

# PATHLIGHT

NEW CHINESE WRITING

SUMMER / 2013

Wang Anyi  
Bi Feiyu  
Jiang Yun

Yi Sha  
Li Hao  
Lu Nei

Bai Hua  
Zang Di  
Yang Li

*Speed*



Photo by Qiu Lei



Photo by Wang Yan

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## 王安憶

### Wang Anyi

Wang Anyi was born in Nanjing. In 1980 she attended the Chinese Writers' Association Literature Academy and in 1983 participated in the Iowa University's International Writing Program. In 1987 she became a writer at the Shanghai Writers' Association and in 2004 took a professorship in Chinese at Fudan University. She has published the novels *Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, *Age of Enlightenment*, *Scent of Heaven*, *Bao Town*, *San Lian*, *Uncle's Story* and *Tian Xian Pei*. She has won the National Short Story Prize, the Mao Dun Literature Prize, the Lu Xun Literature Prize, the *China Times* "Kai Juan" Book Prize, and Malaysia's First World Chinese Literature "Hua Zong" Prize. Her works have been translated into English, German, Dutch, French, Russian, Italian, Spanish, Japanese, Hebrew, Korean, and Vietnamese.

# In the Belly of the Fog

By Wang Anyi

**T**hat this particular couple should appear on this particular overnight train seems unnatural.

Most of the passengers on this local train over the plains of the northern border are farmers. They all wear winter clothes of dusted blue or black, while at their feet lie satchels of the same color and over-stuffed shape. Occasionally, a flame of brightness flickers between them, the peach-pink or blue-green of a woman's ski jacket, the gold hoops at her ears. Yet the color is a bit offensive, and does nothing but make the ambiance of gray depression all the more disappointing. Outside is only pure black – probably ten or eleven o'clock at night. Human shadows flicker to and fro over the double-paned windows, followed by threads of tiny lights that run across the glass like hairline cracks, then vanish instantly. When the train arrives at a station, the windows all light up, admitting the shadows of those without. Yet the light dispersed into the train car washes out the view of things inside. The recycled air from the heaters, the moisture of human breath and the miasma of tobacco collect into one clearly visible gaseous entity that oozes between bodies. Then the train leaves the station, the light on the windows fades and dies out, and all returns to shadow. The scenery inside the car condenses and turns in on itself. There is one instant when everything stands out, outlines become sharp, yet it all falls back into void moments later. But the train moves so slowly and stops so frequently that soon enough this brief instant of clarity loses its ability to attract attention. So even this subtle transformation sinks out of sight, and time and

the trip stretch out into a single line in the darkness.

Of course, even a local night train like this one has a soft sleeper carriage! Passengers come and go so frequently here that the door to the car is always open, and the light always on – though, perhaps because of a scant current or a bad battery, it shines only weakly. The soft-sleeper passengers are hardly peasants, yet they also wear heavy, dark clothing against the northern winter. Their eyelids are swollen, presumably from lack of sleep, blurring the contours of their North Asiatic features. The dusky lamp above throws down shadows of all sizes and shapes, and people sit submerged in shadows, each husbanding untrustworthy motives and expressions. The tracks are quite old, and the train wobbles heavily. At every switch in the rails it slams loudly, followed by a full-body shiver, as if the old train were gritting its teeth and jumping right over. Followed by more wobbling. The soft-sleeper compartment wall blocks the light from outside, so the scenery inside doesn't change when the train nears a station. Even as passengers go out and come in, it can be hard to tell the difference; new people and empty beds are all hidden in darkness. Mid-winter. North China. The same people, the same winter clothes, the same North Asiatic faces.

The man and woman get on the train separately. When the man enters the soft-sleeper car, the woman is lying on her bunk. Light from the station shines into their compartment. On the floor, which has lost its paint to years of salt water and will never be clean again if the stains go any deeper, sits a low-cut deer-skin boot. The material has turned gray-black, with a

few patches of the original yellow still vaguely visible. The boot's collapsing top with its soft wrinkles identifies it as real deerskin. From one angle, one can even see the embroidered flower pattern at the top. The other boot is lost in a shadow somewhere. The train stands a while at the platform, then pulls away. This boot is also lost to the darkness, becoming a formless pile of shadow. The man judges that the owner of the boot is a woman, and certainly not from anywhere along this line. The woman wakes up on her bunk. Her lazy consciousness is being invaded by a voice speaking in a crisp Beijing accent. This accent rings strongly in the throat, and it sounds sharp, even a little cold, compared to the heavy northwestern accents around it. This voice hops and flows around the compartment with unnatural vivacity, stirring up the dull miasma of heavier sounds. It brightens up the leaden space, as if carrying its light with it. She determines that it is a new voice. It breaks through the utterly unexceptional surroundings, and brings the wide outside world in along with it. Yet by doing so it only makes this little world seem more remote, as if it has gone on its solitary route and been forgotten. She turns her face from the wall toward the interior of the compartment. The voice is coming from the corridor beyond. It sounds cheerful, which already seems out of place in this environment. Soon after, a figure is silhouetted in the doorway. This figure not only does not adumbrate the inside of the compartment, it actually intensifies

the light that slips around it from the corridor. Apparently, that space is quite bright. She feels the owner of the voice has arrived. His shadow, like his voice, cuts a clear outline of itself amid a hazy atmosphere. He leaps through the door, and leaps again over to the bunk opposite her, where he sits down. The two outsiders are now face-to-face.

Her body and her face are in shadow, but this sets off the brightness of her eyes. They sparkle with a quiet light. Not slept in three days, have you? he asks her with a smile. The grey background makes his skin appear particularly white. His face is one of the handsome types one finds in the north: long, with single eyelids, long-tailed eyes, a straight nose, and thin lips. The legendary Pan An, Adonis of ancient times, probably had a face like his. His height is obvious even when he's sitting down, as his two long legs occupy the space between the bunks. His shoulders are broad and flat, his waist narrow – very well-shaped. He rests his elbows on his knees and stares at the eye gleaming at him from the shadow opposite. He has no way to guess her age, yet this eye is enough to give him a fairly clear impression. He knows this must be the owner of the deerskin boots. The train has just made another stop, and now sets off again. Station lights pass the windows one by one, and the deerskin boot on the floor comes in and out of view, its top still softly crumpled. When he first asked her this facetious question, she had begun to respond, yet swallowed it at the last minute.



Illustration by Tan Tan

She is clearly not in the mood to laugh. Her face turns back to the wall. With her form overshadowed by the upper bunk, he can't tell if she's lying on her side or on her back. But as soon as her eyes disappear from view, the rest of her seems to retreat completely into nothingness.

An unknown amount of time passes; slow trains always have that effect. Rolling over this desolate northern territory, they seem quite isolated from the world. The small stations where they stop are all cold and quiet, with no feeling of life to them. A few sounds from beyond the window: running footsteps, the peal of a whistle, an exchanged word or two. Just a few

needlepoint-sized atoms that come from the freezing emptiness and ping once or twice before they disappear.

When she turns back over, the opposite bunk is empty, yet a hand-held video game player on the tea table before the window signifies that he hasn't left yet. That crisp Beijing accent is silent, yet the air is still excited, so he must still be on the train. Sure enough, he comes back not long afterwards. When he arrives, he finds her sitting up on her bunk, playing with his handset. The game is Tetris, and the battery must be low because the images on the screen are very faint, and she has to hold it at a certain angle to

make out the little block figures raining down from above. She's really into the game, and holds the screen almost up to her nose in order to see clearly. Her face and hair are half-hidden behind the stand-up collar of her down jacket. The jacket looks like a man's, both heavy and baggy. It makes her look young. He knows she isn't that young – why? No reason. He just has that feeling. Of course, she isn't old yet, either – also a feeling. The truth is, he can't even see her face clearly, he just senses she is in her richest years of experience and emotion. He sits on the low bunk opposite her and watches her play. They both sense that, on some level, they are of the same kind. Part of that is the environment, which has forced both of them out into the open. He watches her play for a while, then says, Don't stare at the screen so hard, it isn't good for you. His tone carries a note of concern – concern which, on this dark journey, suggests a certain vulnerability.

She takes his advice, holding the handset farther away and adjusting to a more comfortable position before starting up another game. Now, they've made a connection, and they can talk to each other. He does most of the talking. What is she traveling for? he asks. Is she selling a product . . . or collecting debt, maybe? She looks up at him sharply and shakes her head. From this, one could conclude she is not very well-acquainted with the world, and maybe even an introvert. Well then, how did she end up on a provincial train like this one? Now he's curious. He starts asking about her

profession. She doesn't tell him, so he guesses: project assistant? Newspaper reporter? Actress, even? She answers neither yes nor no, but it's clear she is in a better mood now than she had been. She turns to face him. Her features cut the downward-shining lamplight into distinct shapes of light and shadow, giving her face a three-dimensional feel. He considers the face for a moment, then says: You look like you're in economics. This actually makes her smile – only for a second, though, and she pulls it back in immediately as if she had some powerful reason not to smile. Yet she puts down the handset and looks straight at him. She finds his way of speaking entertaining. The train is stopping again; this station is even more desolate, probably because of the hour, which is already past twelve. Light from the station passes through the window and shines on her face. The change is significant: now it looks wide and flat, yet with a healthful glow. Then the train starts off again, the light fades, and she recovers her previous appearance. He's sitting at an angle, his back to the door, so the change in light doesn't affect him. Besides, with sharp features like his, his face is always the same set, definite representation; he is always attractive. This is another reason she enjoys listening to him.

He starts talking about himself. He's done everything: real estate, futures, selling official permissions, producing shows. He knows a number of celebrities, and lists off a whole slew of them in one breath: so-



and-so, so-and-so, so-and-so, along with so-and-so's son, daughter, mistress. His grandiloquence is suspicious, especially on a backwoods train like this one. What would a high-flyer like himself be doing here? Most of the passengers here are peasants or small-time businessmen. They get off at some tiny, no-name station, carrying their bundles of clothing, toiletries, machine parts, or expired medicines, and disappear into the nameless corridors of night. Yet he scoots closer to the window and, looking at the glass, says, I have so much money, I could raise a whole harem if I felt like it. This boast doesn't come off as self-satisfied, but is mixed instead with a note of sadness. She detects this, and asks, Are you happy? Not at all, is the definite answer. Now he sounds believable. Of course, everything on this local overnight train is tinged with melancholy.

No sound comes from the bunks above, though both are occupied. Are the passengers asleep, or are they listening? They're quiet, at any rate. The other passengers seem to have acknowledged these two are of their own kind and not of theirs. That they should be talking to each other is perfectly natural. Still, no reason why they can't listen in! Thus, even the shadows have eyes and can hear plainly. Occasionally, other people go by in the corridor. Time blurs during a trip like this – maybe they think it's still day! Yet the presence of night is still detectable in the stupid woodenness of passengers' movements. While his Beijing accent is clear, cool, and sharp, and slices right through

the heavy air of the train. Their faces, especially his, carry a certain sharpness that cuts open time. While hers, being more three-dimensional, opens in a way that isn't so eye-catching, yet has more depth to it. The atmosphere of this car in this compartment is changed, the airflow altered. Here, the quiet night is a little more restless.

Each asks where the other is getting off – both at the same place, a major station ahead. The great majority of passengers will be getting off there, and many other people will get on. The station lies right at the border of two provinces. Its name is grand and familiar, and hearing it gives one a feeling like a hole has opened in the void through which one can escape. Hope flashes in the heart. He asks her what she'll be doing there; she still doesn't reply. Nor does he dwell on it. A woman from the outside world, who looks like she's "in economics," riding a provincial non-express train at night – what could she be doing? Still, in a world where truth is stranger than fiction, anything can happen! He tells her what he's here for without waiting for her to ask. He is indisputably the talkative one, and if it weren't for that crisp Beijing accent, it would be too much. He seems to be intent on using conversation to break the pressure of the night. He says he's arranged with a couple of Hong Kong businessmen to meet in that inter-provincial coastal city, from which they'll set off for some island with a forgettable name. They're going to check out the local

economy; the island is known for producing apples, along with a variety of seafood products, and it's becoming a hot target for development. He looks over at her. Her face is once again enveloped in shadow, only the outline of one cheek visible as a lighter patch on a dark background. The train shudders hard; then, a loud clang as it jumps a switch. A glint on the outline of her cheek – something is sparkling. He feels that she is crying. Not that there is anything strange about that; it's perfectly natural. Moreover, her crying is even a little easier to bear than her not, as if it were softening a sharp edge. He too feels a twinge in his nose. Even though neither of them knows anything about the other; they are still strangers.

He becomes gentler. Gentleness is incompatible with his handsome face. The over-adored features reveal traces of old wounds as they assume an expression of sympathy. He moves farther over to one side of the tea table to face her directly; now he, too, is half-covered in shadow. He says, You know, we have an extra space in the car. Come with us. No, she replies. She says so little, he can get no clear impression of her voice or accent. At the very least it doesn't have the glottal harshness belonging to natives of these parts. The two of them already understand that, even as compatriots on this local night train, the distance between them is still very great – too great even for words of comfort.

The door at the front of the car slams open, and there is the sound of leather shoes. It's the midnight

police patrol. They tramp down the corridor and throw open the door at the other end. When that slams shut it coincides with another hard track change, which resounds like a disproportionately loud echo. The darkness inside the car oozes like an object with physical density, slowly covering everything over, yet when it gets to these two, it goes around them, as if forced away by some magnetic anti-polarity. It's very obvious they are both creatures from the outside world. That world is vigilant, with hard, sharp thorns that stick out and interweave, and train them to be alert, nervous, shrewd. Their forms are brighter, the material of their bodies more tightly meshed, and therefore liable to stand out in this lightless, unforming space.

Another stop. Light from the station lamps filters through the double-paned window and falls on her booted foot. The deerskin boot softly covers her foot. A wave of wrinkles by the heel communicates the clever knit of her bones. It's the heel of a creature from the outside world that's already stepped over who knows how many different kinds of road. A person outside stops and looks in through the window. With his back to the light, his face is entirely black. The moment feels like a dream – human shadows moving like paper figurines. The figure stands a while, then moves off. The train waits a moment, then silently slips away itself. The faint noise of a whistle reaches them, as if it had carried over far mountain ranges. He looks at his



watch, says, We're almost there.

The train has moved onto an inter-provincial track. It picks up speed, and its rhythm over the tracks becomes clear and regular. Inside the car, the borders of light and darkness become more distinct, outlines more definite. This leg of the journey seems to drag out for two or three times the length of the previous leg, and the travel becomes smoother. The atmosphere of accumulated anxiety seems a little lighter. They both collect their luggage and go to stand in the vestibule by the exit doors. The light there is much better. Each examines the other, discovers things that were different moments ago in the dark. It's as if they both have lost a little color – not gotten darker, but paler, more diluted. Yet, no matter what, each already has an impression of the other, and new alterations do nothing to change the original image. In fact, being exposed like this under normal light makes them seem more easily understandable to each other. He looks at her, and says again: You really do look like you're in economics. Is this praise? Or is he trying to get her to be closer to him, to make her someone he can better understand? She smiles, although that doesn't alleviate her worried look, but only makes it more sorrowful. Yet, seen under full-on light, her sorrow is more fully revealed, and seems closer to the surface and more understandable. He earnestly entreats her – this earnestness distorts his overly-symmetrical face, making it ugly, yet honest. He entreats her, Come with us. He

trusts she is moved, because she turns her face away, and emphatically replies, No. His face relaxes with the recognition of final defeat. He lets out a small sigh, then, as if by way of compromise, asks, Is someone picking you up? She gives him no answer.

The grind of train wheels on steel track grows louder. The engine shrugs off the lethargy of a local train and starts to run freely, imparting a sense of the strength of its speed. This strength breaks through the crust of the night and opens a snow-white tunnel. Up ahead is a major station; on the platform, a line of brilliant lights stands at attention. The train passes under a footbridge, rattling the bridge's underpinnings with the echoing rip of its whistle, and pulls into the station in a blast of baptismal energy. They disembark one after another. Under the black sky, the platform lights seem to lean together into a vaulted arch leading toward an opening above their heads. They walk into that opening, and gradually separate.

*Translated by Canaan Morse*

# Tradition and Rebellion: A Conversation with Wang Anyi

**Zhang Xinying:** The Cultural Revolution ended thirty years ago. Since then Chinese literature has gone through huge changes, through different phases each with its own outstanding authors and works. But some writers have worked consistently over this period. Rather than fade away they mature and produce significant work. Those writers are of your generation, and though there are few of them, they form the backbone of contemporary Chinese literature. You are one of those writers, and I'd like to talk with you about literature and so on. It'll need to be an ongoing process, not something we can finish in one or two conversations. I don't want to discuss abstract theoretical problems though; I want to talk about the concrete and straightforward, the perceptual and experiential.

**Wang Anyi:** So could you tell me one of these actual questions?

**Zhang:** If today you go back and read your mother's writings . . .

**Wang:** I just mentioned that after my mother passed away, I took another look at the books her generation wrote. We got our start in the context of individualism, of liberation of the personality and reverence for the individual. That made us resistant to their writing:

it was too collective, there were no individual voices. But we were mistaken; they were much more individual than we were, they'd grown up with individualism. They better understood what the individual was; and their personalities were certainly better developed than ours. But then Communism made other demands on them. There was a contemporary of Hemingway, Stein I think, who said something that helped me understand my mother's generation: that individualism is human nature, but that Communism is the human mind. That was what set me straight, what made me realise we'd failed to understand them. Of course they were dogmatic, they had a socialist aesthetic, and of course I don't deny that. But I think they worked terribly hard to improve themselves. They worked to express their individuality through writing about the collective, and they did that so well because they had restraint, something contemporary people lack. They could show something with such restraint, it was moving. In Sun Li's *Baiyangdian*, when the old man tells the young woman soldier to hide under the lotuses and watch as he kills the Japanese – who'd think of that today? They couldn't do it. And also in *Seven Matches*, their individuality was kept in close check. The personality can't be too free, you can't just write at will –

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that wouldn't be writing, it'd be venting, a tantrum.

**Zhang:** Is it possible that your upbringing made you part of the tradition of modern Chinese literature, rather than just part of your own generation? That's quite a big question, so let me explain my own experience: When I was studying in the mid- and late-80s I thought, wow, contemporary literature is great, better than anything since the May Fourth Movement. As a student, I thought post-1985 novels were fantastic, and I just couldn't get through anything written earlier. But very, very slowly, as I grew up a bit, I found I was wrong. Very, very slowly the scales started to shift; very, very slowly I found those books were worth chewing over, there was something in there, something spiritual or something literary, that eventually started to become apparent, while literature after the Cultural Revolution gradually became . . .

**Wang:** Weak.

**Zhang:** Yes, it did a bit. Personally, I think we failed to take that tradition, from May Fourth to the end of the Cultural Revolution, seriously. We didn't try to properly understand it. I remember clearly a letter that Hsia Tsi-an wrote to his students, Kenneth Pai and the

others. Hsia had studied Western literature; and he covered mostly modern Western things when editing *Literature* at National Taiwan University from 1956 to 1960. Then he went to the US, and Pai and the others started *Modern Literature*. Hsia wrote them a long letter, which was never sent for some reason. But a few years back Hsia Chih-tsing was going through his brother's possessions and found it and had it published in *Unitas*. So what was the letter about? He told Pai and the others that as writers they had to read authors from May Fourth onwards. This seemed strange to me, as he himself was a student of Western literature, he'd covered Western modernism, and politically he tended to be anti-Communist. And now he was telling Pai and the others to read all the authors from May Fourth up to the rightists. Why did they have to read them? Because, he said, you're writing in *baibua*, the interim language between classical and modern Chinese, and that's where *baibua* started, so you may face the same problems they did. And he said it was hard to predict if *baibua* would become a literary language. But classical Chinese is, without doubt – you've got Li Bai, Du Fu, so on. But that wasn't the case with *baibua*, they couldn't know what would happen. So they couldn't rely on the West alone and ignore that

modern Chinese tradition, they had to know what had gone before. They were part of that tradition and it doesn't matter if those writers wrote well or not, there's a rich heritage there – it might have been a failure, it might not, but you need to study it. He wrote this long letter of advice about it. And what amazes me is that if you compare this with the mainland, I think since the early '80s we've suffered a widespread lack of awareness of earlier traditions. Sometimes writers talk about literature, particularly about their predecessors, and they can make things up, they can just get it wrong . . .

**Wang:** Yes, they can say anything they please.

**Zhang:** So when he said that, he unconsciously revealed his understanding of that modern tradition, or I should say, his lack of understanding . . .

**Wang:** I think that's an academic question, and not one I'll say much about. I'll just say that I've met a lot of Taiwanese writers, and I feel they're in closer contact with the source of their tradition. Chiang Hsun told me that once, when riding his bike as a child, he was stopped by a policeman for breaking traffic rules. What was his punishment? To recite teachings of "the President." They had that kind of education, but who

knows anything like that now? Even I don't, never mind the kids. So culturally they are closer to the origins of Republican China. Our generation really was poorly taught, and now we've lost that.

**Zhang:** And it doesn't seem to be just a matter of losing the source, we seem to be actively throwing things away. Each new generation discards what the last has left them.

**Wang:** I think it's in the nature of the young to rebel; the question is what do they rebel against? Against whatever they've been taught. Look at some films about the rebellion of the young, like *Dead Poets' Society*. Why do they rebel? They have to wear suits, they have to sit quietly, they have to go to sleep on time. And only then can they rebel, to sneak out to smoke and mess around. First you have to be taught to do something, and then you rebel against it. There was a reason for it. Now the reason is gone and you just have the action – it's not rebellion anymore, it's just smoking. I think that as our children never learned to submit, when they rebel – it's not rebelling, it's just misbehaving. Rebellion has to be an attempt to free yourself from a restriction. But there are no restrictions now, so what's the point in rebellion? It's just a



Illustration by Tan Tan

pose, just going through the motions.

**Zhang:** Did your generation rebel in a similar way?

**Wang:** I think we did, when we were growing up. Like I just said, we rebelled against my mother's generation. And it was real rebellion, I think. It was serious.

**Zhang:** You're different; I think you're a special case. You knew what your mother had written, but weren't others of your generation unaware of what the last generation of writers had written?

**Wang:** They knew, they knew. Liu Heng copied out my mother's *Three Visits to Yan Village*. I think our

generation still quite respected the older generation and read their works. I think, in this way, we weren't as bad, but we still lacked manners, we really did. Sometimes we weren't even suffering, we'd just rebel anyway. It was anger; all emotion and no thought. We shouldn't take that rebellion too seriously, and don't think it was well thought-out, because it wasn't. And so each generation has become disconnected from the last. If you look at Western literature you can easily trace a work back to a point of origin; it's all tightly linked. Follow it back and you'll find its ancestry, maybe in a book of the Bible, from which it is descended. In any book you can find something related

to a source.

**Zhang:** I studied the history of Western literature at university, and I had a good teacher, Xia Zhongyi, who knew Western literature incredibly well. As he told it, the history of literature was all linked – how a style appeared, developed, and disappeared; it all had a sense of history, of connection. But our modern literary history lacks that sense of continuity; it's just each generation refuting the last. And then I realized that most of the writers in our history are young.

**Wang:** It's rare to find any who write into old age.

**Zhang:** You rebel when you're young, and it's in that rebellion that you achieve. So when you look at our writers, in the first generation only Lu Xun was older, he started late, writing *Diary of a Madman* when he was 38, while the others were very young, in their 20s or 30s. A hundred years of literature and the average age of a writer is about thirty. I think that's very interesting. And it's quite unique; you wouldn't see that in a true literary tradition.

**Wang:** I'll say that in China true professional writers are rare. If you aren't writing professionally by thirty you quit.

**Zhang:** Sometimes I joke that our history of literature is a history of the young. You get some who weren't young but who were very good, like Feng Zhi. The poetry of his 20s was just the poetry of a young man, but his *Forties Collection*, that was something special. But we don't have many instances of writers in their 40s. And that's something to do with our rebelling every generation.

**Wang:** That's one thing, another is political uncertainty.

**Zhang:** And our literary standards. We, literary circles, pay particular attention to novelty. There's almost a compulsion to seek the new, to seek change.

**Wang:** And also because we never had a Romantic movement. During the Romantic Period the West developed a tradition of criticism – literary criticism, art criticism, music criticism, theatre criticism. So even if the media makes a fuss about something, there will still be a more mainstream evaluation. It seems China never developed that system of review; we just jumped right into the media age. And so the media does all of our criticism, which means none of it is done properly. That's one reason. Another reason, to get back to the sources we just talked about, is that we demand

originality, to excess. You might think Western literary works aren't original, as they so often resemble something previous. But I think of writers as craftsmen, and the more they work the better they get – though it takes a generation or more. Yet we want originality, our critics use it as a standard, and that constantly requires new ideas. But that's a measure of change, not quality.

**Zhang:** Like we always talk about literature from the '80s, or from the '90s – when you talk about '90s literature you're talking about the newest writers, works, and trends of thought. If I started describing Lu Ling, who was prominent in the '30s and '40s but didn't die until 1994, as a '90s writer people would think I'd lost the plot. I think that's become a habit.

**Wang:** A bad habit.

**Zhang:** And it's not anyone's fault in particular, it's a tradition we've inherited from the May Fourth Movement. Each generation is concerned with the newest forces, the newest trends.

**Wang:** And you're supposed to be writing about current events, reflecting the latest happenings. If you write about something even slightly in the past, they

think you're behind the times.

**Zhang:** Like when you write about Shanghai in the '50s and '60s . . .

**Wang:** It's nostalgia; they say I'm being nostalgic.

**Zhang:** And that's strange. If you'd written about Shanghai in the '30s or Shanghai today it would have been fine. But if you write about the '50s and '60s it doesn't fit.

**Wang:** It's odd that they say I don't reflect modern Shanghai. First, novels aren't about "reflecting" anything. And isn't it modern anyway? When does it stop being modern? Five years, or ten, or just one? Victor Hugo wrote *Les Misérables* thirty years after the events were meant to have happened. *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* was set hundreds of years in the past. In general the cultural environment isn't very good nowadays – I'm not saying it's very bad; it can be good for the right person. If you can stand up to it, that's good, nobody bothers you. But if you're weak it can easily affect you.

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Fiction



畢飛宇

## Bi Feiyu

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# The Deluge

By Bi Feiyu

**T**he lass took after neither the mother nor the father – how *did* she come out so good looking? A crude joke went around the compound: “Dayao, she’s no seed of yours.” Dayao could hear the approval behind the crudeness, of course, and never lost his temper. Unruffled, he’d respond: “Genetic transplant.”

Dayao was a plumber, but he was a plumber at a teacher’s university, so naturally his diction was elevated. He was careful in his speech – he’d known plenty of professors, and even more plumbers, and in this day and age what real difference is there between a plumber and a professor? None at all, you might think. But there is one crucial difference, and it is located in the mouth. Different speech issues from different mouths, and so different pockets are filled with different gold. The tongue is a soft thing, but it holds a hard power.

Dayao, like his father, was no fool. Like any father he was happy to hear his daughter’s beauty praised, but of course he hoped the praise wouldn’t stop at her beauty. “She’s passable,” he’d say. “It’s more a matter of her bearing.” His nonchalance was disingenuous; he threw everything he had into elevating their compliments to a higher level. There’s two kinds of talk, they say, that should always be taken with a grain of salt: a mother’s praise for her son, and a father’s for his daughter. They may appear calm, but inside they’re burning up.

Of course Dayao wasn’t wrong about his daughter’s bearing. When Yao Zihan was only four her

mother, Han Yuejiao, began her training. First was dance class – ethnic dance. Dance is a queer thing, it can take root in a child’s bones, and raise them up. What does “raise them up” mean? It’s hard to say, but you know it when you see it. A firm axis ran from Yao Zihan’s waist up through her back, and into her neck, and it never for a moment left her.

She had many hidden talents, as well: She’d played *go* for four years, and was ranked. She had a lively Oustyle calligraphy. She could sketch accurately. She could do paper-cuts. She’d placed second in the municipal Math Olympics. She excelled at public speaking. She could program computers. She’d performed *guzheng* solos on the provincial Spring Gala program. Her English was particularly strong, and spoken with an American accent. When she said “water” it never came out as *wo-te*, but always the proper *wa-te-er*. Yao Zihan’s full array of skills far outstripped the ancient cultured requisites of chess, zither, calligraphy, and painting. Yao Zihan’s strengths were best displayed in mathematics: her scores had always remained comfortably within the top three of her class, and top ten of her year. It was uncanny. Her second year classmates at the elementary school had long since stopped seeing her as one of them. They weren’t jealous, quite the opposite: they took pride in her, and called her “Painted Skin,” after the beautiful monster of legend. But it went deeper than that. When she stood she rose with elegance; when she sat she was enthroned. She was the very figure of grace, the very image of an arty youth. The dean had seen every type of child under the sun. Never mind “Painted Skins,” he’d known zombies and

goblins, too. But to be honest, not one of those zombies or goblins had developed in as balanced or well-rounded a way as this Painted Skin. The dean once cornered her in the library, and asked in the reverent tones of a die-hard fan: “Where on earth do you find the time and energy?” “A girl’s got to be hard on herself,” she’d replied with the self-possession of a true teen idol.

And Yao Zihan was extremely hard on herself. From the moment she became a young woman, she hadn’t wasted a single hour of daylight. As with most children, it began with her parents pushing her. But in truth, whose mother or father *isn’t* hard on their children these days? Any parent picked at random would make a perfect prison warden. But in the end, of course, most kids can’t handle it: push them too hard and they’ll bite back sooner or later. Yao Zihan was different, though. Her ability to endure was akin to the sponge from Lu Xun’s story, that was squeezed dry by an iron hand: squeeze a little harder, and there’s yet another drop of water to be had. At a parent teacher meeting Dayao had once complained: “We keep reminding Yao Zihan that she should rest, but she won’t listen!” What could you do?

## 2

Michelle was very punctual. At precisely ten-thirty in the morning she presented herself in the Yao family living room. Dayao and Michelle had met under

interesting circumstances: in the women’s restroom of the library. Dayao had been fixing a spigot in the sink when Michelle had come barging in, a cigarette clamped in her jaw. Before she could light her cigarette she noticed a tall man standing there. She jumped out of her skin, blurted a mangled “sorry” in Chinese, and ran out. A few seconds later, however, she came strolling back in. She leaned against the doorframe, the cigarette trailing from her right hand at shoulder-height, and said archly, “Hey handsome, are you looking for a taste?” How did this foreign girl know a phrase like that! Dayao said, “I don’t eat in the restroom, and I don’t smoke in the restroom, either.” As he spoke he pointed to his uniform, and knocked on a water pipe with the wrench in his hand – the misunderstanding was promptly cleared up. Michelle was a bit embarrassed. She crumpled the cigarette in her palm and said, “Yours truly made a mistake.” Dayao laughed. She was an American girl, healthy and self-confident, probably in her early twenties. Still girlish, and a little vain. “A good comrade learns from her mistakes,” Dayao said. Once two people have met, they’re sure to meet again. After the restroom incident Dayao and Michelle ran into each other four or five times, and each time Michelle seemed thrilled to see him; she’d call out to him loudly: “handsome!” Dayao, for his part, would give her a thumbs-up, and answer “good comrade.” Just before the summer vacation began, Dayao saw Michelle walking past a crêpe stand. He squeezed his brakes, set one foot on the ground,

blocked her way, and asked her outright if she had any particular plans for the vacation. Michelle told him she would stay in Nanjing, and volunteer at a Kunqu opera theater. Dayao had no interest in Kunqu, he said: "I want to discuss a bit of business with you." Michelle arched an eyebrow, and rubbed the tips of three fingers together: "You mean, *bazness* bazness?"

"That's right," Dayao said. "Business."

Michelle said, "I've never had done bazness before."

Dayao wanted to laugh. Foreigners all talked like that. They added "had" to everything. He didn't laugh, though. "It's a simple thing. I want you to have a conversation with someone I know."

It took a moment, but Michelle understood – someone must need to practice speaking English.

"With who?"

"With a princess."

These poor Americans, they can never keep a problem inside their heads: all their wondering and pondering is right there on their faces for anyone to see. One eyebrow and the corner of her mouth thought for a while, and then Michelle realized what "princess" meant. She spoke in intentionally exaggerated "foreign-devil" Chinese: "Your royal highness, I understand-a!"

But then she wrapped her arms around her waist and glared at Dayao, her chin and gaze slowly shifting in opposite directions. She put on a crafty look, and said, "I'm very expensive, you understand-a?"

Dayao knew the prices, of course. He low-balled: "Eighty an hour."

"One hundred and twenty," she said.

"One hundred." Dayao said. He added, meaningfully: "The yuan is very valuable these days. Deal?"

Of course Michelle knew the yuan was very valuable. One hundred just for an hour of talking was a good price. She flashed a toothy smile: "Why not!"

Standing in their living room, Michelle looked as cheerful as ever. She was excited and kept rubbing her hands; this made her appear to take up even more space, and the living room seemed smaller. Dayao formally introduced her to the princess. During the summer vacation following elementary school, the princess had been given excellent training in social niceties, and her comportment was excellent, proper and noble. She was somewhat expressionless, though, as if Michelle crowded her. Dayao had noticed that his daughter's face rarely betrayed any expression, as though it were disconnected from her thoughts and feelings. She bore a perpetual look of disinterested amiability. The princess, solemn and noble, ushered Michelle into her sanctuary, and Dayao closed the door behind them, leaving it a crack. He wanted to listen, all the more so because he could not understand. What greater sense of accomplishment could a father have than to hear his daughter speaking a language he does not understand? He relished it; the world was vast and full of marvels.

Dayao took a moment to signal to his wife with his chin. Han Yuejiao, a gardener at the teachers' univer-

sity, took the hint immediately. She donned her sleeve guards and started making dumplings. The couple had planned things the night before: they would treat the American girl to a meal. Both Dayao and his wife were canny; they never made a losing deal. They calculated thusly: they were paying Michelle for one hour of language instruction, but if they could get her to stay for dinner afterwards, their daughter would get two.

Dayao had been pondering the question of his daughter's spoken English for a long time. Her English was excellent, there was no question – her midterm and semester test results were proof of that. But one day last year, as he was eating lunch, Dayao happened to glance at the television, which was showing a middle school English competition. As he watched he suddenly realized – Yao Zihan's "excellent English" only went as far as the eye and hand, not the tongue. To put it another way, it wasn't "hard power." Dayao and Han Yuejiao watched the program together. As luck would have it, they got addicted. As highly-experienced consumers of television, Dayao and Han Yuejiao were like everyone else in the country: their favorite thing to watch was something called "PK." This is the age of the PK, the "player kill," the utter annihilation of one's opponent. Singers PK, dancers PK, pianists PK, public speakers PK, even blind daters PK, so of course English speakers PK, too. On the day of the children's English PK finals, Dayao came up with a new set of "good girl" standards and requirements for Yao Zihan. Simply put, they were these: One, to get on television.

Two, to withstand being PK'ed. Stated a little more clearly: the child who went through the PK and was still standing at the end was the truly "good child." Those who fell would at best be considered "revolutionary martyrs." That night, Dayao and Han Yuejiao began drawing up their plans. Their thinking went as follows: Due to an oversight on their part, Yao Zihan had had no spoken English training during elementary school, and if she were to suddenly be thrown into a competition now, as a middle-schooler, she might not even make it through the elimination round. But that mattered little – so long as Yao Zihan began cramming in early middle school, by the time she was in high school three or four years later, she'd be able to tell her moving story on the television; she would do her parents proud. As she imagined this scene of her daughter "doing her parents proud," Han Yuejiao's heart swelled and broke, and her eyes swam with tears. She and her daughter had been through so much, so much . . . truly they had been through so much.

At about the same time Michelle emerged from Yao Zihan's bedroom, Han Yuejiao was setting the table for the dumpling dinner. Han Yuejiao had never before had direct contact with "foreign friends," and she was feeling embarrassed. Embarrassment can often come out as brusqueness, and she said to Michelle: "Eat! Dumplings!" Dayao noticed that Michelle seemed as nonplussed by the steaming plate of dumplings as she had been the day he surprised her in the restroom – her face had flushed red. Michelle spread



Illustration by Wang Yan

her long arms wide and said, “How could I possibly?” Hearing that, Dayao immediately assumed the role of foreign diplomat; it was his responsibility to clarify the stance of the Chinese. He told Michelle, in tones of great gravity: “The Chinese people are very hospitable.”

“Of course . . . of course.” Michelle answered, equally grave. “Of course.”

Michelle was in a bind, however. She had dinner plans. She hesitated. In the end she was swayed by the rising steam – she pulled out her phone, and told her

friend that she was going to have a small meeting with three Chinese people, and she would have to arrive a bit later. Ah, so this American girl could lie – and even her lies were delivered in authentic Chinese style.

The dumpling banquet, however, was not a joyous one, mainly because it did not develop according to Dayao’s plans. Before the meal officially began, Michelle delivered a whole speech’s worth of polite courtesies, all in Chinese. Dayao glanced at his daughter, trying to give her a hint. Yao Zihan, sharp as a needle, *of course* caught his meaning. She picked up the

thread of Michelle's conversation immediately, in English. But Michelle gave Yao Zihan a brilliant smile and encouraged her to "use Chinese," pointing out that "in her own home" it was "impolite" to speak a foreign language in front of her parents. Michelle was careful to be modest, of course, saying: "I also want to learn Chiniss from you."

Dayao hadn't seen this coming. He'd paid for Michelle to speak English with his daughter. Yet now his daughter was speaking Chinese with Michelle, and not only was it free, she was getting a dumpling dinner as part of the deal. How had this happened?

Han Yuejiao shot a look at her husband. Dayao caught it. Naturally it was a look filled with import. Not accusation, exactly, but certainly a degree of disappointment, and Dayao blamed himself.

The moment Michelle was gone Dayao went nuts. He wanted to curse, but couldn't bring himself to do it in front of Yao Zihan. His taciturn daughter had a constant deterrent effect on him, which he resented, and resentfulness magnified his suffering. After more than ten years of working in an academy of higher education he'd learned to frame his suffering within a larger context, and in tones of great pain he said to Yao Zihan, "The weak nation has no voice – why must it always be we who are cheated?"

Han Yuejiao only stared emptily at the few remaining dumplings. The roiling steam was gone and the dumplings lay like corpses, unappealing. But Yao Zihan turned away from them and began fiddling with

her computer and television. Within moments, scenes of her conversation with Michelle suddenly appeared on the television, and she was able to fast-forward, reverse, and replay them. Yao Zihan, the tireless student, had recorded the whole thing so she could study it afterwards as often as she pleased.

Dayao stared at the screen, elated. It was the kind of joy particular to the downtrodden, when at last they're able to take some small advantage. His mood reversed so quickly and so thoroughly that his joy was also magnified, almost hysterical. Dayao clutched his daughter tightly, and said stiffly: "Our motherland thanks you!"

### 3

Dance class was at seven that evening. Yao Zihan wouldn't let her mother take her. She got on her bike and set out alone. Though Han Yuejiao was ostensibly employed as a gardener, she was essentially idle, and her only real duty and pleasure was to accompany her daughter to her classes. When she was younger Yao Zihan had little say in the matter, and by this point Yuejiao had become accustomed to the routine; it was she who needed it now. But at the start of that year's summer vacation, Yao Zihan's face had told them in no uncertain terms that they were no longer allowed to accompany her. Dayao and Han Yuejiao were like any parents: their daughter may be essentially expressionless, but they could still tell from her face what they

were supposed to do.

A chill breeze was blowing. Yao Zihan rode her bicycle, her emotions torn. She'd forbidden her parents from accompanying her because she was resentful, and angry at them. Any type of dance would have done – why couldn't her mother have chosen International Standard Ballroom Dance? Yao Zihan had only recently fallen under the spell of "ISBD." ISBD was cool; each movement quick and sharp, electrifying. Yao Zihan had fallen in love with it instantly. She'd asked her teacher if there was still time to switch to ISBD, but his answer was vague – it wasn't *impossible*. But that was the thing about movement: once you'd trained past a certain point it took root in you, and the harder you'd trained the more difficult it was to make the switch. Yao Zihan had tried a few of the ISBD movements in front of the big mirror, but couldn't get them right. They were too graceful, too gentle. What you'd expect from a "little woman."

Then there was the *guzheng*. Why on earth had they picked the *guzheng* for her? When had that started? Yao Zihan had recently become infatuated with being "cool," and developed a distaste for anything that was visually "uncool." Yao Zihan had once performed in a school concert, and afterwards took a look at the recording. She looked gormless compared to the others. A *guzheng* performance wasn't even as impressive as the *di* flute, not to mention the sax or piano. Embarrassingly earnest, and totally uncool. Yao Zihan cut too miserable a figure to appear onstage.

The evening wind lifted her short hair and made her squint. What Yao Zihan felt wasn't just resentment, wasn't just anger. She hated them. Was this what they called taste? Was this what they called vision? Meanwhile all the drudgery had been hers. Not that she minded drudgery, if it was worth it. What she found most depressing was that she'd progressed too far to give it all up now. But she felt cheated. Big time. If only she could just start her life over again, and be her own boss, make her own decisions. Just look at her: her life was obviously off-track but she couldn't hit the brakes. She couldn't even let up on the accelerator. It was nuts. What greater sorrow could life hold? Yao Zihan suddenly felt old; in her imagination the crow's feet were piling up at the corners of her eyes.

In the end it all came down to one thing: money. Her family was too poor. If they had money, her parents' decisions might have been different from the start. A piano, for instance: they couldn't afford one. Even if they could it wouldn't fit in the house, just finding a spot for it would be a problem.

If you got right down to it, though, the problem of money had always been secondary, the real issue was her parents' taste, and vision. Yao Zihan's sense of humiliation welled up again. Her classmates all knew Yao Zihan's home was in the "big yard" of the teachers' university. That sounded good, as far as it went, but Yao Zihan never went into any more detail. In fact, her parents were peasants from the distant edge of town. It had been the relocation and expansion of the teach-



ers' university that had allowed Mr. and Mrs. Dayao to transform themselves overnight from a young peasant couple to university staff members. That transformation had cost Dayao's father no small amount of cash.

It is the nature of humiliation that it can lead to self-pity. Yao Zihan, that renowned Painted Skin, that encyclopaedic giant, pitied herself profoundly. It was all completely meaningless. Through all that suffering and hardship she'd accomplished nothing but to lay the wrong-headed foundations of a wrong-headed life. It was too late to go back.

Thank god for "Her Royal Highness." "Her Royal Highness" was in the same dance class as Yao Zihan, a goblin-grade boy from No. 21 Middle School. He was actually quite macho, but the girls in the dance class insisted on calling him by his nickname. HRH didn't mind, he just gave a red-lipped, white-toothed smile.

Yao Zihan and HRH weren't friends for any particular reason, besides the fact that they had similar problems. People with similar problems might not be able to comfort each other, but just being together can often be reassuring. HRH had told Yao Zihan that his greatest wish was to invent a time machine, in which all the children no longer belonged to their parents. Instead, they would be their own masters, and could choose their fathers and mothers as they pleased.

Yao Zihan and HRH walked their bikes back from class, chatting for a few minutes along the way. Just as they were reaching the intersection, as they were about to part, Dayao and Han Yuejiao appeared and

blocked the way. The two of them were squeezed awkwardly onto one electric bicycle, and looked peculiar. The moment she saw them Yao Zihan was unhappy – hadn't she told them not to accompany her? Yet here they were.

At this particular moment, however, she wasn't the only unhappy one. She hadn't attended very carefully to her parents. If she had, she would have seen that Han Yuejiao's face was severe, and Dayao's expression could be described as distorted.

He squeezed the brakes of the bike, and said with no preamble: "What do you mean by this?"

"What do I mean by what?" said Yao Zihan.

"What do you mean by not letting us accompany you?" he said.

"What do you mean what do I mean by not letting us accompany you?" she said.

Dayao dropped this pointless back-and-forth and went to the heart of the matter: "Who gave you permission to talk to him?" Without giving Yao Zihan a chance to answer he repeated the question: "Who gave you permission to talk to him?"

Yao Zihan looked at her father – she still hadn't really understood what he meant. Dayao retained a grip on himself, but it wasn't a very firm grip, and he could lose it at any moment.

Just as in the classroom, where Yao Zihan didn't need the teachers to ask a question more than twice, she understood what her father meant. She pushed her bicycle forward, saying quietly: "Excuse me, please let



me pass.”

Compared to Dayao’s thunderous power, Yao Zihan possessed at the very most four ounces of strength. But that was the miraculous thing: those mere four ounces were enough to let her simply walk through the thunder. She was as cool as pure bottled water; as noble and self-possessed as a princess, and just as condescending.

The daughter’s arrogance and haughtiness was enough to kill the father. Dayao barked, “That’s the end of your dance classes!” It was nonsense, of course; he’d simply lost control.

Yao Zihan had already quietly passed by the electric bike. She suddenly turned back, this time she looked nothing like a princess – on the contrary, she was a scolding shrew. “I’m tired of it anyway!” she said, her pretty face flushed red. “Send me to ISBD classes, if you can afford it!”

Yao Zihan disappeared beneath the streetlights, and Dayao did not pursue her. He propped his electric bike up by the side of the road. He was calming down. But calm sorrow is the most painful. Dayao gazed at his wife, like a fish newly out of water, his mouth opening and closing. His daughter had finally broached the subject of money – it had only been a matter of time before she said what was really on her mind. As the lass grew older she was increasingly humiliated by her family’s poverty, increasingly contemptuous of them as parents, Dayao could see that plainly. He could feel it – in the first half of the year alone she’d concealed two

parent-teacher conferences from him. He hadn’t dared ask; it had made him angry, but even more it had made him ashamed. Shame is a very peculiar organ. It’s full of veins and arteries, just below the surface, and turns into a bloody mess at the slightest touch.

Dayao felt sad, but more than that he was bitter. Bitter not only about what all those years had cost him, but because there was a secret behind that bitterness: Dayao wasn’t rich, but his family was. That’s an awkward statement – Dayao really didn’t have much money, but his family did.

How did his family come to have money? That was a long tale to tell, one that started in the year of Yao Zihan’s birth. It was at once strange and relatively common: the teachers’ college needed land. And the moment the teachers’ college needed land, Dayao was elevated to a Buddha before he could say *amitabha*. This was a strange age, Dayao felt, and an even stranger land.

Mostly it was thanks to Dayao’s father, Laoyao. The clever old peasant had discovered, long before Dayao was even married, that the city was like a pizzle on its wedding night: it was big, and getting bigger, and would eventually knock up against their own front door. Their house was built on foundations of gold: if the teachers’ college didn’t buy it, the University of Science and Technology would; if an institute of higher education didn’t buy it, a property developer would. In a word: there would be a buyer. Of course, plenty of people besides Laoyao knew this secret. Everyone had

figured it out. The problem is that as people survey their future prospects they tend to get greedy, to lose their patience, and to pounce on their perceived gains. But the moment they pounce, they lose their position. He told his son: don't go anywhere. Whatever you might be able to grasp is just petty cash, you're waiting for the big one. Earning money by the sweat of your brow is a mug's game – have you ever seen the wealthy sweat? You just sit tight. He put a firm stop to his son's imbecile plan to buy an apartment in the city, and refused to let him shift his housing registration, either. He instructed his son to stay put in Yao Village on the outskirts of town, and then to build, slowly and steadily. And finally to grit his teeth and wait. "Do you really think," the old peasant would say, "that rich people earned their own money?"

Dayao's father bet correctly, and his plots of land won him big money. It was no small winning, either – it was a proper, respectable chunk of cash. The old man didn't let it go to his head, though. He handed over everything he'd made to his son, then made three pronouncements to the couple. 1) Nothing we do in life means anything, except what's done for our children. As your father I've made you wealthy; I've done my part. 2) Don't show it off. You're not a businessman, so live as if you were still poor. 3) The two of you are parents, too, and you've got to provide for *your* children. But just sitting and waiting isn't going to work for their generation. You've got to find a way to send that child in your belly to America.

Dayao didn't have money, but his family did. As if it were a dream, as if it had been a parlor trick. Dayao often dreamt of counting money – he'd count and count, until he awoke in a fright. Every time he awoke he was happy, and exhausted, though when he thought back on it they seemed more like nightmares.

And now this. The damned lass thought her family was poor, an embarrassment to her. But what did she know? Did she know all of her life's secret twists and turns? Not by a long shot.

Han Yuejiao grieved with him. She hesitated: "Maybe . . . maybe tonight we should tell her that we're not a poor family after all."

"No," said Dayao. He was firm on this point. "Absolutely not. The get of the poor are great, the sons of the rich wastrels . . . You think I don't know her? The moment we tell her she'll drop the ball. If she doesn't work hard, she'll never amount to squat."

But the more Dayao thought the angrier he got, and the angrier he got the more bitter he felt. He shouted in the direction of his long-vanished daughter: "I've got money! Your old da is rolling in it!"

He'd finally said it. That felt good. That was more like it.

A young man passing by laughed. He inclined his head and said, "I heard every word!"

## 4

This Michelle really was something – it was just

an hour of English practice, but she insisted on doing it on a soccer field. Wasn't she worried about the sun on such a hot day? The lass usually hated being out in the sun, but as her face hardened she insisted on going to the pitch. She was being stubborn; she was still trying to gall her parents. Fine, then – go if you want to go. Anyway, the atmosphere at home was heavy and uncomfortable. So long as you're diligent, you're learning no matter where you are, right?

The sun glared overhead, and there was no one besides Michelle and Yao Zihan on the pitch. They weren't far from home, but Yao Zihan had never been in a place like this. She was frightened by its emptiness – or rather by its size. And also by its garishness: the grass was an expanse of emerald green, surrounded by a brick-red running track, which was itself divided by white lines that zipped all the way down to the end. The stands were even more riotous: painted a different color for each zone. Majestic. Brilliant. Grand. Yao Zihan surveyed her surroundings, feeling a little dizzy – it must have been particularly warm on the soccer field. Michelle told her that back in Michigan she'd been a “very good” soccer player, and had even made the papers. She liked soccer, this “girl's sport.” Yao Zihan didn't understand how soccer could be a “girl's sport.” Of course it is, Michelle explained. Men only like American football. She didn't like it at all, it was “too brutal.”

As they conversed – that is to say, as they held class – they didn't notice that the sun had grown milder.

The storm clouds were gathering overhead – it was too late, entirely too late. The clouds were gathering with greedy speed, and would break at any instant. As Yao Zihan realized what was happening she covered her head, and watched as Michelle opened her arms and leaned her head back, opening her mouth to the Heavens. Now that was a mouth worthy of the name. It was at once alarming and alluring. The raindrops struck her face and bounced off, leaping and dancing. Michelle went crazy, and yelled at the top of her voice: “Here . . . comes . . . the . . . love!” By the time her voice faded she was thoroughly soaked, her alarming breasts swelling through her shirt.

“Here comes the love?” A crazy thing to say – before Yao Zihan had time to ask, Michelle had grabbed hold of her and taken off running. It was a deluge, so heavy the ground smoked. After Yao Zihan had taken seven or eight steps some mysterious inner part of her body came to life, and her spirit awoke. If she hadn't been in the midst of it, Yao Zihan would never have experienced the sweet pleasure of a hard rain. It was new and strange kind of physical contact, like a secret not yet revealed, tempting yet troubling.

The rain was too much. In just a few minutes there was standing water on the green. Michelle let go of Yao Zihan's hand and took off towards one of the goals. As she turned and came back, she acted as if she'd just made a goal. Her face was exultant, and her finishing move was a long slide across the grass, on her knees. She took it a little too far, and nearly crashed



Illustration by Wang Yan

into Yao Zihan. Even after her body had come to rest, her breasts seemed to continue their struggle. “Goal!!” she shouted. “*Goal!!*” With hardly a pause, she shouted: “Why aren’t you celebrating?”

Of course she would celebrate. Yao Zihan dropped to her knees, raising a splash. The two teammates embraced ecstatically, overflowing with ecstasy, as if they really had just won the World Cup. What a thrill! How fucking awesome! It had all popped out of nowhere, as real as anything.

The rain fell harder, and Yao Zihan erupted with a

desire to scream out loud. Michelle had been teaching her quite a bit of what they called special vocabulary, and without giving it a thought she shouted something dirty in English: “You’re a fucking slut!”

Michelle was soaked through, her face dripping, strands of hair running with raindrops. Through the thick-falling rain Yao Zihan could see the corners of her mouth spreading in opposite directions behind her messed-up hair. She was smiling, crookedly.

“I am,” she said.

Rainwater flowed rapidly down Yao Zihan’s face.

She had frightened herself. There was no way she could have said something like that in Chinese. Foreign languages were strange – you could say anything you liked – but now the “translation” was ringing in her head, disturbing her. What had she said! Perhaps seeking some balance, she squeezed her fists tight, lifted her head, and shouted at the sky:

“I’m a fucking slut, too!”

They both started laughing, and could not stop. The rain roared down, and the two young women roared with laughter until they were dizzy. But then the rain stopped, with no warning, much as it had started. Yao Zihan desperately wished the rain would keep falling – would fall forever. But it stopped, it disappeared, and left Yao Zihan soaked and exposed on the soccer field. The field was washed clean, and all its colors appeared in their original form: the green brilliant, the red bloody, the white snowy, all shockingly unreal.

## 5

The fainting spell came over Yao Zihan while she was practicing *guzheng*. It was startling. She collapsed over the instrument with a twanging bang, snapping several of the strings. What could have made her faint? It was just a cold; she’d been taking cold medicine for a couple of days. Han Yuejiao bitterly regretted letting her daughter out the door when she had a fever. On the other hand, this wasn’t the first time. When had she ever let a headache or a fever stop her? She refused

to miss a single class. “The others are making progress!” That’s what she always said, usually stamping a foot. It’s what Han Yuejiao found most lovable about the girl, and of course also what made her most proud.

When Dayao and Han Yuejiao rushed in they found Yao Zihan half-conscious. She’d vomited, and her front was covered in partially-digested dinner. Dayao had never seen his darling in this state. He gave a cry, and started weeping. Rather than panicking, Han Yuejiao set about cleaning her daughter up. No one knows a girl like her mother. She knew that Yao Zihan would hate being so filthy, so she made it look like it didn’t happen. If Zihan knew, she might go silent for three or four days, at least.

Clearly, it was more than a cold. Yao Zihan had been a sickly child, and Han Yuejiao was no stranger to hospitals – she knew her way around blood tests, temperatures, medicines, and IV drips. But this time was completely different. The nurses wouldn’t say anything. The tests they were running didn’t appear to be regular blood tests, either. The needle was alarmingly long, around ten centimeters. Dayao and Han Yuejiao watched from behind glass as the nurses turned Yao Zihan over, opened her dress, and exposed her lower back. The nurse held the long needle over the middle of her back, and plunged it in. What was drawn out was not blood, but what looked like water. It seemed to be thirty or forty ccs of water. Dayao and Han Yuejiao were beside themselves with worry; sensing the gravity of the situation from the number of unfamiliar

tests. Two hours later, the situation's gravity was confirmed by medical instruments. Tests of her spinal fluid came back with a protein level of 890, far in excess of the normal level of around 450. Her white blood cell count was a shocking 560, fifty-six times the normal amount. The doctor relayed the clinical significance of these figures to Dayao: "Inflammation of the brain parenchyma. Brain fever." Daoyao didn't know what parenchyma was, but he understood "brain fever," and he sat down heavily on the polished tile of the hospital floor.

## 6

Yao Zihan finally awoke from her coma a week later. It had been an experience worse than death for Dayao and Han Yuejiao. They had kept a silent watch by her bedside, gazing at one another in moments of despair. They were furtive, dread-filled, helpless looks, looks of inexpressible pain. The glances were brief, the pain they saw in each other's eyes unbearable. They watched as their eyes sunk, and darkened. Unaccustomed to embracing, they nevertheless held each other up and leaned against the other in the hospital. Otherwise neither could have stayed upright. There was hope in their hearts, but as time crept slowly on, hope receded. They had no desire but that their daughter might one day open her eyes again, and speak. If only she could speak again, they would gladly give their lives – even if it meant she would be sent to an or-

phanage, they would be happy.

Michelle was dutiful – she'd called Dayao from the gate of their building. As soon as he heard her voice anger swept over him. If she hadn't insisted on Zihan going to the soccer field, the lass wouldn't have gotten this ghastly illness. He had no real right to push all blame on to her, though. He was a plumber at a teachers college, after all. "Please don't call again," he managed to say with great restraint and courtesy. After hanging up, he paused, then deleted her number for good measure.

Hope can never be bought with human suffering, but heaven did finally smile upon them. On the morning of the eighth day – dawn, to be precise – Yao Zihan finally opened her eyes. It was Han Yuejiao who noticed first. She was in shock, and her scalp tingled. But she didn't cry out. She didn't dare feel happy. She simply looked at Zihan with complete focus. She was looking, studying her expression. Great heaven above, a smile crept onto her face. She was smiling at Han Yuejiao, her eyes limpid and lively, her gaze in silent communion with her mother's.

Yao Zihan looked at her mother, and her lips parted weakly. she said, "ma." Han Yuejiao could hear no sound, but she could tell by the shape of Zihan's mouth that she was calling for her mother, calling out – it was true. Han Yuejiao's answer welled up from the depths of her heart. She kept answering, she needed to grab hold. Dayao, sensing something, followed her into the room. Yao Zihan's limpid gaze shifted from

her mother's face to her father's. She was smiling, only a little wearily. This time she spoke audibly.

"Dad," she said in English.

"What?" he asked.

"Where is this place?"

Dayao stared at her, uncomprehending, then leaned in closer and asked, "What are you saying?"

"Please tell me, what happened? Why aren't I at home? God, why are you two so thin? Have you been pushing yourselves too hard? Mom, if you don't mind, would you tell me if you two are sick?"

Dayao stared fixedly at his daughter. She seemed perfectly normal, apart from being tired – but what on earth was she saying? Why couldn't she speak Chinese? "Lass," he said. "Speak sense."

"Thank you, boss. Thank you very much for giving me such a respectable job, and of course such a respectable salary. I could never have afforded a piano otherwise. I have to say I still think it's too expensive, but I like it."

"Lass, it's your father. Speak properly!" Dayao was seeing double, he couldn't hold himself together. "Doctor!" he shouted, in a near-squeak.

"And my thanks to all the judges, thank you very much. I'm very happy to be here. May I have a glass of water? It seems I'm not expressing myself clearly, allow me to repeat myself: May I have a glass of water? Water. God . . ."

Dayao reached out his hand, and covered his daughter's mouth. He couldn't understand her, but

he couldn't bear to hear any more. He was terrified, dread-filled. Hurried footsteps sounded in the corridor, and Dayao stripped off his shirt. He knew for sure his daughter needed emergency assistance, she needed a transfusion. He was willing to open every vein in his body; he was willing to give until he was dry as a bone.

*Translated by Eric Abrahamsen*

## Translator's Note

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Eric  
Abrahamsen

This was a strange piece to translate. It passes through so many different registers: from the vernacular to officialese, from hip to square, cartoonishly foreign to cartoonishly Chinese . . .

The first couple of paragraphs seemed like familiar territory, at first: written in that rustic, down-homey story-telling voice; all-this-happened-years-before-you-were-born; as if someone's uncle had just cleared his throat and launched into a long-winded reminiscence. It's a familiar voice from an older generation of earthy, rustic literature, and is difficult to translate because it so often comes out as a series of improbable rhetorical flourishes, various body parts and embarrassingly hokey sayings, and readers are rolling their eyes before you've even gotten around to "butter my butt and call me a biscuit."

But in section three of the story Bi moves on to the daughter of the family, Yao Zihan, and the narrative voice shifts from the anonymous storyteller of the opening sections to something tinged with "young person talk": "2B" and "*niubai*" are both ways that a Chinese girl with delicate sensibilities might dance around the vulgar but highly popular term *niubi*. The terms *ku* (a transliteration of "cool") and *shuai* (technically "handsome" or "stylish," but used more like "awesome") are quoted at first, but are later subsumed into the narration, along with terms like *biao*, which I've rendered as "nuts," but technically means a whirlwind.

Then we meet Michelle, the American girl who mangles her Chinese pronunciation (and also enacts



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a whole clutch of foreigner stereotypes, but never mind), denoted in the text by the use of incorrect Chinese characters in dialogue (the correct character helpfully provided in parentheses by Bi). No problem here: English and its infinitely malleable spelling are made for situations like these. Goofy foreigner accent solved.

Then we have a few gems of official Chinese language emerging from the mouths of regular folk: Dayao starts going on about national humiliation (“The weak nation has no voice – why must it always be we who are cheated?”), and later channels the emotions of the entire motherland.

Yao Zihan’s grandfather, a canny old gentleman, posed a bit of difficulty as he returns to the earthy (“Earning money by the sweat of your brow is a mug’s game”) and mixes in the gruff dignity of traditional Confucianism: “Nothing we do in life means anything, except what’s done for our children. As your father I’ve made you wealthy; I’ve done my part.”

I wonder now if I haven’t gone too far in toning down the storytelling quirks. There are several places in the Chinese where the narrator steps forward and offers some little “ain’t-life-like-that” kind of observation, and come to think of it several of the more embarrassing pronouncements about foreigners and their crazy ways are also delivered in this voice. Perhaps I should have embraced it, turned up the corn a bit, and created more distance between author and narrator.

Luckily things end up where most translators se-

cretly hope they will: with a big chunk of English you don’t even need to translate. Yao Zihan’s closing lines are actually written in English text in the story: a Chinese reader would feel precisely the same confusion while reading the text as her father Dayao did while listening to her speak.

Equivalence can only be taken so far, obviously, and I’m not going to translate her speech back into Chinese just to confuse English readers. But I’m actually kind of pleased with the present arrangement: Yao Zihan’s first line in English is followed by “she said in English,” but for the rest of the conversation, the only indication that they’re not speaking the same language is that Dayao doesn’t understand anything she says. Thus readerly confusion is preserved.

# A Professional Interest in Suffering: A Conversation with Bi Feiyu

## Fragile and cold – this is how I see modern relations

**Zhang Li:** I remember when I read “Breastfeeding Woman.” It was about children who had been left in the countryside after their mothers went off to work, and how those children came to associate all the trappings of motherhood with women who were completely unrelated to them. It really struck me. So I reread it last year, and I feel like it really touched on something essential about human relations – with China’s changes as a country, relations have also changed, which reflects a change in values as well.

**Bi Feiyu:** I wrote “Breastfeeding Woman” in 1995. I wasn’t intending to write it from the standpoint of the disappearing villages and towns, but rather about the disappearance of the traditional family. Since the “basic policy” was implemented in 1982, family has become something abbreviated and simplified, and social relations have become more fragile. Why do I say fragile? Because the nuclear family is incredibly unstable. These families are under tremendous pressure in terms of education, health, social safety, and employment. It’s so easy to become neurotic. All it takes is something minor and unexpected to ruin everything in the blink of an eye. At the same time, our expectations for the next generation have become increasingly neurotic as well, almost absurdly so. Under such circumstances, I don’t know what kind of change to

expect in our values. What I do know is that our values correspond with a few overall symptoms, uncertainty and anxiety, a lack of fortitude, a lack of perseverance.

**Zhang Li:** Wasn’t this the case with “Family Matters”? In the world of children, schools are the working units, and also the tribe. The classmates become each other’s husbands and wives, mothers and sons, fathers and daughters, or relatives. The children are imitating relations that appear to be everyday, matter-of-fact realities, but are in fact already history. The reader feels a sense of longing. This story caused a lot of soul-searching. It examined the deep emptiness of the human heart.

**Bi Feiyu:** I’ll take this opportunity to reiterate that “Family Matters” is not a love story; it’s a parody. It’s one generation’s collective parody of the traditional family. Why is it a parody? Because the family has disappeared. To put it more poetically, all that’s left is the retreating figure of the family. In this sense, “Family Matters” is also a story of nostalgia, of children playing house. As a fiction writer, I don’t have the ability, or the interest, to analyze it academically. I was just “chilling out” with the kids. To take a phrase from international relations, I used this book to express my “serious concern.” Changing your family structure can change a person’s genes, or even the nature of an entire race, of this I am sure.

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**Zhang Li:** Perhaps this issue could be addressed from a domestic Chinese angle as well.

**Bi Feiyu:** The economic reforms in China provide another context. When we emerged from the Cultural Revolution, we were so eager to shed our Red ideology, but we didn't think about reconstruction, and certainly we weren't concerned about people's souls. Since then, the incentive principles of the market economy in China have become perverted.

**Zhang Li:** When I was a child, I thought that the ultimate goal in life was to live like a Westerner, with lights and a telephone on every street corner. I thought that was how to have it all. But now I realize that's not the case.

**Bi Feiyu:** Europe and the US also have market economies, but it's not the same. First, the rules of their game are actually in effect. Second is their Christian background. There's a sentence in the Bible: "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." The problem is here. I call this pressure from heaven. There's a famous quote from Carnegie: "To die rich is to die disgraced." There's another quote from Rockefeller: "Gain all you can, and give all you can." Both ideas are related directly to the idea of pressure from heaven – so it gets interesting. With this pressure, their wealth is granted a more nurturing and wide-reaching role.

**Zhang Li:** We don't have this pressure, or this sense of awe.

**Bi Feiyu:** We don't have this pressure, which is fine. But this brings about another problem: When we produce wealth, there is really no direction or focus for this wealth. "Just give it to your son" could count as one I suppose. "What's the point of getting rich?" We respond instinctively to these questions. We're still a long way off from providing a rational answer to this question. We have made the journey to prosperity under the shadow of intense poverty. To put it frankly, when we work to earn money we think only of money, never people. In other words, we do not leave space for any "other" – selling fake medicine and stealing from charities are perhaps the most extreme and craziest examples. This has also given rise to the second defining characteristic of China's human relations: coldness.

**Zhang Li:** Fragile and cold. You've summarized it vividly. It makes me think of your story *The Days We Were in Love*, in which two college graduates find comfort in each other in an unfamiliar city. The story ends with her showing him pictures of other suitors on her cell phone, and him helping her select the best one, with a car and a house, to marry, after which they amicably part ways.

**Bi Feiyu:** *The Days We Were in Love* is a story about cold-hearted love. How cold? Colder than 37.5 de-

grees. You can go back and take a look, I write about their body temperatures, the weather, without any fanfare. I do the same in describing sex. Amongst all of my novels, the way I described sex in this book was almost to the point where I couldn't stand it myself – when it was formally published, the editor actually made some changes. You know, when I was writing that story I ran into a real problem. Other than sex, I didn't know where I could take things. Do you know what I mean? I've run into so many young people like that. A lot of peoples' lives are like that – I try to write but nothing else comes out. It's one of the most memorable experiences I've had in writing.

**Zhang Li:** This book is reminiscent of Lu Xun's "Mourning." The two main characters are lovers from outside provinces, living on the margins of urban life. But the differences are also clear. The spiritual world of Zijun and Juansheng was immense. They didn't accept the standards and judgments put forth by society. But in *The Days We Were in Love*, the superficial value judgments have an influence over their behavior, and they have no choice but to accept it.

**Bi Feiyu:** The issue you raise is an important one. The youth of the May Fourth era shared one basic characteristic: the overwhelming desire to build a new century. Whether depraved or hopeless, the desire to build something new was an essential part of their psychology. But things are different now. Our culture has been poised at the end of a century, and has two distinct characteristics. I can summarize them in two words. Impatient and short-sighted, a world away from the principle of utility of the May Fourth period.

**Zhang Li:** Perhaps even more extreme is "Sleeping" (appearing first in October, 2009 issue of *People's Literature*). In the last part of the novel, when the mistress Xiao Mei wants to "rest" with the college student she's walking dogs with, he holds out five fingers (indicating 500 yuan). It leaves the reader very cold. I feel like the biggest difference between *The Days We Were in Love* and "Mourning" is that, in the former, faced with the threat of money and capital, love and honor have no place – this is the result of GDP purism. Presented with the might of capital, people become completely insignificant.

**Bi Feiyu:** Talking about money, I have no choice but to talk about our civil society. The biggest problem in Chinese society is not money, but rather the lack of a developed civil society. Civil society has received a lot of attention in recent years. But in truth, squared off against the overwhelming presence of the state, the positive elements of civil society are completely powerless. What's more alarming is that there's been a trend of even further restriction of existing civil society resources. If civil society were allowed to develop, to have power, what would happen? It would inevitably influence how money is directed in our society. Civil society has a fundamental role in redistributing wealth. This redistribution is beneficial. It's not just a matter of "working more to earn more," but can, rather, highlight the simplicity and crudeness of simply working more to earn more.

**Zhang Li:** Your works such as "Breastfeeding Woman," "Rainbow," and "Family Matters" have been a reflection of your understanding of China's changing

social relations, which to some degree is a result of the relationship between development and modernization. You attempt to express the universal confusion of our era.

**Bi Feiyu:** You just used a crucial word: confusion. As a writer, this is what I feel the most. Confusion. Why do I feel confused? I'm confused about a lot of issues. I have discovered that I often sink into moral relativism. I must admit that I am a relativist on lots of issues. To rid myself of this confusion, or this relativism, I have to give myself a boundary when dealing with an issue. That boundary is China. This so-called development is China's development and this so-called modernization is China's modernization. When I think about things in these terms, it gets a bit simpler.

**Zhang Li:** China is, after all, our place of being.

**Bi Feiyu:** China's development is a good thing. China's modernization is, too. But in the face of problems, I am a writer. My role is very simple, and that is to critique and question. I don't necessarily think that my critique or questioning has much effect, but it's still the role of a novelist. By nature, writers are weak, have a penchant for pessimism, and a kind of professional interest in suffering. Then there is criticism. Rather than say this is a writer's duty, one should say that this is a result of a writer's psychology. Writers' temperaments and minds have dictated their role. Maybe the biggest point of confusion for a writer is this: even if he knows a road must be taken, he still questions it, and still criticizes.

## We have not entered an era of diversity.

**Zhang Li:** Your stories *Yu Mi*, *Yu Xiu*, and *Yu Yang* are very influential, depicting the lives and fates of three women during and after the Cultural Revolution. They were translated together as the novel *Three Sisters*. My favorite is *Yu Yang*, in which you write about "just how long a disaster can last" – the story shows in great detail how the everyday violence left over from the Cultural Revolution has entered into our lives, and how the betrayals, exposures, and punishments typical of that era have persisted.

**Bi Feiyu:** I wrote *Three Sisters* in 2000. You know, what I first wanted was a love story, but then things somehow got off track, and it ended up in its current form. The question now is why did I get off track? I think that this is the more interesting question for me.

**Zhang Li:** If a novel changes direction, there must be a reason for it.

**Bi Feiyu:** A lot of things can only be understood in hindsight. I remember, at the time, or earlier, there were some academics who began issuing praise for the Cultural Revolution. There were some reasons, such as a smaller gap between rich and poor during the Cultural Revolution, no corruption, and there being better health care and public health in the countryside during that period. Following that line of reasoning, can't we say that Hitler's extermination of the Jews did a great service to the overpopulation problem?

**Zhang Li:** So, you wanted to express your own views?

**Bi Feiyu:** Yes. In truth, my novels are drafts of my own

perspective. I'm someone who really wants to speak out on a lot of issues, but I also know my strengths and weaknesses. I know what form of speaking out is the most appropriate for me. Many of my novels are a product of this process. You just mentioned "Yu Yang" and I'd like to take a moment to say a little more. "Yu Yang" is one of my most important attempts at speaking out. Although it wasn't as influential as "Yu Mi," for myself, it's not any less important than "Yu Mi," and in fact may be even more significant.

**Zhang Li:** *The Plain* was about the Cultural Revolution, and it was recognized as one of 2005's ten best books. The intellectual in the book, Mr. Gu, could only recite "materialism," and he's so alienated to the point of being completely unable to have a normal life. It was a parody and rebellion against the scar literature of intellectuals. You've said yourself that you are a reader of scar literature, but that it has disappointed you.

**Bi Feiyu:** I wrote *The Plain* in 2003, not 1980, and certainly not 1978. The authors of scar literature were operating in an entirely different context than I was. In fact, I'm able to say I'm disappointed with this literature purely because of my role as an observer. It was a period Chinese literature had to go through, that goes without saying. But, on the other hand, if my voice as a writer was formed like those in 1978, then it would have been a real tragedy. The relationship between a person and history is so peculiar. Sometimes, once you've stepped back from something, you can actually see it more clearly. I'm not saying that I have some preternatural endowment, just that time

is a force that breeds richness. We cannot allow ourselves to be passed over by time; we must consume it. Starting in 1978, under my father's tutelage, I began reading contemporary Chinese literature. Of course, at the same time I stayed up on ideological struggles and history, which I have continued to this day. Without more than thirty years of absorption, there would be no way I could produce a book like *The Plain*.

**Zhang Li:** Many of your stories take place against the backdrop of the Cultural Revolution. To me this means you're a writer who thinks that era should be remembered. Is "The Infected Remain" a reflection of your own ideas and attitude about the Cultural Revolution?

**Bi Feiyu:** There were two basic components to the Cultural Revolution. Events and the spirit of the period. This is common sense. I think that one of China's largest problems is that there are some things which everyone knows, but which no one is willing to say out loud. Whether or not a thought escapes our lips is a critical distinction. If it escapes, it becomes human speech. If it doesn't, then the most it can be is a fart. We all know the word "truth," but a prerequisite to finding the truth is to speak it out. If you don't speak out, then it's not the truth. This is the nature of it. If it can't be spoken then there's no way it's the truth. They say practice is the only criterion of truth, but what I want to say is, our lips are another criterion of truth. What's sad is that we're too absorbed with, too infatuated by, the abstruse Eastern aesthetic of truth being "intuited not transmitted," and meaningless bellettrism. It's the same with the Cultural Revolution.

We only talk about the events, but we never talk about the spirit of the period. In *The Plain* I arranged, at the end of the story, for one of the infected to only speak the simple truth. Although the events have passed, the spirit remains.

**Zhang Li:** You like to use language from the Cultural Revolution and politics in daily life, both for humor and for irony. As a writer sensitive to the use of language, there's no way you're doing this arbitrarily.

**Bi Feiyu:** Of course I would never say that I am someone insensitive to language. But, I would like to say that, for the language in *Yu Mi* and *The Plain*, I did not think it all through prior to writing, and that's the truth. I often say that writing is a system, and that you can only get to work after getting into the system. In *Yu Mi* and *The Plain*, I made use of a great deal of language from the Cultural Revolution and political slogans, but why? I'll tell you. As the light becomes dim, our pupils naturally dilate.

**Zhang Li:** To "naturally dilate," this explains your "readiness at a moment's notice." Language is basically a symbol of individual identity; it is form but also content.

**Bi Feiyu:** Language is a huge problem. Its meaning entirely transcends language itself. Have you noticed that many of the people that have had the most influence in history, not considering whether good or bad, have all shared one characteristic? They are all masters of language. Doctors often say "you are what you eat." I say that "you think what you read, and what you hear." Reading and listening are so tightly interwoven

with language. The language of an era is distinct from its spirit, but language and spirit are both components of a unified whole. The language and the spirit of the Cultural Revolution were of a piece. Victorian language and Victorian spirit were of a piece. After the Second World War, in order to rebuild their country, the Germans reconfigured their language. As for us, we've not done enough.

**Zhang Li:** What characterizes the language of our generation?

**Bi Feiyu:** We live in an era of vulgarity, and this vulgarization has been especially noticeable in language.

**Zhang Li:** "Vulgarization . . ." I think we should explore this further.

**Bi Feiyu:** We often hear that we live in an era of diversity. It sounds so nice, doesn't it? But I don't really think it's true. This so-called "diversity" is, in essence, actually a matter of not believing in anything. We really don't believe in anything. The most basic element of value is belief; the most practical element is also belief. Lack of belief is completely different from diversity of values. They are fundamentally not related. From this we can see that all we have done is enter into a more self-interested and self-serving age, and not an age of diversified values. To transition from a unified system of values to one that is more diverse, this process is far more difficult than I had imagined. It's not that simple.

**Zhang Li:** Bei Dao once said "I don't believe." But that lack of belief is different from what we're talking about now.



**Bi Feiyu:** It is different. Bei Dao's time was a time of forcing people to "believe." The majority had belief forced upon them. But Bei Dao spoke out to say "I don't believe," which was groundbreaking. The "disbelief" of our times is a lack of belief in anything. It's for our safety. What we do most is sell ourselves out, make ourselves into dog shit. How much safer could you get? You'll never get stepped on. This is the source of the vulgarity: I'm dog shit, what are you going to do with me? Anything in it for you? Nothing.

**Zhang Li:** You have an article in which you say that, because we have cell phones, we've already seen the rise of a type of "new language." I feel the same way.

**Bi Feiyu:** Yeah, I wrote an article about that. Although I don't have a cell phone myself, I'm familiar with the language. I don't know what you think, but I think it's coy, insincere, irresponsible, and slick. Most of it is flirtatious. My point is, if you're flirting, there should still be something genuine in it, an expression of real fondness.

**Zhang Li:** The language of cell phones is very close to what's used online. No one talks like that when they're face to face. But everything changes once communication is "mediated," and this so-called flirtation, humor, and satire dominates.

**Bi Feiyu:** When I was writing that article I used two quotes. One was from Dostoevsky, who once used a cutting phrase in criticizing Russia. It was "coarse pleasures." I think that's what we have today. I also quoted Thomas Hardy, his "fastidious emotion," something that we're missing these days, too. Dostoevsky never

provided any additional explanation for these coarse pleasures. My guess is that might correspond with the "state of savagery."

**Zhang Li:** Do you mean to say that, while cell phones have helped us communicate, they have ruined our interpersonal ethics?

**Bi Feiyu:** No, no, no, definitely not. There's no problem with cell phones, that's for sure. What I don't like is actually the mode of language, both naked and coy. What makes it naked? It's extremely purposeful, extremely utilitarian, while its coyness is a weapon, camouflage. This actually corresponds quite well with the basic sentiment of our time, naked and yet coy. As far as values go, I don't know what kind of value system we're maintaining these days, I really don't. But I do know its basic nature: naked yet coy.

### Dignity is not an individual problem, it is a social problem

**Zhang Li:** *Massage* was a book about the lives of blind masseurs. Have you been affected by people with disabilities?

**Bi Feiyu:** Let me mention something else first. I was born in a rural part of northern Jiangsu in the 1960s. There were a great number of people with disabilities in the Chinese countryside then. I don't know if you've noticed, but in literary works produced by sent-down youth, characters names are all special in some way. You often see names like Second Crutch, Third Blind Man, Fourth Idiot, Fifth Mute, Sixth Cripple.

My point is that they didn't make these names up. In my own life, I have run across many a Third Blind Man and a Fifth Mute.

**Zhang Li:** It was commonplace.

**Bi Feiyu:** I was always afraid of the disabled. In country folklore, the disabled are summarized as follows: Lame and ruthless, blind and bad, dumb and dangerous. Why lame and ruthless? They have difficulty moving, so when they get bullied they can't chase the culprits, so deep resentment builds up in their hearts, and once they get their hands on someone, they go for the kill, ruthlessly. Blind and bad. The bad here is in their hearts. Why are they bad? They can't get around easily, and when harassed they have no way of knowing who did it. As a result they develop a deep suspicion of all others, an animosity towards other people, and secretly make life hard for others whenever they can. Why dumb and dangerous? Mutes can get around easily, but are harassed and bullied all the same. They know their fates from the sinister and mocking smiles all around him. Their lives are crude and mean; they are stepped on and kicked. They know this, but do not understand it, and thus the desire for vengeance weighs heavy on their hearts. I've never done any specialized research on the psychology of the disabled, but I can confirm that the vast majority of disabled people from that era had serious psychological problems. Their minds were seriously twisted and deformed, twisted by other people, and also by themselves.

**Zhang Li:** The sense of dignity didn't exist at that

time. Neither did people have any idea of dignity between two people.

**Bi Feiyu:** In rural China of the 1960s, the highest exhibition of humanism, if humanism could be said to have existed at all, was that people weren't starving, weren't freezing to death. No one knew what dignity was, what respect was. But the lack of dignity and respect wasn't the core. It's critical that there was entertainment. What kind of entertainment? The disabled. The most direct way was to laugh at them, and mock them. I guess it's better to say it. To this day I can still mimic the different kinds of disabilities, it's a black mark on my heart.

I still remember a blind man, Lao Zhu. To entertain the village folks, he mastered an extraordinary ability. He could wiggle his ears, and he would mimic the sounds of different sorts of birds and farm animals. He could also pretend to have a club foot, tuberculosis, or be a hunchback. When someone would shout "Blind man, have a drink!" he would take a drink. Allow me to say that his life was no better than that of a beast of burden. But he was happy. He was happy because he knew that, if he wanted to make normal people happy, he needed to make himself happy first. His so-called happiness came from demeaning himself.

**Zhang Li:** It's awful, but I remember seeing people tease the disabled for fun when I was little.

**Bi Feiyu:** We put a great deal of emphasis on dignity. I'm sure you remember Grandma Liu from *Dream of the Red Chamber*. After joining the Jia household, she did many demeaning things just to earn some money. Nonetheless, before going through the door, you see,

she repeatedly adjusted the hem of her blouse. She wanted to be dignified. It's so painful to think about. Grandma Liu's attempts to find joy amidst a life of sorrows were not at all about abandoning her humanity or her dignity.

**Zhang Li:** So, you care about dignity.

**Bi Feiyu:** Yes, I do. To be honest, it wasn't always so. I began to care as much as I do now after spending time with blind people. We spent a lot of time together. I would come and go from a massage center, where they worked, on a daily basis. Then one day, I realized something: a different world existed beyond those doors. Inside the center, there was a great deal of emphasis on dignity, but outside was another world. I felt like I was on to something. Perhaps it's a bit of an overstatement, but I felt like I had touched on an issue of our time, perhaps a problem with our society.

### China must deal with its disregard of universal values

**Zhang Li:** Would it be fair to say that inspiring a sense of dignity has been a goal of your work all along?

**Bi Feiyu:** I've always wanted to write with solemnity. Solemnity, and also with grandeur. Writing that is both solemn and grand is inevitably very dignified. But I'd like to take a moment to explain what I mean by grand: I'm not talking about a large span of time or space, nor about complex and intricate relationships between characters. The kind of grandeur that I'm talking about is psychological depth, and openness. It's

about spiritual pursuit. It's intransitive, but magnificent. It's towering, epic, soul-stirring. Unfortunately, my writing has yet to reach these heights.

I'd like to add a little something here. I grew up raised on a diet of strict materialism, but now my aspiration is to be an artist of idealism.

**Zhang Li:** You just said that many of your novels are your own statements on society. I thought of "Wang Village and the World." I understand that you wrote this piece quite quickly, off-the-cuff.

**Bi Feiyu:** I wrote that back in November 2011, almost at the time of the Doha Conference, the Fourth World Trade Organization Ministerial Conference, when people were discussing whether or not China should join the WTO. A lot of intellectuals were against it. I supported it. The reason was very simple. We cannot be independent from the world. We can't play by different rules than the rest of the world. I like to play soccer. On the field, if you get rough, or violate the rules, it's not a big deal, but you have to have yellow cards and red cards. I can't expound upon why China should join the rest of the world, but I can describe that closed-off world for you. We are weak. When it's not safe, the weak like to cry out. If someone hears our cries, then we can live on. If no one hears, then we must find another way to live.

**Zhang Li:** Writing novels is a subtle business. They have to address big issues with a lightness of touch particular to their aesthetic sensibilities. [In your story], Wang Aipin and Wang Aiguo both live in their own universe, and stand firm in the belief that Wang Village

is at the center of this universe and radiates outwards. Wang Village was a very important symbol to you.

**Bi Feiyu:** Wang Village is a world in itself. It is a place without red cards and yellow cards. It plays its own game, and judges by its own rules. Perhaps you could call these its own Chinese characteristics. Sometimes, our subjective consciousness is overpowering. We clench our teeth and retort “I’m the one playing soccer. Who are you to come here and play referee? Who do you think you are, eh? So you’re going to ref, well fine, I’m not going to take this sitting down, no way.”

**Zhang Li:** Speaking of Chinese characteristics, this makes me think of an ongoing discussion about core values and universal values. It seems that writers must inevitably address this issue as well.

**Bi Feiyu:** We’ve always lived amidst “core values,” and not “universal values.” Not speaking of long-term, but for majority of the last century, our writers have been thinking and writing under a set of prescribed core values. This is the Chinese characteristic exhibited by Chinese literature. The problem is that universal values are detached from our core values, or even in contradiction to them. This is a fact that no one can deny.

**Zhang Li:** This detachment is something that needs to be re-recognized and considered in our time.

**Bi Feiyu:** Let me tell you a story. It was in the 1970s, when bell-bottoms had just become fashionable in mainland China. One day, on a boat, a young guy wearing bell-bottoms got on the boat, and another guy not wearing bell-bottoms started staring at the one wear-

ing bell-bottoms. Then suddenly, the one not wearing bell-bottoms got up and hit the one wearing bell-bottoms in the face. The one wearing bell-bottoms asked “Why did you hit me?” The one that hit him said “I don’t like your pants.” Then they started fighting.

**Zhang Li:** Completely absurd.

**Bi Feiyu:** What I wanted to mention wasn’t the fight, it was something else. After the two boys had been pulled apart, a discussion started among the people in the ship’s cabin. The discussion centered on whether or not the guy should have been wearing bell-bottoms. No one brought up the question of whether or not he should have been hit.

**Zhang Li:** This story feels like a metaphor.

**Bi Feiyu:** A person cannot be attacked for no reason; this is a universal value. Whether or not someone should wear bell-bottom, this also might be a question of values, but obviously it has nothing to do with universal values. This story clearly demonstrates one thing. We usually put universal values to one side and then gripe and groan without end. A few days ago I just happened to read an article on this. Its thesis was very simple and very clear: there is no such thing as universal values. How to put this . . . What I really want to say today is that the disregard for universal values is a problem that China must confront. Really, to say “disregard” is a bit of a euphemism. In my experience, we are deliberately avoiding it.

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# Fiction



蒋韵

## Jiang Yun

Jiang Yun was born in March 1954 in Shanxi to a family originally from Kaifeng in Henan province. In 1981 she graduated from the Chinese Literature Department at Taiyuan Normal College. Jiang Yun began writing fiction in 1979. Her major works include the novels *Secrets in Bloom*, *Prisoner of the Oak*, *My Interior*, *Glimmering in Your Branches*, *The Human World – The Tale of the White Snake Retold* (co-authored with Li Rui), and *The Age of Walking*, as well as the story collections *Beloved Tree*, *The Perfect Journey*, *Imagine a Singer*, *Love in the Last Century*, *Sister Goes Upstairs in the House of Flowers*, and many others. Jiang Yun's works have been translated into English, French, Japanese, and Korean, among other languages. She is the recipient of the fourth Lu Xun Literature Prize, the Zhao Shuli Literary Prize, the Beijing Literature Prize, and many others. She currently chairs the Taiyuan Federation of Literature and Art, and is a senior member of the Chinese Writers' Association.

# The Red Detachment of Women

By Jiang Yun

**T**hat day the three of them accompanied my husband on a tour of the Singapore River.

Three people, three men. I don't know any of them, and I don't know the Singapore River either. Many people from my country make sightseeing visits to that island nation, world-famous for its cleanliness, affluence, lawfulness, and enchanting scenery, but I have never been farther south than the city of Sanya.

It was an evening in the middle of November, the Singapore River picturesque in the lamplight. But in my city, where we lived, the first snow had already fallen, and even though it was a warm winter almost everyone was wearing bulky winter clothes. My husband boarded the Singapore Airlines flight in a down coat. He brought along a relatively formal shirt and jacket, because on this trip he was attending a literary awards ceremony for which he was a member of the selection committee, and also because he had not expected it to be so hot there.

That day, on the deck of the boat, the sweat flowed continuously down his back, leaving him with the impression that the Singapore River was too busy and too cramped, even though it flowed toward the boundless ocean.

Earlier he had gone to all the places one should go, all the places an ordinary tourist ought to go. Sentosa Island, for example. He was left with hardly any sense of these places because of the scorching heat. At Sentosa Island, he came across a group of tourists from Taiwan, a crowd of young people who looked like stu-

dents, all very fashionable. They were taking photos in front of him, striking one pose after another, every one of them making the typical bourgeois poses, hand gestures, and expressions seen in magazines. Day after day, year after year, Sentosa was covered over and over again by these poses, gestures, and smiles. Perhaps the whole of Singapore was covered with poses, gestures, and smiles, like an enormous joyful mask. What was the authentic face, the true soul, of this city, this land? My husband could not help thinking such thoughts.

The boat ride on the river was the final activity on the final evening of his trip to Singapore. The river was crammed with one tour boat after another. Chinese-style red lanterns hovered over the length of the river. Motors rumbled: every single boat had a cheerful, diligent motor. These small wooden boats had once transported cargo, but today they did business as sightseeing ferries festooned with red lanterns. Needless to say, my husband and his companions once again ran into tourists, another crowd of young people, in this case a noisy, chattering group from Japan making "V" signs and other clichéd gestures as they took pictures. Between the racket they made and the roar of the motors, my husband thought the thick, sticky river water might overflow into the cabin.

The lamps shone brilliantly on the riverbank. There was drink and song. A lion dance troupe performed the ancient silk ball dance. This was a happy night for sightseers, even this last evening belonged to them. My husband hardly held out hope any longer. What could an outsider do in just a few short days other than sightsee?



Of the three men accompanying him, two shared the surname Huang, so to tell them apart we can call them Old Mr. Huang and Young Mr. Huang. Actually, they were both older than my husband. One was a teacher and the other worked in an office. Naturally, they also shared a common occupation, that is, they were authors who wrote in the Chinese language. The third man was a poet with the very northern surname of Luo, and a northerner's tall build and curly beard. Over the past several days, whether at meetings, or while sightseeing, they had accompanied my husband everywhere, serving as his chauffeur and tour guides. At first, things seemed headed toward a polite, friendly conclusion, one that would leave no trace, but when they landed onshore someone – my husband forgot who it was, possibly the poet with the curly beard – suggested going out for a beer. As I already mentioned, after the trip along the river, my husband was sticky, greasy with sweat, and highly uncomfortable, so he cheerfully accepted this proposal.

They went to an open-air seafood restaurant some distance away.

Although it, too, was a busy place, the people eating and drinking at the restaurant were not excitable tourists. The place had a local flavor, the flavor of life. A family was celebrating a child's birthday at a nearby table. The candles on the birthday cake made the child's face shine. The beer was good. It was my husband's favorite Tsingtao. A benevolent breeze from the river – or was it from the sea – blew onto their faces. Suddenly everyone relaxed. Off in the distance, the red lights on the Singapore River created a warm and emotional atmosphere.

Letting down their guard, they started to talk about literature.

Contrary to my husband's expectations, the men had an in-depth knowledge of contemporary literature in China – Chinese fiction, Chinese poetry, Chinese authors. A deep and serious understanding: not just opinions, but the more critical and valuable comprehension that follows after opinions. They had not only heard of, but had also read, almost every important recent work of literature, including my husband's works. The expression "true believer" rose in his mind. The eager longing in their eyes convinced him in an instant that the world is, after all, a romantic place. My husband was deeply touched. The men also spoke of their own loneliness in writing, and the even more brutal loneliness of not knowing how many people they were even writing for. Maybe no one would read what they wrote. Yet they were writing, they were expressing themselves with the scarred layers of the Chinese language. It was not merely out of love: it was almost the reason for their existence.

The beer and conversation brought a flush to my husband's face and warmed his heart.

He heard them say a word in passing, the name of a place. He wasn't sure whether it was Old Mr. Huang, Young Mr. Huang, or the poet Mr. Luo of the curly beard who mentioned it first. Once the name of this place was uttered, they sat silent for several minutes. It was a name my husband had never heard before, a name so entirely strange to him that he failed to remember it. Yet he swiftly realized that it was no ordinary place. It made him think of Taiwan's Green Island.



In the early 1980s, when the singer Teresa Teng was popular on the mainland, her *Green Island Serenade* was one of the very first Taiwanese pop songs that I learned. At that time I was extremely ignorant and I thought of this Green Island as a very romantic place, an island of love. I sang the serenade in a tender, sentimental manner, until one day a friend asked me,

“Don’t you know what the Green Island is? An internment camp!”

This comment woke me from my dreams. My shock and dread were indescribable. From then on, and over the many years since, I have never sung this frightening song again.

That evening my husband realized that the three men before him, Old Mr. Huang, Young Mr. Huang, and the curly bearded poet Mr. Luo, had all once been to Singapore’s equivalent of “that place.”

Snowy foam topped my husband’s Tsingtao beer. He felt a chill, as if snow were falling in his heart. So this wealthy, serene island nation with its painterly natural scenery had also had its hot-blooded, violent youth. Yes, these three men, Old Mr. Huang, Young Mr. Huang, and Mr. Luo, had once been passionate young men with left-wing revolutionary ideals. Of course, it had been in the 1950s and 1960s, during that turbulent period when revolution seemed to be the fate of any headstrong youth who loved freedom and despised injustice. And in Singapore, “revolution” held another layer of meaning. At that time, the Chinese language was banned, but they had persisted in using Chinese to write, to express themselves. They and the Chinese language had suffered together.

“I spent eight years in prison,” Young Mr. Huang

told my husband.

Old Mr. Huang, six years. Mr. Luo, the shortest time, five years.

The Singapore River decked with ferries and lanterns was lit up bright as day, but in the near distance the ocean was black. The brilliant lights along the coastline, the lights of the human realm, were not strong enough to penetrate the powerful darkness of the unfathomable ocean. On this miniature island reef, men who’d met only by chance were able to form a close bond. When they were red to their ears with drinking, the time was ripe for the story about *The Red Detachment of Women*. Young Mr. Huang, the one who had been imprisoned for eight years, told the tale.

It was the story of one of his classmates, Young Mr. Huang said. What sort of man was his classmate? This is where the revolutionary ballet *The Red Detachment of Women*, one of the model plays of the Cultural Revolution, comes in. In *The Red Detachment of Women* there is a scene called “Hong Changqing Gives Directions.” According to Young Mr. Huang, his classmate led the way like Comrade Hong Changqing, the revolutionary martyr in charge of the Red Detachment of Women. Young Mr. Huang was from the countryside but had tested into a university in the city. On the first day of registration, he asked someone for directions. The man took his rattan suitcase in hand and, braving the blazing sun, delivered him to where he needed to go. They talked the entire way. Young Mr. Huang said, “This place is huge!” The man replied, “That’s right! As Gu Kuang said to Bai Juyi, ‘Chang’an is big and living here will not be easy.’”

This man was Young Mr. Huang's classmate.

This classmate, his senior at the university, was born to be a leader. He studied economics but was well versed in the classics. He held important positions in student organizations and was editor-in-chief of a student magazine called *Venus*. Hearing its name one knew that it must be a radical publication. He engaged Young Mr. Huang to write for it, thus leading this young man, the son of a fisherman, to the fiery enthusiasms and perilous road that would be his fate.

This classmate was handsome, with a typical Malaysian face, a distinctive profile and large deep-set eyes that really did look intelligent and bright like the planet Venus. His smile was dazzling. A man like this was destined to be loved by women. Many of the other students fell for him! A number of the women who took part in the rallies, demonstrations, and other radical activities did so, it was said, in order to pursue him. "Love" made them overlook the gravity and import of these events. Later on, this classmate did have a relationship. He fell in love with a first-year student, a delicate, flower-like young woman. Uncreatively, he fell in love with the slight girl at first sight, from the first moment he saw her, for the rest of his life.

The girl had a name that suited her, as the jewel of a poor family: Meiyu, or Beautiful Jade; Tang Meiyu.

Tang Meiyu was a peaceable girl, timid, gentle, not concerned with world affairs and ignorant of the revolution for which the classmate yearned. In her presence this brave, energetic, domineering young man grew calm and sentimental. He saw things that he had previously overlooked as if through her borrowed eyes: the beauty of flowing clouds; the glistening of

dewdrops; the many attitudes of the many varieties of flowers. Before, in his eyes, a flower had been a general concept, a dim notion of good and beauty, but now each flower seemed like a being ready to come to life. The flowers were like her neighbors, she called their names familiarly and cheerily as this sister or that sister: water tower flower, swallowtail grass, blue pig's ear, dancing girl orchid, firecracker flower. She even knew about their properties. The clusters of firecracker flower, also called golden coral, or yellow eel vine, had medicinal uses. Its flowers could moisten the lungs to treat a cough, its stem and leaves cooled internal heat and were good for the throat. It was a different world of things he had never had time to pay attention to before – trivial, subtle, yet vast and deep.

In this world there was another important cast of characters, who were . . . ghosts. The classmate had never realized that there were so many ghosts appearing and disappearing all around him. In the basement of the library, in the laboratories, in the apartments where the students lived. It was said that these ghosts weren't really frightening. They were lost souls who had gone to another world but were unwilling to leave someone in this world. In the town and around campus ghost stories were passed from one generation to the next like traditions, growing and multiplying. A story like this one, for example. Naturally, it is a story about a pair of lovers, lovers in a puritanical age, who both lived in the student dormitories. The boy lived upstairs on one side of the building, the girl lived downstairs on the other side. The school's strict rules made it difficult for them to see each other. Every evening the young woman cooked a bowl of sweets



Illustration by Xiao Bao

for her lover as a bedtime snack: a bowl of red bean porridge, or a bowl of rice wine dumpling soup. At a fixed time, the male student would let down a bamboo basket on a rope from his window and the female student would place the bowl of red bean porridge in the basket for him to raise and eat. Every night they did the same. They used this method to communicate their endless longing for each other. One day the male student suddenly got permission to visit his young lover about some urgent matter. Excited, he went over

to the women's dormitory, but the people there were astonished at him. They said, "She's not here. She died over a month ago!" The male student was even more astonished. He said, "How is that possible? I ate the porridge she made last night!" As it turns out, the female student returned nightly as a ghost, making bedtime snacks for her beloved . . .

These childish stories, these childish ghosts, tended to make Young Mr. Huang's classmate laugh so hard he had to hold his stomach in both hands. At

such moments Tang Meiyu would sigh, saying,

“Don’t you respect the darkness?”

She respected the darkness, because the darkness was unknowable. She respected every powerful, unknowable thing. They strolled by the sea hand-in-hand, watching how the night swallowed the ocean so completely, so powerfully. The lights on the shore, the multitude of lights in the city, appeared futile and weak beside the abyss at the edge of complete darkness. She leaned in close at the classmate’s side, her voice trembling in the wind, and said,

“Don’t you respect the darkness?”

The arrests came after a large-scale rally to oppose a proposed law. The army police surrounded the campus late at night. As this classmate and Young Mr. Huang were taken away, he said only one thing to the people nearby. He said, “Tell Meiyu to forget me.”

Maybe in their terror and panic they forgot to pass this absolutely crucial message to the delicate girl. Or maybe she ignored them. From that time on, Tang Meiyu waited for him and searched for him. As soon as she saw anyone coming she would say, “Can you tell me where he is?” Everyone could see that the sudden shock had withered this hothouse flower, this jewel from a poor family. She grew confused. She wandered the campus, the city streets, the shore, and the pier. She took a boat to Sentosa Island, then called Blakang Mati. She went to each place they had gone together, searching for him, asking everyone they met for signs of him. Every day at dusk she stood in line at Lanji to buy the taro cake that had been his favorite. Once he had teased her while eating this taro cake, saying, “Don’t forget, someday, if we are separated from each

other, I will hang a bamboo basket from my window. That will be my signal. When you see the basket, put a piece of taro cake inside, and I will know you’ve come.”

“Not necessarily. It might be a ghost who put it there.”

He smiled, embracing her delicate, fragile little shoulders, and said, “It would be you transformed into a ghost, the most adorable ghost in the world. What’s there to be afraid of?”

She really did carry a piece of taro cake as she searched every corner of the entire city for the window with the bamboo basket hanging from it. She gazed upward, straining her neck, tripping and staggering, dreaming of a miracle. Where was the miracle? In a sea of people with thousands upon thousands of windows – fancy ones, crude ones, bright ones, dark ones – none of them was his, none of them showed traces of the bamboo basket. The best she could do was toss the taro cake into the dark ocean, into the basket of the gods, with reverence and with infinite faith, saying,

“Sea, you’ll know what to do. You’re the only one who can bring him this cake. Please . . .”

Finally, one day, she received the long-awaited news. It was a letter, his return letter, one short line of characters written in blood on a torn-off piece of his shirt. He had written:

“Meiyu, darling, forget me. Live well!”

She showed the blood letter to everyone who had known him. She said, “Look at this. What is he saying? Strange!” She went to the pier with the blood-written letter at her breast, climbed aboard a ferry, and when the boat was halfway across she leapt into the

sea, flinging herself into its “basket.” Someone heard the last thing this lunatic said,

“Sea, take me to him. Please . . .”

Much later, the classmate learned of Tang Meiyu’s unhappy ending. He had to wait for eleven years, for more than four thousand days and nights, until he finally discovered her fate. On that Green Island-like island, for more than four thousand nights, wave after wave from the black sea had patiently washed away his youth, his life. He remembered what she had said, “Don’t you respect the darkness?” In the daytime, the cries of the seagulls made him daydream about “freedom.” He shut his eyes and imagined her life in every detail: bearing a daughter, then bearing a son, growing full and round. This image was painful but had a heroic, sacrificial pride to it. Eleven years later, the classmate completed his sentence and was released. He was not yet forty, already graying at the temples, and when he learned from his friends about Tang Meiyu’s death his hair turned white overnight, like Wu Zixu in the Beijing opera *The Wenzhao Pass*.

And life went on.

The Chinese language was no longer banned. It was even required in schools. It no longer needed anyone to martyr themselves to it or sacrifice their lives for it. Now Chinese gives young people headaches because it is so difficult to learn. Who wants to think about the suffering it caused in the past?

Life goes on.

It seems like nothing is taken seriously anymore. People prefer to summarize the past with clever phrases as if they had experienced it themselves: “If you haven’t believed in some ‘-ism’ by seventeen, then

you’ve never lived. If you still worship some ‘-ism’ after twenty-seven, then you’ve lived for nothing.”

The classmate did not summarize.

The years passed, he married, started a family, found a job that although lowly could support the family, and began to live ordinary nine-to-five days. When it became fashionable to pursue a youthful appearance and everyone dyed and oiled their hair, he left his snowy white hair alone, which made him look senile and hopelessly destitute. Most of his former classmates and friends kept away, with a few exceptions, such as Young Mr. Huang, who had also returned from “that place.” He smoked heavily and couldn’t quit no matter how angry it made his wife. He still had to have strong *baijiu* like Kinmen Liquor almost every evening, but no one had ever seen him drink enough to lose consciousness or work himself into a frenzy. Drink was just a medicine he used to help him sleep. On his days off, he went fishing on the river and thought about how clear the water used to be. This was practically his only leisure activity. He liked the feeling of motionlessness, the fixed staring, the sense of being removed from life. It was never clear whether there were actually fish in the river, because he rarely brought in a catch. Everyone who passed by along the road took him to be an old man in the waning years of his life, worn down, no longer engaged by the world.

He didn’t eat taro cake any more.

Sometimes, on a few occasions, a very few occasions, probably after drinking more than usual, and as if sleepwalking, he did something absurd: he lowered a stainless steel container, a cooking pot, from his bedroom window. He put a nylon rope through





Illustration by Xiao Bao

both of the handles to let it down. Hanging outside of the window it became in his imagination roughly the same as a bamboo basket: a bamboo basket carrying a message to another world. The metal cooking pot hung suspended in midair, blown against the wall by the night breeze, clanging and clattering. A night of

accumulating scars, of terror and innocence. He sank into dreams. Now he respected the night's darkness, but this was a night without ghosts. No ghosts came to take part.

Then the ballet troupe arrived.

Young Mr. Huang gave him the information over

the phone, although he was already well aware of the troupe's arrival. Would the media ignore such an important event in the world of entertainment? A dance troupe from China was performing two programs. One was a selection of scenes from the classical ballet, the other was –

“*The Red Detachment of Women*,” Young Mr. Huang said on the telephone, suppressing his slight agitation. “I have two tickets for the best seats. How about it? Can you go?”

He hadn't wanted to go. Anything emotional exhausted him. But Young Mr. Huang's sympathy and disappointment made him change his mind. He said, “You should go with someone else . . . ” Young Mr. Huang was silent on the phone for a moment before answering. “If you don't go, I won't go either. I can't think of anyone else to go with . . . ”

That's how it was that they arranged to meet at Young Mr. Huang's house, where he arrived wearing a short-sleeved T-shirt without a collar. Young Mr. Huang was taken aback. He had forgotten to tell his classmate that formal clothing was required at the theater. He had also forgotten how unfamiliar his classmate was with “that kind of place.” Young Mr. Huang's wife hastily found a shirt and suit for him to change into. The classmate was taller than Young Mr. Huang and the clothes clearly did not suit him. His arms stuck out stiffly. Laughing, he said to Young Mr. Huang,

“You always used to borrow my clothes. Do you remember?”

For many years they had barely mentioned events from the past. It was taboo. Evidently, on this day, his classmate was happy. The theater was not very far

from Young Mr. Huang's home so they walked down the street side by side, just as they used to do long ago, walking shoulder to shoulder to a rally, a rally that made the blood boil. The sun sank down and the ocean looked like a flame, or like the gurgling blood gushing from a stab wound. Wearing the borrowed, ill-fitting suit and smiling obliviously, the classmate went to his engagement with the red revolutionary ballet.

As for *The Red Detachment of Women*, it holds memories for me that I can never forget. I have stood many times before crowds of strangers who held power over life and death, repeating the lines again and again:

“Wu Qinghua saw the red flag fluttering in the wind. Greatly stirred, she rushed forward . . . Red flag, oh, red flag, today I have found you . . . ”

My voice was strained, trembling, artificial. In front of the crowds, I could not suppress my despair and shame. Facing them, facing an opportunity to make an income, an opportunity to subsist. I knew I would fail at the menial work, but I continued to struggle, each time more hopeless than the last, harming myself, each time more terrifying than the last. At that time, I, along with millions of others, shared the same name. It was the Cultural Revolution and we were “society's young,” former students who were unemployed, or “educated youth,” students sent to the countryside.

I raise both hands to my head, where in my mind is poised an imaginary bamboo hat. “The waters of the Wanquan River run clean and pure. I weave a bamboo



hat for the Red Army . . . ” This pose, this mold, was the stance of my youth.

At such times I always hear a piercing scream, a girl’s scream, shrill like a metallic whistle or like the cry of some unknown bird. “Ge Hua, your father jumped from the roof!” I can clearly remember our propaganda team holding a dress rehearsal that day on the fourth floor. We were dressed in red silk shirts, costumed as the women of Hainan Island, although I don’t know why I didn’t have the bamboo hat. The shout rang out suddenly and we leapt toward the window. Looking down from that great height we saw a man in the opposite courtyard, his body spread out in the shape of the character 大, his face affectionately pressed to the ground. It wasn’t all that frightening, at least, at first glance, it did not seem hideous. The blood and the white brains polluted such a small piece of the ground. A man throwing away his life in a single leap, all of his energy, all of the love and hatred in his body, only dirtied such a small space. The sky was as blue as before, the trees were as green, the plum tree still bloomed, lively and vulgar, and the people were still noisy – noisily surrounding the man who no longer lived. Then I saw the girl. She burst in, parting the crowd, hesitating dully a moment, only a moment, before suddenly, magnificently, rushing toward the corpse in its pool of blood and – “pah” – spitting a mouthful of saliva onto it.

Some in the crowd applauded, while others shouted slogans.

I have always remembered the name of this stranger: Ge Hua. The shrill scream “Ge Hua, your father jumped from the roof!” or the mouthful of saliva Ge

Hua spat on a member of her own family as he lay in a pool of blood – these shot like a bullet through my life and my still tender young heart. The “Bamboo Hat Dance” was ruined. No matter how I tried, it would never again be joyful and fluid.

Many years later, a contemporary model theater troupe came on tour to the city where I live. They had selected a scene from *The Red Detachment of Women*, precisely this scene. “The waters of the Wanquan River run clean and pure. I weave a bamboo hat for the Red Army . . . ” The instant the singing began my eyes burned. We met once more, the stranger Ge Hua and I, Ge Hua of blood and fire, the girl who had hurt me but whose actions made me pity her all the more. Except that the women of the Red Army onstage now, the women soldiers, the female masses, were entirely charming and pretty. They were not the Red Detachment of Women from the 1930s, not the Red Detachment of Women from the 1960s and 1970s, not the Red Detachment of Women to which Ge Hua and I had belonged. No matter how they concealed it, or how much make-up they wore, they were a group of charming beauties. On their bodies, the gray uniforms looked oddly fashionable.

I suspect that the troupe Young Mr. Huang and his classmate went to see that evening must have been a similarly charming and fashionable “detachment of women.” Yet the ballet had a red background, a bloody background, a background of sacrifice and martyrdom. *The Internationale* blared out all at once. In the large, luxurious theater not even the cold blast from the air conditioning could extinguish the raging fire that tortured Hong Changqing as he died a martyr’s

death under a large banyan tree. Gentlemen in suits and leather dress shoes and perfumed and coiffed ladies had spent no trivial sum of money to watch and enjoy what Young Mr. Huang and his classmate could not touch – their spirited, precious, and incomparably fragile youth.

At curtain call, people went onstage with flowers, the applause was enthusiastic. There were more curtain calls and returns to the stage, unending encores. The fragrance of the flowers was slightly suffocating. As they left the theater a wave of hot air engulfed them. Young Mr. Huang took off his jacket and loosened the tie wound tight around his neck, but his classmate appeared not to notice the heat. He walked quickly, with hurried steps, his snow-white hair fluttering like feathers in the hot wind. Young Mr. Huang could hardly keep up with him. He called his name from behind, saying, “Let’s go have a beer.” The classmate reached a stoplight, where Young Mr. Huang saw him come to an abrupt halt, his hand pressed against the post as he slowly slid to the ground, squatting down. Then Young Mr. Huang heard a wrenching, heart-rending howl.

He knelt on the ground, weeping.

Going to prison, getting out of prison, eleven years of imprisonment, more than four thousand nights swallowed by the waves, even hearing the news of flower-like Tang Meiyu drowning the sea: through it all he had never cried. Everyone thought he was made of steel.

Hot tears flooded Young Mr. Huang’s eyes.

Nearby, on the Singapore River, the cheerful, night-denying lanterns dimmed slightly, as if fright-

ened. But they quickly settled. What hadn’t they seen before, shining over this river every night? A song from a Taiwanese opera rang out suddenly, resounding through the clouds and across the sea. Naturally, it was sung for the benefit of the tourists.

*Translated by Annelise Finegan Wasmoen*

Fiction



李浩

## Li Hao

Li Hao is a native of Hebei province. He was born in 1971. A member of several provincial and national writers' bodies and recipient of numerous prizes, Li Hao's works of fiction, poetry, and literary criticism have appeared in prestigious magazines such as *People's Literature* and *October*. His best-known work of fiction is perhaps *No One Is Born An Assassin*.

# The General

By Li Hao

I'm getting old. I'm plenty old now. Cataracts make a steady advance towards covering my eyes altogether. These things in front of me – a table, the house, bushes, and trees – are now so many clumps of grey fog. The things before me have abandoned my field of vision so now I distinguish them only by touch alone. At times I see butterflies flitting and dancing before me. There they are right there, but when I reach out to touch them they turn into something else. They become a hanging lamp, a ball of cotton wool, a shaving mirror, tree branches swaying in the breeze.

Because of these cataracts, I've let my life become an utter muddle. Barely a single one of my things is in the place it's supposed to be. My tea cup and hot water flask are on the bed; my walking stick leans upright against the right-hand bedpost; and my spoon is on that little low table opposite, if I remember right. Since the cataracts, I've put these things where the habit of my hands dictated, which has meant lots of things that by rights ought to be kept indoors have ended up outside, because my hands haven't got used to putting them where they should be. You'll often hear a clattering and clinking in my room: I'm getting old and I'm likely to forget where something is the minute I've put it there. When I say my life's become an utter muddle I mean that in another sense, too, but let's not get into that now. The good news is that this muddle takes a turn for the better as soon as I leave the room, as the moment I leave this stuff behind I pay it no more mind, especially so seeing as I have plenty of other things I can be thinking on. I sit out under

the eaves. The cataracts might have done for my sight, but I've become highly sensitive to temperature. I can sense the way the heat increases little by little from first light on up to noon, how it gets so much thicker and more broad.

The way I sit seems as if I'm looking off into the distance.

That's how it seems because that's exactly what I am doing. Things right in front of me I might not be able to see clearly any more, but people and events that happened back in the past have become sharper than ever. I can see every line on the face of someone from thirty years ago. I can see the black scorch marks made by the candle stubs on that table I used forty years past. I'd doze off and the candles would burn down without me noticing. I'd not even smell the acrid tang of the table-top getting burnt.

I sit out under the eaves. I sit out under the eaves and dip my head. After I've lowered my head a while I look off into the far distance. Of course, with the cataracts I can't see what's in that faraway place, but still, I strike the pose very much in earnest. I'm copying someone when I do this, a general dead these many years since. It's entirely unintentional; I only noticed I was doing it myself about three months ago. This way I sit is so very much like how the general did.

I find myself thinking on him more and more.

Thinking on him, the ground beneath my feet gives the slightest tremble, then the air goes right through me and I disappear. I go back to being with the general. I am just turned twenty-one once again, a care assistant at the sanatorium for retired cadres.

Thinking on him, my cataract eyes fill with tears. I'm plenty old now and I know I don't have much time left. I hear the rasp of the Angel of Death stood just behind me. I have nothing to fear. In fact, I think of him more as a dear friend, a companion. There are things I feel like saying, when I recall some event or some person, and it's him I say them to. When I think about the general, I tell Death about our general. I tell him about the general's army. Angel of Death he might be, but that doesn't mean he knows any more than I do.

The general's army was packed away in two enormous wooden chests. When I'm at my looking-off-into-the-distance, I see again the mottled varnish on those chests, the rust on the locks; there's the smell of rust, and a faint mildew whiff off the wood.

This was the very centre of the general's life at the sanatorium: Each day he would fetch those two chests out from his room, open them up, take out the many wooden plaques engraved with names that were stored inside, then put them back again one by one come evening. He never missed a day at this task right up until the one he died on.

Those wooden plaques, once white but now turned grey, were the general's army. Even now I couldn't tell you where they came from. When I mention this to my companion, he gives me nothing by way of answer. I tell him that my first guess was that the names on these wooden plaques are most likely those of soldiers killed in action following the general on his campaigns up and down the country. My guess seemed reasonable enough, but later on, as I was sorting through the plaques, I found that some were inscribed with names like "White Horse," "Dapple Roan," and "Pistol." There were some with no words at all, just an irregularly-drawn circle painted on them. Perhaps the general hadn't known the names of these

fallen comrades-in-arms.

I strike my looking-off-into-the-distance pose and see the general stood underneath the scholar tree unlocking one of his wooden chests. He oh-so-slowly takes out one of the wooden plaques and considers it the while, running his hands over it. He then places it down on the ground in front of him. He sets them all out one by one. The serried ranks of wooden plaques emerge out from the shade of the scholar tree and into the sunlight, until they seem to fill the whole courtyard. I'd reckon there'd be upwards of a thousand of these plaques, so many of the things, and you can be sure it takes a fair old while to set them all out like this. Once he has all the wooden plaques from both chests set out, the general stands up straight, gives a little stretch and shake of his neck, his arms, his legs, and his back, then he steps out in front of his army.

Bright sunlight and the shadows of the leaves mottle the general's face, giving it a faintly world-weary cast. Stood before his army, the general looks at each plaque, looks at their ranks in rows, then turns his gaze to the distance. The impression that first struck me, at the time, seems right even now: the general only looked like a general when he was stood in front of his army like this. At other times he was just an old man – a genial enough, and perhaps slightly lonely, old man. This change would take place the very instant he stepped away from his army. It began at his waist, which would start to bend just a little forward. He'd then take his seat under the eaves and look off into the distance. He could stay sat looking off into the distance like that a whole morning, or a whole afternoon. Thinking about what, I had no idea. Now I'm old, too, and I've also learned to sit and look off into the distance, but I still can't imagine what the general spent entire days thinking about. Probably because of these

cataracts, I can't keep on looking all that long. Also, sometimes I can be thinking of nothing whatsoever. I'm just sat there, blank, looking away off somewhere with my blurry eyes. I'm sure the general wasn't at all like me, in this way. He'd been through all those wars, all that death and derring-do. He was bound to have his mind on something.

I'm getting old. I might not have any clue what the general was thinking when he looked off into the distance, but I did know what was going on when it looked like he was talking to himself. He wasn't doing anything of the sort, as it happens. He was talking to the companion beside him, talking to the person or people he had called to mind. He was talking to the past. Just like now, I'll spend a little time talking to the general, or with my departed wife, or to the Angel of Death. I certainly didn't talk to the general the way I do now back then. I was never completely at my ease with him, even though he was kind to me, and when we spoke I'd choose my words very carefully. Now I think of him as an old friend; two old fellows about the same age, that's us.

After I'd helped the general set out the wooden plaques, I'd retreat into the shade, as the remaining business was something for him alone. While he tinkered with his wooden plaques I'd find my mind racing off on all manner of nonsense. These random thoughts helped the time pass more quickly. When I wasn't daydreaming, I'd pester passing beetles or ants with a bamboo switch, or watch how a cicada gets itself noticed by making a noise, never mind that it's well hidden in a dense thicket of branches and leaves. Snatches of what the general said to himself would come to me, but so much of it is lost, what with my idle daydreaming or whatever else I was up to. What did reach my ears was all disjointed, nothing to link it together.

The general said, "Off you go, then."

The general said, "Of course I remember you. I remember when your hand froze so bad it turned black. It was your left hand, wasn't it?"

The general said, "You young bugger, you'll do as you're told, I'll thank you."

The general said, "Did I not tell you to get down here?"

The general said, "And don't forget to water the horses."

The general said . . .

I strike the off-into-the-distance pose when I peer into the past. I can never recall the general's expression as he spoke, but I can recall his voice. His voice would go from very loud all of a sudden, then to nothing. I'd often unconsciously shiver, not knowing why, at the sound of his voice, abandoning my daydreaming and bamboo switch.

On two occasions, the general, pointing at the names, asked me if I knew a Zhao So-and-so or a Wang So-and-so, or if I knew how things were with a Liu So-and-so. I could only give an honest answer. "I don't, general."

"Oh." The general seemed a little lost. The effect that ageing was having on him became clearer to me. The general shook his head as he looked at the plaques with the names he'd just enquired after. "This memory of mine! I'm old . . . but they seem so very familiar. I really have gotten old."

He pressed hard at the lined corners of his eyes.

I had been quite moved even, but in the end I couldn't get the words out. Thinking back on it now, I should have said something. The general, sometimes, told me stories about his army way back when, but the subject matter he chose would not be battles, nor war, but the smallest things, such as how so-and-so loved to



play the flute. He was excellent, had some of that true flow for the music, and he'd play whenever they recuperated between campaigns. Later on his right hand got blown off in a battle, and he lost the flute, too. He was utterly dejected for the longest time, and could barely bring himself to eat or drink! He was sent to a hospital behind the lines. Two months later, the general happened across the man playing the flute. Without his right hand, he could barely hold a tune. He told the general the flute was the self-same one he'd lost. He looked for three days before he found it.

There was also the soldier who loved to sleep. Right after a battle, the moment the general issued the order to stand easy, the man would be snoring like thunder, sometimes still stood up. Also, his feet stank something awful. The general said he'd considered having the man as one of his personal guards but the thought of that rotten foot stench put him off. The general kept his voice very light as he told me this, with even a lilt of laughter to it. His laugh was a touch furtive even, but it took years off him. I wanted to tell him so at the time, and when I'm looking far off into times past at such small moments, I do. "You young bugger, you!"

I'm no young bugger, I'm old now.

The general also told me stories about other small things – grubbing for worms, catching poisonous snakes, eating grass roots, or some inconsequentiality about this and that person. He rarely spoke to me of war or the like; why, I don't know. You must realize that in a lifetime of military service the general must have fought in countless battles great and small, and of these he was on the losing side only very rarely, and you must also realize that the army of wooden plaques that are his command now is most likely made up of his fallen comrades-in-arms.

After he died, I got together a fair amount of material concerning his life and career. A book only had to mention his name and I'd be sure to buy a copy. I'd wanted to keep his two chests of wooden plaques, but later on I thought he had a greater need of this army than I did. The wooden plaques turned one by one into drifts of smoke as they burnt by the general's graveside. I could almost hear the clamour of the men and the snorts of the horses, the sound of feet tramping through the mud, and of bullets whistling past too close for comfort. Where did the general lead his army off to? What would be the expression on his face when he saw his troops again?

I hung onto two of the wooden plaques. Neither had characters inscribed on them. I'd had three to begin with; the other one was the one that read "White Horse." For a country boy like me, that was something friendly and familiar. But afterwards I sent the white horse off after the general as well – I watched as it started up from out of a thick curl of smoke, turned its head back to look at me, and then gave a whicker before speeding away in a clatter of hoof beats. The white horse belonged to the general.

Before the cataracts did for my eyes, I'd often look through the various books and papers about the general, or take out the two wooden plaques. The books gave accounts, detailed or in brief, of the general's military career. They described the sorrows of war, the general's courage and strategic brilliance, as well as the many virtuous qualities he displayed in the very hardest and most trying circumstances. There was nothing in the books that touched on the things and people the general talked with me about. I could never connect this man in the books with the general I'd known.

If it were raining or snowing, or if the weather were too hot or too cold, the general would have



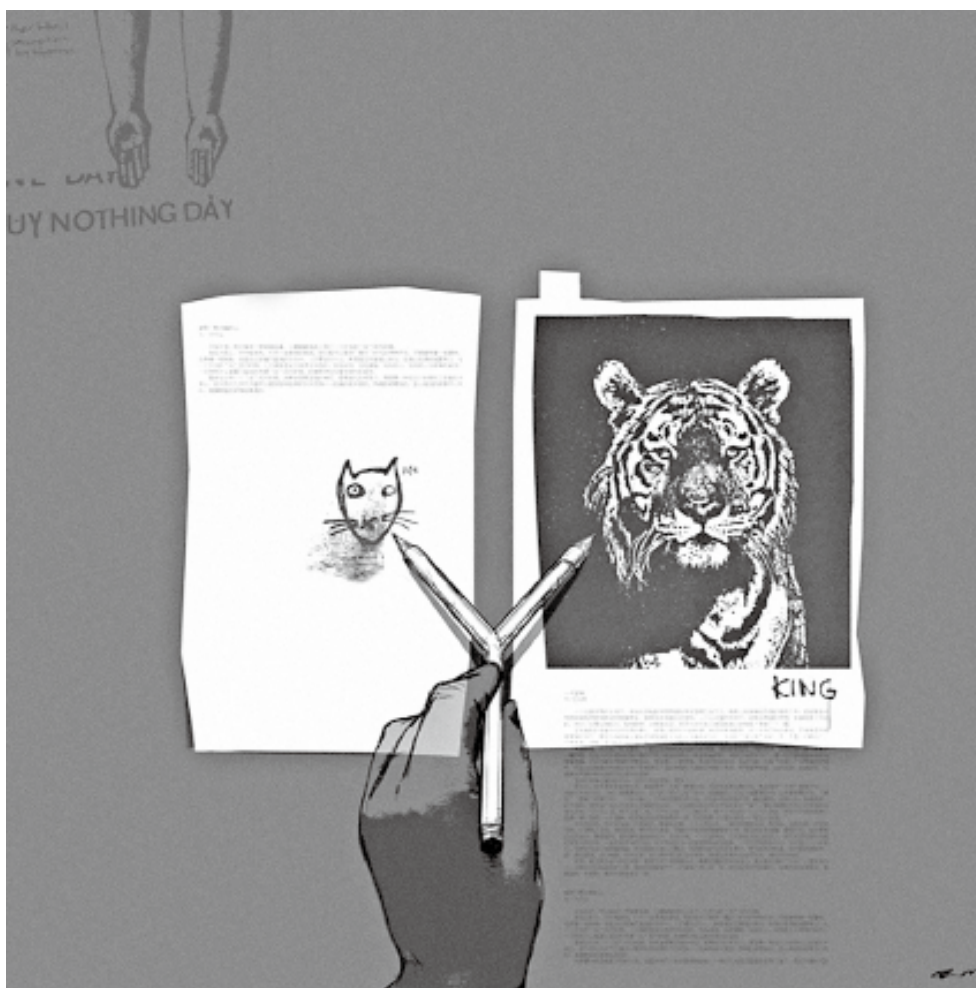


Illustration by Xiao Bao

me open the chests in his study. He would take the wooden plaques out one by one, and starting in one corner of the room, place them down until they were up onto his desk, then over his chair, and back down to the floor again. When they'd been set out, the general would take himself out of the study. Indoors, the dense array had a solemnity that caught your breath up short. Every time he finished setting out, the general would stand up and stretch – neck, arms, back, and legs. He walked over, stood in front of his army, and looked at them a while. Then he asked me to fetch him a chair, and he sat, his gaze turned to the window and what lay beyond. He most certainly was not looking at the tree branches beyond the window, not at the way they trembled as the rain fell, or at the thick wreaths of mist

that twined around them. Oh no. I'm old now, too, and I have the same habit of looking off into the distance, and I know now that what the general was seeing were the years long gone by. With these cataract-blind eyes, I can clearly see the general sat sidelong on his red chair, eyes firmly fixed on the window lattice. There was a heavy scent in the air, and the light was grey and pale. Darkness washed in like so many tides, flowing over the general and his chair, and on towards the study. The door to the study stood open. The light inside was dim. The wooden plaques, some tall, some low, stood still and silent in the darkness.

I once tried to find out about the names inscribed on the general's wooden plaques, though my investigation was hardly systematic. I'd occasionally mention

them to people who might know, but they would only shake their heads. It appeared no one had ever provided the general with a list of the fallen soldiers who'd served under him, at least not since his retirement.

So where did the names on the wooden plaques come from? When were they inscribed onto enough wooden plaques to fill two big chests?

Staff Officer Commanding Wang from the sanatorium provided me with a small clue. He said he once saw the general in a terrible rage – something that had happened before I'd come to work there. He saw the general clutch one of the wooden plaques very tight, and shout at it, "Even if you came back to life again, I'd still have to have you shot!" Wang said he was near enough too startled to draw breath by this. The general threw the wooden plaque a long way. There was a crisp clatter as it skittered along the floor. A long time passed before the general asked Wang to go and fetch the wooden plaque for him. When it was handed back to him, the general wiped away the dust and dirt, then placed it carefully back among the others. Wang said his memory wasn't all that clear but it seemed to him that when he handed the plaque back, the general's eyes were very red.

There was nothing about the general's later years, or the way he would set out his "army" every day, in any of the books and papers I collected. A cadre from the propaganda department interviewed me about the general's later life, and I described to him the various strange goings-on surrounding the general. I made a point of telling him about setting out the army every day. "Was he nostalgic for his army days? Did he want to carry on the fight, smash the enemy one more time?"

I thought for the longest time how best to answer this. No, I'd say, that wasn't it. In his last years the

general hardly thought of war at all. It seemed to me he was just, just . . . how best to put it? It seemed to me to be this: he set out his plaques, he thought about the past, and that was all.

The propaganda cadre was most disappointed. "How am I supposed to write about that? Have a think and see if you can come up with anything else."

When a body gets old one becomes fond of recalling times past; one likes to let one's imagination run on. Truth to tell, I was a daydreamer even as a young man. I sit out under the eaves, I lower my head a while, then lift it up and look away to some place far distant. I think more and more on the general. I feel as if certain parts of him are coming back to life within parts of me. Sometimes, one life can become another; but I am, after all, old now.

Now I'm getting on myself I've come to understand many things about the general as he was back then, but there are still plenty that I will most likely never fathom to my dying day. I think about dying. I don't know when I'm going to die, nor in what surroundings, but I do look forward to death, at least a little. I often think that when I die it will be on some morning early, with a gentle rain falling outside the window. I'm coming to resemble him more and more.

He'd been unconscious for two days, then the general came round again that early morning with the gentle rain outside. It seemed that the hospital and everything in it was strange to him; he was even perhaps a little afraid. He clasped my hand tight, his hand trembling and very hot. "Are you . . . ?" he asked. I hesitated then told him I wasn't. "Are you . . . then?" "No, I'm your care assistant. I'm called . . ."

He let go of my hand. He turned his face away. The strength went out of his hands altogether.

"Help me. The chests . . . get the chests out."

There in front of the general I opened up the chests. I'd brought them over while he lay unconscious as I knew he wouldn't be without them. I set the wooden plaques out in their proper order. The general propped himself up a little and looked at those once-white-now-grey wooden plaques and then he was smiling faintly. "Hah, look at you, you wee bugger. Really, really . . ."

The general stretched out his arm, oh-so-slowly. He was pointing at the wooden plaques on the floor and table, but I couldn't see precisely which. Now it seems to me that whom a person points at in their very last moments, whom their thoughts turn to, doesn't matter so very much.

The general had the faintest of smiles. He was gone.

Sat here quietly now out under the eaves, I hear

the humming of the bees as they hunt for pollen. I can hear the sound of the flower buds popping on the scholar tree. I can hear the heat of the sun falling from the trees. I also hear so many things I have never heard before – or perhaps I have heard them but paid no mind. I can't recall how to makes noises like these. But then, after another while, I don't think about it anymore. I go past it, and look off at somewhere far, far away.

My finger is running over the two wooden plaques I've kept. In the muddle of my life, they always stayed in the same place. And now, as I run my finger over them, it feels as if they have become smaller, but so much more important than they were before.

*Translated by Jim Weldon*

## Translator's Note

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Jim  
Weldon

Li Hao's writing here is plain and unadorned, making the challenge one of capturing the tone of the piece, which is at times familiar and at times poignant. I hope my rendering reflects the gentle interaction of these two, and how this builds to create the ultimate effect.

The one vocabulary item that gave me some pause was *mupai*, which I have rendered as "wooden plaque." Those familiar with China and other Asian cultures will doubtless picture the kind of small standing wooden tablet with the name of the deceased written on it, which one sees at a memorial shrine, and that is what I take to be the basic form of the objects in the story. I was tempted to add "memorial" to make the resemblance even more overt but that is not explicit in the text, and my sense was they are not such formal objects. The story itself talks about what these mean to the general and our narrator, and in the end I thought that was more than sufficient without further stage whispering from me.

Fiction



路内

## Lu Nei

Lu Nei was born in Suzhou in 1973. He now lives in Shanghai, where he is a member of the Shanghai Writers' Association. His first novel was published in 1998. He then worked as Creative Director at an advertising agency. He became a full-time writer in 2011. Since 2007 his published novels include *Young Babylon*, *On the Trail of Her Travels*, *Cloud People*, and his latest work, *A Memoir of Flower Street*.

# Keep Running, Little Brother

By Lu Nei

**M**y little brother, Wu Shuangfeng, was born in 1984. The day he was born, Dad was doing overtime at the factory. Nan and Granddad were at home playing mahjong. The baby had shown up on the ultrasound as a girl, so Dad's side of the family weren't particularly bothered about the birth. They already had one girl, me, and having another would be a complete waste of our child quota; we wouldn't be able to try again even if we wanted to. But when the baby was born it turned out to be a boy, and what's more, he had pneumonia. When Grandpa, Mum's father, called up to tell Dad the news, he threw down his electrician's knife and rushed over to the hospital. He twisted his ankle jumping off the bus at Xujiahui, and by the time he arrived the baby was in intensive care and no one could see him.

So how did Shuangfeng become a boy? As a child it really puzzled me. I only really understood when I got to university. Ultrasound scans can be unreliable. The foetus sometimes keeps his little penis hidden, and so the doctor decides it's a girl. Nowadays it's against the law to do "non-medical checks" to determine the sex, but at some hospitals if you slip them a sweetener they'll scan you on the sly. Sometimes, if it shows up as a girl, the parents will decide to have an abortion, but then it turns out to have been a boy all along.

This ambivalence around the birth would prove a sign that life for my brother wasn't going to be easy. You see, Granddad Wu had wanted to have my brother aborted and Dad refused to take sides, but my

mother's side of the family was adamant we should keep the baby, which is the only reason he's here at all.

As a baby, Shuangfeng was always ill. It was as if his resistance had been all but used up by that bout of pneumonia. He was constantly hooked to a drip in intensive care or being injected with antibiotics. He spent the first part of his life shielded from view behind a white curtain, but as he grew bigger we could see he had droopy eyelids, a raised-up upper lip permanently parted from the lower one, a dark complexion, and six toes on his left foot. As children we would sit on the steps outside East China Normal University's staff dormitory and count our toes. I had ten but he had eleven, no matter how many times we counted. With his raised-up lip, he couldn't keep saliva from dribbling out all over them. He was four at the time, and naïvely thought that everyone was born with eleven toes. "No, Shuangfeng: ten toes, not eleven," I would tell him. He didn't believe me, but when we went hand-in-hand to ask Granny, she mournfully pronounced: "Most people have ten toes, Shuangfeng. You have a birth defect."

Grandpa was a professor at East China Normal University. He came up with my brother's name. In Grandpa's home village there was a river, the Twin Moon, and as I was born in February, the second month of the year, I was named "Twin Moon," or Shuangyue, after the river. As it happened, there was also a mountain near the village called the "Twin Peaks." Grandpa thought, as "Twin Moon" was such a good girl's name, why not call the boy "Twin Peaks," or Shuangfeng, after the mountain. This carefully thought

out yet utterly foolish idea completely destroyed my brother. “Twin Peaks” – you might as well call him Camel or make some boob joke, and what with having a surname like Wu, a homophone for “nothing,” the possibilities for nicknames were endless. The fact is, the whole time I was growing up, I never heard his friends call him by his real name.

The whole family doted on my brother. As the only third-generation son and heir it was only natural. We weren’t badly off. Dad was promoted from electrician to workshop chief. Mum worked in a government department. We could afford whatever we wanted. Shuangfeng may have been the pet at home, but he was never taken out of the house. Mum and Dad always took me when they went on a work holiday, dressing it up as “Shuangfeng’s too young,” when in fact they thought he would be an embarrassment to them. When we looked back at our childhood, it turned out I’d been to most of China’s famous sites, whereas Shuangfeng had always stayed home with Granny and Grandpa for the holidays. “I don’t want to talk about it,” he would say. Even when Granny went out food shopping, if at all possible, she would take me rather than Shuangfeng.

You can’t run very fast with an extra toe, so when Shuangfeng was five he had an operation to remove it. My parents thought maybe he’d be able to run better, but as it turned out, he had flat feet as well so it didn’t make much difference. Growing up, I lost count of the times I saw other boys going after him. He would run for his life on those once eleven-toed and forever flat feet, tears and dribble flying. I’m five years older so I would charge over to stop them. Then one day, on my

way home with some classmates, I saw a group of girls pushing him about. They were shrieking, pulling his hair, pinching his ears, and yanking at his school bag. Nine-year-old Shuangfeng sat on the ground in tears, trying to escape and screaming at them to stop. I took out my steel ruler and whacked the little demons over the head. They backed off.

This time it was my turn to be teased.

“Wu Shuangyue, is that your brother Wu Shuangfeng?”

“Come here, Wu Shuangfeng, and let me have a look at you.”

“Your little brother’s really ugly.”

“How could you let yourself be bullied by girls?” I asked him.

“They ganged up on me,” he said, wiping away tears. I sighed, said goodbye to my friends and hauled him to his feet. On the way home he suddenly looked at me.

“Your friends know about me?” he asked

“Yes.”

“And they know my name is Wu Shuangfeng?”

I felt bad. I had made jokes about Shuangfeng to a few close friends, it was true. Even though they’d never met him, he was well-known because of that stupid name. Shuangfeng saw I wasn’t going to answer. Walking on he said suddenly: “I’ll get my own back when I’m older.” After a while, he said, “I’ll get my revenge on those girls.” To me he was the same old droopy-eyed, goofy-mouthed boy. He still had a tear in the corner of his eye. “I doubt you’ll ever get a girl looking like that,” I thought to myself. “Let alone get your revenge.”



My brother had a miserable childhood. Even in year five, he was still dribbling over his homework. The family was always scolding him: “Close your mouth, Shuangfeng!” Even the maid started doing it. I wouldn’t stand for that, so I accused her of stealing and got her dismissed. I wasn’t surprised he got low marks at school; he had no confidence in himself. The few times he did well, the teacher accused him of cheating, and Mum and Dad gave him a thrashing. He was lazy with his schoolwork and a cheat, they said. Nothing he said could persuade them otherwise. My brother cried bitterly. When he tried to explain, they assumed he was a liar, too. “I’m stuck whatever I do,” he told me. He was only twelve at the time.

That wasn’t the only traumatic experience of my brother’s life: in year two he was forced to undergo a circumcision at school. Some doctors came into class and examined all the boys, but it was only Shuangfeng whose foreskin they decided was too long. They took him to the clinic and sliced it off there and then. Smearing on some antiseptic, they told him not to drink fluids or pee, and then sent him back to class. Able to bear it at first, it soon hurt so much he couldn’t sit down. Then he got told off for crying. By the end he was clutching at his penis, and jumping up and down. At that point they called Mum to take him off their hands. Shuangfeng was still crying when we sat down for dinner. My dad got angry, the school had gone too far this time. Why wasn’t the head of the family informed? I asked Granny what a foreskin was as I ate my dinner.

“That’s *not* the sort of thing you should ask,” she mournfully replied. “Shuangyue, as far as I can tell, I

think your brother has been gelded.”

I can’t help saying, at this point, that Granny had let her imagination run away with her. Though I was once convinced there was something wrong with my brother’s physiognomy, I learned at university that circumcision can be a good thing, but why be so brutal about it?

After finishing middle school, Shuangfeng wanted to go to catering college to become a chef. This wasn’t good enough for a learned family like ours. Grandpa owned a huge collection of books, could recite classical poems and write Ou-style calligraphy, how could he possibly tolerate his only grandson working in a restaurant? He was so put out, he hardly ate for days. He scolded Dad at mealtimes, until he lost his appetite as well. Then Dad turned on Shuangfeng. The dinner table became a battlefield. In the end Granny said mournfully: “Shuangfeng, you can’t close your mouth. What if you dribbled all over the food?”

“Granny, I don’t dribble anymore,” replied my brother, aggrieved, “haven’t you even noticed?”

It wasn’t entirely Granny’s fault. Shuangfeng still couldn’t close his mouth properly, so whether he was fifteen or twenty-four, the family were still likely to remind him to close it in a strict, or gentle, or absent-minded way.

Anyhow, he went on to high school, where he focused all his energy on getting into university. A lot of people think the university entrance exam pass rate is high in Shanghai compared with other places. From my experience I would say that two thirds of pupils get channelled into vocational or technical colleges, so naturally they aren’t counted as part of the univer-



sity entrance rate. Catering would have been a good option considering his lousy marks, but pushed into doing exams, he managed to get into some mediocre high school in Wuhui. Going to university still seemed highly unlikely, but for some reason his luck began to change. It was a kind of reprieve for him, even if, the first time round, he only got a measly 217 points in the entrance exam. The family was aghast; no one would give him a place at university, even if you paid them. But the following year he sat it again, finally finding temporary gratification in studying marketing at one of Shanghai's third-rate universities.

I went to college in Shanghai, graduating from East China Normal University in '98. The family wanted me to stay at home, but I insisted on living on campus. This had the effect of me, the good girl at home, rapidly degenerating into a punk rocker, charging all over the city to underground gigs, smoking and drinking, and generally cursing my head off. Anyone I liked was the dog's bollocks; most people were twats. It was around '98 that the Internet really got going. I began to spend my time writing short stories in Internet cafés, buried myself in chat rooms, and had online friends from all over the world. I started living with an indie youth from Beijing around that time. I had left innocent girlhood behind. Whenever I went home, and saw my brother's gormless face, I couldn't help thinking that we were slowly drifting apart. I was fearless and free, but he was lost in twatsville.

My brother got fat at high school. He was shortsighted and wore rusty wire-framed glasses. All the other boys had some sort of hobby, even if it was just watching cartoons. My brother was the perfect exam-

ple of someone without a life. He didn't like reading or sport; he didn't even watch a lot of television. As someone born in the '80s, he had no idea what New Concept Literature was, he didn't know the difference between Adidas and Nike, and he'd never been to People's Square on his own. I couldn't see what pleasure he got from life at all, until one night, somewhere near Xin Cun, I saw someone collapsed on the ground, surrounded by a group of teenagers shouting: "Milk Tea! Milk Tea!" That *was* Shuangfeng's nickname, but I didn't believe it could be him. I went over, and it *was* him, passed out from drinking. I tried to lift him but he was too heavy so I ended up getting four of his mates to help carry him home. On the way back I berated them for drinking at their age. "Don't look at us," said one, "your brother just downed eighteen pints." I was shocked. One of the girls who had come along pulled at my sleeve: "You won't be too hard on him, will you? He's not having a very good time of it."

So what did Shuangfeng have to worry about? No one even told him off when he came to because Grandpa put on such an air of tolerance and understanding. After a long heart-to-heart with the family, Shuangfeng swore he would never drink again. A few days later, he was carried home again drunk as mud. After he had repeated this pattern a few times I realised that drinking was what my brother did for a hobby. I couldn't really believe it: a boy of eighteen, a drinker? Surely that sort of thing only happened in novels.

After university I got a job at a fashion magazine. My punk days were over. I got myself some designer

clothes and handbags, changed my image, and studied the season's trends. That same year my brother started university, but because I had set such a bad example Mum and Dad didn't allow him to live on campus. So life for him was no different than when he was at high school. He ate rice porridge in the morning, went off to college, and then biked home in the afternoon. One day he asked for my advice: how to escape from his own personal house arrest. I thought for a moment, and said. "How about joining a club, at least you'll be able to stay out." A couple of days later, he told me he'd been accepted by the college football team. Yet again, this confounded my expectations. He was fat and short-sighted, and he had calluses and flat feet. I just couldn't imagine him sprinting around a field. I later learned that he'd given his new Samsung Anycall, worth about two thousand yuan, to the team captain, and bought himself a cheap second-hand Motorola with his pocket money. He'd also told the captain: "My sister's interviewed such and such celebrity, maybe she could get you an autograph." The captain was really into that particular celebrity, almost as much as he liked Samsung mobiles.

At last, I saw in my brother the potential for a social life. I went to see him play: Running around the dilapidated pitch were a crew of total misfits mucking about with a football. Shuangfeng was wearing the No. 7 Man United shirt I'd given him and his Nike football boots. His Levis were draped over the crossbar of his Giant ten-speed mountain bike. His Jeansport rucksack hung off the handlebars. He really stood out. A group of girls were hanging about watching the game. "No. 7 looks pretty cool," said one of them.

"Here's your chance for payback, Shuangfeng," I thought to myself. "I hope revenge is sweet."

It was a great time for Shuangfeng: he slimmed down and got all fit and muscly. I gave him some white designer glasses which disguised his droopy eyes, and even his goofy lip didn't seem to be a problem. "People reckon I look like Milan Baros," he told me.

"Who's that?" I asked.

"Centre forward for the Czech national team. Plays for Liverpool," he said.

By that time, I was living with my boyfriend and wasn't at home very much. Mum told me that Shuangfeng was training like crazy. He could do more than a hundred press-ups and went running every morning. Though his flat feet meant he wasn't very fast, his stamina was amazing. He could run for an hour at a stretch. He even seemed to have found a girlfriend. More importantly, no one hassled him if he got drunk every once in a while.

Then one evening having dinner at my parents, I heard a woman crying outside in the grounds and man's voice shouting at her: "Shut your face! I'll kill you if you don't stop that noise."

"Please, let me go! I'm begging you!" cried the woman.

I went onto the balcony to have a look. It was completely dark and I couldn't make anything out. Then, loud and clear, I heard a slap. A woman screamed and burst into tears. It sounded like someone was being badly beaten. Calling the police would probably be too late so I called down:

"You violent bastard! The police are on their way." Unfortunately the man had no fear of the police.



Illustration by Xiao Bao

“I’ll come up there and kill you!” He called back.

Mum came over at that point and dragged me away saying: “What do you think you’re doing? It’s just that outsider beating up his wife, the one that’s just moved in. He’s drunk. He hits her every week.” Then I heard the sound of someone running up the stairs. The bastard was actually coming to get us. Someone kicked at the door. At this point I got scared.

My brother walked out of his room. He had just

done fifty press-ups and still had fifty to go. Bare-chested, he pulled the front door open and hit the low-life in the face. He screamed and fell from our door down a whole flight of stairs. Shuangfeng stretched his neck this way and that in a very cool manner and then turned to me: “Drunken bastard,” he said.

This was the first time in my entire life that I had seen my brother hit someone. Over the last twenty years I had seen him beaten up and blamed for things

he didn't do, time and time again. "Little brother, you can stand on your own two feet at last," I thought, a trifle naïvely. At the same time I knew, you can't protect yourself from everything life throws at you, even armed with a pair of sturdy fists.

My brother finally went public with his girlfriend.

She was a girl from Sichuan, in the year above him, called Lu Qinqin – acknowledged as one of the prettiest girls in college. I was pleased that Shuangfeng had found someone good-looking, but then he told me: "She doesn't have a very good reputation. She's had too many boyfriends." Then he added, "and she comes from a poor family."

"You don't need to worry about that. You're only going out on a few dates," I said. Then I asked him how he managed to get her to go out with him.

"She used watch us play," he said. "Everyone knew her. Then one day my mates from the team dared me to try and pick her up," he said. "I stood at the college gates waiting for her. When she came out, I bought an ice pop, walked over, and said: 'Hey, want one of these?'"

'Get you!' she said.

'I don't mess about,' I said. 'I reckon that's a good thing.' Then she agreed to come out with me."

"When you were at high school, there was that girl with the big eyes who was really into you," I said.

"I chucked her."

My blood ran cold remembering what he had said when he was small. Evidently he had been getting his own back for quite a while.

In '84, before house prices in Shanghai shot up, Mum and Dad bought a new apartment and rented out

the old one. When we moved into our new upmarket apartment, my brother brought Lu Qinqin over. She was rather quiet and very polite, a thin, pale girl, who I wouldn't say was exactly pretty. I don't know why, but she made me feel uneasy. She seemed burdened by a weight of anxiety which sat oddly on her youthful shoulders. Sichuan girls are often mature for their age and tend to be pretty astute, capable and hardworking. My brother was obviously no match for her. After only a couple of sentences I could see that she had him under her thumb. Mum, of course, could see it too, and as a possible future Shanghai mother-in-law, she was not likely to stand for it. She turned to me and said: "She's not right for Shuangfeng."

That year my dad had been promoted to the management team of a medium-sized state company and was flushed with his success. One evening after a few drinks at dinner Dad asked Lu Qinqin:

"Hey, Little Lu! What do you think of our apartment? Décor's not bad, is it?"

It was obvious that he had had a bit too much to drink and was beginning to show off.

"It's very nice, Mr. Wu," said Lu Qinqin. "When I bring my mum and dad to Shanghai, I want us to live in an apartment just like this."

"Shuangfeng has a lot of faults. Mostly he drinks too much," said my dad. "You'll have to keep an eye on him."

By this time Mum was glaring at him. It was obvious why. My parents hadn't officially acknowledged their relationship, but here was Dad talking as if they were already engaged. "Shuangfeng's a good person," she said. "But he needs someone to look out for him;

he's like a big kid."

My mum rolled her eyes. I felt put out. Mum and I had always been very protective of Shuangfeng, and then along comes another woman who feels just the same towards him. Of course we were going to resent her.

Lu Qinqin often came to dinner at ours. Sometimes I was there, sometimes I wasn't. I didn't really know the specifics, but then one day my brother rushed over in a state of distress. "Mum and Dad don't want me to see Lu Qinqin anymore!" I asked why. "They think she's too poor," he said, "and she's an outsider, so she must be after our money."

"So, we've got two apartments, big deal!" I scoffed. "That's peanuts compared to some people."

"That's just what Mum and Dad said!" said my brother.

"What if Lu Qinqin *is* only after your money?" I asked him seriously.

"No way." he said. "There are richer people out there."

"Very few people marry for love alone," I said. "Maybe the person she truly loves is completely penniless, and then there's this mega-rich guy chasing her but she doesn't like him at all, and so maybe you're somewhere in between."

"You're only suspicious because she's not from round here."

What could I say? My brother was just twenty-two, only in his second year of university. At that age I was still making a nuisance of myself at gigs and staying up all night writing incomprehensible articles. He had always been quite immature for his age and had

very little experience of the world. How could I expect him to understand something so complicated all at once.

Going out with someone is an expensive business. My brother had always been generous with his money. I helped him out at university so I knew he had no sense of economy. One month he blew more than a thousand yuan so Mum and Dad had to limit his spending money. They also wanted to remind him they could still tell him what to do. Then one day when he and Lu Qinqin had spent everything they had, she sighed. "We're so poor!" she said. My brother was desolate. Going home by himself through People's Square he saw a blood donation truck. "Right now I'd do anything," he thought. He pushed inside and told the doctor to take two hundred millilitres but when he asked for the money the doctor looked at him as if he was mad and pointed to the slogan pasted on the truck. Bloody hell – "The gift of blood is a gift of life."

When he got back to college my brother gave Lu Qinqin a carton of milk. "This is what I got for giving blood," he said. "I thought they would give me money but it turned out to be a donation truck."

"Nowhere gives you money for giving blood anymore," Lu Qinqin told him. Then she said, "Shuangfeng, I will love you forever."

The funny thing was, two weeks later the school organised a "Give Blood" campaign. My brother didn't know how to explain and so let them take another two hundred millilitres. He nearly went cross-eyed. Luckily he was pretty healthy otherwise he might have ended up dead.



Lu Qinqin got a job as a personal assistant with the grand wage of one thousand, five hundred yuan per month. You'll find girls like her all over Shanghai. My brother was in the year below her and had already started looking for work. The trouble was most people who did marketing had a gift for it; lousy subject or not. No one could possibly have any hope that Shuangfeng could sell stuff. My mum's idea was to get him into my dad's work-unit and that would be the end of it, but Dad had his reservations. For one, he was on the management team, and having a son in the same work-unit wasn't always a good thing, and anyway he would probably retire soon. Once he left, they'd soon forget about him and where would that leave Shuangfeng?

"Let Shuangfeng find his own way. There's nothing wrong with a few rejections."

It was more like a wholesale free fall into nothing.

What I had worried about the most was about to happen. Shuangfeng had to get out there with his curriculum vitae and look for a job. There was no going back now. Whatever he went through at school was irrelevant; the world out there probably couldn't even be bothered to pick on him before kicking him out the door. My boyfriend was the marketing manager for a foreign invested company so I asked him to come over and give my brother some interview practice. The two of them talked for an hour. Afterwards my boyfriend told me privately: "Your little brother doesn't even know the 4Ps of marketing. He can't even use PowerPoint. Who would ever give him a job? What did that shit college teach him anyway?" I sighed. "That shit college cost ten thousand a term."

To begin, we needed to find him an internship. I got him a placement at a company where a friend of mine worked. There was no pay, but he got a box meal at lunchtime. He had a computer, but my brother had no interest in computers whatsoever, so after a while, sitting there was like sitting on a bent pin. It turned out to be a complete waste of time. My friend had known Shuangfeng for years so she ordered him around as if he were *her* little brother, sending him off to get snacks from the shop downstairs. He never did any real work. There was just this crazy crowd of women sending him out on errands to buy chewing gum or soft drinks or cigarettes. By the end they'd even got him to go and buy sanitary towels for them. If he got the wrong ones they'd send him back to exchange them. In the two months he was there he didn't learn anything useful, but by the end of it he knew everything there was to know about sanitary towels: Unicharm, Carefree, everyday use, night use, with wings, ultra-thin, which girl used which kind, which brand was having a promotion, who usually had long periods and who had short ones. One day over dinner he told us all about it. My dad was livid. He gave me a piece of his mind and ordered Shuangfeng to hand in his notice.

My brother had no problem with buying sanitary towels – he wasn't the least embarrassed about it – he was just a bit bored of being around all those women, so he stopped going. My friend called me: "Shuangfeng can't just pick and choose, you know. If he carries on like this how will he ever get on?"

"Just think about it," I said. "If he'd stayed on at your place he'd have been selling sanitary towels

wholesale by now.”

“To be honest, the others only asked him to go on errands for my sake,” she said, “and of course he’s so cute and harmless. Most interns wouldn’t get such an easy time.”

After that my brother tried out at all sorts of companies, but no matter what he went for, an interview or an internship, he’d be back home after a couple of months. I helped him get through the door of the first few companies, but the longer it went on, the more I got annoyed with him. In the end I couldn’t be bothered to fix things up for him anymore. He could fend for himself for a while. He soon realised that being sent out for sanitary towels hadn’t been so bad after all. The family hadn’t expected much of him in the first place and that year they rapidly lost all hope.

“What do you *really* want to do?” I asked him one day. He thought for a bit: “I don’t want to be stuck in an office. I hate sitting in front of a computer.” I was flabbergasted. Note: Shanghai is full of recent graduates trying to get into one of those state-of-the-art office buildings. Getting a desk and a computer is like finding gold at the end of a rainbow. “It sounds like you should be an express courier or something,” was all I could think to say.

I had always thought Shuangfeng was pretty ordinary; he was fairly well-behaved and his intentions were good, I thought he would follow the crowd. I had no idea he was actually a bit of a maverick.

“I want to go to police college and become a police officer,” he said.

“Isn’t it hard to get into policing?” I said. “Don’t you have to have connections?”

“It’s not so bad in Shanghai. Our football captain got into police college completely on his own merit.” he replied.

I encouraged him to have a go. To be honest I didn’t take him seriously. Nothing seemed to go right for Shuangfeng. He only had to voice an idea for it to fall through. It was as if he suffered from some sort of curse.

Compared to my brother, Lu Qinqin was extremely driven. When she graduated she asked to live in our old apartment, but Mum and Dad refused. Their biggest concern was that it would affect the rental income, but it also reflected the fact that Mum and Dad had no intention of acknowledging her. This determined young woman from Sichuan was having such a hard time of it, renting a room with friends with a shared toilet and kitchen, but she did well at work and soon got a pay rise. That girl had vision. She had joined a yoga class whilst still at college, at a time when yoga was becoming popular in the city, and then she took a second job as a yoga instructor. Her wages rose to about eight thousand yuan, enough for a two bedroom flat in an old apartment building. Whenever she came to ours for dinner she was wearing H&M or I.T. I gave her a set of Yves Saint Laurent make-up. She obviously recognised the brand, as she thanked me several times.

Mum still hadn’t warmed to her. In private she said to me: “Such expensive make-up. Why give it to Qinqin? Spoiling her will only make her spend more of Shuangfeng’s money.”

I laughed and said: “You underestimate that girl. She’s far more capable than Shuangfeng. In a few years



she'll be standing on her own two feet."

My mum sighed: "Once that happens she won't look at your brother anymore."

"You say that because you know your son isn't up to much," I said. "I don't know what you have against her."

"Well, she's from a poor family and she has no roots here, nothing to fall back on. However much she earns it doesn't mean a thing. As soon as a man with cash comes along, she'll be off like a shot. I think she's keeping her options open; there's no way your brother can support someone like that."

"You may be right," I said. "Let's wait and see."

Life improved no end for my brother when Lu Qinqin got her own flat. He stopped going to work, got drunk, and slept all day round at hers. We all thought he was working at some company as an intern. It was only once he'd graduated that Dad thought to ask if he had been taken on properly. That's when he told us: "I stopped working ages ago. I go to Lu Qinqin's in the day." My dad nearly had a heart attack. He blamed Lu Qinqin for leading his son astray.

"Dad, surely you should blame your son for his own failure," I said. "Look, she's got no choice, she has to work her guts out, do you really think she wants him lying about doing nothing?" I had just got myself a new boyfriend, an outsider who had come here to work. My mum, who had had enough, interrupted: "What is it with you two and these outsiders?"

"What's so great about being from Shanghai anyway?" I said. "We'll all leave here in a box eventually."

"Why can't you all just leave me alone!?" shouted Shuangfeng.

I flew into a rage and wagged my finger at him. "You sit there drinking all day long. Haven't you even noticed? You've turned into a complete fathead. You come from a good background. Kids a lot poorer than you are out there slogging their guts out and here you are, wasting your time doing press-ups, happy to live off your parents for the rest of your life. Loser!"

"I've lived in the shadow of this family all my life!" cried Shuangfeng.

Before I could lay into him, Dad jumped up, grabbed hold of a chair, and threw it at him, howling with rage. Shuangfeng tried to keep out of his way but he had nowhere to go. Dad had been a soldier in Tibet when he was young and even at fifty he could still pack a punch, but this was the first time he had ever hit Shuangfeng. Seeing my fifty-year-old dad resorting to his fists to teach Shuangfeng a lesson, I began to cry.

The next day Shuangfeng turned up for an interview with a swollen face. He was asked to leave as soon as he opened his mouth.

To be honest, I was well aware that the employment situation had been dire since the early eighties. Plenty of decent university graduates were unable to find work. If even computer geeks and people educated abroad had to fight for a job, what chance would my brother have? Shuangfeng's only advantage was that he had a few apartments to rent out, bringing in an income more or less equal to an office worker's salary, the so-called basic. Some people might work their whole lives to get what Shuangfeng already had when he started out. But did that even count for anything anymore? They were just apartments. The streets were full of fiercely ambitious young people focusing

their energy on getting ahead. Do you really think that in twenty years' time my brother would still be able to boast that he had two apartments?

Lu Qinqin's parents were coming to Shanghai. She had to work the day they arrived, so Shuangfeng asked me to drive him to the station to pick them up. He wanted to make a good impression. Chatting over dinner we learned that they were laid-off workers from Sichuan in considerable financial difficulties. In order to send their daughter to university, they had used up all their savings and were more than forty thousand yuan in debt. The old couple had ran a snack stall in the city centre but about a month ago it had been flattened by the city council, so they had no choice but to come to Shanghai and rely on their daughter to support them. Mr. Lu was a middle-aged man of few words. He hardly said a thing, just sat there drinking baijiu shots with my brother. Lu Qinqin's mother liked to talk. She kept smiling at my brother as she chatted. She obviously really liked him. "Do you like Sichuan food, Little Wu?" she said. My brother nodded. "Well then, from now on your Auntie Lu will cook for you. You're welcome to come over whenever you like. Don't worry. Your Auntie Lu isn't going to sit at home doing nothing. I'm going to look for a supermarket job straight away."

"Mrs. Lu, please don't talk like that." I said quickly. "This is Lu Qinqin's home. It has nothing to do with Shuangfeng. He has no right to ask anything of you."

"But I like Shuangfeng," she said. "He's a good, kind boy. I wasn't quite sure before I met him." My brother and I forced a smile.

Lu Qinqin's parents' arrival in Shanghai coincided with Dad going abroad on business so they weren't able to meet. My brother kept plotting this dinner, but Mum was continually on the alert to prevent it, because eating together would mean acknowledging the relationship between the two families. My brother had no choice but to trick Granny and Grandpa into meeting them. Grandpa was eighty. Older people don't tend to suspect ulterior motives so getting them to go along was easy. Shuangfeng seized the opportunity, and announced that he intended to marry Lu Qinqin. This put Grandpa in a rather awkward position. "But, you're only twenty-three," he said.

"In the old days people got married at eighteen," Shuangfeng said.

Grandpa rolled his eyes. "In the old days your parents decided who you married and it was arranged through a matchmaker. I think you should go home and discuss it with your mum and dad." Yet again, what my brother had hoped was a foregone conclusion hadn't gone to plan at all.

"You want to take a wife but you don't even have a job, Shuangfeng. That sort of thing would be out of the question in the countryside, you know," said Granny mournfully.

My brother started taking stuff from home over to Lu Qinqin's apartment. At first it was just a camp bed that we didn't use, and extra cups and pillows, but then he took all our cooking oil, salt, soy sauce, and vinegar. He even gave his bike to Mr. Lu, pretending to us that it had been stolen. One day my mum was making dinner and couldn't find the cleaver. When she asked, it turned out Shuangfeng had taken that as well. "If I had

that cleaver here I'd chop you up this instant!" spat my mother.

I saw how things were panning out. It was in the bag; Shuangfeng would soon be married. But he was the sort of person who could never quite see anything through.

He appeared a few days later, completely mortified. "Lu Qinqin is seeing someone else," he said. I was surprised, though not that surprised – for his sake I acted astonished and asked him what had happened.

Lu Qinqin had been very secretive about it, he said. He hadn't noticed anything at first. I must admit, given his emotional IQ, it was highly unlikely my brother would have noticed that something was going on. Lu Qinqin's mum was the one who had told him. It seemed that she genuinely liked Shuangfeng and had let him know that lately there had been a man taking Lu Qinqin home after her yoga class. Maybe she had got to know him there. Distraught, Shuangfeng had rushed over to the yoga studio and laid in wait near the main door. Sure enough, he saw Lu Qinqin coming out with a man.

With the stuffing knocked out of him, my brother couldn't summon the courage to confront them. Instead he biked home, told me what had happened, and then tore open the special edition Maotai that Dad had been saving for ten years and drank the whole lot. Still not drunk, he found the cooking wine, drank half the bottle, collapsed on the sofa, and fell asleep.

It was late. My mum had gone to bed much earlier and had no idea what was happening. I stood there for a while looking at his drunken form and thinking to myself: "When he wakes up he's going to wreck

the house." I decided to go and see Lu Qinqin. Her mother opened the door. She guessed why I'd come as it was so late, and let me in, apologetically. Lu Qinqin was on the phone. I looked around the room and saw all the stuff from our house: our camp bed, our bedding, our calendar, our alarm clock, our slippers, and our kitchen cleaver. Lu Qinqin put the phone down, let her mother go back to bed, and made me a cup of tea. Then we discussed my brother.

"That guy, he's just a friend," said Lu Qinqin.

"Don't get me wrong. I didn't come over to accuse you," I said. The man was a colleague from work, she explained, the manager of the marketing department. He did Taekwondo at the gym and when he noticed Lu Qinqin teaching yoga, he was intrigued and came over to chat. She didn't want the company to know she had another job, so she had no choice but to go for a coffee with him a couple of times. When he asked to take her home, she found it difficult to refuse. Little by little they got to know one another. He was interested in her of course; it just wasn't out in the open yet. "I don't think I've behaved very well," she said, finally.

"You can't say that," I said, "this sort of thing could happen to anyone. I just hope that one day, if you give up on my brother, you don't hurt him too badly."

"I like Shuangfeng so much," she said, "but he's just a big kid. I can't rely on him for anything."

"He's tried very hard to prove he can contribute," I sighed, looking at all the things he had taken from our house. Lu Qinqin shook her head and said: "This isn't what I want. I'm under such a lot of pressure. It's me who has to repay all the money my family owes.

I hope that he has a future and will stop depending on his parents. Surely a girl can hope her man will do something with his life?"

She kept shaking her head. "I have never been able to rely on him," she said. "Maybe he should find a girl from Shanghai, someone well-off, and then he'd have no worries for the rest of his life. He has always been such a child. But strangely enough, that's what I love about him," she said. "I don't know what to do. I'm so confused."

"So . . . well . . . what have you decided?" I asked her.

"Shuangfeng said he wants to try for police college," she said. "I think I should wait until after his exam to decide."

So that's what held their relationship together. Lu Qinqin said she didn't want anything to affect him emotionally before his exams but she also wanted to wait and see whether my brother was capable of turning himself around. After all, a police officer is similar in status to a civil servant. Being a policeman would be a brilliant future for someone like my brother. But with his lack of emotional intelligence, I had a hard time believing that he would be capable of catching any bad guys; I'd just be thankful if he didn't harm any good guys.

"I'm definitely going to get into police college!" announced my brother.

He had made similar boasts before his high school exams, before his university entrance exams, and before his finals, but the results hadn't been anything to write home about. My mum and dad were really happy about it though, thinking that this time, their son was

going to do them proud. My dad announced: "If you get in I'll bring out my ten year old special edition Maotai!"

That year the police college was taking on two hundred new recruits, more than ever before, but only this year's university graduates could apply. That meant if my brother didn't get in this time, he wouldn't get another opportunity. The exam was made up of a written exam, a physical ability test, and an interview. All he had to do was train hard, and work hard at his studies. He shaved his head and he started wearing contact lenses. He got all muscly again, and when he came out with us my mates took quite a shine to him.

But he flunked it.

Apparently he had only concentrated on anaerobic exercise. Sure, you need muscle strength to do press-ups and pull-ups, but the exam was a test of stamina: a five hundred metre run. My brother knew this, but oddly he had neglected the running exercises, doing strength training instead.

His rainbow-coloured world turned monochrome. I hadn't had high expectations for him, but still I had hoped for the best. Now I was certain that even this monochrome world would soon collapse. Lu Qinqin and Shuangfeng wouldn't last much longer.

One day, during a quarrel about nothing, my brother roared: "Why don't you just go off with that marketing manager of yours!" Lu Qinqin slapped him right there in the middle of the street, jumped into a taxi, and disappeared.

Shuangfeng had a group of slacker mates from his football days; simple-minded meatheads, the lot



Illustration by Xiao Bao

of them. They had a really stupid idea: text her, and say you have a new girlfriend. If she begs you to come back, that means she loves you. If she doesn't, it means she's gone off with the marketing manager. My brother, not having a clue about girls, did as he was told. She texted back later that day: "Let's split up then."

The day they broke up Lu Qinqin asked Shuangfeng to introduce her to his new girlfriend. My brother didn't know how to get out of it, so he asked

me to come along. The break-up took place in a tiny park beneath a system of flyovers. It was deserted. Cars and trucks whizzed past overhead. The leaves on the trees were covered in dust. Standing next to Lu Qinqin was a tall man in a track suit. He looked pretty ordinary but you could tell that he thought he was some kind of Johnny Depp. I asked my brother whether this was the marketing manager. He scratched his head. "I've forgotten what he looked like."

Of course it was him.

“Why haven’t you brought your new girlfriend, Wu Shuangfeng?” asked Lu Qinqin.

“I haven’t got a new girlfriend,” replied my brother. “I was trying to trick you.” I couldn’t believe it. Was this really the time to admit such a thing?

Lu Qinqin gave him a despairing look. “Why are we here then?” she said.

“Let’s get things straight. You’re the one who went off with someone else,” said my brother.

“Shuangfeng, you’re beginning to sound really hateful now,” she said.

“So this is your new boyfriend,” my brother counter-attacked. “Not up to much, is he?” The new boyfriend gazed up at the cars on the overpass and smiled to himself.

“Let’s not hurt each other, Wu Shuangfeng,” said Lu Qinqin. “From now on, let’s pretend we never met.”

“Okay,” said my brother.

And so just like that he let her go. She and the boyfriend were already at the exit when Shuangfeng suddenly called out: “Hey you! Do you want a fight?”

Johnny Depp came back, looked at Lu Qinqin, then looked at me. “That’s not cool, man, there are ladies here,” he said languidly. I dismissed him with my hand: “Don’t mind me. Come and have a go if you think you’re hard enough.”

“I’ve no intention of fighting,” said the boyfriend. “Anyway, I thought you wanted to be a policeman? You won’t have much chance if you get arrested for fighting.”

“I didn’t pass,” said my brother. Once again, this

was too much information. It was an idiotic thing to say.

“Come on mate, fighting never solves anything. You’ll realise that soon enough,” he said.

“What’s that got to do with anything?” I sneered. “You’re just not up to it.”

The boyfriend looked at me, unriled. He took hold of Lu Qinqin and walked off.

On the way home Shuangfeng said: “You were supposed to calm things down.”

“I was hoping he’d Taekwondo you to a pulp,” I said savagely.

That night Shuangfeng suddenly broke down. The entire household crawled out of bed to comfort him. The old people tried everything but it was no use, so in the end they rang and told me to come over. My brother said he wanted to talk to me alone. There was no soul searching; to my surprise he said: “I’m so cut up, Sis. The week before we broke up we had sex six times.”

I couldn’t believe it. “*Six times?*” I said.

“She held me tight, and said she wanted to be with me until the end.”

I sighed: “And you still didn’t suspect anything?”

“No,” said my brother.

After a while I couldn’t help saying: “Fuck me! Six times in a row? Did you take anything?”

“Why should I? I’m pretty fit,” said my brother.

“Bloody hell, that’s good going!” I exclaimed.

Lu Qinqin had lost her virginity to him, he said, and so he’d always thought she’d marry him, but it had all gone off-track, and he was hurting. “It doesn’t matter,” I consoled him. “It was your first time too, so you



don't owe each other anything."

"That wasn't my first time. I lost my virginity to that girl with the big eyes at high school."

I nearly fainted with annoyance. "When was that?" I asked.

"In the summer holidays after the first year," he said.

I did a quick calculation. I would have been in the second year of university. I had sex for the first time that year, and I'm five years older. The more I thought about it the more furious I got.

"You were too young to do that sort of thing, you little bugger! You deserve everything you get! Stupid idiot, cry your heart out!" I fumed.

After his split with Lu Qinqin, my brother's football mates talked him into running a milk tea shop. They wanted something to do. One of them knew someone who ran a chain of milk tea shops, and he wanted to expand out of Shanghai. This lot were going to buy the shop from him.

My brother talked to the family: my dad decided the boy would be irredeemably lost if he carried on as he was, so he agreed to plough in his hard-earned savings and make my brother the main stockholder. He invested eighty thousand yuan, and Shuangfeng took on a shop-front not quite a metre wide. The previous owner had left, and it was only when my brother and his mates were unloading stock that they realised he still owed the head office thirty thousand yuan in payment for goods. It was up to my brother to pay this back. My mum and dad were spitting blood again. He hadn't even started and the shop was already losing money.

"Milk Tea" was my brother's nickname, so now Milk Tea sold milk tea, and everyone thought that was great. I went over to have a look. The little shop was bright and bustling. It was opposite a bus stop so foot traffic wasn't an issue. The milk tea my brother made tasted better than anything you could buy on the street. Watching him working skilfully behind the counter, taking payment and giving change, I felt a sliver of comfort at last. "Oh Shuangfeng, if only this could be the start of something good!" I said to myself. Having a look around as I drove home I discovered that within a strip of about a kilometre, there were at least ten other milk tea shops. My heart misgave me. Yet again, he was going to sink without trace.

Inevitably, the shop lost money. It lost about five thousand yuan every month. He worked very hard. He delivered tea in the pouring rain, falling off his bike and breaking it in the process. He manned the shop from nine in the morning until ten at night, and never compromised on the quality of ingredients, but in this competitive world it just wasn't enough, even for a small taste of success. Maybe that's just how it is on the street. Success has nothing to do with whether you work hard or not.

Around that time, trading stocks was on the rise. My mum missed out on the opportunity to invest as she had to give my brother five thousand a month. She'd had enough.

One day my brother was alone in the shop. Light from the sunset lit up the street, and Lu Qinqin appeared before him. "A milk tea please. No pearls," she said. Then she recognised him. "You're running a milk tea shop now, Wu Shuangfeng?" she asked. My



brother nodded. He noticed she was wearing a purple anti-radiation dress.

“I’m pregnant,” said Lu Qinqin.

“Did you marry the marketing manager?” my brother asked.

“No, I married someone from Hong Kong,” she said. “I live nearby. I had no idea you were here.”

That day my brother took her home on the back of his bike. She didn’t live very far away. She could come over for milk tea often. When they were saying goodbye she said: “Shuangfeng, I knew you during the worst part of your life. It’s just not fair.” My brother didn’t speak. Hurt, she said: “You were the worst boyfriend I ever had but, remember this; I was the best girl you’ll ever know.” Confused, and sad, my brother watched as she walked slowly into her building. He rode back to the shop and thought for a while. Then he turned off the power, rolled down the metal door, and declared the tea shop bankrupt.

He never saw Lu Qinqin again.

My parents pulled some strings, and got my brother a logistics job in a loft complex. Compared to a lot of jobs, it wasn’t so bad. He didn’t have to sit in front of a computer, he just had to put up with the boss’s ugly face. There were a few girls after him, all from Shanghai. I asked him why he didn’t go out with one of them. “I want to wait until I get into police college,” he said. I was surprised. He still had a chance at being a policeman? The World Expo was just around the corner, he told me. This time they weren’t only recruiting that year’s graduates, but last year’s as well. There were a relatively large number of places. This was his only chance.

At the dinner table, Granny said, mournfully, “Close your mouth this time, Shuangfeng. You were rejected last time, you know, because you didn’t close your mouth.”

This time Shuangfeng prepared well for the exam. He gave up drinking, studied every day, did running and strength training, and even had an operation to fix his eyesight once and for all. No one in the family held out any hope, they just let him get on with it, but I could tell that my brother’s lousy luck was about to run its course.

He passed the physical exam, the theory exam, and the interview easily. Last of all came the running. When I went with him to the playing field where the test was held that day, he was nervous.

“There’s something I’d like to tell you,” I began. “I’ve just split up with my boyfriend.”

“If you go on like this you’ll end up on the shelf,” he replied, “you’re nearly thirty.”

“Look, if a talented girl like me still can’t find a husband, but there are still girls after you even after you’ve messed up so badly, then nothing’s fair.”

“Bollocks,” said my brother, “it’s just that Shanghai boys are popular for some reason.”

He started to get ready and took out a pair of faded trainers.

“You never wear any of the trainers I give you,” I said.

“Lu Qinqin gave me these. I haven’t worn them since we split up, and I’m not going to wear them again,” he replied.

“Do your best,” I said. “If you lose, there won’t be another chance, unless you want to be a community

support officer.”

“That won’t happen. I’m going to win it for you. Just you wait and see.”

As he walked to the starting line, he turned: “I really am going to win it for you.”

Fine rain fell from the sky. My brother was at the centre of the pack. He moved in and out of sight among the runners. The leader was a skinny boy, the perfect build for running, much better proportioned and lighter on his feet than my brother. Next to me were a middle-aged couple, who I guessed were his parents. They spoke with a rural Nanhui District accent. “Our Jianguo is going to win it this time!” they cried.

Shuangfeng didn’t have to win the race; he just had to be one of the first five in his heat, so basically he was going to get through. But it was police college and everyone wanted to win.

The boy from Nanhui ran like a deer in the fine rain, gradually leaving the rest behind. He looked great as he ran, even giving his parents a wave as he passed us. His face wet with rain, Shuangfeng didn’t glance my way at all.

About half-way through I noticed Shuangfeng was five metres behind the boy from Nanhui. The rest were trailing about half a circuit behind. He flashed past me, and I couldn’t help but call out: “Shuangfeng! Go for it!” The rain got heavier. “Win it for me, Shuangfeng!” I called after him.

I remembered him being chased and beaten by the other boys when he was small. I recalled the pain and the hurt. “So you think you can outrun it all, Shuangfeng.” I watched him pounding intently towards

the finish line. I imagined him standing before me in police uniform. If only it had happened a year earlier.

In the final dash he was right behind the Nanhui boy. A second from the finish line, the boy from Nanhui shouted, “Hey Ma, I’m in!” to the middle-aged couple beside me, and in that second, my brother passed him.

I can no longer recall the look on his face.

*Translated by Rachel Henson*

## Translator's Note

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Rachel  
Henson

Translating the most satisfying of swear words: *shabi*, literally “stupid or silly cunt,” and *niubi*, literally “the cow’s cunt,” is a challenge. There’s nothing worse than swear words used awkwardly, in fact the ability to swear in a second language, without sounding ridiculous, is a badge of honour.

Here is a working translation of the sentence in question from Lu Nei’s “Keep Running, Little Brother:”

The family wanted me to stay at home, but I insisted on living on campus. This had the effect of me, the good girl at home, rapidly degenerating into a punk rocker, charging all over the city to underground gigs, smoking and drinking, and generally cursing my head off. *Anything I didn’t like the look of was (a) “silly cunt” (shabi); anything I did like the look of was “the cow’s cunt” (niubi).*

I needed a pair of joyful, swears words that were homophones or connected in some way, but that had opposite meanings. The word I decided on for *shabi* (silly cunt) then had to be incorporated into a follow-up sentence further on in the paragraph as a kind of punch-line:

Whenever I went home, and saw my brother’s gormless face, I couldn’t help thinking that we were slowly drifting apart. *I was fearless and free but my brother was already sailing off into an ocean of silly cunts.*

I came up with “shite” and “the shit” (as in “hot shit”), a coinage that I had heard recently:

*Anything I didn’t like was shite; anything I did like*

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*was the shit.*

*I was fearless and free but my brother was already sailing off into an ocean of shite.*

Somehow the imagery was just too shitty.

Then I tried “fucked up” and “fucking brilliant:”

*Anything I didn't like was fucked up; anything I did like was fucking brilliant.*

This sounded awkward and strangely polite, as if spoken by a public schoolboy.

*I was fearless and free but my brother was already sailing off into the fucked up ocean.*

I like the rhythm of this sentence, so I went with “fuck” for a while.

However, “fucked up” with its connotation of “twisted” or “not right” isn’t a good enough fit with the meaning of *shabi*, which basically means “stupid.” I thought of “a load of bollocks” and “the dog’s bollocks,” which jumped the alliterative hurdle and “the dog’s bollocks” was a great approximation of “the cow’s cunt”:

*Anything I didn't like was a load of bollocks; anything I liked was the dog's bollocks.*

This was fairly clever, but perhaps too obvious, and because it didn’t work rhythmically, it didn’t have enough punch.

*I was fearless and free but my brother had already lost his way in Bollocksville.*

I liked “the dog’s bollocks” but not “a load of bollocks,” so I played around with “a load of toss” instead:

*Anything I didn't like was a load of toss; anything I liked was the dog's bollocks.*

*I was fearless and free but my brother was lost in an ocean of toss.*

Nice alliteration in the final sentence, but I couldn’t stomach the toss.

Then I came up with “twat.” This was possibly the nearest I was going to find in meaning to *shabi* as it means both “cunt” and “stupid,” and has a similar tone of utter scorn and disgust to it. However, it can only be applied to people, not to things:

*Anyone I liked was the dog's bollocks; anyone I didn't was a twat.*

Or even better:

*Anyone I liked was the dog's bollocks; most people were twats.*

I liked this sentence so much I wanted to keep it, even though it meant losing the alliteration. It goes with the whole punk ethos of scorning anyone who isn’t punk enough, anyone in the “straight” world, including Shuangfeng, the narrator’s brother.

This meant the punch line would be:

*I was fearless and free but he was lost in Twatsville.*

So, which is better, Bollocksville or Twatsville, or are both equally preposterous? Or would you rather have a footnote and a more literal translation? Suggestions welcome.

# Fiction



Photo by Matthew Niederhauser

## 阿乙

### A Yi

A Yi's real name is Ai Guozhu. He was born in 1976 in Ruichang, Jiangxi province. He graduated from police college and spent the following five years in the force, after which he worked as a sports, literature, and photo editor. At thirty, he started writing fiction, publishing a novel, *What Should I Do Next?* and his short story collections *Grey Stories*, *The Bird Saw Me*, and *Where's the Spring?* He was named one of *People's Literature* Future Top Twenty, and *Unitas* Sinophone "20 under 40" in 2012. He lives in Beijing.

# Two Lives

By A Yi

**Z**hou Lingtong reached the low point of his life at age twenty-six. Twenty-six years old. When some of his classmates already had children, and others had graduated from university some years before and were already teaching at high school, Zhou Lingtong was still doing his retakes. After he'd finished his most recent round of college entrance exams, Zhou Lingtong disappeared. He waited a long time for the exam results to be released and then snuck back onto campus. Wild grasses, already scarily tall, grew out of cracks in the cement, and one corner of the white paper stuck to the wall had drooped down, as if drowsing. Zhou Lingtong smoothed it back and read down the list. Reaching his own name he wailed and burst into tears. Once he'd stopped crying he had no idea what to do with himself. He stumbled blindly around in all directions, at a complete loss. The sky looked like black mud, pouring over him in distinct, cruel layers. He found himself walking towards the river.

The surface of the water was suffused with spots of light and he could hear assemblies of insects calling from the fields. Zhou Lingtong inched his way into the cold. When he was nearly up to his neck a woman's voice floated out of the grass thicket saying, Lingtong, what are you doing?

I'm washing, Zhou Lingtong said. His muscles had tensed with the cold, so he started to make his way out of the river. All he could see as he emerged was the back of a figure carrying a washing barrel, disappear-

ing into the distance. A bolt of lightning grazed down from the sky, lighting up the peak of the mountain. Taking a deep breath, Zhou Lingtong climbed ashore and, dripping with water, started to climb to the peak.

There was a temple at the summit of the mountain called Dragon Spring Temple, built at the end of the Qing dynasty. Zhou Lingtong reached the temple door, its paint peeling, to find it tightly closed. Zhou Lingtong didn't knock, but instead fell to his knees. He knelt until he had pins and needles. Unable to hold up his useless body he laid himself prostrate. After he had lain for a while, a party of ghosts gathered behind him and many quilts appeared before him. He toppled over, curled up like a dog, and fell dead asleep. Early the next morning a shower of rain swept the sky, and swept Zhou Lingtong back to consciousness. He straightened himself up and resumed kneeling. When it got a little lighter the temple door creaked open and the monk De Yong, who suffered from blotchy skin pigmentation, walked out looking up at the sky. When he saw the living, breathing thing kneeling in front of him, he jumped back inside the doorway.

As Zhou Lingtong pressed his forehead to the muddy ground, De Yong pointed at him and asked, What are you doing?

I want to become a monk, Zhou Lingtong said.

De Yong exclaimed in dismay and shook his head. Master, Zhou Lingtong went on, I can't go on living, please take me in.

Taking care not to muddy his cloth shoes, De Yong walked over to inspect Zhou Lingtong. You're in the prime of life, he said. Why would you want to

become a monk?

I've failed the college entrance exams eight years in a row. I have nowhere else to go, Zhou Lingtong said.

De Yong put his hands behind his back and stood up straight. You listen to me, he said. You are still tempted by desires, troubled by earthly things, and have no future with Buddhism.

Zhou Lingtong grabbed onto one of De Yong's legs. I will die if you don't take me in, Master, I will die.

Disgusting, De Yong said. He extricated his leg and walked back to the temple without looking back. Fuck your mother, Zhou Lingtong wanted to shout, but he didn't have the energy. By the time the temple door creaked closed, Zhou Lingtong had passed out. When he woke up again his vision was blurred, and it was a while before he saw the wrinkled apple in front of him. He gobbled it up like a jackal. Then he saw De Yong brandishing a huge door bolt. Get out, De Yong said. Zhou Lingtong got himself up and started to walk unsteadily down the hill. He walked a little way before turning to look back. De Yong stood on the hillside, door bolt in hand. Get out! he yelled again, and the sound resonated like a temple bell.

## 2

At the foot of the mountain, Zhou Lingtong found a patch of sweet potatoes the size of mice and ate them all. He could see a corner of the temple at the mountain top. He would have liked to set fire to it, but it felt too far away. He sat for a while, thought he might go home and surrender to his parents, when he saw a prissy young woman riding a Phoenix bike down the paved road. The woman, with her permed bouffant

hair and delicate complexion, looked at him with revulsion.

Zhou Lingtong lifted his muddy, sunken face and shouted, What are you looking at? So fucking what if I failed my exams eight years in a row?

You're mad, was the response, and the woman pedalled harder. The downward slope of the road meant she didn't need to pedal, and when she did, she popped her chain off. Woman and bike hit the ground with a clang. Her palms were grazed and began to bleed as she ow-ow-owed with pain. Zhou Lingtong walked over to her and demanded, Who did you just call mad?

The woman frowned and ignored him. Zhou Lingtong grabbed her collar and repeated, Who are you calling mad? The woman clenched her teeth but said nothing. Zhou Lingtong dragged her off the side of the road, into the fields, and behind a clump of mugwort. The woman was screaming for her life now so Zhou Lingtong squeezed her throat. The sound ended in a coughing. Zhou Lingtong peeled off her clothes and let her lie there a while, her bare white flesh trembling. Then he started fucking her. He fucked her with brute force, saying Who were you calling mad?

He fucked the tears right out of her eyes. The woman was rubbing her head around on the damp soil beneath her, until she made herself a complete mess. You stupid bitch, Zhou Lingtong said, I'm going to make you sorry. Suddenly a low roar came up from along the road – a car driving past. Zhou Lingtong hurriedly covered the woman's mouth. As it passed the abandoned bike the car slowed down, and sweat broke out along Zhou Lingtong's spine; then it accelerated loudly, and was gone. Zhou Lingtong finished hastily. He used the woman's clothes to bind her wrists and



ankles and her knickers to block her mouth. He took the money he found in her shoe and walked back to the road. He removed the bike's chain plate, replaced the chain and sped off. As he pedalled through the town the vegetable vendors, butchers, bun vendors, restaurant owners and men listening to the radio all turned to stare at him, opening their mouths as if they wanted to say something, but couldn't think of it in time. Don't you want to say, Quick, catch the rapist? Zhou Lingtong said as he passed.

Zhou Lingtong raced through the town, looking for an escape route. It was an hour before the people and the police realised what had happened. By the time they had armed themselves with guns and cleavers, piled into two big trucks and headed out after him, Zhou Lingtong had already abandoned the bike and boarded a boat. By the time they were making their frantic calls to people on other side of the river, Zhou Lingtong was already in a truck headed far away. The provincial police station on the other side of the river said they thought he'd left in a blue Liberation truck – or had it been a white Dongfeng. The precise situation was a bit unclear.

Later the team of pursuers was refined. A team of three people led by the head of the county Criminal Investigation Department was deployed to Nanjing to continue the chase. Parking their green Jeep at the Nanjing bus station, the four of them saw people flowing like schools of fry, rushing all one way, then all another way. They were stuck.

### 3

Zhou Lingtong remained within that flow of people, destitute and frightened, always thinking he was about to feel a forceful hand upon his shoulder

and hear a voice saying, So, this is where you've got to. From time to time he'd turn his head and glimpse something, but it was just workmen he'd never met rushing around on their bikes. After a few days here, Zhou Lingtong was ready to move on to somewhere more densely populated, and then to somewhere less so. He wandered until he was exhausted, then sat in the cool under a stone pillar, like a beggar. Just as the grand clock of the department store chimed out, a ten-jiao note floated through the air to him.

Zhou Lingtong felt safe within the bleak emptiness that followed the noise, and began to lose his fear. Like the tears he'd shed that day, once the fear passed, nothing stood in his way. Once again Zhou Lingtong felt gripped by a cruel clarity. The fact was he had failed his exams for eight years straight, and now had committed rape as well. Any hope he'd ever had was gone, and the only future he could possibly envisage now was kowtowing and chanting, Thank you, Thank you to the passers-by. That was the way it was: they would walk along the street on their two legs while he crawled along the ground like a reptile. Belonging to two separate worlds.

The problem was that after a couple days of begging, the cold night air and the damp of the road he slept beside started to make his back ache. A healthy young man was sliding into physical decline. Being idle was tiring Zhou Lingtong out. Life felt colorless, as if he were dying of slow blood loss. Wouldn't it be better if he just went ahead and died, then? His hope was already dead. The deed didn't have to be performed straight away – he would first eat chicken soup, Liuhe preserved beef and White Cloud pig trotters. When he had eaten these things he would climb to the top of Purple Mountain and watch the sunrise. Only then would he be ready to do it. Written on the *Nanjing*

*Daily* he was sitting on was: “look afar, to where the gathered mountains meet the sky. Great blue-green waves rush toward your eyes. A hundred mountains, a thousand green clusters. Where can we contain the fine dust of this floating world?”

The mountain was only three or four hundred metres high and Zhou Lingtong didn't find the climb hard going. From time to time tour groups gathered behind him and he listened with interest to the descriptions the guides gave about the local area through their bullhorns. Soon we'll go and see Sun Quan's tomb, they said. Everyone knows Sun Quan – so strong and so filial that even his enemies wanted their children to be like him. At one point Zhou Lingtong actually ran up to one of the ancient cedar trees and reached out his arms, clumsily embracing it. Its canopy was huge and he couldn't imagine how a snake could shake it hard enough to make such a loud rustling. Just as he was feeling at ease, he saw two porters on the stone steps furiously punching a tall, slender girl, like the legendary Wu Song beating the tiger to death. Not satisfied with merely hitting her, they grabbed at the curls of her hair too.

When the girl turned her face, Zhou Lingtong saw blood flow from her mouth and nose. Her eyes, haunted with despair, looked the way a fish on a chopping board might as it's about to meet the butcher's knife. Zhou Lingtong felt a stab of empathy for her plight, and suddenly understood his life's meaning. If he could exchange his life for another life, it would all be worth it. So he picked up a rock and rushed them. Nanjing people are renowned for being abusive to women, but when they saw the rock they screamed and ran off into the forest.

Zhou Lingtong helped the girl up. It took a few tries before he managed to get her standing in her

high heels. The woman had an equine face, with curiously small eyes, huge ears and nostrils – quite a startling sight. Moments later, a group of young men in suits and ties rushed over, pushing Zhou Lingtong out the way and taking hold of the girl. Some ran to the edge of the forest and stood on tiptoe to peer in. Zhou Lingtong stared in stupefaction as the girl was escorted farther and farther away, until all that remained of the group was a faint echo of their chanting.

The girl walked with them for a while, then stopped. Do you have a pen and paper? she asked. These were given to her; she wrote out a phone number, and beckoned Zhou Lingtong over. Thank you, she said. If you're ever in Beijing and need help, please look me up. Zhou Lingtong ran over to take it, mumbling an incoherent thank you. She'd have no way of saving him, he thought. She'd buy him a meal and that would be the end of it. City types were all the same – their gratitude never lived long.

Zhou Lingtong realised he needed to get to the hilltop. He climbed until there was no one around and lay down to sleep. He planned to sleep until early the next morning, when he would watch the sunrise before finding a way to kill himself.

#### 4

The rising sun floated up like an enormous, red ping-pong ball. Zhou Lingtong's whole body felt alive, as if he were covered in stinging insects. When the sun had risen fully, Zhou Lingtong shouted three times as loud as he could before going in search for a supple vine. Such vines weren't easy to find, but he found one, then went looking for a suitable tree. Most were either too low or too high. When everything was finally ready, Zhou Lingtong grasped the vine with

both hands and did a chin-up to reach his neck inside. Only then did he notice four people in green police uniforms making their way up the mountain along the path below him. I said we needed a tour guide, but you didn't listen, said one who sounded like the leader. You said you'd been here before, but you've still managed to get us lost.

Zhou Lingtong was sure it was the Goose Hill County accent he was hearing. He dropped to the ground, instinctively wanting to run, yet had nowhere to go. You can't escape, Zhou Lingtong! the lead detective shouted. Zhou Lingtong heard him clearly, yet was frozen to the spot. Caught like a deer in headlights, he watched the four panting jackals run him down. The lead detective reached out with a pair of hairy hands, and was just about to clamp down on him when Zhou Lingtong steeled himself and rolled down the hill. Lots of small yellow and white flowers and big patches of grass rolled up with him, and were thrown up to the sky. He kept rolling until an earth ridge blocked his way. He climbed over it, his head still spinning, but he didn't dare roll any further when a bullet pinged against a nearby rock, and ricocheted away.

Zhou Lingtong jumped behind a bush. He saw that the police were coming hand-in-hand down the hill. Like a madman he dashed into the dark undergrowth. He ran until he was surrounded by trees, only a tilted slice of sunlight filtering in, hidden insects calling from all directions. Only then did he consider the pain he was in. He realised he'd fractured the little toe of his left foot. He didn't dare cry out. All he could do was scrunch up his face and let the tears flow, feeling extremely sorry for himself. The more anguished he felt, the stronger the thoughts of hatred he harboured.

The monk's door bolt, the disdainful look of the prissy woman and the bullets fired by the detective all

forced him back into the world and the busy streets of Nanjing. He spent the days begging and the evenings sleeping, before going out into the alleyways at midnight with a brick in hand, waiting for people out walking alone. First he would tap the person on the shoulder and ask them for money. The person would fish out a five- or ten-yuan note together with all their small change and hand it over. Run, he'd tell them, and they would run.

This was how Zhou Lingtong carried out his guerrilla warfare, moving his battlefield to Zhenjiang, Wuxi and then on to Suzhou. When he felt he had shaken off the detectives from Goose Hill County, he settled back into the awful work of begging on the street. This didn't last long. Suzhou's city beautification programme had teams of vehicles out regularly collecting vagrants, and Zhou Lingtong was in trouble again. One day, when the beggars on one side of the street suddenly leapt up, the whole street's worth of beggars got up with them, and everyone made a run for it. Zhou Lingtong, his stomach caving from lack of food, only managed to run a few steps before falling down, whereby a young man in uniform charged over and grabbed his arm. He'd already thought through this chain of events: if he were taken in, he'd be sent back to his hometown and from there directly to jail. Now his charges included rape and resisting arrest, which meant he could be shot. He bit through the young man's sleeve and into his wrist, leapt up and ran into a small alley. At the end of the alley he glanced back and saw seven or eight uniformed men running towards him. He tore into a side lane and ran them in circles a couple of times. When he saw he'd lost them, he took the lid off a dustbin and stuffed himself inside.

Zhou Lingtong stayed there until nightfall before crawling out. Moonlight shone upon the pav-



Illustration by Wang Yan

ing stones and the wall stood tall and imposing. He walked around, wretched, feeling cold and hungry and frightened. All of a sudden he felt the expansiveness of the world and the tiny space each person took up. He recited a poem to himself:

*I will ride the wind and crest the waves one day  
I will straighten my sail and cross the vast ocean.  
I will straighten my sail and cross the vast ocean,  
I will ride the wind and crest the waves one day.*

He recited it all the way to the little grocery shop at the end of the alley, where under a light bulb he saw a sign advertising national and international long-distance phone calls. He fished out his money, piling all his small notes together in a bundle before taking out the phone number he got at Purple Mountain and dialling. The phone rang for a long time with no response. How would she be able to help him anyway, he thought. She'd probably just say thank you and po-

lately fob him off. But there's always hope – don't lose your hope, young man. Do you still charge if it doesn't connect? he asked the grocery owner, who waved a hand at him in disgust.

At that moment there was a rustle on the other end of the receiver and a voice said, Hello?

It's me, said Zhao Lingtong.

Who are you? asked the girl.

I'm the one with the rock on Purple Mountain, said Zhao Lingtong.

Oh, my protector, the girl said, How have you been?

Zhou Lingtong started weeping. Miss, he said. I can't live much longer like this.

Why can't you live much longer, what's the matter? the girl said.

I'm going to starve to death, he said.

Where are you? she said.

I'm in Suzhou, Zhou Lingtong said, angling his head so he could wipe away his tears and see the road sign clearly. I'm in Changrui Lane, Suzhou. If you walk north past two telephone poles you'll find me in the dustbin.

You wait right there, said the girl, and don't move. Then she hung up the phone.

## 5

Zhou Lingtong paid for the phone call and bought himself a small biscuit. The surrounding houses all looked empty. Reclining on top of the dustbin he felt his throat expanding and gaining strength, along with a barely controllable urge to just swallow the biscuit whole. His hands trembling, he tried to collect the powder on the biscuit with his lips, but his lips started to tremble as well, as did the rest of his body. He

lapped at the biscuit for a long time until only a few soggy crumbs were left. He felt disconsolate. That small amount of food had been like bait, luring out the immense god of hunger. He flipped up the lid of the dustbin, finding radish roots and vegetable leaves, which he began to eat. He ate until he came across something he couldn't chew through; pulling it out, he realised it was a plastic bag.

A cold wind was blowing that night. The sound of a phone being hung up carried through the air. The sounds of a living person disappeared, connection disappeared. The girl washed, fell asleep and woke up having decided to forget the whole thing. Yet he still felt he had to wait; really, waiting was the only thing he could do. He pushed up the dustbin lid, shoved aside some rubbish and, nestling among all the foul odours, fell asleep. He woke a couple of times in the night and popped out to look around. The only thing in the alley was the wind, leaping off roofs and jumping onto paving stones. The little grocery shop had turned its light out. There was nothing else around.

At dawn, Zhou Lingtong heard the muffled sound of metal being kicked, but, distrusting his senses, went back to sleep. He had just drifted off when he snapped awake. He clambered out of the dustbin and looked around the alley but saw nothing. He rubbed his eyes and looked again, and saw the back of a tall, slim figure walking past the little shop.

Is that you? Zhou Lingtong shouted. The figure stopped. It's me, Zhou Lingtong yelled. The figure turned around. The rock, I'm the one with the rock, Zhou Lingtong continued to shout.

The girl walked over. It's me, she said.

Zhou Lingtong felt all the fireworks in his heart go off at once. Then he saw the dim outline of a black bag being extended towards him. Inside was every-

thing he'd been wanting for: endless supplies of food, including roast duck, ham and bread, as well as Coca-Cola. He pounced on the bag and tried to tear it open. Unable to rip it, he bit it open instead. He ate ferociously, using both hands. He ate until his throat was crammed with bone fragments and he strained to swallow it all down.

Zhou Lingtong cleaned out the black bag, then shook it, but could find nothing else inside. He lifted his head to look at the girl and she shook her head. While they were staring at each other, the girl tapped one of her high heels on the pavement. Let's go, she said. Zhou Lingtong made clumsily to his feet. Before they set off, she bent down, picked up her leather bag and carefully tossed it in the bin.

Zhou Lingtong wanted to thank her but he couldn't get the words out. He followed her out of the alley and into the main street, where the cleaners were sweeping with their bamboo brooms. It felt eerie. Zhou Lingtong had heard stories about people who tricked you into getting drunk, then anaesthetised you and cut out your kidneys, to sell them to people who needed transplants. Zhou Lingtong watched the unfamiliar figure in front of him, his suspicions rising now that he was warm and full. On the other hand, if he were going to die, he would die. He'd been dead for a while anyway. At least now he wouldn't die hungry.

The girl led him all the way to a hotel. The red uniformed guard at the door bowed first to the elegant girl then to the scruffy stinking Zhou Lingtong. All at once Zhou Lintong felt as if he belonged to this girl. She arranged for a room and took Zhou Lingtong inside. She turned on the hot water and tested the temperature, saying, Wash yourself for three hours.

Zhou Lingtong looked in the mirror, saw a ghost. He jumped into the water and washed himself franti-

cally. He washed until the water turned black, then turned white; examining himself closely in the mirror, he looked human again. He repeated this a couple of times until he was clean all over. Realising he had nothing to wear, he ran behind the door to listen. Hearing nothing he gently opened it a crack. In the doorway he saw a pile of clean clothes: underwear, a shirt and trousers.

Zhou Lingtong put on the clothes, took a deep breath, and walked barefoot across the shaggy carpet. The early morning light was strong and it thrust down upon the girl's body, casting her shadow onto the white bedding, while she faced the light and smoked a cigarette. She flicked the ash into the bin with long, soft fingers like she were playing a piano. At this moment Zhou Lingtong saw her warmth as a haze of gas radiating out in layers from her elegant back and bare arms. He suddenly found himself in tears. Zhou Lingtong fell to his knees and said, I love you, Mum, I love you.

## 6

When Zhou Lingtong was twenty-six years old, his luck began to change for the better. The girl from Beijing, whose name was Zhang Qian'na, became his utopia, his inconceivable Bodhisattva. She gave Zhou Lingtong a firm grip on reality, and became his protector, his source of life and money.

Zhou Lingtong retained his mean instincts for a long time. When the two of them first went to Beijing, he gripped her hand tightly for fear she might run off and leave him. Sometimes, he even felt unsafe when he was inside her. There finally came a day when Zhang Qian'na, unable to resist, took him out and started licking him up and down like an ice-pop, and he felt

his whole body start to relax. Don't, he said as he caressed her hair. Oh, baby, don't do that.

The first time they paid a formal visit to Zhang Qian'na's father, Zhou Lingtong was a little nervous. He sat on the edge of the leather sofa and didn't dare look directly at the man's big, heavy-browed eyes. The old man scrutinised him for the longest time before picking up his mug of tea and taking a gulp. So, Zhou, where are you from? he asked.

I'm from Anhui, Zhou Lingtong said, his face flushing.

The old man waved a hand and said, I already knew that. I'm asking if you're from the city or the countryside.

Zhou Lingtong felt belittled by the question. I'm from the hills, he said in a quiet voice.

Louder, where are you from? the old man asked.

From the hills, Zhou Lingtong shouted, full of embarrassment. He heard the sound of clapping and the old man starting to laugh. He laughed until Zhou Lingtong's body trembled, then he suddenly stopped. From the hills, he said. I'm fond of hill people. They're down-to-earth. He laughed some more, and this time, Zhou Lingtong laughed with him.

The old man drank a lot during dinner. He turned a bright red face to Zhou Lingtong. Down to earth, he repeated, and patted Zhou Lingtong's shoulder.

Zhou Lingtong didn't think it wise for him to stay on after the meal. He tried thinking up an excuse to leave but the old man had already walked over to the sofa and had picked up the phone and was dialling. He had a leisurely conversation and then hung up. The old man looked again at the restrained Zhou Lingtong and said, Come over here, son-in-law, I'm going to give you your own business to run.

Sitting in his general manager's office, Zhou Ling-

tong wrote that sentence out many times: Come over here, son-in-law, I'm going to give you your own business to run.

It was so hard to conceive. Not long ago he'd been a fugitive living in a dustbin amongst plastic bags and dead rats, while today he had both feet up on this huge mahogany desk so shiny it twinkled.

Later the business opened a branch office in Malaysia. The first time Zhou Lingtong went there, he found a hotel and got a trusted colleague to make a call on his behalf. Soon after, he was surrounded by prostitutes from England, France, Germany, Russia, America, Japan, Italy, and Austria. Laughing they bowed to him. How are you, Boss? they asked in Chinese.

Zhou Lingtong reached out a finger and counted the girls. Back in the day, he said, you were the Eight Allied Armies occupying Beijing, my country's capital. Now I'm here to set things straight. His voice was stern and solemn, and the eight girls looked at each other, at a loss. Unable to really understand Chinese, they laughed for a while before removing his burnished leather shoes and starched trousers and pulling him out. Each of them got to taste him in her mouth, and they continued until they'd enticed his nectar. Zhou Lingtong felt flustered and aggravated. It hadn't been fucking worth it.

Zhou Lingtong muddled along peacefully like this for eight years, until one day, as he was leaving his office, he was accosted by a couple of people who rushed at him shouting, Lingtong, Lingtong. The security guard tried to stop them, but without success. Zhou Lingtong heard the Goose Hill dialect and panicked. I've got a gun on me too, he shouted.

The leader of the group laughed, and said, It's not about that, it's not about that. What was being said



back then was slander.

Only when Zhou Lingtong looked again and saw the ingratiating smiles on their faces did he feel at ease again. He waved a hand and told the men to take a seat. They sat down and explained why they had come. He learned that they were from Goose Hill County's Beijing representative office, and were pulling strings to upgrade the county to city status. Zhou Lingtong started off making excuses, saying that his words carried little weight. The Director and Deputy Director understood; they told him that his being accused of rape back then had been nothing but slander. Who saw the crime? Where was the evidence? They had been chasing the wrong person.

He served them the good tea and entertained them with the good alcohol but didn't agree to their requests. A few days later the head detective of the county police force, now the Deputy Secretary of Goose Hill's Judicial and Public Security Department, rushed over on behalf of the county magistrate, bringing his personal assurances as well as a legislative note. Only then did he believe the guarantee was explicit. After a lot to drink, Zhou Lingtong shook the Deputy Secretary's shoulder and said, You had excellent aim back then. The Deputy Secretary blanched and quickly changed the subject. Did you know that we're cousins on your mother's side? I think of all the hardship Auntie and Uncle went through.

Now you're calling yourself family, Zhou Lingtong thought to himself. Still, he didn't want to seem unfilial, so he asked, how are my mother and father?

They died soon after you left, the Deputy Secretary said with regret. Zhou Lingtong looked blankly around the room. He took a napkin and wiped his eyes a dozen times, until they were all red. Everyone flocked around him, told him not to cry, it had hap-

pened many years ago. Only then did Zhou Lingtong really start to weep.

## 7

It was a full eight years after he'd gone missing that Zhou Lingtong first returned to his hometown. He didn't go by plane or by train, but made the journey with Zhang Qian'na leisurely in a limousine. When they approached the sign that announced they were one kilometre from Goose Hill County, he saw the local Party Secretary, the mayor and a number local dignitaries awaiting him, their group of Santanas parked respectfully at the roadside.

On entering the city he saw red banners hanging from every building, celebrating their upgrade to city status. Great red archways had been inflated at the entrance of each street. Hydrogen balloons floated in the sky while remnants of firecrackers scattered the ground. Goose Hill residents were all gathered in the streets or else queuing for the public toilets. The traffic policemen whistled to clear the way for the convoy as it drove by, yet they failed to obstruct the countless hands that reached out to touch the jet-black saloon car. Dressed in his suit and tie, Zhou Lingtong sat in the car looking at pair upon pair of shocked and excited eyes that surrounded him. They couldn't see him but he could see them; he could see right into their souls.

Having attended a few city meetings and made some speeches, Zhou Lingtong suddenly felt weary. All he wanted to do was go back to his old home and sweep his parents' grave. After sweeping their grave he would go back to Beijing, never again to return to this place.

His wife was getting a migraine, so Zhou Ling-

tong journeyed alone in the car arranged by the county magistrate to his family village in Toushan. He handed a stack of red envelopes to the village head and asked him to distribute them among the villagers for him. Afterwards he went to find his parents' grave. He'd been searching a while when he was told with some embarrassment that it was the one without a monument. Oh, Zhou Lingtong said. He gave out some money and asked a few paternal cousins to take care of it.

At midday, Zhou Lingtong drank a few cups of grain wine and left his family village. He was halfway back when a thought occurred to him. He asked his driver to take him up to the mountain peak. It only took fifteen minutes to drive up there in the Santana 2000. Zhou Lingtong got out the car and, seeing the slope down to the paved road and the dried-up sweet potato plot, felt his breath catch in his throat. I'm going up the mountain to burn some incense, he told the driver. The driver wanted to accompany him, but he excused himself, saying it would feel more sincere if he went alone.

Zhou Lingtong felt even more resentful than he had those eight years before. He was plumper now but walked more quickly, as if there were something he was burning to see. By the time his shirt was soaked through and he'd taken off his jacket, he was at the summit. He stood in the very place he'd knelt eight years before and looked from this patch of shade to the dilapidated Dragon Spring Temple. The temple door was tightly closed and steam was rising from the tiles. Zhou Lingtong went over and beat loudly at the door, saying, I'm back, you asshole.

A voice floated out from behind the door: Coming, coming. It sounded familiar to Zhou Lingtong but he couldn't place it. The door creaked open and he

unwittingly took a few steps backwards. The monk reacted similarly, stumbling back and falling on his bum. Zhou Lingtong looked down at the monk's bald head, his orange robe and prayer beads and toppled onto his bum as well.

The monk and Zhou Lingtong were mirror images.

Zhou Lingtong began to say something just as the monk opened his mouth to speak. Zhou Lingtong gestured for the monk to go first. The monk raised his hand: Amitabha Buddha, he said. As soon as he spoke, a strange mildew started to spread over that familiar face and finally they were distinguishable again. Monk was monk, Zhou Lingtong was Zhou Lingtong. Humble was humble, affluent was affluent.

Zhou Lingtong felt assured. Where's De Yong? he asked contemptuously.

The Master died eight years ago, said the monk with a nod of the head and a bow. When he raised his head again, an insatiable envy flashed in his eyes. Zhou Lingtong waved the hand wearing the Rolex to the right and saw the eyes follow it. He told the monk to come over and touch it and, embarrassed, the monk came over and pawed at this and that.

What did De Yong say when he died? Zhou Lingtong asked.

He cursed me, the monk said. He said there was only enough food for one person to eat in the temple. He starved to death after I arrived.

*Translated by Poppy Toland*

# Fiction



Photo by Matthew Niederhauser

任曉雯

## Ren Xiaowen

Ren Xiaowen was born in Shanghai in 1978. She holds a Master's degree in Journalism from Fudan University. She started writing in 1999, and her published novels include *She* and *On the Island*. Her short story collections are *On the Balcony* and *Flying Carpet*. She was a Notable Mention at the 2009 Chinese Media Literature Awards.

# I Am Fish

By Ren Xiaowen

Every morning Ah Mo brushed her hair. The top of Elva's head emerged slowly, so that her long hair floated on the water like black thread. Ah Mo combed until it was smooth and separated into strands. He braided each *liu* into a plait, and attached a pearl to the end. Ah Mo had a lot of patience and nimble fingers; not a hair on Elva's head was lost for no reason. But each fake pearl was so heavy it tore her scalp to shreds. A few times her hair caught on the weeds, and chunks were pulled out. Ah Mo couldn't do anything about that. He could only remove her make-up in a timely fashion, after the exhibition closed at night. She looked like a small water nymph now, with a rush of hair and a body as light as a smoke-cloud, writhing in the water. Ah Mo closed the door, cleaned and fed her, changed her water. He didn't need to lift his head to know how beautiful she was. Elva's beauty was like molecular gas, affronting him with each breath he took.

Ah Mo had the time of his life, spending dusks like this. He was born a deaf-mute, and his parents had left him by the roadside. The old woman who adopted him, his *popo*, had been holding him, cooking, when she'd had a stroke. He'd fallen to the ground and a pair of fire-tongs had blinded him in one eye. A neighbour had, out of kindness, asked a favour from her son, gotten Ah Mo a job at the aquarium. *Popo* died that same year. Ah Mo was ten.

When he wasn't carrying out his routine of cleaning the aquarium every morning and night, Ah Mo usually stayed in the storeroom. He'd seen more fish than humans, and when he saw Elva for the first time,

he felt a sense of closeness rather than shock. They belonged to the same species! But he soon dropped these thoughts. He was convinced of his own ugliness, just as he was convinced of Elva's beauty.

Under such careful attention Elva lost some of her shyness. She swam out of her crystal dwelling. The tourist who saw her first shouted: "Look, it's the mermaid!"

The people in the queue pushed toward the front. There was the sound of applause.

Now Elva was more like a fish, her flat hands and feet fin-like; the whites of her eyes wax-yellow and her eyeballs bulging out more than ever; her breasts, by now fully developed, swelling when she took in water; her ink-green pubic hair showing like a clump of glistening seaweed. Her activity was limited most of the time. She dived to the tank's bottom, flapping hand or foot now and then, as she used to do in her uncle's house.

The aquarium had paid a handsome sum for her, but that didn't mean she should get comfortable. The Deputy Director of the aquarium, responsible for overseeing the Crystal Palace, was surnamed Li. Li demanded that Elva dance every day at a designated time, and then swim away according a route he had planned.

Elva found this funny, and didn't take the pie-faced man seriously. Director Li immediately found a way to get back at her. He put a white medicinal powder into the water, which dissolved to produce a smell that was sour like shit. Elva hid inside her house and tried not to breathe. She had survived two weeks in an

unchanged water tank, so the new and strange smell didn't affect her. She wasn't intimidated.

Next, Director Li put a water snake in the tank. The water snake was olive-coloured, with a short, fat body, and mean, beady eyes. A stripe of reddish-brown adorned either side of its belly. The water snake wasn't interested. Quick, with a big appetite, it went straight for the tropical fish in the tank. After feeding, it swam around a branch of coral and coiled up in the corner. Elva acted like nothing had happened when it slid across her spine.

Li thought of another tactic: passing low-voltage electric shocks through the water. The first current, a trial dose, left Elva slightly numb and twitchy. Excited, Director Li asked Ah Mo to crank up the voltage. Elva experienced a dry hotness. "More, higher, *higher* . . ."

The dry hotness wanted to split Elva open. It was thin needle points, then sharp knives, and torture sticks. It was too much for the poor water snake. Its ghostly-white belly, with partially-digested food, floated out of the water.

"Will you listen to me now?"

Elva tipped her head forwards, upturned her body, and her limbs went limp. She didn't feel anything anymore.

After two days of rest, her bones still ached. But Director Li pressed her to perform. Elva had to make

the *da* character with her body, then curl into a ball, or somersault repeatedly. These moves were designed to expose her nipples and pink underbody. Elva knew how shameful this was, so she held her thighs together, and crossed her arms across her breasts.

"Open your legs," said Director Li. He ordered another employee, Xiao Zhao, to keep training Elva. "Open your legs," he said, following Director Li and rapping on the tank walls with a broom handle. So Elva was forced to open her legs, and icy-cold water gushed into her vagina. The rice fields, the young man's hand and his blue gown, came back to her. She remembered her dream about the scissors and iron hook.

Apart from her daily four-hour dance she also had to swim around the coral reef and the small crystal house. All at the same time, she had to continually shake her head to make sure the pearls on her plaits loosened up. She shook her head from left to right, bruised her temples, and scratched her face on the coral's sharp edges. Xiao Zhao would glare, and shake his broom handle.

"Control your direction! Control your direction! For an idiot like this you need to use electricity!" he said to Ah Mo, who was, at this time, wiping off dust from the edges of the glass tank. Elva saw his nose redden, leaving a clear trail of snot.

After ten days of training, Elva could dance el-



Illustration by Xiao Bao

egantly, and could generally direct herself when she swam around the tank. Director Li stuck a huge sign in front of the Crystal Palace, reading “The Mermaid’s Nude Dance” and, through his connections, had a publicity piece published in the local newspaper under the headline, “Dancing Mermaid Awaits Prince.”

This was a disgusting idea, but enticing. On the first day, the queue waiting to get into the Crystal Pal-

ace was so long it looped around the building several times. Elva’s limbs were painted with a pattern of fish-scales, and she wore a sparkly belt tied around her waist, as well as double the number of pearls in her hair. To the ordinary multi-coloured lights had been added two big spotlights at the top of the tank, making the paint on her body sparkle.

See the mermaid dance! Gentle light from the



pearls, overbearing light from the spotlight, and even a timid light emanating from the mermaid herself. A disorder of light and limbs blended together, and when Elva somersaulted, the crowd cheered and egged her on, while some people even threw coins over the railing into the tank. A young couple queued from morning to night, going in with their son four times. Interviewed on television, the one-year-old boy looked straight at the camera and said his first word: “Mermaid.”

Director Li pushed his way into the crowd to listen to the compliments. After the show, a newspaper labeled him “Young, Innovative, Thoughtful Man-of-Action.”

After two weeks, this publically lauded man-of-action extended the opening times. Another two weeks, and he added evening shows. Private booths were added around the glass tank, so guests could drink coffee whilst enjoying Elva’s water dance. Income from the Crystal Palace quickly exceeded the income of all the other exhibition rooms put together. Director Li’s salary leapt up a whole level. He began to secretly search for opportunities, hoping he could go somewhere where there was more room for growth.

The coloured lights, which flashed at night, damaged Elva’s vision, and the strenuous performance weakened her body. After two months she was unable to somersault or shake her head, and she slumped into

a ball at the bottom of the tank, letting the audience boo her as much they pleased.

After closing time, Director Li came over to take her to task.

“Don’t *pretend* to be dead!” He banged on the wall of the tank.

Elva didn’t move. He lowered a gigantic fish trap into the mouth of the tank, trapping her by one leg. She turned over from pain, and then immediately stopped moving. After he tried a few more times, he turned to Ah Mo. “Get the electrode,” he said.

Elva raised herself up and crawled to the biggest cluster of coral in the tank. Shells sliced lines of blood on her stomach and elbows. She leapt forward, and her neck was trapped by a coral branch. She twisted her shoulders, but the more she struggled, the more she was trapped.

“Electrode!” Director Li shouted again.

She shut her eyes, and heard a sequence of noises. She was surprised, but soon no longer had the energy for surprise. There was pushing, shoving, things hitting the ground, the *bang bang bang* of the metal gate opening and closing. She was still stuck on the coral, trembling under the waves, but then she felt the water suddenly retreat from her body. The top of her head felt cold, then her forehead, face, neck, and body. Her naked calf, exposed to the air, twitched slightly.

Someone came up to her and stroked away the

wet hair on her face, and an eye – filled to the brim with a single, large tear – came right up to her face. Ah Mo looked at Elva. Elva looked at Ah Mo. He tossed aside the metal pole supporting the coloured lights, removed the fish trap from her leg, and then, lifting her body up with one hand, used the other to smooth the hair tangled in the coral reef. He lifted Elva gently out of the water. The dried blood on Ah Mo's hands began to drip drop by drop after touching the water. A chunk had been knocked out of the open-air water tank. Shells, sand, was everywhere, and a few tropical fish wagged their tails hopelessly.

On the other side of the big pool lay Director Li with a bloodied head, cursing as he tried to prop himself into a standing position. The gate was locked, and a knock came. "Director! Ah Mo!" cried an exasperated Xiao Zhao.

Elva twisted in the crook of Ah Mo's arm. He held her down, and pointed to his small storeroom. Elva shook her head. Ah Mo picked her up. The door of the storeroom was pushed open and the smell of rotten, compressed fish food wafted over. The room was so narrow that Ah Mo had to turn sideways. He lifted Elva above his head, as though lifting a sacred object. The dust and cobwebs all over the ceiling slid past Elva's cheeks. Ah Mo adjusted his angles and positions continuously, trying to limit the shaking of his tip-toed feet.

On the steel cot next to the window, a thin duvet was piled against the wall, and a pillow with its stuffing falling out was thrown down at the end of the bed. Balled-up dust spun in the wind. A rat ran across the top of Ah Mo's foot. He lifted his foot and rubbed it gently against the bedsheet, and then stepped on the bed.

A pile of cardboard boxes was stacked by the head of the bed. Some were sellotaped shut, some were open, some were empty and lying face down or stamped thin into stacks. Black bugs crawled in and out. Trousers, socks, toothpaste, and other objects were scattered across the top, coated in a film of dirt.

Ah Mo picked up the thin duvet and wrapped Elva in it. From a box he took out a shirt, and a big bag of dried banana chips. He wrapped the food inside the garment, and then wrapped it around his arm. He then pushed open the window, stood on the pile of cardboard boxes, stepped down, pushed up. Elva felt herself entering the outside.

Ah Mo set her down on the window ledge, then crawled through and dropped himself down. He turned around and picked her up again. The shirt caught on a hook on the window frame and the banana chips scattered across the floor. He hesitated a moment, then draped the shirt over Elva's face. The air outside the window was thick, and breathing wasn't easy.

Opposite the room was the workers' dormitory, and not far off was the aquarium's rear entrance. They had to cross a small garden overgrown with weeds, and in their way was the door room staffed night and day.

On the balcony of the workers' dormitory some workers were chatting, their laughter loud and piercing.

"Hey, deaf-mute, what are you doing?"

"He's got a bundle of stuff."

The men laughed wildly, slapping the edge of balcony. Some whistled.

"Hey, you better not have thieved something."

"Stolen something? What's worth enough for the deaf-mute to steal?"

"Probably the mermaid he looks after."

"Haha. A pair of monsters. Secret stolen bride?"

"They suit one another."

"Hey, deaf-mute, lift up the shirt so we can see!"

Ah Mo bent his body; his limp was worse than ever. The men mocked him a while longer.

Under the shirt, Elva turned her head. She glimpsed the sharp stepping stones on the path. Ah Mo's bare feet were studded with drops of his own blood, one red dot after another. Her breathing came easier, and her ears became accustomed to the noise. She discovered that the world outside the water was not as uninhabitable as she'd imagined.

"Hey – " said the voice of an old man, probably

the guard. Elva saw Ah Mo's big toe pull tight with tension. The old man called out a few more times. Ah Mo quickened his step, and ran out of the gate. Sweat beads were forming on the crook of his arm, and Elva nearly slipped out of his grasp. The jolting made her sick.

There was suddenly commotion behind them, probably the guards. The shirt fell, Elva took a deep breath, and saw the iron-grey sky, and clumps of clouds that reminded her of the dust in Ah Mo's room.

Ah Mo chose the little paths. Elva's knees knocked against a wall and started to bleed. Ah Mo's heavy breathing mixed with groans, which intertwined with gradually messier footsteps.

Luckily there were only four or five guards and they were distracted; Xiao Zhao had gathered them from the dolphin pool next door. It was the end of the work day, and they had been planning to hide somewhere to play cards. Although they couldn't put it off, they didn't really want to go after Ah Mo and Elva. After a few feeble shouts, their footsteps grew fainter.

Ah Mo lost the pursuers after a making a few turns. Elva struggled free of his grasp, pushed away the arm supporting her, and slowly stood up with her back against a wall. Pain spread from the large, flat soles of her feet to her heart. She weakened in waves, as if the air still held invisible water.

Ah Mo wept uncontrollably as he controlled his

breathing. Yellow blood leaked out of Elva's wounds. He squatted down, picked out a pebble embedded in his foot, and then drew three curved lines on the pathway. He resolutely pointed forward.

Elva stared indifferently at the dirt between Ah Mo's toes. Her skin was wrinkled, and water drops were forming. She could not walk. Sweat from her body converged and formed flowing streams. Her breasts shook every time she breathed in, as if straining to open up her lungs.

At least, Ah Mo could see clearly that, instead of her usual slackness, Elva was looking at him straight in the face, as though she wanted to envelope everything in her gaze.

As last, Elva stopped seeping. Ah Mo thought that her feet looked smaller, and water residue immersed the three white marks he'd made.

Ah Mo picked up the duvet that Elva had discarded and draped it over her again. Then he bent down and opened up his arms, hinting that she should climb on to his back. Elva shook her head and moved away slowly. On the wall was a water mark in the shape of a human body, with shreds of skin stuck to the shadow. Her shoulders, which had leant against the wall, were a bright, burnt red. Elva picked up the corner of a duvet, and covered her crimson shoulders.

She walked very slowly, each foot lifted high, coming down on a definite spot. She did this with tre-

mendous care. Her frozen muscles had lost all feeling, and her skin felt wind-beaten. The air that bloated her intestines stopped all movement, and last night's fish food refused to digest. The pieces juttied against her belly. Just three small steps had taken all of her energy.

*Taken from "I Am Fish," a novella by Ren Xiaowen*

*Translated by Alice Xin Liu*

## Translator's Note

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Alice  
Xin Liu

*I Am Fish* is a longish novella Ren Xiaowen completed in 2003. At the time, and now still, Ren is considered one of the top writers of her generation, pegged as avant-garde, which is plain from this story.

In *I Am Fish*, the voice is quite often distant: this works since we're reading about Elva, a woman who can breathe underwater, who eats fish food, and who's billed as a "mermaid" and imprisoned in an aquarium, performing rude dances for money that goes into the pockets of her captors. She is saved by a deaf-mute, Ah Mo, the aquarium cleaner, who also braids Elva's hair for her performances. Ah Mo sees the two of them as belonging to "the same species."

At this stage in Ren's career, her descriptions were more cerebral than emotional. She relies heavily on descriptive detail, just piles them on, so the first draft of this translation went on clumsily, an overload of words, stacking up in black and white.

It's interesting to me that though the story is told without emotion, everything that Ah Mo does is pitiful. He cries a lot, "leaving a clear trail of snot" in one instance, and, in another, with one great fell of an image that's very cinematic, Ren chose to depict Ah Mo in close-up after he smashes Elva's tank: "Someone came up to her and stroked away the wet hair on her face, and an eye – filled to the brim with a single, large teardrop – came right up to her face." The editor of this piece took out what I wrote originally, "propped open with a single, large teardrop," because the Chinese has *chengman*, or literally "filled to the brim."

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Filled is a much better translation, but I was reluctant to give up “propped open” because it makes Ah Mo’s will seem so weak and I thought it coalesced the image. But I conceded.

Later, when we go inside Ah Mo’s room, we see a smelly, bug-infested, and disorderly place. Stuffing has come out of a pillow. The pillow is strewn about at the *end* of the bed, and the Chinese is *chuangwei*, which is graceful and elegant in its two-character way. The English, “down the end of the bed,” is so ugly, but there was nothing I could do about that. It has become, of course, collateral damage.

My concern for this wordiness falls very much into the dangerous fantasy of rewriting the original piece in your translation. How much is appropriate? At which point are you defying its author and her style? Can I *just* put “on the bed” instead of “down the end of the bed”? Do you really need to add that the rat ran across the “top” of Ah Mo’s foot?

In another painful example, what should I do with the abundance of escape detail in this excerpt? In the end I chose to translate it faithfully. Beginning “A pile of cardboard boxes were stacked by the head of the bed . . .” all the way to the banter between the workers on the balcony are four paragraphs that are nothing but actions, depicted in full; Ah Mo folds dried banana chips in a shirt, Ah Mo wraps that shirt around his arm, it falls off, he drapes the shirt over Elva, she peeps out from underneath. As I was translating this, I wondered aloud if all this was necessary. But it’s pos-

sible to find in this detail the necessary crux of the story, which is ugliness being covered up, or used for depravity. Because Ren is a consummate user of detail (“On the wall was a water mark in the shape of a human body, with shreds of skin stuck to the shadow”) it’s easy for the translator to lose her patience with its density. I wanted to simply slim it down so I felt better. However, I’ve followed the rule that, if you’re translating a piece, it’s best if it’s because you like its style and therefore *chose* to do it. I’m a fan of Ren Xiaowen’s academic way of writing, so I’m happy to keep it as it is.

Having said that, though, the banter between the workers on the balcony had no descriptive detail in it, and it was the most fun to translate.



## 蘇瓷瓷

### Su Cici

Su Cici was born in the 1980s. Aside from working in a mental institution for five years, she was also a nurse, a propaganda officer, a go-go dancer, a hotel clerk, and a newspaper editor. Her poetry and fiction have appeared in a wide variety of literary journals, including *Poetry Periodical*, *Poem Selection*, *The Star Poetry Monthly*, *Chinese Poets*, *Poetry Monthly*, *Youth Literature*, *Writer*, *Harvest*, *Mountain Flowers*, *Flower City*, *People's Literature*, the Japanese journal *Hinabeshi*, *Fiction World*, *Changjiang Literature & Art*, and *Selected Stories*. Her stories have been anthologized by numerous year-end poetry and fiction collections, and she received the Chinese Writers' Association's Literary Newcomer Prize, the Spring Literature Prize, and was the first recipient of the Changjiang Literature & Art Prize. Her short story "Run, Li Lini" made the Chinese bestseller lists in 2006. She is the author of a collection of short stories, *The Ninth Night*, and a collection of essays, *One's Hospital*.



# The Zebra That Didn't Exist

By Su Cici

**H**ow old was I that year? Please forgive me: I can't remember what my exact age was. It's not that I'm getting old or anything, it's just that my memories of that time are somewhat confused. I know I had already deferred my studies and was spending all my time at home. My daily companions were the leaves on the trees outside the window turning green to yellow, yellow to green; the slow spread of a water stain on my desk; the myriad sounds filtering through the ceiling; the shoes behind the door gathering dust. The only thing I can clearly remember is the plastic tube in the pocket of my jacket. There was nothing special about it: it didn't have a bright, colourful label or an unusual smell, and the button on top was a little dirty. Every so often I would grab it and shoot a wet white mist into my gaping mouth, like someone trying to kill themselves by swallowing a bullet. I could feel the warmth of it moving through my soft, crimson respiratory tract. I was like an old-fashioned electric fan, my thoracic cavity emitting a whirring roar, spittle and phlegm arcing out of my body and splashing onto the sheet. There was a zebra on the sheet, with a body of interlacing black and white – a zebra that would never run, because its hide was festered and worn from the various bodily fluids I had spat onto it over the years.

At first there was always a crowd of people around me: my mother, father, and little sister either wailing by my side or pacing about the room in a state of panic. Sometimes one of them would place a gentle hand on my back and pat it, in the belief that it would ease my nerves. Maybe it worked: gradually, my bro-

ken breaths would come together, until they formed a perfect, harmonious arc. Later on, they all disappeared. Whenever I became short of breath, my body curling itself up into a ball, I would see their feet moving through the crack under the door – but they never stopped. My mother getting up to hang out the clothes, my father wandering about the living room with a newspaper, my sister, of course, doing aerobics to some program on television. Only I heard these sounds, at first sharp and fleeting, but later deep and broad. Upstairs, a little girl was hammering at a beat-up piano, hitting the black and white keys together to produce an intense and distorted sound. My stomach spasmed; it seemed as if a hole had appeared in my body, and all the air inside me was being sucked out in time to that stuttering, disjointed staccato.

Along with the wheezing came a series of gradually rising white clouds, clouds which stuck one after another to my pituitary gland. I knew what this meant: that my life was dwindling away, along with this motley assortment of monochrome negatives. As always, I managed to fish out the white plastic tube before my fingers froze up completely, opened my mouth, aimed and fired. A sticky white membrane covered up the black holes forming inside my body – tiny holes like those in a honeycomb briquet. The dreadful piece of music that had been playing came crashing to a sudden halt. I slowly raised my head, and the green paint peeling off the wall swam into focus once more. I was covered in sweat; the boulder in my heart had disintegrated, but its fragments were still clogging my veins. All I could do was hold my chest and slowly force

steady puffs of black smoke from my mouth. Only when my breath had returned completely to normal did I get out of bed and walk to the windowsill. There was a huge mirror on the desk, but I flipped it over before my reflection came into view. I didn't need to be reminded. I knew what I looked like in moments like these, and I hated those warped facial features and bulging veins profoundly. It was a face possessed by a demon, not the sort of face that a young girl should own.

I was already accustomed to living with asthma. It was a disease that could strike at any time: insidious as a field of poppies in full flower, their scarlet petals slowly bursting forth, clustered around black, ugly sex organs – organs that spawned like parasites from among the foothills and in the soil, until finally they were plucked and transplanted onto unsuspecting peoples' bodies. There was a row of camphor trees outside my window; I could see people moving about through the leaves, little heads and patches of skin just exposed. They were just like my family, with their loud voices and their boundless energy. Every year around midsummer, people would gather from all around, waving palm-leaf fans and conducting loud, exuberant conversations on every topic under the sun. I would eavesdrop from my dark window upstairs, cocking my ears to catch everything they said. After they had all wandered off, I would lie quietly on my bed and attempt to reproduce the sound of their voices, word after word. It was exhilarating: through these captive sounds, every change, every occurrence in the outside world became vibrant and full of life. In this way, I proved that I was not really absent from the world: I was just feeling the city's throb after my own fashion.

After all, you know my situation. I could never savour these things personally; I am allergic to their unfamiliar odours, and might choke to death out of sheer excitement.

There were several manholes on the road outside our apartment. My mother was always urging my sister to be careful: every now and then, a child would fall down the shaft exposed by a stolen manhole cover and die. My mother never looked my way during these lectures, but I didn't take offence. She knew I would never let myself walk far enough to risk falling into a sewer drain. Just as they had grown accustomed to my asthma, my family took for granted my capacity for self-preservation. They no longer stood aghast and afraid during my attacks; they had been duped by one false crisis after another, crises from which I had always emerged safe and sound. Even I had begun to weary of this cheap trick. By twelve years old I knew it wasn't anything to be afraid of: all I had to do was fish out the plastic tube, take a puff – and just like that it was over. Nevertheless, I had a heightened sense of caution. Perhaps it was an old habit I had not fully abandoned; perhaps I just enjoyed the sense of childish drama.

In any case, it wasn't out of fear that I began to pay attention to the manhole covers. A month before, at around 4 a.m., there had been a sudden noise outside our apartment: the sound of someone treading hard on a manhole cover. Whoever it was must be really strong, I thought to myself. The sound of that foot stamping down echoed oddly in my head all day. After this, I began to hear the same sound every night at the same time. A month passed before finally, my curiosity aroused, I leaned out of the window one night to

look. It was a man in white sportswear out jogging. He had appeared out of the darkness; although there were no streetlamps, and no moon that night, his body was stubbornly emitting a faint white light. His arms were swinging powerfully, his head held high, his gaze fixed straight ahead. He ran closer and closer, until at last one foot fell unmistakably on the manhole cover. That brief sound made my heart jump every time I heard it – which is not to say I disliked it. Instead, it gave me a kind of bizarre thrill. The man wasn't aware of any of this, of course; he kept running relentlessly forward, further and further away, until finally he disappeared from sight. I couldn't make out his features, and neither could I tell his age: apart from the foot that inadvertently struck the manhole cover each night, steady and punctual, he was a total stranger. As soon as I heard that familiar sound, I would fall into a deep and undisturbed sleep.

It was drizzling outside. The doctor's office was full of models of the bronchial pathways: smooth muscles, mucous membranes and cilia, all coated with a layer of red paint. The expressionless doctor had assembled these models like they were toys; now he was pulling them apart one after another and placing them on his desk. Without warning, the rain outside stopped, and sunshine leapt into the room. A tap had been dripping in the filthy white sink throughout our consultation; now the drops hitting the water were soaked in light, as if the basin were full of gold.

"Now do you understand? This isn't a scary disease. You can defeat it!" said the doctor. It was a sentence full of warmth, both encouraging and consoling. My fragmented vision converged on his face, but it

was still devoid of any expression. Not even a smile. He wasn't even looking at me; his pale, drooping eyelids, covered in delicate blue veins, were fixed firmly on the floor.

"Really?"

I was pretty sure I understood better than him.

He didn't seem satisfied or dissatisfied with my reply: it simply wasn't of any significance to him. He opened the glass cabinet with his slim fingers and began to stuff the models inside it one by one, his joints as stiff as a puppet's, his movements betraying his exhaustion. I didn't want to disturb him, and I left his office quietly without saying thank you.

I caught sight of a pink figure as I walked back into the outpatient hall. Before I could escape, it was calling to me: "Big sister!" With a great effort, I managed to force a smile as I headed over.

Her mother was there too, holding her daughter's hand. "So nice to see you again," she said to me with a smile. "You're looking well!"

"She is, she is!" I heard the little girl in the pink skirt say.

"Could I bother you to mind her for a bit? I want to go get her case history from the doctor." Before I could even answer, the young woman dropped her daughter's hand and ran upstairs.

The little girl curled up at my feet and grabbed my hand. "Big sister!" she shouted again.

I sighed helplessly and squatted down beside her. "How have you been?"

Maybe this was the sort of question only adults understand: she ignored me. "Mummy bought me a baby doll yesterday. It's this big," she said, extending her weak little arms with an effort. "And Daddy

bought me chocolate. He's going to pick us up soon, too: he wants to take me to the park." Did all little children prattle on like this? I watched her mouth squirm incessantly, spraying spit onto the back of my hand. I was feeling jittery. What was she like during an attack? I imagined her pale face, her body curled into a ball, spitting out her crimson tongue like a python opening its maw. She was still jabbering on about all the stupid little things her parents had bought or done for her. I suddenly felt disgusted. What did this kid know? Her sickly-sweet expression, her vivid descriptions: it was like a cream cake that had gone off, stinking and sprouting green fuzz.

"Don't you get it?" I said suddenly, gripping her shoulder. "They'll leave you in the end. You've got to believe me."

The little girl was stunned for a moment, staring at me in dismay – but it was only a moment. After a second, she started up again, as immersed in her own words as before.

"They'll throw you away in the end, throw you away like rubbish," I said through clenched teeth. "They won't want you. They'll hate you! You're a nuisance to them, a worry to them, constantly tormenting them with your asthma. Believe me, they haven't got the patience to love you!"

At last the little girl fell silent. She stared dumbly at me, her facial features squeezing together unpleasantly as she started to bawl. An ear-splitting sound ripped through the hall, and a few people nearby looked at me strangely. My face red, I abandoned the little girl and ran for the door, the sound of her weeping nipping at my heels. I had already forgotten I was not allowed to run.

Where was I? I came to a halt and leaned against a wall, my breath slowly returning to normal. The inside of my mouth was burning. I could still run – run fast and far! It was just a shame I didn't have time to enjoy the airy lightness of it all before it was over. I couldn't hear the little girl crying here: all I could hear was laughter, people talking, the sound of moving limbs. I took stock of my surroundings. I was outside a sports field; the sounds were trickling out through the iron fence. I walked in slowly, not thinking about what I was doing. Ten people about my age were standing on the green lawn: young men and women dressed in track suits, with muscular bodies and faces tanned to a healthy, athletic bronze. I sat down on the steps and watched them. They had stopped talking when I came in, faces all turned in the same direction. I followed their gaze, and saw a young man in a white singlet and shorts on the running track loosening up with some high kicks. Behind him was a dense curtain of gold, the sunlight racing past his bouncing shoulders and getting in my eyes. His figure was exceptionally well proportioned: everyone was sighing in admiration, whether it was for his taut calves, his outstretched arms or his twitching collarbones. These qualities were even more noticeable when he ran. Yes, he had started to run! I stood up involuntarily: he was coming closer. I could hear his panting breaths and the steady sound of his feet hitting the ground. His chest was heaving violently, and he wore an expression of pure concentration; his whole body gave off a powerful radiance, a sense that his hair was welcoming the wind. I could perceive every change in his body, his chest gasping for breath, his aching muscles. Without thinking, I placed a hand on my chest, because he had begun to

accelerate, every muscle taut, every bone standing out, as elegant as a statue.

At last he reached the finish line, and the young men and women standing on the lawn went off to crowd around him. I stood on tiptoe, but I couldn't catch a glimpse. After a while, the group dispersed, walking back in twos and threes to where I was standing. Then I saw him again, his wet hair plastered on his forehead, wearing a smile as open and innocent as a baby's. He was smiling at a girl standing close to his right. She was tall, with long legs and hair tied back into a ponytail, and dressed in sportswear like everyone else, though she walked with a certain spring in her step, her ponytail swinging proudly. She handed a bottle of water to the young man, and he drank it as he chatted to her, both of them heading slowly in my direction. They were already quite close; I could see the words "Sports College" written in red on the singlet still clinging to his chest. When they were about ten metres away from me, I quickly lowered my head, my long hair hanging over my face. They were coming closer. I twisted my fingers together, not daring to raise my head until they had already moved past me. Then I turned around cautiously to watch their retreating backs. I saw that the young man had a red number "13" on his back, which shook in time with every step he took.

Believe me when I say that people who are chronically ill possess almost superhuman sensitivities. My congenital deficiencies have forced my healthy organs to develop abnormally well: I might not be able to breathe normally, but I have been blessed with an exceptional sense of hearing. The road was full of



Illustration by Zhu Hong

people, but I could still make out the young man's footsteps. I wasn't following him, as such. But each perfectly-balanced step seemed incredibly familiar to me: where had I heard that sound before? Curiosity impelled me to trail in his wake. Every time his foot hit the ground, it seemed just one step away from my memory, but when he lifted it again, my mind went blank once more. I racked my brain for anything that might be connected to him, but by the time he and the girl disappeared into a cinema, I still had no idea.

I walked back home, preoccupied. All of a sudden, I was startled by a clear, ringing sound. I looked down and saw that I had just stepped on a manhole cover. I slowly squatted down to look at it, a preposterous hypothesis germinating in my mind. Could he be the person who ran past my apartment every morning at 4 a.m.? I looked up at the blue sky over my head and laughed. It was too absurd. Maybe I was just hoping it was him.

I couldn't sleep that night. I tiptoed to the win-

dowsill, my father's snores surging through the room like rolling thunder. The concrete path was deserted, a silvery streamer thronged on either side by shadowy trees. I looked at the clock; it was already 3:20 a.m., forty minutes before the man was due to come running by. The sky looked like it had been washed with black ink. I began to feel strangely impatient; when the ache in my craning neck became intolerable, I decided to go downstairs and watch for him there. I found a spot behind the close-knit trees and waited. The cold wind blew in fitful bursts, making me shiver violently. Time seemed to have frozen. Was it 4 a.m. yet? Why hadn't he come? Every so often a leaf would fall on me from the trees above. There was no light, no sound of people talking; the buildings had become indistinct decorations, my surroundings devoid of life. All I could see was a layer of thin white fog.

I was just about to give up waiting when I heard the sound of running feet, first faint and then louder, diffusing in waves from some far-distant place. He was here! I quickly crouched down, peering into the darkness at the end of the road. A fuzzy little white dot gradually coalesced into an incandescent body. At the moment he broke through the darkness, I dug my fingernails into the tree trunk in excitement: it really was the same young man! He carried himself as he had during the day, and his expression was the same. We were surrounded by silence; there was only me to witness his graceful stride. Against the immaculate background of the night, his bones, joints and muscles struck me even more than they had in daylight. I heard his foot strike the manhole cover, as deafening as the pounding in my chest. He paid no heed, his gaze straight ahead, his arms swinging on. Every bob of his

Adam's apple, every curving line, every strand of drifting hair drew my attention. My skin was scalded by the breeze stirred up as he passed. As he moved gradually away from me, I started to breathe again. I could faintly see the number "13" on his back flashing like a flame, until it was extinguished by the wind.

My life began to change. To begin with, I started going for walks. Every afternoon, around the time the sports college students trained, I wandered along the footpath to the field close to my home and sat down in a corner, with eyes only for that young man. I watched him running, talking, drinking, catching his breath. At the end of each day's training, he would leave with the ponytailed girl. She must be his girlfriend, I thought. I always followed closely behind them, but sooner or later they would speed up and disappear into a cinema, park, or arcade. I couldn't follow them in, because the allergens in those unfamiliar places could trigger my asthma at any moment. Some years before I had attempted it, and wound up falling to the ground like a fish leaving a lake, my gaping mouth spitting incessant bubbles. People had crowded in a circle around me and watched in fascination. I never forgot that sense of humiliation, so when they entered these forbidden places, there was nothing I could do.

I was most happy at night. That was when he belonged to me, and me alone; I would stand behind the trees and watch him slowly pulling away from the darkness, like an angel charging out of the gates of hell. That glorious moment never failed to move me. When I got home, I would lie on my bed and stroke the sheet under my body. One night, the zebra's hair was unusually bright; moonlight was falling on its hide. It was the first time I had noticed its radiance.

Its raised hoof and bright pupil told me that it was running, that it only ran at night. It made me think of that young man. Yes, he was a zebra, a powerful, dynamically galloping zebra. I clung tightly to the zebra's body. I could feel its warmth, the mingled scent of sweat and sunshine. There were also a few water bottles hidden under my bed, bottles that the young man had thrown away after training. I took them and spread them out on the bed. Then I picked one up and brought it to my face, pressing my lips to the mouth of the bottle, to the very place that young man's lips had touched. The freezing bottle began to warm as I clamped my teeth hungrily on the opening and fell asleep.

But there was one evening when I didn't go downstairs to wait for him. I was brooding on something that had happened that day, and feeling a pain I had never felt before. I couldn't get the scene out of my mind. Him leaving the sports field with that girl. Going into the woods with her. Kissing her. I was hiding in a corner, my whole body trembling. The girl closed her eyes and stood on tiptoe; the young man leaned down and fastened his mouth onto hers. How could she even breathe? I was already short of breath, suffering bronchial spasms, the air knotting and stopping at my lips. I covered my mouth with both my hands, afraid they would hear my harsh, noisy rasping. My brain was starved for oxygen; the trees around me were whirling, and it felt as if there was a hand clutched around my throat. I slumped down against the wall. It was almost impossible to dig out the white plastic tube and, shaking uncontrollably, spray the medicine into my mouth. The disconnected breaths joined together once more, the spinning scenery came to a stop; my

body recovered its strength. By the time I had picked myself up off the ground and looked back into the woods, they were gone. I held up my hands, which were covered in spit. Then I pressed them against the bricks and rubbed with all my might. I wanted to make all this filth clean.

The doctor was soaking his models in ethanol. My consultation was already over; I should have already left, but I hesitated, looking at his back, and asked: "Where's that little girl? Why haven't I seen her at the hospital recently?"

"Oh, she died. I think it was last month."

I watched the doctor, his shoulder blades sticking out as he pushed down on the model in the basin. "Oh. I see."

When I got back to the main hall, I began to feel nervous as always, scared I would hear that shriek of "Big sister!" at any moment. Stupid! Somehow, I'd forgotten she was dead: that I wouldn't have to hide from her anymore, to look at her pale little face and hear her endless prattling. And I wouldn't have to imagine what she looked like during an attack anymore, either, because she would never have an asthma attack again.

I didn't rush to the sports field right away; my body felt weak all of a sudden, and all I could think of was heading home and lying next to my zebra. I was particularly shaky that day, and soon I could barely walk. Exhausted, I leaned against a nearby wall and watched the people hurrying by. Just then, I saw the young man's girlfriend jogging on the other side of the road, wearing white sportswear as she always did, her ponytail swinging playfully. She passed a knot of people, some of whom turned their heads to stare. I had



to admit, a well-shaped girl like that out running was hard to ignore. She had already crossed the road and was moving steadily towards me. Just as she was about to run past, I summoned all my strength, shot forward and grabbed her wrist.

The girl had no choice but to stop. She turned around and stared at me in shock, her mouth opening to say: "You?" Sweat poured down her forehead and into her eyes. She closed them for a moment, and before she could complete her sentence, I stood on tiptoe and pressed my lips to hers. She reacted in an instant, pushing me away so hard I hit the wall. Opening her large eyes in horror, she touched one finger to her lips and looked at me incredulously. I laughed at her, laughed until she shrieked in fear and fled. I wore a smile the whole way home, biting my lip every now and again. I had kissed her because the young man's warmth was on those lips: now that warmth was on mine. After that, my mood took a turn for the better.

As soon as she saw me arrive at the sports field the next afternoon, the young man's girlfriend tapped on his shoulder and said something to him. They were a long way from me, but I could still see her turn and point at me. The young man looked in my direction. I quickly jumped up off the steps and ran to hide myself in the bushes outside the sports field. After training finished, a surge of people left the field, the girl included. After a long time, the young man ambled out. The people ahead were already lost to sight. Why was he on his own? Suspicious, I followed cautiously behind him; he crossed the street, passed a shopping mall, and stopped in a secluded alley, shady and green. I hid around the corner, wondering why his girlfriend wasn't with him. Had they broken up? The next time

I peered around the corner, the street was empty. Where had he gone? How had he disappeared so fast? Slowly, I moved out from behind the wall, flecks of sunshine filtering through the trees and landing on my feet. I looked about for any sign of him as I walked. Suddenly, as I turned, he appeared before me. I didn't know where he had jumped out from, but we were already face to face.

"You're following me, aren't you?" he said.

I wanted to run, but my feet wouldn't listen to me. It was as if they were nailed to the ground. "No, no, it's not like that!" I stammered.

"Don't lie to me. I know you've been following me for ages. My girlfriend and I worked it out early on. Every afternoon you come to the sports field to watch us train, and then you follow us. What on earth are you up to?"

I had never been so close to him before. I could see his brown eyes, the clear outline of his lips. He didn't seem angry as he said those words; in fact he was smiling, a smile so tender that I became flustered and forgot to answer his question.

"If you don't want to say that's fine. I can't force you. But I can't imagine why you wanted to kiss my girlfriend!" He moved closer to me. I could already hear his heartbeat, smell the distinctive musk of his body. I lowered my head nervously, my breath coming in hurried bursts. The situation was slipping away from me. My lungs were already hissing like an electric current along a wire. I couldn't bear his gaze; it was stirring up my asthma. I just wanted to get out of there. But I didn't have the strength to take a single step.

Suddenly, he reached out and lifted my chin with

his hand, so that I was forced to look up and meet his gaze. "What's wrong?" he said. "Why won't you look at me? Are you shy? It's pretty cute of you, following me for so long and then kissing my girlfriend. I don't know what you were thinking. Do you just really like kissing?" He laughed cryptically.

There was a giant stone pushing down on my trachea. Soon I wouldn't be able to breathe. I was already incapable of speech, and could do nothing but implore him with my eyes: release me, please, release me! But he either didn't see or understand me; his mouth slowly moved down to cover my own, and my body went rigid, my sight blurring, the black hole in my body ever expanding. Finally, just as our lips were about to meet, my body convulsed, my breath ruptured, and fluid spurted out of me. He shoved me away, shouting. I fell to the ground heavily, wheezing like a punctured balloon, my face crimson from choking and pent up tears. The white plastic tube had flown out of my pocket and landed at his feet. I twisted my body, stretching out one arm with difficulty. "Please, please give it to me!" I gasped. His expression of alarm slowly disappeared. "What's wrong?" he asked, squatting down and looking at me.

"Please . . ." My tongue was stiff; I couldn't finish the sentence. I put my hand to my throat and looked at him desperately.

He picked up the plastic tube that was swimming before my eyes. "This, right?"

I tried to nod. My brain was buzzing, my tongue protruding like that of a dying man.

The young man looked as if he had realised something. He looked at me with intense interest, still holding the bottle. "So it's asthma, is it? How strange.

I've never seen an asthma attack with my own eyes before. Now I know how fake the ones you see on television are. How did you get asthma? It's a shame, a beautiful girl like you. Though you look pretty scary when you're having an attack!"

I thought I was about to die. My arm had already fallen to the ground, and the breath that had surged like seawater before was gradually coming to a stop. My eyes were bulging in their sockets; I could see now that he had no intention of giving me the bottle. I fell back, watching coldly as he put it in his pocket. "Let me have this, okay?" he said. "I want to take it home and study it." He was still toying with my lip. "Look at you. I wanted to kiss you, but you spat all over my face. What a shame!" Finally, his face still plastered with that innocent infant's smile, he said: "Poor little girl. I'm off now. Goodbye!" And he left, like a zebra cheerfully trotting away.

I didn't die, though I have no idea why. I didn't even know I was alive until I woke up. I crawled to my feet, carefully dusted the dirt off myself and walked home as if nothing had happened. There was nobody home, so I rummaged through a cupboard on the balcony for a while until I found a hefty iron bar. I picked it up and jabbed it at the floor a few times. Very sturdy; the perfect tool. I held it in my hands and laughed.

I went downstairs at 3:20 a.m., the same as always – although strictly speaking, it wasn't the same as always, because this time there was an iron bar in my hand. For as long as I could remember, I had believed I was weak, someone who would never be able to carry out any strenuous physical activity. It wasn't until that night that I realised I was wrong. I finished what I had come to do earlier than I expected, and dragged the

iron bar back home. The zebra was still running under me as I lay on my bed, moonlight sailing along the walls. It was a particularly quiet night, without a single noise to disturb my rest. I slept very soundly.

It was already time for dinner when I woke up. Silently, I thanked my family for not interrupting my seventeen-hour snooze. I opened the door and walked into the living room to find my father, mother and little sister already seated around the table for dinner. I yawned hugely, filled a bowl with food and sat down beside them. I felt refreshed.

“Don’t you remember what I told you? Stop charging about everywhere, do you hear me?” Mother was saying to my sister.

My sister pouted. “Yeah, yeah, I remember already! Why do you worry so much? Don’t I come home safely every day?”

My father put down his chopsticks and glared at my sister. “Don’t take this so lightly. Just this morning a young man fell down into the sewers while he was out jogging.”

My mother nodded. “Exactly. This is serious! They still don’t know if they can save him. Personally, I doubt it.”

“That manhole cover was still there last night when I got back from studying,” my sister said. “Where did it go?”

“Idiot!” my father said. “Thieves only steal manhole covers at night!” My mother, my sister, and I all nodded our heads, satisfied.

My family was sleeping soundly; it was already very late. I tore the sheet out from under my body, put the water bottles from under my bed on top and

took the whole lot to the bathroom, throwing them onto the spotless white tiles. Then I set them alight. The plastic bottles melted and fused together, but the zebra was still running, his hooves flying, his body full of burning black holes. I waited patiently until he disappeared, slowly, slowly, from the savannah. I never saw the young man again. And every night at 4 a.m., I was peacefully asleep.

I was fifteen that year. I’ll never forget it.

*Translated by Sarah Stanton*

## Translator's Note

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Sarah  
Stanton

I don't believe in synchronicity. I think it's the preserve of hippies in weird jumpers and badly designed websites with "wellness" in the header. But something must have been going on for this story to find its way to me. For starters, there's the matter of the title: it just so happens my online handle for some five years was zebrazebrazebra, and it's a name I still go by in a few odd places. So when "The Zebra That Didn't Exist" first landed in my inbox, I couldn't help but relish the coincidence. It seemed oddly fitting, this notion of three zebras that did exist – if only virtually – being chosen to translate one that didn't.

I read the first few pages of this story on the high-speed train back from Qingdao, sharing occasional snippets with the girl sitting next to me. I was immediately struck by the vivid, confronting descriptions of asthma and its effects, by the sheer desperation and loneliness that permeated each line. This was not an academic response. I have lived with chronic illness for most of my adult life, and the struggle depicted in these opening paragraphs is a struggle I have shared. It really began to seem like this story was made for me. A taut, poignant exploration of disability. With zebras in it. I was in love.

And then I got home. And I read on. And the story did a complete 180° and felled me like a kick from a tree.

Because in the end, "The Zebra That Didn't Exist" isn't about chronic illness, or even (I'm sorry to say) about zebras. It's about chronic humanity – that dark, absurd place inside all of us ready to bubble up at a moment's notice. The characters in this story are not crazy; they are humans responding as humans do in extreme and painful circumstances, victims of nothing more than belonging to a species which, under stress, becomes a long streak of unpredictability. At its heart, this story is about insularity, about all the irrational decisions that only seem right if you are cut off from the rest of the world. Like falling in love with a footstep. Like killing because you've just discovered you can. Or even, if I'm honest with myself, like believing that fate gives a damn about who translates a story. Which is ridiculous, of course. Fate only cares that the story is translated *right*.

# Fiction



Photo by Matthew Neiderhuser

生鐵

## Sheng Tie

Sheng Tie is the penname of Wang Tie. He was born in 1976 in Beijing, with family roots in Jiangsu province. He has worked in advertising and the media. He is now the chief editor of *Popular Software*. He has written novels since the age of eleven. His novel *Appliance World* won the Heilan Prize for Novels in 2006, and he is the author of a selection of short stories, *Scout*, *You're in the Wilderness of Love*.

# The Train Was Clean and Cool

By Sheng Tie

**B**ailu stood in the shadows in the car park next to the south gate of Beijing West Station. The close air of a late summer afternoon drained him of energy. In the car on the way here he had dimly heard a few claps of thunder, but there was no sign of rain now. Beside him, his dad locked the car door and passed over his luggage, a rucksack.

“Is your ticket in the bag?” his dad asked.

“It’s in my pocket.”

“Make sure you keep it with you. Did your mum say she’d be waiting here?”

“She said she’ll call when she gets close.”

Bailu’s mother arrived a few minutes later, bustling out of the night in a purple dress. It always made Bailu slightly uneasy when she got dressed up. She in turn asked whether he had his ticket. She did not speak to Dad. The three of them walked together into the station.

It was the first time that Bailu had travelled a significant distance on his own. He had just finished his 15-plus exams, and Dad had arranged for him to have a holiday with an uncle in Shenzhen.

The three of them were the only people walking through the deserted concourse. On either side of them were rows of shop fronts with papered-over windows. It looked as though no one had done any business on this floor for a long time. Illuminated by ranks of strip lights on the ceiling, the space seemed silent and dirty. Beijing West has a lot of these empty spaces. For some reason, they feel not just dirty, but damp.

The bright waiting halls were full, as always. The

people in looked swarthy and rough. There were a couple of out-of-town girls in shorts, white thighs showing, but they didn’t leaven the mix. The railway station was oppressive, and loud, yet isolating. There was no escaping this sensation; it just had to be borne.

After a tedious half hour or so in the waiting room, they at last filed through the ticket gate and onto the platform.

The glaring lights on the platform seemed to accentuate the muggy blackness of the night.

The sign suspended over the platform flashed “T107 Beijing – Shenzhen.” The train was waiting, a tired-looking attendant standing by the open door of each carriage. Bailu’s parents boarded the train with him. They found his bunk in the sleeper car, and the three of them sat down. Bailu was starting to have reservations about travelling alone, and he barely heard anything his parents said to him.

“Remember to go and get something hot from the dining car. Order two things. It doesn’t matter if you don’t finish them. Don’t just eat your noodles the whole trip. Have you got your hand soap?” Mum ran through her travel checklist, while her son just dumbly nodded or said, “Yes.” The door to their compartment stood open, and every passenger glanced in at the family as they passed along the corridor. It made Bailu feel exposed. Then a passenger dragging a large case stopped at the compartment door. He took his ticket out to check the berth number once again, then began to stuff his suitcase under a bunk. He was dark-skinned and tall, with large teeth, and it seemed to Bailu that the miasma of the station waiting room seeped from

his pores. He brought it with him into the compartment. When his suitcase was safely under the bunk, he squeezed past Bailu to sit next to the window. He took his tea flask and a few other bits and pieces from the bag in his hand, and placed them on the small table. He didn't seem to mind sitting among Bailu's family at all.

Mum and Dad didn't get off the train until shortly before it departed. Mum gave Bailu another thousand yuan, to make sure he had plenty of money. Dad had already given him two thousand. When he saw the two of them together on the platform, receding further and further away from him, Bailu finally started to relax a little. He tossed his backpack up onto the top bunk and climbed up after it.

The rough guy with the teeth was in the lower bunk. He'd lain down and gone to sleep as soon as Bailu's mum and dad had left the train. The doors had closed and the train had set off, and the other two bunks in the soft sleeper compartment were still empty. So it's just the two of us in this compartment, Bailu thought.

The train's motion became smoother. Bailu lay on his bunk, listening to the rattling noises inside and outside the carriage. His familiar, reassuring city was receding into the distance, and he knew it. On the train's PA system outdated elevator music started up, and the female announcer intoned a welcome onto the train. Despite her warm, euphonious voice, her only effect was to irritate the newly boarded passengers. It was not yet nine in the evening; sleep was impossible. The fluorescent tubes in the corridor filled the compartment with a pale glare, but somehow it still wasn't enough to read by without squinting. Bailu rolled over

and lay facing the wall. Now that they were a few minutes out of the station, the air in the compartment was less stuffy. Bailu hadn't seen this uncle in Shenzhen for five years. The last time they'd met was in his first year of middle school. The uncle had come to Beijing for something to do with his work, and they'd gone to a lamb hotpot place near Baizhifang. He was Bailu's dad's younger brother, but to Bailu, he was just a stranger. Bailu could still remember how, in the middle of dinner, his uncle had patted him on the shoulder, still with his face turned towards Bailu's father, and said, "Bailu can come and work for us when he leaves school." Mum had been there, too. They were still together then.

The train wouldn't get to Shenzhen until the evening of the next day. His uncle was going to pick him up at the station. Bailu imagined what that would be like. They would have nothing to talk about in the car on the way home. He would be staying at his uncle's home for nearly four weeks. What would his flat be like? They should have plenty of space. They might give him a big, empty room, with furniture that still smelled of paint. The whole city probably smelled that way. It was full of new arrivals, full of new buildings, probably no magazine kiosks. It was going to be a long four weeks. He didn't even want to go, but when Dad suggested it, he hadn't said anything. Why? No reason.

No reason. Often, people don't have any choice; just as in summer, when you have no choice but to sweat till your shirt drips, or on the execution field, where you can do nothing but wait your turn.

Bailu lay on his bunk, his mind racing with these thoughts. It was a long time before he got to sleep.



Bailu was wide awake soon after it became light the next morning. He climbed down from his bunk, fished his shoes out from underneath, and put them on. His companion in the opposite lower bunk had got up even earlier, and was not in the compartment. Bailu enjoyed the privacy. He looked out of the window and found that the train was in the countryside. Rural landscapes streamed past. For a young man on his first long trip alone, novelty had displaced the anxiety of the night before. His phone and his wallet were still safely in his pockets. With his shoes on and his feet firmly planted on the carriage floor, he felt he had nothing to worry about.

A babble of voices came from the carriage. Most of the women were still lazing in their bunks, children lying alongside them. But the men were up, some sitting, others in the corridor looking out of the window.

When he went along the carriage to the toilet, he saw that the tall man from the lower bunk was smoking in the smoking area between two carriages. The man noticed Bailu, but said nothing to him. Still, he didn't look as awful as he had last night. Bailu thought he looked a little bit like the severe platoon leader from the movie *Visitors on the Icy Mountain*. In wartime, he might have been a fearless war hero, but in this century he was just a redneck on the road.

Bailu returned to his bunk and watched the countryside outside the window for a while. Mostly he saw flat, green farm fields, with occasional low hills dropped between them. There was the odd huddle of trees. Farmhouses sailed by in the distance, or whipped past up close. Each disappeared out of sight before you could get a good look. They were mostly crumbling, a few brand new, but all of them had a tex-

ture of familiarity – you know what it's like to stand in those yards. The train flew on toward the south, but the landscape didn't change as much as he had thought it would. The memorable sights were the occasional glimpses of two children in a field, or a dog on a dirt road, or a farmer ploughing with his ox.

Bailu soon lost interest in the landscape outside the window. There was little in the scenery that would remain in the mind for any length of time, so his thoughts flowed as quickly as the fields past the window, and monotony gradually set in. Next to the window, Bailu took out a computer magazine and two copies of *The First*, the tabloid his dad left him, and started to read. Half of the magazine was devoted to games, but Bailu finished it in less than two hours, more quickly than he'd expected. There was nothing in *The First* that interested him, either, and in just a couple of minutes he had leafed through both papers. It was not yet 10 a.m.

He felt the train stopping again. It had stopped only twice that morning, at large stations, and the PA system told him that this stop was Nanchang. He hadn't eaten any breakfast, and he wasn't hungry. It was less than a ten minute stop at the station, then, just before the train set off again, the tall "platoon leader" returned to the compartment. He had bought something to eat on the platform – he began devouring a bun he had pulled out of a steaming plastic bag. Now Bailu was hungry, but the dining car was not yet open, and he didn't really want to go and eat there, anyway. When the train started moving again, he made a Master Kong instant noodle, ate it, then picked up the computer magazine again, and flicked through it a second time.

The tall man left the compartment again. Bailu



Illustration by Tan Tan

saw that there were two magazines next to his pillow. Without noticing what the magazines were called, his eye was caught by the headlines screaming from the top of the cover: “10 Republican Era Cover Ups,” “Double Agents in the anti-Japanese War,” “Mysteries of the Eastern Qing Tombs.” Seeing as the tall man wasn’t there, he picked up one of the magazines.

A while later the tall man returned, carrying his glass tea flask.

“I borrowed your magazine for a moment,” Bailu said, embarrassed.

“That’s fine,” the tall man said, with an obvious northeastern accent. Without another word, he picked up Bailu’s computer magazine. “I saw you reading this all morning.” The tall man studied the magazine. “Laptop Boom: Reviews and Comparisons of Cheap Laptop.” He read the title of one of the articles out loud, then flicked over a couple more pages, then gave

the magazine back to Bailu.

“It’s a computer and games magazine,” Bailu explained. The tall man did not reply.

When Bailu finished the tall man’s magazine, it was nearly twelve o’clock. The sunlight outside the window was very bright. Bailu felt a little dizzy. He closed the magazine and placed it on the table.

“Read enough?” the tall man asked.

“Uh-huh.”

The tall man smiled at him, revealing yellow teeth.

“Do you go to Guangdong a lot?” Bailu leant back on the lower bunk. His dislike for the man was diminishing rapidly.

The man nodded. “I go every year. You’re from Beijing, are you?”

“Yes,” Bailu said.

“I thought so. So are you going on holiday to Shenzhen?”

“Going to stay with a relative.”

“Staying with family’s good. Makes things easier.”

“Are you going for work?”

“Yes, for my job. I sell minerals. I go to Beijing and Tianjin all the time. Every time I go to Guangdong I have to come via Beijing.”

Bailu was still feeling dizzy, so he took off his shoes and climbed into his bunk, and lay back on the folded duvet. “Have you been on this train before?” the tall man asked him.

“No,” he said, his eyes closed.

“I take this train a lot . . . You have to relax on the train. If you’re tired, then just sleep. Don’t try to think about anything else . . . There’s no safer way to travel than by train . . .” Bailu fell asleep to the sound of the tall man’s voice.

When he woke up again, the light had faded considerably. The announcer’s mellifluous voice was looping on the PA system: “ – in order to make your journey more pleasant, we will be playing you a selection of folk songs, entertainment and light music throughout the afternoon – ” The tall man was gone again, probably to smoke another cigarette. Bailu sat up. The sound of the train’s motion seemed somehow different. He glanced out of the window, and oh! The landscape outside the window had changed at last. It was now water, as far as the eye could see. The train seemed to be going past a great lake.

From the backpack that he’d thrown onto the top bunk, Bailu took out his camera to take a photo.

When he turned back to the window with his camera, he suddenly realised that the pavilion on an island in the lake was . . . not actually on an island at all. It was just a pavilion sticking up out of the water. And on

closer inspection he saw that it wasn’t a pavilion, either. It was the roof of an ordinary house breaking the surface of the water.

Even stranger was that the house seemed to be on the same level as the train window. He couldn’t see the girders of any rail bridge. He walked out of the compartment and towards the carriage door. When he got to the door and was able to look down, he found that there was no bridge. There was no embankment. The train was running through water! The train’s wheels were stirring up yellow, muddy waves and froth. The ripples spread out from the two sides of the train into the flat surface of the water. It looked like a boat’s wake in the sea.

There was no sign that the train was going to stop. Bailu felt a slight sense of panic. The soft sleeper car was very quiet. Most of the compartment doors were closed. Where the doors were open, the passengers inside seemed completely unconcerned by the scene outside the window. There were still groups playing cards, and little boys in their bunks giggling loudly with their mothers; there were still men standing quietly in the corridor, looking out of the windows. Bailu didn’t know what to say to these people. A passenger walked towards him. He said, “The train is under water!” but the passenger walked straight by without taking any notice of him. A group of card players in a compartment looked at him through the open door. “There’s water everywhere,” Bailu started to say, but they turned back to their game as if they hadn’t heard him speak.

Bailu felt his face becoming hot. He had to find an attendant to ask, he thought, and started to walk, only to find that his legs were shaking. He wanted to know

what was going on. He walked through the carriage towards the front of the train. He walked through three carriages (or was it four?), but there was no one in the attendant's cubby in any of the sleeper cars. He felt as though the water outside the windows was rising. It seemed to be flowing faster, and it was no longer just water, it carried strange rubbish. The train's PA system was playing an old folk song – *Rain on Banana Trees*, he thought. No, no, it was *Higher Step-by-Step*, it had to be *Higher Step-by-Step*, but the music seemed to have been slowed right down . . . just ignore it, don't worry about that now. The carriage in front of him brought a flash of relief and pleasure. It was brightly lit, with snow-white cloths spread on tables, and there, around one of the tables, sat a group of people chatting. Train attendants and two transport police. Bailu appeared in the dining car doorway.

“Can I help you?” One of the slightly older attendants had spotted him, and spoke without getting up.

Bailu pointed to the window next to the transport policemen, and said, “There's water everywhere!” Everyone stared at him, as if he had very rudely interrupted them.

“So?” The attendant answered him, then turned to glance out of the window. Two of the dining car waitresses started to laugh. Then the others also began to smile. “Haven't you taken this train before?” a policeman asked Bailu.

“No.”

“Do you know that there are floods in the south?”

“Yes,” Bailu said.

“Huh . . .” The policeman, who had a squarish face and just a hint of spread about his middle, gave

a high-pitched grunt and peered at Bailu with an odd smile on his face. It seemed to be saying, “So what are you fussing about?”

“This is a flood zone. This is what happens when it floods. Once we get through this section it'll be OK. It's fine!” explained the waitress who had first laughed at Bailu.

As Bailu left the dining car, he heard a burst of laughter behind him. It was starting to get dark. Looking out from the carriage corridor it seemed as though the water was about to reach the windows. All sorts of things were floating in the water. There was a lot of sodden paper and cloth twisted up together. There was also a dead cat (or dog) in amongst the rubbish. Its belly seemed to have burst open, and there was something grey hanging below its anus. Next, Bailu saw something like hair among a jumble of broken wood. It was a person, it's a dead person! He was sure he had seen a person's arm, hair, and white shirt billowing on the surface.

Outside the train was chaos. More roofs appeared on half-destroyed houses, and trees with no trunks. Inside, the train was dry and tidy as before. There was no sign of water leaking into the carriage. The tinny speakers continued to play folk tunes. Bailu started to feel afraid. He took out his phone as he walked back towards his carriage. He wanted to call Dad, but there was no signal. He couldn't make any calls.

The train slowed. The rhythmical sound of the train wheels had faded, and he now heard the lapping of the water, a grinding of metal against metal from below the carriage, and a muffled thumping – as if there were something under the water which was scraping and banging against the train. The train was

rocking slightly, as if it was about to float away. Suddenly a boy and a girl slid open the door to a compartment and chased each other out, laughing. Bailu jumped in shock. The girl, in front, laughed shrilly, and as if in response, a long, deep woman's chuckle came from the speakers. It was the voice of the announcer. Inside the carriage, passengers padded here and there in vests and plastic flip-flops. But outside the window, more and more shapes like dead bodies were appearing among the flotsam on the surface of the water. Bailu might never have realised he was running if it were not for the irritation in the eyes of the lethargic passengers he brushed past.

But he soon realised that he had come to the wrong carriage. He couldn't find his compartment. The light was now so dim that it was hard to read the compartment numbers. He turned and ran back the way he had come. The announcer started to speak again. Her voice sounded deeper, but grated on his ears. "Good afternoon, passengers. Your train journey is an opportunity to enjoy some beautiful scenery, and to relax with your family over a cup of tea. While you are with us, I hope you will all remember the following things." Suddenly the carriage started to rock. The water outside smacked against the glass like waves on the beach. It had risen right up to the windows. More objects from below the water were thrown up in front of Bailu. They bobbed in the dirty water, broken bodies, all of them, bodies that looked like pigs or some other farm animal, but some that looked like people.

"I hope you will all remember the following things. All remember the . . ." The woman's voice was becoming uglier. It sounded as though she was desperately suppressing some strong emotion. Bailu stopped

looking outside the window. He kept his eyes fixed on the compartment numbers and ran back along the train. It seemed to be a very long way. This carriage seemed to have become unusually long. From the PA system he could hear music, then the "Hah!" of a comedian, and the wave of laughter that followed it, then the announcer's strange monologue once again. Bailu was crying, though he hadn't realised it yet.

As he finally found his own carriage, the train's lights flashed on simultaneously. There was no one in the carriage corridor at that moment. The sound of the PA system had returned to normal. But by the light of the carriage's internal lights, he could see that the floodwater outside had now risen above the level of the windows. The train was driving underwater, and every window along the corridor was full of bodies. They swayed in the unseen currents, black hair floating between grey-white thighs and arms. The train seemed to be proceeding very slowly, as if the whole train were stuck in a mire of bodies, sinking ever deeper. The skin of the bodies could be heard clearly rubbing against the windows, and the noise swelled and fell as the train rolled on. Bailu did not want to look, but he still saw the faces of the dead. Some had open eyes with popped eyeballs; some had open mouths with puffy tongues lolling out; some had cheeks pressed against the glass of the window, and were twisted by the motion of the train; most were only blurred shapes, no visible faces at all; and there was one child of about two, its entire body pressed against the window, head down, one arm gone.

The corridor seemed to get deeper, and the train seemed to sink deeper into the water . . . Bailu's legs had no strength. He walked shakily forward, covering

his face with his hands, and only now realising that his phone was still clutched in his right hand. Behind him, a compartment door suddenly slid open, and a hand caught Bailu's shoulder. He turned, and saw the horsy, bright-eyed face of the tall man. "Hey, where are you off to? I was just looking for you. Come in here, I want to tell you something." The tall man's voice was mild, but his hand was enormously strong. With a single tug he pulled Bailu into the compartment and shut the door. Then he said in a low voice, "What the hell do you think you are doing?"

Bailu lifted his head and looked at the tall northerner in front of him. "What's going on?" he asked. The lights were off in the compartment, and the curtain had been pulled tightly closed. He couldn't see the expression on the tall man's face, but he could make out the man's two bright, moist eyes staring at him. "Don't look. Listen to me, don't look around at anything! Quickly, get up in your bunk!"

At that moment the announcer, who had been prattling without pause, screamed through the speakers of the PA system: "Don't look! Get in your bunks!" The scream was so sudden, so hysterical. It was not the refined and gentle broadcaster patois of a woman in her 30s. It was the gutturing roar of an emphysemic old crone. "Don't look! Get in your bunks! Don't look! Get in your bunks! Don't look! Get in your bunks!" The voice wailed on and on.

Bailu shouted and tried to cover his ears, but the tall man grabbed his arms and heaved him towards his bunk. Somehow Bailu scrambled up rapping his head on the ceiling of the carriage. He picked up the blanket and covered his head. He realised he had not taken off his shoes, and this gave him a crumb of comfort

amid the chaos.

"Lie down. Don't get up until I tell you." Bailu felt the man giving him a pat, then returning to his own bunk.

But the fear did not end. Outside Bailu's blanket it had become thicker and heavier.

"Don't get up! Don't sleep! Get in your bunks! Don't get up! Don't sleep! Get in your bunks!" The announcer's throat rasped from the shouting, the sound so close it seemed to be lying just on the other side of his blanket.

After some time, the announcer coughed twice and stopped shouting – the pleasant program for our enjoyment has finished, thank goodness – but now Bailu could hear other sounds more clearly. A grinding, jagged noise was coming from the wheels as they shuddered along the track (like a drawn-out screech of brakes). From the windows, the squeak of flesh against glass continued. Not only that: amid the noise he could sometimes hear a muffled knocking as if someone in the water was banging on the carriage window with their head or their knee or their fist. The noise made him want desperately to open the curtain and look out. What was it? Who was knocking on the glass? Was someone alive out there? No, it was impossible. No one could believe such a ridiculous idea. Bailu knew there was no longer any need to wonder why. There was no reason. None.

When Bailu again heard the voice of the announcer on the PA system, he realised that the train had stopped once again. The woman's voice had now transformed completely into the voice of an eighty-year-old. All Bailu could make out was the greeting "Good evening, passengers . . ." After this, the lan-



guage faded into a sound like gargling. Once the train had stopped, Bailu began to listen for voices outside. He heard the train doors being opened, as if there were passengers boarding and leaving the train. He stuck his head out of his blanket and looked downwards, but the tall man's bunk was empty. The blanket had been smoothed out, and the man was nowhere to be seen. The carriage was still very dim. It seemed to be evening. With the elation of a survivor, Bailu peeled the curtain back a little and looked outside. It took him a few seconds to recognise that the black clumps covering the window appeared to be human hair. Bailu's heart cramped once again as he accepted that he had not been dreaming.

Just as he built up the courage to look out of the window once again, someone slid open the compartment door. Bailu instantly ducked back under his blanket. He pulled open a slit, and saw three figures standing in the doorway. There were no lights on in the corridor, but he could see them perfectly clearly. All three of the figures were wet through. When they stepped forward he could hear that their shoes were full of water.

The train shivered once, and began to move slowly forward once again. In the darkness without looking, he knew that the three people had stepped into the compartment. Something – a hand or a foot, or rather it seemed more like a strong bird's claw – gripped one corner of Bailu's bunk and his blanket. Bailu's heart almost stopped beating. He almost wanted to throw off the blanket, and loudly demand that they tell him who they were. But his body refused to obey his commands. He hugged his head, held his breath, and pretended to sleep. Still, the hand groped over his blanket, like

a piano player subconsciously playing notes. Then he heard someone climb onto the top bunk opposite him. If indeed it was a "someone."

Bailu felt a taint of bitterness on his tongue, as if every frustration that he had endured in his life were pent up to the point of bursting. He thought suddenly of a mass grave and the bodies of the workers who had been buried alive. Every skull seemed to wear an expression of gloom and despair. Perhaps that was the fundamental expression of all human beings, hidden below the skin.

The quiet teenager waited in a silence like death. He prayed that he would lose consciousness soon. He saw green in the darkness.

*Translated by Philip Hand*





## 柏桦

## Bai Hua

Bai Hua was born in Chongqing in January 1956, and is currently a professor in the Chinese Department of the School of Arts and Communications in Southwest Jiaotong University. His published poetry and scholarly work includes *Inspectors of Air*, *Things Past*, *On the Left – Lyric Poetry in the Mao Zedong Period*, *Five Sichuan Worthies*, and *A Landscape Handbook*. *Wind Says*, an English-language collection, has been published by Zephyr Press. *Historical Records*, *Late Qing to the Republic*, and *A Drop of Ink* are forthcoming in China. He has received the Anne Kao Poetry Prize, the Shanghai Literature Poetry Prize, the Rougang Poetry Prize, and the Red Rock Essay prize.

### *Small Town Tale*

“A shoddy excuse for a hotel corridor.  
A shoddy excuse for calm and death.”  
Startled awake by delivery vans from night’s travel-weariness

both begin to bicker, and inevitably encounter  
the undying poplars outside the door

in lamplight he’s an old man still young  
in the process of injecting his diabetic arse

she blows the smoke hard through her nose  
two elephant tusks curve upward and away

### *Village, 1977*

The poultryman sells eggs, the tinker mends pots, the knife grinder still here;  
apart from illness, is anger passed down through the generations too?

Tangled, tiresome, paddy-terraced 1977;  
pig’s liver was dear, ox lungs cheap, but there was everything to make Secretary Jian happy.

That contented atmosphere of a cowed household, early morning  
The aroma of pork noodles drifting from behind the Post Office.

This evening, will we read the paper? Ba County at peace, Longfeng Commune likewise.  
I’m not sleeping, not sleeping. That mysterious algebra can be studied at night.

However, at the end of the dark alley, on the right, one red lantern:  
that serene sleeper (from the old Republic) has been dead for six months now

### *Mock Nursery Rhyme*

face                    is a crab-shell face  
milk                    is a bag of milk  
drum                    is a rattle drum  
drape                    is a golden drape

red                      is *Lady In Red*  
spring                    is *Might As Well Be Spring*  
autumn                    is *When Autumn Leaves Start to Fall*  
fish                      is *Like A Sturgeon Touched For The Very First Time*

taste                    is the taste of Shanghai  
clang                    is Eileen Chang

#### APPENDIX 1

merciless good            is Air Rested Kailed  
unmoving good            is Tray Tor Eggs Siled

#### APPENDIX 2

early off                    is Old Master Rhymester  
late back                    is Wah! Iron Eyebrows

## *The Illusion of Life*

*Merely staying alive is big affair; a heroic achievement, almost.*

Eileen Chang

Whose life is strangest?

A servant's life? The poet Yao He's life?<sup>1</sup>

Probably the life of Louis IX was,

who, under the oak in the garden, dispensed justice very well.

That punctilious Japanese archaeologist,

did his life grow of his body's inheritance?

How nice, he happens to be narrow-minded,

punctual, meticulous, with no learned habit of being late.

How sad – the tree died like a flame extinguished. A hundred years!

Startled, you cried in alarm: Look!

How nice, it isn't the horse trough that's moist and warm,

but my hale and hearty old scrotum.

Yesterday at Fortune Revival Temple. You'd had your hair cut,  
and found yet another of its superfluous cloisters.

How nice, as you came from its silent depths you saw us  
waiting for you under the trees by the gate.

1: Author's note: Yao He (779 – 846) was a poet and scholar-official of the Tang dynasty. He liked to write about everyday life and natural settings. Five-character poems were his specialty. His style resembled that of another poet, Jia Dao, to such an extent that contemporaries referred to them as "Yao-Jia."

## *Thoughts Arising from the Pig*

*A treeful of plum blossom, and the pig's trotters ready*

Zen Master Splendor-Maris, of Brokenhill (1597 – 1666)

Pig's feet (Chinese people love 'em best) are also known as trotters. There's sheep shank horse hock shin of beef, but we don't say cat trotters, dog trotters. Yes, indeed, "Fish and chips won't do!" Loin liver intestine tongue ear heart even brain will do nicely. Ox lungs cockscombs bird's heads will do too. Quick, see us gulp scalding pig's brain from the hotpot.

Lard is a lost art. Lard refiners are no longer wanted. (I happen upon Proverbs 24.xvi: "For a just man falleth seven times and riseth up again, but the wicked shall fall into mischief.") We've been munching on ox head horse face for years, but don't drink milk.

In the East palm trees are what they always were, and so is food. All that's lacking is lard. And pomegranates. Electricity. Female men. You ask the wild pansy, you're asking about thought—of course the pear whitens when its yellow skin is peeled. Another look at the "beautiful life" of the Chinese would cause alarm.

*Translated by Brian Holton*

## Translator's Note

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Brian  
Holton

The poem “Mock Nursery Rhyme” seems to be an acrostic of sorts; the first stanza appears to use wordplays and puns (and I don’t entirely get them all); the second stanza uses the titles of famous plays; the third stanza includes a pun on the name of the famous writer Eileen Chang (Zhang Ailing, where *ling* = *tinkling*); Appendix 1 & 2 each use two personal names, and none of the four are familiar to an English-speaking audience: at first reading, I asked myself whether this poem was translatable at all. My solution to Stanza 1 was simply to translate the denotation: it’s equally odd in Chinese. In Stanza 2, I substituted well-known songs for the play titles, and couldn’t resist an awful pun of my own. The original uses *huanghuayu*, which dictionaries all agree is the Yellow Croaker, a sea fish, but I have eaten it, and it’s clearly a freshwater fish: a little research shows it to be cousin to the sturgeon. (Sorry, Madonna.) The real-world author in Stanza 3 is retained purely for the sound of her name; I made some odd noises for the potted biographies of the characters in Appendix I (if James Joyce could do it, why can’t I?), and aimed for a sort of Hong Kong Martial Arts movie feel with the personal names in Appendix 2. Because it’s impossible to translate all the jokes, puns and wordplay in a text like this, losses are inevitable, and I try to compensate for this by adding more of my own jokes so we have an equal *density* of jokes, if not an equal number.

# Poetry



楊黎

## Yang Li

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Yang Li was born in Chengdu in 1962, started writing in 1980, and helped usher in China's third generation of poets. He has produced a large body of work over the last decade, including the collections *Five Red Apples*, *Seeking Wang Jubua*, and *Mistakes*. Yang Li is known for initiating the hugely influential Not-Not poetry movement.



### *Fated*

Someone walks past my window  
every afternoon at three  
he walks past my window  
in an old-fashioned black robe  
when I lift my head  
I can see him  
perhaps he isn't wearing  
a black robe  
he's just dressed  
all in black  
at three in the afternoon  
the calmest hour  
I lift my head  
and see him  
walk past my window

### *An Old Poem*

One night  
as I was hurrying home  
suddenly  
someone stopped me  
he asked  
do you have a light  
I said: I don't

*The White Horse*

The white horse wants to go back north  
because the south  
is now so hot  
he just can't bear it  
but his owner  
still can't leave  
he has a lot  
of unfinished business  
in the south  
midday is ablaze  
the white horse's owner  
prepares him a bucket  
of cool water  
the horse sticks his head in the bucket  
his head cools off  
but the body  
beyond his head  
still feels like it's burning  
even that famous tail  
no longer twitches

*Courthouse (I)*

I passed the entrance to the courthouse  
not knowing it was the courthouse  
I was with my father  
he was holding my hand  
he quickened his step  
and only after we'd gone a ways  
did he ask me  
do you know what that place was?  
I shook my head  
he said: that's the courthouse  
when we go by it  
we'd best be quick

*Translated by Eleanor Goodman*

## Translator's Note

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Eleanor  
Goodman

These poems make their mark in the earth with a trowel, laying bare their meanings in what is written and what is revealed beneath. Fables, anecdotes, bits of conversation, familial advice – everything is delivered in straightforwardly straightforward language, as if to make a claim about how poetry can and perhaps should function. Yet there is also a play of satire in the attention to detail, and a pressure imposed on the evocation of all the everyday can denote. The translator must strive to replicate this effect of ordinariness opening out into recognition, without losing the carefully casual tone.



伊沙

## Yi Sha

Yi Sha is the penname of Wu Wenjian. Born in Chengdu, Sichuan province in 1966, he attended university in Beijing and now teaches in the Chinese Department of Xi'an Foreign Languages University. A prolific writer, he has produced over twenty collections of poetry, fiction, and non-fiction prose, including several volumes of criticism. Well-known poetry collections include *Starve The Poet! Selected Poems* (Bloodaxe Books, 2008), *The Train Crosses the Yellow River*, *Corner of the World*, and *Ecstasy*. Recently, his Weibo channel *New Poetry Canon*, which introduces one poem by a young Chinese poet every day, has attracted considerable attention within China. He and his wife have co-translated over eighty foreign poets into Chinese. He has been a guest at international poetry festivals in Sweden, the Netherlands, England, and Macedonia.

*Rhythm is What Matters*

He likes women  
But he's always so impatient  
Facing premature ejaculation  
So he asked me for advice  
Because I once had bullshitted to him  
Indeed, I had bullshitted myself  
Into a big old bull  
Now the bull was playing the lute to people  
In a professorial tone  
I told him  
It was a question of rhythm  
After a week of playing his lute  
His original three minutes  
Increased to twelve  
One night he joyfully came  
To see me  
Finding him so sincere  
I had to confess  
That what I was talking about  
was the rhythm of poetry  
Apparently they're the same thing

*Memories Evoked by Reality*

When I was little  
I first heard it said  
“Don’t poke hornets’ nests”  
Whereupon I ventured into action  
I poked one with a stick  
Turned on my heel and ran  
By the time I got home  
I had six bumps on my head  
That made me grimace with pain  
For revenge I launched  
A live-fire attack the following day  
On the same stick  
I carried a burning rag  
And covered the hornet’s nest  
Turned on my heel and ran  
By the time I got home  
I had only one more bump  
On my head  
But there was no pain  
All seven bumps were cheering

*Notes on Mt. Erlang*

Up on that high mountain  
Is a fiery red fox  
Whose eyes flash lightning  
Whose mouth spills a rainstorm  
Which sixteen years ago  
Sent my lingering youth  
Sliding down the mountain slope

*Cross-eyed*

In my left eye  
There's a train  
That looks like an earthworm  
Inching ahead  
Over the earth

Train! Train!

In my right eye  
There's an earthworm  
That looks like a train  
Driving ahead  
Through the mud

Earthworm! Earthworm!

*Translated by John Balcom*





臧棣

## Zang Di

Zang Di was born in Beijing in April 1964. He received a Ph.D. in Literature from Peking University in 1997, and now teaches at the Chinese Department there, where he is also a research fellow of the Modern Poetry Center. He serves on *Modern Poetry Review's* editorial board, and also he edits the *Chinese Poetry Review*. His poetry collections include *Chronicles of Swallow Garden*, *Disturbances*, *Fresh Brambles*, *The World is Flat*, *Bluffing*, *No Name Lake*, and *The Enlightenment Series*, among others. He has won many awards, including the *Southern Literary World's* 2005 Award for Criticism, the Ten Best Young Poets Award, the Top Ten Avant-Garde Poets of 1979-2005, the third annual Pearl River International Poetry Festival Award, the first annual Yangtze Literary Arts Award, the seventh annual Chinese Literature Media Award for Poetry, and the first annual Su Manshu Poetry Award.

### *Remembrance Series*

The train slowly starts up. The world blurs into backdrop.  
There is only the beautiful arrow of the self.  
And can anyone's voice  
resound more crisply than the bull's-eye when struck?  
The train heads south of the plains,  
the plains are quiet as an ointment,  
letting the steel velocity turn impulsive smearing  
into a mysterious healing. After its acceleration,  
the train heads toward Shanghai, a country where frogs are given as dowries,  
toward little southern towns where there is more memory than air,  
toward a Valentine's Day deep in the Pacific ocean.  
You lean against the train doors, completely unaware  
that there is a whole world following you, and you've pushed it out  
to the limits of innocence. This damn innocence,  
as though innocence never aids opportunity. Ten minutes,  
and you're a bit regretful. After all, innocence has corrected fate.  
But seeing the truth of right now  
at some other time, seems to be something  
not everyone can get used to.  
A truth brewed in the heart: whose memories  
will be like this slowly turning cork?  
Who in their loneliness can judge the meaning of this difference:  
my memories always easily catch up to time,  
and your memories have never caught up to time.

### *Transmission Series*

In the search for the counterpart of existence, the old equipment  
can't be used anymore.

Parabolas aren't parabolic, but shoot you straight  
into the darkness. All that is primitive  
is closest to politics. Everything corrupted  
must be conjured first. All that can't be changed,  
turn over to the nails straightaway. *Bang bang*

how this brief life blares. Here, it's clear,  
a correspondence isn't a symmetry. The new orbit's esthetically  
reflected light is a little reactionary. Measured by the moon,  
existence nearly corresponds to human life.  
Measured by secrets, who can feel wronged?  
Not you and me, anyway. The status of the universe  
not only isn't reduced, but it wants

to solve your problem this way:  
indeterminacy doesn't equal nothingness. The indeterminacy  
of a cherry is enough to counter the conjurations of nothingness.  
The indeterminacy of a butterfly can make any incarnation  
lose its weightiness. When no further incarnation is needed,  
that signifies a kind of progress. It's a bit shameful,  
but in the end it shortens the distance between man and culture.

Continuing to use embodiments and getting confused—how to put it—  
isn't as good as using substitutes, outsmarting dilemmas.  
But are about-faces and constant tact really better  
than not interfering with the distances that exist between people?  
My confusion is a beautiful meaning that's been beautifully crafted—  
it seems perhaps one could say for now that human bankruptcy  
still can't create a complete corruption of the soul.

What puzzles you is, if I'm not a substitute,  
then who are you? How can the indeterminacy of a fish  
determine this flavor right now? Or again,  
how can the indeterminacy of a flower be involved  
in disrespecting others? Or, to use an example you know,  
magically, the indeterminacy of a maple leaf,  
amid a hundred years of solitude, can dye this single day red.

*Translated by Eleanor Goodman*

## Translator's Note

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Eleanor  
Goodman

Zang Di's poetry arrives quickly and lingers for a long time. One of the main challenges of translating his work is trying to capture the intellect that barrels down like a bullet train bringing a sensibility as subtle and complex as the scent of apple blossoms. He sees intuitive correspondences between seemingly unrelated things; he brings Valentine's Day into the ocean and spinach into a love poem. With each of these leaps, the interstices between objects and meaning, cognition and emotion, poetry and politics, suddenly become illuminated, a map to the pathways leading out of unawareness.



馬永波

## Ma Yongbo

Ma Yongbo is a publishing strategist, critic, author, postdoctoral fellow in literature, and part-time professor at Xiamen University. He is also a well-known translator and commentator on post-modern poetry from the United Kingdom and United States. Since 1986 he has published more than sixty works of poetry, criticism and translation, including *A Summer Broadcast at Two Speeds*, *Post-1940 US Poetry*, *Post-1950 US Poetry*, *Post-1970 US Poetry*, *An Anthology of Contemporary US Poetry*, *Selected Poems of John Ashbery*, *To Die For Beauty – An Emily Dickinson Anthology*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *The "Nine Leaves" Group and Western Modernism*, *The Barren Page*, and *Snow on the Hedge*.

### *Night Traffic*

At midnight, your approaching voices  
come to abrupt climax beneath my window  
like sudden acceleration. I can make out  
the agitated thrum of tractors  
the futuristic scream of lorries  
and taxis, gliding by  
smooth and silent as ghosts  
sometimes I get up and stand by the window  
my face appears indistinctly in the glass  
I know the darkness outside and the darkness inside  
are not the same, and I am content to think this:  
you are all involved in my life  
but I know nothing about you

*Letter to My Wife, at Mid-Autumn Festival*

she retreated deep into the hills behind a tiny moon  
she grew colder and colder  
the sound of the stream got farther and farther  
when it vanished beneath the snow  
she brought back the wet firewood and the rake  
wiped her hands on ice-cold sacking  
saw the moon move over snow-clad pines  
drank, let leaves pile under the window



*Fragment of a Memory From 1977*

it seemed we sat all night on the train from Yichun to Keshan  
it seemed the train was black with coal smoke  
midnight, we and some crates reached the muddy station  
the black mud glistened, it must have been early spring  
the county town was pitch dark, it seemed a ghost town  
I was lolling on Mother's back, just awake  
trying hard to inhale some warmth through her grey parka  
hearing her young heartbeat muffled by the parka's wadding  
it seemed the sound was coming from a far-off age  
just our family on the platform, Father in uniform, tall, ramrod-straight  
and a young lass of fourteen with her two little brothers  
standing to attention in a shaft of light, unable to speak,  
it seemed they'd just fallen wretchedly into adulthood

*Translated by Brian Holton*

# Recommended Books



01 **Blossoms**  
Jin Yucheng, Shanghai Literature and Arts Press, March 2013

In parallel narrative threads, *Blossoms* depicts the lives of a colorful array of Shanghai characters in the 1960s and 1990s. The novel won praise for the way its language captures the cadences of colloquial Shanghaiese, and Jin was named novelist of the year at the 2012 Chinese Literature Media Awards.



02 **There's a Room You Can Use**  
Sheng Keyi, Beijing Yanshan Publishing House, December 2012

The thirteen stories in this collection demonstrate Sheng Keyi's blend of forceful language, a discriminating eye for detail, and uncompromising social critique. This volume covers the highlights of her decade-long fiction career, from 'Turn On' and other early work to the more recent "1937 Phonograph," as well as "Fishbone," which appeared in translation in *Pathlight's* Spring 2012 issue.



03 **The Big Thirty-Six**  
Feng Tang, Zhejiang Literature and Arts Press, November 2012

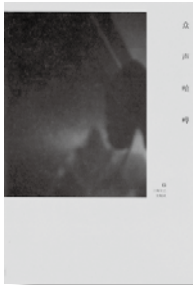
*The Big Thirty-Six* is the latest collection of essays from the incomparable Feng Tang. Garnered from his column in the Chinese edition of *GQ*, these writings package Feng Tang's unique musings on life as open letters to an unlikely array of recipients: the post-'90s generation, Chinese hipsters, blogging sensation Han Han, football coach Diego Maradona, seventh century Buddhist monk Xuanzang, and even a recently purchased B5 notebook. As always, Feng Tang is deceptively irreverent, his incisive commentary sidling alongside an obvious delight in all matters profane.



04 **Sister**  
Shi Yifeng, Foreign Languages Press, March, 2013

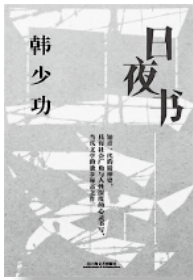
Eccentric and acerbic reporter Yang Mai has been getting along just fine in Beijing - perhaps lacking direction, but content as long as he can maintain a distance from the ongoing cold war waged by his estranged parents. His isolationist strategy encounters a hitch when his younger half-sister Xiao Mi, whom he hasn't seen in over a decade, unexpectedly arrives in Beijing for an internship. Forced to share an apartment, these two seemingly incompatible personalities face more than their share of conflict - that is until Yang Mai realizes headstrong Xiao Mi has brought something into his life that was long missing: a sense of home.

## People's Literature Magazine's Recommended Books of 2013



05 ***The Clamoring Crowd***  
Wang Anyi, Shanghai Arts and Literature Publishing House, December 2012

*The Clamoring Crowd* is a collection of six new novellas by one of China's modern masters of literature, Wang Anyi. The title story, *The Clamoring Crowd*, describes the lives of "the little people" of contemporary Shanghai à la the author's earlier, best-selling novel *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow*. In *The Clamoring Crowd*, Wang Anyi depicts with her characteristic patience and thoroughness the stories of aging Uncle Ou, owner of a small button shop; Nan Nan, the handsome, stuttering security guard protected from the world by his sisters; and Liu Ye, a young migrant woman from the northeast, who sublets part of Uncle Ou's shop to sell clothes.



06 ***The Book of Day and Night***  
Han Shaogong, Shanghai Arts and Literature Publishing House, April 2013

Described by the poet Ouyang Jiange as "a requiem for an entire generation," *The Book of Day and Night* follows the lives of a handful of college students born after 1950, from their re-education in the countryside, to the Cultural Revolution and the reform and opening up era of the '80s. Tao Xiaobu, Ma Tao, Ma Nan, Shi Maolin and their classmates are made to participate in China's historical dramas, post-Communist takeover in 1949. Han Shaogong presents their stories as one great, multi-part answer to the great spiritual question posed by their age.



07 ***Broken Up, Broken Down***  
Zou Zou, Beijing Yanshan Press, November 2012

This novel of love and literature is the most recent publication of Zou Zou, editor at *Harvest*, one of China's foremost literary magazines. Huai Huai and Zou Zou meet - one is seeking, the other waiting. They love, talk, write, fight, part. China's literary world and urban future is filtered through the minds and writings of these two hungry souls. Their love affair, their conversations, and their literary works hum with an artist's keen awareness of self and society, and the connections between the two.



08 ***Out of Liangzhuang***  
Liang Hong, Huacheng Publishing House, April 2013

In 2010 Liang Hong came to national attention. Her work of non-fiction, *China in Liangzhuang*, was a chronicle of her return to the village where she was born after years of working in Beijing as a journalist and writer. *Out of Liangzhuang* is a more extended account of that earlier work, a summation of two years spent travelling around China, visiting a dozen provinces, interviewing over three hundred villagers. The result is a unique portrait of a nation still in the grips of an epochal transformation from a rural to an urban society. Through these in-depth portraits of rural folk, Liang Hong confirms the implicit thesis of her earlier work: all villages are unique, but to know one is to know them all.

# Translators

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*Eric Abrahamsen*

*Eric Abrahamsen is a translator and publishing consultant who has been living in China since 2001. He is a co-founder and manager of Paper Republic, and the recipient of translation grants from PEN and the National Endowment for the Arts. His translation of Xu Zechen's Running Through Beijing will be published by Two Lines Press in late 2013.*



*John Balcom*

*John Balcom teaches at the Monterey Institute of International Studies. Recent publications include: Stone Cell by Lo Fu (Zephyr Press) and Trees without Wind by Li Rui (Columbia UP).*



*Bryan Davis*

*Bryan Davis is a US-based translator with wide-ranging interests. He began studying Chinese in university and continued his studies during his time in Beijing, where he lived from 2008 to 2012. He has worked on translation projects covering a variety of disciplines, including law, economics, and literature, and worked with clients including Brill and the Ford Foundation. His projects include China's Journey Toward the Rule of Law: Legal Reform, 1978-2008, Transforming the Chinese Economy, and Poverty Reduction and Sustainable Development in Western China.*



*Roddy Flagg*

*Roddy Flagg accidentally moved to China after graduating in something entirely irrelevant, and surprised himself by ending up earning a living translating Chinese and running websites. He left China after ten years and is now living in London, where he continues to surprise himself.*



*Eleanor Goodman*

*Eleanor Goodman writes fiction, poetry, and criticism, and translates from Chinese. Her work has appeared widely in journals such as PN Review, Los Angeles Review, Pleiades, Terrain.org, The Guardian, Cha, and The Best American Poetry website. She is a Research Associate at the Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies at Harvard University.*



*Philip Hand*

*Philip Hand is a translator who lives and works in Xiamen, in the southeast of China. He does mostly academic and commercial translation, but is developing an interest in literature. He studied Chinese and linguistics at university in the UK, then went to China to teach English. He did a spell on a local English language newspaper. Winner of the Harvill Secker Young Translators Prize 2012 for his translation of *The Wig* by Han Dong, the story was published in *Granta*. Blogs occasionally at [buxieboxing.livejournal.com](http://buxieboxing.livejournal.com).*



*Rachel Henson*

*After graduation, Rachel Henson contributed to the leading text book series for Chinese language learning, *Basic and Intermediate Chinese: A Grammar and Workbook*. She produced music, theatre and visual arts events in Beijing with Chinese production companies, the British Council and Visiting Arts. Since returning to the UK in 2001 she has advised and translated for Chinese theatre projects at the Royal Court Theatre. She recently translated a story for Comma Press's *Shi Cheng*. She has developed a successful live art practice in Brighton.*



*Brian Holton*

*Brian Holton was born in the Scottish Borders. After a rigorous education in the classics, he studied Chinese at the universities of Edinburgh and Durham, two institutions where he later taught Chinese language and literature. He was the first director of the Chinese translating and interpreting programme at Newcastle University. He began a continuing working relationship with the poet Yang Lian in 1992, and has published a dozen books of Yang's poetry in translation. He worked on *Jade Ladder*, a major new anthology of contemporary poetry for Bloodaxe Books, and Renditions Press in Hong Kong is preparing to publish a collection of his translations of Chinese poetry into Scots.*



*Alice Xin Liu*

*Alice Xin Liu was born in Beijing but left for London at the age of 7, returning when she was 21. She is a graduate of English Literature, Durham University, but her Chinese cadre grandparents were the main force behind her education. She has translated poems by Sen Zi for the Copper Canyon Press/NEA Chinese poetry anthology *Push Open the Window*. Her *The Letters of Shen Congwen* is forthcoming from a Chinese publishing house.*



*Canaan Morse*

*Canaan Morse is a Beijing-based translator and editor. His first major translation was of Wang Shuo's 1984 novella *The Stewardess*. Canaan's poetry has been published in *The Maine Times* and *20 Below*; his translations of He Qifang's essays have appeared in *The Kenyon Review* and *Chinese Literature Today*. He is currently studying for an M.A. in *Classical Chinese Literature* at Peking University, as well as working for *Paper Republic*, where he writes criticism for the blog and manages translation projects.*



*Sarah Stanton*

*Sarah Stanton grew up in Perth, Western Australia. Halfway through university, she abandoned a promising career in not having much of a career when she transferred from an opera performance course into a Chinese language major, eventually settling in Beijing as a freelance translator, editor, and writer. She translates regularly for Frontiers of Literary Studies in China, LEAP Magazine, and Bird's Nest: Ai Weiwei in English, and is currently interning for Asymptote Journal. Find her online at [www.the-duckopera.com](http://www.the-duckopera.com) or tweeting @theduckopera.*



*Poppy Toland*

*Poppy Toland is currently doing a Ph.D. in Translation Studies at Bangor University, translating work by the Taiwanese writer Hao Yu-xiang. She studied Chinese at Leeds University and lived in Beijing for four years during which time she worked as editor for Time Out Beijing and field research supervisor for the BBC's Wild China TV series.*



*Jim Weldon*

*Jim Weldon is from the north of England. After leaving secondary education, he worked for a decade in unskilled and semi-skilled jobs. He then went to SOAS, under the University of London, to study Chinese. Upon graduation, he volunteered at a rural development agency implementing projects in south-west Sichuan. He then worked for an independent social development research journal in Beijing. Jim also undertook various translation projects, and when his post at the journal came to an end, this became his full-time occupation. He has translated literature, social science papers and monographs, journalism, and art criticism.*



*Annelise Finegan  
Wasmoen*

*Annelise Finegan Wasmoen studied comparative literature at Yale University and Chinese language and literature at the Inter-University Program at Tsinghua University in Beijing. Originally from Philadelphia, she has worked for several academic presses as an acquisitions editor, publishing coordinator, and marketing assistant. This fall she will begin a PhD program in Comparative Literature at Washington University in St. Louis. In addition to a number of shorter translation projects, Annelise has completed translations of a selection of essays by Wang Meng and a full-length novel by Can Xue.*

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Photo by Wang Yan

# *The Touch Pass*

By Yi Sha

Many years ago  
A soccer coach  
(Actually he was just  
A high school gym teacher)  
Told me about the  
Idea of the touch pass  
He said receiving the ball  
And passing the ball had to become  
One single movement  
Only one  
Most sensible movement  
Best not to dribble  
Let alone trap  
What he said next  
He spoke standing up  
His voice  
Reverberated throughout the  
High school pitch  
He said: your purpose  
Is to use the cleanest movement  
In the shortest time  
To put the ball in your opponent's  
most dangerous place  
Later  
I didn't become  
a pro soccer player  
like he'd hoped  
But his theory  
Is definitely bound up  
In my writing

*Translated by John Balcom*

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