

# PATHLIGHT

NEW CHINESE WRITING

SPRING / 2015

Hai Zi

Deng Yiguang

Liu Liangcheng

Ye Zhou

Zhou Xiaofeng

Shao Bing

Li Shaojun

Liu Qingbang

Zhang Wei

*Nature*



Photo by Wang Yan

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海子

## Hai Zi

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Born in Anhui in 1964, Hai Zi (the penname of Zha Haisheng, literally meaning “son of the sea”) was accepted into Peking University at the age of 15, and later taught philosophy and art theory at China University of Political Science and Law. Between 1983 and 1989 – when he took his own life by lying in the path of an oncoming train – he wrote around two hundred poems and several epic cycles. Translations of his poems have appeared in *Asymptote* and *Mānoa*.

### *Autumn*

Autumn grows deep, in the god's house the eagles gather  
in the god's hometown the eagles speak  
autumn grows deep, the king composes poems  
here in this world autumn grows deep  
what should be gained has not yet been gained  
what should be lost has long since been lost

### *On the Great Plain a Great Snow Seals off the Mountains*

On the commune  
someone  
sings the praises of rain and snow  
and the sloping foothills

Autumn passes in a flash  
many bumper-crop villages lose its traces

Yesterday's lightning  
cleaved the cart and horse  
snow seals off the mountains  
from now on the days get hard

*Swan*

At night, I hear the distant sound of swans flying over a bridge  
the river in my body  
echoes them

As they fly over the mud of a birthday, the mud of dusk  
one of the swans is injured  
but only the blowing lovely wind knows  
she's injured. She's still flying

while the river in my body is heavy  
heavy as the lattice doors on the house  
as they fly over a distant bridge  
I cannot echo them with graceful flight

As they fly over the cemetery like snow  
the snow has no path to my door  
—the body has no door—only fingers  
upright in the cemetery, like ten frostbitten candles

On my muddy ground  
on a birthday's muddy ground  
a swan is injured  
just like the folk singer sang

*Words West of the Vineyard*

It's just as well  
I feel  
I'm carried toward a poor but holy snowfield  
I'm planted there, by pairs of large laboring hands  
painstakingly planted

So I feel Solomon's tent blown open by a southerly gust  
Solomon's psalms  
unfold  
down the mountainside  
like spring water  
against my back

The dark graceful face in the gully  
is interred in my heart. It's just as well  
I feel I'm carried toward a poor but holy snowfield  
loveliest of all women, you are my coffin, I am your coffin

*Translated by Eleanor Goodman*



吴明益

## Wu Ming-yi

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Taiwanese author Wu Ming-yi, born in 1971, is also a noted academic and environmental activist who is famous for his non-fiction books on butterflies (*The Book of Lost Butterflies* and *The Dao of Butterflies*) in addition to his novels. Darryl Sterk's translation of his ecological parable *The Man With the Compound Eyes* (shortlisted for the 2014 *Typographical Era* Translation Award) received international acclaim from critics and writers such as Ursula K. Le Guin.

# Death is a Tiger Butterfly

By Wu Ming-yi

*But my heart was strangely quiet. Something had made it friendly to death.*

Naoya Shiga, "At Kinosaki"

*In that tiny, quenched image of vitality, a bird like a leaf dropped by the wind in passing, I felt something of our common, friable substance – a shared vulnerability...*

John Haines, "Death is a Meadowlark"

In the department office, after the staff had all gone, I encountered my colleague Professor Kang, whose father had recently passed away. She looked exhausted. I sat across from her, going on about the things I'd been reading as she sorted through her mail. Suddenly, she looked up and asked, "How long did you spend grieving your father? Until you were able to move on?"

I couldn't say, my dear Professor Kang. You understand life more than me. With every breath you take, you are more in synchrony with the rhythms of the Earth, and closer to the Lord than me. I couldn't say, Professor Kang. I don't know how much time I spent grieving. Maybe I don't even know if there's a time when (or a space where?) one can finally move on.

On 14 April, 1964, Rachel Carson died in Silver Spring, Maryland. A few days later, at the funeral, the minister read a letter Carson had sent the previous September to her friend Dorothy Freeman. In the letter, Carson wrote about a trip they'd taken together, about how moved they were to witness a monarch butterfly migration in Maine at the end of the summer. Pouring out her feelings with every tear and every

bead of sweat, Carson pondered the memory:

*But most of all I shall remember the monarchs, that unburied westward drift of one small winged form after another, each drawn by some invisible force. We talked a little about their migration, their life history. Did they return? We thought not; for most, at least, this was the closing journey of their lives.*

*But it occurred to me this afternoon, remembering, that it had been a happy spectacle, that we had felt no sadness when we spoke of the fact that there would be no return. And rightly – for when any living thing has come to the end of its life cycle we accept that end as natural.*

Professor Kang, this is what Carson, not knowing that she was just half a year from the end of her own life cycle, was writing about, what the migrating monarchs had related to her in the whispered language of flight. They revealed the riddle of what life is, before leaving with the key to the riddle. For they were soon to be discarded by life: once the monarch mothers lay their eggs they lose the impulse to fly. They decompose into organic matter in the soil where, the following spring, a cluster of milkweeds will bloom.

Professor Kang, I admit the metaphor is inapt, because a father is not the same as a monarch butterfly. After all, I am an organic outgrowth of my own father's cellular tissue. We're bound by the same genetic chain, by a set of circumstances related to survival, you might say. Father bit his nails when his mind wandered, the same way I do. I have poor color vision, because he had poor color vision. But while he might have been worried about keeping the family shoe store afloat. I would just let myself sink into a nameless funk



between excitement and dejection. He used to stitch soles, while I would doodle on the shoeboxes.

To be honest, I don't know whether he was able "to regard the end as natural" when he was about to leave this world. But it seems to me that sorrow is a parasite emotion that cannot survive without its host. My father's sorrow passed away when his irises dulled, while I have given up on moving on from the space of grief. (Or should I say, the time?) I have even, at certain secret moments, been drawn out by sorrow into long discussions with my father, on several different occasions. God knows what a stranger I became to my father, from the year I turned sixteen! And how unrecognizable my father was to me after he suffered heart failure, after the vessels in his brain grew thin and brittle.

In that room of time I am unable to leave, I gaze out the window at scenes I've never seen before. A flying fox, spectral and crafty, streaks across the moon, a monarch butterfly, suspended in its chrysalis, flashes filaments of gold, while fierce fathead ants dismember everything they encounter: flaccid flesh, swollen lymph glands, humid femorotibial joints, clouded sclerae, the stench of rot, and rotten memory. I've almost forgotten the rough feeling of my father's hand in mine when I was a child. How I wish I could have the memory whole! The flesh is the first thing that goes, too, for decomposing leaves. In the end, all that's left is the skeletal pattern of the veins. The main vein holds up until the end, but nothing green can stay.

My sorrow will end when my life ends, irrevocably. As John Haines put it, death is a meadowlark, *for death is waiting, even in the voice of a meadowlark*.

Death is a monarch butterfly. Did she not just flutter her flame-like wings?

There are monarchs on record in Taiwan, especially in the south. But in the 1960s the monarchs mysteriously disappeared, all over Asia – swiftly, helplessly, heavy as a sigh. The great Taiwanese lepidopterist Mr. Chen Wei-shou once said that a monarch is so full of vitality that when you catch it to make a specimen, it's not easy to pinch it unconscious. Even if you pinch it so hard its body breaks, it will thrash about in the three-cornered envelope, as if refusing, while still able to fly, to die.

A close relation of the monarch (*Danaus plexippus*), the tiger butterfly (*Danaus genutia*) is still found in Taiwan. It is slightly smaller, and its wings don't bear the same black filigree, only a black mottling. But to predators, its beautiful body is just as much a symbol of death.

A symbol of death, residing in the flesh.

In mythic Greece there lived a surpassingly beautiful girl from Thessaly, Coronis by name. The sun god Apollo fell for her, and with her composed a song of love. But despite his divine perfection, Apollo had an ordinary man's jealous heart. He sent his pet bird to spy on Coronis, not suspecting the bird would return with a dubious message: rumor had it that Coronis had fallen in love with a mortal man.

In a rage, the god of truth lost the light of reason and called upon his sister Artemis, the goddess of the hunt, to use an infallible arrow to murder love on his behalf. But in the end, Apollo decided to burn Coronis alive. As he watched her beautiful face contort with

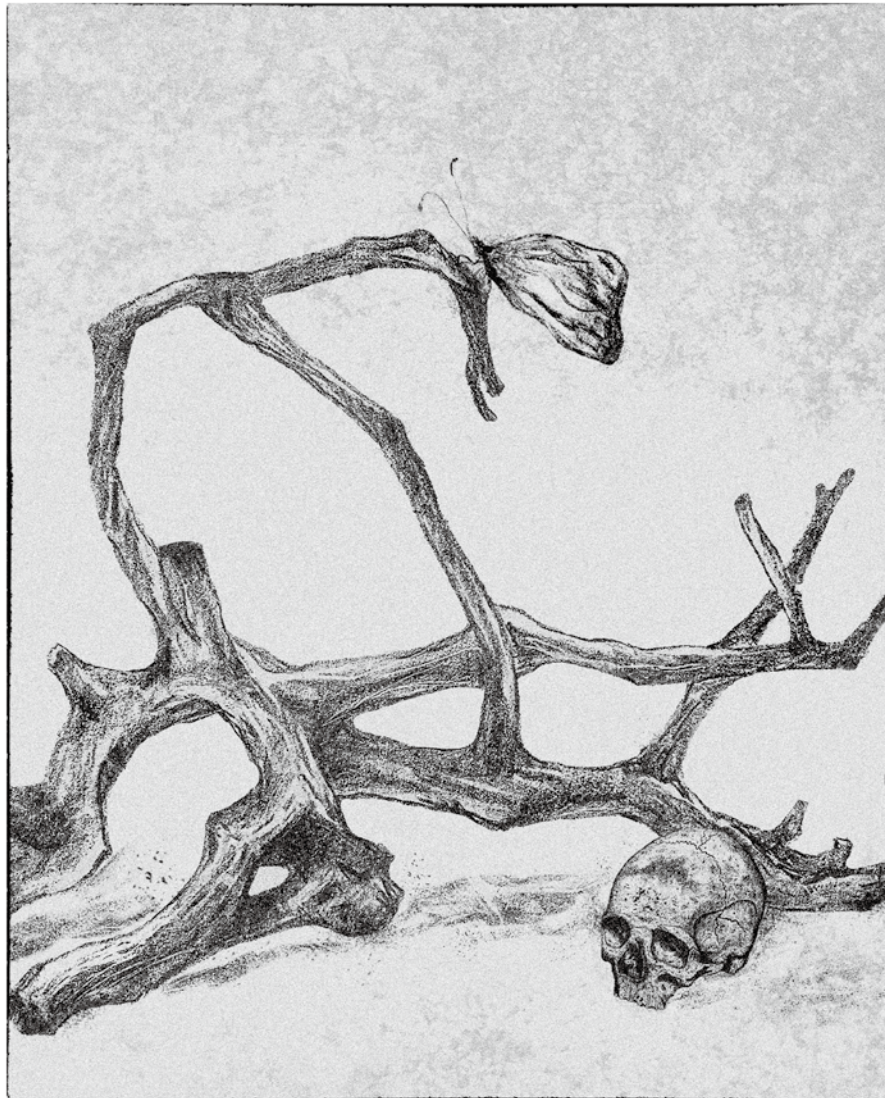


Illustration by Wang Yan

fear of flame, he remembered the beautiful moments they'd shared together, until he heard an infant crying. He managed to save the infant from the peril into which it had just been born. That infant, the fruit of Apollo and Coronis's love, had survived upon a thread of breath.

And the bird that delivered the message? Apollo,

tormented by jealousy, sorrow and rage, changed its color, turning it from white to black. From that day on it could only caw.

Never again would good news be conveyed by mouth of crow.

The fortunate baby boy was raised by the centaur Chiron in a cave on Mount Pelion amongst the

myriad things of nature, on the border between the spirit and the human realms. He grew up investigating the efficacy of various medicinal herbs and testing out enchantments. For he was the future god of healers, Asclepius.

After Asclepius came of age, his therapeutic skill became so refined that his touch could restore the sick to health, the lame to wholeness, and even the dead to life. So many souls deserted the netherworld that Hades went to complain to Zeus: “The human realm is full, without a soul in hell. Is life without death not an affront to the law of existence?” he asked. Zeus heard his complaint, thought it just, and struck down the healer Asclepius with a thunderbolt.

And the wheel of life and death started to turn once again.

Apollo was furious at the death of his beloved son, and took it out on a race of giants, Zeus’s arrow makers, pursuing them with death. Thereupon Zeus punished Apollo with descent into the mortal realm. Honestly, I feel that Zeus’s punishment was no punishment at all, for a god of Olympus. Tormented by love, plagued by jealousy, maddened by anger, the Olympians were all more human than humankind.

Life and death, the gods of healing and hell, the spirit world and the human world, curing and killing – these dualities, these pairs of opposites seem to belong to two diametrically opposed dimensions, but in fact a shadowy chain binds them all. Do we not all exist astride this shadowy chain?

Milkweed, with soft lanceolate leaves and sailing cottony seeds, is so called because when you break

its stem the wound will flow with milky sap. This sap contains alkaloids called cardiac glycosides, which, once refined, can be used to treat heart conditions. In Chinese medicine, all parts of the milkweed plant are used to reduce inflammation and fever, to cool corporeal fire and slake thirst, to detoxify and to disperse bruising. It is effective for wounds and lung infections, too. The root is used as an emetic, even as an antidote to snakebite and a treatment for tumorous growths. But, as we know, medicinal properties can coexist with poison in a single plant, and consumption of milkweed that has not been properly prepared leads to debilitation and difficulty breathing, to hyperpyrexia and tachycardia: one burns up as one’s heart races. It’s said that assassins in ancient Rome used to dip their weapons in milkweed sap.

Milkweeds belong to the genus *Asclepias*, named after the Greek healer. That frail but poisonous plant contains in the shadow of death the hope of life. Maybe it’s a metaphor for the fact that not even a god can stop the wheel of life and death from turning.

Milkweed. *Asclepias*. A milk of life, a poison drink of death.

Indeed, the sap of a milkweed, of many species in the family *Asclepiadaceae*, is milk and honey to the larvae of the tiger butterfly. They absorb and accumulate the alkaloids through adolescence, brewing in their bodies a poison wine for would-be predators to drink. But self-protection can sometimes turn into suicide, as primary larvae sometimes choke to death trying to swallow sticky milkweed sap. Tiger butterfly larvae quietly chew their way through milkweed, gambling with their lives.

The butterflies never get particularly poisonous, and a single meal isn't fatal. Birds or praying mantises that feed on a tiger butterfly will throw up, feel faint, frail, generally debilitated. Debility is not death, but in nature the shades of death always follow the shadows of the feeble. Any predator that has consumed a tiger butterfly knows the fear of debility – the fear that it will be too weak to escape or resist when its natural enemies appear. Any hunter that has gotten sick on a tiger might remember its discomfort the next time it sees a flying fireball bearing tawny blemishes, a warning coloration, and leave it off the menu. It might also pass on butterflies that mimic the tiger: the Indian fritillary (*Argyreus hyperbius*) and female Danaid eggflies (*Hypolimnas misippus*).

In this way, the death of a tiger butterfly becomes a ritual self-sacrifice in a population's struggle for life.

In early summer, from time to time, a tiger butterfly lays her eggs on the milkweeds I grow on my balcony. Somehow she knows there's a cluster of edible plants out there. Like a wealthy woman checking the quality of a bolt of cloth, she brushes a leaf with her forelegs, to make sure that her young will have good food to eat. Just six or seven carefully placed eggs doom a potted milkweed to be eaten alive, which comes as no surprise: a tiger butterfly baby, with black and white and yellow stripes across its back and four swaggering palps around its proboscis, can increase its bodyweight three thousand times. Compare that with a human infant, who will only get about twenty times heavier from birth to maturity.

The primary larvae eat the epidermis off the

leaves, and obtain sustenance from the flesh within. The paths they nibble in the leaves are like furrows, or secret portals, through the stuff of life. With the increase in larval body size and appetite, the paths gradually grow into arc-shaped holes, the freshly chewed margins of which ooze the milkweed's poison sap. Third instar caterpillars will chew on the petiole until it snaps, leaving the leaf hanging vertical. Then they eat their way around the margins. Ready to molt, each caterpillar selects the back of a leaf big enough to cover it, then spins a silken pad – to give it something to hold onto – clutches the leaf and sloughs off its old skin to release its bloated new body. A tiger in the final stage of larval existence (say, fifth instar) slithers like a little speckled snake up and down the stem, eating what it wants: leaves, petals, sometimes even the stem itself.

A final instar caterpillar curls itself into the shape of a comma, as if to signify that its life is about to enter a new phase, in which the order of its cells will be redispersed. It's as if it uses some kind of molecular converter to transform itself into an extraterrestrial. Watching a final instar caterpillar's final transformation is unforgettable: it writhes with particular violence to escape (or rip up) its old self as it molts into a bean-shaped chrysalis, a still soft body without organs, to enter the "pseudo-dormancy" of pupation.

About ten days later, the process of cell differentiation, division and redispersion is almost complete. The walls of the chrysalis thin, the color darkens, and you can vaguely see the corner of a wing inside. I wait and wait, and then for several minutes am utterly absorbed as the butterfly frees itself from the golden

cateniform of the chrysalis, a symbol of death, with its soft wet wings. As if plucking up the courage to face the world, it strolls until it finds a spot where it can spread its wings.

With its wings open, it is a golden Pegasus.

The butterfly hasn't been 'reborn' so much as thrown in the way of death. The only way for him to survive is to avoid all potential forms of fatality, for even though the angel of death will eventually catch up with any distracted, debilitated, or decrepit fleshly body, he has got to suck the nectar and dance the mating dance until the moment he is caught. He must never stop. Dance, dance, dance.

Actually, a "poisonous" butterfly is not invulnerable to all predators. Animals in the oyamel fir forests in which monarch butterflies winter have evolved either a stomach that can digest the poison or an instinct to avoid the toxic parts. Like gourmands, who know how to avoid the toxic organs of a pufferfish, the black-headed oriole and the black-headed grosbeak leisurely wring the necks and pluck off the wings with their beaks, dine upon the butterfly's flesh, and shriek with satisfaction. There's a local endemic species of "black-eared" opossum with a high poison-tolerance that feeds upon monarchs: the opossums have even matched their breeding season to the arrival of the monarchs, like a veteran fisherman waiting for the mullet to return.

"For every strategy, no matter how perfect, there is a counterstrategy," exclaimed the University of Cornell biologist Thomas Eisner upon discovering that the Brazilian ant has evolved specialized jaws that enable it to strip the bristles off a millipede. Emerson

expressed the same idea poetically: "Nature is always consistent, though she feigns to contravene her own laws. She keeps her laws, and seems to transcend them. She arms and equips an animal to find its place and living in the earth, and at the same time she arms and equips another animal to destroy it."

I don't know whether birds and small mammals in Taiwan have evolved stomachs to neutralize the poison of a tiger butterfly, or the culinary skill to prepare one. But many times in the wild have I seen slightly dull pieces of tiger butterfly wing in a web whose architect sits to the one side, coolly waiting for its next meal. Which suggests that webs are sacrificial altars for tiger butterflies, even if spiders don't eat them.

A spider uses the four "looms" at the base of its abdomen to spin silk threads, which it hangs from branch to branch before lying in wait like the god of death at the gate to hell. Different strands have different textures and functions: sticky and wind-resistant, the woof strands are for catching prey, while the dry warp strands provide support. The spider usually walks only on the radial warp strands, and even if it touches a spiraling woof strand by accident, its claws and an oily substance on its feet prevent it from getting trapped in its own net.

To an unfortunate tiger butterfly, the web is not like the post beside which a proverbial Chinese farmer waited passively for rabbits, but rather an active trap. A web is structurally creative and intricate, reminiscent of a damask wall hanging in the Louvre. Some webs are invisible under sunlight, like silent killers. And some can reflect ultraviolet light, emitting a soft floral spectrum that insects find appealing. A web is



an amazing snare, combining optics, mechanics, and chemistry into a fantastic trap, a visual lure that beckons insects irresistibly.

Brimming with toxic cardiac glycosides, a tiger might well, in a happy hunting mood, get beguiled by the colorful curse a spider has wrought in silk and dive right in. Maybe there are spiders that can secrete digestive enzymes to transform the glycosides in the flesh of the tigers into carbohydrates and digest the once flying life into venom, into spermatozoa, into the kinetic mobility of a segmented monster, into an amazing aptitude for ultraviolet hunting.

But to the butterflies, considering that only a few will be predated upon, the real concern is not predation but the disappearance of edible herbs and habitat. The monarch faces a crisis of survival with the decline of its wintering ground in Mexico. Once the wintering forests disappear, millions of monarchs will lose their journey's destination.

In a multi-generational flying relay of over four thousand kilometers, where shall they find a place to rest?

But it's bigger than butterflies. The disappearance of the forest might mean more than the collapse of mutually antagonistic or reinforcing survival networks within the food chain. It might mean spiritual aphasia, the loss of a medium of interspecies intercourse. In pre-Columbian Mexican mythology, the arrival of the monarchs meant the return of the spirits of the dead. Over ten million monarchs (or spirits) gather in the cooling season each year to gaze at the living. If the monarchs one day disappear, Mexicans who attend to the old stories and believe that the ancestors still exist

in some form will lose contact with the departed forever. And the souls that return every year will, along with memory, melt away in the sun.

"Death" does not just signify the departure of an embodied spirit. The dead take with them the gazes and the tears of many living beings, among other things.

Some time after my father died I reread Naoya Shiga's "At Kinosaki".

"At Kinosaki" is a record of a conversation the author had with death while convalescing after a traffic accident. One morning, in a languid countryside in which even the air circulated slowly, he saw a dead bee on the roof of the porch:

*Its legs were doubled tight under it, its feelers dropped untidily over its head. The other bees seemed indifferent to it, quite untroubled as they crawled busily around it on their way in and out. The industrious living bees gave so completely a sense of life. The other beside them, rolled over with its legs under it, still in the same spot whenever I looked at it, morning, noon, night – how completely it gave a sense of death. For three days it lay there. It gave me a feeling of utter quietness. Of loneliness. It was lonely to see the dead body left there on the cold tile in the evening when the rest had gone inside. And at the same time it was tranquil, soothing.*

Naoya Shiga wrote that his heart was strangely quiet, that something had made it friendly to death.

Soon after, while walking by the river, he saw a rat struggling for its life in the water, with a skewer thrust through the skin of its neck. Badly wounded, the rat swam to the bank and tried to climb up, but got caught



on the rocks, and all the while a rickshawman and a few children were chucking stones at it. Naoya Shiga wrote:

*I did not want to see the end. The sight of the rat, doomed to die and yet putting its whole strength into the search for an escape, lingered stubbornly in my mind. I felt lonely and unhappy. Here was the truth, I told myself. It was terrible to think that this suffering lay before the quiet I was after. Even if I did feel a certain nearness to that quiet after death, still the struggle on the way was terrible. Beasts that do not know suicide must continue the struggle until it is finally cut short by death. What would I do if what was happening to the rat were happening to me now? Would I not, after all, struggle as the rat was struggling?*

All mortals must die. The rocks and stones that forced the rat into the water are everywhere. I imagine Naoya Shiga, in a body that might at any moment be near to death, asking, and pondering answers to, these questions, whispering words upon the page as a way of testing his temperature in the face of death. As he wrote, he remembered strolling barefoot on the path first thing in the morning and watching as everything proceeded slowly and calmly, as the cool of the morning dew and the sting of the grass were clearly conveyed through the soles of his feet.

As Naoya Shiga wrote in “At Kinosaki”, “To be alive and to be dead were not two opposite extremes. There did not seem to be much difference between them.” As Martin Heidegger wrote in *Being and Time*, people are beings-toward-death. As the sick old lady who lingers in the “Swedenborg Room” in Lars von Trier’s miniseries *The Kingdom* is fond of saying, death is the duty of all who believe in souls. And, in a turn of

phrase with which you, Professor Kang, as a Christian, must be familiar, as Jesus said to Simon Peter, death is an exodus, literally an out-going, a *de-parture*. Death is just departure, just departure.

A body is first the house of a living soul and then the house of death. One leaves, the other moves in, and the house collapses in a chilly heap of dust. That’s why we must shed tears: to maintain appropriate levels of humidity and temperature for a living being.

Professor Kang, you asked me how long I spent grieving my father’s death, when I was able to move on, and I said, “You know, I can’t actually remember. That’s how time passes.” Forgive me, Professor Kang. I was lying. Actually, time hasn’t passed, not at all. My memories are like the people of Pompei, completely buried by Vesuvius in volcanic ash, preserving postures of flight, repast, sleep, love and fear, muscles tense but eternally slack. At that, I silently withdrew from the department office, quietly closed the door behind me, walked slowly down the stairs and opened my umbrella.

Maybe forgetting is necessary, as John Haines said. Isn’t it so? In English, “lethal” is cognate both with the genus of a butterfly I once wrote about – *Lethe europa pavidata*, the bamboo treebrown – and with Lethe, the river of forgetting.

Forgetting is necessary, but not inevitable. As the highway lights flowed past on the drive home, many scenes streamed through my mind. There, in the depths of a snowy oyamel forest, was fire, while from every twig, from every hole in every tree, from every pine needle there hung clumps of stiffened monarch butterflies (at a temperature that would chill even

spirits). The ground layer of the forest was covered in hundreds of thousands of butterfly bodies, frozen to death. The dead butterflies were still brilliantly colored, legs upcurled, immobilized mouthparts elongated. A possum scurried about, holding corpses in its mouth, swiveling its enchanting eyes. The yellow highway lights poured down like rain and turned to liquid light. A cage of society finches I raised as a child was attacked by a rat one night. All that remained of one finch was a head in a bloody corner of the cage, while the other kept pecking away at food pellets with terrified eyes and broken wings. The snow melted, into water that seeped into the soil. In the army, I dug a grave for Little Yeller, as the corner of its mouth dripped blood under the blistering sun of southern Taiwan. Just the day before he'd been wagging his tail and rubbing against my army issue 57 rifle! Before Father's casket was nailed shut, my elder brothers and I put a gold ring on his finger. Was that cold hard piece of matter I felt through the white glove the hand that would hand me balloons? Was that my father's hand?

The rain got so heavy I had to turn the wipers up to high.

A monarch butterfly takes flight. Ten thousand monarch butterflies take flight. Ten million monarch butterflies take flight, a fireball takes flight, the spring season takes flight, resolution takes flight. All the leaves in the forest seem ready to fly north. One generation of monarch butterflies can't complete the journey, but a younger generation will take over. The airborne odyssey will continue, in fits and starts.

Maybe only things which have once been given

life, which have once been happy or sad, will die. Including lifeless bodies that we regard as "seemingly alive." But they too might literally come to life, somewhere.

Professor, have you ever seen migrating monarch butterflies? Although I've never seen a live monarch butterfly before, when I sight tigers in the wild I imagine a scene of monarch migration. If I have the chance I must go to the oyamel forests of Mexico to see the spirits of the dead who have descended from the north. Until that time comes, I'm happy to keep observing the golden Pegasus that flies over Taiwan, from my sundeck or wherever I happen to be in the wild.

Tiger butterfly of mine, in the cramped black display of my camera tremble flame-gilt butterfly wings. You know that spirit lingers in that mobile body. You know that all joy and sorrow linger there.

You know death is a tiger butterfly, and so are joy and sorrow.

*Translated by Darryl Sterk*

*Excerpts from "At Kinoshiki" by Naoya Shiga  
translated by Edward Seidensticker*



鄧一光

## Deng Yiguang

Deng Yiguang, a writer of Mongolian ethnicity, was born in Chongqing in 1956 and now lives in Shenzhen. He has published nine novels including *I Am the Sun*, *Recalling the Prairie*, *Dear Enemy*, and *I Am My Own God*, and more than eighty stories and novellas. His numerous awards include the Lu Xun Literature Prize for his novella *Father is a Soldier*. His short story “Shenzhen Is Located at 22°27’-22°52’ N” appeared in *Pathlight* Winter 2012.

# Wolves Walk Atwain

By Deng Yiguang

**I**t was here that their fate would change, spinning off in another direction.

By then she was ravenous. The deer they had caught two days ago had been their last meal. Since then, their luck had turned. He had tried hunting an eagle circling low in search of voles under the snow. He had leapt from the height of the sloping terrain, intending to knock the eagle from the sky, but his failure had been inevitable. He had bounded forward and sprung from the top of the slope, soaring like a bird. But he was no bird; he was a wolf, and he had unwillingly fallen from the sky. He had fallen violently, head over heels, and skidded far across the snowy ground. At that point she had been standing gleefully to the side, laughing so hard she could hardly keep her back straight. She had adored his foolish enthusiasm. His head was filled with idealism and ambition. How had he thought that he could catch an eagle flying in the sky? In her mirth she had released the half dazed rabbit she had caught. She had wanted to prolong her mirth until it had spread to every corner of her being. How could she have known that she would soon be so hungry? Later she was so hungry that her stomach rumbled, and so cold. So hungry and so cold that she wanted to cry aloud in regret at the rabbit that had clumsily darted away through the snow.

The sky darkened relentlessly. The snow shone blue and lustrous, and the wind scattered the clouds into a fog even finer than the snow. This made her vision useless and unreliable; nothing she saw could be believed. He resolved to catch something as soon as possible for her to eat her fill. He chose the path near

the village, dangerous for wolves. They interacted with people only reluctantly, usually avoiding the dwellings of humans and keeping to the wilderness and forests – except when it came to taking revenge. Now they had no choice. He could see her happiness fading rapidly in the snow and wind, her wet black nose ice-cold. In the thick fog her silver coat had lost its sheen and the gleam in her glistening pupils had faded. He felt on edge, blushing at his uselessness. For a moment he forced himself not to look back at her. What kind of mate was he? It was then that he decided to venture into the village under the cover of night in search of food.

The night was dark, the wind and snow heavy. It was difficult to see even a short distance ahead. In such conditions, as he faced the lights up ahead and vaguely made his way towards what might be the village, it was only natural that he did not see the well. It had been dried up for years, but once the water had been plentiful and sweet and so deep you could not see the bottom. Who knew what had cut off the source of the water? The well had dried up, leaving a gaping shaft thirty feet deep. Fat lily of the valley leaves and wide cattails grew upon the walls, frozen like stone as if they had been painted there. Pulpy black moss grew even more plentifully. The villagers used the well as a cellar to keep sweet potatoes and cabbages. Otherwise, it was a hollow memorial, cold and oppressive, drawing people to look at it and remember its former glory.

The well looked like a great eye hewn into the face of the earth, always open. It was usually uncovered, but unfortunately it had been snowing for several days.

Since the villagers did not want the well to fill with snow they had draped an old brownish yellow coverlet over the opening, disguising the well's appearance and turning it into a trap. They would never have thought that anyone would approach the village when the wind and snow were so heavy and suffocating. They might not have used such a flimsy covering if they had thought of it. The problem was, they had not.

He walked ahead, and she behind about a dozen paces. He had not the slightest hint of the danger ahead. By the time he felt alarm at the gaping emptiness beneath his feet, it was already too late. He had already crossed on to the draping coverlet, which had been buried beneath a pile of fluffy snow.

At that moment she saw swirls of snow just above the ground. Amid the snow a broken pine bough whirled like a dancing girl spiraling out of control. She had heard a muffled boom from somewhere underfoot. Only then did she realize that he had disappeared from her line of sight. She rushed to the opening of the well and faced the pitch-black emptiness, too deep for her eyes to judge. She felt a jolt of terror. How could they have known that beneath the pure white snow this treacherous well lay in wait? How had he landed from his fall? She feared that he would never return to her, that he would be trapped behind that darkness forever.

She faced the pit and called in a quavering voice, "Where are you?"

He was there.

He had passed out for a moment, unconscious of the thirty-foot drop. His body abruptly surrendered

to the fall, and he landed heavily at the bottom in a jumbled heap of muscle and bone. He woke suddenly and quickly understood his predicament. It was the very essence of his survival instinct. He was no longer afraid. It was not as bad as he had imagined; he had only fallen down the shaft of an old well. This was nothing. He had once been caught in the noose of a hunter's trap meant to catch wood grouse. Another time he had been wedged between two clumps of ice that had flowed downstream, and it had taken him two whole days until he had been able to break free. Once he had come face to face with an injured wild boar. That time his whole body had been dyed red with blood. No matter how bad his luck turned, he always managed to find a way through it. He had never thought of himself as lucky, but he also never thought of himself as one to give up. That was simply the way he was.

He stood slowly, lifting his body and shaking off the snow and mud gathered there. He sized up the situation, looking for a way out.

The well was shaped like a jug with a narrow shaft and a wide bulb at the bottom. The covering of moss made the walls smooth and slippery with nowhere for his paws to find purchase to climb out. He grew frustrated. This would be more difficult than he had thought. But he was not discouraged; he would find a way to overcome this setback.

"Are you there?" she called.

"Yes, I'm right here," he answered.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"You scared me!"

"Don't worry, I'll climb back up."

He could not see her at all as spoke. He was determined to see her and to escape from this unlucky dried up well. As long as he got out and saw her again, everything would be fine. He instructed her to back away from the opening so he would not bump into her when he jumped out. She stood up and moved a fair distance away. As a rule she always obeyed him, except when she was feeling mischievous. She listened to his confident voice emitting from the well shaft. She heard him take a deep breath, then a loud scratch, and finally the thump of him hitting the bottom again.

She rushed back to the well.

The snow and wind had stopped. The sky had cleared, and the moon came out, illuminating the ground with a clear, bright light. Lying near the opening, she watched him in the moonlight.

He lay at the bottom of the well, covered from head to toe in snow and mud. He was not as lucky as he had promised her. That last leap he had taken had been twenty feet high, no mean feat, but he had still fallen short of the opening of the well by a good length. His front claws had scratched two sets of deep impressions upon the frozen walls, a ghastly sight that embodied his profound regret. It was as if they were telling him that escaping from the well would not be so easy after all.

He lay at the bottom of the well, she at the opening. Both stared blankly without a word. Reality had

sunken in, and they were dismayed. In the abrupt quiet of the snowy night, such a blow was unbearable. They had suddenly run aground upon the bank of reality. It had been a long time since he last ate, and his stomach rumbled with hunger. The bottom of the well was narrow, with no room to run and jump high enough to escape. He was trapped, as he had never been before.

Realizing this she wept. She crawled to the edge of the well, and once she began sobbing she could not stop. Her plaintive howl pierced the silence. "It's all my fault! I should never have let that rabbit go."

All he could do from the bottom of the well was laugh at her tears. The gruff sound echoed loudly up the well shaft. He stood, shaking the snow and mud from his fur, and then looked up at her. "Very well. If that's so, then go back and catch that rabbit again right now."

The sky grew lighter. It had not started snowing again, so the sky was clear and crisp. Just before day-break, she left the well and returned to the forest in search of food. She journeyed far, until finally under a tall, thin oak she caught a half-frozen, narrow-beaked black grouse. She was so cold and tired that she almost lost consciousness. She lay down for a moment in the snow, unmoving, afraid that if she moved she would gobble the grouse up herself. Only after resisting the cries of her own stomach did she carry the grouse back to the edge of the well.

He devoured that choice morsel completely, even the bones. With a full stomach he felt much better. Perhaps he could still have eaten an onager or a roe



deer, but it was enough for now. Strength and confidence returned to his body, so he continued his attempts to jump free.

This time she did not bother leaving the edge of the well. She no longer worried that he would bump into her. She lay beside the well encouraging him, urging him to jump. Resolute in the brightening dawn she held her paws out across the awful distance separating them. Moved to tears at the bottom of the well, he was overcome with an urge to leap into her arms and embrace her.

Yet all of his attempts failed. Each leap was powerful and tall, full of his will to live and indignant resistance to fate. Nevertheless, they all ended the same, with him falling back to the bottom of the well, back to where he had started. The mouth of the well loomed like a treacherous demon. No matter how high he jumped, it always lurked a little bit higher, jeering down at him. Each jump left two deep tracks of claw marks on the walls.

After his fifteenth failed attempt, he lay down at the bottom and did not move, exhausted and panting heavily. At the edge of the well she stretched and stood up. They were silent, for in that wordless moment they had both been bombarded with thoughts of despair.

As the dawn brightened, she left the well and went into the forest once again. They were too close to the village, so close she could even make out the silhouettes of the villagers. If she stayed there, she would draw their attention.

The whole day lay before him. He rested in the shade of the well, not moving as the hours drew on, except occasionally to lift his head and look up through the narrow patch of sky at the opening. People were constantly walking past: sometimes hunters with their hounds and sometimes children riding on sleds. They knocked powdery snow into the well, and it fell gently on his face and body. He did not shake it off, but remained motionless, as if he were a shadow that had always been part of the well. He felt more humiliated and depressed than he had ever felt before. For the first time in his life he wanted to weep.

She returned at nightfall. She made her way with difficulty to the edge of the well. She had brought him a badger, having already eaten her fill. This had taken almost all her strength. He gobbled down the badger until there was nothing left, and then started his attempts anew.

At times she left the side of the well and made her way along the village to see if anything stirred, and then she walked back to the well. She half believed that a miracle would be more likely to occur if she were away. She would look towards the well, hoping to see him standing there dripping with sweat, panting heavily, and laughing foolishly at her.

Alas, no. He was not standing at the edge of the well. He was indeed dripping with sweat and panting heavily, but he was still at the bottom of the well, huddled against the wind. He was a flash of lightning the color of ginger in the dark, throwing himself again and again at the well's opening. He threw himself

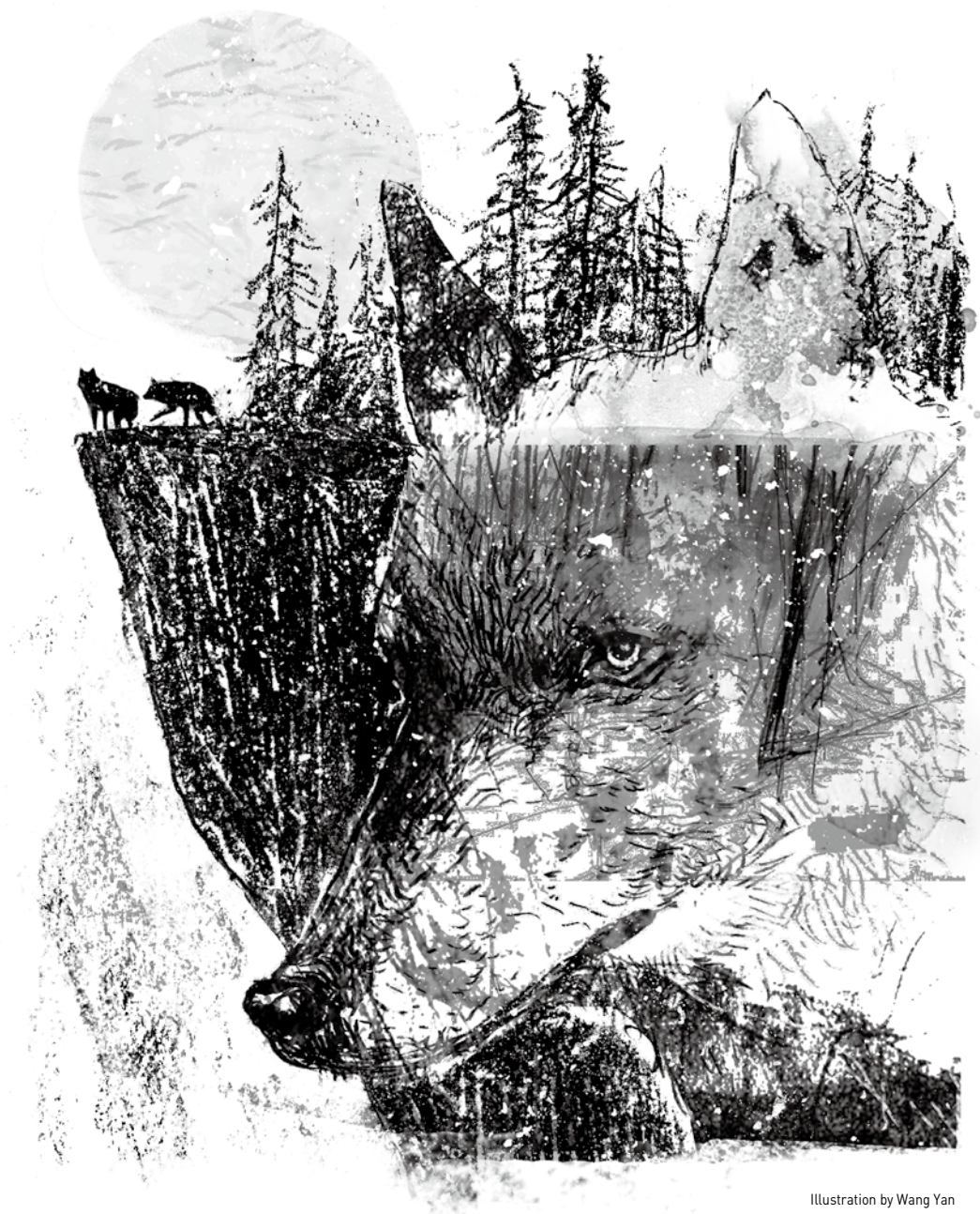


Illustration by Wang Yan

with more energy than he ever had before. But that meant nothing. With each jump up he fell just as far back down. The higher he jumped the harder he fell. A few times he dropped so hard that he had trouble getting up again. The snow fell silently and slowly,

as if through thick liquid. He watched it float down flake by flake, as if it would never reach the ground. Without the wind, the falling snow seemed grotesque. Suddenly, there was the moon. The distant, bright moon brazenly hung in the sky, undisturbed by the

snowflakes. In the moonlight he leapt, and the moon seemed to tremble each time he fell crashing down, so hard that eventually he could no longer see it.

The sky grew lighter, and she left again, disappearing into the forest.

When the sun rose it shone dazzlingly upon the snowy ground, and a lark alighted at the edge of the well. It turned to face the sun, and after a moment it opened its beak and chirped out a song, bright and beautiful. At that clear melodious sound, the sunlight shattered into countless golden shards. He lay in the dark at the bottom of the well, letting the shadows and dampness cover him. With all his hopes turned to dust, he closed his eyes and breathed deeply. His whole body was filthy, a shapeless mass of muddy yellow fur. His body was already swollen in places from his countless falls, lending him a dispirited look. He buried his head in his front paws and lay motionless, dejectedly passing the long, lonely day.

She did not rest the entire day. She roamed far to find food, searching almost the entire forest. She was much more exhausted than he was, close to collapsing. She could not do anything about her tangled fur, and she was injured. After chasing a wild dog unsuccessfully, she had gone so far as to dazedly pursue a hyena, which had bitten her on the neck. Wound open, she had dragged her body with its wild, wind swept silver grey fur into a pile of spongy dead leaves. She flitted past birch and cedar forests, looking sad and tragic as she hurried along. As she ran she disturbed puffs of snow. They hung like a mysterious, creeping fog, sus-

pended in the air for a long time before they scattered.

When it grew dark she returned beaten and exhausted to the well, heart aching with guilt and sadness. Her luck had been poor. After a whole day of hunting all she had caught was a young squirrel that had not even grown to its full size. Of course she herself was hungry, so she licked at some snow in a mere symbolic gesture. She knew the pitiful squirrel was hardly a mouthful. In normal times, she would not even have noticed it if it were looking straight at her. It would not have been worth the energy. But now, what choice did she have? Could she give him this squirrel? That would be too insulting, as if she were disgracing him.

What she saw next shook her quickly from her dispirited state. She felt a pleasant rush of surprise. He was still at the bottom of the well, but now he was not simply waiting for her, resigned to his fate. He was hard at work, dripping with sweat. He had scraped the frozen mud from the sides of the well, one clawful at a time, and collected it in a pile beneath his feet, packing the mixture down until it was solid. He was giving it his all, and he must have been at it for a long time already. His claws were torn to shreds, dripping blood that soaked into the bits of frozen tundra that he had piled. Still, he did not look like he would give up any time soon. He piled the mud from the walls bit by bit, head turned up and front paws outstretched. At first she stared at him blankly, but she quickly realized that he was trying to raise the bottom of the well so that the distance to the mouth was not so great. He had

thought of a way to save himself. Once she understood this, her eyes grew moist. He's so brave, she thought, her throat tightening as she almost shouted this aloud.

Then she started to help him. She let him take a break while she continued his work. At the edge of the well she dug under the frozen snow and loosened the tundra beneath to cast into the well. With each pawful of earth she waited for him to pack it down into another layer. The work was strenuous and dull, but they did it happily and with all their strength. Because she was adding mud from the ground above, he no longer had to scrape bits from the well wall. All he had to do was stomp the clumps of mud down as each new layer fell, so the work went much faster. After they had worked together in this way for a while, he discovered that she was slowing down. He encouraged her loudly from the bottom of the well. He was impatient, and he did not know that she was hungry and exhausted, or that she was injured. There was a moment when she collapsed into a pile of snow and struggled to get up again. Her breath was ragged and she gazed west at the rapidly setting moon. After a while she threw herself back into the work, digging up earth and casting it down into the well.

All night long the air was filled with the dank smell of permafrost.

They stopped once the sky grew lighter. They were both exhausted, with beads of sweat frozen on their fur, like majestic armor. As they moved it made a metallic sound. They were pleased with the work they had done. They had already packed a thick layer

of earth on the well floor. The dried up well no longer seemed so terrifying. They both felt it. Even the gloomy, chill, damp air felt as if it were humming with the warmth of life. At this rate it would take one night, or at most two, to build up the pile high enough for him to jump out of that lonely dried up well. This prospect left them feeling much better.

She left at dawn, dragging her exhausted body into the forest. One last hunt, while he rested at the bottom of the well. At dark she would rush back to him across the vast plain of snow.

If things had progressed in this way, they would have been able to leave behind that accursed well before the next morning and dash back into the forest. They felt an eager sense of anticipation, like waiting for the sun to rise after a long night. However, things did not go according to plan. Something went wrong at that critical moment.

They had been discovered by two village youths.

The two villagers walked to the well, looked inside, and saw him lying there expectantly. They ran back to the village to fetch a hunting gun to shoot him at the bottom of the well.

The bullet pierced his spine, embedded in his left rib. His blood poured out like a dark spring. All of a sudden he fell and could not stand back up. Just before the gunman was about to send his second bullet flying, his companion stopped him. The second youth pointed out the footprints in the snow, like plum blossoms wrought exquisitely in silver, extending from the side of the well all the way into the forest.

She returned when the sun sank behind the mountains, carrying a Mongolian gazelle. She did not approach the well, though. Amid the faint fragrance of acorns and pine boughs she also smelled the scent of humans and gunpowder. Then she heard him howl into the clear night.

It was as if he had sounded an alarm warning her not to approach. He wanted her to turn back into the forest and leave him far behind. He had lost too much blood. His spine had been broken. He could no longer stand. But he struggled to lift his head and howl into the emptiness.

As soon as she heard his cry, she felt uneasy. She lifted her head, turned towards the well, and howled back at him. She asked him what had happened. He would not answer. He told her not to worry about it, to leave quickly, to leave the well and go deep into the forest. She refused. She knew something had happened to him. She could tell from his voice that he was wounded. She insisted that he tell her what had happened, or else she definitely would not leave. The two youths did not understand the two wolves howling, one echoing the other. To them it was only noise. Where was the echo coming from? They did not have to wonder for long. She soon showed herself.

They were stunned by her beauty: her slender stature, her lithe body carried in all its glory, her deep black nose, and her glistening eyes. A mist rose in the air floating upon a soft gust of the south wind. Her fur had frozen silver grey. She imparted her silence and composure to everything around her, and all that

it touched was elevated to a new grandeur. She stood there and then slowly turned to walk towards them.

A moment later they came to themselves. One lifted his gun.

The crack of the gunshot was muffled. The bullet fell into the snow, scattering powder into the air. Like a burst of clean wind she disappeared into the forest. At the sound of the gunshot he let out a long howl from the bottom of the well, so loud the well almost shook. All night long she waited just inside the forest, howling unceasingly. He was glad to know that she still lived. He warned her repeatedly not to return to him, but to turn away deep into the forest and never come out. She looked to the sky and howled. The sound rang out from the edge of the forest.

The sky grew lighter; the two youths could not stop themselves from dozing off. She approached the well and placed the gazelle at its edge. She sent up a cloud of snow as she struggled to drop the carcass down into the well. He lay there unable to move. The gazelle fell beside him. He scolded her loudly. He wanted her to flee, not to bother him again, or else he would give her hell!

He tilted his head to one side, refusing to look at her. He seemed furious. She climbed up on the edge of the well and whimpered sharply that he should hold on, that as long as he drew breath she would find a way to free him from this bloody well.

She and the villagers circled one another for the next two days. They shot at her seven times, but they never hit her.



During those two days he howled unceasingly inside the well, without stopping for a moment. His vocal chords must have already ripped apart by the end, for his cries grew intermittent and he could not sustain a continuous sound.

On the third day their howling suddenly stopped. The two youths peered into the well and discovered that the big male wolf that they had injured had already died. He had dashed his head against the walls of the well. His skull had been smashed and his brains spilled in all directions. The gazelle lay next to him, frozen and intact.

Those two wolves had tried with all their might to return back to the forest. They had almost succeeded.

In the end they ran into disaster. First him, then her, both the same. One was already dead. He had died, and she would not come again. That had been his motivation for dying, after all.

The two youths returned to the village to fetch a rope. They had not gone far when they stopped in their tracks. There she stood, her body covered in a silver gray coat. Her skin was bruised and scarred and covered in scabs. She was bone weary, destroyed body and soul. Fur blowing in the wind, she seemed like an ancient spirit of the forest. She lifted her lower jaw slightly, as if she were sighing gently, and turned and rushed to the mouth of the well.

They gaped at her, until at the last minute one of them lifted his gun.

When the gun sounded, the snow that had stopped for two days and nights began floating down again.

The first snowflake did not fall from the sky, but fell instead from the apple tree beside the well.

That was the last of the apple trees.

*Translated by Cara Healey*





黑鶴

# Gerelchimig Blackcrane

The fiction, essays and poetry of Gerelchimig Blackcrane (born in 1975) take inspiration from his youth on the border of the grasslands in Inner Mongolia, where he grew up with two white wolf dogs. He has twice received the Chinese National Children's Literature Award, and in 2013 his children's novel *Black Flame* was translated into English by Anna Holmwood.

# The Nightjar at Dusk

By Gerelchimig Blackcrane

*After the sun set behind the mountains, the strange tapping call of some bird came from the forest surrounding our tent. It continued throughout the night. It was the nightjar, we discovered, known to the local Russians as the “blacksmith”. The Tungus call it the “chabzakan” – again, meaning blacksmith.*

Russian naturalist Richard Karlovich Maack,  
*Journey on the Amur*, 1859

**T**his is an ancient remedy, used even into the present day by the Evenks: Scrape resin from the trunk of a tree and steep it in boiling water. The resulting liquid, fragrant with the scent of the resin, aids healing and can be applied to a reindeer’s wound to speed the knitting process.

I had sliced my thumb sharpening my knife some days back – a cut just two centimetres long, but deep. There were ointments in the camp stores and I had my usual first-aid kit, but I thought to try the traditional ways. I didn’t clean the wound, just squeezed it to stop the bleeding then rinsed it with the reddish-brown preparation. There was no particular sensation but the next morning I knew it had worked. The wound no longer throbbed and turning it under what light filtered into the tent I could see it was already closing and knitting together. I carefully reapplied the liquid and on the third day was able to bathe in the stream as normal.

Balchayi calls it the tears of the trees.

Wonderous though they may be, the old ways did not seem to be helping the reindeer calf. Its wound

was healing very slowly, probably because it was so deep.

The calf was the only white reindeer in Balchayi’s herd. I remember one in Maria Suo’s herd also. It’s not a once-in-a-lifetime thing, to see a white reindeer, but still rare. They often don’t survive. They stand out from the herd and draw attacks by predators. It makes sense – in a herd of reindeer clad in forest browns, a lone silvery-white calf is sure to draw attention.

This calf, though, had been caught in a snare.

There were poachers in the forest. Maybe they didn’t know there was an Evenk tribe here herding reindeer, or maybe they just didn’t care. Either way, the forest was infested with snares and it wasn’t just wild animals that were killed. Our reindeer sometimes meet the same fate. It must be the worst way to die, caught in the wire, your death lingering and alone.

True hunters won’t use snares. And anyway, hunting is illegal now.

Several of the camp’s reindeer had been injured this way and bore the circular scars just above their hooves. These were the lucky ones, the ones which had broken free. The others we wouldn’t find until the circling crows told us where to look.

Last year two reindeer went missing. They were bones by the time we found them.

While I waited for the white calf I built up a fire, selecting small damp branches to ensure a smoky burn. Clouds of smoke rose heavy over the forest, disappearing into the just-darkening sky.

I fetched the salt bag from the tent.

Long handling had worn the fur from the elk-skin

bag, but the same handling had oiled the leather beneath, leaving it strong and dark. Sections of roe deer hoof threaded on the drawstring clacked together as I swung the bag, the sound fast and weighty, a storm of heavy rain striking the earth.

The sound carried, even deep into the forest and to the ears of the reindeer roaming within. Sometimes it seemed that bag of salt was the true tether binding the Evenk and our reindeer together.

The sun passed over the western ridge and the forest grew darker. The ringing of reindeer bells, clear and languorous, drifted up from deep in the valley.

Soon they emerged in twos and threes into the camp clearing, brown and grey fur blending with the damp tree trunks behind. On first stepping out they seemed part of the trees, floating out of the rain-washed forest and peeling away like bark.

They are a part of this forest.

They slowly gathered by the fire, lying down and allowing the smoke to envelope their bodies.

The mosquitoes were not yet abroad, thanks to a shower earlier.

In summer it wasn't just salt we used to lure these roving creatures in from the wilds – the fires we set also helped. Under the thick resin-scented smoke the reindeer were safe from the clouds of mosquitoes that maraud the forest. The mosquitoes were a real problem. Walking in the forest I tried to squash them as soon as they landed, while they tried to pierce my skin with their mouthparts and suck my blood as quickly as possible. The mosquitoes here were bigger and darker than those I was used to down on the plains.

It came back with the last group, their movements slow and hesitant.

Habit had brought them here, though they also

knew the mosquitoes would be in hiding after the rain and they would be safe this cool fresh evening. But sometimes reindeer do what they are used to doing, and so on paths trodden out over the years, they came. Only as the outlines of the camp became visible through the trees did they hesitate. Perhaps back to the forest, for succulent lichen and the new mushrooms?

But then the odour of the salt caught them and they hesitated no longer.

And behind them, the white calf.

By now the only surviving snow would be deep in mountain hollows. Yet here the calf was, white as a fresh fall.

The brightest colour in the forest, a pure white shine. It stepped lightly out of the trees, dreamlike.

It was too pure a colour to belong to the forest shades.

I always tied a red scarf around my head when walking in the forest, for the same reason. The more you stand out, the further off you are seen. And so those craven hunters were less likely to mistake me for prey.

Half a month at camp had cleansed me of the odours of the outside world, replacing them with forest smells, but the calf was still doubtful. I had to tempt it with a piece of bread if I wanted to bring it closer. But it knew the routine now, that there would be some tasty treat awaiting. Instinct told it to flee back to the forest, but the lure of food was stronger.

It came over and started to lick the crumbs of bread from my hand.

I wrapped an arm round its head and tethered it to a tree trunk.

I squatted to examine the wound the snare had left on a back leg. It had cut to the bone, yet there was no

sign of infection or rot and the wound was closing and drying out, only a little blood oozing at the very deepest point. It would knit together soon.

Remarkably, there were no maggots. Flies are the forest's eternal opportunists, and their sense of smell brings them in swarms to even a single drop of blood. If there were no maggots the flies had not been able to lay eggs in the wound. Probably it was the medicine – the smell of the resin must act as a repellent and stop them landing.

I opened up the bottle of medicine and carefully bathed the calf's wounded leg, ensuring the liquid seeped deep inside.

When I let it go it circled the camp and, finding no way into the tent and to the food within, it lay by the fire to rest and chew the cud.

The light was fading from the sky, the mountain ridge a dragon in silhouette, curled around the forest valley.

Inside I lit another fire, the dry wood quick to catch and warm the tent. The stove heated to a red glow, the heat fierce on my face.

I left the tent, propping the flap open to let the breeze feed the fire and draw out the moisture of the day. The tent had been put up when I arrived and the ground beneath was still damp.

The sky continued to darken.

I sat on a fallen tree by the tent and waited in silence.

It arrived, by the glow of my watch, at twenty-three minutes past seven.

As usual, no later than half past.

Always on schedule, with neither prelude nor timid testing of the air, the call came suddenly, urgent and unrelenting.

I struggle to put that sound into words. A small

hammer, tapped manically on an anvil? But a hammer light enough to allow that pace, and a good anvil, ringing clear between the strikes.

That is, a constantly repeated *jok jok* call. So the Evenk call the nightjar the jokjok bird, matching it perfectly.

Not far off through the trees thick smoke rose to swirl silent over the valley.

Secluded. Hidden.

Only the reindeer, stretching now and then against the black trunks of the forest, broke the stillness of this scene from another time.

And in that endless stillness there was no sound but that bird, and its persistent call. Though I suppose this is just how it sounds to a human, but amongst all bird calls perhaps it's one of the more collected and regular.

The boy was back.

He moved through the forest as silent as a practiced hunter. He had already drawn close when I made out his silhouette.

He entered the tent, unloaded his rifle and propped it carefully in a corner. He pulled off his boots, made for crossing the boggy ground of the forest floor, and swapped them for trainers.

Then I realised he'd noticed I was listening to something, to the bird, and was wondering what it was. This was the one thing I didn't want to happen.

His curiosity drove him to track down the bird, to cross the camp in search of it. Eventually he stopped at the foot of a larch and raised his head to look.

He was strong, a ruddy glow to his skin. Down in the settlement he'd put on the traditional Evenk dress with the other children and perform for the tourists, singing our ancient folk songs in his still unbroken voice.



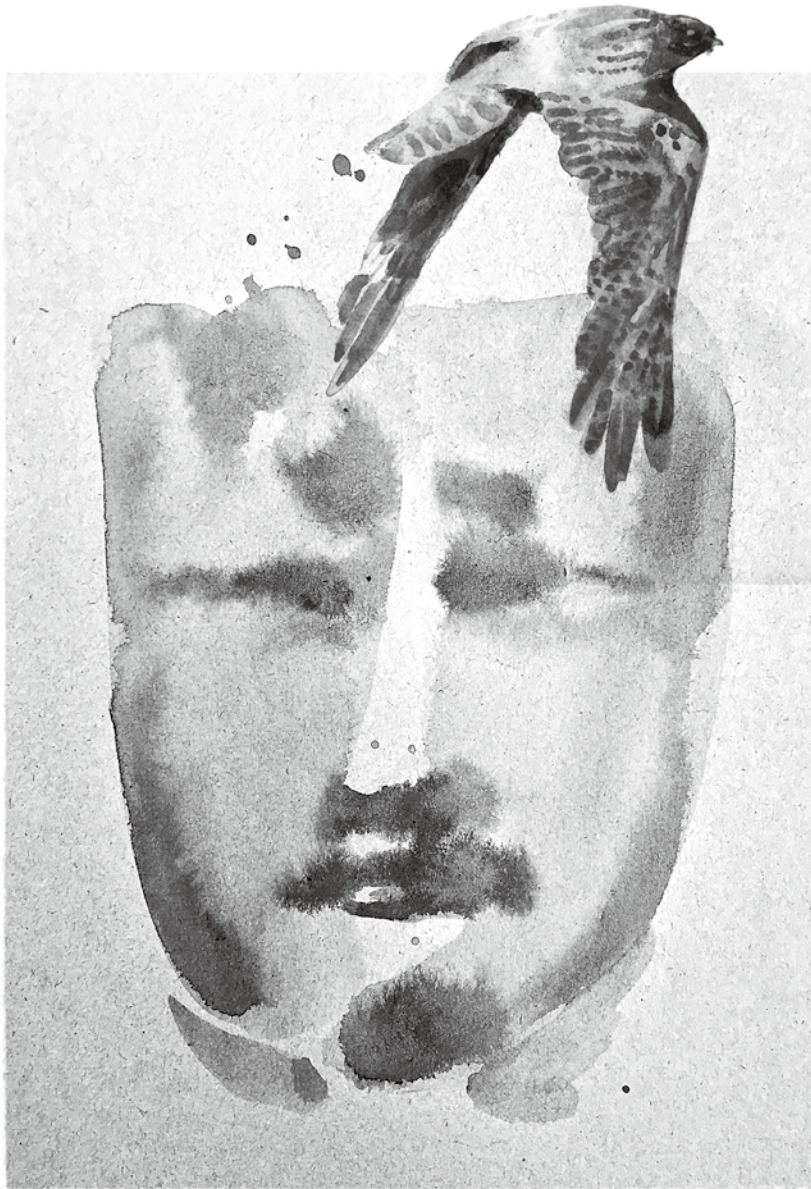


Illustration by Wang Yan

This was Gul's child.

Gul, a true hunter of the Reindeer Evenk, the last legend of the dying age of hunters, the bringer of tales of stalking giant elk and bear.

But Gul had died young, the child had never known his father.

There was something in the blood though, something that could not be denied. Some kind of gift.

Even as a young boy he could move swift and silent through the forest, shivering in the rains, but never slowing. He could bear the hardship, and far more of it than the other children.

Nobody had needed to teach him what the forest was.

I could have told him he'd found the right tree. Nightjars are expert in concealment, and even an

expert naturalist may not be lucky enough to catch a glimpse. They are active at night, and when they emerge at dusk they stick close to the tree-trunks, scorning the more prominent branches. Their plumage of mottled bark-like tones is perfect camouflage. A nightjar could be right in front of you, and you'd see nothing but a knot in the tree.

But the boy's eyes were sharp and I could see he'd spotted the bird. His gaze was fixed on the tree trunk, maybe ten meters up.

I walked slowly toward him.

You'd need to look hard to see there was a bird. That was how it survived, hiding all signs of itself. If it wasn't for that unique call, I don't think anyone would even know they existed.

The nightjar halted its call and made no further sound.

The ground below my feet was soft, a thick layer of fallen leaves and lichen cushioning the earth, spongy from the morning rain. Water oozed beneath my feet.

I trod on a fallen branch. It must have been there a long time, as despite retaining its original shape it was rotten and loose inside, awaiting reabsorption into the earth and reincarnation. I helped it on its way to rebirth, my foot snapping it like a wafer.

While the boy stood at the foot of the tree the nightjar had been confident in its powers of concealment. But as I approached and broke that branch under my foot, sending a clap of thunder into the silence of the forest, it decided the time for hiding was past.

It flew as fleet as a swift, a streak of black shadow on fast and noiseless wings. An instant later it was lost in the forest below, ashes whisked off in a storm.

Right enough, it had taken off from that protrusion on the tree I'd been watching.

The boy had turned to look at me just as the bird took flight, his gaze wary and meaningful. A hunter stalking prey.

I said nothing. He had missed the bird's escape.

I didn't want to tell him that he was right, that the bird had been in the tree.

When he saw the apology in my eyes he turned, satisfied, and looked back up to the tree.

The sky was darkening, and that spot high up in the tree, fading into the black, looked no different

That little lump, like a knot under the bark, was no longer there. But it wasn't easy to detect the change.

I stood and watched with him, staring up at the tree.

So now the escapee nightjar and I were conspirators. I had to stay patient and play my part in its plot.

We stood a while longer, though of course the urgent call did not sound.

But the boy stood there motionless, gazing up at the spot where the bird had once perched. He already had what a hunter needs most, patience.

My feet were growing numb and I, at least, knew there was no point in waiting further.

"Maybe it's gone," I said, gently breaking the silence.

He murmured assent and lowered his head, then when I said nothing more went back to watching. It's a battle of endurance sometimes, to see who can be most patient. I was happy to lose.

"I didn't see it fly off," he said, unwilling to give up.

"Maybe it was too quick. It's too dark to see." I had to put it like that, or risk insulting him.

"Can't have." He wasn't happy about it, but knew there was no hope.



“What kind of bird was it, anyway?”

“A jokjok.”

I could tell he had never heard this Evenki word before. He had so little of our traditional knowledge, our language. He spoke even less than I did.

Much of our old ways will be lost forever with the passing away of our old folk.

As we walked shoulder to shoulder back to the tent a reindeer just back from the forest walked over to me, perhaps attracted by the sweat on my skin. It stopped and snuffled at me, sucking in the odour and I reached out to run my thumb along its warm and searching lips.

Even in summer the forest was bitterly cold once the sun went down. I pulled my clothes tighter around me and the boy and I pushed our way into the tent.

A light rain fell that evening, tapping a constant rhythm on the tent and lulling us off to sleep.

Half-dreaming as I drifted off I heard the snort of a reindeer, perhaps defeated in battle, running past the tent and the crack of a branch it trampled on its way.

The truth was I'd meant to step on that branch earlier.

I woke shivering, the fire long out and the tent freezing. But it was the click of a rifle bolt sliding back that had woken me.

The boy was half-sitting on his bed, his torso bare, working the rifle, clearly awake for some time. His breath hung white in the air, but the dawn chill didn't bother him.

It was a short but sturdy small-calibre hunting rifle, light and portable, perfect for small prey like birds and roe deer.

His eyes glistened in the faint light, all focus on his simple gunpowder machine. He ran his hand over

the stock, smooth and shining with the oil and sweat of constant handling, then held the sights to the light and tested the action, working the bolt back and forth.

His movements were clean and practiced, a real hunter.

I liked guns too, when I was younger.

Some things come naturally, I think. I'd never been shown how to hold a gun, but the first time I picked up my grandfather's double-barrelled shotgun I knew to take aim. Not that I was old enough to fire it, of course. He added extra gunpowder to his cartridges for a better chance of a kill and so the shotgun had a terrifying kick to it, easily enough to send me flying.

I remember him having four guns then. That double-barrelled shotgun, an over-and-under, and a small-calibre hunting rifle. And the other one, a rifle, a true beauty with a long slender barrel and a silver maker's plate on the butt, engraved with two wild ducks. I used to run my fingers over that tarnished old plate while he filled his cartridges. Even now I can see the picture – two wild ducks taking off from an expanse of reeds.

It had been a gift from an old army friend and my grandfather treasured it. It was rarely used though, just kept on the top shelf of the cabinet. I only got to look at it when it came down to be cleaned and oiled.

Anyway, I knew very young what guns were for – to kill animals, to turn them into the meat, fat and proteins we people needed. I have no idea how many I've killed myself, though the biggest would have been roe deer, which stand not half as tall as man.

Then something happened that made me want to never shoot at a living thing again.

It was spring and I was out with my own hunting rifle slung over my back, intending to take a shot at whatever I happened across.

I spotted a bird sitting on a branch. I forget what

kind, maybe a thrush just back north after the winter. I shouldered my gun, took aim, and with my first shot the bird fell to the ground and I rushed over to lift my prey. Now I've never believed in miracles, yet as I raised it up by a leg every single feather on that lifeless body fell off and blew away in the wind. Without its thick mottled coat, the bird that had moments ago strutted lively on the branch became scrawny and repulsive.

It was no longer the bird I'd just seen.

I used my hunting knife to dig a small grave under the tree and buried it there.

And then for years and years I never fired another shot.

Until one time ten years ago, when Gul and I had set out from the mountain camp in search of a stray reindeer.

We startled a pair of grouse in a mountain gully. One flew off over the brow of the ridge, but the other came to rest on a nearby tree. Gul took three shots, the bird sitting unruffled through each, failing to even fly off, much less fall dead. He passed me the rifle to try, complaining the sights must be off. More likely it was the drink, I thought. And I felt like showing I too could shoot, so I took the rifle and aimed. To Gul's dismay, the proud grouse fell at my first shot, balancing stiff on the branch for a moment or two before falling to the base of the tree. I felt a pang of regret, but Gul hailed as me a crack shot. Sure enough, I've maintained a perfect record for over a decade. One shot, one kill. I never miss.

What Gul didn't know was that I'd aimed at the bird's chest, while the bullet had pierced its neck. He was right, the sights were off.

The boy was still fiddling with his rifle, showing no inclination to get up. That wasn't a luxury I had, so

I slid from my sleeping bag and shivered my way into my clothes.

The lichen I'd placed by the fire had dried well and I spread it out on the ashes. Above that, chips of birch bark, then layers of twigs and small chunks of chopped wood, and finally two large logs. I lit the lichen and the resinous birch bark above caught, the fire gradually taking shape with a joyous crackle.

Within seconds the temperature rose, hotter and hotter until breathing became uncomfortable.

I pulled back the flap of the tent and went out into the cooler air. Several reindeer standing on the ground out front plodded over to greet me, their breath white in the cold air. Their hopes for some carbohydrate-laden treats were in vain – no bread in my hand, or anything else edible. I gently pushed the reindeer aside.

I went to the other tent to fetch a piece of bread and made my way down to the fire I'd set for the reindeer the night before.

The white calf rose when it saw me and came over. The other reindeer must have caught scent of the bread hidden in my hand, as they also clustered around me, jostling and anxious. I had to push through them to get to the white calf, but they took the rejection well, trailing me and nuzzling at my back and arms with their lips.

Finally I pushed them clear and made it to the white calf. I pushed the bread towards its mouth and it curled open its wet lips, its nimble tongue taking hold of the bread and pulling it inwards. It always took care not to nip me when it fed.

As it chewed on its treat I squatted down to check the wound. It was mostly knitted together, but I could see even when healed there would be a scar, a vivid reminder of the snare.

Maybe all the attention I was paying to the white calf made the others jealous. I'm not sure though, I've never felt reindeer are that attached to us humans. Maybe they just wanted a share of the bread. Either way one shoved in from the side and sent me sprawling backwards.

I sat heavily on the ground. The reindeer droppings covering the moist earth were now smeared over my trousers too. But at least there was no stink. Reindeer droppings are nothing but lichen and mushrooms, after all, just with the nutrients squeezed out.

When the sun rose higher the reindeer wandered off in twos and threes, back to the depths of the forest.

The white calf was the last to leave, circling the tent for some time until accepting there was no route to the food inside and making his reluctant way back to the forest.

And after a rushed breakfast the boy followed them, off in search of a stray reindeer.

I spent the day catching up on my journals, disturbed only by a solitary crafty jay. It was keeping a watch by the tent, hoping to filch some of the meat I'd set out to dry.

I kept scaring it off and eventually it gave up, settling down further away. But it cawed incessantly and I couldn't settle to my books. In frustration I grabbed whatever came to hand and slung it – and hit! The bird flew off squawking.

I walked over and found I'd thrown a wooden hunting scabbard. Several of the jay's feathers were scattered around, but of the bird itself there was no sign.

But even that attack was inadequate warning. Later I looked up just in time to see it flying off, weighed down by the biggest piece of meat. A clever bird, at

least clever enough to choose the largest piece of plunder. And this time it'd come in silence, ensuring a successful heist.

I recalled once having to punish another pilfering jay.

That one had become a regular at camp. If it had been snatching just food I'd have tolerated it, but it got cocky and decided to promote itself to burglary, sneaking into the tents when nobody was around. Once I caught it about to take off with a cap from one of my lenses clasped in its beak. If I hadn't spotted it in time and chased after it, forcing it to abandon its booty to escape, I'd have been one photographic accessory down. It had to be taught a lesson. I had no wish to cause any real harm though, just give it a fright. I caught it by baiting an upturned basket with a piece of dried meat, then whenever I had a spare moment I went over and had a bit of a shout while kicking the basket – as much psychological torture as I could apply without actually hurting it. At dusk I lifted the basket and set it free, knowing there was a risk of it dying of dehydration if I kept it too long. It darted off with a speed more suited to a hawk on the attack than a member of the crow family. It seemed the trauma would be enough to warn it away from humans.

And it must have worked, as I never saw that jay around the camp again. Lucky for him too, someone less charitable would have got him eventually.

Night fell around me as I planned a second abduction. I glanced at my watch and saw it was already past seven.

It'd be here soon.

I walked over to sit on the fallen log, the same place I sat every evening at this time to hear its call.

I waited a while, but no sound of urgent tapping disturbed the forest silence.

Perhaps it'd been held up, I told myself. And anyway, it sometimes missed a day.

A shot cracked out from down in the valley, a bullet ripping through the air. The report travelled far, a sudden excitement spreading across the stillness of the forest.

It was the sound of a small-calibre rifle, like the boy carried. He must have found some quarry, most likely a roe deer or something similar. A couple of days earlier I'd caught a glimpse of two roe amongst the trees along the stream down where the shot had come from.

I hoped they got away.

Half past seven, and no sign of it yet. If it wasn't here yet, it wasn't coming. I'd been here long enough to know its routine.

I stood up and went into the tent to light the fire.

As I came out again to fetch firewood I saw the boy emerging wearily from forest gloom. The blood of a famed Evenki hunter might run in his veins, but thirteen years is thirteen years. A day of tramping through boggy forest must have exhausted him.

I let out a breath of relief as I saw there was no deer slung over his shoulder.

He saw me and grinned, running over. Conifer needles picked up in the forest still spiking his hair, the smile on his face as clear and innocent as a mountain brook.

He came up to me and held out his left hand.

And there rested his tiny prey.

I'd known that same delight once, when I was young. Bringing home a corpse still warm and dripping blood, searching out my grandfather to show him. I remember my first, a lapwing.

And, I admit, I was quite keen to see what he had shot. The last time we'd been up here together he'd

managed to bring down a hawk owl. Hawk owls are small and reclusive, and even ornithologists specialising in birds of prey only realized a few years ago they live here in the Khingang.

I looked down and saw a bird on the boy's open palm, perhaps a young one.

It was dead, claws splayed and eyes half-shut. It looked like one of the nocturnal raptors, but of smaller proportions.

A young long-eared owl, I thought at first, but I soon saw it wasn't. It had a wider beak and mouth, and sparse bristles around them.

So that's what it was.

Actually I'd never seen a real nightjar before, only the pictures in the reference books.

Even so, I knew this was my nightjar the boy held in his hand.

Shot by the boy while resting on its way to camp.

No urgent call would I hear that night.

*Translated by Roddy Flagg*



孫一聖

## Sun Yisheng

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Born in 1986 in Shandong, Sun Yisheng's jobs since graduating in chemistry have included stints as a security guard at a cement factory, a waiter, a factory operator, and a technician in a pesticides factory. His short stories have been translated into English in publications including *Words Without Borders* and *Asymptote*, and he currently works for the online literary journal *Guoren*.

# Apery

By Sun Yisheng  
(alias One-Sage Sun)

Father was not a mountain, nor is this the story of a mountain. The mountain facing the village looked exactly like a great conflagration. Last night's rain did not extinguish the mountain but it did drench our spirits. Father, who was dripping wet, did not die at the beginning of the mists. The mists shifted the mountain further away. But we heard Father open fire, and the firing brought the mountain nearer again.

No one believed that Father was not a weakling. He was gaunt and swarthy, and was one of only a couple of teachers at the Shenlou Township Primary School who taught Chinese language and literature. He was the epitome of the bookish scholar, but had an air of arrogance too. After his wife ran off with another man, Father shut himself at home for a whole week. Everyone was saying he'd died, but then he came out and, without a word, went on a binge and drank the whole village dry. When it got to midnight, he went around banging on everyone's doors, scaring them so they locked themselves in. Father had to prop himself in a doorway to sleep. People could hear Father cursing and swearing, snorting and snoring. He wouldn't return to the land of the living till the next morning, when the dew soaked him. From then on, people sneered at Father, regardless of whether he was behaving normally. Father could not shake off their taunts but he had heard the fear with which everyone talked about the mountain. From that formidable, forested giant, there blew an ill wind that chilled people to the bone. No one dared go there, or so it was said. Every time Father went to the mountain forest, the fear that

lurked all around froze, motionless. It was as if a dull light had torn gashes in the air. I'm not afraid, said Father. His voice, boosted by the drink, had outgrown him. Almost everyone reckoned Father was mad, when he took his hunting rifle, walked the narrow alleys between the flattened graves, waded the river, and came to the fringes of the mountain forest. He wandered around until midnight but never fired his gun. In the daytime, even more contempt came at him, partly from people's chilly glances, partly from himself. Father felt humiliated. He tried his best to keep going but he was increasingly anxious. The mountain forest couldn't possibly be more hostile than human beings. Finally one day, Father's eyes filled with moonlight, he saw it was about to rain and, without a word, he left, crossed the river to the opposite bank and plunged into the unfathomable gloom of the mountain forest.

In the mist, the mountain was almost motionless, emerging with faltering slowness. No one realized that Father had somehow gone to the mountain. Father plunged through the exuberant undergrowth, confronting packs of wild beasts, filled with fearful astonishment. With his predicament, this story begins. His bullets were used up, his gun barrels were smoking, packs of wild animals stared him down and he dared not make a sound. They were so close that if he'd made the slightest movement Father would have lost his life. As Father related proudly, the stand-off only came to an end when a voice from somewhere shouted "Hey!" and that "Hey!" saved him. The scared beasts scattered in all directions, crashing through branches and over tussocks. In his panic, Father spotted the



monkey in the distance.

“Where have you come from?” Father asked.

No one has verified the mountain’s ferocity, still less whether Father really went up the mountain. But none of that matters now. Even if they all gloried in the mountain’s menace and mocked Father, he did not care two hoots. His face glowed with the immense pride of a humble man whose dream has come true. It was as if a lantern has suddenly illuminated it. The face of someone who wants to fire up people who have grown dully indifferent. Father said: It’s a miracle. The hum of voices grew and filled the house to bursting but no one wanted to listen to Father. It’s a miracle, Father said. Outside the window, a wind blew hard, keen as a knife blade. The noise broke a hole, scattered the voices, and only then did they hear what Father was saying. No one could keep a straight face; they all burst out laughing. The monkey said “Hey!” said Father. The monkey spoke human language, it was a miracle. There was no shadow of a doubt in his expression. His face stood out among these identical faces like a patch of newly-ploughed earth on a vast plain. People were flabbergasted. They stood rooted to the spot, the commotion congealing in the air three feet above their heads. Just a moment later, they all burst out laughing again. The laughter was intended to show Father up as a liar, but he really had brought the monkey back from the mountain forest with him.

For years, no one had seen a monkey, alive or dead. For hundreds of *li* around, nothing remained of monkeys except the word and its utterance.

News of the miraculous monkey’s capture leaked out. I mean, look at the birds wheeling in the sky, listen to the jostling of the leaves in the trees; it must have been the footsteps of the wind that sent the news to the neighbours. That day, as Father remembers it, the village streets were packed with people, and there was a hum of sound. The scoffers paid no attention but

as the numbers gradually increased, even they began to feel they were being stubborn and, one by one, they crowded around. There were so many people that, in order to keep the numbers down, Father sold entrance tickets at his courtyard gate. He charged everyone ten *kuai*, let them in and drew the drawstring tight. Even so, there were as many of them as before. It was more like a zoo than a home, people said. Until late at night, they jabbed holes in the darkness with their flaming torches and flashlights, every dogged face illuminated. Billows of sound rose and fell, all jumbled up with the barks of dogs and the cries of birds, so it was hard to distinguish human language. This immense racket burned down in the flames to a mere crackling.

Father rubbed his eyes hard and saw how the night wind made the tongues of flame and the beams of light convulse. There was a low murmur from a scattering of stars, as if all living creatures had fallen silent. Then a sudden hush, as the clamour of the crowds hung suspended in the air, and innumerable eyes scraped away like a blunt knife blade. No one closed their eyes, they stared at the cage with the monkey huddled inside. Father drank his liquor and planted himself under the eaves, looking up at the people crowded around. Everyone opened their eyes and stared through the bars. A sour smell came from the straw bedding. There was a constant stream of spectators for several days, their inquisitiveness undiminished whatever the weather. But the monkey never varied its performance. It relapsed into what seemed like deep thought, its eyes tight shut, ignoring everyone. Even when people stretched their arms through the bars of the cage, it was not stirred into panic. Gradually, people’s enthusiasm cooled, their faces drooped in the firelight, and they looked despondent. Some got angry. They used their cultured human language to make animal honking noises. Then they took the road, and their inevitable disappointments, home. The angry ones made sure

to ask Father for their money back before they left. The peasants who'd scoffed at Father just asked for half the ticket price back. After allowing their ridicule to waver, they were now ramping it up a notch. They counted the remaining half as the zoo entry ticket – they'd seen the monkey, after all.

This was a setback for Father. He lost a lot of sleep over it and became more taciturn than ever. For many days, neither he nor the wind that burst through the door, went out of the house. But when it rained, he could not keep hold of the wind, and released it. Tufts of wind scraped at Father's face, almost splitting it open. He was as puny as before, the villagers could see that. Their mockery was not like before – they could get right to the heart of his feelings just by shooting him an indifferent glance or looking down and pursing their lips. Most of the time, Father was distracted and silent. Sometimes, he took a drink to give him some liquid courage, and made vain attempts to convince them: That monkey said "Hey!" – the monkey spoke human language, it was a miracle. My bullets were used up, my gun barrels were smoking, I was scared of the bear, I didn't dare make a sound. Just at that moment, there was a voice from somewhere, and that was the end of the stand-off. The voice said "Hey!" and that saved my life.

By this time, Father had almost lost his indomitable, fiery vigour. His throat was strained and hoarse, and echoed with unchanging anxiety.

That's how badly this story began. Everyone got what Father meant straightaway and, even if he didn't succeed in convincing them, at least it gave people a kind of amusement. They listened as he talked, over-stressing each word, and they laughed in all the right places. Some, who had not heard the story before, came looking for him mainly out of curiosity, and smiled in a dignified way as they listened to him. As they left, they did not forget to offer him cut-price

courtesies. For a few, mockery wasn't enough and they challenged Father outright: Why don't you teach it to speak? That was what they said, every time Father finished his explanation: Why don't you teach it to speak? Father understood where they were coming from, so he kept his mouth shut. And their mockery inspired him: he would stop trying and failing to convince them he'd heard that "Hey!" He did something different instead.

When Father kept telling the villagers, I heard the monkey say "Hey!" quite clearly, it was an attempt to wash away past humiliations. It made his listeners laugh at first, but eventually they got fed up with it. They could not even be bothered to mock him. It got to the point where, when they spotted Father in the distance, they'd be off before he could open his mouth.

The first day of every month clove the month before from the month that followed, with a single chop. The glow from the light bulb made shadows dance on the walls. Father was awake all night. He chose this day to stop trying, and failing, to convince them he had heard that "Hey!" He did something different. He stubbornly repeated the same jerky movements, knocked out the same words, teasing the monkey in different ways. Father was so impatient that he didn't give himself a minute's respite, just tried and exhausted every trick he knew, but the monkey wouldn't make a sound. Father felt a chill of anxiety but still would not give up. He changed tactics. He ignored the monkey for days on end, and allowed it to become weak and befuddled, until it was gasping for breath and barely alive. Then he got its food out and tried to entice the monkey to say the sound it had made at the start. "Hey!" The monkey looked at him, panting, and then it rolled its eyes, mouth agape, its breath cooling for a long moment, and fell head over heels, *ker-plonk*, to the floor. Father tried to revive it, cupping his hands and frantically breathing hot air into its mouth to

try and ease its hunger. He didn't allow himself to be defeated and stiffened his resolve, but he was discouraged. He had to come to terms with the fact that the monkey, though constantly seeming on the verge of success, had not actually pronounced a single syllable. Father was first furious, then sorrowful, and eventually let the whole business drop.

He dropped it as suddenly as he had started it. The wellspring of his hopes had dried up. Night after night, Father tossed and turned in his bed, listening to the animals of the village – the dogs barking, the cocks crowing, the oxen bellowing and the donkeys braying – but he could not sleep. He had long ago stopped bothering about the monkey. He acted the way he used to, eating, walking, sleeping, smoking and drinking as if there was still hope, but the ground felt like cotton wool beneath his feet, his face was deadly pale and bloodless, and he wore a dazed expression. During the long nights when there was nothing for him to do, he drank alone, staggering around wherever the mood took him and bumping into things. From then on, if you took a look, you could see that the monkey in the cage throwing itself around in the same way Father did. At first, Father thought it was faint from hunger, but then when he stood still, the monkey stood still too, and pulled just the same weird face to match Father's. The monkey was a superlative mimic. It could not only do throwaway gestures like these, but also gave wonderfully clever imitations of the whole subtle range of human emotions.

Now that Father had stopped repeating, "I quite clearly heard the monkey say 'Hey!'" the villagers smiled, offered cut-price courtesies, and went away. The monkey would imitate them too, hands clasped behind its back, eyes forward as it walked – until it bumped into the cage bars, making the people laugh out loud.

The villagers' comments behind Father's back

passed from one mouth to the next, of course distorted and flippant, dripping into his soul and eating away at his self-respect. Father drank himself into a stupor, grabbing an iron rod to jab the monkey. The monkey did likewise, grabbing a pretend rod to jab Father back. Father felt ashamed. Waves of heat came up through his feet, he burned with anxiety and began to hop up and down frantically, unable to put his feet on the ground. The energy beneath his hand was so great that it was as if the entire weight borne by his feet was pressing on his hand. At this, the monkey felt pain, and retreated to the corner of the cage for several nights licking away the trickles of blood. Every night, Father heard the sound of its wounds healing over, like the sound of bamboo shoots breaking through the soil. It filled him with unease. The sounds grew louder every night and kept waking him. He switched on the light, the beam swept down like the wing of a bird, and Father saw the monkey gripping a piece of iron, just like himself, and attacking the bars of the cage. Father felt he would soon drown in the sounds and the light beams.

Around 1995, power cuts were common in the village. There was no definite explanation but the villagers guessed that there was not enough power to share with the city and the newly-built factories. Every time there was a power cut, Father would light a candle, and its little glow turned bright yellow as the darkness pressed on it, as if Father was breathing out a sigh. Before bed, he blew out the flame, and slept the whole night, waking when it was light outside. One of those dawns, Father saw that his whole stock of candles had burned down to the wick. He thought he was dreaming, then thought he must have been mistaken and put it out of his mind. But this happened several times, and the burnt-out wicks even charred black holes in the table. So at night, although there was no power cut, Father turned off his electricity and lit a new

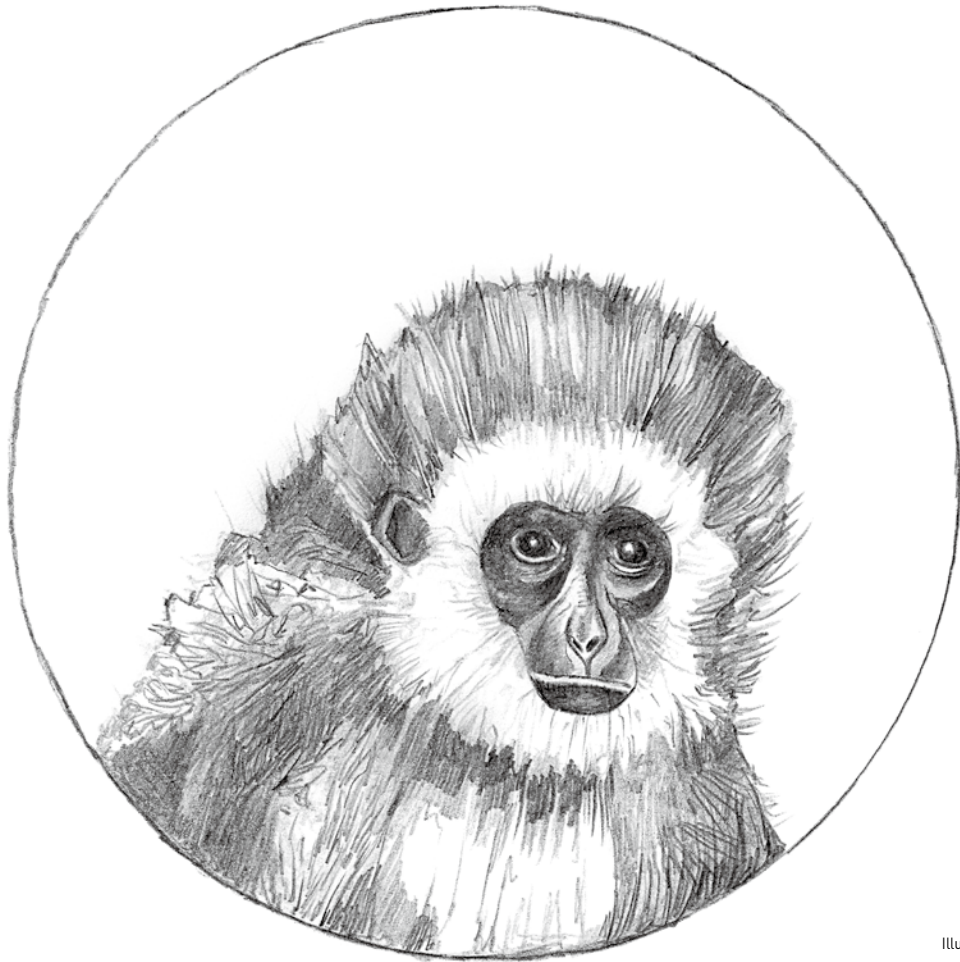


Illustration by Isobel Haysom

candle. Then he ate his dinner, blew out the candle, got into bed and pretended to go to sleep. For a long time there was no movement. Then, around midnight, when he was nodding off, there was a whooshing sound and a flame flared up, tearing the night apart. Illuminated in the flame was the monkey's face, like a bud ready to burst. Before the blaze could die down, it leaned towards the candles on the table, and those unlit wicks, in a single hungry impulse, became one with the flame, and there was candlelight. Before long, Father got up, sat down at the table and looked at the monkey. He realised that the monkey was staring back at him and at the candlelight, whereupon Father

sighed, took the matches back from the monkey and lit his cigarette. Father then put the matches down on the table, got another cigarette out, leaned into the candle, inhaled, then handed the cigarette through the bars to the monkey. The animal drew on his cigarette and puffed out just as if it had been doing it for years. It put the cigarette in its mouth and inhaled, then instantly expelled a single puff of smoke. The monkey's face broke the surface of the candlelight and turned a glistening yellow. At that instant, Father looked at it and once more believed that this was the monkey that had said "Hey!"

The people of the township all said Father was

a damned good teacher. For hundreds of *li* around, there were few people with a reputation to match, even though Father had neglected his studies for many years. Diffidently, Father searched his memory – the classroom (the width of the back of a knife blade), the pupils staring at him, the dust dancing in the sunlight that filtered in. As if he merely wanted to fabricate some memories, Father cut open the river of his recollections and pulled out yellowing exercise books. He would use these to teach the monkey to speak. But even though it was very intelligent, it was only a monkey, with a monkey's abilities. Even if it were the world's wisest monkey, it would never be wiser than a stupid human. Father expended all his energies trying to teach the monkey but despite repeated efforts, the creature could not produce any real sound, only a faint chirp when it tried as hard as it could. As syllables went, the chirp had absolutely no shape to it. Rather than bash his head against a brick wall, Father decided to work on this sound and teach the monkey to write characters. There exists an onomatopoeic character to describe this sound, pronounced "zhi". The monkey's pronunciation of it had always been, in a certain sense, more precise than that of human beings who had to use human study models to learn it. In this case, all Father had to do was to teach the monkey how to write the character and tell it the meaning. In just a few months, thanks to Father's tireless tuition and its own unremitting efforts, the monkey learned to write its first character. It was a horribly wonky character but Father's enthusiasm was not dampened. Gradually, after persisting for decades, Father taught the monkey to recognise and write 3,500 of the most common Chinese characters. The trouble was, apart from the "zhi", the monkey never managed to make any more sounds, and Father could never be sure if it understood the meaning of the characters. Perhaps because he was getting older, every time Father taught

the monkey a character, he forgot it within a few days. It was as if the monkey was not learning it from Father but physically stealing it from him. So Father decided to get out his old books to burn as fuel and keep himself warm. When Father came back into the room with some kindling in his arms, the monkey was hunkered down in its cage, leafing through one of the books, a well-thumbed copy of *Monkey's Journey to the West*. As it turned the pages, they fluttered like birds. Watching this burst of energy, Father really believed that it could read the story. But later, as he watched it scanning the sentences, he saw its amazement at coming across the characters it had learnt elsewhere. It was the kind of surprise we calendar dates feel when we jump out of our calendar line-up into another, only to find a mirror image of ourselves: same date, different calendar.

The days passed and winters came and went. Father felt the flames leap in his heart until his body crackled. Even though he'd been unable to get the monkey to speak, at least he'd stopped other people's mouths. Then one day the monkey vanished. Father had turned out the light and gone to sleep when, as the half-moon sank low in the night sky, the monkey succeeded in opening the cage and escaped.

That night, I suddenly realized I was a grown-up. I shouted to Father but he just turned over and went back to dreamland. When the morning sunshine brought the light slipping in, Father saw the cage standing there with its door hanging open. He inspected its padlock. There was a piece of iron poked through the keyhole, a piece that had been ground down over more than ten years until it was a hair-fine wire. Father gulped in shock, then let out a gut-wrenching bellow. The cry seemed to tear his throat apart: *aiai-yeeyee*. No words. From that moment on, Father was speechless.

After the night of the monkey's disappearance, Father never put a foot out of doors. He lay in bed all

day, and did not sleep a wink at night. His gaze gradually lost all human purpose. I watched over him day and night, but could not prevent Father wasting away. People began to spread nasty rumours that he'd died. You can take a horse to water, as they say. Actually, we really had run short of water. I went to the river to get some and looked at the darkly inscrutable mountain on the other side, shorn of all its forest. People had chopped the trees down and scythed the grass. Just a few stumps remained standing, as if someone had patched the slopes. With the forest retreating day by day, people talked of seeing fleeing pheasants, hares, boars, roe deer and even bears, but the one thing they did not see was a monkey. No one knew how Father had managed to capture his monkey. It was as if it had burst on him like a thunderstorm. People cut down the trees and filled in the gullies and built highways on the mountain. The tarmac pierced through one village after another, but instead of bringing prosperity, the roads only added to the desolation. Father shut himself indoors and, before many years were up, he'd been forgotten. People had no more time for teasing anyway, since most of the young and fit had been swept up on a tide and exchanged a life in the fields for toil and suffering in the cities. They dreamed that the streets were paved with gold and they left, never to come back, not even in their coffins. Cities with names like Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou groaned under the weight of their rebelliousness, their lives, loves and offspring. A small number of the better-off moved their families lock, stock and barrel to a nearby county town. Lonely old folk were left behind to wander the villages like ghosts. If you went to our village, you would certainly see these tattered old people. In a few more years, they would be gone too. The courtyards and the roofs would be completely smothered in weeds. By the light of the setting sun, the wind ran and ran, making the leaves swish in the trees, then the

sounds died away and spread silently over the dismal, dew-drenched wilderness. Dark and draughty houses crouched, like wild beasts waiting their chance to take back these millennial communities.

The years went by and the village was completely overgrown. Father was still immersed in a fantasy world, somewhere between reality and illusion. He wasn't worried, he didn't harbour any hopes. Even though there were no villagers around, their mockery was still there, not getting any bigger but not deflating. At the same time, Father found it difficult to rebut these attempts to humiliate him. He knew that even without the villagers, there would be others. It was as if the villagers' humiliating taunts were not bestowed by them but rather something he went out looking for, to store carefully away and bring out occasionally during his long life, to bolster his failing courage. Since the night of the monkey's disappearance, Father had not put a foot out of doors. He lay in bed all day, and did not sleep a wink at night. His gaze gradually lost all human purpose. In the depths of these nights, Father grew thinner and his face was a waxy yellow. I knew I could not coax Father out of his mood so I just kept busy. I washed his clothes, got his dinner and generally looked after him. Father went really crazy and, on top of everything else, he started peeing and crapping in the bed. He threw off his clothes, and the bedding went on the floor. His body was collapsing in on him. The minute his foot touched the floor, he jumped up onto a chair, or the table, or the bed, reaching for the electric cables, as excited as if they were tree branches in the spring wind. I had no idea what his illness was, all I could do was adopt new tactics and appease him. I tried to encourage him to come to terms with it but he took no notice of me. He no longer talked, just mimed what he wanted, like a mute. He was like Father except that he had to wait for human beings to work out how to vocalize the sentences he wanted to utter. When I



saw the huge efforts he made in his stubborn but unsuccessful attempts to speak, I knew he was definitely a mute. Every time I argued with Father, I was not sure (as I still am not) whether this was a real argument, because he ‘talked’ to me in fierce gestures. He flailed his arms madly, but all he could spit out were desiccated sounds, just as if he’d swallowed back the words he wanted to say, leaving only the bone-cracking sounds of crunched sentences.

These memories always remind me of Father teaching me to talk and read and write. I’ve always been suspicious about humans’ motives in inventing the written word. Language has not only failed to make human communication simpler, it has complicated it. Clumsy linguistic formulations are rarely appropriate, let alone true. They just sound alluring. For instance, the name that Father chose for me. When people call me by that name, it gives solid form to an image, but that image is not the real me. I am not my name. Words are just a heap of lifeless corpses. Language forces words to model reality or objects but the minute humans speak, the meaning has been distorted. I found out, in time, that life is a terrible thing, that people use each other through language. I always think that language is an exercise in futility, rather than a gift bestowed on humans. Behind language’s back, humans get up to all sorts of antics, but they don’t realize that language has tricked them. When someone expresses themselves in language, their listener applies their own understanding to what has been said, then replies in their own language. This creates a double distortion of the original meaning. Thus, there are always misunderstandings in human linguistic exchanges. It is true that languages might be able to interact with other languages, but they are of no use to humans trying to bridge the gap with each other. Yet at the same time, these two systems are mutually interdependent. Without ideas, there is nothing to express in language.

Then there is what is passed down vertically through the generations, a different situation. Although vocabularies from antiquity have evolved and multiplied, they have not lost their innate, unfettered nature. The history that vocabularies record constitutes an independent realm of language; the history understood by an individual is no more than that person’s history. And since everyone’s understanding is different, the history that depends on the survival of language is mediated through the understanding of numberless individuals, and may result in numberless different histories. Human beings mistakenly believe that these histories are one and the same history. So, in chronological terms, the horizontal exchange of language and its vertical proliferation is a stubbornly resistant, branched network that is both erroneous and perfectly precise.

Who knows?

Day turns to night turns to day, and the world goes on. Rampant, lush undergrowth has submerged the village, blocking out the sunlight. Irrepressible creepers snake up the walls and into the houses, turning their interiors green. Father is shriveling up day by day, living a very different life, and ageing with the rapidity of a fast-rewind button trying to ambush time. His dried-up skin is a mass of wrinkles. His back becomes terribly hunched and, when he walks, his gait is grotesque. His hair and beard grow slow and long, until fine hair hides half his face. There, a pair of eyes take you by surprise. They are muddy but they are the right size for his line of sight and are constantly searching for the formula that can spring him from this entrapping civilization into wildness. Not many days later, I hear the sound of the woodcutters at work. One by one, the trees are felled, letting the light in inch by inch. The day father disappears, I have gone to the township to buy some things I need. Perhaps I take too long, because when I get home, Father has

left. Table and chairs lie broken all over the floor. I search for half the night but find no trace. A few days later, I hear the sound of woodcutters outside and, as the trees fall, the light doesn't just come in, it floods the house. Not many months later, the village is back to its former desolate self. Hiding in my room, I hear the woodcutters talking outside. They're talking about my father. They say he left by jumping out of the window. He gave them a lot of trouble but they caught him. They say he's now in the county town.

I arrive in the county town. There are no rugged mountain roads here, any steep slopes are human-made (in the form of vertically-rising walls). I've never been in such a flat place. The sensation of walking on such flat ground is astonishing, as if I'm going to sprain my ankle with every step I take. I look for the place that woodcutters told me about, but the townsfolk say Father has gone to a bigger city. I make the long journey, trudging on foot through towns and provincial capitals until I come to the city they call Beijing. Its houses are really tall, and sharply angular, with no gentle transitions, like ill-designed cuboids, or perhaps you could say, shapes sucked dry of desire. All the houses are squeezed together but in orderly layers. The people are restless, crowded cheek by jowl. With considerable difficulty, I find a bunch of addresses people have given me, but I do not find Father. I figure they were telling me lies – I can't stand human beings, either their vices or their jokes. I sit down outside the railings around the zoo and can't hide my sorrow. I peer through the crowds and focus on each of the beasts. It all looks normal, but then suddenly I spy Father through the bars. I'm stuck in an enormous crowd and can only see him from a distance. He's stuck inside the cage, hunched over and crawling up and down. I almost don't recognize him. Father always told me: You see, humans are only monkeys painfully standing upright. I didn't believe him, not until I'd lived human

life for a bit myself. And here's Father, fighting failure painfully hunched over, and apparently succeeding as a monkey. I don't know if he recognizes me. Then he calls, waving at me, his arm looking like it's pulling down a call that hovers in mid-air, as if plucking a peach. He almost splits himself apart, pouring a lifetime's energy into that call: "Hey!"

I can write all this down, because finally Father taught me how to read and write. I didn't know what to write, so I wrote Father, this Father that I call Father.

Before Father taught me to read and write, he chose a name for me. To do that, he went through every one of his treasured books. Finally he found inspiration in a book called *Monkey's Journey to the West*, and took my name from the monkey in the story with a human face. The monkey was called Great-Sage Sun. "Your name is One-Sage Sun," said my father. Ever after that, when people heard my name, they asked me: "Why didn't he just call you Great-Sage Sun, straight up?" Of course, I'm quite sure that readers all know about me by now, but you don't know about my name. You see, my father had taken the character for "Great", 大, and removed the character for human, 人, leaving only the 一, One. That was because, at that point, Father didn't know that I'd turned into a human being.

*Translated by Nicky Harman*



蔡世平

## Cai Shiping

Born in Hunan in 1955, Cai Shiping has dedicated himself to the *ci* form of poetry. In addition to his own works he has edited anthologies, managed websites, and published essays about this traditional lyric form. *Ci* poems originated in the Tang dynasty and are written to fixed “song templates” which define the line length and placement of rhyme and tone.

*[Flying Fowl]*

*Wasted Towns and Broken Rooms*

*Upon learning that the pine slopes in my hometown would be turned into a landfill.*

They say pine slopes will play home to a poison pit.  
For miles, yellow silt will break out in boils.  
Forests will wither, sparrows sigh, men's hearts freeze,  
streams grow old, fish slow, earth's lungs cold.

Mountains bleed out, dreams hoard frost.  
Wasted towns and broken rooms cry to their makers:  
Who can put away this desolation  
and bring back bees and butterflies to busy in mulberries?

*[Remembering Old Excursions]  
Thicketing of Shadows*

The minute we are born, we start our journey home.

Ice crystals bloom in a slow flash:  
a hare's whiskers, sparrow's lashes.

Split seas and fork lightning,  
stride toward ultima thule,  
till dust cake your cavalry robe.

Lonely village, one torch cooks a night cold.  
Slow thicketing of shadows,  
snowflakes fly as dusk dies alone.

Unreachable. Lone traveler  
latches his wooden gate  
rehearses folk songs.

Fire warms mud walls,  
cherries outside his window  
burn on their branches.

A new crescent moon returns,  
to grandmother's house we go.

But we wake in the garden,  
amid weeds,  
wilting flowers,  
whistling wind.

*[Water Spirits]*  
*Toothache*

*At fifty, I developed tooth problems. The pain kept me up all night, and I despaired. Thereupon I thought back on the Three Years of Natural Disasters, and the springtimes when my mother would take me to Lake Dongting to dig for foxnut to hold off hunger (a wild water vegetable with a yellow flower that roots in muddy shallows; the seeds inside the pod can be eaten raw or cooked, and have a sweet, mildly astringent flavor). I still remember the flavor of the new stems between my baby teeth.*

Mother led me to the lake:  
yellow blooms, black soil, blue field.  
My teeth knew tender stems from tough.

The foxnut juice ran down my lips,  
a whole season's worth of sweetness.

For fifty years I dined on wind and swallowed rain;  
my beard now tougher than my gums.  
What good dreams can lull my mother to sleep?

Hard frosts grip fallen leaves;  
midnight cold sticks in my craw.



*[Evening Breeze] Red*

Snowline wraps the world. To the mountains:  
find his music,  
his poetic piths.

The vole ventures not from his den,  
the sparrow can't unfurl his wings.  
Gray ceiling sits heavy on the brow.

Soft static chatters in the ear. I look up:  
geese have frozen the lake's face.  
Then I see them—spots of red.

In seconds, red has lit the world. Leave it do:  
dye the frost's complexion,  
dye the snow's cheek.

Red like thatch stems or shrimp shell  
when vision starts to spin.  
Red reaches threads of rain  
and fillets of wind,  
until there is no difference between snow and blood.

Only plum blossoms test the depths of loyalty.  
Men catch fire,  
not from Heaven's anger.

*[Boat-song Prelude] The Mountain Spirit*

Who rides the red leopard,  
as foxes ride behind?  
Her dress is woven of fig and Spanish moss,  
she shoulders an osmanthus bow like a banner.

I'll carry a spray of fresh flowers  
to decorate my immortal lines,  
and catch him with my eyes.

The spirit only smiled once,  
and charmed herself.

Summon bears, call rabbits, feast on new pears.  
Make a pastoral paradise,  
vibrant and alive.

Send all rain, and noise and lightning,  
send soft breezes with a pale moon,  
and listen to the gibbons sing with me.

Stand alone on the summit  
to watch the warring clouds.

*[Green Papayas]*  
*A Bird Calls on a Flowered Branch*

A bird calls on a flowered branch.  
The bird is gaunt, the flower too.

The bird starves, and the flower knows not;  
the flower starves, and which of us will know?

We look up at heaven, and stand on earth;  
we carry sky and surface in our hearts.

Allow the moon to alight on the branch,  
watch it wrinkle with the wind.

*Translated by Canaan Morse*

## Translator's Note

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Canaan  
Morse

These pieces are translations of lyrics, not poems. “Lyric” is the English name for *ci* (詞), a category of traditional verse narrative related to but distinct from *shi* (詩), “poem,” which is now used as generally in Chinese as “poem” is in English, yet in pre-modern times referred specifically to four-, five-, and seven-character verse. In Chinese, *ci* lyrics are not considered a subcategory of *shi* poetry; if you were to ask Cai Shiping about the Chinese source texts, and you called them 詩 “poems,” he would correct you. His Chinese wiki describes him as a 詞人, “lyricist,” not a 詩人, “poet.”

The *ci* lyric is an antique genre of diverse origin that formed and evolved during the Tang dynasty (610 – 907 CE) but achieved the height of its popularity during the Song (960 – 1279 CE). Song lyrics were song lyrics (!): they were verses set to traditional melodies performed for aristocratic audiences, frequently by female courtesans. They were traditional art: the melodies required certain cadences and rhyme schemes, their subjects traditionally romantic, their tone traditionally sentimental. The literati took up the form as an entertaining diversion from *shi* poetry, which was dedicated to more solemn utterances. The Chinese say “詩壯詞艷”: poetry is strong, lyrics are pretty.

Cai Shiping is engaging in traditional creation – to some degree. He is not 寫詩, “writing poems”; he is 填詞, “filling in lyrics.” The traditional patterns are named in brackets before each piece – “Flying Fowl,” “Boat-song Prelude,” “Water Spirits,” et cetera. I have employed off-rhyme and syllable/word counts to reflect as best I can to reflect the different character and tone cadences, which in the Chinese are so lively and mellifluous. I have also gone to some trouble to recreate the peculiarities of their language. Cai Shiping continues to engage with *ci* tradition by composing in classical Chinese; but, like so many contemporaries who still compose in China’s ancient literary language, his classical is a patois of anachronistic references and contemporary habits, making it either extremely versatile or extremely fragile as a means of communication.



# 劉亮程

## Liu Liangcheng

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Dubbed a “bucolic philosopher”, Liu Liangcheng was born in Xinjiang in 1962. After his first writing job at the *Worker's Daily* newspaper, he later turned to poetry, essays, and eventually (with the 2006 novel *Loose Earth*) fiction. He received the 2014 Lu Xun Literature Prize for his essay anthology *In Xinjiang*.

# A Village of One

By Liu Liangcheng

## 1. Things Undone

They'd gone back, leaving me to watch over the stacks of wheat on my own. After a busy month in town they'd be back, their hands freed up for the threshing.

It's better than a half day's walk from the village to this wilderness, which is to say you can't get here and back in a day. More like two. If you were bullheaded enough to try it in a day the sky might go dark with you on the road and that'd be tough going at the end. No one would want to walk that leftover stretch of road, not in the dark, not likely.

The pressing work of harvesting the wheat was done, and it wasn't hard to imagine the same work starting up someplace else – there were a couple of fields like this in the wilds outside the village. They'd left me enough flour and rice to get me through the month, and not enough oil, not even half a small bottle. Wouldn't fry up two plates of veggies. The guy who set me up with the job said before he left: Don't laze around staring at the sky. See what's left undone. Show some initiative.

Next day walking the fields of cut stalks I found plenty left undone. Wheat uncut, bundles never stacked, but the harvest was over and everyone was home. There was a big bundle at the south end of the field. So big that whoever was hauling bundles had to have skipped it on purpose. At the west end, there was half a row still growing and at the very end a scythe growing there too, a sorry sight, like someone had reached the end of their patience and strength and that was that.

That someone must've been the last one on the field, the afternoon light angling down, watching the others leave him behind with a half row to go. He probably just walked to the other end and stood or squatted there with the others, and no one knew the difference. It's a big field, can't hardly see one end to the other. One person to a row, head down, working his way up, cutting till the sky turns its evening colors. Till the sound of scything dies down around him and he finally lifts his head to see everyone's done and heading home, and there's just his half row left, all by its lonesome. He must've gotten anxious, bent down to swing the scythe a few more times, then drifted to a halt, at a loss for what to do. There was no one left to mind if he finished or not. No one to know one way or the other. The guy in charge of inspections was gone, so he probably just sat down on the row, exhaled, and went blank for a moment before thinking: to hell with it, I'm done.

I might've been able to find out who it was. In fact I was pretty sure I knew. But there was no calling him back to finish cutting the wheat. This job was done, and more pressing work was starting up someplace else. Whatever was left undone didn't matter anymore.

For the next few days I was running all over that empty field, finishing things that quite a few people had left undone. I suppose there's always someone cleaning up at the end of the show, someone following in the rear, doing the things other people thought they had already done. A lot of things are like that: there are plenty of folks at the start, but at the very end it comes down to a single someone.



## 2. Far from the Townsfolk

My day's work: Get up in the morning and take a look at the stacks of wheat, all together five big ones stretched out in a row. No need to mind them much after that. Then in the afternoon check the surrounding wilderness for anything suspicious that might be headed this way.

Lots of things were hiding out here in the wilderness – a man and five stacks of wheat, for one – and none of them wanted anyone else finding them out. Even the trees grew bent over, bodies crooked, limbs hugging the ground. I'd never seen a tree in this wilderness that grew proud, holding its head up high, like a white poplar does. Something pressed down on everything here, and it pressed down on me, too.

Over the course of a few afternoons I noticed a shadow growing bigger in the west. I couldn't make out what it was, but it crouched out there, alone, and kept me up at night. If something next to you is getting smaller and smaller until it disappears, you'll probably pay it no mind. But if something near you suddenly gets bigger, huge as anything, you're going to be terrified. You're going to panic.

In the morning I crawled out of bed and saw the black shadow had grown again. And looking over the stacks of wheat, I swore they must have shrunk in the night. A bit worried, I shouldered a hoe and carefully made my way west. After crossing the field and walking a bit I saw that it was just a tree – a dried out old desert poplar that all of a sudden had thrown out a bunch of new leaves and branches. I circled the tree once. A bunch of those leaves had grown fresh last night; I could tell they would keep growing, and growing vigorously. I imagined a root from that old tree must have worked its way into an aquifer deep under-

ground.

A place that lets a tree grow like that would likely do the same for a man, so when it came time to leave I took note of the spot. At that time I had only just begun to understand what I was doing for myself: I was letting myself grow as needed, like a plant does. My arms were too thin. My legs weren't strong. I lacked for courage. So many things needed to grow, yet for quite a few years, growing was something I seemed to have forgotten.

Having slowly finished up all those things left undone, I felt a sudden emptiness envelop the thatched-roof hut where I slept. The work was done, the hoe and scythe laid aside. Solitude became a thing. Fear and loneliness became a thing, a very big thing.

I realized for the first time that I was alone, and the rest of them were a group, a flock, all stacked together opposite me. My native community was dozens of kilometers away in Yellow Dune, and at this moment no one – no friends, no family, no neighbors – could help me. I had brought this loneliness and fear with me all the way from town.

Everyone faces their leftover loneliness and fear alone. It doesn't matter if you're in a big crowd or alone in the wilderness. It belongs to you alone, just like it does for a bug or a blade of grass. Whatever community they might belong to, they also face their joy and suffering alone, and the other bugs or blades of grass will never know a thing about it.

When a person dies we set them aside – we bury them – then we go on living right next to their tomb. After living a while, we feel something's not right, and we think: who left this road here? Who was it who did this or that thing? Who was it who said those words? Who was it who once loved that woman?

I lived with the townsfolk for a few dozen years. I



Illustration by Wang Yan

had pretty much seen it all. If I had stuck around nothing much new would've happened. For my remaining few decades I wanted to live with the grass and flowers, with the bugs and birds and rivers and dirt. I didn't know if that was okay or not. Maybe the townsfolk would call me back, tell me to get a wife and raise some kids. Maybe they would make me plow the earth and plant wheat every year. They couldn't just let me sit around at any rate. All those things they had to do,

they'd make sure I was doing, too. They didn't know that in my heart those things were finished a long time ago, and if there was anything left for me to do, it was something about the grass, the bugs, and the clouds.

I still had a dozen or so days in the wilderness, maybe more, and I was far away from the townsfolk, where I could do whatever it was I needed.

### 3. Bent by the Wind

The wind blew hard one night. Howled me awake halfway to dawn, crying something terrible over my hut and over the stacks of wheat like an unhappy woman. These thatched roofs and stacks of wheat sticking up out of the countryside must've tripped up the wind's feet, or snagged her clothes, or tangled her hair, so she couldn't keep up with the rest of the wind. So she tugged and cried until the only sound in all heaven and earth was her howling.

I stuck my head out of the hut and faintly saw a few things rolling around in the dark, and pretty fast, too. They'd swing past me then they were gone, bundles of wheat blown off by the wind. I didn't know how many. I just watched them blow away. I wasn't much bigger than a bundle myself. If I had gone out there I might have been blown to who knows where. They'd be in town by morning if the wind didn't change direction. Folks there would wake up and find one bundle after another lined up against the wall like livestock come home to rest.

Every year a few big winds came through the village, blowing on people till they were bent. Till trees grown crooked were blown straight. It came from all directions, so plants and people had no choice which way they were tilted by it. Only thing they could do was straighten themselves up after it passed. All manner of wind blew on those trees, giving them the strangest shapes you could imagine. You could almost guess which curves were blown into their crooked trunks by the south wind, and which by the north. But they stood there big and tall and thick and strong, because there wasn't a wind north or south that could blow them down.

There were a couple of big trees like that outside town, and a couple of people like that *in* town. But I was too young, my roots weren't deep, and my body wasn't sturdy. I was worried I'd be blown off by a big wind like a blade of grass or a leaf, blown a thousand miles to some unknown place. Whether you liked it or not, willing or not, one toss and you'd be gone. There's no place you can go that'll be any trouble for the wind. When it blows there's nothing but wind the world over, and when it stops there's nothing but empty air. When it's gone it's like nothing ever happened. Except your fate has changed. Out of the blue you've landed in some other place, and all you can do is wait for it to start blowing in the other direction and hope it carries you back. You might wait years and never see another wind strong enough to blow you there. And while you're waiting to fly home you'll keep growing, becoming heavier than you ever imagined.

Last year during an east wind, I saw a leaf from our family's elm finally blown back after years in some distant place. It did a few flips in the air before fluttering down on the window ledge. That wind came to a halt right in our village like someone slammed on the brakes. Things started falling out of the sky: pieces of paper – some with writing, some blank – strips of cloth, clumps of hair and fur, and plenty of leaves. There in the midst of all this stuff falling out of the sky I recognized that elm leaf from our tree. I quickly snatched it up and lay it flat in my hand. It had a couple of tears around the edges, and its underside was bleached white by the sun. Must have been a strong sun, wherever it had been. There were yellowish bits of earth stuck to the top side. I wondered how far it had been blown before another wind brought it back, how many places it had passed along the way, places I had never been. It's a rare leaf that gets blown all the

way back to where it came from.

Wind is air on the move. Once it dies down, the air that was in a place has moved on, and with it some of the sights and smells. The aroma of cooked meat that filled the alley the night before. The scent of a woman's body that someone enjoyed last night. A rag hung to dry in a tree that was never taken down. A piece of paper you'd written a few things on and set on the window ledge. The wind blows off the entire blanket of air that's been brewing over a town, breathed in and breathed out by all the townsfolk, sending it someplace a thousand miles away or more.

After a wind there were always a few unfamiliar clouds left hanging over the town, their colors fresh, their shapes strange, their meanings uncertain. If another wind didn't come along they'd loom overhead whether you liked them or not, while the clouds you were comfortable with were far out of sight, run off by the wind.

But people were mostly too busy to look up at the sky after a wind had passed. A few quick glances and you'd start to think those clouds belonged in your town. If it got too hot, you'd hope they would cover the sun. If the soil was dry you'd want them to hurry up and drop a little rain. And if it was really dry, if it hadn't rained in a month or two and in the midst of the townsfolk's bitter hopes those clouds overhead actually looked like they might rain (their color changing from snow white to lead grey to ink black, so you could just about see the rain coming), all of a sudden a north wind would start blowing and those rain-filled clouds would sway and shuffle and fly out of town. Then with a *whoosh* they would dump a full night of rain on the south ridge where not a single soul lived.

There would be nothing for us to do but stare up

at the empty blue skies and curse those clouds that had been brought up to misbehave so badly. Next day there would be a town meeting that would conclude with a solemn declaration: never again would we pay any heed to those clouds that came and went, nor would we ever allow any of them to stop over our town. No, we would drive them out and send them on their way. Nor would we ever turn our hopes to the skies for water. Instead we would dig an aqueduct all the way across the Gobi Desert.

Once on a south wind I caught a thick fishy scent. I imagined a seaside fishing village hauling in a massive net of fish and piling them on the beach, the wind carrying off their scent, leaving the fish behind.

Another time I caught the scent of a gaggle of girls just coming of age. I thought of one beautiful girl after another, all growing up and becoming women in some far off place, and then growing old. My dangling tool rose to face them, then fell again, for all its length powerless to reach them.

Every kind of wind passed over that town. No one could tell you how many times their roof had been blown clean of its dirt. You could practically see the four walls of the town aging as they deflected those inconstant winds for the townsfolk. While some folks disappeared, most remained. What kept them there?

What kept me here?

What kept the stacks of wheat here?

If all the grain were blown off with the wind, I wondered, would the townsfolk all move to some distant place? Would they leave behind a ghost town?

In the morning I found the bundles of wheat about a half *li* away, caught up in a bell-thorn bramble. In the past the clumps of bell-thorn growing to the side of the field had blocked our way, snagged our clothes,

or scratched our hands any number of times. And any number of times we had burned a big pile that we uprooted with pick-axes, but they always came back the next year.

We could never figure out what use on earth there was for those bell-thorns. After warding off the mouths that wanted to eat them, the hands that wanted to pick them, and the feet that wanted to trample them, the little thorns that covered every inch of the bramble just stood there pricking at the sky, clouds, air, and wind. Now that they had saved our wheat bundles from being carried off, I felt a deep gratitude to those bell-thorns.

Perhaps many of the things that make up our lives – or life itself – are there just to hold us steady at some critical moment. A blade of grass, a tree, a cloud, a little bug... they dig their roots into the ground for us, or walk on air for us, or sing in the wind...

The death of a single blade of grass is also our death.

The premature passing of a single tree is also our passing.

The cry of the smallest insect is also our cry.

#### 4. A Shovel Is a Good Thing

Most times I head out I've got an iron shovel over my shoulder. That shovel is like a hand the world reaches out to me, and I must take it firmly in my own.

A shovel is a good thing. When I get tired of walking out in the wild, a couple of digs and I've leveled out a bed to lay in. Another few digs and I've built up a nice pillow. When I sleep my shovel stands tall in the wilderness, looking nothing like a tree or a dead piece of wood. If someone wants to find me, they'll see that shovel from a good distance. If a wild ass or a wild buf-

falo comes charging past, they'll avoid the shovel and avoid trampling me as well. If there's a ridge that looks hard to climb I wouldn't dig a tunnel clean through it, but I'll be able to uproot any brambles in the way. That bramble will probably wonder how it got mixed up with my shovel – it was just growing in the wrong place, directly in my path, and without even so much as a how-do-you-do my shovel cuts it down, setting it back a year on *its* path. I don't waste much thought on whether it was my wrong turn that brought me to this thorny wilderness. No mistake, the bramble will grow back in the same spot next year, tall and bushy as ever, choking off the trail I blazed with my shovel. And if I come back by the same path years later, it'll still be there. Plants aren't like people, avoiding the places where they once had a run-in with something bad. They've just got their one path to follow, always up. I'm going north, south, east, and west, always getting farther from where I started, never retracing a single step.

I've run across my fair share of animals in the wild, some with horns, some with a mouth full of sharp teeth, some covered in spines. Some come flying on wings, others stampeding on hooves, but I've got a shovel on my shoulder, and we know to steer clear of each other.

Once I nearly came face to face with a wolf. We stopped about twenty yards short of each other. Gave us both a shock – two mutually hostile animals hurrying along with our heads down, raising our gazes at the last moment to find we were already in a face-off. No passing in the night for us. The wolf looked me up and down, and I looked it over tip to tail. A beggar of a wolf, this one, its tail as frayed and yellowed as autumn grass, and missing a patch of fur on its spine



like it had just wriggled its way out of a bramble. With its shrunken gut it looked like a loose-jointed skeleton brought to life.

Clearly this wolf wasn't getting on so well, and thinking this made me feel a bit superior.

Its eyes had a pitiful look, like it was pleading with me: let me feed on you, just let me have a bite, I haven't eaten in days.

If wolves ate wheat I would have tossed it a few bundles. If they ate rice I would have cooked it some. The problem was wolves had to eat meat. It would happily take it from my leg, my chest, my arm, my face. In the already lonely nature of that wolf I saw the redoubled loneliness of subsisting on meat alone.

I couldn't tell if it was male or female, and I wasn't going to dip my head down and take a look at its crotch for fear it would rip open my neck.

And how did I look to that wolf? For an earnest half hour it looked me over from head to foot, then left in a huff. I could swear I saw some trace of disappointment in its eyes – one living thing's disappointment in another – but I'm not sure I fully understood its meaning. I watched that wolf until it disappeared over a sand dune. I let out a sigh of relief and put down my shovel before I noticed my palms were moist with sweat.

That wolf probably had never seen a man with a shovel. The unaccustomed sight of me coming along shouldering that chunk of iron was enough to deter it from taking a bite out of me. It gave up on me. Wolves aren't stupid. Otherwise my shovel would be stained with wolf blood, something I wouldn't want to see.

I'm not lonely like that wolf. My loneliness isn't found in the wilderness, but amongst people. All the things people have done are left here, so even at my most vulnerable I don't feel alone or afraid. If a pack

of wild animals came charging in, they would first of all be startled by the discovery of this field, and slink off into the high stands of barley. And second, they wouldn't dare underestimate a man standing in the field with shovel in hand. When a wild animal steps onto cultivated land, land shaped by humanity's labor, it is just as terrified as a person stepping into a wild forest populated by predators.

All the things people have done are left on the earth.

People have already finished so many of the big things; what's left are the small things. That's all that we're capable of doing.

And is that leftover wolf another thing that'll need to be done? Sooner or later someone will face that wolf again, and they'll either kill it or let it live.

There's still a lot of things I have to do, and every one of them is something someone else left behind – they're my things now. And if I ever get them all done I'll stick that shovel in the ground and go.

After all the things we've done, when our shovels are dull and work-worn, we plant them in the earth. That'll be the last thing each one of us has to face.

## 5. The Rabbit Trail

In the morning I followed a rabbit trail west for nearly half an hour, hoping to see how rabbits lived. It was narrow, barely wide enough to accommodate my footfalls. If a rabbit had come down the trail I would have had to step aside to let him pass, but no rabbits came. The trail had been worn about a fist-width deep from years of use by wild rabbits, and was littered with black bean-sized droppings. They seem to like leaving their droppings on their trails, pooping as they hop or dash along. They don't stop for something as minor



as taking a crap. They don't find some private place to squat half the day away like people do. Maybe they've got just as much business to take care of as we do, running from the day they're born. Running on those four little feet for some grass to eat, or running for their lives. No one knows in the end how far they'll run.

I wonder, what does a rabbit think when he comes tearing down a trail and sees the poop he scattered that morning lying there still fresh and steaming? Does that tickle his fancy?

Or what about those rabbits that won't eat the grass around their burrows? Let's say they run all night to eat a mouthful of grass someplace else, then return in the morning only to find the grass around their burrow has been grazed clean away by someone else? How do they feel then?

Sometimes the rabbit trail carefully skirted some small object like a clump of grass or a dead piece of wood. Even a clump of dirt could force a bend into the trail. Sometimes it threaded through the narrow space between two clusters of thorn grass and I was the one forced to walk around. The fact is, I never saw how wild rabbits lived. They were always hiding where no one could see them. Being spotted could cost them their lives, and my arrival had probably sent them all fleeing in terror.

Anyhow, though I never spotted a wild rabbit, I did run across a dense bell-thorn bramble. I sized it up for a while but couldn't see any way past it. Squatting down I saw the rabbit trail extending deep into the bramble, where it wound through the roots and then disappeared.

On the way back I noticed the deep footprints I had left embedded in the narrow rabbit trail. What a fool I was! I couldn't walk on my own road, could I? No, I had to come here for my leisurely stroll and

trample all over someone else's road. How many years of wild rabbits running to and fro would it take to erase even one of my footprints, pressed so deep into the soil? They might abandon this trail altogether, or, if they were angry enough, this entire patch of land. They might cross over the sand dune and move to another piece of grass far away. At my age, I said to myself, making a blunder like that.

I came back a few days later to check on things. Little claw marks on the trail told me the wild rabbits hadn't moved away. All I had done was to fill their road with potholes, and I felt bad about that for a long time.

## 11. The Biggest Thing

I only spent one month up on that field in the wilderness (I had spent dozens of years in the village). After the month was over some folks returned from town. We threshed the wheat and left, setting the wheat stalks to one side. Whatever was left undone wasn't our business anymore.

I hear that a mouse, once its lair is fully stocked with food, will go out and find a place to dig a new hole. That new hole might appear next to my thatched hut, or under the wheat stalks. The land around the hut is higher, dry and cozy, a suitable place for people to build and mice to dig. A lair under the wheat stacks would be safer, more discreet, and every stalk will bear leftover grains of wheat, enough for a few generations of mice.

Birds will build nests on the thatched roof, and the part of the beam that sticks out will get spattered with white droppings.

Wild chickens will squeeze in through the crack in the door and start laying eggs and scatter their feath-

ers on the pile of hay where I slept.

These troublesome things I leave to whomever comes around next year, when everything starts anew, and another round of leftover things gets set aside.

And if we don't come back next year, or the year after...

If we never come back at all to our hut in the wilderness, to our town, to our cities near and far... if all the things people do come to an end, or if there are still a hundred thousand things that need doing but there's no one left to do them... if it all just ends...

Then all the things we have succeeded in doing will become the biggest leftover thing of all.

Never mind the cities of steel and towns of brick, just a single run-of-the-mill mud house will take them years to sort out.

The grass will need five years or so to grow over a dirt courtyard that was leveled and tamped down good and firm. The roots will have been hibernating in the earth all along, eavesdropping on the goings on above them: years upon years of footfalls coming and going, slow and soft or fast and heavy, till they finally went quiet and were never heard again. The grass will tentatively break the surface, sending up a sprout that will then grow into two blades of grass to welcome the wind and test the weather. Once it's certain there are no more shovels to uproot it or feet to trample it, the grass will start working its way up in clumps to find that this land it once called its own has become unrecognizable, strangely disfigured by the house that towers over it.

The grass will grow outward, through cracks in walls, and upward onto the roof. In the roof beam, a couple of termites will plan a grand undertaking: spending the next eighty-seven years gnawing out the core of the beam to send the whole roof crashing to

the ground.

Meanwhile, the wind will take forty years to age the red lacquer on the door, and the rain eighty years to wash away the mud plaster on the walls.

Ants will build their lair in the foundation of the wall, hauling out the dirt one grain at a time. The old generations will die off and new generations will be born inside the walls. In a process that no one could ever experience – it would be too long and too slow, eighteen hundred years maybe – the foundation of the wall will be destroyed. This dirt that had stood up and towered over the surrounding landscape will finally collapse and return to the mud.

Yet it will be nearly impossible to totally erase all traces of this mud house. Even the strongest wind would need a hundred years to shear away a single ridge of earth that lined one edge of a field. Even after three thousand years buried in the earth, the markings on a porcelain bowl will still be legible. The piercing pain caused by a length of rebar stuck in the earth will last an eternity. Pretty much nothing can eat it away, or break it down.

Nothing except time.

Time by its nature has no limit.

This so-called eternity is merely the time it takes to wear something away, as long as that something is still there.

And then time will no longer know time.

*Translated by Joshua Dyer*

# Liu Liangcheng: Literature Only Begins Where the Story Ends

Interview by Shu Jinyu

*This August [2014], Liu Liangcheng's In Xinjiang won a Lu Xun Prize For Literature.*

*Liu has worked arable farms, been a shepherd and spent more than a decade as a maintenance worker in a township farm machinery shop. Almost all of his writing is in some way connected to the countryside where he has lived, offering a profound narrative of one ground where human life plays out and the condition such lives are lived in. In Liu's work Xinjiang is a place far off, isolated geographically somewhere out beyond familiar bounds. Literature from Xinjiang shares this sense of being out on its own. "Writers from Xinjiang can offer something a bit different to Chinese literature," says Liu Liangcheng. Liu writes by an unpredictable process as the mood takes him. Writing carefully during troubled moments, Liu draws on a life experience that is both rich and simple to present some of life's plain truths.*

*"From the moment a person enters the world, the whole of his future is set out clear as daylight there in the village. It would not be possible for him to live a life of any other kind." Yet there is something else that troubles Liu, a fear that the village will move away in the night and that he "will go to a different village and never be able to come back again."*

**Shu Jinyu:** When did your writing start?

**Liu Liangcheng:** You could probably say it started with my compositions in primary school. It's hard to get an education in the countryside; some villages don't have a school. When I went into second

grade I had to walk to a village about seven kilometres away to attend class. I was so young I found the walk too much. I wanted to wait a few years before starting school until I was old enough to make the walk a bit easier. So I waited two years and started in fourth grade. I stayed in school until the third year of junior high, then I passed the exams for a technical middle school to study agricultural machinery. After that I lived always in the countryside, as an agricultural machinery technician in a little rural farm machinery centre in Shawan County. There were a couple of us who'd look after all the tractors in the county and go out to the various villages to oversee planting and ploughing. Seemed like an all right life to me.

I lived as a single man at the farm machinery centre, my folks lived a good way off, so times when I had nothing else to do I'd write poetry. Writing poetry doesn't take up a lot of time, it's a thing you do when you're bored, and it didn't get in the way of the rest of my life. If someone wanted me to go out with them I'd definitely just put my pen down and go, everyday living is the vital part of real life. You live quite naturally, doing the things you want to do, live in a way that takes you nearer your dreams. Seems to me I had a lot of good times while I was young, which left no time for writing and that's why I never wrote anything worthwhile before I was thirty.

The place I was living in then was big, wide country but cut off from the rest of the world. We were poor and everyone hankered after leaving, the only

goal anyone had seemed to be to get to the city. Literature looked like one way out, not a particularly realistic route but one that could take you forwards. Writing was something I could instil with a lot of my dreams but after I really got involved with literature I no longer expected to get so much from it in material terms. A literary existence turned into an aspiration you kept inside. A young man lives in the countryside and dreams of getting away, living a little better; he has a bit of a way with words but no other escape route so he wants literature to be a path to someday living a better life.

**Shu:** What was your frame of mind when you first set out to be a writer?

**Liu:** Initially the way I thought about literature was utilitarian; I wanted to use writing to change the circumstances of my life. But ultimately I realised that's not possible. I also realised that the circumstances of my life didn't need changing. What had to change was something inside. Other people live like this; you live like this but the way you think is different, your dreams aren't the same as their dreams. Although you sit beside them and don't talk about it, or do anything that might surprise them, you don't think the same way they do. You often startle yourself by the way you think.

So afterwards I quit my job, gave up my little career and ran off to the big city. The thing that made me do it was that my wife wasn't happy with the way I

lived my life; she wanted me to go out into the world and try my luck. When I thought about it, although there was nothing wrong with life at the farm machinery centre there wasn't too much right with it either. So I got a casual job as a writer at the *Xinjiang Workers' Daily*. The other writers at the paper were all university graduates and I hadn't got a single qualification. They'd say that the "*Workers' Daily*" was turning into the "*Peasants' Daily*" now this peasant had turned up. Luckily I knew a bit about literature so later on they decided the peasant was all right. I was already past thirty when I produced my first piece of writing worthy of the name. Though ideally you'd want to start writing even later in life than that, from age fifty or sixty even. Someone lives a life then sits down and writes something – that to me is a beautiful thing. Writers today are all too young, some of them young as in actually young, not really lived through all that much but in a hurry to tell everyone else about it; then some others who could keep writing until they're old and grey and still be immature.

**Shu:** Your earliest forays into creative writing began with poetry. What influence did these early exercises in poetry have on your later writing?

**Liu:** My first poem was *Childhood Dreams*; it was as if I'd written it straight after waking from a childhood dream. Writing poetry has meant that no matter how old I become I never lose touch with the fantastic.

**Shu:** What's your view of your first full-length novel, *Loose Earth*, which came out in 2006? The writing style is both that of prose essay and literary fiction. This seems to be something that writers who make the transition from essays to novels have in common.

**Liu:** I think of *Loose Earth* as a long poem. Its whole mood and mind-set are poetic. It's like some poem I never finished in my early days that I ended up turning into a long-form piece of prose. And it wasn't me who called it a novel when I'd finished it. The publishers chose to do that, no doubt with an eye to the market. Not that I opposed them on it; it couldn't be presented as an essay, there's too much made-up stuff in it. If a piece of literature has lost the ability to craft fiction it's usually because the author can't access the power of writing. When that happens to some authors they go out into the everyday world and write about something real for us to read about, but that isn't literature. Literature is fiction, something that shows us the author's ability to imagine and make things up.

**Shu:** That sense of the philosophic in your work, something extrapolated from the philosophy of life as lived in Xinjiang, has led some to call you a "bucolic philosopher". Why does your writing have this style?

**Liu:** Xinjiang gives it that, I'd say. When I was writing *In Xinjiang*, I felt like a Xinjiang person. So much of who I am comes from Xinjiang: the way I look, my accent, how I look at things, the way I carry myself walking, the way I use language and so on. My

writing is inevitably influenced by it as well.

*Liu Liangcheng has always advocated preserving living culture and works in various ways to achieve this goal.*

**Shu:** These past few years Feng Jikai has also been involved in urban preservation and rescuing folk cultural heritage, in fact he's steadily transitioning from literary figure to "social activist". Do you think doing this sort of work will affect your writing?

**Liu:** These things are precisely what a writer is interested in. An author hearkens back to the past, loves the past and preserves the past. All those old ways that don't have a place in this world any more have been collated and preserved in literature. The final thing we have to say about the world is that we cherish what's gone. Everything passes and literature begins again.

**Shu:** I hear you've set up a cultural studio where you write down and record the local culture of Xinjiang. Is this something you set about doing on your own initiative? How did you conceptualise your book series *Culture: Chuguchak* and what difficulties did you encounter in the actual process of producing it?

**Liu:** Bringing out a series on local culture is one part of the work we've set for ourselves. There's an exceptional wealth of culture in Xinjiang; we're only dealing with one small part of it. Over the past couple of years we've arranged for specialists to conduct cultural research on the hero-epic *Jangar* and right now

we're working in conjunction with the county government of Hoboksar, where Jangar is said to come from, to build an "Epic Plaza". In its concept and design and in the construction process we're seeing a whole host of marvellous ideas being turned into reality. The process is a creative act. It's writing a text on the very soil.

**Shu:** Many writers, in their own particular ways, have expressed concern about the disappearance of rural culture. But you seem to have engaged in a much more profound way. I've heard that in private you've discussed seven proposals concerning the future development of Xinjiang that your friends jokingly refer to as "Liu's Seven Point Plan".

**Liu:** Rural culture or rural civilisation has its own particular fate, and in the present era this is the fate that has befallen it. But as I see it rural culture has by no means been damaged to the extent those people claim. If you head out into rural areas you'll find that a traditional culture based on Confucianism still dominates the countryside. We've yet to reach a point where some sort of modern culture has completely replaced rural culture. How do today's Chinese people live? They still live according to a Chinese rural cultural matrix that can be characterised as Confucian. They're born in it, grow old in it, get sick and die in it. This matrix is vast. The countryside is in decline but generation after generation of peasants heading into the cities have carried with them values from this rural cultural matrix. We mustn't think that because large

swathes of the countryside have been developed therefore the countryside is failing and its culture no longer exists. Mud-brick walls and tumbledown shacks have nothing to do with culture; people are its true bearers. People can take rural culture with them to lives in the town. The town cannot give them a fully realised culture. If a Chinese person moves to America they remain Chinese. They take their culture with them.

It doesn't matter if you've read the classics, you have the DNA of China's traditional culture in your blood. The surroundings you live among will teach you these things. Culture gets into the blood and generation after generation live their lives in the manner it prescribes.

**Shu:** Your work, in whatever format, is all connected in some way to the land. This is why some say you're a writer who "grew" out of the soil. What feelings do you have about the patch of earth under your feet?

**Liu:** If you live on the land for long enough you become a clump of its soil yourself. There's no need for "feelings".

*Liu's Exploring the Empty was chosen by The Asian Weekly as one of the ten best novels of 2010. The magazine's writers described it as a rare example of a work portraying a particular Chinese loneliness. Liu was very pleased with this critique. One of his early essays was titled "One Man's Loneliness". In Exploring the Empty we*



*have the loneliness of a whole region, of a group of people, a sense of being “cut off in the outlands” as the classic phrase has it. Loneliness is a very human thing. Liu says that as he approaches his middle years he grows ever closer to timeless questions such as this.*

**Shu:** You started writing *Exploring the Empty* at almost the same time as you were writing *Loose Earth*, and you consider it to be “a novel in the true sense; the reader will agree it is a novel from the very first sentence.” Yet actually it’s a work that still shows the influence of essay writing, fresh and vivid impressions but looser in terms of structure. What do you think?

**Liu:** That’s true. I get too caught up in giving an account of the natural world. I let the story come to a halt, let the pace slow right down and spend time writing about things that don’t appear to have much relevance, though in fact it’s all of a piece. If you read *Exploring the Empty* carefully you’ll find that the descriptions of small details unconnected to my main theme are likely the most significant parts. When I’m writing I forget my theme. *Exploring the Empty* was always a work where I hadn’t set myself any particular goal. Nor did I want it to obviously arrive at some set end point. I didn’t want to have my writing running along in pursuit of my theme.

**Shu:** Isn’t a bit risky working like that?

**Liu:** Being in a desperate hurry to finish off your main theme would be the risky thing to do. I let some things lose speed so they can set down their true

meanings. They discovered oil by the village and some of the old folk thought they could feel movement under the ground – the test drill had bored right under where they stood. I am writing about the pain the land feels. The direction the story goes in is one of straining to listen to sounds. I write about finding rebar in the rubble and how some of the idlers in the village were sharp enough to know you could get cash for rebar. It’s the sort of small thing we might miss. I’m saying something about the way they live; it’s the final act in a social construction project. Things that are seen as useless in the town get hammered out by the villagers and sold for a bit of cash. As city dwellers, we never get to know where the rubble goes to or what happens to it.

**Shu:** In *Exploring the Empty* sound serves as a very special carrier of meaning. You use the acute memories of sound of the deaf man Zhang Jin to construct a unique and magical village world. This special function of sound is something quite new in terms of novel-writing. What were the reasons you wrote the book in this way?

**Liu:** There’s an enormous amount of writing about sound in all my work. It’s probably something I got from my childhood and it’s also a very natural thing to express. Every writer has to write using what he’s good at. I’ve made full use of my sense of hearing in all my past writing and in *Exploring the Empty* I concentrate on expressing what’s heard. I’m most likely

a bit deaf myself in my own life – I listen to sounds I want to hear and avoid those I don't. What they call an acute sense of hearing doesn't mean taking every sound into your ears, it's distinguishing the sounds you need within the general hubbub. The clamour of the city drowns out people's sense of hearing. In the country we're woken at five by cocks crowing, you can even hear the sound of ants crawling, the sound of a mouse in the yard, of a dragonfly's wings beating, motes of dust colliding in the air... We know how to hear big sounds but not how to hear small ones. It's really the small sounds that are loud enough to shock: the sound of all creation growing, seeds sprouting, ears forming on the corn, the ripe fruit falling, this myriad of sounds. Our ears have stopped working.

**Shu:** In *Exploring the Empty* you again set out your concerns about Abudan village and indeed the wider Kucha region. With the arrival of modern civilisation Kucha is no longer the tranquil, unhurried, poetic place of rolling sand dunes found in *A Village of One*. What's your view of these changes?

**Liu:** I don't see the need to get overly worked up about these sorts of externally imposed changes to the countryside, they're inevitable. I'm more interested in the things inside people that don't change. The countryside is in decline, the peasants are moving to the towns, but what isn't changing? That's what interests me. As long as a person has the countryside intact in their heart, wherever they go they'll be able to find a

place to settle their body and their soul. In fact, the countryside has been largely a cultural concept for a very long time, a kind of hidden utopia created by the collective effect of things like the *Book of Odes*, the lyric poems of the Tang and Song, and traditional ink-and-wash landscapes. It is portrayed as something that existed once but has now disappeared. Now China only has farm districts, villages where food is produced. The countryside has long since become an idea we look back on with yearning.

**Shu:** Are you happy for your work to be called "ecological literature"? How do you understand the term?

**Liu:** I'm still not too clear what the concept of ecological literature is and what it implies. Ecology ought to be something much broader, a concept that extends on down from the very landscape, at its core the world and all the things in it. It's an attitude a writer ought to have. Literature is not just the study of humanity, otherwise it becomes very narrow, the world and all the things in it exist only to serve mankind and then we say something from a human standpoint.

I prefer to call my writing naturalist literature. That is something with deep roots in China, going at least as far back as the Zhuangzi, then on through landscape and pastoral poetry, even rural literature – these are all literary ideas that have the same thread of tradition running through them. For me at the heart

of naturalist literature you have Nature herself. Naturalist literature should put Nature in her most natural place, let her speak for herself. My writing, beginning with *A Village of One*, has been working in this direction. At minimum, in what I write Nature isn't just there to perform a function. Of course in my sort of writing there's still symbolism and allegory, but it has to be a living Nature.

**Shu:** How should we understand that?

**Liu:** Would you call Fabre's *Book of Insects* ecological literature? I think not. I think it was field notes, notes of a scientific study, an instruction book about life. Although Fabre's language is beautiful and his observations are subtle and scientific it's still not literature. What is literature then? The place where the observations in the *Book of Insects* end is where literature truly begins. The *Book of Insects* could only show us how insects live seen through a scientific lens. Things seen through a scientific lens and then written out are scientific notes; it is to take things as objects of study.

Literature isn't a simple instruction book for life; it's not there to make everything clear and simple, rather the aim is to make life have more feeling. Where Fabre makes insects clearer to us, literature makes them less clear, it gives them an air of mystery. If literature could make things perfectly clear it would just be applied copywriting. Literature gives warmth to the breath of life, rekindles life's sense of awe and wonder. Literature is writing with a soul. The first

principle of naturalistic writing is that everything has a soul, which was the fundamental belief of the shamans. Literature is a form of expression that occurs when the human soul communicates with the spirits of the natural world. The ancients spoke of inspiration. Inspiration is not something that comes from the person; it comes from something else, from a sudden access at a spiritual level to some other thing. A wonderful collision occurs. It's something that Nature gives to us. What are called spiritual powers are just what happens when we achieve communication with certain divine forces in the natural world.

For run-of-the-mill writers inspiration is something happenstance and fleeting that does not come at one's bidding. For a true author, inspiration ought to be their constant state. When Zhuangzi wrote about plants it was the plants speaking. The plants a true author shows us are going to be different from the plants we find in the natural sciences. They live between Heaven and Earth, they have a fragrance, a colour, a way of bending in the wind, a sound. An author can look at a plant and see emotions, see the process of life, sense the entirety of the grass and trees and flowers. This is plants when depicted in literature. Put another way, when all other forms of expression have finished, only then does literary expression truly begin.

Zhuangzi sought a unity between Earth and Heaven, the mind melding with Heaven and Earth, an individual interaction with the essence of Heaven and Earth – that is naturalism. But later on our literature

became too instrumentalist; we expressed our themes too clearly. When literature has a clearly articulated theme writing becomes merely a tool; description of landscape becomes just set-dressing, only serving the protagonist. How could literature like that be naturalist literature?

**Shu:** So what is naturalist literature in your view then? Does *Walden* qualify? Why can't we seem to arrive at the place where we are in touch with this "spirit in all things?"

**Liu:** *Walden* is too instrumentalist as well; it's observational writing with a clear purpose. As for there being a spirit in all things, that is a tradition that generations of artists have carried forward. A writer's most basic belief ought to be that there is a spirit in every thing. This world sparkles with divine light. The dust is so many open eyes. When we hear the wind, that too has eyes.

Two things block us off from touching the spirits that are in all things. One is scientific knowledge. We analyse using scientific methods, dissect a living thing and give a simple scientific explanation. Of course we can't say that's wrong, it is one way of explaining the multiplicity of things. When people approach things with their authentic selves, with their instincts, the way that literature looks at things, these have a much longer history. Seen by a literary person, the world is a far richer place than in the eyes of science. This is the scientific education we receive from very early on

preventing us having an enhanced understanding of things.

The second impediment is our lack of a language to express Nature. In part this is because we are not familiar with Nature. An author writing about Nature is likely to write badly. In the classic novels we find many passages describing Nature, but now all our stories take place somewhere other than in Nature. They have moved into human society. In part it is because the introduction of Nature into a story has become something awkward, affecting the pace of a novel in a time when speed is everything when it comes to reading. The reader hasn't the inclination to appreciate Nature.

**Shu:** So why are you able to achieve this?

**Liu:** Probably because my mind-set preserves a kind of naivety, so that I haven't completely closed off the cracks through which one can interact with the things of the natural world. The environment in which I lived from childhood, in a village quite far from anywhere else, meant I could listen in great swathes to the sounds of Nature.

*Translated by Jim Weldon*



駱一禾

## Luo Yihe

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Luo Yihe was born in Beijing in 1961, but spent his youth in rural Henan with his parents. After graduating from Peking University in 1983 he began working at *October* magazine. A close friend of Hai Zi, Luo Yihe died from a brain hemorrhage in 1989. His long poem “The Blood of the World” was published three years later.

*snowing and snowing*

within blood  
flesh and bone are near, midwinter is near  
a breath of air stirs still  
and snow falls outside the body  
the day of our birth and bloodstains have not dried  
I imagine the ocean in January, terns  
crossing the strait  
who is that? or maybe it's me  
as I withdraw my gaze, step into some semblance of life  
preparing to suffer my own heart

warmth causes those who arrive in the world  
to sense the snowing  
my heart sighs  
another year since heaven made me. snow falls  
I stand on the shoreline  
my feverish skull nears brine and fog-white beasts  
at the end of it

I see the patriot's desolate sea  
last winter's bad news and lanterns emit a soft hiss  
that conquers us  
snowfall beneath footfall  
illuminates white copper, doorframe, windows, green rust  
leaf on the palisade, beauty of breathing  
arrive along the same path as snow

snow falls. it is snowing  
the body covered with murky points of Mars  
deep in the marble a dark arm  
interprets dreams as I sleep  
leaves art, appears toward me  
on the black cobbled breakwater of this world  
and black stone wall  
black continent and black hull  
shadow of snow descending without halt, this snowing  
and snowing, contrary to my words



*the moon*

the world:  
half-dark, half-lit  
events pile high. those hemorrhaging facts  
city and year, day and night they flow  
these frictionless messages  
make men omniscient  
in the dark half  
gridded rows of lanterned alleys  
though the moon illumines thick coats of dust, glory  
is missing everywhere. the moon is stale  
beached upon cobalt shingles, naked, destitute  
like some skin drawn on coal  
yellowing dimly  
wearing half a black helmet, facing the deck of a bald sea  
revealing branches  
the living upon the earth  
do not know why you must think  
world, you self-righteous staircase  
how many great nations descend  
with their overdeveloped humanity and gravity  
only the moon  
by the door faces that healthy forest  
on our behalf, confessing every wrong

*white tiger*

white tiger has stopped, white tiger has flown back  
white tiger's voice flew over the north, over winter and the annals  
submerged in jute's thorned bloodstains  
flown back

this is vast and timeless  
the survivors on land are beautified by devastation  
green blood crests in waves with the wind  
lights and Asia are raiding  
carts full of white tigers  
jute and kenaf weep on the Indus  
the envoy of Jerusalem loses battle after battle

the rain this spring is unlucky, saccharine day after day.  
a headful of home travels a thousand miles  
daytime is especially bright  
the great annals winter finished are thorough and upstanding

*the great river*

back then we sailed a big boat on the river  
at dawn  
back then our collars were frayed but clean  
back then we didn't tire  
that was when we were young  
we were single  
we didn't ask for wages  
we drank river water  
and faced the sun  
blue corridors opened and closed  
red-painted wheel turned behind us  
the deck was unbearably crowded  
strangers slept atop one another  
back then we had no home  
just a window  
we had no experience  
we were the farthest from understanding  
the sharp prow with its ancient rust folded through foam  
wind stung our cheeks  
burned our eyelids as we slept on the canopy  
motionless, we watched  
meanders turn black beneath day's shade  
an overpowering scent of mint flashed by  
flaying us open  
snowdrifts on the main road quickly go grey  
we throw back our heads to drink,  
swallow the sheen of great river

*Translated by Karmia Olutade*



Photo by Wang Yan



榮光啓

## Rong Guangqi

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Born in 1974, Rong Guangqi graduated from Anhui Normal University in 1994. He has written numerous scholarly works on contemporary poetry, and edited several compilations of the poems of Hai Zi. Currently teaching at Wuhan University, he made a pilgrimage to Walden Pond when he was in Boston as a visiting scholar in 2009.

### *After the Rain*

This moment  
Rain gone, sky clear  
The honest twilight  
With any luck  
Might bring a rainbow  
After their bath, the plants around you  
Release a lusty smell  
Truth be told  
In the forest after the rain, I often  
Trace the scent of fresh semen  
Yes, isn't life wonderful

Wherever I walk  
There are people who greet me  
A contentment in my heart like sunlight  
Or the milk of a new mother  
An itchy overflowing  
And at the same time, grief

If there is no truth to eternity  
And in the end, even we can enter it  
Not a single future will be lit

### *Full Moon*

The roundness of that moon  
Round as you grow suspicious  
I remember the poet saying  
"The moon and her leukaemia"  
I remember the poet saying  
"It is the fourth watch now  
I have risen nine times  
Just to  
Praise it"



*Metal*

When the metal was discovered  
It was exciting  
On its body  
People first saw colour

After a few years  
Its lustre began to disappear  
In the south  
With the climate so damp  
Rust grew  
The constant threat of fracture

And now the metal  
Never struck  
No longer produces sparks  
And if it were beaten  
Not even an echo  
People question its metallicness

Its only use is  
When we cut it up  
To make safe boxes  
The remainder  
We treat as rubbish  
One day  
We no longer see it  
Believing  
It never existed

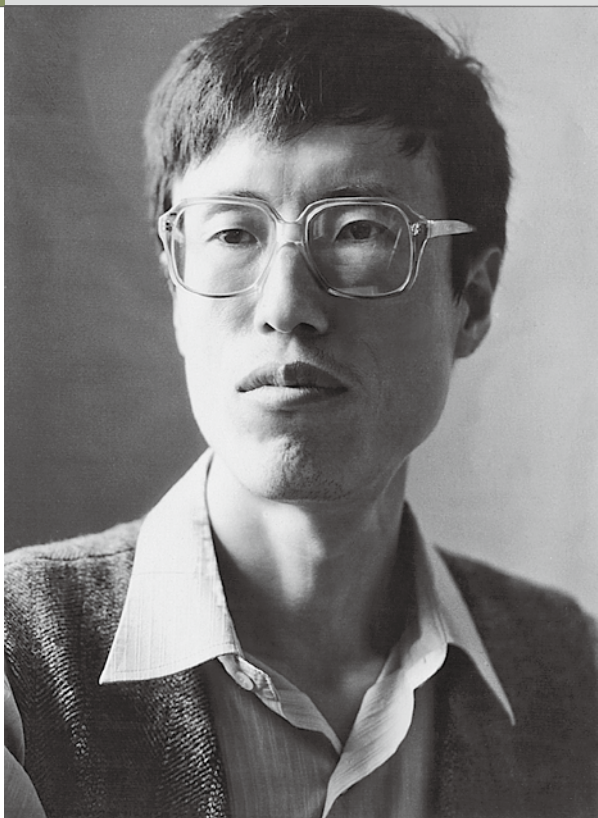
*Squirrel*

At that moment  
I thought of a verse from a friend:  
“The puppy’s pain spilling along the motorway”  
My guilt and my sorrow  
Stains the network of roads on the map

The car at 40  
The breeze sifts and sifts  
Body and mind fresh, upright  
Before me jumps a squirrel  
I don’t dodge away immediately  
Can only let it pass between the front wheels  
But once the car has gone  
The squirrel has lost its hop  
Fluttering to the ground like a dried leaf  
What seems like its corpse  
Almost certainly is a corpse  
A pulp flesh  
And unseen blood  
Like a rumour of velocity

Still my friend laughs  
A voice laced with taunts  
I am shameless  
Not long ago I praised its sweetness  
Using its form to convey warmth  
And now I have slain it, silently  
Like a regime

*Translated by Amanda Halliday Palin*



葦岸

## Wei An

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Born in the outskirts of Beijing in 1960, Ma Jianguo took the penname “Wei An” from a poem written by Bei Dao. Influenced by writers such as Tolstoy and Whitman, as well as Thoreau, Wei An was a committed environmentalist and vegetarian. Excerpts from his collection of meditations “Life on Earth” were translated into English by Thomas Moran in the 2012 *Mānoa* compilation *Sky Lanterns*. Wei An died of liver cancer in 1999.

# Going into the White Birch Forest

By Wei An

**A**s I often admonish myself, and hold as a standard for my life: as long as you can feel things instinctually, as long as you have a heart that can receive revelation despite growing older, you should go out regularly into nature. I go into the white birch forests in autumn. Autumn travel is a joy, as the plants are flourishing and richly hued, and the colors of the earth seem to appear there just for the walker. There are a great many things on earth, and often one thing is in the midst of becoming another thing. Because they are no longer what they were, nor yet what they are becoming, they have their own unique value; because they encompass what they were and also what they are becoming, they are all the more rich and abundant. Dawn and dusk are more lovely than day and night, and the springtime and fall are more splendid than summer and winter. When trying to describe all I see in a mountain crag or on a beach, I sense the feebleness and simplicity of human language. As the Russian poet Ivan Bunin said: "Poets are not good at depicting the enormity of autumn, because they do not often describe colors and the sky." But the words available to poets are limited, and many new lexicons are yet to be invented.

I have never actually been in a white birch forest in my life, yet in my heart I feel a deep, innate affinity with it. Whether I see it on the screen or in a picture, I never fail to be moved. I believe that the simple, upright shape of a white birch is a symbol for my life and spirit. For many years, I have yearned to stroll through a birch forest in autumn. I can imagine the falling leaves like birds swirling beside me, occasionally falling upon my shoulders and head. At that moment, the

forest is like a flock of birds swooping down upon the earth, shaking off their golden feathers in the molting season year after year.

Only after traveling elsewhere have I finally found them in the northern grasslands. The seasons arrive earlier here than in Beijing, and I'm disappointed because the white birches have already lost their leaves. Though I face a desolate and bleak landscape, there is no need for me to feel sad for the birches. Over their lifecycle, they must resolutely abandon those branches and old leaves in order to mature. I am the same way. If I grasp tightly onto all that I have gradually accumulated, how can I travel to more distant places?

Walking through the leaf-bare forest, my footsteps sound like a horse-drawn carriage splashing through the puddles on a wide lane. When I reach out to touch the gleaming trunk of a birch, I feel warmed as though touching the Yellow River for the first time. I believe deeply that there is no fundamental difference between them and me. They also have blood flowing through them. I have always respected the white birch's tall, straight form, and looking at them there in front of my eyes, I suddenly realize a fundamental truth: being upright is their foremost prerequisite for survival. Any tree that deviates implies a lack of sunlight and eventual death. It is precisely because the trees grow straight upward that each one takes up very little space, and may grow into a forest and live in harmony with each other. I think that this eternally just law of existence in the forest is equally applicable to human society.

# Thoreau and I

By Wei An

Thoreau's name is forever linked with his book *Walden*. The first time I heard about the book was in the winter of 1986, when the poet Hai Zi told me that it was the best book he had read that year. Before that, I knew nothing of the book nor of Thoreau. Hai Zi had borrowed the book from the library of the China University of Political Science and Law where he taught. It was a 1982 edition put out by the Shanghai Translation Publishing House, and translated by Mr. Xu Chi. I borrowed it from Hai Zi and read it twice (I recorded reading it between December 25, 1986 and February 16, 1987). I took over a thousand words in notes, which shows just how much I liked it at the time.

From then on, I started searching for the book in bookstores, and at present I have five different Chinese editions, published by three different mainland publishing houses (in addition, I also have a 1962 English edition published by Macmillan, a gift from a friend). I wrote in a letter to that friend, "Over the past two years, Thoreau seems to have undergone a revival. *Walden* has been republished again and again, and is a bestseller in scholarly bookstores across the country. Seldom does any nineteenth-century novelist or poet achieve this, and it demonstrates Thoreau's timeless significance and the power of his writing."

*Walden* is the only book I have collected in different versions, commemorating the priceless "foundation" this profound work has had on my own writing and life. My "literary career" began with poetry, but the appearance of *Walden* ended my seven or eight years of self-study during which my reading and inter-

ests revolved around poetry. In my autobiography *One Man's Path*, I wrote: "What finally turned me from poetry toward prose was Thoreau's *Walden*. When I read this unparalleled book, I felt joyfully that my love for it surpassed that of any poetry." This critical juncture in my writing seems to have come about by chance, but reading this book was to some degree inevitable: I had a kind of natural resonance and closeness with Thoreau's work. Put another way, in all of my previous reading I had never before discovered an author whose style (and of course, it was more than just style) could excite me and make me feel a profound identification, and now he had appeared. The comparison below may demonstrate the basis of this shift more clearly:

*I often forget that the sunshine that shines down on our cultivated fields and on the plains and forests is the same, it is equally matched. They all reflect and absorb the rays, and the former is only part of the painting that the sun gazes on from afar. As far as it can tell, the earth has been cultivated to look like a garden. And so we accept its light and heat, and should also accept its trust and magnanimity...*

Autumn is a strong season  
a guide for life  
a harbor that accepts heavily burdened ships

In the north, birds gather  
nature goes through its cycles  
all the seed-bearing plants  
droop their heavy heads to the earth

their expressions are solemn and serene  
like people who have accomplished something

The sun is collecting its rays of light  
like a traveler before a long journey  
who is beginning to pack up his things  
he carries the most precious cargo  
which is three seasons of experience

The first section is from the chapter “The Bean-Field” in *Walden*, and the second is a poem I wrote at the time called “Strength.” The poem displays a kind of “prose-like” flatness and broadness, while Thoreau’s writing has not lost the vaunted beauty of the “poetic.” Still, I am even more captivated by Thoreau’s freedom and conviction, his style as pure and open as the land itself. In any case, my poetry was vanquished: Thoreau had converted me to prose. Afterward, I trusted all the more that in writing, the author does not choose a genre, a genre chooses the author. The mode that an author chooses establishes his relationship with the world, and it has little to do with talent or desire, but more to do with a combination of factors such as lifeblood, temperament, faith, spirit, and so on (experiences in Chinese and other literatures can largely verify this).

In terms of the human species, one had already experienced the enormous transition from an organic natural world to an inorganic natural world. As the cycle of humans differentiating themselves from nature and not being able to reintegrate came about, people placed themselves in the inorganic world. I

wrote about it in *Earthly Things*: “One day, man will look back at the beginnings of his failed existence on earth, and will realize that it happened in 1712, when a precursor to Watt, an Englishman called Thomas Newcomen attempted to invent the first steam engine in the world.” As though in response to this twist, in the mental realm, human language formulated and then expressed a transmutation from “organic” to “inorganic,” which increasingly tended toward an abstract, analytical, obscure, speculative course. Just as Thoreau stated, “All the distinguished writers of that period possess a greater vigor and naturalness than the more modern, for it is allowed to slander our own time, and when we read a quotation from one of them in the midst of a modern author, we seem to have come suddenly upon a greener ground, a greater depth and strength of soil. It is as if a green bough were laid across the page, and we are refreshed as by the sight of fresh grass in midwinter or early spring.” Certainly, in the work of (basically) contemporary authors, we can find statements like: “The city had lost its youth, like a year without spring,” or “Virtue passed on like the rivers, but moral people do not change.” Are these expressions richly lifelike, like words written in the growth of plants and the rush of rivers? In a time when modern writings are so obvious as to be superficial and so plain as to be idiotic, when literary works no longer “yield of their sense in due proportion to the hasty and the deliberate reader. To the practical they will be common sense, and to the wise wisdom; as either the traveler may wet his lips, or an army may fill its water-casks at a full stream” (from Thoreau), these charac-





Illustration by Wang Yan

teristically great works have disappeared, and literature and academia have become abstruse and sealed-off.

Thoreau's language is "organic," which is one of the reasons I love it. What I mean by "organic" is that in these writings, the language itself is alive; it is fully textured and warm-blooded, and the meaning is not stated outright, but is expressed in terms of the natural

world (so that more people will understand and accept it), embodying the original internal harmonious unity of people and the universe. This is the immortal characteristic of classical works (whether literary or philosophical), and Thoreau continues in the well-established vein of this great tradition: "The abrupt epochs and chasms are smoothed down in history as

the inequalities of the plain are concealed by distance;” “The moon no longer reflects the day, but rises to her absolute rule, and the husbandman and hunter acknowledge her for their mistress;” “Homeliness is almost as great a merit in a book as in a house, if the reader would abide there.” In countless phrases such as these, Thoreau shows his style’s freshness, liveliness, beauty, and intelligence, and his work is full of irrepressible charm.

I call Thoreau a composite author: a non-conceptual, non-systemized thinker (he saw himself as a philosopher); a graceful and keenly intelligent essayist; a sympathetic and learned naturalist (his knowledge of living things, especially of plants, is astonishing, and he collected many hundreds of botanical specimens); an optimistic and skillful traveler; and a self-professed “mediocre poet.” Thoreau was born on July 12, 1817 in a town called Concord, Massachusetts. Concord’s fame came primarily from it being, along with its close neighbor Lexington, the inaugural ground for the American War of Independence. Thoreau was quite proud to be born in “one of the places in the world most worthy of respect.” Among the Transcendentalists who settled in Concord over the following years, Thoreau was the only one born there. Hawthorne once described Thoreau as “a young man with much of wild original nature still remaining in him... with uncouth and rustic, though courteous manners...” In fact, Thoreau had received a formal education, going from the public school in Concord to the Concord Academy and straight on to Harvard University. In 1847, a thirty-year-old Thoreau wrote on a Harvard survey on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of his

graduation: “I am a Schoolmaster, a private Tutor, a Surveyor, a Gardener, a Farmer, a Painter, I mean a House Painter, a Carpenter, a Mason, a Day-Laborer, a Pencil-Maker, a Glasspaper Maker, a Writer, and sometimes a Poetaster.” This largely summarizes what would be his life’s work. Thoreau’s combination of knowledge and physicality once again confirms what the ancient Greek Thales expressed to the world: “It is easy for philosophers to become rich if they wish, but their ambition lies elsewhere.”

In discussing Thoreau, it is impossible not to mention a man who was a tremendous help to and influence on him, namely Emerson, honored as the “Spirit of Concord” who “brought us universal accord” (since Emerson once wrote a hymn for the town). In 1835, at the age of thirty-two, Emerson bought a house in Concord for thirty-three hundred dollars, and officially moved from Boston to the small town. Thoreau was a junior at Harvard at the time. In 1837, Thoreau, who had already quit his job teaching in the Concord public school in defiance of an order to administer corporal punishment to six students, joined Emerson’s New England “Transcendental Club” and their great friendship commenced. In 1841, Thoreau ended his two-year management of the Concord Academy and, then unemployed, accepted Emerson’s invitation to move into his house and work as a gardener there. Two years of close contact with Emerson and his large collection of books helped Thoreau establish the foundations of his own basic ideology and convictions. (The unique connection between Thoreau and Emerson led one critic, who was adept at finding any unkind angle, to mock Thoreau as “the mere shadow

of Emerson.” But Thoreau was still Thoreau. One of the reasons that the men later drifted apart was that Thoreau had misgivings about the effect his growing fame and popularity might have on Emerson.)

As for the connection between Thoreau and Emerson, I would rather believe that in their hearts and minds there was a kind of natural agreement and fellowship. In his speech, “The American Scholar,” Emerson expounds this basic ideology, that “the state of society is one in which the members have suffered amputation from the trunk, and strut about so many walking monsters,—a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man. Man is thus metamorphosed into a thing, into many things. The planter, who is Man sent out into the field to gather food, is seldom cheered by any idea of the true dignity of his ministry. He sees his bushel and his cart, and nothing beyond, and sinks into the farmer, instead of Man on the farm. The tradesman scarcely ever gives an ideal worth to his work, but is ridden by the routine of his craft, and the soul is subject to dollars. The priest becomes a form; the attorney, a statute-book; the mechanic, a machine; the sailor, a rope of a ship.” Emerson’s idea about “Man” was that for one to completely master oneself, one must consistently leave one’s “station” and embrace absolutely everything. Thoreau said, “Men have become the tools of their tools. The man who independently plucked the fruits when he was hungry is become a farmer; and he who stood under a tree for shelter, a housekeeper... The best works of art are the expression of man’s struggle to free himself from this condition...” We can see from Thoreau’s response to the Harvard survey that it was exactly this

idea of “Man” that he set out to experience, a lifelong process of “freeing himself.” (In his journal, Emerson wrote humorously of Thoreau: “I cannot help counting it a fault in him that he had no ambition... instead of engineering for all America, he was the captain of a huckleberry party.” This lack of competitiveness in Thoreau would seem to run counter to the modern society at the time, whose mechanisms and essential qualities were already driven by competition, but I am convinced that these mechanisms and qualities were one of the fundamental reasons for “man’s failed existence on earth.”)

In *Walden*, Thoreau explains himself thus: “I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive rank and savage one.” Thoreau’s anti-pragmatist or anti-materialist tendencies, his aesthetic appreciation of the world, and his poetic way of life had already been revealed in his Harvard senior thesis: “This curious world we inhabit is more wonderful than convenient; more beautiful than it is useful; it is more to be admired and enjoyed than used.” The self-revealing phrases that Thoreau uses in the above passage can help us understand how in the course of his unusual life he “repudiated all regular modes of getting a living, and seems inclined to lead a sort of Indian life among civilized men” (Hawthorne). (What made it possible for Thoreau to have this kind of life was his declaration, “my greatest skill is to want but little.” I think that if Thoreau is connected to contemporary environmental protection, it is mainly in his attitude of conscious anti-consumerism. In 1839, twenty-two-year-old Thoreau and his brother John



Jr. built a boat called the “Musketaquid”, and sailed it for a week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, a journey that practically became his life’s central event. Walden Pond, the place where Thoreau lived and which gave him his immortal work, has become a symbol for Thoreau himself. On May 6, 1862, Thoreau passed away from pulmonary tuberculosis at the age of forty-five. At his funeral, Emerson painfully delivered a eulogy, saying with great emotion: “The country knows not yet, or in the least part, how great a son it has lost.”

One could speak of Thoreau endlessly. In 1873, Thoreau’s friend Ellery Channing took the lead in writing about Thoreau, and since then innumerable books have been written about his life and works. Over the past two years, much has been published about *Walden* here in China, and articles about Thoreau (both praising and criticizing him) also frequently appear. The letter I mentioned earlier expresses the following thought about this: “When people discuss Thoreau, most of them simply regard him as an author who proposed a return to nature (which he himself tried for two years, and was ridiculed for not doing it thoroughly enough), but this does not accurately or comprehensively capture Thoreau. The essence of Thoreau is not in the initiation of a “return to nature,” but instead in his respect for “man’s perfection.” When Thoreau went to Walden Pond, it was not with the intention of becoming an eternal hermit who had “returned to nature”; rather, it was an expression of his respect for “man’s perfection.” This respect was anti-mechanistic and not limited to a station or a profession, and its essence lay in a person’s attitude

toward the world: whether or not everything was directed toward a “purpose” or a “goal,” while ignoring or sacrificing all else. (This is the greatest reason I like Thoreau, rather than the ancient scholar Tao Yuanming). While we understand Thoreau in terms of his “traveling and writing” life, he did not ignore the system of slavery in America at the time, and he never ceased fighting it (he wrote many articles about it; he refused to pay taxes because of it and was subsequently thrown in jail; he hid escaping slaves in his home and helped them flee on to Canada; he organized the rescue of the arrested abolitionist leader John Brown; and he sympathized with and aided the Native Americans). Given all this, we will agree with the evaluation given to Thoreau by his students at the Concord Academy: he was “a deeply compassionate man.”

*Translated by Eleanor Goodman*



夏笳

## Xia Jia

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A former student of physics at Peking University, Xia Jia (born in 1984) has received numerous Nebula and Galaxy awards since publishing her first work in 2004. Ken Liu has translated several of her stories in *Clarkesworld* magazine (including “A Hundred Ghosts Parade Tonight”, a 2013 SFF Translation Award nominee) and elsewhere. Xia Jia currently teaches literature and writing at Jiaotong University in Xi’an.

# Heat Island

By Xia Jia

**T**he summer night lasts forever. A humid breeze blows in through the window, making it impossible to sleep.

At moments like this I try to tell myself a story, a simple one; doesn't matter what it's about. There's enough time, and I'm the only audience, quiet and loyal. All I have to do is find a beginning, and then wait patiently until the memories slowly surface in my mind, weaving into words that whisper in my ear.

Look, I'll show you. I turn off the lamp, my phone, and anything else that gives off light, hide my watch under the pillow, and lie quietly on the bed. I whisper to the cool wall: *A long, long time ago...*

A long, long time ago, I was trapped on an island where the weather was sultry and muggy, and it rained every night.

It was only last summer, though it feels as remote as a previous life.

June. Everyone kept busy: working on their senior theses; eating out; posting to BBSs; alternating forum posts with paragraphs of academese. Each day, I headed for the lab, passed through the emptying campus, climbed up five flights of stairs, and entered a tiny, dimly-lit cell at the end of a corridor. The few computers in the room were always on, humming to the clumsy drone of the air conditioner, which often tripped the circuit breaker because it was too powerful. Piles of books teetered on desks, and random objects left by students over the years filled the rest of the space: pillows, blankets, rackets, sneakers, opened bags of rancid snacks, and boxes upon boxes of differ-

ent brands of instant coffee.

I was assigned the ancient computer in the dimmest corner of the lab. Its specs were so outdated that it couldn't even handle basic chat software, let alone be used to play online games. The barebones machine, incapable of distractions, forced me to focus on my task of wading through an ocean of data day after day. The weather logs of more than a dozen summers recorded by the Beijing Meteorological Observation Tower sat in a dusty stack on my desk like a small hill. It was my job to enter the data into the computer, smooth and correct the curves, extract key nodes, calculate averages, generate assorted spreadsheets based on time and altitude, compare, plot, eliminate noise, and then plot again.

For a whole month, I got up, went out to get breakfast, set off for the lab while the day was still young and cool, turned on the computer, entered data, processed data, processed some more, entered more data – all while my headphones pumped bizarre Russian music into my ears and my mind wandered in exotic realms. At noon, I ordered takeout, which I ate while playing Minesweeper, breaking the long-forgotten record on the lab computer again and again.

Once June rolled around, the graduate students disappeared one by one like ghosts until there was only me and one other undergraduate left in the lab. Although the same professor supervised both of us, we didn't know each other well. The boy was a legend in the School of Physics: though he rarely bothered showing up for classes, he nonetheless kept up the grades to qualify for his scholarship. He had started



working in the lab to assist our professor as a mere sophomore, and few, if any, of the reference books piled on his desk were in Chinese. To me, he seemed to belong to a completely different world, even another dimension, as distant from mine as his brand-new, shiny, souped-up laptop was from my obsolescent antique.

I can't even recall his name anymore: the School of Physics was full of similarly unkempt, gawky boys. All I remember is that we first met on a drizzly afternoon in May – in that shadow-filled room at the end of the corridor on the fifth floor, of course.

We sat face to face, smiled, and nodded shyly at each other in the peculiar manner common to students in the science departments.

"I remember you," he said. "In Military Theory, I always sat in the back row. You sat in front of me."

I grinned, a bit flustered. "Everyone wants to sit as far back as possible in a class like that. Good for dozing off."

"You used to stare at the ceiling daydreaming all the time, right? Or else you doodled in your notebook."

I was rather embarrassed by his summary of my classroom demeanor and tried to change the subject. "What project are you working on?"

"A modeling study of the Beijing urban heat island effect." He spoke slowly, enunciating each word carefully. "And a controllable variable correlation analy-

sis."

"Heat island?" Frantically, I racked my brain for snippets that might explain what he was saying.

He gave me a shy, awkward smile, perhaps nervous before a girl. "Okay. Beijing is a metropolis with a pronounced heat island effect. There's little ground vegetation in the city, so it's highly reflective; surrounded by relatively undeveloped land, the city behaves like an island in the ocean, and causes localized atmospheric circulation similar to sea breezes. The city itself is also a massive heat source with uneven distribution. There's a lot to be gained by studying these local microclimate variations."

"So are you trying to build a model?" I asked. "A model of the heat island?"

"That's right. Once the model is in place, the rest of the research will be much easier."

"What sort of research?"

"Err... I can't say."

He gave me that awkward smile again.

So many things happened over that summer: getting to know some people in a hurry; saying good-bye to others; parties and outings; getting drunk again and again, somehow ending up hiding, alone and in tears, again and again; an old movie; a few dreams; several long-distance calls; a cold that lasted weeks; and a birthday that I would never forget for the rest of my life.

With all that, I still managed to get up every day –

whenever I could – and make it to the lab where I sat by myself in the dim corner and faced a dim screen, walling myself off from the outside world, scorching and deserted, resounding with the cries of cicadas.

*Enter; process, process, enter...*

The day after my birthday was gloomy, but waves of heat roiled the city like a pot about to boil. I bought an ice-cold orange juice from the vending machine in the lobby of the Physics Building and, as I climbed the stairs leading to the lab, I held the can to my forehead to cool off. Flipping through the thick, yellowing pages of the meteorological logs, I noticed that the June of twenty years earlier was similarly hot and humid. I tried to imagine this building back then, wondering whether its windows were also caressed by ivy leaves, whether the poplars also susurrated in the breeze, and whether students with pale, bloodless faces also drifted through the corridors like ghosts, holding stacks of data printouts and books.

*After the passage of so many years, what has changed in the world?*

I smiled, slightly depressed, lowered my head, and saw an unfamiliar cactus in a palm-sized pot peeking out of the piles of books scattered over my desk.

My lab partner turned around. “A birthday present for you.”

I was touched. The wrinkled cactus in the dark-red ceramic pot glowed with a translucent light, as surreal as the very fact that I was receiving a gift on

this blazing, tranquil day.

“Thank you,” I said.

He smiled but said nothing.

After a while, he turned around again. “I have a preliminary version of the model. Do you want to see it?”

I squeezed myself next to him in front of his computer. I can’t honestly say now that I remember the image in detail, but it involved many curved lines in different colors all twisted together, indeed looking a bit like an island.

“This is just an outline, showing the temperature, humidity, and pressure changes over metropolitan Beijing.” He moved and clicked the mouse, and I realized that the model was three-dimensional. The blue isobars and red isotherms delineated the rolling landscape, overlapping, nested, and as he dragged the mouse to change the camera angle, the image shifted gracefully like an aerial shot of the city. Of course, I meant *graceful* in the aesthetic sense, which was the only way I could appreciate it.

“This is where we are.” He shifted to an overhead view and pointed at a certain spot. I was now looking at a map of Beijing. The concentric blue and red lines resembled the meteorological maps I saw in classes.

“When is this data from?”

“From the night before last to yesterday afternoon.”

“Oh.” I pressed closer. The blue isobars and red isotherms squeezed against each other. A low-pressure



Illustration by Xiao Bao

trough was moving in.

“So is it going to rain tonight?”

“I think so.” He nodded. “Did you bring an umbrella?”

“No. I guess I’ll wait till the rain stops before heading home. I’ve got tons of data to enter anyway.”

“It won’t rain for long.” His fingers danced over the keyboard, and the curves on the map started to animate. A tiny clock in the upper-right corner blinked.

“A dynamic model!” I widened my eyes. “You could use this to predict the weather, couldn’t you?”

“That’s right. The model is very accurate, although it’s limited to the bounds of the city.” He stopped the animation. “It will stop raining by 11. That’s not too late, is it? I’ll give you a ride.”

“It’s no big deal.” I shook my head. “Just go home when you’re done. Might as well leave before it starts raining.”

“I don’t have anything to do at home anyway,” he said. “Now that it’s almost graduation, my dormmates stay up every night to drink and play cards. I’m not much of a drinker; I’d rather stay and finish my the-

sis.”

“You aren’t done with your thesis?”

“Nope, I haven’t written a single word. I’ve spent all my time on this model. What about you? Have you started?”

“It will be a while yet. I have to generate a bunch of graphs. My thesis defense is scheduled in less than a month – sometimes I’m ready to jump out the window.”

“Ah... do you need help?”

I thought about it. “My computer is too old to run graphing programs. Can you help me make some wind roses? I’ll give you the data.”

“Sure.”

A wind rose shows the distribution of wind direction. Usually it’s a set of concentric circles drawn against a light-green background around a red center. From this center, sixteen pie slices of various lengths radiate outward like light-blue petals. It’s very pretty.

Once, I wrote a poem: *Silver-Blue Rose*. Carefully, I hid it in a folder buried on my computer. I fantasized that many years later, another young student assigned this workstation would discover it by accident and then, startled, would try to guess which of their predecessors was capable of such a grandly romantic gesture.

I imagined him or her opening my poem against a screen full of data, reading it silently, and then turning suddenly to gaze at the dense foliage outside the

window as two streams of tears meandered down their cheeks.

Mid-June. The weather became even hotter and more humid. I began to have trouble sleeping: because of the insufferable weather, but also because of the imminent thesis defense. My cold seemed to get better but then returned, adding to my anxiety. Every day, I left home early, returned long after dark, and spent every minute in between under the chill of the air conditioner, a terry cloth blanket draped around my shoulders and a box of tissues next to my keyboard: drafting, calculating, plotting, pasting spreadsheets, writing summaries.

My partner was also working overtime. I was almost envious of his workhorse attitude, laboring silently and sturdily. Compared to my project, his had far more scientific depth, and his research had generated so many interesting results that he could put out a highly technical thesis whenever he wanted. But all I had were some spreadsheets and graphs, and all the English and Chinese “works cited” were pulled out of electronic journals to dress up a thesis that really wasn’t very impressive. In that dim, windowless room, we hunched over our keyboards, clacking away back to back. It was only when I occasionally stared into space after watering my cactus that I thought to turn and look at him, and noticed the colorful patterns swirling across his screen like Buddhist mandalas.

The week before my thesis defense, torrential rain

fell on Beijing as though the city had been cursed. The rain started every night around seven, and ended at one in the morning, as though someone was opening and closing a faucet. The rain turned all the paths on campus into shallow rivers, and I had to trudge through the icy water in my flip-flops to get home, where my roommates, who had completed their theses, complained about not being able to go out for a midnight snack. I washed my feet and went straight to bed.

After nights of confusing dreams, I awakened to bright dawns illuminating dry paths, with only scattered puddles next to them, a few leaves floating in the water. The hot sun baked the water out of the ground as rising mist, flavored by the aroma of rotting vegetation.

The circuit breaker in our lab tripped more frequently: two computers, four fluorescent lamps, plus a droning air conditioner seemed to be pushing its load limit, and each such incident cost me half a day's or even a full day's worth of work. Eventually, I learned my lesson and brought my laptop to the lab to continue the fight for my academic life. The only challenge now was to survive the endless tests of my spirit: the ever-present droning and humming would suddenly be interrupted by a shocking noise, all the lights would go off, and the air conditioner would gradually come to a shuddering stop. I used the break to drink a sip of water, massage my aching wrists, and gaze up at the ceiling in a daze.

My partner would always get up from behind me, and, flip-flops slapping against the floor, head into the corridor to reset the circuit breaker. Then he would return, switch on the lights and the air conditioner, and I would turn around to lock gazes with him in the sterile white light. That awkward smile.

The night before my thesis defense, the night of June 19<sup>th</sup>, was a sleepless night, a night of death. It was said that countless labs and dorm rooms across campus stayed lit throughout the night as students worked overtime in the death throes of their school days. Rain poured out of the sky, adding to the dismal mood.

I sat in front of my computer and made some final edits to my PowerPoint slides for the thesis defense presentation. Slowly, I sank into a confused state as everything around me seemed to become unreal: the cramped lab, the droning air conditioner, the messy cubicles and silent computers, the dirty towels and boxes of tissues, the tiny cactus in its planter supported by a stack of books – this place where I had spent most of my time for more than a month was at once so familiar and so insubstantial.

“You’re done?” my partner asked me.

“As much as I ever will be. How about you?” I turned to look at him. Our voices and faces seemed so strange to each other – I couldn’t even recall the last time we had conversed.

“The model still needs to be adjusted, but it’s good enough for the thesis.” His eyes peered out of dark

depressions in his gaunt face, which appeared wan and bloodless in the glow from the computers. I imagined that I looked about the same.

“Good job.” I smiled and curled up in my chair. My body felt very light, but my head felt very heavy.

For a moment neither of us could think of what to say. The rain continued to come down hard outside, the night broken now and then by flashes of lightning and thunder.

“I wish we could go out and share a few drinks to celebrate,” I said. “Damn this rain! It’s been more than a week of rain every night. Is this the heat island effect?”

“That’s right.”

I recalled the image of my atmospheric physics professor lecturing in front of the blackboard as his pale fingers guided the chalk to sketch out the dynamic dance of clouds and winds. During the day, the air, heated by the urban landscape of the city, rose; moisture-saturated air rushed in from the surrounding area in the form of winds. At night, however, the air above the city cooled and sank, and the air masses collided violently, causing thunderstorms to release the latent heat. The rainwater seeping into the earth then started the next cycle of the local circulation: a stable and recurring pattern.

Too stable.

“How can it be like this?” I asked. “It rains every night at seven on the dot. Even artificial rainfall can’t be so precise.”

That familiar awkward smile didn’t appear on his face. Silent, exhausted, he gazed at me, as though waiting for something.

After a while, in a low voice that seemed to be intended for just himself, he said, “It’s the last day.”

“What do you mean? The rain? Or your thesis?”

“Both are going to be over.”

“Yes, over.” I stretched my legs lazily as I leaned against the back of the chair. “Words feel inadequate for moments like this. Four years of college – and now the whole thing is about to end.”

“Four years, yeah.” He nodded, his voice slightly husky.

Not knowing what else to say, I licked my dried and cracked lips. “Do you want a drink? I’ll go to the vending machine downstairs.”

“Why don’t I go instead?” He stood up.

“No, please, let me treat you, all right? You’ve been helping me so much.”

“It’s dark on the stairs. Let me go.” He didn’t wait for me to object and left, his steps echoing in the empty corridor until they faded.

The rain went on and on. I didn’t know how long the rain would last: maybe the entire night, or a whole year.

The circuit breaker tripped.

Darkness engulfed the room as the air conditioner quieted along with the buzzing fluorescent lights; in the stillness, only the hideous shadows cast by the trees outside the window continued to sway violently



in the rain.

Wrapped by my soft terry cloth blanket, I curled up in the chair without moving, like a tiny bird with its feathers in disarray.

The sound of my breathing filled the room.

Somehow, the computer on the other desk stubbornly remained on. The complicated model on the screen resembled some postmodern work of art. Slowly, I wheeled my chair over, and examined it with the mouse.

The model was now far more impressive than it had been two weeks ago. Gradually, I shifted the perspective, feeling as though I was entering a giant metropolis: everywhere around me coordinates and numbers flashed in phosphorescent green; the sky was a web woven from isobars and isotherms, like the dense peaks of overlapping mountains or a sea of clouds and mist; tiny arrows in various hues dashed and darted hither and thither; flow fields, temperature fields, divergence and vorticity, latent heat flux and vapor flux – everything was connected to everything else through the most rigorous sets of equations, order constraining chaos.

I was awed by the harmonious and intricate spectacle, grand and stately. Everything was so beautiful, so beautiful that I held my breath, an artistic soul wearing the guise of a scientific investigator.

Air masses continued to collide violently outside the building, just like the roiling ocean of flickering numbers and twisting lines on the screen. Suddenly, I

noticed the number at the corner of the screen: June 20, 2008, 12:00 AM.

*What I'm seeing on the screen is synchronized to reality.*

My hand trembling, I moved the mouse across the desk, searching over the map, adjusting the scale, magnifying-searching-remagnifying until I found that familiar campus, that familiar building. The flow field formed a closed low-pressure area right around the campus, like a giant vortex or an eye.

In the middle of the eye was a small line of text.

*Test location one: controllable local closed low. Period of persistence: June 10-June 20, 2008.*

The lights came on.

Bright white light flooded my vision. I lifted my hands before my eyes, turned around, and saw him standing at the door with two cans of orange juice.

He waited a long while before speaking. "You... saw." The voice was very hoarse.

I didn't respond. I stared at him, my mind a blank, like the turbulent clouds outside. I struggled in the blankness, slowly climbing onto solid land, dragging my heavy body behind.

"This is secret military work, right?" I kept my voice low. It sounded like a rusty blade, cold, rough, losing its edge in the damp air.

"Yes... my project –"

"Is a meteorological weapon, isn't it?"

"I –"

"You're responsible for the rain this whole week,



aren't you?"

"I... I just..."

"What?"

He lowered his head and said nothing. All of a sudden I felt utterly drained, as though a bucket of ice water had been dumped over my head, thoroughly chilling every inch of my body until not a trace of warmth was left.

"I'm going home." I got up slowly. My legs were numb and cold. I'd been sitting for so long that they'd lost all sensation.

"It's still raining," he said, confused. His face was pale as a sheet of paper in the fluorescent light.

"I'm going home." I put on my flip-flops and packed up my laptop, plastic clacking against plastic. He came closer and put down the cans of orange juice, condensation beading against the metal. His face twisted through a succession of different expressions; I refused to look at him.

"It's going to stop raining in an hour. Why don't you wait?" His voice became even lower. "You're not fully recovered yet. You don't want to make it worse before tomorrow."

Stubbornly, I picked up my laptop bag and headed out the door. I'd always been stubborn. When I wanted to leave, no one could stop me. He stood rooted to the floor, immersed in the droning of the air conditioner.

I can't recall clearly what happened after that. A

montage of disordered images: the thesis defense, falling ill, sleeping in a daze, and then graduation, paperwork of various sorts, pictures, lots of pictures, eating out and drinking, parties, big and small.

The only thing I remember clearly is that it never rained again from the day of my thesis defense. Bright sun and clear skies reigned every day.

At the last meal with my class, everyone was relaxed. After the beers ran out we switched to *baijiu*, and after the *baijiu* was gone we ordered more beers. My head was terribly dizzy, but I sat in a corner, acting like I was the most sober person in the place, and I realized that I was surrounded by strange faces. Though we had spent four years together, they were still strangers.

My partner sat in another corner. I had almost forgotten his existence. Later, he went around the tables, toasting every girl with awkward speeches. After each toast, he conscientiously drained his cup, his movements deliberate and serious.

I lifted my cup and laughed. "We worked well together, partner."

He laughed, too. "Are you fully recovered?"

"Not really," I said. "My brain was probably roasted by the fever. I won't be able to do any physics in the future. I'm switching to writing fiction."

"That's good," he said. "As long as you're happy."

"What about you? Are you staying in Beijing?"

He hesitated for a second. "I'm going to Sichuan, actually."

“Why?” I was genuinely surprised. “With your grades... why aren’t you going to grad school?”

“My scholarship obligated me to go to CAEP after graduation. I’ll be continuing my research on the heat island effect.”

“Oh.” I finally understood.

The China Academy of Engineering Physics was a state research institute focused on national strategic weapons systems and cutting-edge defense technology, like nuclear weapons. In order to develop the necessary research talent, in December of 2001, CAEP signed an agreement with Peking University to funnel certain students to CAEP after their undergraduate careers.

I remembered his powerful computer, the dynamic, intricate model on the screen, the rain that went on and on, and that eye-like closed low-pressure area.

“Are you going to be working on meteorological weapons?” I asked, laughing.

He smiled his habitual, awkward smile, a bit embarrassed. I lifted my cup, cold foam flowing down my fingers.

“Comrade, work diligently! The motherland needs you.”

Our cups clinked. “That night –” I began.

He looked at me.

“– thank you for giving me a ride back to my dorm.”

He nodded, and, because the alcohol made him temporarily bold, gave me a hug. Before others could

seize the opportunity and make a joke of it, he turned to toast the girl at the next table.

That night, the water had already risen over the lobby threshold and flooded the first floor corridor. I stood on the steps holding my laptop bag. He stopped in front of me on his bike.

“I’ll give you a ride.”

I sat on the rear seat of the bike and held up the umbrella over both of us. The water cascading off the rim of the umbrella soaked his hair and his clothes. I felt the heat rising from his strong back.

“I... uh...” His hoarse voice drifted to me through the curtain of rain, sounding somber. “I just –”

“Stop.” I kept my voice low as well.

He kept on pedaling strenuously. But after a long while, a muffled question drifted back to me.

“What?”

“You don’t need to say anything.” I raised my voice. “I know everything!”

“What... what do you –”

“I know!”

“Oh, all right.” I heard a chuckle, and he went back to his dedicated pedaling.

I looked up at the crimson sky, sliced by millions of glistening, parallel rain trails like cuts made by a razor. The reflections of my bare feet flashed over the water.

*I know you’re better at talking about science than talking to girls. We’ve been going to the same school for four*

*years, and we were colleagues struggling in the same lab for so long. And you've never said anything.*

*I know also that you're good at helping me with the wind roses, teaching me how to process the data, flipping the circuit breaker whenever it tripped, remembering my birthday, giving me a cactus.*

*I know you made the city rain for ten days, from seven at night until one in the morning.*

As the storm continued, we glided over the submerged streets, the wheels of the bicycle slicing through the cold surface of the water, splashes echoing behind us, like riding in a rowboat when I was little.

What a lovely sound.

What came after that was a confused jumble of memories: packing up all my possessions, selling what I could, tossing what I couldn't. I went to the lab and stuffed what belonged to me into a cardboard box: terry cloth blanket, flip-flops, mug, box of tissues, unfinished instant coffee, and the cactus, still translucent and green.

The day I left Beijing was sunny and cloudless. I couldn't recall ever seeing the sky so blue.

I got onto the train by myself, and the gray buildings and streets and pedestrian overpasses swayed slowly and began to recede outside the window. Beyond the city came the endless verdant wheat fields, exuberant under the bright summer sun. June was over, and July had just arrived. Surrounded by green, I left behind me the city, that lonely, hot island, and all

the memories attached to it, waiting for the day when I'd return.

The story is over at dawn. Noises and the night heat subside together. Finally, hugging a corner of the blanket to me, I fall asleep, the fan buzzing by my ear while the sound of rain gradually rises in my dream.

*Translated by Ken Liu*



葉舟

## Ye Zhou

Ye Zhou was born in Gansu in 1966. After graduating from the Northwest Normal University in Lanzhou he worked as a professor and a journalist. His work has been published in numerous literary periodicals, and in addition to poetry he has written essays and fiction – including the short story “Peace Within My Tent”, which received the Lu Xun Literature Prize in 2014.

### *Nature's Perfume*

Wind at high noon.  
Under ripped silk, bronze at high noon.  
For half a city heroes of fortune sheath their pitch dark uncertainty  
Xinjiang at high noon.  
A mural of spirits, venerated in plaster, dance as they ascend.  
Mulberry flowers pattern their breasts—  
Wafts of mutton at high noon.  
Autumn, dreams like a flank of mutton at high noon.  
A grotto opens  
—a thousand comets shine at high noon.  
The classics in the sun furled and unfurled at high noon.  
On Qinghai Lake, prayer flags catch faces and spirit names hang high  
A foal is birthed at high noon.  
Go west from the Sun Gate, a sheepskin filled with water at high noon.  
The sunlight dazzles  
The world at high noon

In an ancient medicine box, I want to meet you—  
Life of Dunhuang  
The cold at high noon.

*Nine Horse Prairie*

Nine horses on the prairie, endless to the horizon  
Nine autumns, like a lover's bag quietly held  
Bringing water to our doorstep  
Nine horses huddled and still, against the wind, toward the water.  
Qinghai: seven stars, nine temples  
Nine straight avenues to the beautiful, physical world  
Beneath the nine oil lamps, cows and lambs return to the fold.  
Will you still love me tonight, as you did before—  
Nine goddesses, you are quiet like a bell's smallest snowy peak  
Nine galloping breasts, nine tents.  
Clutching fresh flowers I sink into August's wound.  
Nine recitations, raised to heaven.  
Nine hawks, circling the sky.  
Autumn ruin, like a desolate altar.  
Nine whips hung on love's rafters—  
Nine leopards shriek, with a glass of wine  
I am left all alone, clutching a horse light.  
Nine nights, half my body sleeping for you.  
To become a martyr  
To revive a heart. Qinghai—  
Nine great horses on the prairie, nine times dreamt.



Photo by Wang Yan



### *Qinghai Skies*

Under Qinghai skies  
Lies buried the insignia of the hawk clan   relics of clouds  
Blue glass of a crystalline lens  
Precipitous and sleek, it weeps without tears  
Earth's brimming curve—  
A bronzed face  
Cries come from the sheepfold housing the gods  
Under Qinghai skies  
Plateau: extant in mighty geometric form  
Viewers fooled into seeing God  
See the nine temples in sharp relief  
The Yangtze in view  
Tibet in view  
The prayer flags compelling all to bow  
Under Qinghai skies  
Humanity has just revived  
Entered the Iron Age  
Lakes lapped speedily   Religion intoxicated   Love was candid  
Standing before one hundred thousand oil lamps  
The priest and the bellwether  
A gust of autumn wind, intertwined hearts  
The mourning entertainers glimpse the Buddha's light  
Under Qinghai skies  
The sire of a half-beast trods the road  
A dusty book forgotten with deliberation

A village sits wide open  
Calamity and dogs enter the darkness  
In a range of towering, craggy peaks  
A herder's daughter opens a shrine a flower fades  
Congratulations for a thief's severed head  
Under Qinghai skies  
Summer has just been established  
Winter is collapsing elsewhere a destroyed plot  
Rebellion rises with the grass—  
Praising the prophets of the plain  
The fish king keeps his scent, the livestock work the fields,  
the stars follow their winding course  
Only the misfit rocks that form the molehill,  
Store a semblance of dawn and truth  
In the highest place  
The greatest beauty is common sense  
In this moment as I go under Qinghai skies  
My heart is sincerely silent  
At the precipice I long to meet  
A leopardess in health—  
rumored to represent a miracle extinct

*Translated by Laura Tucker*



周曉楓

Zhou Xiaofeng

A former editor of both *Harvest* and *People's Literature* magazines, Zhou Xiaofeng was born in Beijing in 1969. *The Great Whale Sings*, the essay collection from which these excerpts are taken, received the Lu Xun Literature Prize in 2014. She has also served as a literary advisor to director Zhang Yimou on his novel adaptations, including *Under the Hawthorn Tree* (2010), *The Flowers of War* (2011) and *Coming Home* (2014).

# The Great Whale Sings

By Zhou Xiaofeng

## I. Prelude

**H**old your fingers together and cup your hands. When we hold our hands like seashells over our ears, we hear the familiar roar of heavy surf. It is the sound of blood coursing through capillaries in the head, and the sound of the tide, preserved in the memory. Blood is as saline as seawater.

The ocean. The only thing in the world beside a clock's pendulum that can repeat itself without becoming an annoyance. Hans Christian Anderson's story says that the mute little mermaid lives in an underwater kingdom deeper than the longest anchor can reach. Many years ago, CCTV played the American TV series *Man From Atlantis*. I can still remember Mark Harris's deep blue eyes, and his indescribable attachment to Elizabeth, the scientist. Theirs was a mermaid love story for an industrialized age – except that, in their case, Mark and Elizabeth rescue each other. I like mermaid-esque characters, because they are as intensely emotional as they are restrained, and they have a tendency toward self-sacrifice. I imagine that only the ocean can grant them the capacity for such love.

Yet all life originates from the sea, including our own ancestors. This tells us why, of all the five flavors, only saltiness is essential to our physical bodies. The taste our tongues know brings back the flavor of the ocean, allowing us to return to our ancient home. Salting food has become a daily ritual; not only does it decide the pH balance of the body, it constantly crystallizes our knowledge of the ocean. Like salmon

swimming upstream, we follow a flavor toward our old home.

## II. Jellyfish

I walk along the ever-changing surf line, the seawater chilly at my feet. This area has only recently been developed for tourism, and there aren't many people around, especially not in the dawn hour. A fishing boat has returned with the day's catch, and the baskets being carried off are full of dying fish and their silver-dollar scales. A few meters in front of the bow lies a gray-white mass. I edge closer for a look. It turns out that the fishermen first empty their nets on the beach, then pick out the fish and shrimp, and leave the unsalable jellyfish on the beach.

The jellyfish are all of equal size, about the diameter of a dollar coin. Their color is close to that of a dead person's fingernails, grey and translucent – a hue coveted by wandering ghosts. Their flesh is so soft and slippery that I can't tell if the bubble-shaped corpses are shrinking or expanding; when I put my bare foot down, they squish through my toes in an undifferentiated, semi-liquid mass. Jellyfish out of water decay immediately into a fluid form the consistency of mucus, and turn from something beautiful into something rather disgusting.

As members of the phylum Cnidaria, jellyfish appeared on Earth long before the dinosaurs – as far back as 650 million years ago – even though their individual lifespans might be as short as a few months. They have no eyes, ears, brain or heart. Their bod-

ies are completely translucent, and almost abstract in form. Seemingly lacking the completeness of an animal body, they look like the innards pulled out of one, or like the disembodied swim bladder and intestines of a fish. They move by pulsing like a heartbeat, or just by floating quietly, as souls in legends are said to do.

Jellyfish that have not been trapped in fishing nets are the most poetic creatures in the ocean. They look like cherry blossoms opened under water – weightless, floating, with a sort of hallucinatory beauty. Some are a simple, unadorned bell-shape, some wrap themselves in lace, and some look so outlandish they could be mistaken for aliens. Many jellyfish are bioluminescent; their little lanterns come together and illuminate the ocean like the firefly-filled night of a fairy tale.

Jellyfish often exist in swarms of inestimable size, and though they might be beautiful to see, their appetite is considerable. Their tentacles are made of venomous cells called cnidocytes, and the jellyfish hunt constantly for prey. They will sweep up the tiniest plankton, and will even eat each other when necessary. For a person to get caught in such a swarm can be a painful – even potentially fatal – experience; the sight of any such bubble-shaped creature – let alone the death-banner tentacles of the man-o-war – brings no aesthetic pleasure after that. Jellyfish float on the water surface like drowned spirits. I was caught once; luckily, I got to shore in time, but my skin itched and burned unbearably. That – plus one instance of food poisoning from mushrooms many years ago – inspired a fairly prejudicial personal taboo: I'm very wary about things with umbrella caps. The shape is clearly meant to be a

means of protecting themselves, but extreme forms of self-defense often hide venoms meant for others.

Though separate genders exist, hordes of jellies give the impression of being great colonies of women. They look pure and innocent, with soft, weightless arms. Yet those who dare touch them are sentenced without mercy, and die under the hoops of their antique dresses. They carry their chastity to brutal extremes: soft tentacles become a noose around the neck of the intruder, whose body is pulled into the jellyfish's abdomen and dissolved. The untouchable lady drinks the hot broth of revenge.

The jellyfish drifts and rocks in imitation of the sea's rhythm, just as one leaf imitates an entire tree. The sea, itself a giant jelly, reaches out with tentaculate waves to catch its prey, which it feeds into its vast, transparent abdomen. When the drowned are shot up onto the sand, the moon hangs high, like an axe-head spotted with rust. Does ill luck walk with light footsteps, like the jellies' venomous tranquility?

### III. Tide

The tide gives the sea its own heartbeat, turns it from a geological phenomenon into a biological entity, a blue-skinned giant possessing an ancient yet undiminished vitality. We can sense in the tides a rhythm as tireless as primal lust.

At first, waves break over each other in low terraces, but eventually the water begins to wrinkle with tiger stripes. The rising tide conceals a storm. The fisherman who lingers by the rocks loses everything

for a moment's greed: in the time it takes for him to put away his rod, the water level changes, and the sea swallows up his way back. The pummeling waves will drive him far from home.

When the surf hammers like war drums, and the quietly building waves rise like the backs of whales, the sea communicates its fury through a stunning, irresistible force. It seems to yearn for some destruction or judgment. Clashing waves raise white Baroque spires – I can guess what kind of religion lives in this deep blue church, deep as darkness and desperation: one that adapts, recycles, accepts, innovates, and provides for all life – but also brutalizes without needing an excuse, and carries out bloody, instantaneous executions with unparalleled efficiency and purity of purpose. The ocean calmly imposes its laws. Its world is undecorated by adjectives and holds no space for modifiers. Like a newborn baby or a tired old spirit, it has no need to dominate language or rely on communication to gain energy or aid. Its universe does not require a coordinate system to calibrate itself. It is a willful strength – or, put another way, only this level of strength grants the freedom that willfulness represents. The sea's power to terrify comes also in part from the fact it can turn its brutality on itself. Before a storm, the water surface is ravenous, the sky rolls with black, apocalyptic clouds, the water turns headstone-grey. Once the rain starts, it only takes a few minutes before its percussive melody is whipped into an orchestra. Once, to test my bravery, I wanted to experience for myself what a storm at sea was like, but I was soon forced to flee the ocean's masochistic fearlessness. Everywhere

about me were waves torn apart by force, and the entire ocean resembled a ruined carcass. I thought of the words Marguerite Yourcenar put into the mouth of the emperor Hadrian: "The virgin gold of respect would be too soft without some alloy of fear."

Luckily, the sea also has its depression, its exhaustion, its weakness. Otherwise, it would only be a barbarian king, unrestricted by morality, unapproachable by land-based creatures like us. Its drunken stomach constantly tossing, the sea vomits up things it hasn't digested: shells, dead fish, the flotsam remains of ships. Sometimes, the exhausted sea seems unable even to push waves forward. Its light grows heavy, and we see an ocean of dark quicksilver that barely moves in sluggish swells – a huge beast immobilized by its own weight, slowly losing the power to struggle. Especially on the ebb tide, its waves grow smaller and smaller, and their froth breaks and meanders, like the loosening fist of a dying man. This is the sea at its last breath.

Day in and day out, the sea repeats this rhythm, from earth-shattering tempest to paralyzed exhaustion. Then, inevitably, it is resurrected, and the building swells arch like the back of a butterfly swimmer. The tidal sea constantly reviews itself, as if adhering to a cyclical calendar, solidifying its self-imposed edicts through repetition. Whenever I look out at it – that breathing breast – I sense the same kind of hopeless, limitless excitement we feel in the search for truth. An excitement that can also be expressed as a kind of masterfully reined strength. The ocean can sometimes be tender, waves running in anxious, ecstatic bands across the water like the shivers of a caressed animal. What

kind of hand is it that can make this leviathan shiver and torment itself with unceasing desire?

The inscrutable moon, magic outside of imagination. When I first learned that the tides were caused by the moon's gravitational pull, I could hardly believe it; it was like being told that a butterfly could lift a well bucket. The moon was so white and quiet, nothing more than a small, illusory circle of light. Even looking at it through a telescope was like looking at a flower petal under a microscope slide: all you can see is its desolation. That alkaline soil can only support one leafless tree; under the tree twirl cold and lonely dancers. The moon has the gentle, melancholy bearing of an invalid. Yet this cold, indistinct, virginally meek moon can throw around the murderous force of the ocean from its great distance.

Yet perhaps this strange symmetry is actually a law of commensurability: only the most delicate objects can govern the heaviest instruments. A lighthouse guiding an oil tanker is one example. Or an ideal, which can move people to sacrifice the blood in their veins. Or death, against whose quiet we have engaged entire lifetimes' worth of noise. On a more general level, this understanding of small versus large, light versus heavy is significantly different from what we are used to in everyday life. The Garden of Eden may not exist on some vast ethereal plane, but in a child's pupil. When the oracle in the moon begins to dance, she can summon the epic force of the ocean and call the farsighted albatrosses to migrate, the sharks to bare their teeth, the anchor-shaped starfishes to settle into the quiet inertia of pinned specimens...

The moon, epitome of serenity. This gold-speckled fish scale is the totem the whole ocean worships. Growing and shrinking, the vast blue heart beats and trembles for it.

#### IV. Shells

Ebb tide. Ocean waves scoop up the children they will soon abandon and roll onto the beach's sandy cemetery. The waterline retreats step by step like a gift-bearing envoy excusing himself from the room. The naked expanse of the beach widens. This seemingly empty yet endlessly fascinating playground. The photographer's lens has shown us visions of other beaches, where animals are the rulers. There are crowds of seagulls, and everywhere is cacophonous noise, wings, eggs, and excrement. There are walrus beaches, with fat bodies pressed together like brown hills as far as the eye can see, packed so close that just changing position can be difficult. Even when their great forms are active they look as if they've been beached. When the walrus raises his wrinkled forehead and props his huge torso up on his flippers to look into the distance, it always looks as if even staying upright is a struggle. For humans, a beach must have a Formalist emptiness in order to become a playground: there is no visual or moral interference from seasonal birds or animals; the sound of the waves is near, yet transmits also the ineffable tranquility hidden underneath; children can build sand castles, or discover a limitless diversity of creatures in the ecosystems around them.

Between the rocks, tide pools protect lingering fry, as





Illustration by Wang Yan

well as the tiny red and brown seaweeds, similarly bashful. Ornate shrimp are translucent as quartz. Crabs the size of spiders wave their claws around in empty threats and exaggerated warnings, then scuttle sideways into holes no bigger than a mole. Most of the sea creatures left here by the retreating sea are of the smaller types; they are inexperienced lives, and haven't been on earth long enough to grasp the rule of the tide.

The sea at low tide provides predators with a clean tablecloth and an enormous buffet of succulent shell-

fish. Shellfish are such a delicacy that the rim of flesh sticking out between their two halves waves like the "open" sign of a restaurant. Even those who harvest them for money have a hard time resisting the immediate temptation; though knocking and scraping at the rocks for oysters is their profession, they will still reward themselves during the course of their work by prying open the occasional oyster's closed jaw and drinking down the fluid meat like a spoonful of soup – so fresh you can feel it quiver on its way down your

throat.

While the bivalve is soft inside, its adductor muscle is more powerful than a nutcracker's bite. It lives within a careful equilibrium, keeping its monastic spirit strictly cloistered. Because mollusks have no limbs to fight with, they can only handle external objects forced on them by treating them as part of themselves, no matter how painful or difficult it might be. This inherent (and, truly, involuntary) religious impulse demands that they develop hard shells to protect themselves and fend off frequent invasions of varying intensity. I have a cowrie shell I found when I was a child. The spots on its enameled surface are blurred, so the color bleeds into a wash, like looking at the night sky through tears. The cowrie's teeth are thick, and the two rows are close together; the opened body could have slid out and back in through a gate only a few millimeters wide, like a magician pushing a silk scarf into his closed fist – a miraculous feat of contortionism from an animal that has magicked its bones completely away. In sum, shellfish are shy animals, and reclusive by nature; perhaps they are the smallest monks, transporting on their back their miniscule cathedrals.

Clam Island on the Liaodong Peninsula left me with a different impression. When the waves rolled in, I couldn't leap up or scamper up the shore, because there was a thick band of shells several meters wide between the water and the sand. Scooping up a random handful, I found saucer-shaped cockles, broken razor clams, and was even lucky enough to discover a murex snail – viciously beautiful, with those long, rib-like spines that mermaids used to comb the fronds of their

hair. In the procession of waves that followed, I heard the sound of shells stirring against each other, and saw the carefully patterned outsides and brilliant nacreous insides of a million shell fragments flickering in the water. There are some collectors who have never even seen live mollusks in their natural habitat, but the living tissue is itself brilliantly colored, and sometimes more interesting than the shells. But what of it? Isn't this just another instance of buying the saddle and giving back the horse? No matter how enchantingly living butterflies dance, all people want is the color on dead wings. The beauty of shellfish decides their fate. To the zealous collector, shellfish live in beautifully decorated coffins, and they should be ready to die for their beauty, should it be required. What's interesting is that even shellfish with the most operatically extravagant shells still close their door with the same kind of operculum – brown, wafer-thin, with a spiral contour. When the animal sticks its foot out of its shell, it resembles a man wearing an expensive suit with hotel slippers.

I pointed the shell of a tower snail toward the sun, and saw the even glow of the spiral wall inside. The helix form possesses incredible mathematical beauty; I know that the spiral design, which integrates extremities of perception and practicality, reappears in every corner of the universe, from the Canis Major nebula to funnel-shaped tornadoes, from the mountain sheep's hard, symmetrical horns to plants' soft climbing tendrils, from the Doric columns of the Parthenon to the tiny human cochlea hidden within the ear. This tower snail's inner spiral holds a vowel of the first Word.

That night on Clam Island I dreamt I saw the dead snail on the ocean floor, ringing its own shell to announce the end of Vespers.

Shellfish exhibit some strange and extreme contradictions. They get along by uniting hardness and softness, the protein of their meat and the calcium carbonate of their shells. To put it another way, shellfish spend their lives evenly managing two opposed chemistries. Unfortunately for them, all they're doing is increasing their culinary and entertainment value for us.

One of my neighbors loves seafood. I remember something she said once while we were eating scallops. "What's the point of growing such a hard shell? Shellfish don't have hearts. My opinion is that animals that don't have hearts don't need protection." She pointed at the saucer-shaped scallop shell, delicately rippled with radial ribs. "It doesn't have a heart, so it doesn't have a head. Your snails and your clams are like prepared food, and you don't feel the shame or the pressure of their staring eyes the way you would eating other animals."

But what about the creatures with shells, heads, and hearts too? They don't escape either. Crabs are an example – armored up like medieval knights, pointed and edged like the weapons those knights carried. Larger crabs carry an air of intimidating power, like small tanks. Their hammer-shaped claws are terrifying. Yet a fighter like the boxing crab is nowhere near as frightening as his name sounds. Smaller than a silver dollar, he's completely fearless, and will face up to

even the most fearsome predator with a bravery that scorns all consideration of victory or loss. I saw a documentary once that showed a boxer crab fighting; his claws looked soft and feathery, and at first I thought he'd torn his gloves up from too much action. I had to look closer before realizing that he was brandishing venomous sea anemones in the face of his enemy. His childish courage made me smile. A pity that such well-equipped warriors should have their chitin cracked open and their insides dissolved on eager human tongues.

The harder the shell, the softer the organs inside. Perhaps this insight will inspire us to break through the emotionless shells of life and touch the soft, organic warmth within. A cold bell produces a purer tone when struck; the compassion of the Buddha can be experienced through the most violent methods. Yet causality pervades everything: a more aurally pleasant bell is struck more often, and that deep, helpless tenderness is why so many people engage in profanity as a daily entertainment.

Beyond the far side of the cluttered table, my neighbor's turtle basks motionless in the sun. He has a statuesque integrity. I imagine his compatriots in the ocean, the inlaid mosaics on their shells and faces, and how the underwater light must create instantaneous, inscrutable waves on their surface. The turtle's bone-house is remarkable: they have a complete internal skeleton as well as a rounded top shell and a flat under shell. Some species' top shells aren't made of bone, but of leather-hard skin. Biologists claim that the turtle's shell is merely an extension of its rib cage; all we can

do is extrapolate from these confusing scientific explanations into mythic paintings – angels’ wings are merely an extension of their shoulder blades. Crawling animals do not have facial expressions – strange then, that turtles should permanently wear the look of the hard laborer. Even newborn baby turtles climbing onto the beach carry their father’s slave-like demeanor. Sea turtles obey family traditions. Moving with the slow, methodical cadence of a mourner, they dive into the salty depths.

If there ever were a time when turtles moved with energy and agility, it would be in their first moments of life. Newborn turtles have to leave their hatching ground as soon as possible, cross the beach and get to the surf. Flocks of ravenous birds descend to make a feast of them, and only a lucky few survive the perilous crossing.

## XI. Colossi

These massive creatures are so rarely sighted by human eyes that we are more inclined to make myths of them. Their weight is beyond simple comprehension – a blue whale’s tongue weighs up to four tons. Whales, like gods, are living extremes that dwarf all other creatures.

Paleontological research suggests that whales separated from early hoofed animals in the Paleocene period, between 57 and 67 million years ago, and then entered water permanently around 50 million years ago. Whales are truly amazing creatures: having come

from the ocean like all other forms of life, they spent a period of time on land, then returned to the ocean once more. Whales aren’t fish. They are mammals and they use lungs to breathe, unlike fish, which filter oxygen from water using gills. They swim beneath the surface of the open ocean, the province of scaly chordates and armored crustaceans. Whales are the world’s largest loners, choosing not to live near other mammals. Perhaps it is a universal truth that great spirits live apart from their own kind. Some whales even live independently of other whales, like they are guarding their own formidable solitude. Except for their short mating season, these whales spend much of their time alone, traveling without mate, offspring, or confederate, with only the waves for company.

It’s strange – the largest creatures on land and at sea are both mammals. Why do mammals rule the animal kingdom? Obviously, there’s their advanced reasoning capabilities and strong intelligence, but perhaps a more fundamental reason for their superiority is not a strong IQ, but rich emotional faculties. Mammals have obvious emotions, and understand enjoyment, loneliness, dignity, and terror. A part of their life is conducted outside the physical body.

And the whale is the king of kings. They are creatures of mysterious habit: they migrate, they sing, they can fast for long periods, and they can even choose to commit suicide. It must be noted that these obviously spiritual behaviors are planned in the broadest breast in the world, which makes them even more mystifying and worthy of respect. What could such a giant fear? Nothing can kill it, unless it becomes

its own enemy. Although there is still much that science doesn't understand about the mass beachings of whales and dolphins, there is nevertheless one aspect that should astonish us – they understand the concept of “the other side.” Their spirits are strong enough to order the death of the body. Because they don't have hip bones, whale fetuses aren't impeded in their development, and the pregnant mother doesn't show – whales are born in the most unassuming way possible. Yet even the quietest of their deaths is momentous. The beached body of a whale determined to die is like a fallen cathedral, filling us with a sacred quiet and an unanswerable grief.

My prejudiced opinion is that the whale's form has a deep religious significance. The sperm whale, for instance, is very oddly shaped; the head, which looks like it has been pressed into a rectangle, makes the whole body seem out of proportion. Their intestinal bile also contains ambergris, a waxy, fetid secretion that is an important fixer for perfumes. This paradox also illustrates how the philosopher transforms the indigestible darkness within themselves into nourishment for the whole world.

Stories say that looking into the eye of a whale can change your faith.

In sharp contrast to their massive size, whales have incredibly small eyes. A whale's eye is only slightly larger than a cow's. Is it because eyes are not as great an advantage in the sea as on land, and therefore don't need to be overdeveloped? After all, even in the cleanest ocean water, visibility in the depths of the ocean

almost never extends past thirty meters. But shouldn't that make larger eyes all the more of an advantage? Ocean fish, squid, and turtles all have disproportionately large, exposed eyes. Yet elephants' eyes are also notably undersized, like a tractor-trailer truck with tiny headlights. Perhaps it's a common characteristic, instead of a coincidence. Comparatively speaking, large creatures have less need for constant vigilance, just as powerful people can become so powerful they need not fear assassination. They maintain a relatively casual indifference.

By contrast, insects like mantises, locusts, butterflies and dragonflies all have huge and sometimes compound eyes. Too many animals hunt them as prey – they are surrounded on all sides by mouths that would consume them. Located as they are on the bottom of nearly every food chain, insects have coped by becoming extremely efficient at adapting, reproducing, and hiding their weaknesses through mimicry – hence the disproportionately large eyes. I remember going to the museum at the Sanxingdui dig site, and seeing masks and bronze shields decorated with swollen eyes and eye sockets. Some people have concluded that these ornaments are evidence that the people who made them were a fearless, aggressive race. Yet psychology and principles of design in the natural world suggest to me that perhaps the opposite is true: these exaggerated eyes expose the genuine terror these tribesmen felt toward everything in their environment.

Large animals can take all the time they like to close their eyes and refresh their spirit. Gentle giants like whales have no need to express their power



through rage, so they are calmer and more civilized than the mammals that run on land. Most animals expend enormous energy when hunting, yet the whale is a lazy diner: it only needs to open its vast mouth and swim forward, like a gargantuan bulldozer – the languor of the powerful. Kafka’s famous quote: “Idleness is the beginning of all vice, the crown of all virtue.” The largest land animal, the elephant, is a vegetarian. The largest fish, the whale shark, has over three hundred rows of teeth, and its filter pads can strain over 600 cubic meters of seawater an hour, but it eats plankton. When the schools of snappers come together, the whale sharks swimming among them show no interest in the fish – they much prefer their eggs. Whales are no different – they eat krill and plankton, the smallest creatures in the ocean. From whales to elephants to whale sharks, the largest creatures on earth pursue the smallest prey. The temperate appetites of these giants lessen the threat we feel from them. God’s theatrical arrangements, it seems, are always unveiling new significance.

The grey whale travels more than 16,000 kilometers over the course of its annual migration, crossing three oceans; an individual that lives to be forty years old will have covered a distance equal to a round trip to the moon. From lagoons to frigid polar waters the whales roam like destroyers, parting waves before them and shaking tassels of water from their banner-like tails.

What kind of wild, raging freedom allows these monsters to migrate for thousands of miles without

obstruction? What unquenchable energy allows them to conquer their own incredible weight and leap high out of the water? And what all-encompassing, conflicted heart motivates their sonorous song?

The overtones of whale song carry for miles. Whales are virtuoso singers; while the human voice is usually limited to two or three octaves, the whale’s range covers eight. Some sounds from their upper range are audible to humans, but their private conversations in ultra-bass are undetectable by our ears. Elephants communicate with each other over great distances using the same ability. What we hear are not their real voices, but the imprint of those voices. Like seeing footprints in mud, without knowing exactly what creature came before us; or like seeing treetops wave, but having to gauge the wind’s strength, outline, and volume by the movement of the branches. Could it be that what we perceive is not the world itself, but merely a range of imprints of this kind, while the broader truth lies beyond our ability to influence or even perceive – like the mysteries sung by whales?

Although whales’ singing and migration remain mysteries to us, I have my own suppositions.

This is the coldest region on Earth. The interminable polar night is about to fall, and the ice floes expand and grow thicker. Highly-charged particles from solar flares caught in electromagnetic storms cause an explosion of light that fills the sky – like rippling silk ribbons, like floating curtains, like hand-written directives from God. I imagine whales slowly rising through this bone-cold water ringed by knives of ice, rising with their cathedral forms, and that unrelenting



faith that overcomes all danger. The window for this purification can only last for a few days, after which the polar ocean will be locked in ice and darkness. Thus the largest creatures on earth look up at heaven's most magical brilliance and begin to sing beneath the aurora. Perhaps this is the sacred goal of their pilgrimage, this form of prayer and respect. The giants' voices cover all earthly things; they make their ceremonial pilgrimage to the aurora, and the aurora offers them this silent coronation in return.

Picturing this moving scene in my mind never fails to fill me with excitement and a rush of gratitude. It is the reason I love high cliffs and deep trenches, and the sands that bury both Helen and Troy. It is the reason I love the slow ocean, and would even be willing to be entombed in a whale's stomach, to stand sentinel in the basilica of its voice.

Many areas of the ocean floor are nowhere as colorful and rich as the TV cameras depict them. Some are like massive caverns, devoid of life. This is the reason the ocean environment can foster creatures as large as whales. Their broad, shining backs roll quietly out of the water like floating horizons, suggesting the dark beginnings of epochs.

The ocean's breadth defies a unified conception. Covering seventy percent of the Earth's surface, the sea is itself the largest animal on the planet – like a blue whale, whose breath is the waves, dotted with islands like parasitic shellfish and barnacles. Listen to the wind and waves, and to its deep, solitary singing – especially in the evening, when the sea is like an

animal leaning close enough to us that we can hear its labored breathing.

We humans once thought ourselves to be whale-riders, thought of the sea as a thing to be enslaved, to the point where the ocean really has become a beached whale, facing a disastrous future. The day the whales lose the buoyant support of seawater, they will crush their own organs with their weight; and we self-important humans will enter the grave with them.

When the fire-maned mustangs of the sunset have raced away, and the moon has risen, golden whales will breach the water surface. It's as if my cheek rests on a whale's smooth back, and I swim through night and translucent dreams. While the waves crash, the ocean floor is quiet as Heaven, and only the shy scallops and anemones touch sad, soft currents with their petaloid tentacles. Whale song grows in the animal's great chest. How many omissions and absolutions, banishments and welcomes, insane rages and predestined freedoms are enveloped in this voice, enveloped by the revolving tides, and by drops of water that easily evaporate but never disappear.

*Translated by Canaan Morse*



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## Qiu Lei

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Qiu Lei was born in Anhui in 1982. He received the 2013 fiction prize from the online literary forum *Heilan*, and a collection of his short stories and novellas, *Across the Sea Shining*, was released earlier this year.

# Illusory Constructions

By Qiu Lei

**T**he wall that he had seen in bright sunlight now fades in the evening rays and is a different wall altogether. The grain, the contours, the grooves and extrusions, resplendent and glittering when the sunbeams were bending towards this corner of the wall just a moment ago, have sequestered themselves behind the veil that has suddenly materialised. He widens his eyes at the abrupt change – and, yes, because the light has grown dim, also – and examines the shadowy granules and the rough, arbitrary crevices, completely engrossed. The scratches and scars have become clearer too, and the hole that leads inside is a mass of darkness – or, to be more precise, now that he focuses on it – is a muddle of both light and shadow, bound by an unobtrusive circle. There are a few granules of sand stuck to his cheek. He lifts his hand and brushes them from his face, and these granules of paint, not sand, trace two narrow smears of white across his cheek. *This is a white wall.* He knows this is a stereotypical response, crude and hasty – *because it's painted white* – but even if he *were* in fact interested in the actual material of the wall's construction (and he had a feeling this might lead to recriminations) he would not seriously investigate whether it might be soft or hard, whether it might feel cooler, or rougher, than most things feel. His curiosity extends only to the disk, red and round like a marinated egg, that he sees before him. The setting sun is beautiful. But he prefers to call it *pretty*, which equates to not unfurling the delicate apparatus of his own inner perception, but instead dipping a forefinger in red sealing ink and pressing a fingerprint onto

a sheet of white paper. Pretty. A word he would have no qualms about using to describe this wall, which is already greying in deflected light, reddening, not quite resembling a real wall, especially because, *just look around!* The hills have undulated away to leave nothing more than a strip of stubby millet here; the threshing floor and haystacks are calm enough to overlook; the pines and fields of wheat – despite having mingled together over the course of many years, each blurring the boundary of the other – can nevertheless be described as charmingly disordered, and are thus, in fact, better suited to the comprehensive syntactic demands of rural landscaping: each constitutes the necessary content, each creates the necessary structure. Just look at it all. This area, of course, is mantled in the same sunset rays, and because he is further away he can see more clearly: the same red light falling on the slender needles of the horsetail pine produces a completely different effect when it falls on the domed haystack. The naked eye, he thinks, would be capable of discerning their myriad differences, even without the wind. A rural winter nightfall without wind is inconceivable. All of this is as one with the earth beneath his feet – a slowly merged entity – and this is the product of mankind's contractual understanding that each specific place ought to have certain specific things and a specific manner. What does not belong will inevitably be ripped away, burned down to nothing, or covered in white – the white of quicklime, he presumes – covered in white quicklime to resemble an old animal turned albino. This wall, and this whole house, is just such an animal. What kind of animal you imagine is up to you

– it could be an elephant, or a buffalo, but it must have once been a creature dark and docile, sluggish and vast, and it must have had a cumbersome framework, with hefty foundations, beams, pillars and roof, and yes (he affirms with a smile) this is just such a house.

Since when has such a house belonged to this place? When he left, long ago, or just before he returned? A house such as this, thrusting from the ground! Even though most of the other houses also seem to thrust out of the path-hatched fields, none of them are like *this*, so completely incompatible with the road, hillside, fields, and other buildings. No, not because it has been painted white; on the contrary (he speculates) its singularity was probably the very reason it was painted white in the first place. This wall, close to the road, must have attracted the astonished gazes of passers-by – it attracted his, at least, driving along perhaps as far as a mile away, on the point of careening down the hill, sitting there with his mouth agape – that white, low house, beside a greyish-green thicket... bizarre. In the past there had been nothing there but a field, planted with wheat, perhaps, or possibly cotton, but indistinguishable, in any case, from the surrounding crops. And anyway, at the time his attention had been mostly concentrated on the girl at his side, and her flower-patterned blouse, and her cheap but not completely unornamented plastic sandals, and her hair pinned up in a ponytail. They had been standing at a point opposite this house – the distance bisected by the road – standing on a threshing floor still wet with rain, on dark green shoots of wheat poking sparsely out of the ground, waiting for the photographer to press the shutter. He had often thought of that photo before

he came back here. There could be no objection to the use of the word “sweet” to describe her smile. But what kind of trousers had he been wearing? Had she actually had a bracelet on her wrist? Had they rolled up their sleeves? Behind them was the woods, but back then wheat and trees remained discrete, and the paths could clearly be distinguished from the ridges dividing fields, because the best way to tell them apart was by colour, but in a photograph... but anyway, regardless of the potential presence of clues, he is quite sure: he has never seen this house before. There was no house here that might have been subsequently painted white. Ten years ago there was certainly no “Brookside Christian Church” here that he had somehow known nothing about. Impossible.

Even the very words “Christian Church” – *jidu-tang* – are almost unpronounceable in the local dialect and, he feels, ridiculous in sound. It is not hard to imagine the extent of the social hardships endured by those first villagers to say these words. Of course, it is also possible that the more dramatic orators among them took it as a precious opportunity to show off, crunching on each syllable with affected nonchalance. *Ji. Du. Tang.* The stress falls on the punchy plosive of the *du*, immediately followed by the rise of the *tang* and the accompanying downward flick of the tongue – a sound that confers further proof of one’s superior intellect. Standing in an alcove, he smiles and shakes his head at those ludicrous villagers, and at himself. The thin snow melts beneath his feet, and when he shifts position the damp, translucent snow retains the after-image of his soles, each curved ridge radiating towards the edge of the outline. Beneath this patina, stalks of

desiccated grass are flattened against the black earth. There is a resonance, strange but stable, between the church sign and this mire of footprints and mud and thawed snow.

The evening snowfall, especially in the fields, is too thin to cover the dark green wheat shoots. The snow on the moor is drab, but above it glistens a thickened band of brightness, and dim sparks of light glimmer briefly across the heath and disappear. Though the sun has gone down the sky does not darken immediately, and chimney smoke can still be seen. He turns back towards the highway, treading carefully in the wheel ruts. The tops of his trainers are damp from the snow that has piled up beside the trail. The evening breeze gradually grows stronger, and there is a crackling beneath his feet from the thawed snow that is starting to refreeze. His hands are tucked in his pockets; at his waist is his camera, warmed by his body though it is outside his clothing. His footsteps sound turgid and hollow in the semi-solid snow. Distinguishing the bare surface of road from the snowdrift, his pace quickens slightly.

Everything is more picturesque in the gloaming. On this tractor-mangled village trail, tyre tracks and shuffled snow are equal in allure. Beneath the trail is wheat, and this narrow quadrilateral of field is closely hemmed in with trees. Dark grey earth emerges from snow at the foot of the trees, and a jumble of large volcanic rocks is heaped at the top of the hill. Somehow there are still ripples in the pond. It cannot quite be considered the stuff of *scenery*, any of this... He stands by the road, feet pressing lightly into slush, thinking that he has to find the right word, or else he will be

unable to explain: this slender, frail existence (but to use the opposites of these words would certainly not be incorrect either: vast and hefty) – longer than he would himself, that went without saying, and longer than everything he cherished, all of his memories and his whims, but... how long would any of this continue to exist? Beneath boulders and field, dormant now, there had surely once been incredible pulsations, tensions, ruptures and eruptions, and then it had all stopped and that was why he was able to stand here, observing at his leisure. And there was nothing particularly unfathomable about any of this, but to him it *does* seem... unfathomable. And then it occurs to him that – even unbidden – these boulders, this hillside and this earth would still have assumed this same form, would still be just as unassuming, unvarying, and indifferent, and *this* is the really frightening thing. A person who could be more impassive than these impassive things would be a terrifying person indeed.

Now he is facing towards the village, and that white house is no longer the only conspicuous object in his field of view. From a distance, the horsetail pines look like a knitted layer of wool swaddling the surface of this perfectly round hill; the white of the snow is matte between the trees, ceding dominance to grey. But to describe it as a smoke blue colour would, he feels, perhaps be more accurate, up to a point – why not just go ahead and give the name “smoke blue” to this grey verging on blue. Between him and the hill is still the same welter of fields and ponds, is white, grey, black, and even withered yellow stalks of grass (swaying – close-up – gently with the wind), is contrapuntalism of hill and field. Thinking back to that shot





Illustration by Xiao Bao

again: apart from the – long-distance – hill, standing quietly out in the heath beyond the spooling fields, nothing else remains. Much cleaner. After filtering out the light reflected off the pondside snowdrift, the remnants of crops in the fields, and (towards the upper margin) the power lines, there remains only that elliptic arc bulging out like a little pregnant belly from the irregular lattice of fields, greyish-green, greyish-blue.

That white house, if he feels like it, could be photo-shopped out.

After all, this hill, and everything around it, is all he is really interested in seeing. And that white house would not be included even in that vague “everything” that he had been expecting. It is no more than a point in the picture where the wrong colour has been ap-



plied, the botched work of a second-rate artist – *just look around*, what need is there for a splodge of white like that? And its purpose – if indeed it does have a purpose – is as ridiculous as the sound of that word in the mouths of the villagers. A futile, thankless undertaking – but perhaps so futile an undertaking does not merit such harshness. The scenery around the village is the same as it has always been, especially now night has fallen, and the distant hill is slowly sinking into the darkness, only dimly discernable now as a silhouette, and the welter of fields has melted into a slick of greyish-brown, but with a crisper chiaroscuro now of black mud and white snow. There is a whistling around his ears as the wind whisks through the pine trees. He takes the little path past the trees towards the village trail, and the white building disappears.

Cold and darkness slump together to the ground. He steps lightly onto a patch of dry land; the cold is numbing his foot where the melted snow has soaked through the heel of his sock. He looks up. Above, a dome lined in luminescence, a firmament of cloud-refracted light, but when did these clouds appear on the scene anyway? He had been hoping to see stars, although perhaps the clouds might make for a slightly warmer night. The mud beneath his feet is starting to freeze, the damp snow hardening but not yet rigid. He slows his pace, walking with care. The fields are quiet, any possible noises dampened by the sound of wind, or else there simply are no other noises apart from his one deep footstep and one shallow footstep in the congealing mud and snow, a faint crackling that goes unechoed, the repetition tedious and monoto-

nous. He pays no attention to the sound. An increasing number of his footsteps are ending up in muddy water, and his trainers are probably soaked through already. He tells himself he must not stop again now, or else his feet are going to be frostbitten. And besides – barely worth mentioning – it's late, and he cannot afford any more delay. Before him, darkness. No, not completely black, because the shimmer of the snowfall variegates the shade of snow, field and trees, slightly. Though he cannot see clearly, there is little chance of him blundering into the pond. Just now, he had gotten here by following the edge of the pond. After leaving the white building, he remembers, he walked halfway around its circumference, so it follows that the quickest way to get back would be to keep to a straight line, and beyond the pond should be... but his knowledge of geometry is hard to apply in the dark, and the faint shimmer of the snow is of little help. He has to stop again and stamp his feet warm. Tilting his head to one side, he strains to hear anything in the sound of the wind. But there is nothing, no noisy firecrackers, no festive hubbub, no sound, even, of cars passing along the highway which ought to be close by. He is lost.

What he feels at first is not panic, but rather a slightly incredulous mockery at his own absurdity. He has not gone far at all, and besides – no matter which way you looked at it – this is his own turf, and even the fact that it is a snowy evening does not explain it, unless he is prepared to admit that he has been away for *that* long, or that his memory is *that* unreliable. To one side is a patch of open land where snow strata have piled up in waves. All he can see through the

trees is a fluorescent flickering, and everything beyond that is submerged in darkness, imperceptible. The pond behind him does not reflect much light either. The path can only be picked out from between the trees by looking up into the middle distance. Having confirmed that he is indeed lost, what he feels is something of a thrill. The unremarkable landscape he had breezed through in the afternoon might now turn out to be unexpectedly fruitful. In the darkness of night this day had transcended mediocrity, even allowing for the somewhat ridiculous fact of him being lost. But *this* – in a place that could not feel any more familiar – could be considered a precious experience. Keep walking, don't stop, keep on going – revelations may await.

It is the same up ahead. Scant difference between far and near. Any variation in the scenery has long since been expunged by night, and nothing remains but a few feeble monochromes: the blackness of the black is absolute, but the white lacks confidence in its whiteness, has inhibitions, is like a sheen of grease upon the black. But all is black beneath, and the mud might be a ditch might be a tree stump. Might even be wheat field and full of green seedlings. The wheat seedlings are black now too, the same colour as the mud, and the scraps of tamped snow are almost invisible. Although being lost does not worry him in the slightest, he still needs to pay more attention to where he puts his feet, for fear of putting them into an icy pothole. It is from this moment forth that he starts to feel his clothes are perhaps a little thin. Even though he has kept going, and even though the point at which things begin to freeze should not be *that* cold, actually,

his neck and face are beginning to prickle in the wind. He has removed his hands from his pockets, and – retracted into his sleeves – they are parked on his belly to help him keep his balance. His cold-numbered heel is starting to feel hot, and there are worrying inklings of itching. Field supersedes field, unfolding endlessly before him, and on the other side the dense mass of pines is split by the path. All he needs to do is not go into the woods, keep skirting along the edge in search of the village track, and even though it might end up being a roundabout sort of route it will get him out eventually. But where the trees thin out it becomes hard to distinguish between the path itself and the turnings that lead deeper into the woods. Obliquely clustered pine needles loom black against the grey sky above him. He has arrived at the foot of a hill.

Which hill this is, he does not know. The hills here are few, but all the ridges are similarly low, randomly kinking here and there, the peaks nestling together, the raised tracts of earth coalescing where they can. Most lack even a name. What he sees before him now is a gentle slope, and though he cannot yet see how far it rises it would probably not take him too much effort to climb up a way. On the other side is the path he has just been walking, bending around the foot of the hill, leading beyond. He stands pondering before the foot of the hill. For a while he thinks about sparking his lighter, but abandons the idea out of a feeling of trepidation that he himself does not entirely understand. Grabbing hold of the nearest tree trunk, he puts a tentative foot forward, and with bent back begins to ascend. The rough trunks are cold and

hard, and a few shreds of bark peel off at his touch. He carefully differentiates between ploughed earth, volcanic rock, and snow, his shoulders hunched for balance. His foot slips on a pine cone, and he grabs for the nearest tree. Alarmed by the feel of cold smoothness beneath his hand, he lets go of the trunk to regain his balance on a rock. He sniffs his hand: pine resin. Even frozen, it retains its fragrance. He continues his climb, conserving energy thanks to the conveniently intersticed trees. The scent of the resin becomes more intense, and the susurrus of pine needles is all around him. Through a gap in the trees he comes to a jutting boulder, which he scrambles up, and from whose peak he looks down at the hill. Earth has ebbed into night. The pallid silhouettes of hilltop and trees are barely visible in the vastness of the dark. The fields have vanished completely. There is no light, and no way that the village or the town could be on this side of the hill. He turns carefully around, still standing on the rock. There is nothing but homogeneous night – the whole world now seems to have been steeped in a black wash. Slowly, he lowers himself onto his haunches. The night wind roils between the peaks, sweeping a hoarse echo of the pines across the hillside. He forces himself to try and remember the approximate layout of the town and surrounding villages, but here, at the point of divergence between flatland and hill, having basically lost his sense of direction to the night, this is no easy task. But the absence of light here means only one thing: continuing ahead means going deeper and deeper into the hills, where peak meets peak and earthen tracts bulge like veins. The village is on the other side of the hill. He holds on to the edge of the

rock, extending a leg to steady himself on the ground, and carefully climbs back down.

Descending the hill is a laborious process. He relies on vague intuition to avoid wrong turns and plot as straight a line as he can. Leaving behind the support offered by the pines, he hunkers down and stretches one foot forwards while the other serves as a prop, waiting until the rest of his body has shifted position before scraping along behind. He is no longer looking at the path – there is nothing to see. Even during daytime it was hard to tell the difference between tree and tree, and the hillside itself displayed fewer variations still. All other thoughts gradually dissipate: he feels convinced that he needs to get back down and zigzag along the little path around to the far side of the hill if he wants to find the main road. And this is not, he realises with some trepidation, a familiar road, and he does not have absolute faith in his ability to distinguish one road from another on so dark a night. But things will be much better on the main road – easier going, better prospects. He continues to drag himself down the hillside, his ears still prowling the surrounding silence. No, apart from the sound of his own body, dampened by continuous wind, he hears nothing. It has probably been a long time since there were any wild animals on a moor such as this. And as for people (his heart jolts) – he has been hoping all along he might run into someone. But only now he has seen for himself does he truly understand: he is alone, lost, in the wilderness. Having reached the bottom of the hill he stands panting on the path. The path is still the same, no different from before, and the wheat field and snowdrifts, he is sure – to the extent that any cred-

ible claims can be made regarding layout and shape in this darkness – are still the same too. This, surely, is the way. And he will prove it, once his breathing has returned to normal. Apparently this expenditure of energy has been enough to draw sweat from his forehead. Wiping it away, he knocks his glasses askew – not that it makes much difference, in these conditions. There has been no increase in his other senses to correlate with the sharp decline in his sight: his hearing is no more sensitive than it was before – he still hears nothing but wind – and his nose does not seem able to smell much of anything either. The achromatism of this night transcends the visual. This hill, these trees and fields which just two hours ago had undergone so many dazzling metamorphoses at the touch of the red sunset rays, with such diverse modulations of sound and smell, were snuffed into bland uniformity by the night. Dark night, cold wind, nothing else. This is how lost he is. With the melting away of all those variations he has lost all ability to tell where here is. The way still exists, but now – indistinguishable from all the other possible ways – it is just another shade of grey within the black. Now the only way is the one which lies before him. Half out of determination, half out of resignation, he perseveres with this route, because what else can he do? His footsteps are becoming arrhythmic; he is starting feel hunger on top of cold, and on top of them both, impatience at how weary and helpless this trivial mishap has made him. There should be nothing particularly taxing about taking a walk in the snow on a dark night. The path has frozen solid, and the ground has no give to it now. Though soft, the snow is too thin, and he would prefer to tread

on the frozen mud, anyway, rather than get clots of snow in his shoes. The soles of his trainers squeak up against the frozen snowdrifts, scraping off ice shavings. The trees stand obscure to one side, motionless, like they too are frozen. He feels increasingly convinced he is the only living creature on this path. After increasing his pace for a while, he suddenly stops, turns on the spot towards the side of the track, and unzips his trousers. A burst of urine gushes out, thawing the snow and mud upon contact, or so he assumes.

The path does not immediately lead to a more open space after it has wound around the foot of the hill. Apart from the trees there is still nothing ahead of him but field – nothing to indicate the presence of buildings. Everything here is more primeval than he had imagined, with no traces of human habitation. He does not stop to reflect upon this any further, instead maintaining his spurt of energy to keep going, all the way to the next twist in the path, where a second path appears discreetly behind a screen of pines. He stops beside a tree and quickly takes a few steps backwards, like an animal retracing its tracks. He stands in the middle of the road, peering in both directions, bewildered. The hill he has just climbed is apparently bigger than he thought, which makes the quick traversal he had planned look less likely. This need not necessarily be a big problem – the real issue is the appearance of this fork in the path. He has no recollection whatsoever of passing a bifurcation like this one, and a quick replay of his memories produces no results. Stranded between two tines, his head starts to ache. The path on the left seems like the natural extension of the path

he has been walking along, but who can guarantee that this bumpy little path on the right, seemingly no more than a dead end behind the trees, will not prove to be the way out?

The hills embody silence. His breathing gradually becomes even, but now he seems to be able to hear the pounding of his heart. Everything around him remains a swath of darkness. His scalp is still rigid with tension. Yes, he is conscious of his own tension, and this is not something he is uncomfortable acknowledging. Maintaining tension is a necessary measure when it comes to calmly negotiating an unfamiliar environment. *An unfamiliar environment* – he almost laughs out loud at the choice of wording he has stumbled upon. He doubts his heart is beating more quickly, actually, because that pounding sound – he places his hand on his chest (no different from usual) – that sound is getting louder and, he suddenly realises, is in fact the sound of footsteps, the sound of somebody else's swift footsteps on the frozen ground. He looks towards the screen of pines – the sound is coming from behind them, footsteps fast and a little flustered, and now the contours of a person emerge from behind the trees. Thoughts revolve quickly in his head. The first thing he decides on is: *Speak standard Mandarin*. But prior to this he will cough, twice, and the reason he will cough twice is so as not to spook this person with the sudden sound of his voice. Just as he is coughing and preparing to call out his “excuse me sir”, the person gives a startled cry and freezes beside a pine tree. It is a female voice. He hesitates, then forces himself to continue (“excuse me miss”) and ask, in Mandarin, how to get to the town.

The town authorities, he clarifies, awkwardly. But now it is the woman who, clearly alarmed, is the one subjecting him to a string of questions, in the local dialect: Who is he? What's he doing? What town authorities? What's he up to here in the middle of the night? He cannot see her face. He cannot think of anything to say that will dispel her panic and suspicion. He speaks more slowly, trying his best to eliminate the awkwardness from his voice, and explains that he needs to find the town mayor, but he doesn't know which way he should go. She is silent in the darkness for a moment, then – presumably having lifted her hand to point somewhere – “that way, go around.” He does not understand which way, go around where. The woman slips out from behind the trees, heading back along the path he has come along, her hand pointing ahead of him. “That way.” She has already started walking away. He quickly calls out: “How far is it? How far is it still to go?” With a desultory twitch of her hand, she replies without turning back: “Keep walking.”

*Translated by Dave Haysom*



哨兵

## Shao Bing

Shao Bing (born in 1970) has received multiple awards in the course of his poetry career. Both the *Clear Water Castle* cycle and his earlier collection *Record of Rivers and Lakes* are centered on the major bodies of water in his home province of Hubei: Lake Hong, and the Yangtze River. More recently, Shao Bing has also recently taken to writing fiction.



*Clear Water Castle (a cycle)*

*Jacana*

In midsummer, far past the roosting season, in the protected  
wetlands of Lake Hong, a Jacana  
broods over some gorgon fruit, hovering over them like eggs  
in the middle of my path. Throughout the night  
the Jacana and I maintain our silence, facing  
off, like companions  
but more like mortal enemies. Time  
reverses its flow, the solitude on the lake surface and  
the mist, seem like the tragic aftermath of war  
I expect the Jacana to fly away, so that I can  
beat sundown, on my quest to find out where those watery jails  
used to hail. But the Jacana  
blocks the canoe, its manner serene  
unperturbed, no less than  
those ancient sages on the eve of martyrdom

*Window*

The four seasons are distinct on the lakeside  
and foggy. The wind is bewitched by  
the scent of lotus and rotting grass  
But the bee and butterfly, the lonely heron  
are not the only ones seduced by the life and death of vegetation  
I am too  
outside the window  
somewhere a toon tree decays, in September  
already conformed to the cold mists by the lake  
and desolate, two new branches  
explode out. And I  
have already conformed to the autumn sun above the window  
its complexity. Above the eaves  
a few mushrooms grow, sprout unfathomably  
from the lichen, inquisitive heads  
like new swallow hatchlings. Below the eaves bats  
ignore the miracles by the lake, busy ferrying  
lake flies and ladybugs, suckling  
the entire night—through the window  
beyond the rustling earth  
What else have I heard

*Clear Water Castle*

Everyone knows seaweeds never grow in Clear Water Castle, only a buried  
city from the Shang Dynasty. When the weather is fine  
at the bottom of the lake, I can spot its broken beams  
cracked corridors, hung with clouds passing by. A few archaeologists  
tell me the castle is crystal  
clear, it doesn't grow weeds, because its ancient tile  
foundation has absorbed the silt of Lake Hong. But at Clear Water Castle  
I've never believed the archaeologists, only history,  
only believed the primordial ones living there, weeding for me  
on the bottom, where they are rebuilding the city.

*Translated by Kyle Anderson*



# 王族

## Wang Zu

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Born in Gansu in 1972, Wang Zu served in the armed forces in Tibet's Ngari Prefecture during the nineties. He has published several collections of personal essays, in addition to works on the history and geography of Xinjiang, where he now lives.

# Snowfall

By Wang Zu

## 1. Observing

The snow grew in force, smothering the trees, the ground and the rocks in thick white coat after thick white coat. It made the trees become bulkier, the ground vanish without trace, and the rocks fade from solidity into fuzziness. Even the small stream that runs through the village ceased its usual babbling, going silent beneath the ice.

The snow took over each square foot quickly and efficiently, as if carrying out some long-planned attack. The land, transformed and silenced, belonged to the snow now. But the earth beneath seemed unconcerned, content to be wrapped in its blanket and dream deep white dreams. And as I thought these thoughts my own humble cabin seemed even more remote, alone in this endless expanse.

At noon the wind got up, catching the snow as it fell, the snowflakes appearing to fling themselves about. Perhaps they saw the ground approaching and, with strength yet left to spare, took advantage of the wind to fly about. The flakes flew in close formation, like a school of fish in the ocean.

A horse – not one I recognised – appeared from the barn and, seeing the snow, galloped off in pursuit. It was fast, a good horse. It held its head high, as if keeping sight of one particular snowflake it intended to chase down. But it soon found its efforts were in vain – the snowflake flew easily over the hill at the western end of the village, a leap the horse could not match. It stopped and walked back, head lowered.

The snow eased off in the afternoon, the sky calmer and the land bathing in the haze of falling snow. The different parts of the landscape started to show off their new looks: the trees had on new outfits and stood still and knowing; the mountains seemed to squat lower than before and looked unlikely ever to rise again. Or were they sitting cross-legged in meditative peace?

If only I could stand like a tree or sit like a mountain in such a snow. Let the snow cover me, make me another me, just one more snow-covered object among all the other silent things. Let me bare my soul to the snow and allow it to envelope me whole. And then? After the snow I would be at peace. All other things bare themselves to the snow and welcome its touch, but us people... we can't stop and be silent, we have places to go, things to say. So we hide our souls deep inside us, and our actions become cold and obsessive.

Oblivious, we are wrapping ourselves in coat after coat of snow.

## 2. Avalanche

If you look up, the slopes of the mountains seem to quiver under the sunlight, like the blade of a knife rocking to a rest. But squint and you see the snow remains cold and hard, the sense of motion coming only from the reflected light. But actually snowy days are usually the most still! The snow builds on the mountains, plumping them up, and at dawn those sharp young rays of sun run out to play in the snow... and find themselves stuck, held firm in the frozen heights. The back half of the sunbeam sees the plight which

has befallen its front half and tries to flee – but cannot leave its own body behind. And so the light flickers over the snow as the beams try to wriggle free. But it never works. And now the snow, angry at this rejection by friends it thought true, playmates that moments ago had rushed happily towards it, musters the cold of a thousand winters to harden further and fix them forever in place.

Or at least that is what I decided was happening as I squinted up at the mountains. Over thirty, and I'm still daydreaming like this. It's why I like to be alone: ideas come into my head, ideas that are for me more interesting than any amount of company. Several days back I saw Erun turning his head to watch a bull mounting a cow. I've written in my piece "Whipping" about Erun, and how he's shown no interest in women since his wife ran off with one of the other goat-herders. I wanted to convince him he shouldn't take it so hard. Why not find another woman? We'd be cooped up all winter, eating goat. If all the hormones from the meat accumulated inside him and one day he got to thinking about women and couldn't control himself... But I didn't have much in the way of teaching materials up here in the mountains, so I had several of the lads drive the mating cattle to where he could see them better, to put the idea into his head. He watched and watched, his gaze growing more intent. Time to strike! I wandered over and mentioned that several of the village women had an eye on him. Who, he asked, caught off guard. I listed the names and he seemed dubious but also excited. After we parted I walked off muttering to myself, probably something about being happy things might get better for Erun. I didn't notice Sulung's approach until he clapped me on the

shoulder: What are you doing talking to yourself? The question surprised me and I had to stop and think. Yes, what was I doing talking to myself?

Talking, to myself. I think it's because sometimes the ideas I have seem so powerful that by giving voice to them the things I imagine in my mind become real.

If any person, any normal person, talks to themselves they must have some true and fervent desire, so strong that speaking it out loud is its own reward, bringing its own happiness. But all that's just what I happen to think. It could be I'm the only one who feels this way.

My neck was stiff after hours of staring at the snow on the mountains, but just as I was about to leave something happened up there. That's why I had to write about this particular snowfall – in all the time I've spent gazing up there, only this once did I see anything unusual. It started with a dark streak flashing across the mountain slope, just visible for a split second and about halfway down. Then cracks appeared in the snow on the summit, as if someone had shoved it from behind, and huge blocks of snow started to tumble downwards. Some fell straight down while others hit some obstacle and were sent flying off into the air. Those that were sent flying were shattered by the impact and disintegrated in the air into smaller clumps of snow.

The calm on the mountain was destroyed by the roiling line of the avalanche. The tumbling blocks picked up more snow as they rolled on downwards, getting bigger and bigger, faster and faster, until soon they formed one single mass, a hand wiping its way from on high down the side of the mountain.





Illustration by Wang Yan

Avalanche! The village finally reacted, folk hearing the shout and rushing from their cabins to stop stupefied at the sight of that giant hand moving down the mountain. There hadn't been an avalanche for years and years, so this was new for many of them. Snow, in their experience, arrived in discrete falls, one after the other and hardly significant. Maybe the first fall means winter's here and the last of it melting means winter's gone, and so snow is as unloved as the season it ac-

companies. But you didn't think about it much. Yet now the snow had mustered an army and was charging down the mountain, its roar a battle cry. And for those soldiers there could be no better battlefield – each new slope awaited them like a fresh steed held ready, to be mounted and to speed them on ever faster.

Gradually that giant hand started to draw something beautiful. As it moved lower it left behind it a deep wound, like a knife had been dragged down the

mountainside. Several panicked crows, the sight of that sudden wound perhaps too frightening, fled over the summit and were lost to the other side. And just as the crows disappeared a clap rang out and an entire mountainside of snow now came loose, plummeting down the slopes and boiling up towards the sky. This was the real thing, a real avalanche. The rolling blocks of snow at the front became the head of some giant snow monster, the clouds left behind in its wake forming its tail. The monster came to the end of the slope and kept going, diving head-first into the pines behind the village. The trees reared back in unison, the snow they were clad in falling and leaving the branches naked again.

And everything fell quiet once more.

The avalanche monster, like any new-born cub, had no sense of direction. It saw the pines and flung itself towards them – and smashed itself to pieces, scattered on the ground, never to rise again.

What a thing to see, those final throes! For it to risk its life, all in pursuit of some thrill. And to experience that thrill and to die for it, with no regrets.

I obsessed over that moment the avalanche truly took shape, as it risked everything. What greater passion, what grander way to live, can there be? Its very determination to live giving it form, transforming it into something utterly beautiful. And at the moment it moved from life to death it again became something new – the *that* which existed went gladly to its death, and as it died another *that*, again something beautiful, came into being, into the world.

If only we people could do that!

The afternoon of the avalanche I noticed with surprise the goats hadn't been affected by it at all. I found

this a little hard to believe, as my years here at Baihaba had taught me these animals were far more sensitive than any human. There's a story of an antelope leaping over a ravine – the mother antelope wants to cross the river, but her child is too scared to make the jump. Eventually they jump, with the child using its mother's back as a springboard to get across. And as the young antelope lands safely on the other side, it hears its mother screaming from the river below...

So if antelopes can make such a sacrifice, how is it that their goat cousins could be so unmoved by the avalanche? I walked over to the pen for a closer look and realized they must have known about it – perhaps had even witnessed it – but were still indifferent. The avalanche had sent balls of snow rolling deep into the pine trees, even to the edge of their pen, yet the goats seemed to think this was no concern of theirs. If the avalanche had been a little bigger it would have buried the pen, perhaps even the village. But the goats took no view on the matter. The avalanche, it seemed, was not worthy of their attention.

What if you left the goats out in a storm? Let them be swallowed up by it, let it roar over them and buffet them. Perhaps they would react in exactly the same way. That indifference is one way of enduring, of remaining aloof.

Later Gerlin let the goats out to drink from the village stream. The goats were all parched and hurried off to lap at the ice-cold water – all but one, a mischievous kid who veered off towards the blocks of snow left by the avalanche. Happy as could be, he spent his time licking moisture from the snow and hopping back and forth. The other goats, thirst sated, gazed back at the kid with their empty eyes, never reacting. Just a

silly youngster, getting all excited over an avalanche. It didn't realise how close it had come to disaster. If the pines hadn't been there to protect them, they'd probably all be dead.

The kid got bored and, oblivious to the other goats, returned to the pen as if nothing had happened. It even seemed happy. Perhaps spending all day with those boring grown-up goats made it so miserable that any event, good or bad, was worthy of celebration.

As far as that mischievous kid was concerned, there was no danger of anything ever happening in the world.

That was all days back, and when I write about it now – the avalanche, the indifferent goats and the playful kid – it all seems fantastic. One minute it's that monster of the avalanche charging downhill to a glorious death, the next it's the goats unmoved in the face of disaster. In reality we're just the same as those goats, every single one of us. And sometimes I'm that kid, happy and free, forgetting all cares.

It's interesting. I see a lot more in this village than I actually experience, and it's the watching that seems more meaningful. I obsess over it, and when I come to from my daydreams I find myself still more distant. Which is why I can never bring myself to throw my pen away.

### 3. Death

The land has a spot waiting for everyone who dies. In he goes, and then the sun keeps shining on it, the snow falls in layer after layer, and under it all he sleeps the deepest of sleeps, never again to make any sound.

Biel died in the snows.

He rode off into the forest behind the village to set his rabbit snares, the cold so harsh that by the time he set off home his upper lip was smeared with snot. The snow of several days back was keeping the temperature so low that nobody ventured out – Dulen lost three sheep and nobody even knew. In times like that we lived simply, the village appearing empty except for the odd figure rushing back and forth to toss a fork-load of fodder to the goats and horses. The animals were hushed too, munching away with not a sound disturbing the cold hard air. A few chimneys would start to smoke later as folk brewed tea, but nobody went out. Sulung told me that one year one of the old men drank too much milk tea – out of boredom, most likely – and had to go out for a piss. It was so cold the stream of urine froze right there, hanging off him like an icicle. The story made me laugh – imagine the sight of him stuck there! Such potential for comedy – if only one of the women had seen him...

Normally in weather like this Biel would stay indoors. But he and his wife had argued, so off he went. His wife had objected when he'd said he was off drinking with Erun and the others. What's the point of staying here all day, he snapped. What am I going to do, ride you? I've been riding you for years and your belly's never grown once! And that made his wife angry too: And you think that's my fault? You're the one with the problem! Get Erun over here, we'll let him have a shot and see what happens, then we'll know who's got the problem. Biel realized he'd pushed too far, but couldn't back down: You think he's not had any for so long he'll want you? I'll tell you something, when his wife ran off he swore never to ride anyone again. And they bickered back and forth like that until

they lost interest. Biel grabbed his snares and left, his wife getting in a final volley as he went: Nothing but rabbit again? No wonder you're too weak for riding! Biel ignored her, so she kept going: Go then, I'll find someone else for a ride. Biel just kept walking. Enraged, she cursed him: Go then! Break your neck out there! Freeze to death!

She never expected that those curses would come true. Biel was riding home after setting the snares, spurring the horse on so he could get out of the cold and home for a bowl of hot tea. He knew his wife would still be furious and he'd have to get his own tea, but home is home after all. Where else are you going to go? And he knew too he had to keep riding her – one day, maybe one day, that belly would swell. He slapped the horse's flank again and again and the horse, although unsure in the thick snow, gathered speed. And suddenly Biel was floating gently downwards. The horse had fallen into a hollow and stumbled. As Biel cried out the horse managed to regain its footing and leap clear, but the jolt sent Biel flying headfirst into a boulder. He didn't hear the horse whinny in fright or see it gallop off towards the village.

Biel lay in the snow, never to stand again, never even to open his eyes.

He wasn't found till that afternoon, by another villager out on the hill to check his own snares. His body was already stiff with the cold, his face covered with a dark crust of frozen blood. The villager slung Biel's corpse over his horse and took him back to the village. On seeing the corpse his wife wailed and fell to the ground. Everyone came out to stand by the body, the cold no longer important. Biel's mother lay atop her dead son and sobbed helplessly. Then she pounced at

her daughter-in-law, cursing and scratching: You useless cow, what did you send him out into the cold for? The villagers pulled her off: Don't blame her, it's not his wife's fault, you can't blame her! They praised Biel, saying all the good things they could think of to console his mother, their words weighted with their own grief at Biel's death. He was a good man, was Biel. A joy to hear on the flute; easy to get on with, most of the time. And he might not have managed to father any children in six years of marriage, but he was a fine herder. Lovely flock of goats. But what good could it do? With no grandchildren to dote on, her son was still her baby. She held his corpse and wept and wept, the onlookers shivering but unable to leave. Finally she stopped weeping and Biel was carried into a vacant cabin.

Between the cold and the death the atmosphere in the village changed, becoming desolate.

A story went round the next day, about Biel's horse. It turned out that after Biel was thrown off it fled back to the village, but not to Biel's – it got into someone else's paddock, where there was fodder to steal. Nor did it go home once it had its fill – it just lay there and slept. If it had gone back to Biel's his wife would have known something was wrong. A search party sent out to follow the horse's tracks through the snow would have found him. If they'd been quick enough perhaps Biel could have been saved. It was the animal's fault, they said, that Biel had died. For its part in Biel's death, or maybe for stealing fodder, it got a beating as it was driven back home.

But the old folks objected to that: you can't treat a horse like that! It doesn't know what's going on! It was Biel's fate to die in the snows this year, there was

no way of preventing it. The opinions of the old folks carried a lot of weight in the village. They'd lived here for decades and whatever happened, they'd seen it happen before and knew how to deal with it. People would listen to them, and – having listened – agree that yes, what they said made sense. The village was small and isolated, like some remote tribe, and while some things had gradually changed in the decades and decades those old folk had lived, other things were just the same as they'd always been. Those changes, or lack of changes, are the language in which time speaks, how it makes us think and learn, and sum up what we've experienced. So the elders were respected and trusted, because they had the experience the younger folk lacked. They had a special status within the village and when there were decisions to be made they were often given the final say.

I spoke with Sulung about this: "There's a lot of new things from outside turning up here now, and you used to work in the education bureau in town. You'll be helping make the decisions one day."

He laughed: "What do you mean?"

"Things to do with the outside," I said.

He thought about it for a moment. "You're right," he said. "There's more stuff coming in from outside, and more of us going out. Things are changing!"

After the funeral the villagers went to console Biel's wife. She was looking pale and thin, half-dead herself. And the more we told her otherwise, the more she was convinced her curse was to blame.

Sulung's sister-in-law is a good talker, so she tried to help: "You can't think like that. Couples always fight. And anyway, it's a good thing he died this year!"

That caused a few gasps. What did she think she

was saying? And when she saw she'd caught our attention she proceeded to reel us in: "Think about what a good life he had. There was always plenty of young goat meat to eat, his herd and horses are all healthy, he could do anything he wanted... well, apart from being a father..." She turned that round quickly: "And it's good that you don't have kids, it means you'll be able to remarry. Anyway, if he'd got older he'd have been losing his teeth, wouldn't even have been able to eat the young goats; his legs wouldn't have been able to get up the mountain; his eyes would have gone as well, wouldn't even have known what time of year it was. So it was a good time for him to die. He'd enjoyed the best of life and anything else would have been a waste. And you can remarry! You're rich now, all those goats are yours. You can remarry, have kids, start a whole new life..."

"Nobody'll have her," someone muttered at my side. I elbowed him to keep him quiet and he shut up. Outside he spoke to me: Some new start, Biel and I were good friends. That wife of his has been with plenty of other men, yet her belly stays flat as the pastures...

I asked him to keep that to himself, for Biel's sake. He nodded agreement.

*Translated by Roddy Flagg*





# 歐陽江河

## Ouyang Jianghe

Known for his calligraphy as well as his art criticism and poetry, Ouyang Jianghe (born in 1956) was a key figure in Sichuan's avant-garde poetry scene in the 1980s. Influenced by Ezra Pound and Wallace Stevens, his work has appeared in numerous literary journals (including *Asymptote* and *Poetry* magazine). An excerpt of Austin Woerner's translation of "Phoenix" was included in the Autumn 2014 issue of *Pathlight*.



# Ouyang Jianghe: Resistance and the Long Poem

Interview by Shu Jinyu

*Ouyang Jianghe has taken a resolute stand against our commodified era. In 2011, Ouyang's "Tears of the Taj Mahal" won the Chinese Literature and Media's 2010 Annual Poetry Award. The writer and critic Li Tuo remarked that while Ouyang's lofty, tearful extolment of love might appear unsophisticated, in fact it represents a literary reaction against modernity.*

*His sense of the avant-garde does not end there. In 2012, Ouyang Jianghe's long poem "Phoenix" also served as a spearhead pointed at the current reality, incorporating hard hats, scaffolding, and other symbols of labor, capitalism, and art into poetry.*

*After not writing for a decade, what set his pen to paper again? With accomplishments in calligraphy and music as well as other disciplines, why does he regard poetry as his lifelong love?*

**Shu Jinyu:** You began writing poetry in the 1980s in Chengdu. Over these past thirty years, what kind of changes have you seen in your poetry?

**Ouyang Jianghe:** My poetry has gone through three distinct phases. The first phase began in 1983 when I formally started writing, and lasted until 1993

when I left the country. Most of those poems were about eloquence, about one man making proclamations to others, and the pace was quick and the voice loud. The second phase began when I went to America and lasted until I came back to China in 1997. Living in the United States and Europe, I was a poet without an audience, since no one could understand what I said. My poetry became a quiet, low soliloquy, the spiritual circumnavigation of a Chinese poet no longer in China. In the third phase, I stopped writing for ten years after I returned to China. From 1998 to 2008, I restrained myself as best I could, since I had no way to respond to the tremendous changes China was undergoing. The slowness of three thousand years of change and the rapidity of those thirty years of change oddly mirrored each other. I want poetry to have an overriding structure, and when I couldn't see myself in that mirror, I felt afraid.

The critical change that took place in my writing in 2008 happened when I went with Xi Chuan, Zhai Yongming and some other poets to India. We went to see the Taj Mahal, and it was as though I'd received a great shock. Suddenly I found myself crying. "Tears of

the Taj Mahal” opened up a new phase in my writing.

**Shu:** Your poetry collection *Such Hunger for Learning: Collected Poetry of Ouyang Jianghe 1983-2012* was published by Writer’s Publishing House as one of their “exemplary poetry collections.” How do you understand that term?

**Ouyang:** Before 2012, all of my best poetry fell into that category, and most of those works had already become influential. After the commodification and belittlement of poetry, it’s an expression of interest in and respect for the best poetry. Having this standard for poetry hanging there like a sword is good for writers, that’s very clear. I admit that there are many ways of writing, but some of them are exemplary and some are not. Poetry is the product of an understanding of the world. It creates a conversation with the world, a living, pure text. For me, poetry is a conversation with the interior of life, a kind of questioning or even a violent interrogation, but every sentence has to embody some sort of life. At the same time, it must present itself in the depths of language, thought, and wisdom, in all its complexity and expansiveness. I prefer poetry that is both broad and deep.

**Shu:** From short poems to long poems, what kind of changes has your writing undergone? And how many people still read long poems nowadays? Or is it

that you want your long poems to serve as a model for contemporary poetry?

**Ouyang:** Our society turns everything into commodities, even memory, emotion, and youth. I want to write the kind of poetry that cannot be commodified. If you have to put in some effort to think and reflect, if you have to do intellectual work, then it’s something that guards against commodification, and resists it. Our age is more and more fragmented, so I write long poems in response.

I don’t want to become some kind of model for others. I’d much rather be a challenge, a challenge to Ouyang Jianghe as well. It’s not that I want to write better than I have in the past; rather, it’s to be different, to have a higher pursuit, to increase the intensity, to widen my perception, to be even more indefinable, even more steadfast. Long poems have to seek the indefinable, in an attempt to resist the commodification of language. The language of media, of text messages and microblogs – those clever snippets of a few dozen characters – is a kind of commodification. It’s all entertainment. This sort of thing has already become an inherent part of commodified language. At least the long poem doesn’t let people read as consumers. My poetry rejects the pretty scenery of language. My long poems must not be merely clever. I take great pains to lend them a kind of weight and profundity. For me, writing long poems is a kind of torture and weight.

One of my ambitions is for my writing to be an effective way of resisting the transformation of language into a simple commodity or a carnivalesque object. My questioning nature, my point of view, my existence, my thoughts all get projected in mirror image into my long poetry, writing painfully, persistently, without aiming for any recognition. I want to use many voices, I want to turn long poetry into something highbrow and unpopular that lives off of the intellectual energy of the Chinese language. As long as it isn't commodified, it doesn't matter if no one will touch it. I want to open up these sorts of possibilities.

**Shu:** Rilke said that turning points when writers recover their writing are often a gift from God. What do you think the real reason was for your picking up writing again after ten years? A lot of poets have given up writing poetry, abandoning it almost entirely.

**Ouyang:** It's very clear that not writing is part of the way I can maintain my writing. Poets have the right not to write, it's a structural formation, an essential factor in the meaning of writing itself. That's not to say that during this period of "not writing" I wasn't publishing and writing things other than poetry. I was also still using a poet's mind and eye to react to the world, to time, to life. It's only in the sense that I didn't produce finished poetry books that I stopped my writing. This is part of the way I look at writing: writ-

ing doesn't only occur on the page, that's too easy. I want to have control over my inspiration. Not writing is different for me than for other writers. There are lots of poets who have become novelists, or become officials. For many, poetry is just one stop along the journey of life, but for me it's not a question of choice, it's like having smallpox. I don't believe at all that writing poetry can better my life, or give me a new life. It's a kind of work. I was born a poet. I have no other way of expressing what I perceive in this world.

Not writing for ten years gave me something very important. It's said that one's opinion of books is not defined by what one has read, but by what one has not read. Writing poetry is the same. One's opinion of writing is not defined by what one has written, but by what one has not written. I went through ten years of forcing myself not to write, just writing one poem a year. I couldn't help it and I'd secretly write a poem a year. It was like a diabetic sneaking candy, not like writing professionally.

**Shu:** Are periods of writing and of not writing clearly delineated? How does one control it?

**Ouyang:** The impetus behind anybody's writing is mysterious. Pound, Du Fu, Li Bai, Li Shangyin. The tools they used were different, the languages were different, but these minds were all treasures of the human race. When Garcia Marquez won the Nobel Prize, he

was asked, what has literature given to you? He said, when you meet someone else in this universe with the same kind of mind, you recognize it immediately. That recognition is what literature gives to you. When I'm writing poetry, I'm meeting and colliding with minds that have come before, and that's what poetry has given me.

I have always had a reverence for Chinese poetry, and an ambition to surpass it. Maybe I'll fail, and maybe I'm not up to the task, but it's a kind of existence.

**Shu:** You once said: "I'm doing things that have to do with poetry, but my life does not depend on poetry." Is your life still like that today?

**Ouyang:** There is a library in my head of musical melodies that I could play without stopping for twenty thousand hours. I write music criticism, I practice calligraphy, I love life. Life has so many possibilities, so why would I fixate on poetry? I always have reason enough to call myself a poet.

**Shu:** In the years you lived in the United States, did you write in Chinese?

**Ouyang:** You can still be a commander from afar, even if it's only on paper. "A commander on paper" is also one way of being. Derrida said that there is nothing outside of language, that we all live on paper. I lived in New York, but where I lived had nothing to do

with my writing. In terms of language and modes of thought, I was still living in China. Everything I internalized and contemplated had to do with China.

**Shu:** When you returned to China, what state did you find Chinese poetry in?

**Ouyang:** Contemporary poetry in China is always changing. It's quite lively, and more and more people are writing poetry. Moreover, all kinds of different motivations and backgrounds lead people to join the poetry ranks. In the past year or two, the excellent sales of some serious and accomplished poetry books has been encouraging, which has spurred more top-notch poetry writing. New methods of dissemination have also influenced poetry writing. There's been the appearance of Internet language, and some poetry fads that have taken off only after appearing online. In a traditional publishing environment, this kind of poetry could never have gotten through even the first layer of censorship. The poetry that has turned into parody and entertainment doesn't represent poetry's essential qualities; it's just an offshoot, or a bubble. Nevertheless from the angles of distribution and of writing itself, it has had an influence on poetry.

**Shu:** What are your thoughts on the contentious meeting of poets at the Panfeng Forum?

**Ouyang:** The forum presented a conflict between

the popular and the intellectual. This conflict has only influenced poetry in terms of external publicity and criticism. Serious poets don't pay attention to such criticism, and I don't think the Panfeng Forum had any real effect on what's being written. The division between the intellectual and the popular involves many factors, and you'll realize that the division isn't inherent in poetry. It's a sociological division. The real division in poetry is between good poetry and bad poetry.

**Shu:** The long poem "Phoenix" has been very influential in poetry circles. But the writing in it is quite different from our traditional understanding of poetry.

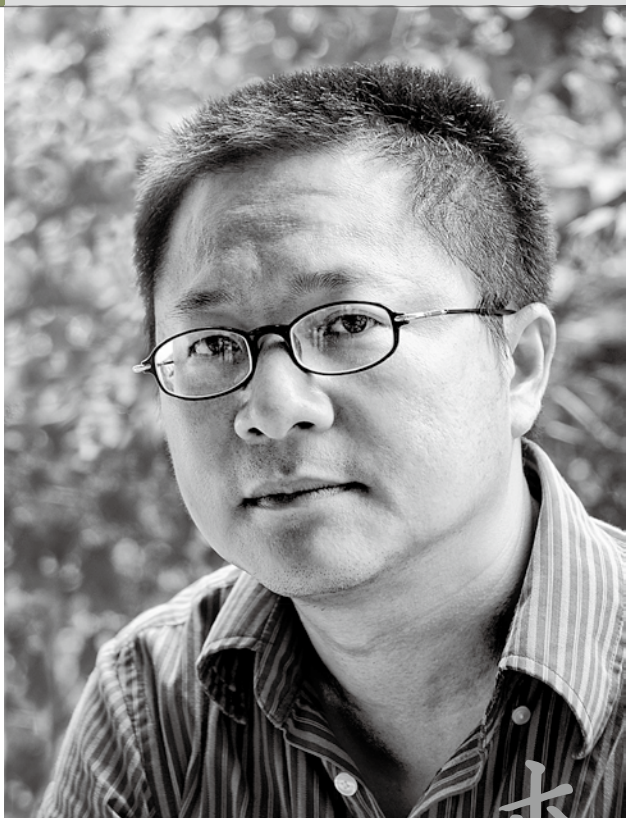
**Ouyang:** My writing tries to express an aesthetic appeal for anti-consumerism, and more, it offers a vision that goes beyond poetry criticism. I bring rationality and irrationality into play too, combining them to create a certain poetic quality. Of course, it's not a beautiful or moving quality. For me, that's much too simple, even juvenile. My kind of poetic quality, aside from its resistance and critical consciousness, also has the excitement inherent in youthful purity – feelings of frustration and wild joy, as well as anger.

**Shu:** How do you feel about the current situation of poets in China?

**Ouyang:** Literature written in Chinese has

reached a high point of maturity, but another aspect has been continually neglected: complexity and expansiveness. My ambition is for my poetry to become an accelerator for language, for my language to reflect my individuality, and for it to change an aspect of the Chinese language as a whole. I've always felt that Chinese isn't precise enough, and more and more it leaves out certain words and objects. I hope to use my writing to reinvigorate it. Any contemporary poet without this aspiration cannot go far. Finally, there is a grave absence of real poetry criticism, since criticism has already become systematized and rote, rather than springing from the flourishing depths of poetry itself.

*Translated by Eleanor Goodman*



李少君

## Li Shaojun

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Li Shaojun was born in Hunan in 1967. Formerly the editor-in-chief of the literary journal *Tianya*, he now works at the periodical *Poetry*. His collections include *Grassroots Anthology* (2010) and *Nature Anthology* (2014), and he has also published essays and fiction.



### *The Legend of the Sea*

She sits at the center, stars dangle over the fields  
Grass shrimp, flower crab and eel perform in the palace  
Whales are the vanguard platoon, gulls come treading on the waves.

I sit on the shoals of the cape and rest for a bit  
wind ripples through the drapes, knocks along the chimes  
the sea is like smooth stained glass in the moonlight  
the waves of my heart have yet to surge

Then, she suddenly laughs like a crashing wave  
the tides roar, folding forward in contest  
only a faint whisper when it reaches my ear

But that tiny sound, spooks me from my skin  
I become that vagabond roaming between sea and sky

### *Mount Jingting*

All our strivings cannot match  
a bout of spring wind. It persuades perfume from the flower,  
presses the bird to call. It delights all creatures,  
causes love to glow.

All our strivings cannot match  
a bird's singular burst upwards into a clear sky.  
At dusk it must return to its nest.  
We who cannot return,  
prodigals, where will our spirits rest?

All our strivings cannot match  
a pavilion on Mount Jingting.  
It is the heart. A million vistas converge here.  
Men like clouds float in from all directions,  
sojourn here to worship.

All our strivings cannot match  
one verse from drunken Li Bai.  
It gathers us to drain our goblets and howl,  
forgetting the millennia that separate us.  
Together, we disappear into the valley.

*Idle Musings in Spring*

The cloud places a white hat on the mountain peak.  
The alley and the vine intertwine, involving a few flowers and grasses.  
Oh, spring wind, you hustle and make your rounds  
blowing the fragrance of wild flowers to the four corners,  
making the cows, sheep  
and self-guided men and women drive into the mountains, where they go missing...

These are only some idle thoughts  
the emerald hills are unmoved still, set on meditation.

*Translated by Kyle Anderson*



# 劉慶邦

## Liu Qingbang

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Liu Qingbang, born in Henan in 1951, spent time working in coal fields before they became the subject and setting of his journalism and eventually fiction. *Spirit Wood*, one of his two novellas to have received the Lao She Literature Prize, was also adapted into Li Yang's 2003 movie *Blind Shaft* (recipient of the Silver Bear at the Berlin International Film Festival). He also received the Lu Xun Literature Prize for his short story "Shoes."

# Pigeon

By Liu Qingbang

His employees dubbed him “Mine Director Niu” as if he were the manager of a large state-owned mine rather the owner of a small independent pit. They even copied the way state mineworkers talk, dropping the word “Director” from the title, their way of feeling up to date and part of the modern world perhaps, so that when they spoke to him it was: “Mine Niu this” and “Mine Niu that.” “Niu” means “cow”, so visitors not in the mining business would momentarily draw a blank. Surely this was a coalmine? What was all this about cows? As far as Mine Niu was concerned, they could call him whatever they liked as long as it wasn’t “Mr Milk It” or some other cow-based witticism.

Mine Niu came out of his office a little after eleven and looked over the low wall towards the entrance of a nearby pit. It was a sloping shaft, the entrance set into a level place about half way up the hill. By craning his head a little, he could take in everything that was happening. The pulley rigged on the metal struts was turning, and then, as the steel tackle came to an end, out rolled six mine-carts piled high with rough-cut coal, each weighing exactly a ton when fully loaded. He loved watching the full carts shunting out of the shaft. The mules shat, the coal rolled out, and as long as it kept rolling he knew there was nothing to worry about; everything was working as normal below. He loved the sound of coal pouring from the full carts into the long metal pans, *shhh*, like wind through a pinewood. It was music to him; his whole being eased at the sound; unquenchable cheerfulness lighting his face. The black stuff was in high demand right

now, and as the days got colder, the queue of waiting dumper trucks grew. Day in, day out, coal would pour from the opening at the far end of the long metal pans straight into the trucks below without once touching the ground, and as the product rolled out, so the money rolled in: a ton of coal was worth between two and three hundred yuan. Large red characters above the entrance to the mineshaft proclaimed: “Black Coal Yields Gold.” The scene before him lived up to the words; the dark stuff shunting out from the mine below took on a certain lustre in his mind’s eye.

His spirits fell abruptly as a sedan drove through the main gate. He knew it was a government inspector, well before he could make out the words written on the side of the car, merely by the way it hardly slowed as it swept through the gate towards him. The fact that his pit was in a far-flung corner of the mountains didn’t stop fox-nosed officials from braving the lapsed state of the road, some of which lay along a dry river bed, to reach him. Government reps from a whole host of different departments, Health and Safety, National Resources, Environmental Protection, the Tax Department, would descend on him in turn and sometimes all at once. It didn’t make any odds where this one was from, he would still have to tug his forelock, play the fool and dance attendance. Such a visit would inevitably involve some sort of cash outlay. If he mucked it up and offended them in some way, they would do their worst, picking up on any fault with the mine, which could mean a fine upwards of ten thousand yuan.

He viewed the approaching car with dismay, be-

ginning to panic. Trying to avoid the official was an automatic reflex; his first instinct was to hide. But it was too late to escape the premises. He turned and slipped through the nearest door, the Guard Unit office at the end of the long line of mine buildings – a row of nine south-facing rooms. His office was five rooms in, right at the centre, following the convention that the most important person at a gathering of leaders gets to sit in the middle for the photograph. A red brick patio, enclosed by a low wall, formed an open courtyard. To the south of it, the national flag flew in splendour from the top of a tall metal flagpole. This was Mine Niu's way of making a distinction between himself and other local pit owners. It wasn't every small pit that flew the red flag.

The car threw up a cloud of coal dust as it drove into the courtyard. He glimpsed the words "Public Security" in large characters on the car door, as it flashed past the window. What on earth were the police doing here? He didn't dare stay hidden a moment longer and, before the car had come to a complete halt, he had charged out, bobbing and smiling, to greet the visitors. He relaxed slightly when he saw Chief Inspector Wang from the Northern District Station getting out of the car. He knew Wang. If they met out drinking they would act like old friends.

"Chief Inspector Wang! Nice to see you here!" Two white hands came together in a handshake.

The Chief Inspector didn't return the smile. He wore his on-duty expression. "Director Niu," he said, "you're doing well for yourself I see."

"Things are ticking along, but I wouldn't say I can relax quite yet."

The Chief Inspector withdrew his hand from Niu's grasp. "That's a lot of trucks you've got there," he said, waving towards the long line beneath the loading station. "Surely every one of those trucks is worth a

packet."

"The challenge is digging enough coal to fill them. It doesn't happen overnight. Please, why don't you both come and sit down in my office." The other person was the driver, another uniformed officer.

Once seated, the Chief Inspector began by inquiring about the security situation at the mine. All was well, Niu told him, there had been no recent incidents. The cook, an old man with short white hair, stuck his head round the door. It was nearing midday and as it looked as though the visitors would be staying for lunch, he wanted to ask Mine Niu for instructions.

"Why not slaughter a chicken," said Niu. "Make sure you buy a large one with a bit of fat on it."

"A hen or a cockerel?" asked the cook.

"A hen?" Niu replied, looking inquiringly at Chief Inspector Wang.

The Chief Inspector brushed the question aside, saying they shouldn't go to any trouble. He had a job to do. He wasn't here to eat lunch.

"That won't do at all," said Niu. "You've always looked after our concerns and we intend to treat you."

Chief Inspector Wang had more to say. He remarked that chickens were all plumped up with hormones these days; there was nothing to get your teeth into, no taste to them at all. It was abundantly clear he didn't want chicken. Mine Niu and the cook looked at each other uncertainly.

A pigeon landed not far from the doorway, shortly followed by another, as if something had caught their eye on ground just there.

The Chief Inspector's eyes lit up. "Come to think of it, pigeon's not bad," he said. "In fact a pigeon tastes similar to how a bantam chicken used to taste."

Taking his cue, Niu told the cook: "Go and ask who the pigeons belong to. Buy a couple. Pigeons are pretty small so get at least two of them. Make sure you



pay the owner,” he emphasised.

The Chief Inspector continued inquiries about the security situation. Had any more mules been stolen, he asked. There were a couple of hundred mules at the mine, all different varieties, used to haul the coal up from underground. The mineworkers looked after them. A few months previously, a gang of masked thieves with clubs and guns got away with seven mules in the night.

Niu told the Chief Inspector he’d asked the guards to organise patrols around the clock, and the thieves hadn’t been back since.

Chief Inspector Wang expressed his approval, then asked: “Do you ever get any wild fowl on the prowl?”

“No, not really, that kind of bird is pretty rare around here.”

“How come? Other mines have flocks of them.”

“There’s no need for working girls. Most of the men are migrant workers from Sichuan or Guizhou. They’ve come out here with their wives. Think about it, there’s enough meat at home; no need for them to go hunting.”

Their talk turned to whether these feral birds were hormone-fed too, like the chicken. All skin and bone, they looked great but had no taste to them. Niu and Wang grinned like rogues, their banter easing the conversation.

The cook hesitated in the doorway, as if unwilling to speak in front of the guest, hoping the Director would step out of the office for a minute. He was empty handed so Niu knew he hadn’t managed to buy the pigeons.

“If you’ve got something to say then out with it,” he said sternly. “Chief Inspector Wang is no stranger.”

“The pigeons belong to Tang Xiaoming and he doesn’t want to sell them,” said the cook.

“You told him you’d pay him, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I started at five yuan a bird and ended up offering him twenty, but he still refused.”

“That’s too little, I reckon. Twenty yuan a bird won’t do it. Offer to give him fifty or even a hundred. He won’t say no to that.”

Niu glanced at Wang as he spoke. The Chief Inspector was sitting on the sofa, apparently oblivious to what was going on.

Tang Xiaoming, the owner of the pigeons, looked after the mine’s lamp room. He allocated a numbered lamp to each miner as they went down, and collected them in again as they came up, slotting them back into the charging unit in order. This was light work compared with digging at the coalface, and he had quite a lot of free time. Instead of playing Majong or getting drunk or wandering off into the fields, he had put the time to good use, digging a vegetable garden in the spare ground in front of the lamp room, growing tomatoes, aubergines, chillies, onions and radishes. In one corner he had planted roses, cockscomb, violets and a plum. There was so much mule dung around, he had no need of chemical fertilizers.

The vegetables did very well on mule dung. It was nearly Mid-Autumn Festival and the garden was still full of plump tomatoes and shiny purple aubergines. His flowers never seemed to stop blooming, and then there were the pigeons. He had started with a pair of newly-mated birds and now had a flock of seven pairs; the original birds producing twelve offspring. He had built a comfortable roost for them out of wooden strips, set against the wall of the dormitory. Other mineworkers bought corn from the village to feed their mules so that they would work harder and bring in the money. Tang Xiaoming fed corn to his pigeons but without any ulterior motive; he didn’t sell them, he just liked pigeons. He did it for fun, he said.

After sending the miners below with their lamps



Illustration by Wang Yan

each morning he would open up the pigeon roost, watching as the birds shook out their wings and launched into the sky. He loved the clap of their wings as they left the ground, and the movement of the flock through the air, especially in autumn when the sky was so high and blue and the sun so bright. The sunlight flashed from their white plumage, and as the flock came together, the rapid flicker of white wings in the sun became one vast shimmering canvas of dark and

light. Tang Xiaoming watched them spellbound, transported by the sight, as if he too had grown wings and flew with the flock.

Yang, the cook, knew who the pigeons belonged to. He found Tang Xiaoming in his room shaving the head of a miner friend who shared his dormitory. He was scraping away with a safety razor as he didn't have a cut-throat. None of the miners were keen on the hairdressing establishments in town. They didn't know

how to shave a head properly and, before you knew it, the girls were giving you a head massage, pushing the price up and making the whole thing unaffordable. His friend's hair was pretty thick and the soapy water made everything slippery, so it wasn't an easy job. Clumps of hair got stuck in the razor casing, dulling the blade. Tang Xiaoming took his time, undid the screw, cleaned the hair out and carried on. Yang said hello and asked him if he could buy a couple of pigeons.

Tang Xiaoming knew at once that something was up. Yang was the cook after all; he knew how to use a cleaver. Any living thing delivered to his hands, be it chicken or rabbit, pigeon or fish, would be cut up into chunks in an instant, bones included, then thrown into boiling water or tossed into a wok of hot oil. Nevertheless, he asked Yang why he wanted them.

"I've always fancied keeping pigeons," Yang said.

"Don't try it on, Mr Yang," said Tang Xiaoming. "What do you take me for?"

So Yang explained the real reason for his visit. *He* had no wish to kill the pigeons and despised the Chief Inspector's gall at such a request.

"Officials these days, who do they think they are?" he said. "They're sick of eating animals that live on the ground and now they're starting on the birds of the air. When they've eaten all the birds, what will they start on next?"

"He can eat the man in the moon for all I care, but he's not eating my pigeons."

"Look, he's an official; we have to jump to it when he gives the order. If you don't sell me some pigeons, what am I going to tell the boss?"

"What's the problem? If you want to buy something it has to be for sale in the first place. My pigeons are not for sale. That's not against the law, you know."

"How about this: I'll give you twenty yuan a bird. Go on, what do you say? If you won't sell, I'll leave you in peace."

"I'm sorry but you'll have to go back empty-handed."

The miner cocked his melon-like head and tapped it with his finger. "This thing on my neck is newly shaven," he shouted after Yang. "You can have it if you want."

Yang let out a snort: "Your bony head wouldn't make a dish."

"Show a little mercy with that knife of yours! You can't just cut up everything you see. Just because you can get it on a plate doesn't mean it's food."

"As if you had any say in it!"

Yang was about to go back to Tang Xiaoming and offer the higher price, but Niu told him call Mr Li over. Li could go in his place. Mr Li was Mine Niu's driver and constant companion. You could say he spent more time with the Director than the Director spent with his wife. In fact, Niu had secrets known only to Mr Li; matters not even his wife was aware of. Mr Li acted as Mine Niu's secretary and bodyguard, and had become his most trusted advisor.

Everyone at the mine knew about their special relationship. Some called Mr Li the second-in-command behind his back. The *si* in *siji*, or "driver", sounded like the *si* in *sizhang*, or "Bureau Chief," so that's what they called him. Mr Li objected, saying he was more like a

groom than a Bureau Chief. But Mine Niu didn't ride a horse, so where did the idea of a groom come in? Mr Li would convince any doubters by pointing at the Director's car. "What do you think that is?" he would say. Then it would dawn on them: the car was a BMW, a *Baoma* or "Precious Horse." The cash stuffed under the driver's seat, usually at least ten thousand yuan, was at Mr Li's disposal. If it became necessary to drive an important visitor into town to entertain them, Mr Li would see to the arrangements, especially if the nature of the entertainment meant it was not suitable for the Director to appear in person.

Mr Li would drive the guest to an expensive hotel and send him up to the presidential suite for a rest. He would call a few young women on the phone and line them up for the guest to choose from. When the guest had selected a girl, or sometimes two, Mr Li would pay them in advance, encouraging them to pull out their best tricks and take good care of the guest. Then he would take his leave. He would appear again when it was time to go for dinner or settle a bill. If there was a problem someone else couldn't fix, the Director could always rely on Mr Li to sort it out.

Mr Li saw no difficulties with the task in hand. He strolled easily over to Tang Xiaoming.

"Hey Xiaoming! You look busy."

Tang Xiaoming was more than halfway through shaving his friend's head. He took in Mr Li's reptilian smile and knew that either he or his pigeons were for it.

"Not really," he said.

Mr Li took out some expensive cigarettes, tapping the bottom of the pack to nudge one out. "Take a break. Have a smoke," he said.

"I don't smoke, thanks." Tang Xiaoming didn't look up.

Mr Li offered the cigarettes to his friend. The

miner did like a smoke but waved them away saying he didn't smoke either. So Mr Li put the cigarette in his mouth and lit up. Time was ticking away. He couldn't put off mentioning the pigeons.

"How many birds have you got in that flock of yours anyhow?" he asked.

"Not many," said Tang Xiaoming.

"I reckon it's quite a big flock. Time to separate them, don't you think? How about selling a couple? I'd like to have a go at breeding them. I won't quibble about the price. What do you say?"

Mr Li reached down to his pocket as if about to take out his money. Tang Xiaoming said nothing.

"Fifty yuan? Eighty? A hundred... two hundred? How about two hundred yuan a bird? That's a good price. Come on, what do you say?"

"What do you want me to say?" said Tang Xiaoming, taking a tuft of hair out of the razor and throwing it on the floor. "I said I wouldn't sell them. I still won't sell them, however much you offer. I don't care who asks me, the answer's the same."

"Are you crazy? You can't turn down an offer like that! Earning money is the reason you came out here in the first place!"

"I must be crazy then," said Tang Xiaoming.

"It's only a few pigeons, for Christ's sake, it's not as if it's your wife and kids!"

"That's just it; my pigeons are my children."

Mr Li was feeling the pressure. He frowned, giving Tang Xiaoming a stare worthy of the second-in-command.

"What's the matter with you, Tang Xiaoming? Think what you've got to lose. Who gave you permission to build a pigeon roost against the wall of this dormitory? Who gave you permission to keep pigeons on this mine?"

"No one," said Tang Xiaoming.

“Well then, it’s clearly not permitted. If you won’t see reason I’ll get security to smash up your roost and confiscate every last one of your birds, don’t think I won’t.”

Tang Xiaoming didn’t reply. The hand holding the razor shook a little. He frowned to himself. What kind of ridiculous logic is that? he thought. Does the grass need permission to grow? Does my hair need permission to grow?

His friend’s head seemed to be bleeding, the blood showing bright red against his white hair. Tang Xiaoming thought he must have cut him by mistake. He tried to wipe the blood away, but the more he wiped the more blood there seemed to be. Then he realised it was his hand that was bleeding. Blood was dripping from his thumb. His friend’s head was like a painted gourd, wet with red ink. He put the thumb in his mouth to stop the bleeding, then took it out again to have a look. It was still bleeding. He put down the razor, found a plaster and stuck it over the cut.

His friend asked: “What’s the matter? Is your hand bleeding?”

“It’s nothing,” said Tang Xiaoming.

The miner didn’t know where to direct his anger: “Oh for fuck’s sake,” he shouted, springing up from the stool and pulling off the old pair of long johns he had around his neck. “I give up, just forget it, I can’t even get my head shaved in peace!”

“Sit down will you!” ordered Tang Xiaoming with equal vehemence. “I’ve got to finish shaving you sometime so it may as well be now. I’m not going to leave you alone until you let me!” he said, grabbing his friend’s shoulder and pushing him squarely down onto the stool again.

From the violence of this outburst, Mr Li realised the strength of feeling against him; he knew it was directed at him. “You know who today’s visitor is,” he

went on in a far more reasonable tone. “Chief Inspector Wang from the Northern District Station. He’s responsible for the security of our mine. He’s the one with the authority; the one wearing a gun. If he stamps his foot the whole mine collapses. We can’t risk upsetting him. Why is he here? To find fault with the mine. If we look after him well, give him a good lunch, have a drink with him, and give him something to line his pocket with, he’ll happily ignore any faults he finds. If we don’t, if we offend him in some way, then he’ll do his worst, find some little thing wrong with the mine and make us pay.”

Mr Li offered them an example. A few days previously some people from Health and Safety had paid them a visit. They had got out a load of books from the commodious boot of their small car; all hardbacks, as thick as bricks. At first they had no interest in inspecting the mine; they were here to sell Mine Niu a set of Manufacturing Safety Manuals. Each book cost more than six hundred yuan. A set of thirty would cost more than twenty thousand yuan. Niu said they were of no use to him. Then what happened? The two of them angrily demanded to see the entrance to the shaft. They pointed out the ventilator, saying it was showing fatigue, constituted a serious safety hazard, and was worth a fine of a hundred thousand yuan. On top of that, they would have to issue an order to halt work. The ventilator was patently new. It was shockingly obvious that this was a pretext. Mine Niu realised his mistake; of course there was nothing wrong with the ventilator, he just hadn’t been quick enough on the uptake.

“Okay, no problem at all, we’ll take two sets,” said Mine Niu, “one for the managers and one for the workers. We’ll read them carefully.” He drove the visitors into town, set them up in an expensive hotel, took them for a hair wash and a foot massage and then on

to a karaoke night. Only then did they drop the subject of the fine and the order to halt work.

Then Mr Li turned the conversation back to Chief Inspector Wang.

“The Chief Inspector has expressed a preference for pigeon,” he said to Tang Xiaoming. “He knows you keep pigeons. What is Mine Niu supposed to do? I don’t like to insist, but surely you wouldn’t want to make things difficult for the Director?”

Tang Xiaoming had no sympathy for Li’s arguments. In fact, he felt even less inclined to cooperate.

“Keeping pigeons isn’t against the law, it’s not a crime. I won’t be intimidated by anyone. Who do they think they are, demanding my pigeons for lunch? Pigeons symbolise peace. They should be protecting them, not eating them!”

“You still don’t get it do you,” said Mr Li. “This isn’t about you and a couple of pigeons; it’s about the survival of the mine. The mine is our livelihood, the reason we have food on our plates. We have to look after its interests. If something happens to the mine we’ll all suffer. Look, you give me a couple of pigeons today, then afterwards, I’ll get you a pair of pigeons who can deliver the mail, a pair of prize winning carrier pigeons, how about that?”

Tang Xiaoming was silent for a moment, as if considering the offer, but then he said: “If you want to raise pigeons, by all means, after the police are gone, come over and take your pick, I won’t take a penny for them. But while that policeman is here I won’t allow anyone to touch a feather on their backs. I don’t care who they are.”

Just at that moment the whole flock flew back, clapping their wings as if in support of Tang Xiaoming, some landing on the eaves, some on the pigeon roost and some on the ground in front of the door. Mr Li was a man used to getting things done. He wasn’t

about to give up just yet.

“If you won’t give them to me, I’ll catch them myself,” he said.

“You’ll never catch one.”

Sure enough, as Mr Li approached one of the pigeons on the ground it walked out of reach, and when he went to grab it, the pigeon flew up to the eaves. From there it cocked its head and peered at him as if to say: “I don’t know you. Who do you think you are?”

Tang Xiaoming had finished shaving the miner’s head. He took the old pair of green long Johns from around his friend’s neck and shook them in the doorway, giving them a final upward flick. The watching pigeons spread their wings and flew into the air as one, as if obeying a signal.

The pigeons flew higher, receding into the distance above. Mr Li knew he had no chance of catching one. “Listen, Tang Xiaoming,” he said, shaking his finger at him, his face creasing into anger. “Don’t imagine you’ve still got a job here.”

“Whatever you say,” said Tang Xiaoming as Mr Li walked away. “You can tell the Chief Inspector from me, if he wants to kill my pigeons, he’ll have to kill me first!”

Mr Li reported back that Tang Xiaoming was a stubborn old bastard who refused point blank to sell his pigeons. He’d been pretty unpleasant about it too. Mine Niu couldn’t really back down in front of the Chief Inspector.

“To hell with him!” he said angrily. “Tell him, he’s got a choice, it’s the pigeons or his job. If he refuses to let me have the pigeons, he can pack his bags and go. It’s the only way to deal with him.”

Chief Inspector Wang was feeling a little uncomfortable. “This pigeon breeder, what’s his background?”

“He doesn’t have any kind of background. No one



with any influence in their family would end up working down a mine.”

“How has he behaved in the past? Shall I ask Mr Zhang to pay him a call?” Mr Zhang was Chief Inspector Wang’s driver.

Niu knew very well what that meant. He said that he hadn’t had any problems with Tang Xiaoming before now.

So, in the end, the Chief Inspector didn’t get to eat pigeon for lunch. Mr Li sped over to Ma’s butcher in nearby White Grass Township and bought ten kilos of cooked mule meat, just out of the pan, so at least there was some meat on the table. Mine Niu was exceedingly apologetic. Continually refilling the Chief Inspector’s glass, he punished himself by drinking two or three cups to each one the Chief Inspector drank. He couldn’t apologise enough. After a while, his cheeks flushed with *shaojiu*, Chief Inspector Wang became more loquacious. His conversation mostly consisted of complaining.

He couldn’t stand the phrase: “If you have a problem, go to the police.” The public had the police to sort out their problems, but what about the police? What happened if they had a problem? It was hard enough covering his household costs: the house, arranging a job for the wife, paying the children’s school fees, not to mention the daily running costs of the station. Sooner or later he’d have orders to send officers into the community on patrol, which meant they needed cars, and cars needed petrol. Where was he supposed to get the money from?

“Chief Inspector Wang, don’t let it bother you, I’ll make sure this isn’t a wasted journey. I’ll cover your petrol costs,” said Mine Niu.

He said a quiet few words to Mr Li who went out and came back with the accountant, who passed Niu two fat envelopes. Mine Niu gave one to Chief Inspec-

tor Wang and one to Mr Zhang, saying it was merely a token of their esteem. Pinching the envelope the Chief Inspector could tell it contained between five and eight thousand yuan. He put it straight into the pocket of his uniform police jacket.

He didn’t say a word of thanks, however. Instead he remarked: “Niu, my old friend, let’s get this straight, if the car needs petrol, I can count on you. If you can’t supply me with petrol money, then you won’t mind if I drive away with your BMW and leave you with this old Santana, will you?”

“Of course, come over whenever you need petrol money.”

After seeing Chief Inspector Wang off, Niu noticed Tang Xiaoming walking away from the mine, his bedroll in one hand and a red and white woven plastic bag, probably containing his precious pigeons, in the other.

“Tang Xiaoming!” he shouted. “Stop right there!”

Tang Xiaoming turned, unsure what Mine Niu was going to say next.

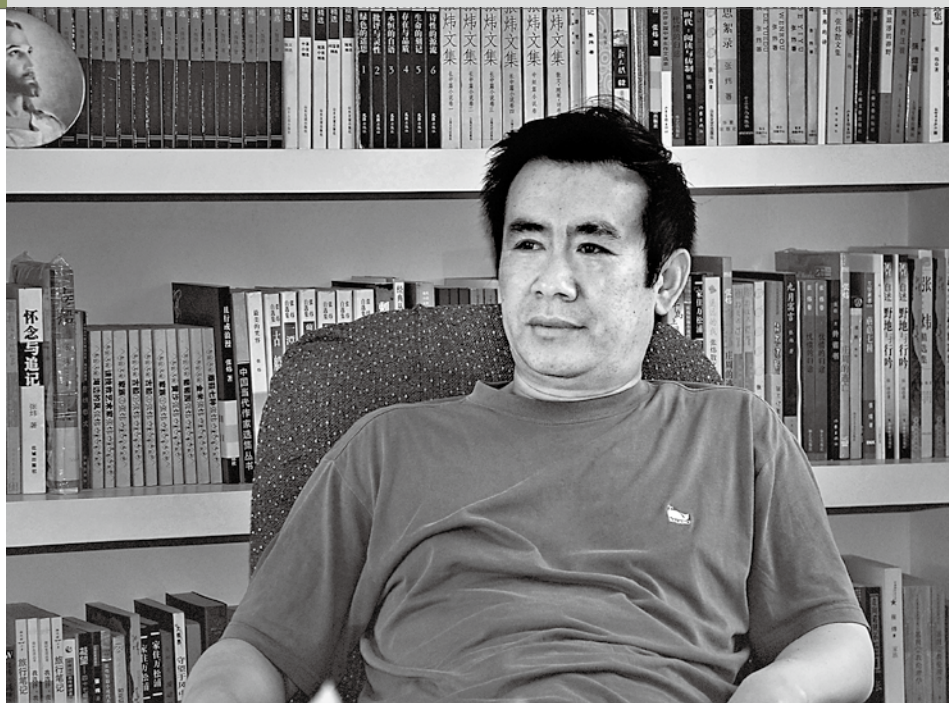
“Where do you think you’re going? You’ve got a job to do.”

Tang Xiaoming looked at him doubtfully as if to say, “Didn’t you sack me?”

“Don’t just stand there. Are your pigeons in that bag? Let them out! They’ll suffocate in there.”

Tang Xiaoming squatted down and opened the bag. The pigeons took to the air in a flurry of wings and, flocking quickly together, began their ever-changing ebb and rush against the sky.





張煒

## Zhang Wei

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Born in Shandong in 1956, Zhang Wei first began publishing poetry at the age of seventeen. His 1987 debut novel *The Ancient Ship* was translated into English in 2008 by Howard Goldblatt. Excerpts from his ten-volume series *You Are on the Highland* (for which he received the Mao Dun Literature Prize in 2011) were featured in *Pathlight* Winter 2011, and his short story “King’s Blood” appeared in the Autumn 2014 issue.

# Rain and Snow

By Zhang Wei

Rain in the old days, now that was real rain. “It’s raining, it’s raining!” people shouted, and went lumbering home with their clothing draped over their heads. They ran past croplands and thorn trees, then hopped onto the smaller pathways and continued running for home.

The rain fell harder; it was raining everywhere on earth.

There’s nothing so terrible as the sky growing dark while it still rains. The sound of the wind mixed with the rain, like a roaring beast. We were only five or six miles away from the sea, and the strange heavy rain made us suspect that limitless expanse of water might be sloshing over.

My father rushed about the yard before nightfall. He heaped up soil in the rain, raising round ridges before the threshold, and dredging the channels which would keep the rainwater from flowing into the house. We were quite accustomed to seeing our washbasins float or our shoes wash away in the middle of the night.

Mother said life hadn’t been peaceful since we moved to this desolate place. The beasts in the forest made frightening noises, and you never knew when they might leap out and snatch our chickens and rabbits. We once kept a dog to guard the house, but its face kept getting torn by animals’ claws. In this wild place, the rain at its most torrential sounded like a baby crying: “waaaaaaa...”

It was my father who brought us to this desolate place. Occasionally you’d see people walking on the beach, come to collect herbs or fish. But you’d have

to walk a long way south, through the forest, before you’d see the large neat croplands, the small villages, and the laborers running in the rain.

Sometimes I ran just for pleasure. The daytime rain was fun, not scary.

Let the rain soak you. Let your clothes cling to your body and the water trickle from your hair. Let me be a wet-feathered bird flying wild through the forest. The rain changes everything in the forest: mushrooms swell, their umbrella tops plump and bright; they grow from tree-trunks, tree-roots, and grass clumps, red and yellow. Some birds dare not fly; they hide beneath dense leaves. Some bigger birds squawk, fearless. I once saw with my own eyes a big fox in the rain, one forefoot lifted, looking all around him for something. The land drinks deep of the rain; the withered leaves and grass swell with moisture like rice that has been steamed, and beetles with stars on their shells crawl over them. Every wrinkle of the old oak tree flows with water. An old tree in the distance falls to the ground; I hear the trees around it cry. A big bunch of red flowers glisten on the ground, as if someone had gathered them there.

“That child’s not back yet.” I heard my mother complaining in the hut, impatient with worry.

Actually there was nothing to worry about. I never played in the sea. Once I was nearly drowned – a gust of strong wind before the rain raised a series of big waves which pushed me under. I swam swiftly for the shore, but I was too late. At any rate, I nearly drowned. The rain fell hard then, lashing me. See the clouds over the sea, garnet-red – what a horrible color!

I remember how I ran home that day, falling I don't know how many times. I had a vague sense of the sea rushing at my back, the huge waves chasing me – and if they caught up with me, I would be swallowed instantly. My face was numb with terror. The thunder crashed to the ground and rolled about as if two women in red were fighting; each tearing at the other's hair. The explosion sounded right at my feet; I felt as if my trouser legs were scorched red. I threw myself down and clamped my eyes shut, unmoving. Just as I was daring to raise my head again, another huge crash of thunder detonated right above me... How I fled in terror!

From then on I understood that terrifying things were concealed all about me; none more so than the sea in the rain.

When I ran home through the forest, my body was always covered with leaves and grass. Mom scolded me as she picked them from my clothes. I couldn't stop talking and gesturing as I told her everything I'd seen in the rain.

Soon after I'd returned home, the frogs began to call. The sound was fiercely dense, and insistent. The sky would be dark as ink. The canals were brimming with water, which pleased the frogs. They danced and sang, playing where they would.

That night I couldn't fall asleep. I lay on the *kang* listening to the rain and wind beating on the window. As midnight approached, the sound seemed to grow louder. It occurred to me that no matter how terrifying the world was, you couldn't do a thing about it. The heavy rain was so cruel that the trees cried out in pain. It had whipped them for a day and a night, and

broken their bright green leaves into pieces. I used to worry that at night the sea tide would rise up, and our hut would float away.

I woke to the sound of Father shouting something – I don't remember what time it was. I hurriedly rubbed my eyes and sat up, to find a dustpan upturned on top of me. At midnight the roof had begun to leak, and my mother was protecting me from the rain. I saw streaks of mud on the dustpan. Father walked into the house with his pants hiked high; he was bent over, collecting our things. The water in the house had risen to half a foot deep, but it showed no signs of stopping.

My father cursed and grumbled. What's gone wrong with the gods? They mean to ruin us. It's rained for a whole day and night, isn't that enough? When will it stop? The gods won't be satisfied until men and beasts alike are drenched.

Rubber shoes floated like boats in the middle of the house.

I jumped down and rushed out of the house. My god! The world outside was a white expanse of water. We seemed to have fallen into the sea. Mother said the southern reservoir dam had likely been destroyed by the flood, otherwise things would never have been this bad. Even if it rained all day and night, our nearness to the sea meant that the water usually receded very quickly. But it was bad news if the dam had really burst. As she continued to grumble, I shouted at the sight of a little white-bellied fish swimming in the yard.

Father and Mother ran into the yard to see the fish. "Looks like that's what happened, all right." His scoop dropped to the ground. He had been bailing





Illustration by Guo Xun

water out of the house.

No matter what, I meant to catch that fish. I scurried all over the yard, but never succeeded. The fish was neither long nor short – about four inches. I was mostly attracted by its bright white belly. After several attempts, the fish was still swimming happily, but I had made myself filthy. Frustrated and sulky, I gave up.

At last, the rain stopped. The water on the ground, however, continued rising higher and higher.

It seemed it really was flowing from the south. Father kept bailing out the house, until the clay of the floor was visible. I suddenly wanted to have a look at a certain distant village – I wondered what it looked like after the heavy rains. I took an opportunity to sneak out. My pants were soaked below the knee. Only the tips of couch grass showed above the water on the ground. I kept an eager eye out for another fish, but saw none.

The village was in a tumult, as if there was a quar-

rel going on. As I approached I could see that some villagers were bustling around, and some standing on the higher ground.

Water had entered every house. Some walls had no stone footings, and could collapse at any moment. Those families were trying their best to bail out the water, and to shore up their walls with earth. The pigs and chickens had been driven outside; the pigs in particular were tied to trees like dogs.

What a rain it had been! All the crops were drowning. Most of the fields lay in a low depression along the southern edge of the village, and in some places the water was deep enough to submerge a person. The water was deepest in the sweet potato fields, which looked like the actual sea. You could only see the top halves of the stalks in the sorghum fields.

You'd have to be a swimmer if you wanted to reach the fields. A crowd of children clamored to jump into the deeper parts of water, but were called back up by the adults.

The sun came out, and everything was dazzling bright. The weather was suddenly hot, and the odor of water grew stronger; it was a good smell. Father caught a big white silver carp the second day after the rain. It had to be cut in half before it would fit into the pot. "How could such a big fish swim here?" Mother exclaimed as she cooked it. "It's so strange."

Someone asked Father to work in the village; they told him to bring a door plank. I went there with him.

A lot people had already gathered, all holding door planks. When everyone was in place, someone gave a shout and they rowed the planks into the fields. We children stood nearby, watching. The laborers dove

underwater, and when they surfaced they held a sweet potato in their hand.

The sweet potatoes weren't full-sized, but they were edible. If they weren't brought up in time they would soon rot in the water; the ones that didn't would still be inedible.

In my eyes, Father was the most elegant of the divers. His legs kicked up, and down he went. I thought he might be drinking the water, because every time his head emerged, he spat out a big mouthful of water.

Our family was provided with a small pile of sweet potatoes. It was steamed sweet potato every day from then on. What was strange was that they refused to soften, and were nearly impossible to swallow. But Father ordered us to eat them, and forbid us to spit them out. Meals became difficult things.

The water on the ground drained away, but slowly. This revealed more and more fish, most of them only a few inches long. They seemed to have popped up out of the ground overnight; they were in every ditch and canal. The cannier people had already begun fishing; they only went for the bigger fish, two or three feet in length.

Father also took us fishing in the canal. He held a spade, and prepared to chop at any fish that appeared. A few fish actually did swim past my father, but he didn't hit them. Then he seemed to have hit one, but it swung away on the current... meanwhile, someone else was catching fish downstream, and he scooped up the fish easily with a basket. I ran up to the man, saying "That fish was wounded by my dad!" He gave me a nasty look. Father came and led me away by the hand.

The day still wasn't over; we stood in the water for

a long time trying to spear fish, but failing. For a time, fishsellers went around the village calling their goods, selling fish from big flowered baskets. Where and how had they caught so many fish? My parents looked at them, full of admiration, and shook their heads.

Later I heard that someone had caught over a hundred big red fish in a canal.

The water stopped draining. Pools formed in the fields. All water-loving animals were very lively – water birds even flew here from far away. Insects darted busily like arrows over the water. There seemed to be endless dragonflies.

Father was busy picking mushrooms all day. The wet weather meant lots of mushrooms; he couldn't catch fish, but he could pick plenty of mushrooms. He was good at it. We dried the mushrooms and packed them in bags. Would anyone buy our mushrooms? They might have, but Father never sold them. Whenever villagers came to us, he would give them some. The villagers gave us corn, peanuts and rice dumplings in return.

Our entire lives had been soaked by the rain. If it hadn't rained, things would have been totally different. Almost all the wells were so full you could get water simply by bending over, and there was deep water and fish in nearly every canal. People from the village accompanied me on fishing expeditions. Father was out of the house all day, busy draining his flooded fields. They tried everything they could to move the water to the canals, then from the canals to the river, and of course the river flowed into the sea.

The weed-filled river was wider than it had ever been before. Waves surged along it, and the water was

a turbid yellow. When it reached the estuary it seemed as broad as the sea, as though it were part of the sea itself. Some said that, since the rains, ten people had drowned in the river, while others said the number was one hundred. Among the drowned some had been catching fish, some were overcome by waves while crossing the river, and some had jumped in of their own accord.

The forest constantly dripped with water. I found that the wild animals had returned after the rain, twice as many as before, more snakes too. There were countless unknown wild flowers. At midnight, some strange sharp call sounded near our house, frightening us. Mother said that it was some animal that had never come to the forest before – an animal that had sprung up after the rain.

After autumn came winter, with heavy snows.

Snow in the old days, now that was real snow. The sky looked sullen, and stayed silent all day. "Here it comes," Father said. Mother hurried to stack firewood in a corner of the yard. Night fell very quickly, so we went to bed early. Father was careful to leave a spade by the door.

The night was silent. When we got up in the morning, we sensed something was wrong. Opening the door, we found a wall of snow as high as a person outside. My father went at the snow with the spade. Once he'd dug a big hole in it we squeezed through, which I thought was great fun. Mother brought firewood back through the hole to cook breakfast. The snow within the yard had been carried there by the wind, but the snow beyond was several feet thick. It

was unimaginable, the way everything was suddenly buried in such heavy snow.

It was very warm in the room. We came in and out through the hole and were careful not to break it or widen it. Father said it could have been bad if we hadn't put the spade inside the door. We would have had to dig into the snow wall with our hands; maybe our whole family would be trapped in the house.

Snow hills and ridges ran through the forest. The wind must have blown hard that night, but the thick snow had gradually sealed the door and windows, and we'd heard nothing.

Mother forbade me to go into the forest. She said I would be trapped in the snow banks if I stepped in them. When the sun came out, it melted the outer layer of the snow banks, and then at night the layer froze hard. They became little glass mountains.

The snow melted and froze by turns, and gradually grew hard. But often new snow would fall before the last had melted away. As for the big forest, it was always choked with snow. It would take the return of spring to bare its hot earth once more.

The top of our snow hole gradually broke open, widening into a square space of a few feet. Some little sparrows flew in through the opening looking for food; they were easy to catch. Some other birds fell straight in, weak from hunger. We didn't kill a single bird – they were our neighbors. Mother said that in those hard days, countless sparrows would fail to survive the winter. They weren't even afraid of the people in our yard.

On sunny days father didn't rest. He went to the village besides the forest to clear snow: that was an

interesting job. They stood in a line, moving forward along the field path. They cut the snow with their spades into several square pieces, like slicing tofu, and then scooped the square parts onto the field. That way, when the snow melted, it would water the wheat.

Finally I could go into the forest. Though the deep snow banks were still there, I could climb up and down on them safely. Even if I accidentally stepped through the ice crust, I wouldn't go deep.

In winter, strange things awaited me in the forest. Some wild fruits had frozen; when you picked them and bit in, they were cool and sweet. I will never forget the taste of frozen fruits. I also ate frozen dates in the snow, purplish-black, soft and sweet.

Something bad and frightening happened that winter. One day Father returned from work and told us that an old farmer, who prepared beans to feed the village livestock, had fallen into a well covered snow as he was crossing the fields. The well was more than ten meters deep!

My mother and I wept.

That old man had been a great person. He used to visit us, and for a while was a frequent guest. He told me many stories, which I never forgot. At that time he shouted as he came in: "Have you got any peach pits?" Mother answered yes, then bent down and used a stick to knock them out from under the table and cupboard. I'd left the peach pits there in summer and autumn, now they had dried out.

Soon Mother had collected a double handful of peach pits. The old man took them happily, sat on the ground, cracked the shells carefully with a brick, and swallowed them one by one. I tasted one, but it was



too bitter, and I spat it out.

Our whole family thought it was odd, how the old man liked to eat bitter peach pits. Father guessed the old man suffered from some disease. If a healthy person ate so many bitter peach pits, he would be poisoned for sure.

Father's judgment was right. When the old man returned the next year, Mother offered him some peach pits, but he waved them away. He didn't want them any more. We asked why, and he explained that one morning he felt sick, and when he opened his mouth, a strange insect crawled out. From then on he had no desire to eat peach pits

It wasn't he who wanted to eat peach pits, but the insect.

I don't remember what happened to the insect – did it run away? If it did, that was very wrong. It was a very bad insect.

The old man didn't eat peach pits any more, so he seldom came to our home.

How could such a kind old man end so miserably? What did the snowy weather have against such a nice old man? I burst into sobs.

Father and I were both there on the day the villagers held a burial ceremony for the old man. The old man had no family; he lived alone in a barn. The villagers said the old man had been closer to his cow than any other villager. I looked at the cow carefully; it had yellow and red hair, and tears in its eyes.

The winter seemed very long, because the heavy snow took so long to melt away. Mother said Heaven had hidden winter in the snow, where it was coming out gradually. I ran to the river and found that it was

brightly polished as an enameled copper plate. At first I didn't dare to step onto it, but then I made my way inch by inch to the middle of the river.

The ice on the river was half transparent; I wanted to see frozen fish in the river. One day, while I was playing on the river, I came across some people who had come to fish. I was curious about how they would do it – first they used an iron drill to cut a big hole in the ice, then lowered in a bucket, and soon they had caught some fish. That puzzled me for a long time afterwards.

Once I also saw a rabbit run from the snow hills on the bank, wanting to cross the river. As it reached the middle of the river, its front paws slipped and it fell on its face. I could tell that it was ashamed to have fallen where I could see it. It stood up and scampered in humiliation to the other side.

When water from the snow on the bank began to trickle into the river, it meant spring warmth was on the way. Then you knelt down on the ice, and listened to water flowing underneath. How long before the snow banks melted away completely? That day was still very far off.

A layer of the heavy snow eventually melted to reveal a layer of sand and dust that had been blown there on some snowy, windy night. Those huge snow banks lay around the village, panting like dying sharks by the sea, filthy and fishy, flies buzzing around them. I noticed that green shoots were appearing in the fields, and little bees and butterflies circled. But the winter snows still wouldn't leave us.

The cold air was concentrated in the forest; when you set foot in there it was like you'd stepped into a

cellar. The leafless tree tops let in the sunshine, which helped melt some snow away, but it froze again at night. Some wild fruits left on the trees from last autumn and winter began to moulder, unnoticed.

There had been no snow in our yard for a long time. Father cleared up the last ice shards from the corner of the yard and the back side of our house. He hated these days that were caught between winter and spring. As spring approached, my mother began happily calculating the days of the lunar calendar, excitedly informing us of the upcoming festivals, and when tomb-sweeping day would fall. It was at this time that I noticed gray hairs on Mother's head; there were about ten altogether, bright and shining. I called my father over to have a look; he came to Mother with his hands at his back, inspecting her carefully, and extending a hand to stroke her hair.

"Mom..." I said.

Mother didn't answer, just rubbed my back gently.

"How time flies! Another year has passed..." Mother seemed to be talking to Father.

I knew what she meant by these words. It was because we had come here in an early spring, walking though muddy melted snow. I couldn't remember it clearly, but my mother told me. She said the snow was a long time melting that year; there was always snow in the shady parts of the forest.

I grew up in this forest. Everything in it belonged to me. I knew all the mysteries of the forest, and all the stories of the river.

Children from the village often played in the forest as it warmed. Together we made swings in the trees, and climbed them to take birds' nests. We liked

to dig into the filthy snow banks and scoop out clean white snow to eat. We brought the snowballs home, pretending they were steamed corn bread, and ate them in front of the adults, who were shocked.

The ice dropped piece by piece into the flowing river. At night, I sat on the banks; I could distinctly hear the ice plates breaking. Spring was coming, but the heavy snows in the forest still hadn't melted away.

We ran along the riverbanks, north towards the sea. The winter had turned the sea dark, white waves splitting open in layers and then spreading across the surface. We were surprised to see snow and ice on the beach – had they been pushed ashore by the waves? Or had they accumulated on the beach throughout the winter? No one could figure it out.

A snake moved slowly on the sand of the beach. We followed it for a long way. A rabbit came into sight, then disappeared suddenly, as if it had flown away. After that we saw a hedgehog.

When I brought the hedgehog home, my father was smoking in the yard. He asked me to put it down and let it walk. After looking at it for a while, he said, "How beautiful it is!" I looked at Father, confused – I couldn't understand what was beautiful about it, or why he would make such a comment.

Mother also came out into the yard. For some reason she leaned against Father, and they looked at it together. "How beautiful it is!" Father repeated, one hand on Mother's shoulder.

"Where did you find it, child?" Mother asked me in a soft voice.

I told them all the details, and they laughed in satisfaction. It had been a long time since we'd had such a

happy moment.

We enjoyed ourselves for a while, then Mother said it was time for dinner, so we all went inside. When I looked for the hedgehog after dinner, it had hidden itself somewhere.

It was very cold that night. They say it's colder when the snow melts than when it falls – and it was time for the snow to melt! At night I piled up thick quilts against the cold. Such nights made you think you were still in the depths of winter, instead of spring. When strong winds blew, scary noises came from the forest. I knew the wild animals wouldn't keep quiet on a spring night; they jumped and played happily in the forest. Branches struck one another, and the wind shouted harshly at the tops of the trees. Was this really spring? It felt like winter. I thought of previous winters and springs, how the heavy snow had melted away before. It had melted faster than it did this year, and silently.

The locust trees in the forest put forth long leaves. Soon they would flower. Then the whole forest would bid farewell to another winter.

I waited, anxiously.

I waited for the day when all the flowers blossomed and the forest was crowded with beekeepers. I went to the forest almost every day, attending carefully to what I saw. I reported every change to my parents. I found that buds had appeared in locust trees, as dense as spikes of chestnuts. This spring, the locust flowers were sure to be thicker than ever. And had the snow left any trace in the forest? No, it had not, it was very warm everywhere. Green sprouts grew on the ground, and leaves dried under the hot sun.

One day, all the locust flowers finally blossomed. Mother and Father took me to the forest. At this time of year we always picked locust flowers and dried them for food – they had a special flavor which our whole family loved.

We spent a long time happily foraging. The animals playing on the beach were no less happy than we were. Birds sang here and there, talking with each other.

As I was stepping over a ditch, I noticed something black and wet in a corner. Curious, I kicked it over, and saw white snow. I called out.

Father and Mother came. They looked down at the snow, silently.

So winter was still hiding here.

We thought again of those long days of snow...

*Translated by Eric Abrahamsen*



葉彌

# Ye Mi

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Born in Suzhou in 1964, Ye Mi first started writing fiction in 1994; her short story “Incense Burner Mountain” received the Lu Xun Literature Prize in 2014. Jiang Wen’s 2007 film *The Sun Also Rises* was loosely based on Ye Mi’s short story “Velvet”.

# The Hot Springs on Moon Mountain

By Ye Mi

**G**u Qingfeng tended three and a half acres of Mexican marigolds that were her heart and soul. They filled the flower beds before and behind her house, on the banks of the creek on the west side, and on the southward face of the hill by the creek. Mexican marigolds come in gold, sunfire red, and tangerine. She liked tangerine the best, so that was all she grew. There was a reason for it: the first time she met her husband, he was coming toward her over the wooden bridge at the head of the village as the sun rose behind him in an orange glow. A sea of tangerine orange light buoyed him up with the sun and pervaded his whole form. Even today, the image made her feel safe and happy.

Her marigolds were by far the brightest of any that grew in the area. Local women whispered that she could communicate with them. At some point, people just started calling her Marigold. They used it so often, her husband joined in. When local cadres brought guests around to show off her land, they would sometimes say her name was Mary – Mary Gold.

Every day she rose before dawn, made congee for the family, then went up the hill to cut grass for the pig. When the sun rose, she gave herself to her three and a half acres of marigolds. Her husband was a handsome man who could play the flute and the *er'hu*, and had a lovely singing voice. But he liked food and clothes, and didn't care for farm work. After breakfast, he'd go for a walk, whistling as he went. People out in the fields would hear the whistle and say, "Shame! Marigold's home alone again."

Her whistling man often ate lunch away from the

house, but would often come home for a nap before going out again. Sometimes he wouldn't come back until the evening. The villagers joked that he was a duck she raised with the other animals.

But Marigold had other ideas. Her favorite part of every long, tiring day was after he'd finished dinner and would say, "Marigold, do you want me to massage your back?" or "Come here, Marigold, let me rub your shoulders." She would usually reply, "It's fine, I'm not tired. Why don't you go lie down?" Marigold didn't like to talk, and on your average day wouldn't say more than a few sentences. Her husband would say that her mouth was only good for eating, and that she was the most standoffish woman in the whole village.

And who was the most engaging?

The most engaging woman in the village was Fang. Two years ago, someone had discovered hot springs on Moon Mountain that were purportedly full of essential minerals. Bathing in them frequently was guaranteed to revitalize the body and prolong life. And who wouldn't want that? So someone immediately built a spa resort on the mountain called The Lunar Palace; soon, men and women were swarming in from the outside like hungry ants. They stripped off their colorful clothes and steeped themselves in the steaming water, their eyes half-closed, as if their souls were evaporating too.

The Lunar Palace was hidden deep amid the mountains and surrounded by the pillared trunks of ancient trees. Drove of young women came from within and outside the mountains, and put down roots there just like the trees had. Fang was the first from

their village to go. When she came back two months later to see her family, she was wearing bright red lipstick and clothes the local girls would never forget. Now, they all understood that Fang's mouth had several uses: it could say captivating things, eat expensive food, and decorate itself with different colors of lipstick. As she talked, she pulled five or six tubes out of her purse and turned them up to show everyone.

"See, this one's pink, this one's plum, this one's tangerine..."

"But why would you wear it?"

"Idiot, men like it! When they kiss you, they'll think of Elizabeth Taylor's lips."

"Well, who's Elizabeth Taylor?"

"Idiot, you don't even know her? If you want to make money, if you want to really know things, get yourself to the hot springs!"

Fang had one of the girls take the tangerine lipstick to Marigold. Fang said to the girl, "You remind her that she was once the prettiest, classiest girl in the village. I'm sure she knows whether she has the kind of life she deserves. If she calls me names, I'll just laugh. If she throws the lipstick away, I'll just feel sorry for her."

After the lipstick made it to Marigold, she cursed Fang up and down and threw the tube in the pigsty without even looking at it. Her mood was foul all day, and she could almost hear Fang giggling and sighing in her ear. Unable to focus, she put down her farm work and waited by the road for her husband.

It was already getting dark by the time her husband appeared, gliding along perfectly at ease like a wandering hermit. "What... exactly do you do all day?" Marigold timidly asked.

He raised his eyebrows and stiffened his neck. "What do you mean by that?"

Marigold didn't want to cause tension, and so she

laughed, "Oh, nothing! I just missed you a lot today!"

Her husband relaxed and said, "Actually, to tell you the truth, *I* don't even know what I do all day."

"Then why do you like to be away all the time?"

"Because it's better than being at home," he replied with conviction. "All the women in our village are gone except for the girls and the grandmas. Who could bear staying at home at a time like this?"

He yawned several times as he spoke.

There sure were a lot of people who liked the outside world. Ever since Fang came back to visit, the other young women in the village screwed up their courage and ran off to Moon Mountain. Marigold was the only woman of her age left. Only she still lived her life the way she always had, watching over her fields of flowers.

Fang stayed at the resort for a year, then came back again, this time only for a day. Once again, she had remade herself. She looked like aristocracy, arriving in a sparkling yellow dress, and leaving in a bright red Western business suit. Even though she only stayed the day, what a day it was. She laid out plans to turn her parents' house into a gaming parlor, help her older brother's family open a cinema, and have her younger brother start a hair salon. And after she left, her family made it happen. From then on, the clatter of mah-jongg tiles continued day and night; the young boys and girls stopped singing songs and flirting in the outdoors, and went to grope each other in the dark theater. A pair of young ladies from away came to work at the salon. They said they weren't used to the heat and humidity here, so they wore blouses with low necklines and miniskirts, and sat with their legs crossed in front of the shop window, cigarettes in hand. The village boys couldn't think of anything else.

But this is all epilogue.

The evening Fang left, Marigold's husband came



home looking unhappy. "I saw Fang," he said. "She was riding in a car. She kept waving at me, like she was mayor or something. I remember back when all she could do was talk; she had nothing on you. Look at the class she's got now! She stopped the car and asked me how you'd been. How the hell do you think...I turned around and walked off. What could I say? Look at you now – you can't even compare to what you used to be, let alone to her. You don't care for yourself, and you certainly don't care about me."

Marigold sat dumbstruck for a moment, then asked plaintively, "How have I not cared about you?"

"You can't even figure that out?" her husband shot back. "You've seen Fang's family, walking around with their noses in the air."

"Let's talk about this later," said Marigold in a placating tone. "Massage my shoulder, it's really sore."

Her husband, clearly not finished, stood with his hands at his sides and glared at her.

Marigold grabbed her husband's wrist and pummeled her shoulder with it. His hand was a cold, dead weight that only moved where she moved it. The minute she relaxed her grip, it disappeared. She felt a soreness spread throughout her whole body, reaching deep into her bones, so painful it made her eyes start with tears.

The two of them ate a flavorless dinner. Before the light failed she said to her husband, "Come on, let's go look at the marigolds."

They went around to the back of the house. The sun was setting into a valley in the west, and long spears of orange light fell over the marigold beds, making the flowers look even softer. Marigold felt a pang in her heart, and started to cry again.

"Again with the crying?" Her husband was annoyed. "Twice in just a couple of hours, it's not like anybody's died."

Marigold dried her eyes and said, "I was just thinking of that time I first saw you on the bridge."

Her husband looked at her intently for a moment, then sat down on the mud wall of the field and said in a softer tone, "Forgive me for being so harsh with you. I was only twenty-one then. That day I was eating a bowl of corn congee, and just as I was finishing I heard two other guys from our village talking about you on the other side of the wall. They said you were the prettiest girl around. I couldn't resist going to look for you. I never expected I'd run into you right there on the bridge... You were so much prettier than Fang back then. Who was she? Just some crazy, dark-skinned girl with no meat on her bones. What gives her the right to be on top?"

"I didn't see her either of the times she came back," Marigold muttered. "I can't imagine how pretty she is now. Are the hot springs really that nice, that they can turn a sparrow into a phoenix?"

A cold gust of wind blew over them, and her husband huddled his shoulders together. The sun lost its footing and slipped beneath the valley. Mountains, trees, wind, and clouds all became dark and heavy. Marigold didn't hear her husband's answer to her question, so she changed topics and asked if Fang had said anything to him. Her man responded without a second thought: "She said the resort had everything a woman could want."

The next day, Marigold rose before dawn the way she always did. She cut grass for the pig, then came home to make congee for her family. After it was done, she went to check on her husband. He was awake, and lay wrapped up in the comforter, absorbed in his own thoughts. Marigold stood in front of him and said, "I'm going to the resort on Moon Mountain today. I'm going to see what's really up there."

Her husband turned over and said to the wall: "Go



Illustration by Guo Xun

wherever you want. No need to tell me. I don't understand. It's none of my business. I didn't hear... Send the pig and the kid away when you go. I'm not dealing with them when you're not here."

Marigold tiptoed out of her husband's room and went to the marigold fields, where she worked as hard as she could until sunrise. When she came back, her husband was gone, having left his empty bowl on the table. Their son, whom they called Tree, was scratching lines in the floor. She washed his hands and made him eat a few mouthfuls of congee. Then she did the

dishes, filled the wood box, put on clean clothes, and packed a bag with another change of clothing and two bags of dried marigold flowers.

With Tree beside her, she let the pig out and prepared to drop them both off at Auntie Ma's. As she walked, she looked everywhere around her, hoping to catch sight of her husband. Sadly, all she saw were memories: the broken wall where the two of them had hidden as young lovers, the tree they had leaned against as they sang to each other, the dyke where he had first kissed her... and the wooden bridge where

they'd first fallen in love, one of them over here, the other over there.

Marigold finally realized that she wouldn't see her husband before she left. If he were intentionally hiding from her, he wouldn't hang around the village.

Marigold delivered her pig and her son to Auntie Ma. She told Auntie she was going to the resort – it was nothing important, she just wanted to see Fang and talk to her about something. Auntie Ma smacked her lips and said disapprovingly, “Go if you want to, I wasn't asking. Everybody says it's a nice place! They have lights on everywhere at night, and it's so bright you could see a hair on the ground. It's too bad I'm so old, and can't travel that far. Fang certainly is talented. She holds up half the sky for all the other women in this village!”

Auntie Ma stood on her doorstep, one hand shading her eyes, and watched Marigold until she disappeared. “All the girls in our village are gone,” she said ruefully. “Where? To the hot springs. To make money. To sell themselves.”

Marigold crossed the wooden bridge. The water below her rushed and boiled with white foam. This scene had remained unchanged for centuries, and seemed as if it would stay that way. But the people were not what they were. She would carry her resentment all the way to Fang, and ask her why everything in the village changed after she came back. Even Marigold's husband lost his smile and didn't want to rub her back anymore. If her man didn't want to rub her back, then she obviously wasn't living the life she wanted. Fang was a smart woman; she need only look at Marigold's man to know the kind of life Marigold was living.

She walked along the road through the mountains from morning until sundown, with still no sign of the resort. She left the roadside for a small stream that

ran close by, and sat down to eat the crackers she'd brought. Night had almost fallen, and a gusting wind shook the bamboo trees like a hail of arrows. It tore right through her, filling her ears with its howling voice.

Marigold threw away the crackers, buried her head in her knees and started to wail. She missed her son, missed the pig, missed her field of marigolds, and missed her husband the most. Everyone said he was lazy, and he was, sort of; but he was also sweet and considerate, happy and humming a tune all the time. Every time he saw her, his face would light up in a joyful smile. All Marigold needed was to see that smile, and she'd feel time reverse itself and take her back to their first meeting. Marigold wanted that smile more than all the riches there ever were.

Marigold was a rough, clumsy woman, but she couldn't go without love. Love made the sunlight warm and the flowers bright. It would let her live with energy and die without regret.

She cried for a while. When she raised her head, she found a man standing in front of her. She had no idea when he'd appeared there. He was covered in dust from the road, yet the gaze he fixed on her was focused and compassionate. He was clearly a man of solid temperament. Marigold connected with him immediately, as if they'd known each other for years already.

“Where are you headed, hon?” the man asked with a smile.

“I'm going to the hot springs on Moon Mountain,” she said, wiping away tears. “Do you know how far they are?”

“I don't know how far they are,” was the honest reply. “But I'm going there myself. I'm from Qinghe Village; my name is Miao Shanlin.”

Marigold no longer felt like crying. “My name is Marigold,” she said.

Miao Shanlin only had one hand. His whole arm was missing.

Now Marigold had a travel partner, and didn't need to fear the dark or being lonely. She walked as fast as she could, her pack over her shoulder; Miao Shanlin followed her, saying, "No need to run. If we take our time, we should get there in the evening, and that's when we want to be there. People say that the hot springs are a paradise at night, and they get busier as the night goes on. In the morning, everybody's asleep, and there isn't much going on." He pointed at the setting sun and asked, "Marigolds are that color, aren't they?"

Marigold smiled. "Pretty much."

"You're that color, too." Miao Shanlin continued.

Marigold pursed her lips in an embarrassed smile. "Pretty much." The things he said to her warmed her heart, and she walked even faster.

"What have you heard about the hot springs?" Miao Shanlin called out from behind her. The wind was at her back, and it carried his voice hurriedly past her and into the distance.

Marigold stopped to wait for him, and said, "I've heard that the hot springs are a young woman's paradise, that they have everything a young woman could want."

Miao Shanlin caught up to her, and said in a pressing tone, "I heard that the hot springs were a man's paradise, and that as soon as a man got there he would be dazzled, and forget his worries." They looked at each other for a moment, then fell silent.

The moon hadn't yet risen, and the night was completely black.

At one point as they walked, the road dove into a stand of trees, then turned down a bluff and into a valley in which points of light were scattered everywhere, like pearls.

That was the resort.

They stopped. The sudden transformation into brilliance made them afraid.

Marigold leaned against a boulder by the side of the road and took off her shoes; she had blisters on her feet. Miao Shanlin stripped the bark off a willow tree and told her to press it down over the blistered area as an analgesic. "My son's nickname is Tree," she said mournfully. "I've never left him before. I can't imagine how he must be crying tonight."

Miao Shanlin paused for a minute, then finally asked. "What about your husband?"

"My husband? My husband is a dreamer. He thinks all day about getting rich and living the good life. There's a girl in our village called Fang who came here to the hot springs and made lots of money. Now, when my husband thinks of her he can't stand me. Everything used to be great with us. He smiled every day. I miss his smile. Every time I saw it, I felt like life was good."

Marigold's voice got softer and softer. Soon she was crying, and had to dry her eyes on Miao Shanlin's empty sleeve. She only dabbed the sleeve over her eyes a few times before putting it down – it was inappropriate, after all. Then she asked him what happened to his arm.

Miao Shanlin turned to look out on the layers of mountains and black-patched forests, and told his story. He said that he once fell in love with a girl from his village. She loved him as well, so they got married and had a daughter. One day, a wealthy real estate developer who had dreams of turning their village into a resort community came to stay, and as he looked over the land he also looked over the women. In the end, he didn't find any real estate he liked, but he took a shine to Miao Shanlin's wife. The rest was predictable enough: the day the developer took her away, Miao

Shanlin cut them off on the main road out of the village. The besotted woman took a knife and destroyed her husband's arm. After that, Miao Shanlin had one arm fewer than anyone else.

It was a long time before Miao Shanlin turned back around. He had been telling his story to the mountains and the trees, and crying as he did so.

He and a few others had worked hard selling herbal medicine, and he made some money. After hearing people say that a man with a troubled heart could go to the hot springs and heal all his wounds, he decided that was what he wanted to do most of all. He would find a gentle, pretty woman, spend all his money, and return home with a lighter step.

Now that the resort was right before his eyes, he no longer wanted to go. He felt afraid, though of what, he couldn't tell. He suddenly realized something: he missed women. He would find one, of course, but she had to be the kind of woman he liked. Marigold was that kind of woman. She had an air about her that was familiar and pleasing to him. His wife had had it when they were first married. It made him feel at peace, satisfied, and thankful; it inspired him to be closer to friends and family, and respectful to strangers. The herbal medicine business had taken him all over the country and shown him thousands of women. None of them possessed that same air – or, if they ever had, it was already gone. After he met Marigold, he felt it on her, and it reminded him of that idea he had once worshipped: that idea called “love.” That reminder made him very happy.

Miao Shanlin kept talking to the mountains and trees.

“How about this: if you're not put off by me, you can have all the money I've got, if I can have you.”

Miao Shanlin's offer was genuine, and Marigold took it seriously. Her brow furrowed, and she thought

about it for a while. But she tossed away the willow bark in her hand, put on her shoes, stood up, and said one word to the back of Miao Shanlin's head: “No.” She didn't explain why not, and Miao Shanlin didn't ask. He turned around; it was his turn to see the back of Marigold's head. “I'll wait for you here!” he called to her.

I'm going to the hot springs, Marigold said to herself, and she walked on. But suddenly she too felt uncertain – she didn't know what she was going to do there, either. She passed through the trees, turned, and crossed a stone bridge that put her on a broad avenue bordering the resort. There was a chill in the air. Cold ripples muttered in the river that ran alongside the avenue, and billows of white fog coursed down from the mountain to play in the streets before disappearing in the woods beyond the bridge. The avenue was full of shops, and the tables and chairs of food vendors were set up in a long line. Everything was illuminated by hot, brightly colored lights, which diluted the deep cold of the natural environment.

Marigold thought of Auntie Ma's description. The night here really was lit up as bright as day – you could drop a needle and find it with no problem. No wonder all the village girls came here. What did the village have? The sour odors of silage and livestock manure, and the smell of house mold on all of the people. Here, even the wind was fragrant with scents of fresh cooking oil, and ever-present traces of perfume. Marigold took it all in for a while, but didn't catch sight of anyone she knew.

Her stomach growled, reminding her she needed to eat something. Too tired to look around, she plopped herself down on the closest chair. The vendor was a solid-looking man in his early thirties, who came over and greeted her with: “What can I get you? We have beef stew and lamb stew, or would you like



steamed partridge? The braised rabbit's good, too." Seeing that Marigold was in no mood to talk, he answered his own question: "How about a hot bowl of noodles with broth, then? You look like you need a big, steaming bowl of noodles with chili sauce."

The vendor had a perfectly round head with close-cropped hair, narrow, smiling eyes, and one sharp canine tooth that stuck out over his bottom lip. His smile reminded Marigold of her own husband, and made it hard for her to swallow her noodles. He was the gregarious type, and never stopped talking. "Eat, eat," he said. "The flour for the noodles comes from Sha'anxi, so they're really *al dente*. You don't look like you're here on vacation."

Marigold set down her bowl and quietly replied, "I'm looking for someone."

"Looking for who? I was one of the first vendors here, cross my heart, I know everyone in this town."

Just as he said this, someone seated in the adjoining stall snorted. "You, number one?" he asked. "If you're number one, who am I?"

"Of course I'm number one," affirmed the first vendor, patting his chest. "What the hell do I care who you are? Don't go looking for trouble. Listen, lady, forget about him, we'll figure this out. Who are you looking for?"

"I'm looking for Fang," was Marigold's response.

Hearing her answer, the vendor froze momentarily. His gaze changed, and he asked her intently, "How do you know Fang?"

Marigold, looking the vendor steadily in the eye, stuttered, "I'm family."

The vendor shook his head. "You don't look like family. You look like you're here looking for work. There's a lot of women who come around looking for Fang, because she knows how to talk, that's how she ended up the number one hooker in town. ("That's

about right," muttered the person in the adjoining stall. "That's more like it.")

"She's eaten here several times. I even let her run a tab when she first came. In the end, she never paid it back, but she let me kiss her a few times behind the stall. That was her payment. Fine by me! She's the most capable woman in the whole resort – smart, pretty, and she's got money. She may not be educated, but she could beat any CEO for strategy and just getting things done. But she threw herself in the river today, jumped right off that bridge over there. It's sad..."

He pointed to the big stone bridge Marigold had crossed a few minutes before. As he turned back, his finger scraped across Marigold's cheek and made her twitch.

He wasn't done talking:

"The bottom there is all sharp rocks, and the water's freezing. The blood on the stones washed off immediately, as if nothing had ever happened... They sent her to the hospital, but if she's not dead she'll be paralyzed. If you want to go see her, I'll have my wife take you. The hospital's not far; if you take the road up the mountain, you should be there in twenty minutes or so."

The vendor ran off to find his wife as Marigold stood in shock. The person in the next booth leaned over and said, "Listen, honey, don't get yourself down. Something like this isn't really big news around here. If you work hard and learn to talk the way she could, you'll have a lot of money to send home too. Just don't let yourself get down the way she did. A person needs to look after number one. I look after myself. These last few nights I've been getting up too often to pee, and I started worrying..."

"Why would she kill herself?" Marigold mumbled.

"Possessed," said the other. "Otherwise, someone like her would never do it. Here, there are ghosts ev-



erywhere; they'll possess you if you're not careful. You know what 'substitute' means?" Marigold continued to stare into the distance and mumble to herself. "She was doing so well, why would she kill herself?"

The first vendor's wife crossed the street toward them, and her interlocutor turned away again, whispering, "I have no idea. I've wondered, too – with that kind of money and status, why would she kill herself? Obviously an idiot, at least not as clever as she looked." Then he started advertising to the crowd: "Live chicken live duck live fish silkworms ants and graaaaaaaaass-hoppers! Put pep in your step, stay up all night!"

The vendor's wife had her hair in a perm, and her lips were bright red. She shuffled along in bathroom sandals and a pair of blue floral pants. She leaned slightly backward as she walked, so that one could see her breasts bob lazily back and forth beneath her blouse. Her husband had called her away from the mah-jongg table, and she was clearly indignant, glowering and muttering as she came, and examining Marigold with a dubious look. But she recognized the girl's provincial, timid demeanor, and this lightened her mood.

"Let's go!" she called. "So are you really from Fang's family?"

Marigold, walking dutifully behind her, responded in the affirmative. "Yes, I guess so."

"Not much of a talker, are you?"

"No." Another one-syllable answer.

The vendor's wife looked at her again, and said with a sweetened disdain, "My man says you want to work here, but you won't make it looking like that. How could you? You're sure not prettier than me; you couldn't even compete with somebody like Fang. And look what happened to her."

She stood up, lit a cigarette, and took a drag.

Moonlight, which fell full on the pathway up the mountain, lit up the two women and threw their diminutive shadows onto the cobblestone. When the figures moved, their shadows shattered. The stones were wet; skeins of fog like strips of cloud snaked across the road in front of them.

"What did Fang really kill herself for?" Marigold asked. The vendor's wife pulled out another cigarette and passed it to her, saying, "Why'd she do it? I was thinking just that back at the mah-jongg table. My guess is she killed herself for a man. You see if I'm wrong. Think about it – besides that, what else does a woman have to worry about? Especially a woman like her." Marigold took the cigarette and started to smoke. The vendor's wife gave a short laugh, and said, "I know her. We were all birds who flew in from outside the mountains, then learned how to tempt men. But we didn't have the smarts, couldn't get ahead like she did. All we could do was use our art to find us a husband, then go back to the straight and narrow. I'm not trying to be mean, but even if you do want to work here, you don't have what it takes. Not unless you have some incredible luck."

Then the vendor's wife told her a story about luck. She said there was once a man out there who was so poor he couldn't afford a wife at forty. But he had courage, and tried his luck at everything. Eventually his time came to strike it rich: he came to Moon Mountain, at first only to harvest herbal medicine. But one day on the slopes he came across a tiger, and when most people would have run away as fast as they could, he followed it instead. And the tiger brought him to the hot springs.

Marigold laughed. "And then?"

"And then?" The vendor's wife flicked her cigarette away and kept on walking. "Then he made a fortune. I hear he has his own airplane. We're all just ants

in the grass compared to him. No, I guess we aren't even that."

Marigold felt a stab of pain in her heart. She remembered walking behind the house with her husband and seeing those sharp spears of late sunlight advance through the valley and over her marigolds. She had felt the same pain then, and cried.

But this time, there were no tears. She had left her marigolds, discovered another world. That world was utterly alien to her, full of legends and transformations, and she couldn't accommodate. At this moment in her life, she had no idea how much she would need to change before she could become a part of it. The hot springs that were right under her nose might as well have been a million miles away.

As she thought on this, she felt a wave of anxiety.

She looked up into the cloudless night sky. What a beautifully full moon! The moonlight was so thick you could almost wear it for clothing. She suddenly recalled the man who was waiting for her under the moon – by the bend in the road before the forest. That man would give her a happiness that was visible and palpable. The world was as miserly as it was overwhelming, and beyond human grasp or comprehension. She had no reason to give up what fortune had offered her.

Marigold sighed to herself, then hugged her arms and sucked hard on her cigarette. The tobacco was poor quality, and the smoke had a dirty, confused flavor. Yet it didn't matter what kind of cigarettes you smoked under a moon like this one, only what you were thinking about. Looking back, the vendor's wife teased her, "Hey, what are you standing there for? What are you looking at? What's in the moon? Are there piles of money up there?"

"There's a hot spring in the moon," Marigold replied. "See for yourself."

The vendor's wife took a close look. What do you know – now that Marigold had said it, she really could see the rippling surface of a body of water up there. What could it be but a hot spring? But so high up! Women couldn't go there to tempt and tease, men couldn't go there to buy their pleasure. It was cold, blank, like a temple lantern, shining down on a world of sin unchanged for a thousand years.

A great bank of fog rolled over the two women. Beads of moisture scattered down like a fine rain.

When the fog receded, only one woman remained. It was the vendor's wife. Her skin and clothing wet with mist, she looked around in alarm but caught no sight of Marigold. She yelled out, "Hey—," but stopped herself. What are you doing? she thought. You don't even know her name. She seemed to remember Marigold saying something to her amid the fog, but her mind was somewhere else and she hadn't heard clearly. She looked around once more, swore, then wiped the rain and mucus off her upper lip and tramped home.

When the fog first rolled in, Marigold had noticed a long, narrow wooden bridge spanning the river. She told the vendor's wife in an almost offhanded tone that she wasn't going to the hospital, although she didn't say why, and the vendor's wife – who didn't even hear her – didn't ask.

She crossed the bridge amid the fog, and was delivered onto another road. This road was dark and slippery, and to walk along it and watch the bright, extravagant colors on the other side of the river was a strange feeling.

After a while, she returned to the road she'd followed here. The stone bridge she had once crossed seemed to tower above her, a huge black shape silhouetted by the lights of the resort. It had just tasted human blood, and glowered menacingly at the world.

Marigold felt grateful she would never have to cross it again.

She walked back up the long, winding road in the middle of the night. She came through the forest to the place where she and Miao Shanlin had separated. All she had to do was stop and softly call out, “Hey!” and the one-armed man appeared. He had been sleeping under a large tree. He had put grass and hay down on the ground, and sheltered himself on the far side of a boulder. In a place like this, one didn’t need a boulder to hide oneself from view. This was the nest he had made for the night. Knowing Marigold would sleep there with him, he had dutifully laid his jacket out on top of the hay. The scent on his jacket wasn’t very much like her husband’s, Marigold thought to herself.

They slept until morning sunlight poured through the forest and fell on their faces. It was an intimate morning, though also a morning of separation. Everything went smoothly, just as Miao Shanlin had said: he got Marigold, and she got all the money he was carrying. Now he was penniless again, and had to take another road to find his livelihood, while she took the same road back to her village.

They gathered their respective bags. Just before they parted, Marigold took a packet of dried marigolds from her bag and gave it to Miao Shanlin as a gift. She felt that the flowers along with her body were a more even exchange for his money.

The sun rose, filling the earth with its light. Miao Shanlin turned east, and Marigold turned west. Miao Shanlin walked into the wet morning sun, contentment and happiness visible in his face. The night before his sky had shimmered with the stars of love, which had watered his desiccated life until it was full, ripe, and could no longer be seared by the fire of his heart.

Marigold went west. The sunlight pressed down heavily on her shoulders, and its heat bit into her like thorns, like she were carrying the love of a strange man. She unslung her pack from her shoulders and held it tightly in front of her, as the corners of her mouth crept up in a satisfied smile. She did not look back at Miao Shanlin; the man had been a gust of wind, which brought her an opportunity for happiness even as it passed through her life. It was as if she could see her husband’s brilliant smile, and those wonderful early days had returned.

Marigold’s feet carried her along a beeline back to her home, sometimes with such strong intent she broke into a run. With her hands grasping the pack at her chest, it looked from afar as if she had no arms.

*Translated by Canaan Morse*

# Recommended Books



01

## **The South**

Ai Wei, People's Literature Publishing House, November 2014

The plot of *The South* follows an increasingly labyrinthian murder case over the course of seven days. Ai Wei employs three different narrative modes to tell his story: first person (for Luo Yiku, the girl who has died), second person (for Xiao Changchun, a political commissar), and third person (for assorted other characters). Their confused and fragmentary recollections depict a world without order. In capturing the social changes that occurred between the fifties and the nineties, Ai Wei has produced a vividly authentic evocation of the south.



02

## **Ling Yang in the South**

Di An, Changjiang Arts and Literature Publishing House, November 2014

Ling Yang, the sixteen-year-old daughter of an Anhui merchant, is married off to the elderly imperial scholar Tang Jian. But when Tang Jian dies within a month of the wedding, Ling Yang's in-laws do everything in their power to coerce her into entering the tomb along with her husband. Though they claim to be acting for the sake of honour, they are really only interested in accruing the benefits granted by the Ming imperial court to the family of a sacrificial widow. Ling Yang's only option is to comply with their wishes, and try to figure out a way to survive.



03

## **Empty Nest**

Xue Yigui, ECNU Publishing House, July 2014

A true story of telecommunications fraud supplies the source material for this novel, in which a female intellectual suffers a day of torment – and a lifetime of recriminations. Her psychological modulations throughout that twenty-four-hour period are depicted with precision, poetry, and philosophical depth. Many a Chinese family has been taken in by a similar kind of scam, and an aging population is one of the greatest problems the country is facing. This novel uses the specific details of one individual case to fuse together these two pressing topics.



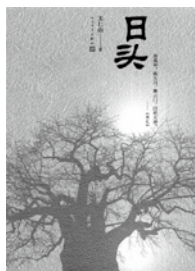
04

## **Three Trios**

Ning Ken, Beijing October Arts and Literature Publishing House, October 2014

This novel comprises three separate stories, intertwined in the manner of a chamber music trio: Du Yuanfang, the boss of a state-owned enterprise who has fled to a small coastal village; Ju Yanze, the government official who lined his pockets together with Du and is now under investigation; and the wheelchair-bound narrator, whose reminiscences about the 1980s form a counterpoint to the interconnected plot strands of Du and Ju. The influence of Borges and Calvino can be seen in Ning Ken's effort to engage with the hot topic of government corruption.

## People's Literature magazine's Recommended Books of 2015

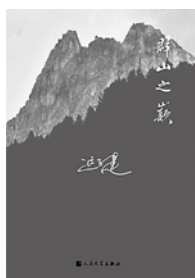


05

**Sun**

Guan Renshan, People's Literature Publishing House, August 2014

*Sun follows the interwoven stories of four families - the Jins, the Quans, the Wangs and the Dus - against a vivid backdrop of dramatically changing northern life. The father of protagonist Jin Muzao dies protecting an ancient set of bells in a prelude which foreshadows the conflicts between these families that are set to unfold over the course of three generations. These twelve pitched bells constitute a significant strand of the plot, and form an innovative chronological structure that is linked to the twenty-eight constellations of traditional Chinese astronomy.*



06

**Peak Among Mountains**

Chi Zijian, People's Literature Publishing House, January 2015

*In the vast Longshan mountains of northern China, in a small town called Longzhan, live a butcher named Xin Qiba; An Xue'r, a spirit who can foretell life and death; An Ping, the town executioner; the funeral parlour's restorative artist Li Suzhen; and assorted other characters who are drifting through their existence upon this peak among mountains. Those who love and are loved, those who are in exile or pursuit of revenge - they all carry their own hidden wounds as they try their best to live out their lives with dignity. Chi Zijian's novel, split into seventeen sections, is written with the surging power of an epic poem.*



07

**My Name is Wang Cun**

Fan Xiaoqing, Writers Publishing House, June 2014

*When a young man suffers a nervous breakdown and decides he is a rat, his behavior starts to cause everyone trouble. After a fruitless visit to a psychiatrist, the family decides to assign the narrator the task of "mislaying" his little brother. But when little brother really does go missing, he must make a conscience-stricken bid to relocate him. The jarring narrative style of Fan Xiaoqing gives this story the gravity of a fairy tale, as it reveals the absurdity of everyday life and exposes the traumatic impact of a transformed rural existence.*



08

**Everything Concrete Disperses Like Smoke**

Yu Yishuang, Beijing Shidai Huawen Shuju, November 2014

*This is a collection of short stories about the relationships between men and women in modern-day cities. We see the ordinary encounters between married couples, exes, and flings. Most of them are middle-aged - not unsuccessful in life, but not entirely happy; desperate for love, but afraid of rejection. Yu Yishuang creates an atmosphere of cynicism, fragmentation, and ennui, and in doing so reveals a slice of the modern world that is fraught with conflict and ambiguity.*

# 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 was published by Two Lines Press in early 2014.*



*Kyle Anderson*

*Kyle Anderson is Assistant Professor of Chinese Studies and Asian Studies at Centre College in Danville, Kentucky. His research focuses on Sino-Italian literary and cultural exchange. He is co-editor of the Chinese-English poetry quarterly Poetry Sky.*



*Joshua Dyer*

*Joshua Dyer is a Beijing-based freelance translator and contributing editor at Pathlight. His previous translations have appeared in Taiwan Literature English Translation Series, St. Petersburg Review, LEAP: The International Art Magazine of Contemporary China, and Pathlight. He holds an MA in East Asian Studies from the University of California Santa Barbara.*



*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 is a writer and a translator of Chinese literature. She is a Research Associate at the Fairbank Center at Harvard University, and spent a year at Peking University on a Fulbright Fellowship. She has been an artist in residence at the American Academy in Rome and was awarded a Henry Luce Translation Fellowship from the Vermont Studio Center. Her book of translations, Something Crosses My Mind: Selected Poems of Wang Xiaoni (Zephyr Press, 2014) was the recipient of a 2013 PEN/Heim Translation Grant. Her first book of poems, Nine Dragon Island, will be published this year.*



*Amanda  
Halliday Palin*

*Amanda was born in Hong Kong, studied English Literature at Cambridge, and on graduation went to Shanghai to seek her destiny. Over the next few years, she coordinated a literary festival, worked in a think tank, studied at Tsinghua, and worked with an international team on a Kunqu opera. Most recently, she was an in-house translator and editor at an art centre in Beijing. Now in London, Amanda is studying for a Master's degree in Sinology at SOAS. She is interested in late modernist poetry, the history of science, and queer theory. Ideally, she'd translate everything into Greek tragedy, but with a nod to the world we live in, she's happy to translate from Chinese to English when it pays.*





Nicky Harman

Nicky Harman lives in the UK. She translates fiction, poetry (and some non-fiction) by authors such as Chen Xiwo, Han Dong, Chan Koon-chung, Hong Ying, Yan Ge, Yan Geling and Zhang Ling. She has contributed to *Asymptote* and *Words Without Borders*, and also mentors new translators and was one of the judges for the Harvill Secker Young Translators Prize 2012. She was Translator-in-Residence at the Free Word Centre in 2011 and is currently working with the Writing Chinese authors-in-translation project at Leeds University, UK. Her home page is here: <http://paper-republic.org/nickyharman/> and she tweets at China Fiction Book Club @cfbcuk and @NickyHarman\_cn.



Dave Haysom

Dave Haysom ([www.spittingdog.net](http://www.spittingdog.net)) has been living and working in Beijing since graduating from Leeds University with a degree in Classical Literature and English in 2007. He has previously translated works by contemporary authors including Shi Tiesheng, Wu Ming-yi and Sun Yisheng.



Cara Healey

Cara Healey is a Ph.D. candidate in the department of East Asian Languages and Cultural Studies at University of California, Santa Barbara, where she studies modern and contemporary Chinese literature and film. Her current research focuses on Chinese science fiction. Cara graduated from Princeton University in 2009 with a degree in East Asian Studies and completed her M.A. at UCSB in 2013. She has also worked as Program Coordinator for Princeton in Beijing and Princeton University's Chinese Linguistics Project.



Rachel Henson

Rachel Henson ([www.rachelbenson.com](http://www.rachelbenson.com)) is a literary translator and walking artist. After graduating with a First in Chinese from Leeds University, she created Chinese Language teaching materials for Leeds and Durham Universities and assisted on *A Chinese Grammar and Workbook*, published by Routledge. She then trained in Beijing Opera woman warrior role at the China Academy of Traditional Opera Theatre. She works regularly with the Royal Court Theatre's International Playwright Programme and has published translations with *Pathlight Magazine* and *Comma Press*.

She is currently undertaking a year-long research project funded by Arts Council England investigating ways of amplifying what is felt, seen or heard live while walking, looking at playful and sensory ways of navigating an audience to a found site using prefilmic devices and physical computing.



Ken Liu

Ken Liu ([kenliu.name](http://kenliu.name)) is an author and translator of speculative fiction, as well as a lawyer and programmer. A winner of the Nebula, Hugo, and World Fantasy Awards, his original fiction has been published in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Asimov's*, *Analog*, *Clarkesworld*, *Lightspeed*, and *Strange Horizons*, among other places. He has translated the works of many leading Chinese speculative fiction authors such as Liu Cixin (*The Three-Body Problem*), Chen Qiufan (*"The Endless Farewell"*), Xia Jia (*"Heat Island"*), Ma Boyong (*"City of Silence"*), Bao Shu (*"What's Past Shall In Kinder Light Appear"*) for English markets. In 2012, he won the World Science Fiction and Fantasy Translation Award for Chen Qiufan's *"The Fish of Lijiang."* He lives with his family near Boston, Massachusetts.



*Canaan Morse*

*Canaan Morse was one of the founding editors of Pathlight: New Chinese Writing. He is a literary translator and editor with an M.A. in Classical Chinese Literature from Peking University. His work has appeared in The Kenyon Review, Chinese Literature Today, Cha: An Asian Literary Journal, Words and the World, and elsewhere. His translation of Ge Fei's novella The Invisibility Cloak, which won the Susan Sontag Prize for Translation, is due for publication in 2015 by New York Review of Books, as part of the NYRB Classics Series. He lives in Maine.*



*Karmia Olutade*

*Karmia Olutade is a Chinese Canadian writer and translator who recently finished her degree in English literature and creative writing with an emphasis in poetry at Stanford University, where she began her dramatic writing career. Her original musicals and plays include Forgetting Tiburon, Nightmouth, Pawn ("Best Original Musical Award" at the 2011 Daegu Int'l Musical Festival; NY Int'l Fringe Festival), Tsangyang Gyatso and a young adult piece, Foundling Hill. Her bilingual poetry collection Ere (Foreign Language Press) was published in 2007 and her English translation of Wang Wenqin's poetry collection Good Now (Yunnan Publishing House), was published in 2013. She currently writes and teaches in Beijing.*



*Darryl Sterk*

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*Laura Tucker*

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## *the great river*

By Luo Yihe

back then we sailed a big boat on the river  
at dawn  
back then our collars were frayed but clean  
back then we didn't tire  
that was when we were young  
we were single  
we didn't ask for wages  
we drank river water  
and faced the sun  
blue corridors opened and closed  
red-painted wheel turned behind us  
the deck was unbearably crowded  
strangers slept atop one another  
back then we had no home  
just a window  
we had no experience  
we were the farthest from understanding  
the sharp prow with its ancient rust folded through foam  
wind stung our cheeks  
burned our eyelids as we slept on the canopy  
motionless, we watched  
meanders turn black beneath day's shade  
an overpowering scent of mint flashed by  
flaying us open  
snowdrifts on the main road quickly go grey  
we throw back our heads to drink,  
swallow the sheen of great river

*Translated by Karmia Olutade*

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