Or how he ripped out Prince Bigan's heart to see whether it had seven orifices? These were just rumours before, but the blind musicians have confirmed it. The king is desecrating the old laws – and tradition holds that he should be punished for it. But it strikes me that neither should a subject attack his sovereign; and Zhou is still the vassal of Shang.’

‘Our pancakes do seem to have been getting smaller recently,’ Boyi remarked thoughtfully. ‘Maybe something is about to happen. Best keep out of it, though. Stay at home and keep on with your t'ai chi.’

‘I'm sure you're right...’ Shuqi murmured in deference to his senior.

‘Think about it,’ Boyi went on, knowing full well his brother was unconvinced. ‘We are guests here, living off the charity of the King of Zhou, a great respecter of

old age. We've no right to complain: either if the pancakes get smaller, or if something worse happens.'

'In other words, we should just concentrate on getting old.'

'Best say as little as possible. I don't even have the energy to listen to any more.'

He started coughing; Shuqi said no more. Once the coughing had subsided, silence descended, the two white beards glinting in the evening sun of late autumn.

II

But the effects of the absence of peace began to ripple outwards, the pancakes growing not only smaller in size but also coarser in quality. The residents of the Old People's Home spent longer and longer in huddled conference. Outside on the street, there was much noisy coming and going of horses and carts. Shuqi grew ever fonder of going out. Though he never said much on his return, his uneasy expression robbed Boyi of his own sense of calm. Their platter of pancakes, he sensed, was about to be upset.

One morning towards the end of the eleventh month, Shuqi got up to practise his t'ai chi as usual. But when he walked out into the courtyard, he paused to listen, then dashed out of the main gate. In about the time that it would have taken to bake ten pancakes, he rushed back in, his nose bright red from the cold, his breath billowing in white clouds.

'Brother! Get up!' he urged in a voice roughened by agitation, standing by Boyi's bed, hands respectfully down by his sides. 'They've declared war!'

Though Boyi was most reluctant to expose himself to the dawn cold, concern for his brother obliged him to sit up, drape a fur-lined robe over his shoulders, and slowly tug on his trousers under his quilt.

'I was just about to start my t'ai chi,' Shuqi reported while he waited, 'when I heard people and horses outside. When I rushed out to the road to look, my worst fears were confirmed. At their head went a large sedan chair, decorated in white, with eighty-one bearers, carrying a wooden commemorative tablet marked "King Wen of the Great Zhou". A retinue of soldiers followed behind. They must be marching against Shang, I thought. He's filial enough, the present incumbent. He carries his father's shrine before him at the start of any great enterprise. Then, when I turned to go back inside, I found a notice on the wall outside the Old People's Home...'

Once Boyi was fully dressed, the two brothers ventured out into the cold air, shrinking back at the chill. The view beyond the main gate presented a refreshing novelty to Boyi, who rarely ventured far beyond the home. A few steps from the gate, Shuqi pointed to a large placard on the wall:

OFFICIAL EDICT

Let all be advised that the King of Shang, in deference to his concubine's wishes, has turned his back on heaven, desecrated the Ways of heaven, earth and man, and estranged himself from his family. He has cast aside the righteous music of his ancestors, generating licentious harmonies to please his concubine. We men of Zhou set out today to deliver punishment, in accordance with the Mandate of Heaven. Gird your loins, men, forthwith!

Neither spoke as they made silently for the main road, both sides of which were packed so tightly with humanity that not even a drop of water would have seeped through. A single 'excuse me' from the two old gentlemen at the back turned the heads of the crowd towards them. In compliance with the late King Wen's order to respect the aged, the throng quickly parted to allow them forward. By this point, the ancestral tablet at the head of the procession had disappeared into the distance, succeeded by row upon row of armoured warriors. After about the length of time it would have taken to bake three hundred and fifty-two large pancakes, the brothers saw a long phalanx of soldiers pass by, hoisting nine-streamered banners that floated above their heads like multicoloured clouds. Yet more soldiers followed, with civil and military officials bringing up the rear, mounted on mighty stallions, and clustered around their formidable king – Wu of Zhou, setting off to carry out the mandate of heaven, his tanned cheeks bristling with beard, a bronze axe in his left hand, a white oxtail in his right.

The silent crowds on both sides of the road were transfixed by the spectacle. Imagine the amazement, then, when amid the quiet Shuqi rushed forward, dragging Boyi behind him, and wove through the file of horses to tug on the king's own bridle.

'Call yourself a filial son?' he yelled. 'Making war before you've even buried your father? What kind of a man plots to murder his own sovereign?'

For a few seconds, terrified spectators and officers held their breath. Even the white oxtail clutched by the Zhou ruler sagged in astonishment. But by the time Shuqi's piece had been said, procession and crowds were in uproar, as a lattice of broadswords closed in over the brothers' heads.

'Stop!'

Everyone paused to listen, recognizing the voice of the Grand Patriarch, Jiang Shang. Their blades halted in mid-air, the king's loyal retinue turned to gaze upon the patriarch's plump face, fringed with white hair.

'Let them go. These are honourable men.'

Withdrawing their swords, the men of war placed them back at their waists. Four

armoured soldiers now stood politely to attention before Boyi and Shuqi, took each by an arm and strode off with them to the side of the road. Again, the crowds smartly gave way.

Once at the back, the brothers' armoured guard straightened up again, released their arms and gave both a push from behind. Yelping with pain and surprise, the two men stumbled forward several yards then collapsed to the ground. Shuqi fortunately fell on his hands, coming away with nothing worse than a face-full of mud. Older, frailer, Boyi knocked his head against a stone and fainted right away.

III

Once the spectacle of the great army had passed by, everyone turned back to surround the prostrate Boyi and the seated Shuqi. A number of the better-informed members of the audience told the rest that they were the sons of Lord Guzhu of Liaoxi, and that they had fled to Zhou, and entered the Old People's Home founded by the late King Wen, on jointly abdicating their claim to the throne. Gasps of wonder rippled through the crowd. A few knelt to get a better look at Shuqi, while others scurried home to warm some ginger soup. Others again went off to inform the Old People's Home and have them send a door plank to take them home.

When, in about the time it would take to bake one hundred and three, or perhaps one hundred and four, large pancakes, it seemed there would be no further major developments, the audience gradually fell away. After another while, two old men finally limped over – carrying between them a door plank covered in a layer of rice straw (in strict accordance with the directives of King Wen to respect the comfort of the aged). The resounding thump the plank made against the ground startled Boyi back into life. Exclaiming with joy, Shuqi helped the two other men lift his brother gently on to the plank, then walked alongside as the stretcher set off for the Old People's Home, holding the hemp rope attached to the door.

'Hey! Wait!' someone shouted, after they had advanced sixty or seventy paces. 'Your ginger soup!' A young married woman was advancing towards them at a measured trot, carrying a clay pot whose contents she seemed afraid might spill.

Everyone stopped and waited for her to catch up, at which Shuqi thanked her for her kindness. She seemed rather disappointed to discover that Boyi had regained consciousness, but managed to recover her spirits sufficiently to urge the soup on him – something to warm his stomach. Boyi wanted nothing to do with it; he had a terror of spicy things.

'Well, what am I going to do with this, then?' she seemed rather piqued. 'This ginger's been steeping for eight years. You won't taste anything better. No one in my family likes spicy things, either.'

And so Shuqi felt he had no choice but to take the pot and somehow force a sip and a half upon Boyi. Seeing that almost all of it was left, he claimed that his own stomach needed medicating and gulped the lot down. His eyes bright red with the strain of it all, he commended the soup for its potency and thanked the lady for her kindness, thereby resolving the situation.

No serious ill effects made themselves felt after their return to the Old People's Home. Within three days Boyi was out of bed again, although the lump on his forehead remained; and he had no appetite.

But still they had no peace: disturbing news was forever reaching their ears, whether in the form of official reports or rumour. At the end of the twelfth month, it was put about that the great army had crossed the Yellow River at Mengjin, and that all the other feudal princes had rallied under the Zhou banner. Not long after, a copy of King Wu's 'Great Pledge' arrived, rendered in especially large script – each character as big as a walnut – for the dim-sighted residents of the Old People's Home. Not bothering to read it himself, Boyi let Shuqi recite it to him, passing no comment except at the phrase 'he has desecrated the ancestral sacrifices, estranging himself from family and country', which, taken out of context, seemed to wound him particularly.

And still the rumours kept coming: that Zhou forces had reached Muye, that they had joined battle with the Shang army, that the corpses of the latter had lain strewn over the plain, that blood had flowed in rivers, with sticks floating along the surface like grass; that all seven hundred thousand of the Shang troops had refused to fight: as soon as they saw Jiang Shang approach at the head of his vast army, they turned and fled, leaving the way open to King Wu.

Although the rumours diverged on points of detail, they agreed on outcome: that a great Zhou victory had been won. Later stories were told of the contents of the Stag Tower treasury and of the Great Bridge imperial granary being transported back – further proof of conquest. Wounded soldiers streamed steadily back from the front – all of them, it seemed, veterans of epic battles. The walking wounded would gather in teahouses, taverns, barbershops, under eaves or in gateways, telling stories of the war, captivating audiences wherever they went. Now that the mild spring evenings had arrived, such recitations would often go on late into the night.

Troubled by indigestion, Boyi and Shuqi never succeeded in eating their share of pancakes at each mealtime. And though they kept to their usual bedtime – retiring as soon as darkness fell – they never managed to fall asleep. Boyi tossed and turned, while an agitated Shuqi listened until – as often as not – he ended up putting his clothes back on and taking a turn around the courtyard, or practising some t'ai chi.

One moonless, starry night, when everyone else in the home was fast asleep, Shuqi heard voices chattering outside the gate. Though he'd never eavesdropped before, this time – for some reason – he stopped what he was doing and listened.

'The King of Shang fled to the Stag Tower as soon as the battle was lost.' The speaker, Shuqi surmised, was a returned soldier. 'Then the bastard piled up his treasures, sat himself down in the middle, and set fire to the lot. Damn him!'

'What a waste!' another voice – the gatekeeper's – broke in.

'Not so fast! He only managed to burn himself to death – the treasures weren't touched. When our great king led the feudal princes into the kingdom of Shang, everyone came out of the capital to meet them. "Peace be with you!" he told his

officers to say to them. Then everyone kowtowed. When they entered the city, they found two words pasted on every gate: “We Obey”. The king drove up in his carriage to the Stag Tower, found the King of Shang’s body and shot three arrows at him – ’

‘Why? Was he afraid he wasn’t really dead?’ someone else asked.

‘Who knows? But after that, he sliced at him with a light sword, *then* got out his bronze axe and whoosh! Off with his head. Then he stuck it up on a big white flag.’

Shuqi shuddered in horror.

‘*Then* he went looking for the king’s two concubines. They were stone cold, swinging on their own nooses, but he still shot another three arrows, and took a slice at them first with his sword and then with his black axe this time. Off came their heads, which he stuck on little white flags. So – ’

‘Were they as beautiful as everyone says?’ the gatekeeper interrupted.

‘Couldn’t say. The flagpole was too tall, and there were too many people trying to look. My wound was hurting me too much to get close enough to see.’

‘I heard Da Ji was a vixen fairy – that she had paws for feet, so she always kept them bound in strips of cloth. Is that true?’

‘Couldn’t say. I didn’t see them myself. A lot of the women round those parts do funny things to their feet – bind them like pig’s trotters.’

Shuqi was a man with a keen sense of decorum: a deep frown wrinkled his brow as he heard them move from the severed head of the king to the feet of his women. Determined to hear no more, he went back inside. Boyi was still not asleep.

‘Practising your t’ai chi again?’ he softly asked.

Shuqi slowly made his way over to Boyi’s bed, sat down and leaned in. After he had told his older brother what he had just heard, the two of them fell silent.

‘I never thought he would turn out this badly,’ Shuqi eventually whispered, heaving a pained sigh. ‘An unfilial regicide, not an ounce of humanity in him... The way things are now, we can’t keep eating his food.’

‘What should we do, then?’ Boyi asked.

‘We’d better leave.’

After a brief discussion, the two of them resolved to leave the Old People’s Home at first light the following day; to eat the pancakes of Zhou no longer. Nor would they take anything else with them. They would go together to Mount Hua, and live out the years remaining to them on wild berries and leaves. Fortune favours the good – they might even find birthwort or truffles.

Their course now set, they felt much lighter of heart. Undressing again, Shuqi lay back down. Soon after, he heard Boyi talking in his sleep. His own mood much improved, he too fell deeply asleep, dreaming of the fresh scent of truffles.

IV

The next day, the two brothers woke earlier than usual. Once they had washed, and combed their hair, they walked out of the Old People's Home, claiming they were going for a stroll. They took nothing with them (in truth, they had almost nothing to take) except for the beloved ancient sheepskin gowns on their backs, their walking sticks and a few leftover pancakes. Realizing they would never return, they both glanced back over their shoulders, feeling twinges of regret.

The roads were deserted except for the occasional sleepy-eyed woman out drawing water at a well. By the time they reached the outskirts of the city, the sun was high in the sky, and the way became busier. Though most of the people they encountered seemed to swagger along, with a robust sense of their own worth, they would give way as soon as they saw the aged brothers, as etiquette demanded. Further along, the trees grew denser: new leaves were sprouting on deciduous species they couldn't identify, seeming to blur into a light green mist through which appeared the hazy outlines of darker green pines and cypresses.

Surrounded by nature, in all its unfettered beauty, Boyi and Shuqi began to feel younger, freer, more energetic.

On the afternoon of the following day, they encountered a fork in the road. Unable to decide which was the most direct route, they made polite inquiries of an old man approaching in the opposite direction.

'Now, if you'd just come a bit earlier,' he said, 'you could have followed a team of horses that came by this morning. Go this way for now. Further on, you'll meet another crossroads – best ask someone else when you get to it.'

That noon, Shuqi remembered, they had indeed been overtaken, in fact, almost trampled to death, by a band of invalided soldiers driving a large pack of horses – either old, scrawny, lame or mangy. He took the opportunity to ask the old man where they were going.

'Haven't you heard?' he replied. 'Now our great king's carried out the Mandate of Heaven, the army's being demobilized. He's sending the horses to the southern foot of Mount Hua, while we graze our cattle on Peach Orchard plain. Peace for all!'

The news hit the brothers like a dousing in cold water. Both shivered, though were careful not to let their dismay show on their faces. Thanking the old man, they advanced in the direction he had indicated. The news had shattered their idyllic hopes for Mount Hua, filling them with misgiving.

They walked on in anxious silence until evening when, approaching a sizeable wooded loess hill topped with a scattering of mud huts, they decided to put up for the night.

Around a dozen paces from the hill, five well-built men darted out of the wood, their heads wrapped in white cloth, their clothes tattered. Their leader wielded a large sword; his followers wooden truncheons. At the foot of the hill, they ranged out in a line and blocked the way forward.

‘Good evening, gentlemen!’ they roared out, nodding courteously.

Alarmed, the two travellers retreated a little way. Boyi set to trembling while Shuqi, the steadier of the two, stepped forward to ask who the men were and what they wanted.

‘Allow me to humbly present myself,’ the one with the sword said. ‘My name is Qiongqi the Younger, King of Mount Hua. These are my brothers, and we were wondering if we might trouble you two esteemed gentlemen for a little toll.’

‘We have no money, O King,’ Shuqi politely responded. ‘We have come from the Old People’s Home.’

‘Ah!’ Qiongqi the Younger exclaimed, his manner newly reverent. ‘Two revered elders. Let me assure you that we, too, presume to call ourselves disciples of the teachings of the ancient kings, and also venerate the aged. I therefore beg you to leave us a small souvenir in token of our fellow feeling.’ When Shuqi said nothing, he raised his sword and his voice. ‘If our two revered visitors insist on being so diffident, you leave us no alternative but to carry out the Mandate of Heaven by conducting a thorough search of your venerable persons.’

Boyi and Shuqi promptly put their hands in the air, while a man with a wooden truncheon removed their sheepskin gowns, padded jackets and shirts and undertook a full investigation.

‘Nothing!’ he turned, thoroughly disappointed, to inform Qiongqi.

Noticing how Boyi was trembling, Qiongqi approached and clapped him respectfully on the shoulder.

‘You have nothing to fear from us, dear sirs. Shanghai bandits would have flayed you like pigs, but we – we are no barbarians. We would not stoop so low. It’s our own bad luck that you are so bereft of souvenirs. Now, with respect, beat it!’

Finding no response to make, without even waiting to do his clothes up properly again, Boyi fled with Shuqi close behind, keeping their eyes cast downwards. Their five interlocutors stepped to one side to let them through.

‘Leaving so soon?’ they chorused, arms back by their sides, once the two brothers had passed them. ‘No time for tea?’

‘No. Thank you, but no...’ Boyi and Shuqi replied, nodding away as they made off.

V

The news about pasturing horses at the foot of Mount Hua, and their encounter with its self-appointed king, seeded grave reservations about the area in our two righteous brothers. After fresh discussion, they turned north, begging for food, walking by day and sleeping at night, until eventually they reached Mount Shouyang in the north-west.

Now this – this was a mountain of delights: its summit not too high, its ravines not too deep, without threat of tigers or wolves, or marauding robbers; a perfect retreat. The two of them looked happily about the base of the mountain: at the fresh, delicately emerald leaves; at the golden earth; at the tiny red and white flowers blooming among the wild grasses. Up they went, tapping out the paths with their walking sticks, until a sudden outcrop of stone indicated the presence of a cave in the cliff-face. Panting for breath, they sat down and wiped the sweat from their faces.

By this point in the day, the sun was slanting down to the west. Now the weary birds were twittering away in their woodland roosts, the brothers' surroundings were no longer as tranquil as they had been when they had begun their ascent; but everything still had a refreshing novelty to it. After they had spread out their sheepskin robes, ready for sleep, Shuqi produced two large rice-balls, which the brothers devoured. This was the last of the food they had begged along the way. Although they had sworn to eat the grain of Zhou no longer, this vow could be put into practice only after reaching Mount Shouyang. From tomorrow, they would hold unbendingly to their pledge.

Woken at first light by crows, they soon went back to sleep, deep into the morning. Since Boyi was complaining that his back and legs ached, Shuqi went off in search of food on his own. After some exploration, he discovered that the mountain's moderate dimensions, and its lack of tigers, wolves and robbers brought their own drawbacks. The village of Shouyang lay at the foot of the mountain, from which old men and women often set out to cut firewood, and children to play. There were no wild berries: presumably long picked by other wanderers.

He thought first of truffles. Though there were pine trees on the mountain, they looked too young to have any at their roots. And even if they did, he had no way of getting at them, as he had no hoe. He moved on to birthwort: but as he had only ever seen its roots, he was incapable of identifying it by its leaves alone. It could be growing right in front of his nose, and he wouldn't even know – he might have to pull out all the grass on the mountain before he found any. He scratched at his head, his face growing hot with vexation.

He was calmed by another idea. Walking over to a pine tree, he picked a pocketful

of pine needles, found two stones by a stream, smashed off the needles' green outer skin, washed them, then crushed the lot into a thin dough. Placing it on another, shallow, flat stone, he carried it back to the cave.

'Any luck?' Boyi asked as soon as he saw him. 'My stomach has been rumbling for hours.'

'Not much. But let's try this, at least.'

He propped up the flat stone – the pine-needle cake on top of it still – on two other stones, gathered together a few dry twigs, and lit a fire beneath. Eventually, the dough began to crackle, emitting a fresh, mouth-watering fragrance. Shuqi began to smile happily: it was a recipe he had learnt while paying his respects at Patriarch Jiang Shang's eighty-fourth birthday banquet.

It rose, then gradually sank back again – just like a real cake. Gloving his hands in his sheepskin sleeves, Shuqi smilingly carried the stone slab over to Boyi. Blowing on it, his brother broke off a corner and popped it into his mouth.

He chewed, frowned, took a few effortful swallows then spat the rest out.

'Coarse and bitter,' he pronounced, gazing resentfully at Shuqi.

Trembling with despair, Shuqi also broke a corner off and set about chewing it – quite inedible.

Shuqi slumped with dejection, his head hanging down on to his chest. But still his brain was working away to pull him out of the abyss – onwards and upwards, upwards and outwards. He travelled back in his memory to his childhood – as the son of Lord Guzhu. He was sitting on the knee of his nanny, a simple peasant woman, listening to her tell him stories of the Yellow Emperor fighting the giant Chi You, of Yu catching the flood demon Wu Zhiqi, of the famine that the people survived by eating ferns.

He had asked what ferns looked like, he recalled; he had seen them earlier on the mountainside. Feeling his strength return, he stood up and strode out through the grass.

His memory had served him well: they were growing in abundance. Within half a mile, he had gathered a good half pocketful of them.

Again, he first washed them by the stream, then brought them back and roasted them on the same stone slab as before, the leaves darkening when they were cooked. This time, however, he tried a stalk himself before daring to offer it to his brother. Placing it in his mouth, he closed his eyes and chewed.

'How is it?' Boyi asked anxiously.

'Delicious!'

The two of them set joyfully upon the roast ferns, Boyi taking two extra stalks because he was the elder.

Every day, they ate ferns. To begin with, Shuqi did the harvesting while Boyi

cooked. Later, as Boyi felt his strength returning, he too went out to gather them. Their repertoire of recipes also expanded: to fern soup, fern broth, fern sauce, stewed fern, braised fern, sun-dried baby-fern leaves...

But the supply of ferns near by gradually dwindled. Though the roots remained, the leaves were slow to grow back, and every day they had to travel further. They tried moving, but the same problem always returned. And it wasn't that easy to find new campsites: they needed a place both where the ferns grew plentifully and there was running water – not easy to come by on Mount Shouyang. Worrying that Boyi might have a stroke if he didn't look after himself, Shuqi urged him to stay at home and take care of the cooking while he concentrated on foraging.

After an initial show of reluctance Boyi agreed and began to take things more easily. But there was a lot of coming and going about the mountain, and as he had nothing better to do, he took to chatting to children and woodcutters. One day, in a fit of exuberance, or perhaps because someone called him a beggar, he revealed that the two of them were the eldest and third sons of Lord Guzhu of Liaoxi. When deciding the succession, their father had decreed that the throne pass to his third son who, in turn, resolved after their father's death to pass it back to his eldest brother. Respecting his father's wishes, Boyi had fled the realm to avoid further troubles; his brother responded by fleeing also. Meeting in their self-imposed exile, the two of them went together in search of King Wen of Zhou and were accommodated in his Old People's Home. Appalled by the regicide committed by the present king – Wen's son – the two of them had resolved to eat the grain of Zhou no longer and fled to Mount Shouyang to live off wild herbs. By the time Shuqi had rebuked him for his indiscretion, there was nothing to be done – their secret was out. He refrained from grumbling further at his elder brother, keeping his critical thoughts to himself. Father had eyes in his head, he mused, when he cut Boyi out of the succession.

Shuqi was right to be worried. Village gossip soon generated crowds of tourists. Some treated the brothers like celebrities, others like freaks, or relics from a bygone era. Some of their visitors even followed them around as they harvested ferns, then stood over them as they ate, pointing, commenting, asking questions, until the two of them were worn out by the attention. But they couldn't allow themselves to indulge in the faintest touch of irritation, for fear their visitors might accuse them of temper tantrums.

Though public opinion was, on the whole, positive. As word got about, a few married and unmarried ladies made their own pilgrimages, although were little impressed. 'What a yawn,' they complained, on their return.

Eventually, even Shouyang's one notable honoured them with a visit: Lord Xiaobing. The adopted son-in-law of the maternal uncle of the ill-fated concubine

Da Ji, he had been Master of Libations under the Shang. Recognizing that the Mandate of Heaven was changing hands, he briskly surrendered to the victorious King Wu of Zhou, bringing with him fifty carts of personal goods and eight hundred slaves and retainers. As this occurred just a few days shy of the great assembly of forces at Mengjin, there was no time to reassign him to an appropriate post. Taking with him forty of his carts, and seven hundred and fifty of his slaves and retainers, he was allocated two hectares of fertile land at the foot of Mount Shouyang, and told to stay there researching trigrams. A great lover of literature, he was oppressed by the idiocy of rural life – the village was full of illiterates, completely ignorant of literary theory. And so, after ordering his servants to prepare a sedan chair, he set off in search of the two old men and some literary conversation – especially about poetry, his own genre of choice. He had already written a volume of verse himself.

But after some conversation, he got back into his chair and returned home in something of a temper. Neither of them, he thought, had anything to say about poetry. First of all, they were poor: no one who was scratching around for food all day could have time to write decent poetry. Second, they were too politically biased to cultivate the proper poetic moderation. Third, they were too opinionated to cultivate true poetic tolerance.² Worst of all, they were a bundle of intellectual and moral contradictions.

‘Every inch of land under heaven belongs to our king,’ he now decreed self-righteously. ‘And that includes the ferns!’

Boyi and Shuqi, meanwhile, were growing thinner by the day. Not because they were exhausted by socializing – their visitors had been diminishing of late. The problem was a diminishing of the supply of ferns: enormous, lengthy efforts were necessary to yield even a handful per day.

And yet it never rains but it pours: once you’re already stuck at the bottom of a well, someone’s bound to drop a boulder on your head.

One afternoon, after a particularly arduous quest for food, they were at last sitting down to a late lunch of roast fern when a young woman they had never seen before – around twenty years old, a servant in a wealthy household, by the looks of her – suddenly appeared.

‘Is that your lunch?’ she asked.

Looking up, Shuqi immediately forced a smile and nodded.

‘What on earth is it?’ she asked.

‘Fern,’ Boyi answered.

‘Why are you eating it?’

‘Because we won’t eat the grain of Zhou.’

Shuqi darted a look at Boyi the moment the words had escaped his mouth. Too

late: the woman smirked with a sharp cunning, her opening spotted.

‘Every inch of land under heaven belongs to our king,’ she recited. ‘And that includes the ferns!’

Her words seemed to stun the brothers – like a deafening thunderclap. By the time they had recovered their wits, the girl had disappeared. They did not finish the ferns, of course – they wouldn’t have got them down even if they had tried. They could hardly bear to look at them; and when they tried to push them away, their hands felt too stupidly heavy – as if they weighed hundreds of pounds.

VI

Perhaps three weeks later, a woodcutter chanced upon the dead bodies of Boyi and Shuqi, curled up into a ball in a grotto on the far side of the mountain. The bodies had not decayed: partly because of their emaciation, and partly because they clearly hadn't been long dead. Their old sheepskin robes had mysteriously disappeared. When this news reached the village, fresh parties of tourists clambered up to see, well into the evening. A few of the more interfering spectators buried them under a pile of yellow earth and even discussed erecting a stone tablet engraved with a few words, as a future draw for visitors.

But since no one in the village could write, they were obliged to turn to Lord Xiaobing for help.

And he wanted nothing to do with it.

'They were idiots,' he sniffed. 'First they ran off to the Old People's Home – but they wouldn't live a quiet life. Then they ran off to Mount Shouyang – but they insisted on writing poetry about it. And then they insisted on using it for their own ends, completely disregarding the principle of art for art's sake. Where is the lasting value of a poem like this?

We scale the western mountain to gather its ferns.

Bandits succeed bandits – virtue is unknown.

The sage emperors of antiquity are gone – where should we turn?

Death alone is our destiny!

'Where's the sincerity? Where's the tolerance? All they did was rant and rave. You can't give your readers thorns without any roses. And literary questions aside, what kind of sons were *they* to their father, abandoning their ancestral land? Then they started laying down the law to the King of Zhou, the treacherous upstarts... So no is your answer!'

Though the finer points of his disquisition were lost on the illiterate villagers, they sensed he was less than enthusiastic and let the idea lie. And so the burial of Boyi and Shuqi remained a simple affair.

But the brothers sometimes crept back into the villagers' conversation as they sat about enjoying the cool of summer nights. Some said they died of old age, others that they died of illness, others again that they were murdered by robbers for their sheepskin robes. In time, someone said they'd starved themselves to death because of what Ah-jin, the maid in Lord Xiaobing's household, had said to them. She'd told him they'd been found about a fortnight after she'd made her trip up the mountain.

Idiots are always quick to pique – maybe they went on hunger strike to make a point. And succeeded only in starving themselves to death.

Ah-jin had her admirers, a good number of them, who praised her for her wit; others, however, felt she'd been too harsh.

The lady herself, meanwhile, refused to accept that the death of Boyi and Shuqi had anything to do with her. Granted, she'd gone up the mountain to poke a bit of fun at them, but it was just a bit of fun. Granted, the old fools had flown into a temper and refused to eat any more ferns. But this had brought them a great stroke of luck.

'Heaven is kind,' she said. 'Seeing they were about to starve to death just to make a point, he told a doe to suckle them. Think of it! All they had to do was sit around all day, drinking milk delivered to their door – no need to lift a finger. But were they grateful? Not a bit. Especially not the younger one – what was he called? – the younger one, anyway; always wanting more, he was. So one day, as he was drinking the milk, he thought to himself how fat the deer was, and how delicious its meat would taste. Then he reached out for a stone – but he didn't know the magic deer could read men's minds. So she just disappeared in a puff of smoke. Heaven was so disgusted by their greed, he told the roe deer to stop coming. They deserved to starve! I had nothing to do with it – they brought it on themselves, the greedy wretches.'

Her audiences always sighed as she concluded her story – the worry lifting from their bodies. Now, if ever they thought of the brothers, they were hazy figures, squatted at the foot of a cliff, their white-bearded mouths gaping open to devour the deer.

December 1935

FORGING THE SWORDS

I

Mei Jianchi had just laid down to sleep next to his mother when the rats came out to gnaw on the lid to the cooking pot. The sound irritated him, and though hissing at them had some initial effect, after a while they began to ignore him and returned to their gnawing with renewed vigour. Raising his voice was impossible, for fear of waking his mother, who, after another day of constant toil, had fallen asleep the moment she had laid down.

Eventually, the noise subsided and sleep crept up on him, until a sudden splash had his eyes wide open again. At the same time, there came a rustling: the sound of claws scratching at pottery.

‘Ha!’ he gloated, sitting up quietly.

Stepping out of bed, he found his way to the door by moonlight, groped for the flint behind it, then lit a pine torch and held it over the water vat. As he suspected, an outsized rat had fallen inside, but the water level was so low it could have no hope of climbing out. Round and round the inside edge it went, clawing at the pottery wall.

‘Serves you right!’ he exulted, remembering how they tormented him every night, chewing on the furniture. After lodging the pine torch into a small hole in the mud wall, he delighted in the scene before him. Yet loathing also welled up in him – at those round, staring little eyes. Reaching out for a reed, he poked the animal down to the bottom of the vat. When eventually he stopped, the rat returned to the surface, resuming its original circuits. But the struggle had exhausted it: its eyes were now under water, with only its scarlet pointed nose bobbing up, rasping for breath.

He had rather taken against people with red noses of late. But the specimen currently before him suddenly aroused his pity, and he now slid the reed under the rat’s stomach. The creature clutched hold of it, rested briefly, then began clambering up. But when it emerged fully into view – with its slick black fur, oversized stomach, wormlike tail – he felt another rush of hatred. He shook the reed impatiently; the rat thumped back into the vat, where the boy now thrashed its head with his improvised weapon, to ensure it sank as fast as possible.

After the torch had been changed six times, the rat was floating in the centre of the water, motionless except for the occasional weak, upwards convulsion. Seized yet again by the pity of it, Mei Jianchi broke the reed in two and – with great difficulty – used the two pieces as pincers to lever the rat out and laid it on the floor. Initially immobile, the rat then began to breathe, and eventually to move its legs. Much later again, it rolled over, apparently preparing for the off. Astonished by its recovery, Mei Jianchi lifted his left foot then stamped down on it – without conscious thought.

A squeak, then – when he squatted down to look – a trickle of blood at the corner of its mouth. It was probably dead.

Again, he was paralysed by pity, agonized by the enormity of his act. There he squatted, staring, unable to heave himself to his feet.

‘What are you doing, Jianchi?’ his mother asked from the bed.

‘A rat...’ he briefly replied, hastily standing up and turning to face her.

‘I know. But what are you doing with it? Killing it, or saving it?’

He made no answer. Now the torch had burnt itself out, he stood silently in the darkness, his eyes slowly adjusting to the pale moonlight.

His mother sighed. ‘After midnight, you’ll be fifteen, but you’re still as weak as a child. One minute hot, cold the next: there’s no consistency in you and I don’t see you changing. Your father will have no one to avenge him, it seems.’

He gazed at his mother, now sitting up, shuddering, in the shadows of the moonlight. The infinite sorrow contained in her quiet voice chilled him to the bone. An instant later, hot blood coursed through his veins.

‘Avenge Father? He needs avenging?’ he asked nervously, advancing a few steps towards the bed.

‘Yes. And you’re the only person who can. I wanted to tell you a long time ago, but always held back, because you were too young. And now you’re a man, you still act like a boy. What am I to do? Can you be trusted with such a task – to carry it through?’

‘I can. Tell me, Mother. I’ll change.’

‘Of course. I have to tell you. And you have to change... Come over here.’

He walked up to the bed. His mother was now sitting fully upright, her eyes flashing in the moonlight.

‘Listen!’ she began solemnly. ‘Your father was celebrated as a forger of swords – the best in the empire. A long time ago, I sold his tools to buy food – that’s why there’s no trace of his old trade about the place. But he was the best of his kind; there was no one to touch him. Twenty years ago, the king’s concubine gave birth to a piece of iron – the rumour went she had fallen pregnant after embracing an iron pillar – a piece of pure-blue, transparent iron. Recognizing this for the rare treasure it was, the king decided to forge it into a sword – a sword to defend the country and protect himself, that would fell all enemies. It was your father’s misfortune to be selected for the task. After he brought the iron back home, he tempered it day and night for three whole years until it was forged into two swords.

‘I remember when he finally opened up his furnace – the terror of it! A jet of white vapour roared up, shaking the ground beneath our feet. Then it enveloped the room in a cloud that slowly glowed crimson, a halo of peach-blossom light about it. There the two swords lay, bright red in our pitch-black furnace. When your father

sprinkled well water over them, they hissed and roared, slowly turning blue. On this went for seven days and seven nights, until the swords lay, almost invisible, at the bottom of the furnace – two pure-blue, transparent icicles.

‘Your father’s eyes blazed with triumph as he took them up and wiped them off. Then a look of sorrow came over him. He placed the swords in two caskets.

‘ “The heavenly portents of the last few days have revealed all – everyone in the empire will now know the swords have been forged,” he told me softly. “Tomorrow, I must go and present them to the king. But that day will be my last. We must say goodbye for ever.”

‘I was astonished: I didn’t understand what he meant or what I should say. “But look what you’ve achieved...” I gasped uselessly.

‘ “Why should you understand?” he said. “Our king is by nature suspicious – and utterly ruthless. I have forged for him a sword that has no equal in the world – of course he will kill me, to stop me forging swords for other people that will equal, or surpass his.”

‘I wept.

‘ “Do not grieve for me. This is my destiny; your tears will change nothing. And I have long prepared for it.” His eyes flashed again as he placed one casket across my knees. “This is the male of the two swords,” he told me. “Take it. Tomorrow, I will present the female sword to the king. If I do not return, it means I have departed this world. You are five or six months pregnant, are you not? Do not waste time grieving for me: have the baby, bring him up well. When he becomes a man, give him the male sword and tell him to use it on the king’s own neck – to avenge me!” ’

‘Did Father come back?’ Mei Jianchi quickly asked.

‘No!’ she answered, with a cold stillness. ‘I asked everywhere, but there was no news. Eventually, I heard that the first blood the sword knew was that of its maker – your father. Afraid that the ghost would come back to haunt him, the king buried his head and body separately, the one at his front gate, the other in the gardens to the back.’

Mei Jianchi suddenly felt as if his entire body were a furnace, as if every hair were on fire. His fists clenched until the joints crackled in the darkness.

His mother stood up and lifted the floorboard at the head of the bed. After lighting another pine torch, she took out a hoe from behind the door and handed it to Mei Jianchi. ‘Dig!’

Though his heart was pounding, he set about his task, one light stroke of the hoe following after another, with calm precision. Around five feet down, the yellow earth began to change colour, to that of rotting wood.

‘Watch what you’re doing!’ his mother cautioned.

Bending over the hole he had just dug, Mei Jianchi carefully reached down to

draw the rotten wood aside. A coldness met his fingertip: like the touch of ice. A sword of a pure, transparent blue emerged into view. After locating the hilt, he grasped it, and drew the sword out.

Suddenly, the moon and stars outside and the pine torch inside seemed to lose their brightness next to this inexorable blue light. The sword's edges melted into the metal's cold glow – as if the thing barely existed. Looking again, Mei Jianchi now made out a blunt-looking blade, some five feet in length – as dully rounded as a leek leaf.

‘You must no longer be weak,’ his mother ordered. ‘You must take revenge – with this sword!’

‘I am no longer weak. I will take revenge – with this sword!’

‘Then I am satisfied. Wear this blue coat and carry the sword on your back – no one will notice it against the background. Your clothes I have prepared here.’ She pointed to a battered old chest behind the bed. ‘Tomorrow you must start. Forget you ever had a mother!’

Mei Jianchi took out his new coat and tried it on – it fitted perfectly. He then refolded it, wrapped up the sword in it, placed it by his pillow, and calmly lay down. Feeling that he had overcome his old weakness, he determined to act as if everything were perfectly normal – to sleep, to wake up the following morning as usual, then to set out with calm confidence to hunt down his deadly enemy.

But he could not sleep. He tossed and turned, itching to sit up. He heard his mother heaving long, soft sighs of disappointment. The first cockcrow told him a new day had arrived: that he was fifteen years old.

II

Before the sun was risen in the east, a puffy-eyed Mei Jianchi walked out of the gate without a backwards look. His blue coat over his shoulders, the blue sword on his back, he advanced in great strides towards the city. Every leaf in the fir-tree wood hung with dew drops, still enclosing the night air within. As he emerged from the forest, however, the droplets were sparkling with new dawn light. In the distance, he could just make out the crenellated outlines of the grey city wall.

He slipped into the city in between onion-carriers and vegetable-sellers. The streets were already buzzing with activity: men blankly standing about in idle groups, while from time to time pale, mostly puffy-eyed women – hair uncombed, faces unmade-up – poked their heads outside.

Mei Jianchi grasped that something important was about to happen – some major event that everyone was anticipating eagerly, but patiently.

On he went. A child suddenly ran at him, almost colliding with the tip of the sword on his back. The sweat poured off him in fear. As he turned north, approaching the royal palace, the crowds thickened into dense files, their necks craned forward, wails of women and children bubbling up in their midst. Afraid of injuring someone with his transparent sword, he dared not push his way into the throng. Feeling the surge of yet more humanity behind him, he was forced to retreat to the back, where his view was blocked by other bodies and necks.

Suddenly, everyone fell to their knees like dominoes as, far off in the distance, a pair of horses approached. Then came soldiers holding truncheons, spears, swords, bows and flags, kicking up clouds of yellow dust as they went. A great four-horse carriage followed, carrying a team of musicians, striking bells and drums, or blowing on instruments he could not name. Then another carriage, its passengers – either old, or short and stout – decked out in bright clothes, every face slick with sweat. They were succeeded by another team of cavalry, wielding swords, spears and halberds. The kneeling crowds prostrated themselves. Now Mei Jianchi saw a large, yellow-canopied carriage drive by, a corpulent individual sitting in its middle, brightly clothed, his small head fringed with a greying beard. At his waist could be glimpsed a blue sword – an exact match with the one on Mei Jianchi's back.

A feeling of intense cold was again succeeded by burning heat, as if he were on fire. Reaching over his shoulder for the hilt of his sword, he began to move forward into the gaps between the necks of the kneeling crowd.

But no more than five or six steps into his approach, he fell headlong – someone had grabbed hold of one of his feet. His fall was directly broken by a young man with a wizened face. Afraid, again, that the sword point may have wounded

someone, he scrambled quickly up again – and took two hard punches below his ribs. Undeterred, he looked back at the road. But the yellow-canopied carriage and its cavalry escort were both long past.

Everyone at the roadside clambered to their feet. The wizened young man still had Mei Jianchi firmly by the lapels. The latter had apparently crushed the former's solar plexus – the very centre of his life-force – and the victim now wanted a guarantee that his attacker would pay with his life if he died before the age of eighty. Idlers immediately gathered around to goggle at the fracas, but no one spoke out. Eventually, a few audience members began to laugh or heckle – all taking the part of the wizened young man. Mei Jianchi felt neither amusement nor anger – only vexation at the tediousness of it, at the difficulty of extricating himself. Time passed – as long as it would have taken to boil a pot of millet. Mei Jianchi's body burned with impatience, while his audience showed no interest in abandoning the spectacle.

The circle of people around him rippled apart to allow a thin, swarthy individual with black beard and eyes to push his way in. Silently, he offered Mei Jianchi a cool smile, then flicked the wizened young man in the chin and looked him hard in the eye. The young man met his gaze, slowly relaxed his grip and slipped away, followed shortly after by Mei's saviour. The spectators also duly dispersed. A few of them asked Mei Jianchi how old he was, where he lived – whether he had any sisters. He ignored them.

He now headed south. The city was so crowded, he thought to himself, that it would be easy to hurt someone by mistake; his best course was to bide his time, until the king returned, in the expansive, underpopulated area outside the southern gate – a perfect retreat in which to wait for revenge. Every conversation in the city seemed to be about the king's trip to the mountains: about his insignia, his magnificence, the unfathomable honour of having set eyes on him, the abjection of their prostrations, how richly they deserved the accolade of model subject; and so on they went, like a veritable hive of bees out on their daily swarm. At last, near the south gate, everything grew quieter.

He left the city and sat down under a large mulberry tree, taking from his bundle two steamed rolls to satisfy his complaining stomach. As he ate, he suddenly thought of his mother and his eyes prickled, but the moment passed. His surroundings grew more peaceful with every step he took from the metropolis, until he could hear even the sound of his own breathing.

The darker it got, the more uneasy he became. He squinted into the distance, but there was no sign of the king's return. One by one, villagers who had come to the city to sell vegetables returned home, empty carrying-poles across their shoulders.

Long after this trickle of humanity had disappeared into the night, the same dark man from before suddenly flashed out of the city.

‘Flee, Mei Jianchi! The king is after you!’ he hooted, like an owl.

Seized by trembling, Mei Jianchi strode off with him as if bewitched; soon, they began to run like the wind. When he stopped to catch his breath, he realized that he had reached the edge of the fir-tree wood. Far behind him lay the silver rays of the rising moon. In front, the stranger’s eyes gleamed phosphorescently in the darkness.

‘How do you know me?’ Mei Jianchi asked fearfully.

‘Ha! I’ve known you since the day you were born,’ the man’s voice said. ‘I know that you carry on your back the male sword and that you seek to avenge your father. I also know you will not succeed. You have already been informed on: your enemy has returned to the palace by the east gate and ordered your capture.’

Mei Jianchi’s heart ached.

‘So Mother was right after all,’ he murmured.

‘She knows only the half of it. She doesn’t know that I will take vengeance for you.’

‘You? You will right our wrong, O champion of justice?’

‘Don’t insult me with such language.’

‘Then, why do you take pity on a widow and a fatherless child?’

‘My child,’ he rebuked. ‘Justice, pity – once, these words were pure. Now, they are the debased capital of fiendish usurers. I know nothing of these things. All I seek is revenge on your behalf.’

‘Very well. But how is that to be had?’

‘I need only two things from you,’ said the voice below the phosphorescent pools. ‘Your sword and – your head!’

This singular demand seemed to invite suspicion of its maker, and yet Mei Jianchi discovered he was not surprised by it. For a while, he could find nothing to say.

‘Do not fear that I wish to trick you out of your life and inheritance,’ the voice continued grimly out of the darkness. ‘The decision is entirely yours. Trust me, and I will go forward on your behalf. Otherwise, I will leave well alone.’

‘But why do you want to avenge us? Did you know my father?’

‘I knew your father, just as I have always known you. But that is not my reason for coming to you tonight. Listen, ingenious child. I excel only in the taking of revenge. Your vengeance is mine; and so is his. I have no care for myself – my soul is thick with scars, inflicted by others and by my own hand; I hate myself for it.’

As the voice in the darkness fell silent, Mei Jianchi drew the blue blade out from behind him, then brought it down on his own neck. As his head tumbled on to the green moss over the ground, he handed the sword to the dark man.

Taking the sword in one hand, grasping Mei Jianchi’s hair with the other, he lifted the head up and planted two kisses on its hot, dead lips, then burst into cold, shrill laughter.

His mirth immediately scattered through the fir-tree wood. A whole wolf pack of phosphorescent eyes now flashed and surged near, accompanied by hungry panting. The first mouthfuls ripped apart Mei Jianchi's coat; the second devoured his flesh and every last drop of blood, until only a faint crunching of bones was left.

Now, the great wolf at the front of the pack rushed at the dark man. With one flourish of the blue sword, the wolf's head lay on the moss at his feet, before the rest of the pack. The first mouthfuls ripped apart the skin; the second devoured its flesh and every last drop of blood, until only a faint crunching of bones was left.

The man wrapped Mei Jianchi's head in the remains of the blue coat, placed it – along with the sword – on his back, turned around and strode off through the night to the capital.

The wolves paused, shoulders hunched, tongues lolling, following his swinging gait with their burning green eyes.

And as he walked, he sang, his voice shrilling through the wood:

‘Ha! Sing hey for love, for love sing hey!
Love the sword, with death you pay.
In this world, we walk alone,
No longer he who watched the throne.
An eye for an eye, both choose death.
A man has taken his last breath.
Sing hey for love, for love sing hey!
Love the sword, with death you pay.’

III

His pleasure-trip about the mountains had brought the king no pleasure. Even worse, the depressing intelligence of an assassin had reached his ears in the middle of it, bringing him back to the capital. He was in a vile mood all that night – complaining even that his ninth concubine's hair was not as beautiful as it had been the day before. It took over seventy captivating wriggles from the lady in question – perched all the while on his knee – to soothe the frown of displeasure from the royal brow.

But when the king got up the following afternoon, his low spirits were still with him. After breaking his fast, he was furious again.

‘I am so bored!’ he roared, yawning.

No one knew what to do with him, from the queen down to the court jester. He was long weary of his elderly ministers' sermons, of his stout, japing dwarfs; recently, he had bored even of his extraordinary acrobats – tightrope-walkers, pole-climbers, jugglers, handstanders, sword-swallowers, fire-eaters, and so on. His frequent rages usually climaxed in him reaching for his blue sword and dispatching a few unfortunates for the most minor of transgressions.

Two young eunuchs had just returned to the throne room from an idle wander beyond the palace. Sensing imminent peril from the grim set to the courtiers' faces, the one whitened with fear, while the other trotted merrily up to the king as if seized by the most wonderful inspiration.

‘Your slave,’ he prostrated himself, ‘begs to report he has just met a stranger, with the strangest of arts, who may be able to divert Your Majesty.’

‘What?’ the king said. (He had always been given to monosyllabic answers.)

‘A thin, dark man – the image of a beggar. Dressed all in blue, carrying on his back a round blue bundle, singing a song of tall tales. When asked, he says he can perform tricks of a like the world has never seen – tricks that can lighten the blackest of moods, and bring peace to the realm. Though everyone begged him to perform, he refused. He said he needs a golden dragon and a golden cauldron.’

‘A golden dragon? He must mean me, the king. A golden cauldron, that I have, too.’

‘My humble thoughts precisely.’

‘Bring him in!’

Before the words were out, four soldiers rushed out on the eunuch's heels. Smiles rippled through the room – from the queen down to the court jester. A show of magic, they hoped, would dispel the king's gloom, restoring peace to the realm. And were the trick not to come off, only the beggar would suffer the consequences.

All they had to do was survive until he was brought in.

Soon enough, six people approached the golden throne: the eunuch at their head, the four soldiers at the rear, the dark man sandwiched between. Everyone saw, at close quarters, that he was indeed dressed in blue; that his beard, eyebrows and hair were black; that he was so thin his cheekbones, eye sockets and brow bone jutted out. When he knelt, then prostrated himself, they all noted a small, round bundle on his back, wrapped in blue cloth and embellished in dark red.

‘Speak!’ the king said irritably. Now he had seen the beggar’s simple appearance, he doubted he would have any great tricks to astonish the world with.

‘My dishonourable name is Yan Zhi’ao, of the village of Wenwen. As a child, I was taught no profession. Later in life, I encountered a master conjuror who taught me to perform magic with a child’s head. But the performance requires more than its conjuror: it needs a golden cauldron filled with water, heated with charcoal and set before a king. Within, I will place the child’s head, and once the water begins to bubble, the head will rise to the surface and entertain you with the most extraordinary songs and dances. Its tricks can lighten the blackest of moods, and bring peace to the realm.’

‘Begin!’ the king ordered.

A golden cauldron, of a size normally used for boiling oxen, was promptly set up in front of the throne and filled with water. Charcoal was piled up below and the fire was lit. Standing to one side, the dark man waited until the charcoal had turned red then took down his bundle and opened it. With both hands, he held aloft a child’s head: delicate eyebrows arched over elongated eyes, scarlet lips smilingly pulled back to reveal bright white teeth, hair wild, like a cloud of blue smoke. After walking around in a circle, holding the head up all the while, the dark man stretched his arms out over the mouth of the cauldron, his lips moving to say something no one caught. His hands opened out and released the head into the water. Five feet of boiling spray surged up; then all fell quiet.

For some time, nothing happened. First to lose patience was the king, followed by the queen, the concubines, the ministers and the eunuchs. Noticing the dwarfs smirking, the king decided he had been taken for a fool and looked to his guards.

But at the very instant the king thought to order them to hurl the villainous trickster into the cauldron and boil him to death, the water began to bubble and the flames to flare up, painting the dark man in the faint, glowing red of smelted iron. As the king turned back to the performance, the stranger lifted both hands up to the ceiling and – staring blankly into space – began dancing and shrilling a curious song.

‘Sing hey for love, for love sing hey!’

In love, in blood, we all must pay.
One man laughs against the flood,
The king lets loose a sea of blood.
I but a droplet or a stream.
Yet I love this head: of blood I dream.
Sing hey for blood, and let it flow!
Alas, alack, and woe, and woe!’

The water began to surge with the rhythm of the song, into waves pointed at their crest, broad at their base, swirling like miniature mountains up to the surface of the water, then back down to its depths. The head bobbed up and down, turning circles, somersaulting; the audience could just make out the happy smile on its face – as if it were enjoying the exercise. Another while later, it suddenly began swimming against the current, still spinning round as it crossed back and forth. The water began spraying out, bringing showers of hot rain down on the court. A dwarf suddenly yelped in pain, rubbing his scalded nose.

When the dark man finally stopped singing, the head, too, paused in the centre of the water – its expression growing more solemn – and faced the king on his throne. Perhaps a dozen instants later, the head began to shudder, then to bob up and down a little faster, still maintaining its poise. After three bobbing circuits around the cauldron, its eyes suddenly flew open – the irises shining with an eerie brightness – and its mouth launched into song.

‘The king’s munificence is great,
Superb in war, supreme in fate.
The world has limits; not so His Grace.
What fortune brings us face to face?
The blue sword bright won’t be forgot
In the royal sight, how strange my lot.
Sad my lot, in the royal sight,
Return to me, my blue sword bright.’

Suddenly perching on the crest of a wave, the head turned a few more somersaults then bobbed up and down again, darting artful glances to left and to right, and still singing:

‘Alas, alack, and woe, and woe!
Alas, poor me, my love lies low.
My love is gone and bloody my head,
Easily, I took one head,

You, my love, left thousands dead...'

It now sank back and failed to re-emerge, the remaining words of the song drowning at the bottom of the cauldron. Imitating the weakness of the singing voice, the simmering water, too, gradually subsided, like an ebbing tide, until there was nothing to be seen – from a distance – below the mouth of the vessel.

'What's happening?' snapped the king, after a pause.

'Great king,' offered the dark man, half-kneeling, 'the head is now engaged in the most extraordinary part of the performance – the Dance of Union – at the bottom of the cauldron. If you wish to see it, you must come closer. I fear my own humble arts are too inadequate to draw it to the surface – the dance must be performed at the base of the cauldron.'

The king strode down the golden steps and, undaunted by the fierce heat, craned his head over the top of the cauldron. All he saw was the surface of the water, calm as a mirror, and the head lying, face up, in its centre, both eyes fixed on his face. When the king's gaze met its own, it suddenly flashed a merry smile. The smile made the king feel they had met before – though he couldn't think where. In this instant of bewildered recognition, the dark man lifted the blue sword from behind his back and, with one clean stroke, brought it down on the king's nape. The royal head fell, with a thump, into the cauldron.

When enemies meet, their responses are unusually keen – and especially at such close quarters. The moment the king's head hit the water, Mei Jianchi's head immediately rose up and bit it ferociously on the ear. The cauldron of water frothed noisily, as the two heads locked in a deadly struggle. After some twenty rounds, the king's head had taken five wounds, to Mei Jianchi's seven. For the king was sly, always finding ways to wind his way behind his enemy's head. One careless miscalculation by Mei Jianchi, and the king had him by the nape – preventing him from spinning back round. The king sank his teeth into his opponent, gnawing his way in. The boy's cries shrilled around the throne room.

Everyone, from the queen down to the court jester, was frozen with terror, until the boy's yelps brought them back to life – as if communicating to them an infinitely dark sorrow. But even as their skin prickled with horror, they tingled also with a secret delight, and opened their eyes wider, as if waiting for something else yet.

Alarmed but not discomposed by the direction the fight was taking, the dark man casually stretched out the arm – resembling a withered branch – holding the sword and extended his neck over the cauldron, as if gazing into its base. With a neat slice of the blue blade, his own head tumbled into the cauldron, generating snow-white blossoms of spray.

The moment it hit the water, his head made for the king and took an enormous bite

at his nose, almost taking the whole thing off. Shouting with pain, the king opened his mouth, and Mei Jianchi's head seized the opportunity to escape, spun round and clamped down on the king's jaw. On they hung, yanking the head to and fro between them, giving the king's mouth no opportunity to hold a bite. Then they fell frenziedly upon him, like starving hens pecking at rice, mauling him until his entire face was a scaly, ruptured mess. In time, he stopped thrashing about the cauldron and merely floated, moaning, until even that lay beyond him. Finally, he breathed his last.

Slowly closing their own mouths, the dark man and Mei Jianchi let the king's head alone and swam a circuit around the cauldron to check whether he truly was dead, or just playing dead. When they were satisfied that the king's head was indeed finished, they locked glances, smiled, then closed their eyes, faced upwards and sank to the bottom of the cauldron.

IV

The smoke dispersed and the fire burnt out; the water stopped bubbling. The extraordinary quiet brought the courtiers back to their senses. A first, solitary cry of horror was echoed by the rest of the room. The moment one of them moved towards the golden cauldron, everyone else frantically followed. Those jostled to the back caught only glimpses through the gaps between other people's necks.

The steam was still scorching. The surface of the water lay flat as a mirror, topped by a layer of grease in which a vast collective of faces was reflected – the queen, concubines, guards, aged ministers, dwarfs, eunuchs, and so on.

‘Oh, heavens! Our king's head is still in there!’ the king's sixth concubine suddenly sobbed hysterically.

Everyone – from the queen down to the court jester – scattered, rushing uselessly about in panicked circles. Only the sharpest of the aged ministers stepped forward. He rested his hands on the edge of the cauldron, then winced in pain, whipping them back to his mouth, where he blew energetically on them.

After calm had returned, everyone reconvened outside the palace to discuss the best way of extracting the head. In about the time it would take to cook three pots of millet, a decision was reached: all the sieves from the royal kitchens would be sent for, and the guards ordered to fish it out.

The required implements – sieves, colanders, golden dishes and dishcloths – were quickly assembled and laid out by the cauldron. Rolling up their sleeves, the guards set respectfully about their task – some with sieves, some with colanders. Metal clinked on metal, churning the water. After this had gone on some while, the face of one of the guards was overcome by an expression of tremendous solemnity. He carefully lifted his sieve to reveal – pearl drops of water scattering from it – the white skull held within. The assembled company chorused gasps of astonishment, as the skull was dropped into a golden dish.

‘Our great king!’ the queen, concubines, ministers, eunuchs, and so on, wailed. Soon, however, the sobbing died away, when another guard fished out a second, identical skull.

Eyes blurry with tears, they watched as the guards continued fishing, their faces running with sweat. They went on to produce a tangled mass of white and black hair, together with another few ladlefuls of much shorter bristles – of black and white beard hairs, it would seem. Followed by a third skull. Then three hairpins.

When only a clear broth was left in the cauldron, they set down their sieves and colanders, and the three categories of objects – skulls, hairs, hairpins – were sorted between three golden dishes.

‘Our great king only had one head. So which is his?’ the ninth concubine asked anxiously.

‘That would seem to be the difficulty...’the venerable ministers muttered, exchanging glances.

‘If only the skin and flesh hadn’t been boiled away,’ observed a dwarf, kneeling down, ‘we’d easily work out whose was whose.’

There was, it seemed, no alternative but to subject the skulls to careful examination. And yet they were all largely identical in colour and size – they couldn’t even differentiate the boy’s. The queen said that the king had had a scar on his right temple from a fall he had taken as a prince; perhaps it would have left a trace on his skull. Just as everyone was rejoicing after one of the dwarves had found such a mark on one of the skulls, another dwarf noted a similar one on a slightly more yellowed skull.

‘I know!’ said the third concubine triumphantly. ‘Our great king had a very high-bridged nose.’

The eunuchs immediately set to researching the respective height of the noses before them; though one of them did indeed seem rather high, the difference with the other two was far from significant. And sadly, there was no mark to the right temple.

‘Besides,’ the aged ministers said to the eunuchs, ‘was the back of our great king’s head so pointed?’

‘We were too humble ever to take a proper look.’

The queen and the concubines now set to remembering; but while some said it had been steeply domed, others claimed the opposite. The king’s hairdressing eunuch would not commit himself.

A great council of princes and ministers was gathered that very night, in an effort to decide which was the king’s head, but the outcome remained as indeterminate as ever. Even the hair posed problems of identification. The white hair, of course, belonged to the king; but as his hair had been only greying, it was very hard to attribute the black. After discussions that went deep into the night, the elimination of even a few strands of red beard was vehemently resisted by the ninth concubine. She swore she had seen the occasional brown hair in the king’s beard – so how could it be proven there was no red, either? The red was reunited with the other colours, and the case reopened.

As the night edged towards dawn, there was still an absence of agreement. The debates were now interspersed by yawns, and when the second cockcrow was heard, the most discreet and appropriate course of action was finally decided upon: to bury the three heads together with the king’s body in a single golden coffin.

By the day of the funeral, seven days later, the entire city was alive with

anticipation. The subjects of the realm rushed from near and far to witness the king's grand exit. From first light, every street was packed with men, with women, with tables of offerings squeezed in between them. Later on that morning, cavalry trotted slowly through to clear the way, followed, after another while, by the royal insignia (banners, truncheons, spears, bows, halberds, and so on), then by four carriages of drums and wind instruments. Behind, the king's yellow-canopied carriage bumped along, the golden coffin – containing its three heads and one body – mounted on top.

The tables of offerings now emerged from among the kneeling ranks of the crowds. A few of the empire's more zealously loyal subjects wept with rage that the souls of two regicides would enjoy the same memorial sacrifices as their king; but it was not to be helped.

Then came the carriages of the queen and the host of concubines, weeping as they gazed at the assembled crowds, and the assembled crowds gazed back at them. After them came the ministers, eunuchs, dwarfs, and so on, their faces draped with expressions of woe, as they jostled their way chaotically forward, ignored by their audience.

October 1926

LEAVING THE PASS

Laozi¹ sat, still as a block of wood.

‘It’s Confucius again, master!’ his student Gengsang Chu whispered, bursting impatiently into the room.

‘Ask him in.’

‘Do I find you well, master?’ Confucius said, saluting him reverently.

‘Same as ever,’ Laozi replied. ‘And you? Read all the books in our little collection yet?’

‘Yes. But...’ Confucius’s face soured with an unusual irritation. ‘It’s taken time, but I’ve mastered all six of the classics – The Books of Poetry, History, Rites, Music and Changes, and the Annals of Spring and Autumn. I’ve visited seventy-two princes – but not one would take my advice. To be understood is hard indeed. Or is it the Way that is hard to explain?’

‘You were lucky,’ Laozi replied, ‘not to encounter a ruler of real talent. The six classics are the remains of the former kings. What use are they for the future? Your words are like a path; and a path is tramped out by sandals – but are they the same thing?’ He paused. ‘White herons conceive through eye contact; insects conceive through their calls; hermaphrodites conceive spontaneously, both sexes contained within one body. Nature is unchangeable; fate is unalterable; time is unstoppable; the Way is unblockable. Once the Way is within your grasp, all will go your way. Without it, you are lost.’

As if dazed by a direct blow to the head, Confucius sat down, dejectedly inert – like a block of wood.

After perhaps eight minutes, he heaved a long sigh, then got up to say goodbye, politely thanking Laozi – as always – for his instruction.

Making no effort to keep him, Laozi rose to his feet and, leaning on his stick,

escorted him out to the library's main gate.

'Leaving so soon?' he muttered mechanically, waiting until Confucius was about to get back into his carriage. 'Won't you stay for tea...?'

Mumbling a refusal, Confucius got into his carriage and cupped his hands deferentially in farewell, leaning against the horizontal bar across the vehicle. With a flick of the whip and a cry of 'gee-up' from his disciple Ran You, the carriage rumbled into motion. When it was some dozen paces from the main gate, Laozi went back inside.

'You seem in good spirits today, master.' Gengsang Chu returned to stand by Laozi's side again, his hands hanging respectfully at his sides, once he had seen his teacher sit down. 'Unusually talkative.'

Laozi sighed. 'You are right,' he replied mournfully. 'I did indeed say too much.' He suddenly seemed to remember something. 'Confucius brought a gift of a wild goose, did he not? Was it dried and cured? Steam it for yourself. I don't have the teeth for it.'

After Gengsang Chu left him, Laozi peacefully closed his eyes. Quiet reigned in the library, disturbed only by the clatter of bamboo poles against the eaves of the house – Gengsang Chu taking the goose down.

Three months passed. Laozi went on sitting, still as a block of wood.

'It's Confucius, master!' his student Gengsang Chu entered and informed him in a surprised whisper. 'We've not seen him for a while, have we? I wonder what he's come about.'

'Ask him in.' The same sparing reply as always from Laozi.

'Do I find you well, master?' Confucius said, saluting him reverently.

'As ever,' Laozi answered. 'It's been a while. You have been burying yourself in books, no doubt?'

'Dabbling, merely dabbling,' Confucius said modestly. 'But I have stayed at home, thinking. And I seem to have clarified one point: crows and magpies touch beaks; fish exchange saliva; the sphinx metamorphoses; an older child will cry when his mother is pregnant again. If I do not embrace change myself, how will I succeed in changing others?'

'Exactly so!' Laozi said. 'You are enlightened.'

Both fell silent as two blocks of wood.

After perhaps eight minutes, Confucius heaved a long sigh, then got up to say goodbye, politely thanking Laozi – as always – for his instruction.

Making no effort to keep him, Laozi rose to his feet and, leaning on his stick, escorted him out to the library's main gate.

'Leaving so soon?' he muttered mechanically, waiting until Confucius was about

to get back into his carriage. ‘Won’t you stay for tea...?’

Mumbling a refusal, Confucius got into his carriage and cupped his hands deferentially in farewell, leaning against the horizontal bar across the vehicle. With a flick of the whip and a cry of ‘gee-up’ from his disciple Ran You, the carriage rumbled into motion. When it was some dozen paces from the main gate, Laozi went back inside.

‘You seem in low spirits today, master.’ Gengsang Chu returned to stand by Laozi’s side, his hands hanging respectfully by his sides, once he had seen his teacher sit down. ‘Unusually withdrawn.’

Laozi sighed. ‘You are right,’ he replied mournfully. ‘You don’t understand: I must leave this place.’

‘Whatever for?’ Gengsang Chu sounded astonished.

‘Confucius understands me. And as he knows that only I can see through him, he will never relax. If I don’t go first, there will be trouble.’

‘But do you not share the same Way? Why should you go?’

‘No,’ Laozi waved his hands in disagreement. ‘We are different. Imagine we have the same pair of shoes: I walk mine into the desert of the north-west; he wears his to court.’

‘But you are his teacher!’

‘What touching naivety,’ Laozi smiled, ‘after all these years with me. Nature is unchangeable; fate is unalterable. You and Confucius are very different: he will never come back and never call me teacher again. From now on, he will call me an old fool, and conspire against me.’

‘Really? But then you are never wrong about people, master.’

‘That is not true. I often used to misjudge them.’

‘Then,’ Gengsang Chu gave the matter more thought, ‘we’ll stand and fight.’

Laozi smiled again, revealing his gums. ‘Do I have any teeth left?’ he asked.

‘No.’

‘Do I still have a tongue?’

‘Yes.’

‘My point being?’

‘The hard falls away, while the soft survives, master?’

‘Well said. Tidy up here, then go home to your wife. But before you go, give my black ox a brush-down, and air the saddle and blanket. I leave at dawn tomorrow.’

Laozi avoided the main, direct road to the Hangu Pass – the gateway to the north-west. Instead, he turned his ox down a fork in the road, riding him slowly around the edge of the city. His plan was to scale the wall: it was not too high and he was sure he would manage to scramble over if he stood on the animal’s back. The only

difficulty lay in getting the ox out also. A crane would have levered it out, but neither of the great engineers of ancient China, Lu Ban or Mozi, had yet been born; and such contraptions lay far beyond his own imaginative capabilities. His own philosophy, in sum, was unable to furnish him a solution.

Unbeknownst to him, as he had taken the fork he had been spotted by a scout, who immediately reported his presence to the warden in charge of the pass. Before he was twenty yards into his detour, a horse-mounted party galloped up from behind, led by the scout, with the warden, Xi, four policemen and two customs officers following.

‘Halt!’ came the cry.

Smartly reining in his black ox, Laozi held still as a block of wood.

‘Well, well!’ the warden exclaimed, galloping closer, then rolling off his horse to cup his hands in salutation. ‘If it isn’t Laozi, the librarian! This is a pleasant surprise.’

Laozi, too, scrambled off his ox. ‘I have the most terrible memory...’ he mumbled, squinting at his interlocutor.

‘Of course – of course you will have forgotten me, master. My name is Xi, I’m the warden of the pass. I came to see you once, when I visited the library to consult *The Quintessence of Taxation*.’

During this speech, the customs officials had turned over the ox’s saddle and blanket. One made a hole with a sharp stick, and wiggled an exploratory finger inside. He then walked off, scowling, without a word.

‘Are you taking a turn about the walls?’ Xi asked.

‘No. I was thinking of heading out, for a little fresh air.’

‘Excellent! Excellent! Healthy lifestyles are all the rage at the moment – nothing more important. But this is such a rare pleasure – you must rest at our lodge for a few days, and share with us a few pearls of your wisdom.’

Before Laozi was able to reply, the four policemen gathered round and lifted him back on to the ox. With a jab from the customs official’s stick, the ox flicked up its tail and galloped off towards the pass.

Once they had arrived, his hosts immediately opened the main hall to receive him – the central room in the gate-tower, overlooking loess plains that levelled infinitely off to the horizon, beneath a vast, blue sky; the air was indeed excellently clear and sharp. The huge fortress surmounted a steep slope; just beyond the gate, a cart track wound between the pass’s impregnable dirt precipices – so narrow it seemed a mere ball of mud would block it.

After hot water and cornbread had been passed around and Laozi left to rest a while, Xi proposed that his lecture begin. Aware from the outset that resistance would be futile, Laozi readily assented. After a certain amount of hustle and bustle,

an audience slowly filled the room: the eight who had escorted him up to the lodge, plus four more policemen, two more customs officers, five more scouts, a secretary, an accountant and a cook. Some brought brushes, knives and wooden slips, ready to take notes.

In the middle of them all sat Laozi, still as a block of wood. After a long silence, he cleared his throat a few times, and the lips within his white beard began slowly moving. Everyone held their breath and leant in to listen.

‘The Way that can be spoken, is not the eternal Way; the name that can be named, is not the eternal name. Heaven and earth began from namelessness; that which is named is the mother of all creatures...’²

Everyone exchanged glances; no one wrote anything down.

‘Only he that has rid himself of desire will see the secret essences,’ Laozi went on, ‘while he that still has desire will see their results. Though both spring from the same mould, they take different names. This sameness of mould is the Mystery; or – the Darker than Mystery. It is the gateway to the secret essences...’

Expressions of perplexed discontent rippled about the audience. A great yawn issued forth from the mouth of one of the customs officers, while the secretary surrendered to a nap, his knife, brush and wooden slips clattering out of his hands on to the mat.

Apparently unperturbed by his reception, or perhaps even encouraged by it, Laozi responded by going on in even greater detail. His lack of teeth, his poor enunciation, and his Shaanxi accent with its Hunan lilt – which mixed his l’s with his n’s, and prefaced everything with an ‘errr’ – ensured no one understood a thing he said. Time crept on, his audience suffering unusual torments all the while.

For the sake of appearances, his audience did not attempt to leave, but as the lecture dragged on, postures slumped, with each listener increasingly lost in his own thoughts. When Laozi finished with ‘The Way of the sage is to act without striving’, no one moved. After a pause, Laozi decided to add one more aperçu:

‘The end.’

At last, everyone awoke – as if from the longest dream of their lives. Even though, having lost all sensation in their legs after remaining seated for so long, they were powerless to move, they still felt a sense of joyful release.

Laozi was escorted to one of the side-rooms, and entreated to rest a while. There, he drank a few mouthfuls of hot water, then sat, still as a block of wood.

In the other rooms, animated conferences were ongoing. Soon enough, four representatives went in to see Laozi, to deliver the following message: because he had talked too fast, and his pronunciation was not what you might call received, no one had managed to take any notes. As a result, there was a lamentable lack of a written record of his talk – could he leave any lecture notes?

‘Arr coodn’t anderstind a worrrrd he soud,’ the accountant complained, in an accent that leaned now to the north, now to the south.

‘Whoo deen’t ya gust writt it orl eet yoorsel?’ tried the secretary, mangling his suggestion with thick south-eastern vowels and consonants. ‘Sar ya want huf woosted ya broth.’

Although Laozi struggled to make out what they were saying, from the fact that the other two were laying out a brush, knife and wooden slips before him, he supposed that they wanted him to write his lecture down. Aware, again, that resistance was futile, he readily agreed, but said he would not start until tomorrow – it being too late to begin today.

Well pleased with this outcome, the envoys retreated.

The next morning, the sky was overcast. Although uneasy at heart, Laozi set promptly about his task, because he was anxious to leave – and there would be no leaving until he had produced his transcript. The sight of the pile of wooden slips before him made him even more uneasy.

He sat stoically down and began writing. Remembering what he had said the day before, he gave it some further thought, then wrote a sentence down. Glasses were still some way off invention, and the labour cost his eyes – cloudy with old age – no little effort. Through a day and a half, he wrote, squinting fiercely all the way and breaking only to drink hot water and eat bread – at the end of which he had produced a text of no more than five thousand characters.

‘That should get me out of here,’ he thought.

He then threaded the wooden slips on to string, making two volumes in all, and – leaning on his walking stick – made his way over to the warden’s office to hand over his manuscript and announce his imminent departure.

The delighted warden thanked him profusely and tried his best to keep him a little longer. Seeing that Laozi was not to be dissuaded, however, he reluctantly agreed and ordered the policemen to re-saddle his guest’s black ox. Taking a packet of salt, and one of sesame, together with fifteen bread rolls from his own shelves, the warden placed them all in a white cloth bag that he had confiscated at some previous juncture, and presented them to Laozi as provisions for his journey. He then clarified that this was a special bonus rate for elderly writers. For younger writers, the base rate was ten rolls.

After thanking him repeatedly, Laozi took the bag and led his ox out to the pass with the usual retinue. The warden strenuously urged him to mount the ox, which, after some demurring, he finally did. Having said his goodbyes, he turned the ox’s head and set off slowly down the great, sloping highway to the West.³

Everyone watched from the entrance to the pass as the animal quickly gathered speed. For the first twenty or thirty feet, no one had any trouble making out Laozi’s

white hair, yellow gown, black ox and white bag. Beyond that, clouds of grey dust began to blanket man and ox, until all had been swallowed up in waves of powdery yellow.

Intensely relieved, everyone went back inside. Stretching out after the strain of it all, gleefully rubbing their hands at the prospect of reviewing Laozi's precious transcript, a crowd of them followed the warden back to his office.

'So this is it, is it?' the accountant picked up one set of wooden slips and looked through it. 'Nice clear handwriting. I'm sure we'll manage to flog it to someone.'

' "The Way that can be spoken, is not the eternal Way," ' intoned the secretary, glancing down the first slip. 'Same boring old rubbish. Gives me a headache just reading it.'

'Sleep's the only cure for that,' said the accountant, setting another wooden slip down.

The secretary laughed. 'I couldn't keep my eyes open. I was expecting a bit of kiss-and-tell, something about his love affairs. I'd never have sat through that lecture if I'd known how boring he was going to be.'

'Your mistake, then,' the warden smiled. 'He's never had a love affair in his life.'

'How do you know?' the secretary asked, surprised.

'If you hadn't dozed off, you'd have heard him say "everything can be done by doing nothing". He's as ambitious as a prince, but as weak as a pauper – since he thinks he can do anything, he ends up doing nothing. If he fell for one person, he'd have to fall for everyone. How could he fall in love? How would he dare? Look at you, now – making eyes at every girl you see, whether she's beautiful as the day itself, or ugly as sin. If you ever get married, you'll have to rein yourself in a bit – take a leaf out of our accountant's book here.'

A wind had sprung up; everyone felt the chill.

'Where was the old man going? What for?' The secretary took the opportunity to change the subject.

'He said he was going into the desert,' the warden said scornfully. 'Hmph – we'll see how far he gets. Not much to eat out there – or drink. I reckon his stomach'll bring him back soon enough.'

'We'll get him to write us another book, then,' the accountant cheered up. 'Though this one cost us too much bread. Next time, we should say we're concentrating on encouraging first-time writers. Five rolls should be quite enough for two volumes.'

'We'll see. He might make a fuss.'

'Not if he's hungry he won't.'

'My worry is no one will want to read this,' the secretary gestured at the transcript. 'We might not even get five rolls back on it. I mean, he seems to be

saying that if our warden wants to become a great man, he should throw in his job and do nothing all day.'

'I'm not worried,' the accountant replied. 'Plenty of mugs out there who'll read it. Retired wardens, or hermits waiting to become wardens.'

The wind sprang up again, darkening the sky with yellow dust. The warden glanced out of the door and noticed a crowd of policemen and scouts standing idly about, listening to them chatting.

'What the hell are you doing?' he roared at them. 'It's dusk! The city walls are crawling with smugglers! Get out on patrol!'

The loiterers disappeared. Those inside the room also drew their conversation to a close, and the accountant and secretary walked out. After dusting his table with his sleeve, the warden placed the two sets of slips on the shelf piled with confiscated goods – salt, sesame, cloth, beans, bread, and so on.

December 1935

ANTI-AGGRESSION

I

It took Gongsun Gao, Zixia's disciple, several attempts to track Mozi¹ down, since he was never at home. Eventually, on Gongsun's fourth or fifth visit, they coincided at the gate – Gongsun Gao arriving as Mozi returned. They went inside together.

After a brief exchange of pleasantries, the visitor gazed down at the holes in the mat.

'So it is a policy of anti-aggression that you propose, master?' he inquired politely.

'Just so,' replied Mozi.

'Then you are saying – a man of honour should not fight?'

'Precisely that.'

'But every creature fights – pigs, dogs... and surely men, too...'

'You Confucians – you waffle on about the sage emperors, but you take life lessons from pigs and dogs. How pathetic you all are.' Mozi now stood up and strode off to the kitchen. 'You don't understand me.'

Heading straight out to the well by the back door, he wound the windlass and drew half a pitcher of well water. After some dozen mouthfuls, he placed the earthenware urn back down on the ground, wiped his mouth and gazed towards a corner of the garden.

'Ah-lian!' he shouted. 'What are you doing back?'

Already trotting over in his teacher's direction, Ah-lian drew to a halt in front of him, his arms respectfully at his sides.

'I'd had enough, master,' he told him, rather indignantly. 'You can't trust a thing they say. They promised me a thousand basins of corn, then gave me only five hundred. I had to leave.'

'Would you have left if they'd given you more than a thousand basins?'

'No.'

'So it's not that you don't trust them – it's because they were short-changing you.'

Mozi raced back into the kitchen.

'Geng Zhuzi!' he shouted. 'Mix me some cornmeal!'

The disciple in question, a vigorous-looking young man, now emerged from the hall.

'About ten days' worth, master?'

'That should do,' answered Mozi. 'Has Gongsun Gao left?'

'Yes,' Geng Zhuzi smiled. 'In a proper fury. He said we were like animals – preaching universal love instead of honouring our fathers.'

Mozi also smiled.

‘Are you going to Chu,² master?’

‘Indeed. So you’ve heard, too?’ While Geng Zhuzi added water to the cornmeal, Mozi lit a fire of dry branches with a flint and some wormwood, to bring the water to a simmer. ‘Remember Gongshu Ban³ – our old countryman?’ he meditated, eyeing the flame. ‘Always making trouble – too clever for his own good. With his grapnels and pikes, and his teaching the King of Chu to fight Yue.⁴ As if that wasn’t enough. Now he’s up to his old tricks again, with siege ladders – encouraging the King of Chu to attack Song.⁵ Song’s tiny – it won’t stand a chance. I’m going to try to put an end to his mischief.’

When Geng Zhuzi had placed the cornmeal dough in the steamer, Mozi went back to his own room, where he rummaged from out of a cupboard a handful of dried, salted pigweed and a broken copper knife, and from somewhere else a tattered old rag. Once Geng Zhuzi brought over the steamed cornbread, Mozi wrapped the lot up in a bundle. He packed no change of clothes or towel for washing his face. Tightening his leather belt, he went to the entrance hall, put on his straw sandals, placed his bundle on his back and walked out without a backwards glance, his knapsack still billowing steam.

‘When should we expect you back, master?’ Geng Zhuzi shouted from the house.

‘Not for at least three weeks,’ Mozi replied, walking on.

II

By the time Mozi crossed into Song, the laces on his straw sandals had broken three, perhaps four times, and the soles of his feet were burning. Pausing to examine them, he discovered a large hole in the bottom of his sandal, and calluses and blisters all over the soles of his feet. He walked on, ignoring the pain, looking about him as he went. Though there were plenty of people around, the landscape had been slower to recover, and still bore the scars of years of flooding and war. In the three days it took him to reach the capital, he didn't see a single decent house, tree or patch of fertile land – or indeed anyone with much life to him.

The city wall, too, was looking distinctly run-down. In a few places, it had been patched with new stone, and piles of mud rose up by the moat, as if some dredging work had been carried out. Right now, though, the only people in sight were a few idlers, sitting by the side of the moat and fishing, it seemed.

'Have they heard?' Mozi wondered. Examining their faces more carefully, he recognized none of his own disciples.

Planning to cross the city, he entered by the northern gate and headed south along the main thoroughfare. The place was sunk in a bleak quiet: all the shop windows were full of sale notices, but empty of either goods or customers. A fine, claggy yellow dust lay mounded over the roads.

'Who would bother to attack a place like this?' Mozi thought.

On he went, greeted only by the signs of poverty and weakness. Maybe they were too used to attacks to be surprised by any news they might have had of the imminent Chu assault. As they had nothing – neither food nor clothes – except their lives left to them, no one thought of running away. Finally, when the watchtower of the southern pass came into view, he glimpsed around a dozen people gathered on a street corner, apparently listening to a storyteller.

'We'll show them what the people of Song are made of!' the man was shouting, as he flung his hands about. 'We'll fight to the death!'

Mozi recognized the voice: his student Cao Gongzi.

He hurried out through the southern gate, without pushing his way into the crowd to greet him. On he walked, for another day and through half a night. After a few hours' sleep under the eaves of a farmhouse, he rose at dawn and returned to the road. His straw sandals, by this point, had disintegrated impractically. As his knapsack was still in service carrying cornmeal loaves, he was forced to tear a strip off his robe to bandage his feet.

But the cloth was too thin to offer much protection against the bumpy country roads, and walking became even more painful. That afternoon, he sat at the foot of a

small locust tree to open his bundle for some lunch and rest his feet. Far off in the distance, a tall man approached, pushing a small but heavy cart. When he drew near, the man stopped in front of Mozi.

‘Master,’ he panted, wiping the sweat from his face with an edge of his robe.

‘Is that sand?’ Mozi asked, recognizing his student Guan Qian’ao.

‘Yes – against the siege ladders.’

‘What other preparations are being made?’

‘We’ve raised some hemp, some ashes, a bit of iron. But it’s not easy: those who still have things aren’t willing to give them up, and those who are don’t have anything to give. A lot of hot air blowing about...’

‘I heard Cao Gongzi on his soapbox yesterday, shouting about “what Song’s made of” and “fighting to the death”. You can tell him from me that he needs to drop his abstractions. Dying is all right in its way – but it’s not the easiest thing in the world; especially if you want to do some good by it.’

‘He’s not so easy to get hold of,’ Guan Qian’ao sadly replied. ‘The last two years, since he started working for the government, he’s not had any time for us.’

‘What about Qin Huali?’

‘He’s busy, too, experimenting with a quick-firing crossbow. I expect he’s just outside the western gate, checking over the lie of the land, so your paths probably won’t cross. Are you off to Chu, to find Gongshu Ban?’

‘Indeed,’ said Mozi, ‘though I’ve no idea whether he’ll listen to me. Carry on with what you’re doing – don’t pin your hopes on me.’

Nodding, Guan Qian’ao watched Mozi set off again, then pushed his creaking cart on towards the city.

III

Ying, the capital of the southern state of Chu, was a whole world away from Song: its roads broad; its houses well maintained; its inhabitants immaculately turned out; its shops brimming with desirable goods – snow-white linen, scarlet chillies, dappled deerskins, fat lotus seeds. Although its people were shorter than the average northerner, they had a confident vitality about them. Next to them, Mozi – with his ancient, tattered robe and feet wrapped in cloth – looked the image of a professional beggar.

Further in towards the centre of the city, Mozi found himself in an enormous public square, packed with stalls and jostling crowds – the city's main shopping area and crossroads. Finding an old man who looked moderately well educated, Mozi asked for directions to Gongshu Ban's residence. The language barrier, unfortunately, mired the two of them in misunderstanding. Just as he was starting to trace out the words on the palm of his hand, there was a loud noise and everyone began chorusing Chu folk songs, led by one of the state's singing stars, Sai Xiangling. When even the old man began to hum along, Mozi knew he wasn't going to get any more joy out of him, and so off he strode. But there was no escape from the singing – no one was to be distracted until Sai was done. Eventually, after things quietened down, Mozi made further inquiries at a carpenter's shop.

'D'you mean Gongshu Ban of Lu⁶ – the one who invented grapnels and pikes?' As Mozi thought, the proprietor – a corpulent individual with a yellow face and black beard – had exactly the information he sought. 'It's not far from here. Turn back the way you came, past the crossroads, then turn south-east down the second road to your right. Turn north again, and the third house is his.'

After tracing the name on his hand to confirm it with the carpenter, Mozi committed the directions to memory, thanked the man and strode off in the direction indicated. His instructions were exact: on the main gate of the third house was nailed an ingeniously carved cedarwood plaque, on which were inscribed in archaic script the words: 'Gongshu Ban of the State of Lu'.

After several raps of the red copper door-knocker – cast in the shape of an animal – an irascible-looking gatekeeper emerged.

'No visitors!' he roared as soon as he saw Mozi. 'We've had enough freeloaders from Lu!'

In the time it took Mozi to look across at him, the gate was shut again. When Mozi tried knocking a second time, he was greeted only by silence. And yet, discomfited by the glance Mozi had shot at him, the gatekeeper decided to report the new arrival to his master, who – carpenter's square in hand – was busy measuring up a model of

his siege ladder.

‘Another sponger, master,’ the gatekeeper offered diffidently. ‘A bit different from the usual crowd, though.’

‘What did he say his name was?’

‘I didn’t ask,’ the gatekeeper nervously confessed.

‘What did he look like, then?’

‘Like a beggar. Tall, swarthy, about thirty – ’

‘Mozi!’ Gongshu Ban exclaimed, abandoning his work and running down the steps. The surprised gatekeeper hurriedly overtook him to open the gate. Visitor and host encountered each other in the courtyard.

‘How’ve you been?’ Gongshu Ban chatted merrily away, taking Mozi inside. ‘Busy as ever?’

‘Same as always.’

‘You have come so far, master. What instructions do you have for me?’

‘Someone in the north has insulted me,’ Mozi calmly told him. ‘I want you to go and kill him.’

The smile faded from his host’s face.

‘There’s ten pieces of silver in it for you,’ Mozi continued.

Now Gongshu Ban’s face clouded with anger. ‘I’m no murderer!’ he responded icily.

‘Delighted to hear it!’ Mozi straightened up, then bowed a couple of times to him, as if intensely relieved. ‘But I still have business to discuss with you,’ he imperturbably continued. ‘Back north, I heard you’d invented a siege ladder to attack Song. What has Song done to deserve this? Chu has too much land, and too few people. What is the point in killing what you lack, to take more of what you already have in plenty? He who attacks an innocent victim is inhumane; he who fails to oppose such a plan is no patriot; he who opposes it but dissuades no one is weak; he who refuses to kill one man, but is willing to kill many is inconsistent. So – what do you say to that?’

‘There is...’ Gongshu Ban pondered, ‘there is something in what you say.’

‘So give up the ladder.’

‘Impossible,’ Gongshu Ban said regretfully. ‘I’ve already given the king my word.’

‘Then take me to see the king.’

‘All right. But let’s eat first.’

Mozi had no interest in food. He bent at the waist, as if about to propel himself to his feet. Knowing how restless he was, Gongshu Ban abandoned his delaying tactics and agreed to take him straight to the king. Going first to his own room, however, he came back with a robe and pair of shoes.

‘But you must change into some decent clothes, master,’ he begged him. ‘People are very conscious of appearances round here – not like they are at home.’

‘Of course. I’m not wearing these old things for the love of them,’ Mozi admitted. ‘I just didn’t have time to change.’

IV

The King of Chu was no stranger to the name Mozi, the sage of the north. The moment Gongshu Ban announced him, he was immediately admitted to the royal presence.

Mozi followed Gongshu Ban into the palace – his bony feet sticking out of the bottom of his ill-fitting robe like an egret's – and bowed before the king.

'Imagine a man,' Mozi expansively began, 'who spurns his sedan chair, coveting instead his neighbour's broken old barrow; who casts aside his brocade, but has designs on his neighbour's felt jacket; who rejects his own rice and meat, while scheming to snatch his neighbour's husk gruel. What kind of a man would you call this?'

'A kleptomaniac,' the king frankly replied.

'Chu is five thousand *li* square,' Mozi went on, 'to Song's five hundred. Which is the sedan chair, which the broken barrow? Chu enjoys the marshes of Yunmeng, teeming with rhinoceros and elk, the Yangtze and Han rivers, with their fish, crabs, turtles and alligators – richer than any other state in the world. Song has nothing: not even pheasants, rabbits or carp. Which has rice and meat? Which has gruel? Chu has great pines, catalpas, cedars, camphors – Song has no forests. Which state enjoys brocade, which shivers under felt? This is my humble analogy for the king's planned attack on Song.'

'Well put!' the king nodded. 'But now I've put Gongshu Ban to the trouble of inventing those ladders, I have to find some use for them.'

'But victory is not guaranteed,' Mozi countered. 'Find me some scraps of wood and we will see.'

Addicted to games and other novelties, the king delightedly told the ministers present to rustle up some pieces of wood. Undoing his leather belt, Mozi bent it into an arc in front of Gongshu Ban, to represent the city wall. The thirty-odd pieces of wood that were procured he divided into two – one set he kept for himself, the other he gave to Gongshu Ban, to represent the weapons of siege and defence.

The two of them then took up their instruments of war, as if playing chess, and the contest began. If the attackers advanced, the other side would defend; retreat by one was answered with pursuit by the other. The king and his ministers watched on uncomprehendingly.

After nine retreats and nine advances, each showcasing different strategies, Gongshu Ban capitulated. Mozi then turned the arc of the belt against himself: it was now his turn to attack. The same dance of advance and retreat went on; this time, however, Mozi's pieces broke through the belt after the third sally.

Though mystified by the whole performance, the king and his ministers could see that their man had laid down his pieces, disappointment written over his face; that he had lost at both attack and defence.

The king shared in his sense of defeat.

‘I can beat you,’ Gongshu Ban muttered, after an awkward pause. ‘But I’m not going to tell you how.’

‘I already know,’ Mozi answered calmly. ‘But I’m not going to tell you.’

‘What are you talking about?’ the bewildered king asked.

‘What he means,’ Mozi turned to the sovereign, ‘is that he’s thinking of killing me. If I am dead, Song won’t have anyone left to defend it. What he doesn’t know is that my disciple Qin Huali and three hundred others armed by me are awaiting their enemies in the capital of Song. Kill me, and you still won’t take Song.’

‘Ingenious!’ the King of Chu sighed. ‘We’d best stay at home, then.’

V

Mozi had planned to return directly to Lu after persuading the king to call off his attack on Song. But because he needed to return Gongshu Ban's robes to him, he was obliged to go back with him. As the afternoon was by then well advanced, and both men were hungry, his host prevailed upon him to have lunch – or dinner, perhaps more accurately – and to stay the night.

'I must be off today,' Mozi insisted. 'I'll come back next year, to show the king my book.'

'Still obsessed with justice, are you?' Gongshu Ban asked. 'Doesn't it wear you out – always looking out for the desperate and distressed? Let the poor worry about justice – it doesn't matter to the rich. He's a king, remember!'

'Faulty logic. The poor make silk, hemp, rice and millet, but the rich need them, too. Even more so with justice.'

'True,' Gongshu Ban cheerfully agreed. 'Before you arrived, I wanted to take Song. Now, though, I wouldn't take Song even if you offered it to me for free. Because it wouldn't be right.'

'If you promise always to do what is right,' Mozi responded, equally cheerily, 'I will give you Song for free. In fact, I will give you the world!'

While they talked and laughed, lunch was brought out – fish, meat, wine. Ignoring the wine and fish, Mozi picked at a little of the meat. Embarrassed to be drinking alone, Gongshu Ban urged food on his abstemious guest.

'Dig in!' he gestured at the chilli sauce and the large griddle cakes. 'These are really quite decent. Though the onions aren't as succulent as they are back home.'

Gongshu Ban's spirits rose further as he drank his way through a few cups of wine.

'Is your justice a match for my grapnels and pikes?' he asked.

'A hundred times better,' Mozi responded robustly. 'Love is my attack, respect my defence. Without love and respect, there will never be peace – only treachery. Love begets love; respect, respect; while your grapnels and pikes beget only further aggression and mutual destruction. That is why I say my justice is superior to your warships.'

'But your justice has just broken my rice bowl, my dear fellow!' Having lost the latest of their arguments, Gongshu Ban now changed the subject, probably already tipsy; he had no head for wine.

'It's still better than breaking all the rice bowls in Song.'

'From now on, I will devote myself to the making of toys. Wait there, my dear fellow, I've something I want to show you.'

Springing to his feet, he ran into the back room, where he seemed to be rifling through a chest. Soon, he re-emerged, bringing with him a magpie made of wood and bamboo.

‘Wind it up,’ he said, handing it to Mozi, ‘and it’ll fly for three days. Ingenious, is it not?’

‘I prefer the ingenuity of wheel-makers.’ Mozi placed it on the mat, after glancing at it. ‘A good carpenter can pare a piece of wood three inches thick into a wheel strong enough to carry fifty piculs.⁷ Human ingenuity must be of practical benefit; all else is a waste of time.’

‘Of course,’ Gongshu Ban sobered up with this latest rebuff. ‘Of course. I knew you were going to say that.’

‘Just do what is right,’ Mozi advised, looking him straight in the eye, ‘and you will have ingenuity and more besides: the world will be yours. But I have disturbed you far too long. Until next year.’

Mozi took up his small bundle and bade his host farewell. Knowing there was no keeping him, Gongshu Ban saw him to the gate, then went back inside. After some thought, he stuffed the model of the ladder and the wooden magpie back into the chest in the back room.

Mozi took his time over his return journey: first, because he was exhausted; second, because his feet hurt; third, because he had finished his provisions and hunger slowed him down; and finally because – his mission accomplished – he had none of the sense of urgency that had driven him on the outward journey. But fortune seemed to be against him: just past the frontier into Song, he was searched twice by patrols. Near the capital, his path crossed with that of a fundraising National Salvation Squad, which claimed his tattered old knapsack as a donation. And just outside the capital’s southern pass, he was caught in a downpour. When he tried to take shelter under the city gate, two patrolmen chased him away with spears. As a result, he got soaked to the skin and spent the next ten days with a blocked nose.

August 1934

BRINGING BACK THE DEAD

[A vast stretch of wasteland, dotted with hillocks no more than six or seven feet high. No trees in sight – only scrubby clumps of grass, through which winds a road tramped out by people and horses. Not far from the road, there is a stream; in the distance, a house.]

ZHUANGZI: ¹ *[entering; gaunt, weather-beaten face, grey beard, dressed in Daoist cap and gown, carrying a horse-whip]* I'm parched, I've not had a drop of water since I set out. What a thundering bore thirst is. How much more fun to turn into a butterfly. Though there don't seem to be any flowers round here... A pool! What a stroke of luck! *[Rushing over to the side of the stream, he pushes aside the duckweed, cups his hands and gulps a dozen mouthfuls.]* That's better. On we go, slowly does it. *[Looking about him as he walks.]* Aha! A skull. What happened to this chap, I wonder. *[He parts the grass with his whip and taps the skull.]* Did greed, cowardice or general malfeasance reduce you to this? *[tap, tap]* Or did you fall on your sword, after defeat in battle? *[tap, tap]* Or did you commit a crime so dreadful you could no longer face your family? *[tap, tap]* Did no one ever tell you that suicide is the coward's way out? *[tap, tap, tap]* Did you starve, or maybe freeze to death? *[tap, tap]* Or die of a ripe old age? *[tap, tap]* Or... what am I blathering on about? Who's going to answer me? But I've time in hand – I'm not too far from Chu. I'm going to ask the God of Fate to restore this man's physical form, so I can ask him myself, before I send him back home. *[Setting down his whip, he faces east, raises both hands up to heaven and shouts]* Great God of Fate! Heartfelt salutation!

[An icy wind gusts up, and a large throng of ghosts swirls about him: young, old, male, female, fat, thin, wild-haired, bald.]

GHOSTS: You idiot, Zhuangzi! You ought to know better, at your age. Death has no master but infinity. Space is time – an emperor would not be so reckless. Mind your own business and get on to Chu.

ZHUANGZI: You're the idiots! You know nothing about dying. Life is death, death is life; its slaves are its masters. I've traced life back to its very source – I'm not going to be put off by a few squitty little spectres.

GHOSTS: It's your own funeral.

ZHUANGZI: I have the authority of the King of Chu – what do I care for you ghosts? [*Raises his hands up to heaven once more and shouts*]

Great God of Fate! Heartfelt salutation! All hail!

The earth is yellow, the sky black, the universe beyond the pale.

Sun and moon ply within their space,

While the heavenly bodies take their place.

Zhaoqiansunlizhouwuzhengwangfengqinzhuweijiangshenhantum.

This Daoist Master begs you show your face!

Come! Come! Come! Come! Come! Come! Come!

[*A cool breeze flutters the grass. The God of Fate – gaunt, weather-beaten face, grey beard, dressed in Daoist cap and gown, carrying a horse-whip – rises up out of the twilight in the east. The ghosts flee for cover.*]

GOD OF FATE: Now what are you playing about at, Zhuangzi? Wasn't that pool enough for you? What else do you want from me?

ZHUANGZI: I was just on my humble way to see the King of Chu, when I happened to spot a skull in the grass still with a semblance of a human head. I felt sorry for it, seeing it stranded out here, all alone, far from its family. So I was wondering if your Spiritual Eminence might consider restoring his physical form, so he can go back home.

GOD OF FATE: Ha! Think I trust you? Sticking your nose into other people's business before you've even filled your own stomach. I never know where I am with you: whether you're joking or serious. Stop wasting my time and get on with yourself – everything and everyone has its own destiny. I can't go messing things about just because you ask me to.

ZHUANGZI: You really have no idea, do you, O God? Life and death are mere constructs. I once dreamt that I had turned into a butterfly, floating on the breeze. Then, when I woke up again, I was Zhuangzi, busy with all the things a Zhuangzi had to do. Now – was I Zhuangzi dreaming I had turned into a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming I had turned into Zhuangzi? Might this skull be alive right now – and if we bring its body back to life, would this be death? Relax, O God – live a little. Don't be such a stick-in-the-mud.

GOD OF FATE: [*smiling*] Talk a good game, don't you? All right – here goes.

Let's see where it gets you.

[The spirit points at the grass with his whip and disappears. Light blazes from the spot on the ground, and a man jumps up.]

MAN: *[tall, around thirty years old, a tanned, rustic sort of face; stark naked. He rubs his eyes and begins to take in his surroundings – including Zhuangzi.]*

Uh?

ZHUANGZI: *[smiles and approaches, examining him carefully]* So what happened to you?

MAN: I – ah – fell asleep. Who are you? *[He looks about him in alarm.]* Hey – where are my bundle and umbrella? *[He looks down at himself.]* Hell, what happened to my clothes? *[He squats down in the grass.]*

ZHUANGZI: Calm down, don't panic. You've just come back to life. Your things rotted away years ago – or got stolen.

MAN: Excuse me?

ZHUANGZI: So: what was your name? Where were you from?

MAN: I'm Yang Da from the village of Yangjia.

ZHUANGZI: What were you doing round these parts?

MAN: Visiting relatives – I didn't mean to fall asleep. *[Becoming anxious again.]* But what's happened to my clothes – and my bundle and umbrella?

ZHUANGZI: Calm down, don't panic. Now, where were we... When were you alive?

MAN: *[surprised]* What?... What do you mean, when was I alive? Where are my clothes?

ZHUANGZI: Tsk, tsk, how terribly narrow-minded – an obsession with personal appearance. A classic case of overweening ego. Why are you worrying about clothes? You don't even know how to live. First things first: when were you alive? Oh dear, I see I am not making myself understood... *[Gives the matter fresh thought.]* Let me put it this way – what kind of things were going on when you were alive? In your village?

MAN: All sorts of things. Yesterday, for example, one of my sisters-in-law quarrelled with one of my grandmothers.

ZHUANGZI: I was thinking – bigger than that.

MAN: Bigger than *that*?... Well... Yang Xiaosan won a posthumous commendation for being a filial son.

ZHUANGZI: Yes, yes, I see the importance – but hard to date, that kind of thing... *[thinks again]* Can't you think of something *even* bigger – a rebellion, for example?

MAN: A rebellion?... *[thinks]* I remember! Three or four months ago, they wanted to bury children's souls under the Stag Tower. *That* got everyone

going – making charms for all the children...

ZHUANGZI:

[startled] The Stag Tower? Which Stag Tower?

MAN: The Stag Tower they started building three or four months ago.

ZHUANGZI: So you died when the last king of the Shang was on the throne?²

Amazing! You've been dead five hundred years.

MAN: [getting angry] I find your jokes in rather poor taste, sir – given that we have only just made each other's acquaintance. All I've had is a little nap, and here you are, talking about me having been dead for five hundred years! Now, I have business to be getting on with, and relatives to visit. Return my clothes, my bundle and umbrella forthwith – I don't have time for your little jokes.

ZHUANGZI: Hold on, hold on – I still have some questions. How did you fall asleep?

MAN: How did I fall asleep? [thinks] Well, I got here in the morning, something went bang on my head and everything went black. *Then* I fell asleep.

ZHUANGZI: Did it hurt?

MAN: I don't think so.

ZHUANGZI: Oh... [thinks briefly] I see. So, during the reign of the last king of the Shang, you were passing through when you were set upon by some highway robbers who coshed you on the head, beat you to death, then stole everything. We're now in the Zhou dynasty, you see; have been for the last five centuries. Your clothes are lost for ever. See?

MAN: [staring at Zhuangzi] No, I don't. I've had enough of this, sir – return my clothes, bundle and umbrella. I have relatives to visit. I don't have time for your little jokes.

ZHUANGZI: Who is this idiot?

MAN: What d'you mean, idiot? Everything I own has disappeared and you're the only person I find on the scene of the crime. Who else is there to ask? [Stands up]

ZHUANGZI: [starting to get agitated] Listen to me: you were just a skull until I took pity on you and asked the God of Fate to bring you back to life. Think about it: you've been dead for ages, how could your clothes have survived? Now, I don't need your thanks, I just want to hear some more about what life was like under the Shang –

MAN: Rubbish! You wouldn't fool a three-year-old child with this humbug. And I was thirty-two last birthday! [pulls away] You –

ZHUANGZI: But I *can* bring the dead back to life. You must have heard of me – Zhuangzi of Qiyuan?

MAN: Never heard of you in my life. Anyway, what good is it resurrecting a man if you've stripped him stark naked first? How can I visit my relatives in this state? And where's my bundle? [*Now on the verge of tears, he grabs Zhuangzi by the sleeve.*] I don't believe a thing you've told me. I'm taking you off to see the village headman!

ZHUANGZI: Easy, easy there. Don't pull so hard – my robe's not in the first flush, you'll tear it. Take my advice: don't get too hung up on clothes. Sometimes it's good to have them; sometimes not. Birds have feathers and animals have fur; but do cucumbers or aubergines? In other words: if one thing's right, it doesn't mean its obverse is wrong. If you can't say that not wearing clothes is right, it doesn't necessarily follow that wearing clothes is.

MAN: [*getting angrier*] Shut up! Just – shut up! Give me my things back or I'll kill you! [*He raises one clenched fist, while grabbing hold of Zhuangzi with the other.*]

ZHUANGZI: [*struggling to mount some kind of self-defence*] Violence is never an answer! Let me go! Or I'll get the God of Fate to strike you dead again!

MAN: [*retreating a couple of steps, smirking*] Fine: strike me dead. But if you can't, I want my clothes, umbrella and bundle back off you – including the fifty-two coins, pound and a half of white sugar and two pounds of dates inside.

ZHUANGZI: [*gravely*] Are you sure?

MAN: Never been surer of anything in my life!

ZHUANGZI: [*resolutely*] If you insist. It's your own funeral. Literally. [*He turns eastward once more, raises both hands up to heaven and shouts*]

Great God of Fate! Heartfelt salutation! All hail!

The earth is yellow, the sky black, the universe beyond the pale.

Sun and moon ply within their space,

While the heavenly bodies take their place.

Zhaoqiansunlizhouwuzhengwangfengqinzhuwei Jiangshenhantum.

This Daoist Master begs you show your face!

Come! Come! Come! Come! Come! Come! Come!

[*They wait a good long time; nothing happens.*]

The earth is yellow, the sky black.

This Daoist Master! Come! Come! Come!... Come!

[*They wait another good long time; nothing happens. Looking all around him, Zhuangzi slowly lowers his hands.*]

MAN: Well – do I look dead?

ZHUANGZI: [*dejectedly*] I really can't understand it – it worked perfectly well last time –

MAN: *[aggressively]* No more funny business from you – I demand compensation!

ZHUANGZI: *[retreating]* Don't touch me! You barbarian! You know nothing of philosophy!

MAN: *[grabbing hold of him]* Scoundrel! Robber! Bandit! Give me back my things or I'll have your gown and your horse!

[While struggling to fend him off, Zhuangzi pulls out of the sleeve of his gown a whistle, which he blows hard three times. Alarmed, the man pulls back. Soon after, a patrolman approaches at a run.]

PATROLMAN: *[shouting]* Stop him! Don't let him go! *[He is, we see as he approaches, a tall, well-built man from north China, clean-shaven, dressed in police uniform including a cap, and holding a truncheon.]* Stop thief!

MAN: *[Reasserting his grip over Zhuangzi]* Stop thief!

[The patrolman grabs hold of Zhuangzi's collar and lifts his truncheon. Letting go of the philosopher, the man stoops slightly to cover his groin with his hands.]

ZHUANGZI: *[trying to fend off the truncheon, twisting his head to one side]*
What d'you think you're doing?

PATROLMAN: Ha! Playing the innocent, I see!

ZHUANGZI: *[angrily]* It was me who called you – what are you doing arresting me?

PATROLMAN: What?

ZHUANGZI: It was me who blew the whistle.

PATROLMAN: You steal another man's clothes then call for the law – have you no conscience?

ZHUANGZI: Look, I was just passing by, I saw him lying dead here, and I brought him back to life. Then he goes and starts accusing me of having stolen his things. Do I look like a thief?

PATROLMAN: *[lowering the truncheon]* I don't know – appearances can be deceptive, I always say. I'm taking you down to the station.

ZHUANGZI: Not a chance. I've got to be on my way, I'm off to see the King of Chu.

PATROLMAN: *[gives a start, lets go and takes a careful look at Zhuangzi]* Are you by any chance Zhuang –

ZHUANGZI: *[bucking up]* Yes! I'm Zhuangzi, of Qiyuan. How did you know?

PATROLMAN: Our superintendent's been talking a lot about you these last few days – he said you were off to Chu to make your fortune, and that you might pass by this way. He's a bit of a philosopher recluse himself, but he still takes on odd jobs for local government – courier work mainly. He loves your essays – especially 'On the Equality of Things': 'Where there's life, there's

death; where there's death, there's life. Where there is possibility, there is impossibility; where there is impossibility, there is possibility.' First-rate stuff; a real tour de force! Could I persuade you to rest a while at our humble station?

[Utterly bewildered, the man edges back and squats down in a clump of grass.]

ZHUANGZI: It's late, I really must be getting on. But I'll be sure to call on your superintendent on my way back.

[Zhuangzi is already remounting his horse. As he raises his whip to set off, the man suddenly leaps out of the undergrowth and runs over to tug on his horse's bridle. The patrolman also runs up, and tries to pull the man back.]

ZHUANGZI: Now what?

MAN: What am I supposed to do now? Are you just going, like that? *[He looks at the patrolman.]* Look, constable...

PATROLMAN: *[scratching his ear]* Tricky... Hmmm... Now, as I see it, sir, *[he looks at Zhuangzi]* you're doing rather better than him on the clothing front – so why don't you give him something, for decency's sake.

ZHUANGZI: Of course, in ordinary circumstances, I'd be delighted to – clothes are just an external, I understand that. But today it just so happens I'm off to see the King of Chu – I have to wear a gown. And I can't very well take off my undershirt and wear only the gown... You see my difficulty.

PATROLMAN: Perfectly. You can't spare either. *[To the man]* Let him go!

MAN: But I have to visit my relatives.

PATROLMAN: Any more of your nonsense, and I'll be taking you down to the station! *[Raises his truncheon threateningly.]* Get lost!

[As the man retreats, the patrolman chases him into the undergrowth.]

ZHUANGZI: Goodbye then – goodbye.

PATROLMAN: Goodbye, goodbye. Mind how you go!

[With a crack of his whip, Zhuangzi sets off. Hands behind his back, the patrolman watches him slowly recede into a cloud of dust, then turns and heads back in the direction he originally came from. Suddenly jumping out of the undergrowth, the man tugs on the patrolman's clothes.]

PATROLMAN: Now what?

MAN: What should I do?

PATROLMAN: How should I know?

MAN: I have to visit my relatives.

PATROLMAN: Go and visit them, then.

MAN: I haven't got any clothes.

PATROLMAN: Would they mind?

MAN: You let him go, and now you're about to slip off, too. Who else can I ask?

What am I going to do? How can I live like this?

PATROLMAN: Suicide is the coward's way out.

MAN: Well, tell me what I should do, then.

PATROLMAN: [*detaching his sleeve*] How should I know?

MAN: [*grabbing back hold of the patrolman's sleeve*] Take me into the station!

PATROLMAN: [*pulling away again*] I can't do that. You're stark naked, you can't go into town. Let go!

MAN: Lend me a pair of trousers, then!

PATROLMAN: These are the only trousers I've got. If I lend them to you, I'll be an affront to public decency myself. [*Extricates himself with some force.*] That's enough! Let me go!

MAN: [*now seizing him by the neck*] You have to take me with you!

PATROLMAN: [*desperate*] No!

MAN: Then I won't let you go!

PATROLMAN: What d'you want me to do?

MAN: Take me to the station!

PATROLMAN: Look... what good would that do either of us? I've had enough of this. Let me go! Or I'll... [*He struggles as hard as he can.*]

MAN: [*tightening his grip*] If you don't help me, I can't visit my relatives. I can't live. Two pounds of dates and a pound and a half of white sugar... You let him go, you settle his debts.

PATROLMAN: [*struggling*] Stop that! Let me go! Or I'll... I'll... [*He gropes for his whistle and begins frantically blowing on it.*]

December 1935

Notes

NOSTALGIA

- [1](#) *Taipings*: The most serious of the revolts that rocked nineteenth-century China, the Taiping Rebellion left tens of millions of Chinese dead between 1850 and 1864. For further details, see Introduction.
- [2](#) *The Simplified Outline and Mirror of History*: A 1711 abridgement and extension of two classic survey histories of the early second millennium AD, this work offered a chronological account of China's history as far as the end of the Ming dynasty.

OUTCRY

PREFACE

- [1](#) *the Meiji Restoration*: The restoration in 1868 of the Japanese imperial power that marked the start of the country's rapid industrialization and modernization.
- [2](#) *Russo-Japanese War*: 1904–05.
- [3](#) *Jin Xinyi*: Another name for Qian Xuantong (1887–1939), one of the editors of *New Youth*; see note 3 below and Introduction for further details.
- [4](#) *New Youth*: The flagship journal of the iconoclastic New Culture Movement and later of the May Fourth enlightenment. See Introduction for further details.

DIARY OF A MADMAN

- [1](#) *Book of... Herbs... Li Shizhen... human flesh is perfectly edible*: Our narrator is garbling the title of a famous herbal compendium by the Ming pharmacologist Li Shizhen (1518–93). The book contains no such observation about the eating of human flesh – a delusion of the madman.
- [2](#) *‘exchange sons to eat’... ‘his flesh... flayed into a rug’*: These are both historical allusions drawn from a chronicle of the Warring States period (c. 481–221 BC).
- [3](#) *Xu Xilin... didn’t they eat his heart and liver?*: Xu Xilin was a revolutionary executed for assassinating the governor of Anhui (a province of south-east China) in 1907; after killing him, the governor’s bodyguards tore out his heart and liver and ate them.

HAIR

- [1](#) *October Tenth... Revolution Day*: The anniversary of the 1911 Revolution.
- [2](#) *Zou Rong... The Revolutionary Army?*: Zou Rong (1885– 1905) wrote a rabidly anti-Manchu nationalistic tract, *The Revolutionary Army* (1903).
- [3](#) *Artzybashev... Sheviriof*: A reference to Mikhail Artzybashev’s (1878–1927) novel *Sheviriof*, available in English translation in *Tales of the Revolution*, trans. Percy Pinkerton (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1917).

A PASSING STORM

- [1](#) *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms... five Tiger Generals of Shu*: Set in the Three Kingdoms period (220–65), *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is one of the great popular novels of pre-modern China, completed in the fourteenth century. The ‘five Tiger Generals of Shu’ are famous military figures who feature in the novel.
- [2](#) *Remember the Taiping Rebellion! If you kept your hair... the head stayed on*: Lu Xun is letting his character rather garble the question of hair politics during the Taiping Rebellion. As described in ‘Hair’, the Qing dynasty forced all Chinese men – on pain of death – to dress their hair in the Manchu style, pulling it back into a single braid and shaving the forehead. The Taiping Rebels of the mid nineteenth century, by contrast, let their hair grow free. It is

not entirely clear whether Mr Zhao is attributing his comment to the Qing authorities or to the Taiping Rebels; or whether ‘keeping your hair’ means pulling it into a queue or letting it hang freely

[3](#) *Zhang Xun... Zhang Fei’s own descendant*: For details about Zhang Xun (1854–1923), see the introductory note to the story. Zhang Fei was another of the heroes of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.

THE REAL STORY OF AH-Q

[1](#) *Chen Duxiu... New Youth*: For information on Chen Duxiu (1880–1942) and *New Youth*, see Introduction.

[2](#) *which leaves me no choice but to transcribe... to Q: Ah-Q*: At the time of the story’s writing, a national phonetic transliteration system was yet to be adopted.

[3](#) *Hundred Surnames*: A rhyming school primer of Chinese surnames and the places from which they were thought to have originated.

[4](#) *Mr Hu Shi*: (1891–1962). One of the most famous reforming intellectuals of the May Fourth Movement. See Introduction for further references.

[5](#) *abolished the civil service examinations*: As the story begins in the years immediately preceding the 1911 Revolution, Ah-Q is doubtless referring to rumours circulating about the actual abolition of the old-style civil service examinations in 1905.

[6](#) *Shang... Zhou... Qin... Later Han*: These are all dynasties that ruled China between the second millennium BC and AD 220.

[7](#) *On the fourth stroke of... Emperor Xuanton’s reign*: Midnight on 4 November 1911; the day on which Shaoxing – Lu Xun’s home town, and the loose model for the ‘town’ in this story – was ‘liberated’ by revolutionary forces.

DRAGON BOAT FESTIVAL^{[1](#)}

[1](#) *Dragon Boat Festival*: Falling on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month; traditionally one of the days on which debts were settled.

[2](#) *Publicly demonstrating... in front of the Gate of New China*: This detail is probably based on an actual collision in 1921 between protesting university teachers and government troops in front of the presidential palace in Beijing.

A COMEDY OF DUCKS

- [1](#) *Eroshenko... in Beijing*: The blind Russian poet Vasily Eroshenko (1889–1952) arrived in Beijing in 1922 to teach Esperanto, living with Lu Xun's brother Zhou Zuoren (1885–1967) until he left China in 1923.

VILLAGE OPERA

- [1](#) *Mulian's mother... torments of hell*: One of the most popular of China's folk stories and operas, *Mulian Saves His Mother* (*Mulian jiu mu*) tells of how a pious Buddhist monk saves his sinning mother from hell, neatly marrying Buddhist teaching with the Chinese tradition of filial piety.

HESITATION

- [1](#) *Qu Yuan*: (c. 340–278 BC). A high-ranking, loyal minister of the southern state of Chu, banished to the far south through the machinations of jealous rivals, where he drowned himself in protest. Since his lifetime, he has been celebrated as the paradigmatically virtuous servant of the state, and as China's first great lyric poet. Translation adapted from David Hawkes's version in Cyril Birch, ed., *Anthology of Chinese Literature* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p. 56.

NEW YEAR'S SACRIFICE

- [1](#) *Imperial College*: The highest institution of education in dynastic China.
[2](#) *Kang Youwei*: (1858–1927). One of the most prominent late Qing advocates of political, economic and cultural reform. See Chronology for further details.
[3](#) *Chen Tuan*: (907–59). A famous mountain recluse who, legend has it, became a Daoist immortal.

UPSTAIRS IN THE TAVERN

- [1](#) *Jinan*: The capital of Shandong province, in north-east China.
[2](#) *Taiyuan*: The capital of Shanxi province, in central north China.

A HAPPY FAMILY

- [1](#) *After Xu Qinwen*: Lu Xun acknowledged having taken the idea for ‘A Happy Family’ from the short story ‘An Ideal Mate’, published in 1923 by his younger contemporary Xu Qinwen (1897–1984). For further details, see Lu Xun, *Diary of a Madman and Other Stories*, trans. William Lyell (Hawai’i: Hawai’i University Press, 1990), p. 263.

SOAP

- [1](#) *paper funeral money*: Money to be burnt at funerals, to provide the dead with currency in the next life.
- [2](#) *Eight-Trigram Boxing*: A form of traditional Chinese martial arts, based upon the cultivation and application of inner force (*qi*).
- [3](#) *Schoolgirls with bobs... are the limit*: Short, bobbed hair was the mark of a ‘modern’ schoolgirl in 1920s China.

THE LAMP OF ETERNITY

- [1](#) *Imperial Guide to the Seasons*: An almanac issued annually by the imperial court, setting out the year’s farming seasons.
- [2](#) *Emperor Wu of the Liang*: The Liang dynasty ruled parts of southern China in the first half of the sixth century.

A PUBLIC EXAMPLE

- [1](#) *white waistcoat*: Prisoner’s uniform.

OUR LEARNED FRIEND

- [1](#) *Yuan Liaofan’s Chronology*: A chronological compendium compiled by the Ming scholar Yuan Liaofan (1573–1620).
- [2](#) *The Rise and Fall of the Eastern Jin Dynasty*: AD 317–420.
- [3](#) *three oaths in the peach orchard... Three Kingdoms*: Lu Xun is alluding to

episodes in the popular novel *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* – not, he is implying, a particularly rigorous historical source. For further details on the novel, see notes to ‘A Passing Storm’ above.

- 4 *Wan Yaopu... Altar Boy to the Jade Emperor*: Wan Yaopu is indulging a traditional literati habit of taking a poetic pseudonym from a classical poem, in this instance alluding to a line by the Tang poet Yuan Zhen (779–831).
- 5 *Sacred Writing Sands of Abundant Virtue... Flower-Heart Pearl*: Wan Yaopu’s poetry society engages in a traditional form of automatic writing, in which a stick is suspended from a horizontal wooden bar over a tray of sand. Two ‘poets’ hold on to the wooden bar and, when the name of the mythical Flower-Heart Pearl (a reference to an immortal of Daoist legend) is invoked, she ‘expresses’ herself to the group through characters written by the stick in the sand.

THE LONER

- 1 *local warlord, Divisional Commander Du*: Within a few years of the 1911 Revolution, China’s new Republic had fragmented into the frequently reactionary violence of warlord rule; for Wei Lianshu to serve on the staff of such a figure would be viewed as a betrayal of the national, modernizing ideals current among progressively educated youth of the 1920s.

BROTHERS

- 1 *huqin*: China’s counterpart to the violin.

THE DIVORCE

- 1 *smashed their stove up*: In Shaoxing, destroying the stove of one’s opponent was a traditional way of asserting victory at the close of a feud.
- 2 *Han dynasty*: 202 BC–AD 220.

OLD STORIES RETOLD

PREFACE

- [1](#) *article... attacking Orchid Breeze*: *Orchid Breeze* was published in August 1922, and the critical review (by Hu Menghua) printed in October that year.
- [2](#) *Cheng Fangwu*: (1897–1984). Member of the Creation Society, one of the key literary groupings of the May Fourth period. By the mid-1920s, his politics had turned radically leftward, and he began to espouse a proletarian, revolutionary stance in literature. (For details of Lu Xun's clashes with the literary left of the late 1920s, see Introduction.) Lu Xun is referring here to a 1924 review of *Outcry* in which Cheng criticized the entire collection as vulgarly naturalistic, except for 'Mending Heaven', which he proclaimed a 'masterpiece' demonstrating that its author could still enter 'the palace of pure literature'.

MENDING HEAVEN

- [1](#) *our king dashed his brains out... smashing the Pillar of Heaven between earth and sky*: A reference to the legendary battle between Zhuan Xu, descended from the Yellow Emperor (China's mythical founding ancestor), and the giant Kang Hui. After Zhuan Xu's victory, the furious giant knocked his head against the mountain that held up heaven, cracking the sky.
- [2](#) *'The Entrails of Nüwa'*: This refers to a curious legend in the mythological text *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* (c. third century BC?), which describes how ten genies declared themselves the metamorphosed entrails of the goddess. See Ann Birrell's translation of the above (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999), p. 173, for further details.

FLIGHT TO THE MOON

- [1](#) *Yi*: A mythical archer, Yi was banished from heaven for killing nine of the sun-birds, whose mischief was bringing terrible drought to the earth. In the conventional telling of his legend, he heroically rides the mortal world of terrifying monsters and scourges. In the course of this, however, his wife, Chang'e (another fallen immortal), is left so long alone at home that, in boredom, she takes the elixirs of eternal life that Yi has begged from the Queen Mother of the West, and ascends to heaven alone.

- [2](#) *Feng Meng*: Here, the reference to Feng Meng (an archer pupil of the legendary Yi) is a veiled stab at Gao Changhong, a former disciple of Lu Xun who began to criticize his conduct in the 1920s. For details of this conflict, see Saiyin Sun's Ph.D. dissertation, 'Beyond the Iron House: Lu Xun and the Chinese Literary Field in the 1920s' (Cambridge University, 2009).

TAMING THE FLOODS

- [1](#) *Emperor Shun... His son, Yu*: Shun and Yu (both c. twenty-first century BC) were two of the great sage rulers of Chinese antiquity, the latter famed particularly for taming the flood waters and as the founder of China's first dynasty, the Xia (c. 2070–1600 BC).
- [2](#) *Land of Clever Tricks*: Lu Xun is satirizing here the 1932 proposal by a number of Beijing scholars to have the city declared a neutral 'cultural zone', to protect it from the imminent Japanese invasion of north China. The 'Land of Clever Tricks' is presumably a reference to Japan, projecting how the city's likely occupiers would generously sponsor complaisant intellectuals.
- [3](#) *Chi You... army of demons*: A legendary general, Chi You gathered an army of demons about him to battle the Yellow Emperor; the latter prevailed only with the help of his weather-controlling daughter, who overwhelmed Chi You and his army with scorching weather.
- [4](#) *Youmiao*: An ancient rebellious tribe of southern China.

GATHERING FERNS

- [1](#) *Boyi... Shuqi*: Princes of the late second millennium BC, famously commemorated in Sima Qian's (c. 145–86 BC) canonical history of China, *The Historical Records*, for their loyalty to the Shang dynasty, destroyed around 1025 BC by King Wu of the Western Zhou, a former vassal of Shang. After the Zhou victory, the brothers Boyi and Shuqi – who had been given refuge in Zhou in their old age by King Wu's father, Wen – refused to eat the grain of Zhou, and retreated to Mount Shouyang, where they died of starvation. For more details, see Stephen W. Durrant, *The Cloudy Mirror: Tension and Conflict in the Writings of Sima Qian* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), esp. pp. 20–26.
- [2](#) *poetic moderation... poetic tolerance*: In the canonical *Book of Rites*, Confucius (551–479 BC) identified moderation and tolerance as key principles

of poetic composition.

LEAVING THE PASS

- [1](#) *Laozi*: The mythical founding philosopher of Daoism, c. 604– 531 BC.
- [2](#) *The Way that can be spoken... mother of all creatures*: Laozi's lecture here is taken from the start of his classic statement of Daoist philosophy, *The Book of the Way* (*Dao de jing*); the translation is my own.
- [3](#) *Having said his goodbyes... highway to the West*: According to legend, Laozi is supposed to have disappeared off to the West on the back of his ox after being asked by the warden of the pass to set down his teachings in writing.

ANTI-AGGRESSION

- [1](#) *Zixia's... Mozi*: Zixia was a disciple of Confucius. Mozi (c. 480–390) was a philosopher-craftsman about sixty years after Confucius who preached a puritanical, egalitarian philosophy of anti-aggression, to counter the violence prevalent during the Warring States period (c. 481–221 BC), in which the Chinese empire was divided into individual states battling for hegemony.
- [2](#) *Chu*: One of the largest kingdoms of Warring States China, Chu occupied what is currently Hubei and northern Hunan, in the southern half of the country.
- [3](#) *Gongshu Ban*: A master craftsman from the state of Lu (see note 6 below), also known as Lu Ban, mentioned in 'Leaving the Pass'.
- [4](#) *Yue*: Also a kingdom of the Warring States period, Yue was located in south-east China, in present-day Zhejiang Province.
- [5](#) *Song*: Another kingdom of the Warring States period, Song was located in present-day Henan, in central-eastern China.
- [6](#) *Lu*: Another Warring States kingdom, situated in north-east China, in contemporary Shandong.
- [7](#) *fifty piculs*: Approximately eight thousand pounds.

BRINGING BACK THE DEAD

- [1](#) *ZHUANGZI*: (c. 370–300 BC). The second main philosopher of Daoism.
- [2](#) *when the last king of the Shang was on the throne*: c. 1025 BC.

Afterword

A few years ago, I gave a reading at a local library in California, and afterwards an older Chinese gentleman in the audience asked me if I considered myself a disciple of Lu Xun. No, I replied, and before I could explain further I saw that the gentleman was disappointed. ‘You should go back and read his stories,’ he mumbled and shook his head. ‘I thought I’d seen connections in your book.’

Curious about the gentleman’s verdict, I later sought him out and learned his story. In the summer of 1949, he, a supporter though not outright follower of the Communist Party – ‘a patriotic youth’ in his own words – boarded a ship for America. After weeks of crossing the ocean he landed in San Francisco, where he learned that a few days earlier Mao Zedong had announced the birth of the People’s Republic of China in Tiananmen Square. Later, on the train ride from San Francisco to Massachusetts, where he would attend medical school, news from his relatives in America caught up with him at Springfield, Illinois: some members of his family had fled to Taiwan, and the rest of them, as part of the landlord class, had been executed by the new government. The dilemma of his life, the gentleman concluded, was that the China he loved had chosen not to return his affection. ‘I know you were pursuing medical science before you wrote,’ he then said. ‘Chekhov was a doctor before he became a writer. Lu Xun was to become a doctor before he turned to writing. It’s a great tradition for someone to go from medicine to writing. One could help the world as much with his scalpels as with his words, and I hope you won’t disappoint your predecessors.’

I was moved and humbled by the gentleman’s words; I was uneasy, too, though out of politeness I did not say that, in my opinion, Lu Xun’s ambition to become a spiritual doctor, and his intention for his fiction to become cultural medicine for the nation’s diseased minds, in the end, limited him as a storyteller; the long shadow he cast in Chinese history has allowed the proliferation of many mediocre works while

ending the careers of some of the most brilliant writers.

I was first exposed to Lu Xun's work when I was six, before I could read. My mother, a primary schoolteacher, had me memorize part of Lu Xun's story 'My Old Home', which was excerpted in the year-five textbook she was teaching.

Suddenly, I saw in my mind's eye a marvellous golden moon hanging in a midnight-blue sky over a seashore planted endlessly with dark green watermelons. A boy, around ten or eleven years old, a silver chain around his neck and a pitchfork in his hand, was stabbing at a fierce-looking dog darting between his legs.

The boy was Runtu.

Thirty years later I still remember the shiver I felt when I was taught these words. It must be the first time I was under the spell of a great writer; the image of Runtu was engraved in my mind in such a beautiful way that I often forgot that neither the narrator nor I had seen Runtu on that seashore. It was devastating, when I read the full version of 'My Old Home' at twelve, to see the sad and reticent man Runtu had become. The glimpse of a bleakness lurking in every man's life, which I did not understand at the time, kept me listless for weeks and months afterwards. In our secondary-school literature class, however, fate was not talked about. Rather, it was the conflict between the landlord class and the peasant class, the suffering of the peasants and their pitiable submissiveness, as well as the awkward final paragraphs of the story, where the author seemed eager to instil significance in the story – 'I prayed they would turn out differently to us: I didn't want them to drift like me, or to suffer numbly like Runtu... I wanted new, different lives for them, lives that we had not lived... Hope, I thought to myself, is an intangible presence... a path that exists only where others have already passed' – that were discussed at length. The author was lauded for pointing out the path to hope, and more so for being one of the pilgrims to make that path available for us.

While reading this great volume of translations of Lu Xun's stories and rereading the original texts, I found myself falling once again under his spell, relishing some of the most memorable characters: Ah-Q's knuckles falling on the shaved head of the young nun; Kong Yiji's overextended fingernails tapping on the bar; the Bean-Curd Beauty with her bound feet and sharp tongue; Mrs Nine-Pounds with her perpetual grudge. It would not be a stretch to say that these characters have taken permanent residence in the collective memory of my generation, and perhaps one or two generations before us. I was equally awed by how Lu Xun could bring to life a group of nameless onlookers – at an execution site, at a village tavern, or in the small town where the twice-widowed Xianglin's wife was mocked for her ill fortune – with precise and dispassionate strokes.

It is, however, frustrating to reread Lu Xun, too. In an essay that detailed his

literary theories, he created a phrase – one of the most famous creations in modern Chinese – to describe his feelings towards his characters: '[he is] as saddened by the miseries of those people as [he is] infuriated by their reconciliation with their fate'. This fury, coupled with his goal to cure the nation's diseased minds with his writing, granted him a position of superiority; in many of his stories, this spiritual doctor with his authorial voice took over the stories, which, in my opinion, was more than mere technical missteps: in 'My Old Home', the author could not refrain from preaching at the end; in 'Village Opera' (my favourite story by Lu Xun, a beautiful vignette of village life where characters seem to exist out of free will, rather than to live up to the author's sadness and fury), the opening passages with the sarcastic comments on the nation's citizens are rather unnecessary and pointless; 'Diary of a Madman', despite its historical significance, relies on a few pithy phrases fed to the narrator by the author to carry the story; and in 'A Minor Incident', an epiphany occurs towards the end, where a rickshaw-puller 'suddenly seemed to loom taller, broader with every step he took, until I had to crick my neck back to view him in his entirety. It seemed to bear down on me, pressing out the petty selfishness concealed beneath my fur coat' – in retrospect, I think that moment of epiphany was repeatedly copied out in our own essays in secondary schools and, more damagingly, it became a successful mode of storytelling for a generation of mediocre writers after Communism took over China.

After Lu Xun's death, in many different situations Mao Zedong hailed him as 'a great revolutionary', 'the commander of China's Cultural Revolution' and 'the saint of China'. It was out of ideological necessity that Lu Xun was canonized, his work overshadowing some of the other writers of his era – Shen Congwen and Lin Yutang, for instance – whose work, if not banned, was rarely seen in print for decades. I wonder, though, whether this posthumous fame would have pleased Lu Xun. Indeed, when he set his mind to cure the nation's spiritual disease with his writing, he had chosen an impossible role as a superhero and a god.

When I was five, my daycare companions and I were escorted to watch a group of prisoners being denounced publicly before their execution. Afterwards, a teacher, who disliked me for my disobedience, put a hand in the shape of a handgun to my head. 'If you don't follow my words, you will end up as one of those criminals. Bang!' she said, triggering her handgun and making her fellow teachers laugh. When I reread Lu Xun's stories, a resonant moment occurs in 'Medicine' – Mr Kang, the executioner, recounts to an audience the last moments of a young revolutionary before his beheading. In retrospect, my teacher's words had the same sense of contentedness and good humour as Mr Kang's; in fact, they were both rather good at making a joke out of someone else's grim life.

And they will continue doing so. The one who has the power over a fellow human being would not reform and become more honourable for Lu Xun, just as the onlookers would not become less fascinated by other people's misfortune. Recently I read in a Chinese newspaper that a young woman was about to jump from the roof of a seventeen-storey building, and as she was hesitating and perhaps gathering her courage to commit the act, a large crowd gathered. Old people from the neighbourhood brought folding chairs so they could sit down and watch; a pedlar arrived in time to hawk binoculars; many raised their camera phones to record. What makes this crowd different from the crowd that witnessed the beheading of Ah-Q, I wonder. Perhaps literature, unlike what Lu Xun, or the older Chinese gentleman, hoped, will not change the world in any grand way; rather, it is what remains unchanged that will make literature live on, and it is perhaps for this reason that Lu Xun's stories will still be read fifty or a hundred years from now.

Yiyun Li

* Lu Xun uses words ('Hua' and 'Xia') that can also mean 'China' for the surnames of both the old man and the revolutionary, infusing the story with an intense historical symbolism.

* An all-purpose Chinese prefix (indicating either affection or contempt) added to personal names, with a roughly diminutive effect; in the case of Ah-Q, one perhaps imagines his interlocutors cannot be bothered to say or remember his full name.

* Midnight on 4 November 1911.

* In Chinese, ‘freedom’, *ziyou*, sounds very much like ‘persimmon oil’, *shiyou*; an understandable error of hearing, therefore, by the good burghers of Weizhuang.

* Chinese semaphore for 'shame on you'.

* A traditional literary appellation for Beijing.

* Or: 1 September 1924.

† In case the gentle reader is less benighted than Huang San: ‘Gorky’ is transliterated into Chinese as ‘Gao-er-ji’. With Chinese names, the surname (usually one syllable) precedes the given name (of one or two syllables). Regrettably deprived of expertise in the Russian language or in the sinicization of European names, our learned friend has imagined that ‘Gao’ was the great man’s surname, ‘Erji’ his given name. Setting himself modestly up as heir to the great Russian tradition of critical realism, our professor thus believes he has designed his own change of name as a close echo of the transliterated ‘Gorky’: Gao Erchu, to the original Gao Erji.

* The original Chinese writes ‘her’, but ‘him’ makes better sense in the context of Peijun’s later hallucinations.