



Scenery in the Distance

Poems and Essays

YANLIN ZHAO

Edited and translated by Richard Li

*Looking out over the endless wheat,
I want to write a thousand lines of poetry.*

— Yanlin Zhao

A Note from the Editor

I'M RICHARD LI. Yanlin Zhao was the first patient I interviewed for the Shanxi LifeSpark Initiative, which raises funds for people with black lung disease in China.

Growing up in Shanxi meant living with a double reality. At school I was taught about China's industrial triumphs under the Five-Year Plans; outside the classroom window, coal trucks rumbled past, trailing black dust that smothered the green of the roadside trees. Like Yanlin, I have always been proud of what my home province has given the nation. But I also wanted to know about the workers whose health paid for it — the estimated six million people in China living with black lung disease. Two years ago, on the road into Pengzhuang, his village, I began to see the hidden side of China's energy transition, and Yanlin was the first person to show it to me.

When I first saw him, he looked remarkably vibrant, wrapped in pink pajamas dotted with oversized hearts. His name, Yanlin, means something like “a vivid forest,” a stark contrast to the sparse greenery around Pengzhuang. An opaque tube ran into his nostrils; the other end was attached to an oxygen concentrator that made a low, constant hum, its display reading 4,729 hours of use. His wife, who could not speak, sat patiently beside him as we talked.



22 December 2024: interviewing Yanlin at his home in Pengzhuang. Yanlin is on the right; his oxygen concentrator stands in the foreground.

In a way, we were both migrants. Yanlin's grandfather fled famine in Henan and walked across the Taihang Mountains into Shanxi in search of a better life; Yanlin himself left home at sixteen and spent thirty years following tunnels and mines. I crossed the Pacific for an education. We both carried our parents' love and hopes, and neither of us quite knew how to repay them. Over the two years that followed, we kept talking on WeChat — about school, about his years in the mines, about his protest. His WeChat name was 远处的风景, “Scenery in the Distance.” It is also the title of this book.



16 August 2025: back in Pengzhuang with Yanlin and his wife. He holds up a T-shirt that says BE HAPPY.

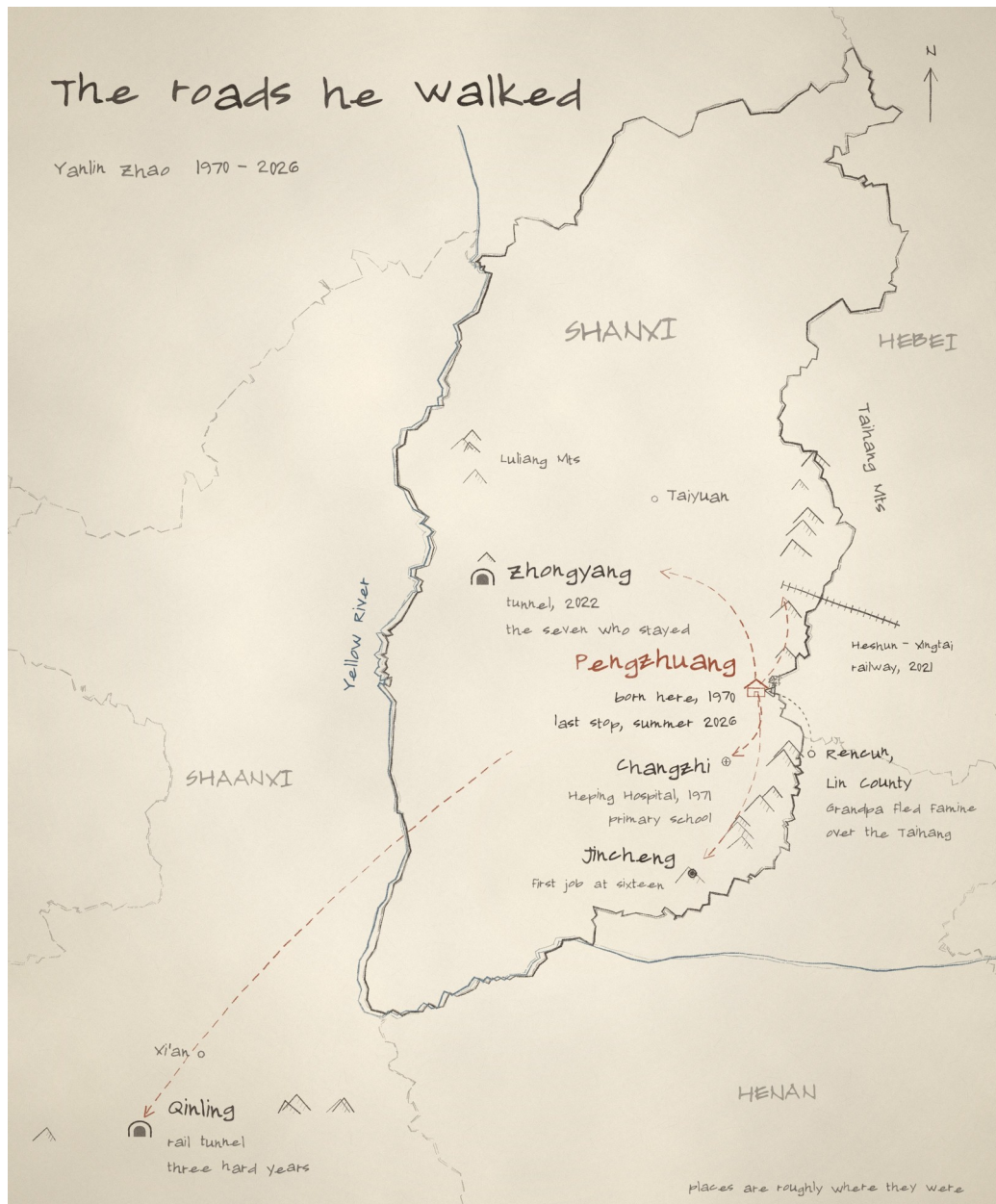
Yanlin died in the summer of 2026. In a piece he wrote from his hospital bed, he asked: “My stop is coming. What will I leave behind?” This book is my attempt to answer for him.

These thirty-three poems and essays are his own words. I corrected typos and arranged the order, and left his dialect and his voice as they were. His family gave permission to publish his poems, essays and photographs, and the funds this book raises will go to help other people living with black lung disease.

— Richard Li, October 2026

The roads he walked

Yahlin Zhao 1970 - 2026



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Before My Stop

FOR THE PAST few days I have been in the hospital. My heart flutters and my breath comes short. At night I cannot sleep: the moment I lie down the coughing starts, so I sit up through the dark. Unhooked from the oxygen I can still manage sixty or seventy meters on my own before I have to turn around and hurry back, and even then I mustn't walk fast, or my heart races, my lungs heave, and the coughing will not stop. I can feel my heart at work in my chest, each beat a hammer blow, and coming far too quickly. I know I do not have many days left. I regret nothing. I can look up at heaven and down at the earth and feel no shame before either. I have lived in peace with my neighbors and my kin; with my workmates and my old classmates I shared a friendship that ran deep, and I gave them my whole heart. That is the life I have lived. I have gone over it carefully, from beginning to end, asking myself whether I took a wrong road somewhere. I have turned the question over a hundred times and found no answer. My heart is heavy with it. Whom can I tell? What could ease it? Only wine.¹

When I was young I was wild and full of swagger, and I spent the precious years of my youth as if they would never run out. Now my stop is coming and I have to get off.² What will I leave behind? Thinking it through, I see that a life is only a journey. You leave your footprints; you leave your awe before the natural world; and in the end you take nothing with you. Sometimes the deep dark of the mine comes back to me in dreams, and all that rust; the roar of the

¹Literally "only Du Kang," the legendary inventor of Chinese wine. The line echoes the warlord-poet Cao Cao (155–220): "What can dispel my sorrow? Only Du Kang."

²Chinese often speaks of the end of life as "reaching your stop," as if life were a long ride on a bus or train. The phrase gives this piece its title.

drill and the shriek of the warning siren break into my sleep. And in the instant I bend and heave the drill up, my eyes fill with light. The scaffolding has left me so many happy memories: partners, workmates, all of us pulling together, every man with his part to play. Every clean blast carried a miner's pride. I am a miner, and I am proud of it. In this country's tall buildings there is a piece of iron I dug; in its dams and power stations there is a little light I gave. You on the high-speed trains flying past — have you ever felt my warmth? Our hearts burned hot, and I think a little of that heat reached you. When you cross the heart of the Qinling Mountains,³ there is a stretch of tunnel that we helped to build. You pass through it in a few minutes; it may flash by in an instant, so smooth, so fast. But I am in it. We are in it: three years of hard fighting, rock that could turn on you without warning, working conditions you would not believe. Every difficulty was beaten by all of us together.

³The Qinling range runs east–west across central China and divides the country's north from its south. Rail lines and highways cross it through long tunnels.



A tunnel portal, with dump trucks and a cement mixer lined up to go in. Photo by Yanlin Zhao.

Friend, can you feel it? Even in the lights of ten thousand windows at night, there is a glow that came from us — the men of the hydropower company.⁴

⁴Yanlin worked for one of China's state-owned hydropower construction groups. Besides dams and power stations, these companies dig many of the country's railway and highway tunnels.

诊断建议书		
姓名 赵艳村	年龄 51	性别 男
门诊号	院号	
部别 (或借贯)	呼吸内科	
病情简记: 主因胸闷气促, 夜间加重 5年, 加重2个月, 无咯血, 无心口疼一咳		
诊断: 尘肺 双肺纤维化		
诊疗意见: 1. 戒烟戒酒。 2. 戒烟戒酒。 3. 定期复查, 不吸烟。		
山西省黎城县人民医院门诊部 2023年 9月14日		

A diagnosis slip from Licheng County People's Hospital, dated 14 September 2023. Under "diagnosis": pneumoconiosis — black lung.



PART ONE

Roots

*Everyone who has walked out into the world from under the great
locust tree is grateful for her gifts.*

Putting Down Roots

OUR FAMILY CAME from Henan.⁵ In a year of famine the land lay scorched for hundreds of miles, and the starved lay dead along the roads. To stay was to watch the whole family die where they sat. Word came that things were better in Shaanxi,⁶ wheat country, where people ate steamed buns of pure white flour. So my grandfather, a young man then, took his father and mother and joined the great river of refugees flowing west. It is hard to imagine what they went through, what troubles met them on the road, with hunger walking at their side every step of the way. And as they trudged west, Grandpa kept hearing Second Grandpa's voice in his ears.⁷ Xi'an — now there's a city! Flat land for two hundred miles in every direction, wheat to the edge of the sky, noodles three feet long and flatbread as thick as your hand is wide. And the girls of the Guanzhong plain,⁸ every one of them fresh as spring water — mm, mm, mm! Such were the tall tales Second Grandpa used to spin for him when he was small. As a young man Second Grandpa had begged his way to Xi'an, where by some stroke of luck he learned to cook, and over the decades he put away a little silver. Then he took up opium. He smoked through every coin, sank deep into debt, and fled home as if running for his life. After that he scraped by on the family's few poor acres, until one winter morning, in the grip of his craving, he froze to death.

⁵The province south and east of Shanxi, across the Taihang Mountains. Henan suffered repeated famines in the first half of the twentieth century; the worst, in 1942–43, killed millions. The essay does not say which year the family fled.

⁶Shaanxi, spelled with a double a, is Shanxi's western neighbor across the Yellow River. Its capital is the old imperial city of Xi'an.

⁷Chinese families name relatives by birth order. "Second Grandpa" is what Yanlin called a man of his grandfather's generation who was the second son of the family — most likely his grandfather's elder brother.

⁸The fertile valley of the Wei River around Xi'an.

So young Grandpa forded rivers and climbed mountains and crossed the whole Taihang range on foot. By the time he reached this place he could not walk another step — and the moment he saw this hill, and this old locust tree, he fell in love. He had never seen a hill like it. It was shaped like the little teapot a rich man cradles in his palm — or better, like the pot on Second Grandpa's table, kept for guests, that never seemed to run dry. The locust tree in the heart of the village had stood for a thousand years, sheltering one generation after another. He would go no farther. This would be home. On a barren slope a third of a mile outside the village he built himself a shack, cut grass, broke the hard ground, fed his father and mother, and set his heart on putting down roots.



A stone lane in Pengzhuang under the red cliffs of the Taihang, August 2025.

⁹The Chinese scholar tree or pagoda tree (*Styphnolobium japonicum*), usually called a locust tree in English. Ancient ones stand at the center of many North China villages, and in Shanxi the "great locust tree" is a byword for the ancestral home.

The Old Locust Tree of Home

PEOPLE SAY THAT a hometown you can never go back to is only the place you came from, and that home is the place you can sink into, flesh and blood, until it holds your very soul. Home is the root of every wanderer — and here it is a root shared by a few thousand people. Mine lies at the foot of lovely Teapot Hill. In the middle of the village stands a thousand-year-old locust tree, its branches thick with leaves, stubbornly stretching out its limbs to keep watch over this land and its people.

Ask anyone from Pengzhuang where they come from, and they'll rattle it off with relish, like a list of family heirlooms:

With Teapot Hill behind us and Old Spire Peak in sight,

a stone bridge to the westward, the old locust at our heart;

*three Guanyin, four Wudao, and the Dragon King at the edge keeps watch on
every one of us by day and through the night.*¹⁰

THREE GATEWAYS — east, west and south — built like the gates of a walled city, made an ordinary little mountain village into something more than ordinary.

But never mind all that. It is the old locust tree I can never shake from my memory: some of it bitter, some of it tender, most of it sweet. It all seems so far away, and also like yesterday.

When we were small the tree was our playground: a patch of cool shade in the blaze of summer, a paradise of laughter and horseplay.

¹⁰A village rhyme listing local landmarks. Guanyin, usually pictured as a woman, is the Buddhist figure of mercy most loved in Chinese folk religion. The Dragon King rules rain and rivers; villages built temples to him to ask for rain and keep floods away. "Three Guanyin, four Wudao" probably counts the village's shrines; what "Wudao" refers to is no longer clear.

I remember the first time I left home. I was sixteen, with a heavy pack on my back, setting out for Jincheng to find work. I had gone a long way down the road when I turned to look back, and the old tree was waving to me, as if to say goodbye. Forty years have gone by since then. I don't travel far anymore. I have come home, and I find the old tree trading its dead branches for new leaves, as if it were listening to a wanderer's song.



A village lane after snow, the old locust tree at the end of it. Photo by Yanlin Zhao.

Today I went out of my way to visit her again — the tree I dreamed of for so many years, the tree that, on quiet nights far from home, gave my homesick soul somewhere to rest when it had nowhere else to go. The same tree. The old tree. She really is very old now. More of her branches have died; ants and insects have eaten into her, and she looks worn and forlorn, stooped with age. I worry that a strong wind might bring a limb crashing down. But my aunt says that in all these years not one falling branch has ever cracked a roof tile or hurt

a single passer-by. Of course not. How could she harm the generations she has sheltered? Everyone who has walked out into the world from under the great locust tree is grateful for her gifts, and everyone who sits beneath her still enjoys her shade.



The branches of the old locust tree. Photo by Yanlin Zhao.

It's true that she blocks out some of the sun. But even where the sun can't reach, a tuft of wild grass is pushing hard toward the light. The old tree has put out new shoots and spread them proudly, to show how stubborn life can be. So what right have I to give up on myself, or to give up hope?

The Xijing Opera Troupe

LIFE IS A play, and a play is life; the stage is small, and the world is a larger stage. Do you remember the Xijing Opera Troupe? It grew out of the Xijing village club in the 1980s, and as the seasons turned — the grass growing tall, the orioles in flight — it was swept away long ago on the tide of history. Not long ago one of the troupe's old actors died of an illness. The handful of friends left from the troupe came together and, weeping, saw their old companion off on his journey west,¹¹ their tears falling on the stage. They said goodbye to him in a way that was all their own, and it moved me deeply. It was feeling at its truest: old friends standing in the wind with tears in their eyes. No one could have watched it unmoved.

Xijing is a village in Licheng County, right on the border with She County in Hebei and next to Jinzhong and Wuxiang: it is the eastern gateway to Changzhi.¹² The local operas here are Shangdang bangzi and Shangdang luozi,¹³ and people never tire of singing them. Anyone who has been away from home too long, out of earshot of those long, lilting voices, feels that nothing anywhere is right — as wretched as if they had forgotten the way home. When Licheng got its own Liming Troupe, the townspeople were so puffed up with pride there was no living with them; they swore that even their dogs barked in big-luozi style. In the early days there had only been the Shangdang bangzi troupe, which people called the "big opera."

¹¹"Going west" is a gentle way of saying someone has died, after the Buddhist Western Paradise.

¹²Licheng, Yanlin's home county, sits in the far southeast of Shanxi where it meets Hebei. Changzhi is the city that governs the region.

¹³Two regional opera forms of southeastern Shanxi; Shangdang is the old name for the Changzhi region. Bangzi takes its name from the wooden clappers that keep its beat, and was known as "big opera." Luozi, lighter and more lyrical, comes in two sizes: "big luozi," staged by a full company, and "little luozi," which a handful of players can put on.

In the middle of the Qing dynasty,¹⁴ the master of a troupe from Wu'an, just over the border in Hebei, came drifting this way on hard times — and the locals didn't care for what his company sang. Players worked themselves to the bone in those days; they had no choice, with dozens of mouths to feed. So he took the little luozi tunes of Wu'an and blended them with the airs of Shangdang bangzi, keeping the best of each and throwing out the rest, and out of it he made a new sound: Shangdang luozi. To everyone's surprise, the locals loved it from the very first night. Big luozi needs a full company, with battle plays and court plays, bright and soaring voices, great sweeping movements — whole epics about the founding of dynasties. Little luozi can be put on by a handful of players, or a dozen; its singing winds and lingers, and its movement is quick and merry. For a hundred years it has sung of partings and reunions, emperors and generals, armored horses and golden spears, gifted scholars and lovely maidens, playing out scene after scene of life and death.

Then came the ten years of the Cultural Revolution and the campaign to "Smash the Four Olds."¹⁵ Opera was a tumor to be cut out, dross to be scraped away — and so out it went. This was feudal poison; how could the fine young people of the new society be allowed to watch such stuff? So people forced themselves to stay away. Now and then, when the longing got too strong to bear, they'd put on a show in secret. The truth is that even the village head — that son of a turtle¹⁶ — could never work out why his old mother loved these feudal leftovers so much. But he was no match for the walking stick she brought down on his skull, so he turned a blind eye, and whenever anyone asked, he played deaf and dumb. In the end it could not be hidden. The commune's Revolutionary Committee¹⁷ hauled him in for a thorough dressing-down and ordered every costume and headdress confiscated and sealed away; the stage swords and spears, the axes and halberds and jeweled hairpins, were all smashed and burned. That night the big, burly village head

¹⁴China's last imperial dynasty, 1644–1912.

¹⁵The Cultural Revolution (1966–76) attacked "old customs, old culture, old habits and old ideas." Traditional opera was banned as "feudal" and replaced by a handful of approved revolutionary works.

¹⁶A coarse Chinese insult, used here half in fun.

¹⁷The local ruling body during the Cultural Revolution. From 1958 until the early 1980s, rural China was organized into "people's communes," which ran farming and village life.

knelt beside his old mother's kang¹⁸ until dawn, never saying a word, never closing his eyes, terrified that his mother, a woman in her fifties, might take it too hard and hang herself from the little window above the door. Don't ask me how I know. I'm the village head's idiot son.

Then came the eighties: reform and opening up, minds set free, a renaissance, a hundred flowers blooming at once.¹⁹ Ideas that had been locked away for more than a decade burst out all together, and a flood of gifted people came with them. Some played rock and roll, some staged absurdist performance art, some lost themselves in the martial-arts novels of Jin Yong, Gu Long, Liang Yusheng and Wen Rui'an.²⁰ There were poets like Hai Zi and Bei Dao; there were fans of Auntie Qiong Yao, and devotees of the Four Heavenly Kings.²¹ But some people loved nothing so much as the little luozi their hometown had been singing for a hundred years. They truly loved it; you could see it in their bones, and no one could talk them out of it. A few young people caught the fever. They wanted to learn — and that one wish cost them their whole lives. They found a master, instruments, scripts. Everything was handed down by word of mouth and learned by heart, and once you took someone as your master, it was for life: you honored and obeyed him above your own father and mother.

Opera is a hard trade. There is an old saying: a good man doesn't become a soldier, and a good girl doesn't sing opera. Why? In the old days a soldier was little better than a bandit, preying on ordinary people. And a good girl doesn't sing opera because it is so very hard. How hard? First comes training: posture, the general's grand entrance and the frozen pose,²² stage combat, acting, singing. You're up before dawn, dodging, leaping, spinning, twisting; singing and reciting, acting and fighting, until your head reels and your arms and legs give way. All the while the master circles with a stick, and if your form is off —

¹⁸The heated brick platform that serves as a bed in northern Chinese farmhouses.

¹⁹Deng Xiaoping's "reform and opening up" began in 1978 and loosened state control over the economy and, for a time, over culture. "Let a hundred flowers bloom" is an old slogan for freedom in the arts.

²⁰The great authors of wuxia, Chinese sword-and-chivalry fiction, hugely popular in the 1980s.

²¹Hai Zi and Bei Dao were leading poets of the 1980s; Qiong Yao is a Taiwanese writer of romance novels; the Four Heavenly Kings were the biggest Hong Kong pop stars of the late 1980s and 1990s.

²²Qiba and liangxiang: a general's formal entrance, and the sharp, held pose with which an actor presents a character to the audience.

whoosh! — down it comes. At best you're left red and bruised; at worst the skin splits open. That's to help you remember. Back bends, horse stance, handstands.

In those days I found school dull and used to sneak out. Once I came upon the opera students doing back bends and handstands, a few girls upside down, a long stretch of bare waist flashing in the light. I stole a few glances — and the master with the stick barked at me: "If you've got business here, come in. If not, move along." I thought: do I look stupid? Walk in there so you can stand over me with that stick and make me train? I picked up my feet and hurried past.

Decades have gone by in the blink of an eye. Those boys and girls who trained so hard must be gray at the temples now, their faces weathered by the years. Do you remember the boy in the road who stopped to watch you?

One Bowl of Noodles, One City

THEY SAY YOU can fall in love with a whole city because of one bowl of noodles. I have seen and tasted noodles of every kind, and the one I miss is Shanxi knife-cut noodles,²³ the only noodle in China named after a tool. Why? Simply because the noodle itself is so good: one plain tool turns out the finest flavor on earth. Lanzhou beef noodles, Xi'an biangbiang noodles,²⁴ Wuhan hot-dry noodles, Chongqing little noodles, Chengdu sweet-water noodles, Suzhou noodles, Yanji cold noodles²⁵ — every one of them is famous for its seasoning, its sauce or its toppings, never for the noodle. Knife-cut noodles are different. The noodle alone will make you cry out. And the craft of it — well, let me put it this way: to eat knife-cut noodles, you have to stand right by the pot. A hundred strokes a minute: the blade, the dough, the cook, a sight fit for heaven. Before you've tasted a thing you are treated to a dance, a dance for the noodle. As the old rhyme has it:

*One leaf drops in the pot, one leaf flies, and the next leaves the dough as the
knife goes by;*

*silver fish dive and churn the water white, willow leaves ride the wind down
out of the sky.*

SHANXI IS DRY country. It grows millet, sorghum and other coarse grains; wheat is scarce, its yields are poor, and most of it is hardy dryland wheat. So people lavish care on flour, working it every way they can think of, to take the roughness out of their coarse-grain fare. That's why Shanxi has so many kinds

²³Daoxiao mian: noodles shaved straight from a block of dough into boiling water with a curved blade. Shanxi is famous for them.

²⁴Broad hand-pulled noodles from Shaanxi, named for a Chinese character so complicated it appears in almost no dictionary.

²⁵A roll call of China's famous regional noodles, from Lanzhou in the northwest to Yanji on the North Korean border.

of noodles. Every tool you can imagine has been used to make them, and plenty you'd never think of. Steamed, boiled, pan-fried, deep-fried — nothing left out; sautéed, stir-fried, braised, baked — each with its own trick. By one count, and not a complete one, there are more than a hundred and sixty kinds.

Knife-cut noodles are said to go back to the Yuan dynasty,²⁶ when the Mongol rulers, afraid the Chinese would rise against them, seized every blade in private hands, kitchen knives included, and allowed one knife for every ten households. One day an old couple were making lunch. They had a mind for noodles; the dough was kneaded; all they lacked was a knife. The old woman sent her husband to fetch the shared one from the neighbors. Under the Yuan, ten households made up a *bao*, and if one family broke the law, all ten were punished together. On his way the old man spotted a piece of iron by the roadside — a scrap of armor, maybe, who knows? Iron was precious in those days, so he picked it up and tucked it into his coat. At the neighbors' he was told someone else had already taken the knife. He came home in a huff. "No knife. We'll use this." "You can't cut anything with that," said his wife. "Then I'll hack at it!" he snapped. And that is why knife-cut noodles have another name to this day: knife-hacked noodles.

When I was in primary school, back in the eighties, the streets and alleys around the Changzhi bus station were full of food stalls. There were no city-management officers chasing vendors away in those days;²⁷ you paid your stall fee and did business in peace. Crowds, noise, noodle stalls everywhere: braised noodles, knife-cut noodles, mutton-meatball soup, whatever each stall chose to call it. Two of the cooks were true masters. One worked bare-chested, a board of dough propped on his left forearm, shaving it with a razor-sharp blade so fast the strips flew — each a good foot long, thick in the middle and thin at the edges, tumbling over one another into the pot. And he did it from five feet away, standing out in the middle of the street, flinging the noodles through the air into the boiling water. A real feat.

The other cook was a man of few words, and he couldn't hope to beat that on skill alone. So what did he do? Oh, he had a plan. He shaved his head bare, laid a little square of cloth on top, and set the dough on the cloth. That left

²⁶ 1271–1368, when China was ruled by the Mongols.

²⁷ Chengguan, municipal enforcement officers, became notorious in the 2000s for clearing street vendors.

both hands free: a knife in each, left and right, slashing away at his own skull. The crowd was terrified he'd slice off a piece of scalp or an ear. After a dizzying blur of blades he lifted the cloth from his head — the dough was gone, and the cloth hadn't a scratch on it. A miracle! People clapped and cheered. The old master made no fuss at all. He simply called out, "Noodles! Noodles! Knife-cut noodles here!"

But my favorite was always my mother's hand-rolled noodles. That taste stays with you for a long, long time. Whenever I'd been away three months I would go home, and that bowl was the reason. My stomach was raised on it as a boy and has never made its peace with food anywhere else; it keeps longing for home, for the taste of my mother's cooking. For me, that bowl stopped being about filling up a long time ago.

Shanxi people love noodles, and that's how they honor their guests, too. There's a joke going around: a big boss — a coal boss²⁸ — throws a dinner. This being Shanxi, he serves knife-cut noodles, naturally: the highest honor there is. But noodles don't look grand enough. What to do? Throw in abalone, the priciest thing on any Chinese banquet table. Now that's coal-boss class.

Shanxi people love to eat noodles and love even more to make them. When a family is looking for a husband for their daughter, just listen to how the matchmaker sells her: Look at the noodles this girl rolls — so thin, so evenly cut! Look how stiff and sturdy the insoles she stitches, how fine her embroidery! So from the age of seven or eight, Shanxi girls stand on stools to mix and knead and roll the dough, so that when they grow up they'll marry into a good family.

There is a noodle called drool noodles.²⁹ Yes, you read that right: drool noodles. That was in the old days; nobody does it anymore. The flour was freshly ground from dryland wheat and smelled richly of the grain; the noodles were thin and long, just one chopstick-load to a bowl, under a carefully made sauce of minced meat. Two bites and they were gone. "Never mind the broth, eat the noodles!" — meaning the noodles were the good part. Whatever sauce

²⁸Shanxi's "coal bosses," who made fortunes in the coal boom of the 2000s, became a national byword for flashy new money.

²⁹Xianshui mian, literally "saliva noodles": each diner gets a tiny portion, and the broth left in every bowl is poured back into the shared pot — hence the name. A similar custom survives around Qishan in Shaanxi.

was left went straight back into the pot, another chopstick-load of noodles came out, more sauce went on, and you ate again. Some say this isn't a Shanxi custom at all but an old Shaanxi one, from around Yuncheng near the border. All I know is that I saw it with my own eyes, once, at a matchmaking meal, when a young man came to meet a girl's family. Her parents can't have liked the would-be son-in-law, because they kept feeding him until he didn't dare take a step, afraid that if he tripped the noodles would come out of his nose. If they like you, you get poached eggs in sugar water instead,³⁰ and the more you eat, the happier your future mother-in-law. If you want to win a wife in Shanxi, you had better be able to put away three or five bowls. Eat too little and they'll say: he can't even eat — how is he going to work? Warm-hearted, hospitable folk, the people of Shanxi — and the people of Shangdang, around Changzhi, are the very best of them.

³⁰ A traditional treat for a welcome guest in the North China countryside.

Green Apricots

ONE AFTERNOON, OUT buying vegetables, I saw an old man selling a basket of golden apricots with a red blush on their cheeks. The bamboo basket could not hold in those curious little heads; they jostled one another to give off their fresh scent — a dazzle of yellow, and that shy flush of red. They looked as if they had just been picked, then carried down the mountain in that neatly woven basket on their owner's broad back, taken by bus into town, turned away at the gate of the market, where only licensed stalls may sell, and set down at last on a quiet street corner, waiting for someone to choose them and take them home, or eat them strolling down the road. Tucked away in their corner as they were, nothing could hide that tempting yellow, that red glowing on their cheeks. They carried the sunlight of the mountain villages and showed it off proudly: the sunlight of a village deep in the hills.

A taste of home came rushing at me and woke every taste bud at once. I have loved apricots since I was little; it's a memory nothing can wipe away. In the old story, a whole army forgot its thirst at the mere thought of sour plums;³¹ that afternoon, the sight of those reds and yellows filled my mouth with water.

Before I knew it I was standing over the basket. "Selling apricots, uncle?"³² The old man's face was all smiles. "That's right, selling apricots. From our own tree — more than we can eat, so I brought them in to make a little money. Not dear. Two yuan a ladle." That surprised me. Everyone else sells fruit by the jin,³³ and here he was selling by the gourd ladle. It really was cheap: at the

³¹The warlord Cao Cao is said to have kept his parched troops marching by telling them there was a grove of sour plums ahead.

³²Chinese people address strangers with family words: an older man is "uncle" or "grandpa," an older woman "auntie."

³³A jin is half a kilogram, a little over a pound. A yuan is worth about fourteen US cents.

market they went for six or seven yuan a jin, and one ladle held a good two jin or more. My shopping basket couldn't hold them all, so I went into the supermarket for two big bags, and in the end I got the whole basketful, fresh and alive, into the cargo box of my electric scooter.

Yes — for as long as I can remember, I have loved apricots. At the head of our village, in Auntie Li's yard, there was a tall apricot tree whose crown covered the whole yard and more, keeping off the heat all summer long. In early spring it was all blossom, as if winter snow were weighing down every branch — so heavy, a whole tree of white that seemed about to brim over and drip.³⁴

³⁴Yanlin's draft ends here.



PART TWO

Ma and Da

A mother's heart never stops protecting, never stops missing.

Making Hard Days Taste Sweet

MY MOTHER IS a village woman through and through. She was born in 1946 and has lived through many, many hard years, but the hardness of life never crushed her. The wheel of the years rolls over every one of us without mercy; each of us carries the weight of being alive. As *The Three-Body Problem* puts it: give civilization to the years, not years to civilization.³⁵

Her memories of childhood are happy ones. Her father, she says, was a blacksmith known for his skill in all the villages for miles around, and in the countryside a craftsman was respected and had a little money in his pocket besides.³⁶ On fair days at the Xijing commune market he would buy her a sesame flatbread, or a flower for a little girl's hair, and she would walk with her head held high under the envious eyes of the other children. Her best friend was Niu Gandi, Niu Jiazhao's daughter, who was always buying snacks and candied fruit, and the two of them would share them in secret. Such a warm memory. Sadly, Auntie Gandi died young, so I can't ask her how happy they were. But whenever my mother tells the story, a child's mischievous delight shines through. My mother is an optimist: she can always make hard days taste sweet. It's in her nature. She loves to talk to people, and she loves to talk and talk with me, with my brother, with the whole family.

³⁵From *Death's End*, the last volume of Liu Cixin's science-fiction trilogy *The Three-Body Problem*. It is a twist on the saying "add life to your years, not years to your life": what matters is what you fill your time with, not how long it lasts.

³⁶Chinese has separate words for grandparents on each side of the family. In this piece "Grandpa" and "Grandma" are Yanlin's mother's parents.



An old family portrait, taken in a photo studio in front of a painted backdrop of a pavilion.

Life is full of suffering. If you believe the world is bitter, your days will be bitter. If you believe the world is full of hope, good things will keep finding their way into your life.

But good times never last, and no one can see what's coming. When she was nineteen her father fell ill with cancer of the esophagus. No one knew it yet; all they knew was that he couldn't keep food down, and his stomach ached with emptiness. She went with him to Changzhi to see a doctor. Travel was hard in those days, and I don't know how they managed it, or what father and daughter went through on the way. They stayed with a kinsman of his, Hu Benli, who worked at the Changzhi bicycle factory as its director or a section chief — I can't remember which; my mother told me when I was a boy. When she's out of the hospital I must ask her again. He arranged for the tests at the hospital. When the results came back, the doctor warned her not to tell the

patient, to spare him the burden.³⁷ But she was so young — how could she hold it in? Before she could open her mouth the tears were pouring down, and she was sobbing too hard to speak. The truth is that her father had known how sick he was before he ever went to the doctor. "It's nothing. Everybody gets sick sometimes. It's nothing, little girl," he said, in the pure accent of Lin County. He and his father had fled famine and settled in Pengzhuang, and to the day he died he never forgot where he came from. "Rencun Commune, Qingsha Brigade, Lin County."³⁸ You must remember to go back home and see it." That is what he told my eldest uncle and my grandmother on his deathbed.

The pillar of the house had come crashing down, and life lost its color. My grandmother was a strong woman and a great mother — an ordinary woman, yes, but every day she ran and ran to keep the family alive. Yes, ran. Not walked; walking was too slow. She couldn't slow down. She had a whole household to feed, and with her husband gone she was the only "laborer" left. Why do I put that word in quotation marks? Hear me out, and you'll see.³⁹

My grandparents were twelve years apart — one full turn of the Chinese zodiac — and both were born in the Year of the Dragon. While my grandfather lived, he doted on her and never let her lift anything heavy. She was a small, delicate woman, and now the whole weight of life came down on her alone. She had to be strong; there was no question about it. The children were all still young. My mother, at twenty-two, was already married. My eldest uncle had just turned fifteen — and that's by village reckoning, which counts you as one the day you're born;⁴⁰ today we'd say he was still a child. My second uncle, born in the Year of the Sheep, was twelve; my little aunt, a Dog, was barely nine; and my third uncle, a Rabbit, was only four. My grandmother was thirty-nine that year.

³⁷In China it was long common, and still happens, for doctors to tell the family about a cancer diagnosis and keep it from the patient.

³⁸Lin County (today Linzhou) is in Henan, just across the Taihang Mountains from Licheng. Under the people's communes (1958–84), villages were grouped into communes and "production brigades."

³⁹In the commune system a "laborer" (laoli) was an adult counted as a full worker, earning full work points. A small, delicate woman like her would hardly have counted as one.

⁴⁰In traditional Chinese reckoning you are one year old at birth and a year older at every Lunar New Year, so he may have been only thirteen.

Grandma raised three sons and two daughters. My mother was the eldest, and without being asked she took on the job of helping her mother carry the load. There's one story she told me that I have never forgotten.

It was the autumn after my grandfather died. The strong men of the village were going up the mountain to haul firewood. Licheng has no coal; winter and summer, all year round, people burned what they called *chaihe* — *chai* being brushwood and branches from the hills, *he* the stalks of the crops: corn, beans, wheat, millet, anything that would make a fire to cook over. The slopes near the village were off limits; the fruit trees belonged to the collective and could not be touched. The straw was fodder for the mules and horses, the donkeys and oxen, and could not be touched either, except for the dead leaves and broken twigs left over, which would do for kindling. To find firewood you had to go deep into the big mountains, a long, long walk — out to the slopes where the tourists go nowadays. A logging team worked there, and you could take the branches they left lying on the ground, but you couldn't cut the bushes. "Those will grow into timber," said the model forest warden of the day. Late autumn: short days, an early sunset. One by one the men came home. Those with handcarts pushed back two bundles, squeaking and creaking all the way; those without hoisted one end of a bundle on their shoulder and dragged the other along the ground, trailing dust behind them. Grandma, holding my little aunt by the hand, stood on the riverbank at the edge of the village, watching the figures making their way home. My eldest uncle, Cunlong, had gone up the mountain with the men, and she kept asking them, anxious: "Have you seen Cunlong? Is he back?" They shook their heads. What with hauling and tying and sliding the loads down the slopes, none of them had seen him. A long time later, after dark had fallen, a small, thin figure appeared, dragging a bundle of firewood slowly across the bed of the Big South River. "Big Brother's back!" my little aunt cried.

How good it was to be home; how long the mountain road had been, how heavy the wood on his back. My uncle ate his supper, went to bed and fell straight asleep. He dreamed he was up the mountain hauling firewood, and his tall father was helping him tie up the loose branches — tied them so well, so neat and square, the red twigs that bound the bundle glowing in the setting

sun, and his father's broad shoulders and rough hands so warm. "Da,⁴¹ let's go down together." Why couldn't he hear Da answer? He turned his head, and his father's figure was disappearing into the thick woods. The brush was so dense he couldn't push through it, and he shouted, frantic: "Da, wait for me! Let's go down together!" He woke with a start. In the light of the kerosene lamp there was only his mother, stitching the sole of a cloth shoe. She had heard him talking in his sleep, and she could not stop the tears from running down her face.

⁴¹What children in Licheng call their father — close, as it happens, to the "Da" of Irish and northern English.

A Bowl of Porridge, Two Eggs

MY BOND WITH Heping Hospital in Changzhi⁴² began more than fifty years ago, before I was even a year old. I was born in 1970, so I remember none of it; everything I know comes from my mother. It was autumn, the harvest was in, and my father's home leave was over; he had to get back to his job in Changzhi. We lived deep in the mountains of southeastern Shanxi, with Teapot Hill standing between our village and the famous Huangyadong,⁴³ and only a winding, rocky path to carry you over it. It was late autumn, and the mornings already had a bleak chill to them; the grass and branches by the road were white with frost. My father walked ahead with his bag on his back, and my mother came hurrying up behind him. He was only twenty-six then, working for the regional construction company in Changzhi, and he couldn't make head or tail of it. "Where are you off to now?" My mother didn't stop to think. "Wherever you're going, I'm going." "And what about the boy?" my father asked. "He's been sick for days." "If you won't look after him, neither will I. You're his da," my mother said, out of spite.

My young father sat down on a stone by the road and thought for a long time. At last he said to my mother, "Maybe we should take him to the city to see a doctor." My mother let out a breath of relief and said, as if she couldn't care less, "Suit yourself. He's not just my child."

The countryside was still poor and backward then, worlds apart from the city in both goods and ways of thinking. Neither children nor grown-ups ever

⁴²Changzhi's Heping (literally "Peace") Hospital grew out of a wartime branch of the Bethune International Peace Hospital, named for Norman Bethune (1890–1939), the Canadian surgeon who died serving with the Communist Eighth Route Army.

⁴³Yellow Cliff Cave, in Licheng County, site of the Eighth Route Army's main arsenal during the war against Japan.

went to the hospital. Every village had its barefoot doctor,⁴⁴ and the dispensary was three shabby rooms of mud brick, with a big cabinet of tiny drawers stuffed with Chinese herbs and a brick counter whose wide wooden top had been rubbed black and shiny by people's sleeves. All the medicine was free to the "poor and lower-middle peasants."⁴⁵ When a commune member's child or old parent fell ill, you collected a bag of herbs, went home, built a fire, and boiled them again and again in a borrowed clay pot gone black with smoke. You drank down the thick, bitter brew, and headaches and colds, fevers and the shakes, the runs and every kind of stomach trouble were cured as if by magic. It could even cure the "blind sickness." What's the blind sickness? The kind the commune hospital had already called incurable — the kind that kills you, so that in half a year or a year you've "crawled into the dirt mound." That's what we say around here when someone dies.

My parents came back together. They went in to my grandmother, who was sitting with me, and said: "Ma, we're taking the boy to see a doctor." Grandma felt my burning little forehead and wiped the tears from her face with her sleeve. "Go. You're his own mother and father; you won't do him any harm. If you're going, go now — don't miss the bus. Leave early. I'll look after the house." She spoke with a thick Lin County accent. That's where our family came from: my great-grandfather brought my grandfather and his two brothers up from Henan, fleeing famine. Our ancestral home is Shangyanke village, in Rencun, Lin County.

And so my parents carried me two or three miles on foot to the bus stop at the Xijing commune and climbed onto the only bus to Changzhi, a big red-and-blue coach with its paint peeling everywhere. It was a dusty ride; the roads were dirt in those days. I can't say how bumpy it was, but I know the bus threw up such a cloud that long after it had passed, long after it was out of sight, the dust was only just settling. At the Changzhi bus station my father ran back to his building site to borrow a bicycle, and only then could he get my mother and me to Heping Hospital.

⁴⁴Villagers given basic medical training under Mao and sent out to provide rural health care, often while still farming.

⁴⁵Under Mao, rural people were sorted into class categories by their family's wealth before 1949; "poor and lower-middle peasants" were the favored ones.

At the hospital the doctor listened to my heart through his stethoscope and told the nurse to take my temperature. When the thermometer came out, the old doctor flew into a rage. "Thirty-eight point six! Why didn't you come sooner?"⁴⁶ My young parents stood there without a sound. That old doctor truly cared. He wrote out a prescription at once and ordered medicine, a drip, injections. I was very sick and very thin, and my veins were so small that it took the nurses several tries to get the needle in. I didn't cry once — not because I was brave, but because I was too far gone to feel it.

The drip fell slowly, drop by drop, and my mother sat beside me. A whole day of fear and strain had left her half collapsed, and sleep crept up on her. It was the dead of night, between twelve and one. A nurse noticed that the needle had slipped out of the vein: beside the drip in my scalp, where they put it in babies, a lump had swollen up the size of a walnut. The old doctor was stern with my mother. "Why aren't you watching the child? Something could go wrong!" My mother knew perfectly well what "go wrong" meant. She apologized with an embarrassed smile — "I'm so sorry, I was just so tired" — as calmly as if I were somebody else's son. The old doctor said, "Bring the child to my office. I'll help you watch him."

Years later, whenever my mother thought of it, she would tell me: "That old doctor saved your life. Otherwise you'd have been thrown away too. Your two brothers before you were lost to fevers." Before me my mother had borne two other children, and neither lived to see two. Around here, when a baby died, people said it had been "thrown away," or "lost." Then you carried another child for ten months and put all your hope in that one growing up. In those days doctors treated their patients like family: if you deserved a scolding, you got one, but what they did for you warmed your heart. Once you walked into the hospital, you trusted the doctors completely and put yourself in their hands.

Later I needed blood. There were no proper blood banks then; it was fresh blood, drawn from one arm and put straight into another. I'm type B, the same as my father. My father worked on the building site all day, and after work he bicycled to the hospital, back and forth, worn out. One day the old doctor was on duty again, and he ordered my father, who had just given me his blood, to

⁴⁶38.6°C, about 101.5°F.

eat the porridge and two eggs that the doctor's own wife had cooked for him. My father wouldn't. The old doctor said: "You can't fall down on us now. Those two are depending on you!" Food was scarce in those years. His wife had boiled the eggs and cooked the porridge because she could see how worn out her husband was from the night shifts; she wouldn't take a mouthful herself.

Years later, when I went to the primary school attached to Changzhi Normal School, a teacher-training college, my father took me to visit the old lady who made such good porridge. When she had heard what happened, she went on cooking rice porridge and eggs for seven more days and brought them herself for my mother and me. Remembering it, my mother would say, "My good boy, the doctors at Heping saved your life." The old lady's porridge was so good that I always ate every drop and washed out the rectangular aluminum lunchbox before taking it back to her. Yes — in those days a worker's grain ration was twenty-eight jin a month, bought with coupons,⁴⁷ and eggs on the black market were frighteningly expensive, maybe ten fen apiece. Don't laugh at ten fen:⁴⁸ my father earned forty yuan a month, and building workers were well paid then. Workers, peasants, soldiers, students, merchants — and the worker was big brother.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ About 14 kilograms. Under the planned economy, urban workers could buy grain only with ration coupons.

⁴⁸ A fen is a hundredth of a yuan.

⁴⁹ A Mao-era ranking of social classes in order of honor; "the working class is the big brother" was a common saying.

Da, Are You All Right Over There?

I SAT ON a bench in the hospital lobby and wrote a great deal. So many things from the past came back to me. Life isn't easy. Human beings are strange animals. Cattle and sheep, dogs and horses learn to stand within minutes of being born and find the teat, or they die; but a human child needs three years to learn to walk and feed himself. Mostly it's the mother who looks after us in those years, and so the person each of us is closest to is our mother. A child who goes without a mother's love carries a flaw that takes a lifetime to heal. That's why a mother is the greatest thing in the world. From the moment she is pregnant she cares for the child inside her, and on through birth, infancy, childhood, school, work, leaving home. A mother's heart never stops protecting, never stops missing.

Being a mother isn't easy. While she's pregnant she gives up so much of what she'd like to do; for the baby's sake she can't eat many of the things she loves, and when she falls ill she goes easy on the antibiotics — all for her child. In labor the pain cuts to the heart. Some say giving birth hurts ten times worse than breaking a bone. Ten times? More. She is trading her own life for a new one. Medicine is advanced now, with painless births and prenatal checks. In the old days a woman gambled her life on luck; all sorts of unknowns lay in wait, all sorts of emergencies no one could foresee. And once the baby came, there was the worry that her milk would run short and the child would go hungry. That is why so many people had longevity locks made for their children,⁵⁰ praying they would grow up strong. A child is a mother's lifelong worry and lifelong love.

I was born in the early seventies. Village life was still poor, and having enough to eat and enough to wear was a constant worry for my mother; she

⁵⁰ Silver lock-shaped pendants hung around a child's neck to "lock in" a long life.

was afraid she couldn't keep her children alive. My parents worked so hard. Somehow they managed to raise two boys, my brother and me. My father kept the family going on his thin wages, with my grandmother to support above and two little boys four years apart below. My mother did all the housework and her full share of labor in the production team as well.⁵¹ It was very, very hard. "In those days I was always afraid you two would starve," my mother would say, still going over it many years later. Yes. My childhood memories are mostly of craving food. A new set of clothes for New Year was something you looked forward to, and glowed over, all winter long.

My father was a building worker for the Prefectural Construction Company — an ordinary bricklayer putting up buildings in Changzhi, which was then the seat of the Southeast Shanxi Prefecture; that's how the company got its name. It went bankrupt long ago; it didn't fit the economy of today and was washed away by the tide. But in its day it took on many important projects, and many of its landmark buildings are still standing: the Lu'an Theater in Changzhi, the Book Building on North Square, and many more — Licheng's railway station, the white-cement plant, the water-pump factory. Across all sixteen counties of Changzhi you will find their work. In the eighties they even helped build an airport in Iraq. My father's generation believed in giving themselves to the cause, in being a screw in the great machine of socialism,⁵² going wherever they were sent and serving the country. It was all about what you could give — not much like the money-making tide of today. Back then it was the planned economy, and you ate with grain coupons: twenty-eight jin of grain a month, mostly coarse grain, only eight jin of fine.⁵³ Even so, my father managed to save coupons for my grandparents in the village, and my mother and I would carry them to Wuxiang and trade them for a big sack of corn.

In those days a corn bun made of pure grain, or a dumpling with no wild greens mixed in, was a luxury — a very, very great luxury. Writing "very, very" isn't a slip of the pen; I simply can't find better words for how hard things

⁵¹The village work unit under the commune. Members were paid in "work points," exchanged at the end of the year for grain and a little cash.

⁵²An image made famous by the model soldier Lei Feng (1940–62), who wished to be "a screw that never rusts" in the revolutionary machine.

⁵³Coarse grain meant corn, millet and sorghum; fine grain meant wheat flour and rice.

were. So — it was hard. Da once said that if he could have just one meal of plain cornmeal dumplings and eat his fill, he would be content. Writing this, I can't stop the tears. Da was never a man of many words; it was my mother who told me he'd said it. He has been gone nearly twenty years now. He died in 2003, the year of SARS.⁵⁴ Because of the epidemic the government banned gatherings and funeral banquets, so we gave him only a simple funeral. We followed the government's call and didn't add to society's burdens — and it suited what Confucius taught, too: care generously for the living, bury the dead simply. So I don't have many regrets. Only one thing still weighs on me: Da, are you all right over there?



Strings of dried corn husks against a brick wall. Photo by Yanlin Zhao.

⁵⁴ Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, which spread through China in 2002–03.

Because We Trust

WHEN THE GURNEY carrying my mother was wheeled into the intensive care unit, the staff stopped us at the door, frantic as we were. Family could not go in; it was a sterile ward. My heart sank. A hundred feelings came at once, and I was sick with worry — about her illness, about all the unknowns ahead, the outcomes no one could predict. Above all I was afraid for her life.

On the nineteenth of December last year my mother fell and shattered her right hip. She had surgery at Licheng County Hospital to set the bone. It went well and her recovery was smooth; she did her exercises every day, my brother looked after her carefully, and she was getting better by the day. But just as everyone was seeing out the old year — on the twenty-fourth of the twelfth lunar month, the day of the big New Year cleaning,⁵⁵ when the whole family was busy scrubbing and no one was watching her closely — she scalded her feet in water that was too hot while washing them. Four or five blisters, a mild burn. The doctor said an ointment for burns would heal them in time. But three or four days later we found her legs badly swollen, from her feet up to her thighs. We suspected a blood clot and called her orthopedic surgeon, who suggested a check-up. The next day, the twenty-eighth of the twelfth month, she had an ultrasound of the veins in her thighs and a blood test for clotting.

The doctor looked at the results and said there was nothing wrong.

On the seventh day of the new year the swelling had moved up into her body, and her face was swollen too. My brother and I knew something was wrong, and we took her to the emergency department of Heping Hospital in Changzhi. She was moved to endocrinology, where Dr. Zhang Kai examined her with great care and concluded that her diabetes was keeping the swelling

⁵⁵Families clean house from top to bottom in the last days before the Spring Festival, the Chinese New Year.

from going down. Swelling of the whole body can have many causes — low blood protein, heart failure, kidney trouble — and in any case she was very ill. The head of endocrinology recommended moving her to intensive care. All those long medical terms made my head spin; I was so tense, so terrified she might not pull through, so anxious. Because of the pandemic the hospital allowed only one family member to stay with each patient, so my brother couldn't be with me. The chief physician asked my opinion and decided to transfer her at once. That is how she came to ride in an ambulance, on oxygen, to the intensive care unit on the second floor of the new building in Ward Two.

A long wait. It was past ten at night. The doors were closed, the chairs outside were full of waiting families, and some people had even spread bedding on the floor and lay there waiting. The head of the unit came out to reassure everyone: "We'll take care of them. We'll treat your family like our own." He told us to wait downstairs in the families' area, where there were chairs and beds. But as soon as some were sent down, more came up. Even if we couldn't see them, at least up here we were a little closer. You can imagine how anxious we were.

Chief Physician Zhang Dong studied under Academician Zhong Nanshan⁵⁶ and graduated from Yale in America. He has long experience of saving lives, and with his skilled hands he has pulled countless patients back from the edge of death. He is a man of great medical virtue, who says he treats patients like his own family and cares for them with all his heart, rich or poor, high or low, keeping up the spirit of the "people of Heping," as the hospital's staff call themselves. The team he leads is first-rate. Because we trust them, we place her in their hands — and that gives us comfort.

⁵⁶China's best-known lung specialist, celebrated for his role in fighting SARS in 2003 and COVID-19 in 2020. "Academician" is the title of a member of the Chinese Academy of Sciences or of Engineering, the country's highest scientific honor.

Six Whole Days

AFTER SIX WHOLE days I finally saw my mother. She's recovering well. She was so emotional, and so was I. We talked and talked. She's recovering well.

The fifteenth of the first month: the night of the Lantern Festival.⁵⁷ I sat alone on a bench in the waiting hall, my thoughts running wild, feeling wretched. My mother had been in intensive care for six whole days. Every afternoon at five o'clock I could see her for one minute on a tablet screen in the ICU families' waiting area. Tormented by her illness, she lay deeply unconscious, barely aware of anything, tubes everywhere, an oxygen mask over her face. It hurt to see her so weak. My brother, Yanjiang, was on the road every day too, coming to visit. Because of the pandemic the hospital allowed only one person to stay with each patient, so he had to wait outside. Yesterday the attending doctor said she was getting better, more lucid, her mind coming back. But until I saw her with my own eyes I still felt hollow inside, miserable.

Around noon a nurse called. My mother wanted to talk to us, her two sons. On the phone her voice was clear and her mind sharp. She missed us; she wanted to see us. To calm her, the nurse made an exception and let me come up. My heart leaped. I hurried to the stairwell and climbed to the intensive care unit on the second floor — the ICU.

Families aren't allowed in the ICU. Everyone in there is critically ill and needs quiet to be treated. This really was an exception, to calm my agitated mother. The moment she saw me she grew very upset. She lifted her hand and said: "Why can't I see you? And Yanjiang? Why are you ignoring me, leaving me here all alone? What did I do wrong?" I hurried to comfort her. "We're not. We're waiting right outside for you to get better, so we can take you home. We

⁵⁷The first full moon of the lunar year, which closes the Spring Festival holidays — traditionally a night for family reunions.

haven't left you. We've been by your side the whole time. Let's get you well, and then we'll go home." Her mind was clear, her voice strong. The swelling was gone completely and her color was much better. Thank heaven, she was out of danger and mending well.

In my heart I thanked the devoted nurses and doctors all around me. I don't even know some of their names, but their kind faces and voices, and their way of treating every patient like family, warmed me and healed me. These people of Heping keep alive a mission handed down through generations. They are ordinary people, too, who took up the work from those before them and carry it on. It is their quiet devotion and selfless work, the way they treat patients like family, their skill and their careful, scientific nursing, that pull one suffering patient after another back from the edge of death; that give every patient real treatment and attention down to the smallest thing, healing not only the patients' bodies but the desolation in their families' hearts. Thank you, people of Heping; thank you, Heping Hospital. And thank you, Dr. Zhang Dong, the attending physicians, and all the quiet, devoted nurses and doctors of the ICU. Because we trust them, we place our loved ones in their hands, and that gives us comfort. That is the bond between doctor and patient. To cure sometimes, to relieve often, to comfort always:⁵⁸ this is the sacred calling the people of Heping keep, quietly.

⁵⁸The epitaph of the American physician Edward Trudeau (1848–1915), much quoted in Chinese medicine.



PART THREE

A Miner's Life

*Maybe we're all having a hard time living, but we're all hard at
it, living.*

They Are Only Children

MY SALUTE TO the medical workers on the front line against the pandemic, and to every volunteer. You have worked so hard, and your efforts will not be wasted. This summer the virus came roaring back,⁵⁹ spreading from one place to the next, and the government did a great deal to hold it back. The Heshun–Xingtai Railway⁶⁰ had been completed, and our crew was moving on to another rail line, far from home and across provincial borders, so we needed COVID tests. That day we went to the big hospital in the county town. It was hot, the line wound on like a dragon, and crowds of people had come to be tested. So hot: the sweat pouring, the sun blazing, tempers fraying.

Up ahead people started grumbling, and a couple of them got into an argument. A few young volunteers, who had been helping older people scan the test's QR code and pay on their phones, came over and patiently calmed everyone down. Order was soon restored. People ought to understand: these young students had given up their holidays to come and do whatever they could against the virus. That alone is remarkable — and they are still only kids. Every life is equally precious. Your quiet, peaceful days exist because someone is standing guard over them for you. What we have to do isn't much: don't run around, and stay out of medium- and high-risk areas.⁶¹ If work makes you travel, get tested as required and follow the quarantine rules — for yourself, for your family, for everyone else. If you can't manage something that simple, what kind of person are you? Everyone has worries. Take your bad mood out on others, and you'll only feel worse yourself.

Someone on Zhihu⁶² put it this way: the generation that was so carefully protected as children during SARS in 2003 is the generation now stepping

⁵⁹Summer 2021, when the Delta variant spread from Nanjing to many provinces.

⁶⁰A line across the Taihang Mountains linking Heshun in Shanxi with Xingtai in Hebei.

⁶¹During the pandemic, Chinese neighborhoods were graded low, medium or high risk; travel from risk areas meant tests and quarantine.

⁶²A popular Chinese question-and-answer site, something like Quora.

forward to protect the world that loved them. Most of the medical staff in this pandemic, and most of the volunteers on every front, come from that generation. Young people are the hope of a country. As the young are, so is the nation.

The medical workers taking the swabs wore protective suits sealed from head to toe. In the heat of high summer, under a sun like fire, we stood there in shorts and T-shirts and still couldn't cool off. And them? They are mothers' daughters and daughters' mothers, every one of them flesh and blood, with a young woman's tender heart. For duty and for what they believe in, they fight on the front line, working hard without a word of complaint, to keep a whole region safe. Heroes? Angels in white? No. They are only children, who took up the trust handed on by those who came before them, bravely put on their battle dress, and now stand guard over the world that once kept them safe.

There is a feeling called being moved. It is that feeling that has carried me through so many stretches of disappointment, emptiness and low spirits, and given me hope.

After our tests, at the crossroads by the Xijing bus stop, there is a woman who has sold cold bean jelly and fried noodle sheets there for years. We sat down at her stall and talked about the pandemic and about everyday things. She told me that just two days before, two people had come back from Nanjing, and the county had sealed off two housing estates at once. To be responsible to the people, and to the children, the education bureau had sent the pupils of the county's No. 1 Middle School home first, and then the children at all the cram schools, to take their classes online. Her business had suffered badly during the pandemic; she was taking in far less than usual. But she smiled and said: "Never mind. Money can be earned again later. A life can't. Better to be strict. It's better for everyone."

It is because of ordinary people with that kind of understanding that we have come through one epidemic after another: SARS in 2003, the coronavirus in 2020, and this new wave now. We have the confidence, and more than that the determination, to beat this disaster. May we all be safe; may our days be quiet and good.

I Am from Licheng

LET ME TELL you something. On the twenty-ninth of March, a man coming home to Licheng from Shanghai was stopped by the health workers screening travelers at the expressway exit, and his test came back positive.⁶³ All at once Licheng was in the eye of the storm again, with every kind of talk going around. The county's risk level was raised, and everyone who had been in close contact with him was quarantined and tested. Overnight the controls grew stricter: schoolchildren were sent home to learn online, and many workplaces couldn't run. People got a bit worked up. I won't pass judgment here on who was right and who was wrong; time will tell.

We migrant workers spend most of the year away from home, so some of us set up WeChat work groups — some people belong to several — to help everyone find jobs, and to find and hire workers. A job comes up, they're short of hands, someone calls out, and everybody brings their friends along to earn a few pink Chairman Maos.⁶⁴ Earning money to support the family, put food on the table, buy a flat, buy a car, dream of a new life — what could be better? But wouldn't you know it, something always goes wrong; somebody has to stir up trouble and spoil it for you. I'm talking about a job ad. Here's what it said: "Any drillers at home? Hongtiguang in Pingshun County is short one driller. 8,000 yuan a month guaranteed, 200 for each extra shift. If you're interested I'll give you the number. No one from Licheng. Anywhere in Shanxi except Licheng is fine." Would you listen to that? What's wrong with Licheng? Have we dragged the people of Changzhi down, or brought them shame?

Licheng sits in southeastern Shanxi, the gateway to Changzhi. Its people are simple and honest, hardworking and brave, with a proud revolutionary

⁶³ March 2022, during the Omicron outbreak centered on Shanghai.

⁶⁴ China's 100-yuan note is pink and carries Mao Zedong's portrait.

tradition: upright and good-hearted, not out to quarrel with anyone, kind to others, solid and sincere. People even call us "Licheng lumps"⁶⁵ — slow of speech and honest as the day is long. When the tunneling record was set at Hongtiguang, Licheng men were there: a single tunnel face driven forward 567 meters in one month, a Guinness world record that no country or region has beaten since. The contractor in charge was a Licheng man, from Qingquan in Huangyadong township.

Licheng was something in the past, too. It was home to the Chinese Communists' first arsenal.⁶⁶ In those stirring years of blood on the battlefield, how many fine young men rose up, threw down their pens and took up arms, and wrote a glorious chapter in their own blood — men of iron, famous all along the Taihang. The Bethune International Peace Hospital, founded under Liu and Deng,⁶⁷ was once stationed at Xicun near Huangyadong, before it moved to Changzhi, where generations of its staff made it one of the finest hospitals in the region. The Huangyadong arsenal moved to Changzhi too and became three national arms factories: Qinghua, Huaihai and Huifeng. The Scud missile launchers that mattered so much in the Iran–Iraq War came out of one of them. Licheng's Changning airfield played a key role in the revolutionary years as well, as a transit and supply point for strategic goods. Communist leaders flew in from Yan'an⁶⁸ and set out from here to build the great anti-Japanese base area and the government of North China. The Bank of South Hebei, forerunner of the People's Bank of China, was founded in Xiaosai village, near Huangyadong⁶⁹ — a vital bank in the war against Japan whose importance can hardly be overstated.

There's no end to it. So many soldiers fought and bled here, in a life-and-death struggle with the Japanese invaders. Here was fought the Battle of Huangyadong Arsenal,⁷⁰ when the few defeated the many, saved the

⁶⁵ Licheng geda, a teasing local nickname for someone plain, honest and a little stubborn.

⁶⁶ The Huangyadong arsenal of the Eighth Route Army, built in 1939 during the war against Japan.

⁶⁷ Liu Bocheng and Deng Xiaoping, who commanded the Eighth Route Army's 129th Division in the Taihang Mountains.

⁶⁸ The Communist Party's wartime headquarters in northern Shaanxi.

⁶⁹ The Bank of South Hebei (Jinan Yinhang) was set up in 1939 to finance the Communist base areas. The People's Bank of China is today the country's central bank.

⁷⁰ In November 1941 a small Eighth Route Army force held the arsenal for eight days against a much larger Japanese attack.

machinery, wiped out the enemy, and kept safe the lives and property of the people of the old base area.⁷¹ The soldiers' blood dyed the cliffs of the whole Taihang range red, and the red has never faded. It's a lovely, pleasant place for tourists now, but the red of Red Stone Park belongs to Licheng, to China, to the world: the red spirit, handed down from generation to generation.⁷² We cannot forget the past. The sacrifice of the martyrs bought the peace we have now. The people of the old base areas won't forget, you won't forget, I won't forget. A nation that forgets its past has no hope and no future.

When Party Secretary Hu Fuguo called on all of Shanxi to tighten its belt and build up the province, when the Taiyuan–Jiuguan Expressway was being built,⁷³ the officials of Licheng's government and Party offices and the workers of its enterprises gave money and goods with open hands, and Party members led the way. The power of example is boundless. From top to bottom, everyone rose to the call, and ten thousand hearts beating as one paved a road to prosperity, a road to happiness.

During SARS in 2003, and again when the whole country rushed to help Wuhan,⁷⁴ the doctors and nurses of Licheng County People's Hospital put on their battle dress and ran toward the danger. They were unsung angels in white, ordinary heroes with no earth-shaking deeds to their names, only gentle hands and pure hearts, and the healer's compassion that cuts down the demon of disease. Where in the world won't you find people from Licheng? So tell me, what's wrong with Licheng? How is Licheng dragging the whole country down? Licheng is only sick; she needs love and warmth and someone solid at her back, not cold words and sneers. Am I right? I was born here and I grew up here. This is my home. Wherever I go, I'll never forget where I was born. Licheng, I love you — my home, the land of heroes. I'm from Licheng, and I'm proud.

⁷¹The "old revolutionary base areas" (laoqu) are the regions the Communists held during the war. They are still honored for their sacrifices, and many remain poor.

⁷²Red is the color of the Communist revolution, and "red tourism" to revolutionary sites is a big industry in China.

⁷³Hu Fuguo led Shanxi in the 1990s; the province's first expressway, opened in 1996, was partly paid for by donations from ordinary people.

⁷⁴The first city struck by COVID-19, in early 2020; medical teams from across China were sent to help.

The Seven Who Stayed

LET ME TELL you a funny story. Because of the pandemic, quite a few building sites hadn't opened this year. We'd tried here and tried there and hadn't found any decent work. Then we heard that a site in Zhongyang County, in Lüliang, was hiring, so we went: more than twenty of us altogether, four or five from Zuoquan County and a dozen or so from around Xijing back home.

Someone had set up a WeChat group for drillers. When we're looking for work we call out to each other there; we're all fellow villagers and old friends, and it's easier to work with people you know. If there's an easy job that pays well with short hours, one shout and everyone comes running. But that's a pipe dream. There has never been a site with short hours and good money. If there's any work at all, it's at a fixed rate by the month or by the shift, and every boss is as sharp as a monkey. A working stiff like you, get the better of him? That'll be the day.

That's the background. When we came, we were told it was an expressway job: two tunnels side by side, one for each direction of traffic, one crew, 7,500 yuan a month guaranteed and 200 for every extra shift. Honestly, the pay was a bit low, but with two tunnels to dig we could work more shifts, so everyone came. They said there'd be a morning shift and a midday shift, and no night shift. We had three days to get to the site. Some drove, some came by bus, some by high-speed train. This was in the middle of the pandemic, with strict controls everywhere, so you can imagine how hard the journey was. By the twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth everyone had gathered at the site, some from home, some from other jobs in Taiyuan and Yangquan.

Once we'd arrived and got ourselves settled — eating, sleeping and all the rest — the boss came in with our crew leader, Wenhua from Zuoquan, whom

everyone calls by his nickname, Ermang.⁷⁵ Wenhua introduced him: this is Boss Lin, from Fujian, in charge of the site. Boss Lin said: "Since you're all here, you start tomorrow." Now comes the important part: the pay had to be agreed beforehand. The boss said that yes, there were two tunnels, but work on the right-hand one was being stopped. There'd be one tunnel left, and once that was through they'd dig the other. That was the project office's decision; there was nothing he could do about it. 7,500 guaranteed for the month — paid for 31 days in a 31-day month, 30 otherwise — and 200 for each extra shift. Sounds fine. The trouble is that with two tunnels you can work two or three shifts a day; even if the base is low, you work more shifts and earn more. These days the going rate is 8,000 at the very least. Nobody pays seven-thousand-something anymore. After talking it over, we all agreed: 8,000 guaranteed, and no "filling in." Those were our terms for staying, even with two tunnels turned into one.

Let me explain what a guaranteed wage is. It's simply a base salary. Tunneling depends on a great many people working together. First, the quality has to pass and the work has to be safe. Go too fast and the supports can't keep up — that's called reckless work, and they shut you down. Safety not up to scratch, and they cut off your explosives. That happens all the time. Then, if the company doesn't get on with the local villagers, they'll block the trucks hauling out the rock. Whenever the work stops, there are no shifts, and a migrant worker is paid by the shift: no shift, no money. To keep men from walking off, there's a guaranteed wage. And what's "filling in"? Say no one works from the first to the tenth of the month, for one reason or another, and then from the twentieth to the end you work forty-odd shifts. How should that be counted? If twenty of them count as extra shifts, nothing has been filled in. If only ten count, the boss has used your extra shifts to "fill in the hole" left by the days you couldn't work. A stoppage that was never the workers' fault gets charged to the workers. That's filling in.

We negotiated hard, once, twice, and never came to terms. "Two tunnels turned into one — don't blame me. That's the project office's decision: get one tunnel through as fast as possible, so the ventilation improves and we can guarantee the air quality," the boss said, in his best official voice. The young

⁷⁵Roughly "Second Bull."

guys were hot-headed to begin with, and we'd all worked on sites for years; we're rough men. A few words, and the whole thing fell apart. We'd been promised two tunnels, and now it was one. We come all this way to slave away for a bit more money. If you're changing the deal, you pay our fare home. The men turned on the crew leader who'd recruited them: "We can't get at the boss. You're the one who talked, you're the one who made the promises." After a round of shouting and arguing the crew leader got scared, jumped in his car and drove off alone. "Ai, these young guys. That was meant for the boss's ears. You took it seriously, you good-for-nothings," said one of the older men, born in the seventies, in no hurry at all. "Don't panic. Let's find somewhere for a few sips." The crowd scattered like birds and beasts; a dozen or more drove off in a cloud of dust — gone, just like that. Who am I? What did I come to this godforsaken place for? It was all over before I'd even worked out what was happening. Oh yes — the village a mile or two down the road, at the foot of the hill, is called Wannianbao: "Full for Ten Thousand Years." Not in generations had Wannianbao seen anything like it.

Lüliang is in western Shanxi, and not far from here is Fenyang, home of the famous Fenjiu.⁷⁶ Wonderful stuff: strong and honest, it warms you right through. That noon a few of us drank it and didn't dare drive, so we slept it off on the bunks we'd only made up a few days before. When we woke, the other two rooms were already empty, with quilts and mattresses on the beds and on the floor, and all the everyday things people had thrown away. Those good-for-nothings — wherever they go, they leave their junk behind. What a waste. Our older brother strolled around, and on his way out he didn't forget to pick up a washbasin. Back in the room he called to us: "Come on, cards! Let's play Fight the Landlord."⁷⁷ We're doing nothing anyway." So some of us played cards and some of us slept. Then Boss Lin came up the stairs and into our room. "Playing cards?" he asked. The older brother laid down his hand and said to him: "A few of us would still like to stay on and work. Is that all right?" "Sure," said the boss. "Leave your names and phone numbers. Come down to the office and sign up."

⁷⁶A clear sorghum spirit, one of China's oldest and most famous kinds of baijiu, the fiery grain liquor drunk at every Chinese meal of note.

⁷⁷Dou dizhu, China's most popular card game.

In the office the boss said: "Those post-eighties and post-nineties kids⁷⁸ — at the first sign of trouble they're gone without a trace. You seventies guys are steadier." When I heard that, I wanted to slap him. That morning he wouldn't give an inch, all official talk, and now this.

Yes, the seven who stayed were all born in the seventies, nearly fifty, a few just past it. With old parents above us and children below, a whole family to feed and clothe and keep, and all of it on our shoulders. Who doesn't want to earn more? If we can't earn more, we have to take a little less. You call us sly old foxes, but there's so much we have no choice about. You don't know what it means. It's a daughter's tuition, an old father's and mother's medical bills, a family's food and life: a whole family leaning on one man. One of the men who'd already left, out on the expressway home, curled his lip: "Damn sly old foxes. What a joke." Yes. We have finally turned into the kind of people others despise. We have turned into a joke.

⁷⁸Chinese sorts its generations by decade of birth: the "post-70s," the "post-80s," the "post-90s."

Always Prepared

I'VE BEEN IN Zhongyang for over a month now,⁷⁹ and not a soul has greeted me with "Welcome back to the Center at last." Nor has the Central Advisory Commission⁸⁰ sent anyone to arrange a post for me. I know my abilities are limited and I may not be quite up to a really important position, but couldn't they have given me a little training first, so I'd have some idea of what my future job might be?

More than thirty years have passed, and I remember it clearly. Led by our old headmaster in his reading glasses, we took the solemn oath: Be prepared! Always prepared! We are the successors of communism!⁸¹ A row of schoolchildren stood neatly in line while the big boys and girls tied bright red scarves around our necks for the first time. The teacher told us the red scarf was a corner of the red flag, and that we were the motherland's future. The speaker's eyes filled with tears; the listeners' hearts swelled.

For communism, for a better life tomorrow, we have worked hard at living, through one spring, summer, autumn and winter after another, through so much wind and frost, rain and snow, bright moons and autumn winds. More than thirty years have gone by. The snot-nosed little kids of those days now have dust on their faces and frost at their temples;⁸² our backs aren't as straight as they were, but our spirit is the same. I firmly believe that the

⁷⁹The joke turns on a pun: the name of Zhongyang County sounds exactly like zhongyang, "the Center," meaning the Communist Party's Central Committee in Beijing. Yanlin pretends he has arrived at the seat of power.

⁸⁰A body for retired senior Party leaders, created in 1982 and abolished in 1992.

⁸¹The oath of the Young Pioneers, the Communist children's organization that almost every Chinese schoolchild joins, wearing a red scarf.

⁸²After a famous line by the Song dynasty poet Su Shi (1037–1101), mourning his wife: "My face full of dust, my temples like frost."

beautiful life is not far from you and me. It will come one day; it surely will. Everyone hopes for a good life, I think, and everyone longs for good things. Don't you agree?



A red boulder carved with the words “China Dream.”⁸³ Photo by Yanlin Zhao.

⁸³The “Chinese Dream” of national rejuvenation, Xi Jinping’s signature slogan since 2012.

I Say This World Is Worth It

SOMEONE ASKED ME: when this life is over, will you come back for another? I said: what for? Even the gods are sent down to this world to suffer their trials.⁸⁴ If even the gods can't escape it, what can a mortal do? So some people say that much of this world isn't worth it.⁸⁵ I read something online once: I've seen people with faces covered in dust look up and smile and say life is beautiful. I've seen people who made it big always reeking of drink. I've seen people who never go home until late at night, still hoping tomorrow will be wonderful. And I've seen people who seem to be doing just fine wipe away tears in secret.

I know that people who take life seriously taste every flavor it has. I know a grown-up's world can fall apart in an instant. You try with all your might to become the person others expect you to be, and even with no home to go to, even battered by wind and rain, you smile and say, I'm fine. We hide in corners where no one can see us and lick our wounds, never wanting to let the tears fall. Even covered in scars, even beaten and stripped of our armor, we don't want anyone to see, or to laugh at us.

Three years of pandemic, and you never get used to it. Work comes and goes; I've missed so many chances. The year flew by. Money is as hard to earn as catching ghosts, and it runs away like water. And just then my old mother's health isn't good, and my daughter sat her exams this year and has finally become a university student,⁸⁶ so there are many more things to pay for. I don't

⁸⁴In Chinese legend, a god may be sent down to live a hard mortal life as a trial (lijie) before rising again.

⁸⁵"The world isn't worth it" became a catchphrase in 2018, popularized by the comedian Li Dan. The title of this piece answers it.

⁸⁶She would have taken the gaokao, China's national university entrance exam, sat by more than ten million students each June. A family's whole hopes often ride on it.

know whether the world has gone bad or I'm just no good, but life feels like one great weight.

Today on WeChat Moments⁸⁷ I saw what a childhood friend of mine, a truck driver, had for lunch: not at a restaurant or a diner but in the cab of his truck — a pot of noodles, with half a jar of chili sauce beside it. I couldn't tell if there were any greens in there, or any crispy pork. This guy who's forever showing off big dinners had posted a bowl of plain noodles in clear broth. So I gloated a little and wickedly typed: "Look who's come down in the world." I'd just finished and was about to hit send when I caught sight of myself. I saw how ugly I was being, and the tears came pouring out. Better to delete it. Nobody has it easy right now. Live in the moment, and be kind. Maybe this guy is struggling hard. I couldn't find any words of encouragement either. So many feelings at once, sorrow and gladness all mixed together. Maybe we're all having a hard time living, but we're all hard at it, living. Tomorrow — maybe tomorrow will be better.

A tourist went to a remote mountain village to photograph the scenery. She saw an old granny cooking for her granddaughter and kindly warned her: "Don't let her eat instant noodles all the time. That's junk food. She's still growing; it's bad for her." The old granny said: "Of course she can't have them all the time. Today's her birthday, so I made them for her. Most days we can't afford them." The stylish young tourist thought about that for a long time, and said nothing.

Yes. What you call junk food, some people can only have on their birthday. Life is bitter at its root, and each of us has to carry ourselves across our own joys and sorrows. How warm or cold the world is, only you can tell. Maybe, once we've tasted every flavor life has to offer, we'll find a little sweetness in the aftertaste.

In these hard days of the pandemic I ought to say something encouraging. I thought about it for a long time. Nothing came. I racked my brains and fell back on the usual words: may I live happily, and may my family, my friends, the folks from home — may all of you be safe. Every long night has its dawn. Tomorrow, tomorrow will be better. I say this world is worth it, because you

⁸⁷WeChat's social feed, where friends post photos and news.

are in it: because of your company and your encouragement. However hard it gets, we keep on living, hard as it is. To be alive is good.

That's all. Let's keep each other going as we struggle through this sea of bitterness.⁸⁸



A cat sunning itself in the scallion patch. Photo by Yanlin Zhao.

⁸⁸ A Buddhist image for the suffering of worldly life.



PART FOUR

Farewells

All the water in the sea could not write out how much we miss you.

Elegy for My Uncle

TERRIBLE NEWS HAS reached me, and heaven and earth have lost their color. My uncle has left this world; heaven and the living are parted forever.⁸⁹ A thousand miles away, your nephew bows his head to the ground and kneels before heaven. Uncle, may you go free of pain from this day on; may your road be smooth. Heaven has sent calamity, and the whole earth grieves. These are strange times; the plague is raging, and I, your child, cannot come home to do my duty and walk beside you on your last journey.⁹⁰ I can do nothing, and the regret cuts my heart like a knife; my grief knows no bounds. You were a generous elder, honest with everyone and true of heart; you never quarreled with a living soul. Heaven is my witness: your workmates and schoolfellows all spoke well of you. All your life you labored faithfully, tilling the field of your days and never daring to slacken for a moment.

As I recall your life, the past rises clear before my eyes. You taught me so much; your patient counsel still rings in my ears, and your kind face is still before me. Then came this sudden blow, this tragedy among the living, and no words can hold my sorrow. With my own hand I write this elegy and offer it to your spirit in heaven. Are you at peace? Is the winter cold in heaven? Riding the crane to the west,⁹¹ are you lonely? Is it hard?

Your unfilial child bows his head to the ground, and kowtows. Bows again, and kowtows. Bows a third time, and kowtows.⁹²

⁸⁹A *jiwen*, or sacrificial elegy: a formal address to the dead in high, old-fashioned language, traditionally read aloud at the funeral or the grave and then burned so that it reaches the departed.

⁹⁰COVID-19 travel restrictions kept many people from the funerals of their relatives.

⁹¹In Chinese tradition the immortals ride cranes; "riding the crane west" is an old way of saying someone has died.

⁹²Mourners traditionally call themselves "unfilial" for having failed to care for the dead well enough. A kowtow is a full kneeling bow with the forehead touching the ground; three are made to the dead.

Remembering Haizhong (I)

THE EIGHTEENTH OF June 2023 was a day of sorrow. On that day Yu Haizhong — my childhood friend, my elder brother in all but blood — died suddenly of an illness the doctors could not cure. When the news reached me it was as if my insides were on fire and my heart were being cut with a knife; I could not believe it was true. All at once the sky seemed to lose its color; the earth sobbed, the mountains and rivers wept together, and every blade of grass and every tree grieved. Five days have passed, and still I cannot be calm.

Haizhong was born in 1970, on the eleventh day of the ninth lunar month, five days before me; my birthday is the sixteenth. We grew up side by side from the very beginning: played together, went to school together, grew up together... Friendship, and something close to kinship, grew up along with us. From boyhood until now he was my hero, my teacher, my closest friend. His sudden death has left me lost. I rage at heaven for its unfairness and at the world for its uncertainty. For days and nights I have been tormented, my thoughts running in ten thousand directions. I lie awake thinking of my brother, going back over the past, mourning him.

Haizhong's life was full of misfortune, but he was strong, kind, upright and always ready to help, conscientious in his work and rooted in the mines. In more than thirty years of hard labor underground he made an outstanding contribution: several model projects were completed by him and his workmates together, and again and again he was named a model worker and an advanced producer.⁹³ He cared about every affair of the people of Pengzhuang, great or small, down to the last detail; he was always glad to lend a hand and was good to everyone. He served his old mother, his uncles and his aunts with all his heart. With his children, his nieces and nephews and his sisters' sons he

⁹³Official honors given to outstanding workers in China's state enterprises.

was strict and attentive, setting an example himself, a model for the young, and he raised them well: a son and two daughters, a niece and a nephew — five university graduates. Several of his sisters' sons have done well too, and become people of use to society.

My mother often told me that Haizhong's mother had been her childhood playmate. My mother was two or three years older, yet by family rank Haizhong's mother was her elder — my mother called her "little auntie"⁹⁴ — but none of that got in the way of two children's innocence; they played together like the best of friends. My mother often brought those days up, savoring them, her thoughts drifting far away. A childhood friendship that was almost kinship, and they were neighbors besides, in the same production team, always helping each other out. She feels it deeply; even now, when she talks about it, it seems like yesterday.

Old Auntie — Haizhong's mother — married into the Yu family. Her husband had lost his father as a boy, and with two younger brothers not yet grown, he and his mother had only each other. She took the weight of the household on her own shoulders and ran it well, inside and out, and brought a great deal of warmth to a poor family. The two younger brothers later found work, one at a coal mine and one at the Huaihai Machinery Factory. Their wages were meager, but they gave the poor family a good deal of strength. They respected her greatly, and she was a devoted daughter-in-law, caring for her husband's mother day in, day out. That is how the family stayed afloat through wind and storm. She was a great mother, and only a mother like that could raise such fine children. Haizhong grew up in that family. His mother told her children: brothers and sisters must help each other and love each other, or you'll never get through a hard life. That family spirit lives on to this day; he and his sisters never forgot what their mother told them. Even the hardest life lets a little sweetness through, and with that warmth, life is never too bitter.

Life seldom goes the way you want. It always has trials in store for you. People say we are born into this world to suffer.

Then their father died, suddenly, and it was a crushing blow. Old Auntie's husband was killed in an accident while working at the mine, only in his

⁹⁴In Chinese villages, neighbors often address one another by kinship titles handed down through the generations, so a younger woman can be "auntie" to an older one.

forties. It struck like a thunderbolt out of a clear sky. What does it mean to a family when the pillar of the house suddenly falls? A mother had lost her husband; the little ones had lost a loving father... But life has to go on, however hard. We have to keep walking, step by careful step. Old Auntie had lost the one she leaned on in the prime of her life; it struck her hard, and overnight her hair went gray. Haizhong was only twelve. Like a mother hen, Old Auntie gathered her children under her wings and made her way along that storm-tossed road. And so they lived in hardship, but they didn't call it hardship; they always picked out a little sweetness from it, and hoped for a little warmth. Taught by his mother, Haizhong was always willing to help, warm and kind, upright and selfless. The brothers and sisters were close and helped one another; they finished school, married, had children of their own. And he grew into a plain, honest miner, rooted in the mines, working hard and doing his work well. But fate has a way of raining down troubles, as if heaven were afraid it had not yet crushed shoulders already bent. Life had only just begun to get better; time had only just begun to dull the old, quiet sorrow.

Then, in a season of endless rain, his elder brother was killed in a mine accident — another heavy blow to the family. Brothers are as close as hands and feet, of one flesh and bone. His heart was torn to pieces; the pain ate into his bones and soaked through body and soul. But that great suffering did not break him. Bearing the agony in body and spirit, he arranged his brother's funeral and took care of his little nephew and niece and his sister-in-law. He was barely thirty that year. Hardship made him grow up fast. The passing years make us forget, but they also teach us to remember. With the stubbornness of country people he faced life's blows squarely, swallowed the bitterness and the pain, and pushed on without looking back.

Remembering Haizhong (II)

Recalling his life, tracing the years gone by, I find the tears have come
unbidden;

thinking of the one who's gone, my old friend, I find we are brothers still.⁹⁵

HAIZHONG ALWAYS THREW himself into the life of the village. He loved this land and this village deeply, and served in turn as storekeeper, militia company commander, village Party secretary and village head.⁹⁶ Whenever a family had a wedding or a funeral⁹⁷ he gave his all to help, and took charge of everything great and small. In time he grew into a fine Communist Party member who set the example himself and led from the front. He helped people prosper together: over the years dozens of men came to work for him, and under his lead became skilled miners. With his own children he was strict and attentive. Because he had lost his father so young and grown up without a father's love, he tried hard to make it up to the next generation, so they would never feel that lack; and he was devoted to his mother, his aunts and his uncles. Only years later did I begin to understand why, whenever he came to our house, he would sit and talk so patiently with my parents. Perhaps it was a longing for a father, hidden all along behind the conversation.

But we cannot stay sunk in grief forever. The dead are gone; the living must go on. We must carry on his noble qualities and the riches of spirit he left us: kindness to others and a readiness to help, uprightness and goodness, hard work and thrift, care for others, harmony among brothers and sisters, a Communist's integrity and example — all for a peaceful society and happy families. Cut through the thorns and push bravely on. We still have to go on living.

⁹⁵A mourning couplet: two matched lines of equal length, traditionally written on long strips of paper and hung on either side of a doorway or a portrait of the dead.

⁹⁶In Chinese villages the Party secretary usually holds more power than the village head. The militia is a part-time local defense force.

⁹⁷Literally "red and white occasions": red for weddings, white for funerals.

These are a few things from the life of my brother Haizhong, set down in mourning. My brush is clumsy and my ink is thin; one sheet of paper cannot hold all I feel. The grief is not over; the missing has no end. With my own hand I write this elegy for my brother. When the news came, my insides were torn apart; heaven and earth lost their color, the earth sobbed, grass and trees grieved together, and the mountains and rivers wept. The tears fell before I knew it and soaked my collar. Brother, go slowly on your journey west.⁹⁸ Are you cold? Are you lonely? I only hope there is no pain in heaven. You are gone, and I am so sad. I miss you. The world is unfair; heaven has taken my brother's life. Gone in your prime, you have left behind the family who worried over you.

My brother lost his father as a child, and his widowed mother raised him through endless hardship; before he was fully fledged, he lost his own brother. He swallowed his grief and walked on. All that bitterness he tasted alone, in silence; all those hardships he never told a soul. Alas, the pain! Alas, the sorrow!

Born and raised in Pengzhuang, he loved this land and the people who live on it. Neighbors, workmates, friends: whenever anyone needed something, he was there to help. Among his brothers and sisters there was harmony and help, the warmth of family.

He was devoted to his parents and elders, his aunts and uncles. To his wife's parents he was respectful and attentive, caring for them with his own hands and his whole heart: a man worthy of the word filial. To his friends he opened his heart completely; whenever there was trouble he stepped forward and gave everything he had. Loyalty came first. He was sincere and kind to others, good and upright and selfless. He was true to the core. All the water in the sea could not write out how much we miss you; all the boundless sea of clouds could not hold our love. Brother, go slowly as you ride the crane west. Hear how much I miss you. You are gone, and I miss you so. Brother, may your road be smooth.

— *your brothers and sisters, the friends of Yu Haizhong*

⁹⁸"Go slowly" (man zou) is what a Chinese host says to a departing guest: take care on your way.



PART FIVE

Letters to Niuniu

Remember to eat. Don't go hungry.

A Letter to Niuniu

My dear Niuniu, my daughter,

YOUR MOTHER BROUGHT your letter home, took a picture of it and sent it to me on WeChat. You've grown up, child; you understand things now, and that makes me very happy. Truly, I've seen that it didn't happen all at once. Ever since the day you told me to quit smoking, I've felt my Niuniu growing up — learning to worry about her old dad.

This is getting a little sentimental. Bear with me, and let me say a few things. Today your teachers held a parents' meeting before you start your final year of high school — an important day — and I couldn't come, because I'm working far from home. It doesn't sit well with me. When I put on my work clothes I can't be there with you all; when I take them off I can't feed the family. That's one of the things in life you can't help. Most of the world lives this way: the bitterness, the helplessness of working people.



His wife and their child.

Studying is hard. Ten years at a cold window, your pen never still, reading through ten thousand books until they fall apart.⁹⁹ At the last parents' meeting Ms. Han said that the books, notes and exam papers from three years of high school would make a pile taller than you. I know exactly what she meant. Twice in two years I've gone to bring your things home from school, and your books alone filled two big boxes — not easy for a grown man to carry, let alone a child. I'm so afraid all that work will crush you. Truly, every parent loves their child, without conditions and without reasons. That's simply the heart of a parent.

I ought to say something grand to inspire you: "to give a heart to heaven and earth, to secure the lives of the people, to carry on the lost learning of the

⁹⁹"Ten years at a cold window" is an old phrase for a poor scholar's long years of study; "read ten thousand books until they fall apart" comes from the Tang poet Du Fu.

sages, to open an age of peace for ten thousand generations.”¹⁰⁰ Those are the words of Zhang Zai, a philosopher of the Northern Song dynasty, and in the old days that is what you read the books of Confucius and Mencius for: to become an official and do good for the people in your care. But we can’t talk like that now, because in the new society no work is high or low. Every job is a screw in the machine of socialism, like Lei Feng. Even a truck driver has his own worth, and earns the respect of thousands.

When we were little we were Young Pioneers, always prepared to be the successors of communism. The teacher said it over and over, his eyes filling with tears, his face solemn and grave. I really believed it. I firmly believed we were the successors of communism. A long time has passed, and the Central Advisory Commission still hasn’t called me in for a talk,¹⁰¹ but I’m sure that day will come sooner or later.

And another thing: I never went to high school. I dropped out in my second year of junior high to go to work. Thirty years of being knocked about by the world, and I still believe it’s better to have an education. The people who will be best to you are your teachers, and the ones who’ll care most about you are your classmates; thinking of it now, I feel so many things. So respect your teachers and look after your classmates. They are the people most worth treasuring along the road of your life. Truly. Since you have this chance and these conditions, study hard and learn — not to leap the Dragon Gate like the carp,¹⁰² not to come top in the imperial exams, but so that when you meet things out in the world you’ll see through them and understand what’s going on, and won’t stumble around in a fog, not knowing what everyone else knows. At this best age of your life, learning comes more easily than it ever will again. Don’t waste these precious years. Treasure the present; live up to your youth.

Of course, the gaokao¹⁰³ isn’t the only way forward. The world has room for all kinds of lives. But with more education you’ll have a few more chances,

¹⁰⁰The “Four Sentences” of the Neo-Confucian philosopher Zhang Zai (1020–1077), long quoted as the ideal of the scholar’s calling.

¹⁰¹A wry callback to Yanlin’s joke in “Always Prepared.”

¹⁰²A carp that leaps the Dragon Gate turns into a dragon: an old image for a poor student’s success in the exams.

¹⁰³China’s national university entrance exam.

and some choice. Otherwise you'll have no choice at all. Not everyone gets to do the work they love. The helplessness of life can push you into becoming exactly what you least wanted to be, and then all that's left is to accept your fate.

Your uncle once told me not to put too much pressure on a child. In his housing estate in Xi'an there was a boy in the next building who failed the gaokao. His parents said something to him, and he jumped from the window. They lived on the seventeenth floor. When your uncle finished telling me, the two of us sat in silence for a long time. The boy's father said: even if he'd been illiterate, even if he'd been a bad kid, at least we'd still have our child. He was their only one,¹⁰⁴ and now he's gone. What is the man supposed to do? When your uncle said that, his eyes were wet with tears.

¹⁰⁴Under China's one-child policy (1980–2015), most urban families had a single child.

Words for Niuniu: On Education, and on History

YOU'RE ABOUT TO start your final year of high school. The work will be heavier and the pressure great, and I don't want to add to your burden. I'd like to talk with you about what I think education is. To educate is to lead out what is inside a person, to draw out their true self, so that they become who they are meant to be.¹⁰⁵ First, it takes love. Then it takes a spirit of chivalry. And most important of all, a person must have a sense of responsibility.

Love is simple to talk about and hard to do. First you must love yourself, your family, your friends, your elders. It's the first lesson everyone learns out in the world: to find your footing you need relationships, and what are relationships? Love — or what people also call emotional intelligence, EQ. Someone with high EQ puts others at ease; people want to be around them, they're in their element among friends, they handle things with ease and succeed more often. Otherwise you'll run into walls everywhere, get nothing done, and annoy people besides. So you have to cultivate yourself, mind your manners, be kind to others, keep a compassionate heart. In a word: learn to be a good person, and be kind all your life.

To love yourself you must first respect yourself, value yourself, be strong and stand on your own feet. In other words: establish virtue, establish words, establish deeds. As the Zuo Zhuan says, the highest thing is to establish virtue, the next to establish deeds, the next to establish words; these do not fade with time, and they are called the Three Imperishables.¹⁰⁶ Virtue is the master of talent; talent is the servant of virtue.¹⁰⁷ To stand upright between heaven and earth, learning to be a good person comes first and matters most.

¹⁰⁵ The English word comes from the Latin *educere*, "to lead out" — the same idea.

¹⁰⁶ The Zuo Zhuan is an ancient history and commentary, compiled around the fourth century BCE.

¹⁰⁷ A saying of the Song dynasty historian Sima Guang.

A person should have a chivalrous spirit: stand up to the strong and help the weak, put down injustice, and give a roar when you see a wrong done on the road.¹⁰⁸ That's the stuff of films and operas. In today's society, under the rule of law, there's no need for all that, but if you keep a little chivalry in your heart, your life will be a little less ordinary. Of course, I don't want my girl walking down the street with half a brick in her handbag, ready for a fight; it would spoil your ladylike image. But when someone near you is being bullied, I hope my Niuniu will slam her hand on the table and glare — not quietly walk away.

Love your hometown. It was this beautiful little mountain valley that raised you and sent you to school. So love your hometown, and love the people there. Every one of them is your family, your neighbor.

After more than ten years of schooling from the state, you've surely learned more than I ever did; in the old days a high school student would already have been a *xiuca*.¹⁰⁹ But I want to say a few more things. Everyone should have a sense of responsibility — to their family, to society — and a love for their country and their hometown. You'll understand this better once you go out into the world. My daughter won't become Yue Fei, Xin Qiji, Wen Tianxiang or Lu You,¹¹⁰ but I hope she'll see them as heroes, admire them from the heart and want to be like them. Old Jin Yong once said: the greatest hero serves the country and the people.¹¹¹ I hope you will love your country deeply.

Also, I don't agree with that speech a high school student gave before the *gaokao*, the one that went around online. The kid declared he was a country pig who was going to root up the city's cabbages.¹¹² Nor with all the talk about the *gaokao* changing your fate. I would rather my daughter were ordinary, even mediocre, than think in that twisted way. Someone like that might come top in the *gaokao*, get into Peking or Tsinghua, China's best universities, and become a dragon among men; but in the end what counts is character.

¹⁰⁸ A line from the theme song of the 1998 television series *The Water Margin*, about a band of righteous outlaws.

¹⁰⁹ A licentiate, the first degree in the old imperial examinations.

¹¹⁰ Patriotic heroes and poets of the Song dynasty (960–1279), who fought or wrote against the northern invaders.

¹¹¹ From the martial-arts novels of Jin Yong (1924–2018).

¹¹² A 2020 pep talk at a famously exam-driven high school went viral: a student called himself "a country pig" determined to "root up the cabbages of the big city."

Without good character, even someone in high office may do society no good. Even if we're ordinary, even mediocre, if we stay true to who we were at the start and are kind to others, ours will be a safe and happy life.

All right, that's enough for now. More next time. Last time I was called to my shift and had to finish in a rush; tonight it's midnight again, and I'm about to go on shift. You get some rest too. And as always: remember to eat. Don't go hungry.

Good night, Niuniu.



PART SIX

In Other Voices

In this part the author writes in other people's voices: a village "simpleton" who believes she is a hero of old reborn, a son who brings his sick mother to the city, a girl whose whole village paid her tuition, a young mother missing her own mother, and Qiqi, raised by her grandmother. The "I" in these pieces is mostly not the author.

— R. L.

The Village Keeper¹¹³

*A shout — and they bind me outside the tent. Yet the hero throws back his
head and laughs!*

*Alone, on one horse, I stormed the Tang camp and cut them down till their
soldiers wailed;*

*the blood ran like a sea across the wild plain, and the dead piled up like
mountains, with nowhere to lie.*

UP ON THE stage they were singing Beheading Shan Tong, in the Qinqiang style.¹¹⁴ Down below, the audience roared their bravos as one. But my own blood was boiling; my arms and legs were dancing all by themselves. Grandma said it wasn't ladylike — not the way a proper little girl should sit, demure and pretty and gentle. I don't want to be demure, and I certainly don't want to be pretty, because I know who I am: I am the hero Shan Xiongxin. How many lifetimes has it been? I couldn't tell you. But every time I come round again on the wheel of rebirth,¹¹⁵ I remember that I am Second Master Shan, whose loyalty reached the clouds, and I cannot lose face. In that life the heroes of Wagang betrayed me: they stood by and watched the Tang king raise his blade, and not one of them dared so much as breathe. Second Brother Qin Qiong¹¹⁶ had gone off somewhere else to fight his wars.

¹¹³In village talk the shoucunren, "the one who keeps the village," is the village simpleton, the one who never leaves — said to stay behind and watch over the place. The speaker here is a girl.

¹¹⁴Qinqiang is the loud, fierce opera of Shaanxi. Shan Tong is Shan Xiongxin (d. 621), hero of the popular Romance of the Sui and Tang; one of the sworn brothers of the Wagang rebels, he refuses to serve the new Tang dynasty when the others go over to it, and is beheaded, cursing them.

¹¹⁵In Buddhist belief, souls are reborn again and again.

¹¹⁶One of the best-loved heroes of Chinese folklore, still pasted on village gates at New Year as a door god.

A thousand years I've turned on the wheel, and I cannot understand why the world has suddenly changed. Kinship, friendship, loyalty as high as the clouds, honor, courage, a promise kept — is all of it a joke now? Think back, Third Brother Xu:¹¹⁷ when you were down on your luck, telling fortunes from a stall in the street, I happened by with my little son, and for the sake of one fortune I brought you home to my estate, Erxian Manor, and fearing you'd not feel at ease, I built you a study of your own. When Second Brother Qin, on official business in Luzhou, killed the innkeeper Hei San by accident, he was given forty strokes and sent in chains to Yanshan; it was I, Shan, who carried money to Yanshan and greased every palm at the magistrate's court to keep him out of prison. On the twenty-seventh day of the seventh month, at the birthday feast of Second Brother Qin's old mother, in the tower of the Jia family, thirty-six of us swore brotherhood.¹¹⁸ Later, because Third Brother Xu was set on joining Wagang, we brothers went our separate ways with hot tears on our faces. Old Yang Lin, the Sui general, brought his army to seal off the mountain until none of the rebel kings could break out; Third Brother Xu drew up the plans and brought young Luo Cheng down from Yanshan to the rescue. But young Luo Cheng was young after all — a splendid fighter, but careless in drawing up his troops — and he was beaten and fled home to Yanshan.

When he heard, Shan Tong nearly burst with rage. No troops, no generals: he rode alone into danger, met old Yang Lin, and with a single wolf-tooth mace drove the old villain into terrified flight. But Shan himself was cut off behind the mountain — and just then Wang Shichong of Luoyang was gathering heroes to his side, and the embroidered ball came to rest beside Shan Tong.¹¹⁹

Go on, then, all of you, go over to the Tang! Will that little Tang prince hand you the empire? Won't you still be eating another man's rice and running another man's errands? And I cursed every duke and general in the Tang camp, one after another.

¹¹⁷ Xu Maogong, the Wagang rebels' strategist, who later served the Tang.

¹¹⁸ The oath at Jia Family Tower, the founding scene of the Wagang brotherhood in the *Romance of the Sui and Tang*.

¹¹⁹ In folk tales a princess chose her husband by tossing an embroidered ball from a tower to the crowd below; here it means Shan became Wang Shichong's son-in-law and went over to his side.

I stretch out my neck — one stroke, and what a relief: the head falls, the blood runs, and never again will I share the same sky with men without honor like you. If I die, I die. Only — I never saw Second Brother Qin again. Second Brother, where did you go?

I Don't Want Your Kind of Clever

I WALK DOWN the busy street like a stray dog on the run. The heat of the day does nothing to thaw the cold that fills my chest. My mother is in the hospital — the only family I have in all the world, the one I've always lived with and lived for. Yes, the only one. I'm thirty-eight now, and apart from my mother I have no close kin at all. I've lived like a dog for half my life; I work and run around from morning to night, and still I can't scrape together the money for her hospital bills. Just now I knelt on the blood-red floor of the emergency room and begged the kind old department head with the silver hair to admit her first, and I'd go and get the money right away. I couldn't say I had no money. If I'd said that, the doctors would probably have thrown us out of the emergency room, my mother and me. The old man seemed to see straight into my head. "By tomorrow morning at the latest you must pay in full. The deposit is ten thousand yuan."¹²⁰ I lowered my head, my eyes red, and pretended to kowtow; really I was afraid he would see the dishonesty in my eyes.

The truth is, I'm not as stupid as the village says. I knew that if I spoke honestly, it would hold up her treatment. My mother has already sunk into a deep coma three times. If she doesn't wake up this time, I won't have a mother anymore — the mother who has always beaten me and scolded me, and loved me more than anyone ever has. What will I do? Left all alone, will I soon die too? For more than two weeks now, with no mother to cook for me — ever since I brought her here from the countryside — I've been living in the underpass beneath the flyover. Every day I go into the little restaurants, and when I see food left on someone's plate I fix my eyes on it, and the moment

¹²⁰ Chinese hospitals generally require a cash deposit before admitting a patient. Ten thousand yuan is about 1,400 US dollars — months of income for a poor rural family.

they leave I grab the chopsticks and pretend to eat, and when nobody is looking I whip out the plastic bag from inside my coat, tip the leftovers in quick, and tuck it back against my chest. Lucky my mother hasn't wanted to eat these last few days. I only have to fill my own belly.

I have to get the money, even if it means smashing a bank counter, or... I don't dare think any further. No, I can't. If they catch me, my mother won't get her treatment, she'll sink into the coma forever and leave this world. And I'll soon starve to death back in that village. Yes, in the village. I won't die in any city. It's too noisy here. Even though half the village doesn't like me, and they're always making fun of me. I know I'm not stupid. I'm not as quick and clever as they are; I keep my wits hidden deep in my heart, so deep that sometimes even I can't find them.

I like to sit by myself and think, turning things over. When I think of something happy, I laugh out loud. When I think of something sad, the tears pour down, and sometimes I howl. When the villagers see me laughing and crying for no reason, they decide I'm a genuine idiot. But that's not how I see it. You can't see my kind of clever, and I don't want your kind.

Without noticing, I've walked a long way. It's getting dark, but the city is full of flashing neon and blazing streetlights, as lively as ever: cars streaming past like dragons, people hurrying by. Nobody notices me. Maybe what they see isn't a lost-looking man from the countryside at all, only a homeless stray dog.

Tuition from Fifty-Eight Households

OFTEN, WALKING ALONE down the street, I find myself behind a man who looks like a migrant worker, with a woven plastic sack over his shoulder that holds everything he owns, every hope he has in life — and I follow him for a long way, crying like a madwoman. Yes. It's as if I were seeing my father. He carried the same sack.¹²¹

I'm the only child from our village — the very first — ever to get into a university in Beijing. I passed the exam all right, and then the whole family fell into a fret: should I go or not? It should have been the happiest news in the world; the whole family should have been walking tall. But there was no money, and that's what made it so hard, so heavy. "You wretched girl, you never let anyone have a moment's peace," Ma kept grumbling. Oh, why do the days drag on so, and why is there always some new heartache coming to break our peace?

I'm the only one from our village ever to study at a university in Beijing, and the fifty-eight households of the village pooled their money to pay my first term's fees. When I tucked those eight thousand yuan inside my clothes, wrapped in a cloth bundle, layer upon layer, they felt so heavy, and a little hot against me. With the bedroll Ma had tied for me on my back, I rose before dawn, caught the bus to the county town, and boarded the old green train that went clattering off toward Beijing.¹²²

On the train I wasn't the least bit sleepy. I kept thinking: thank heaven, I've got out at last. It was like pulling my foot free of a bog — and I was still trembling from it.

¹²¹The cheap woven polypropylene sack, often printed in a snakeskin pattern, is the classic luggage of China's migrant workers.

¹²²The slow, green-painted trains that were China's ordinary passenger trains for decades.

The night before, Da had squatted on a chair smoking his home-grown leaf tobacco; the smoke was strong enough to knock you flat.¹²³ Ma sat to one side crying, and my little brother, already in junior high, glanced fearfully at Da, then at Ma. A few days earlier Ma had said to me: "You're grown now, girl. Go out to work, earn money for your dowry, find a good family to marry into. Don't let those pretty looks go to waste. Be a good girl, and don't make your da's heart ache." I didn't say a word. The tears just kept running. Maybe my tears had softened Ma's heart, because that night she said nothing more about marriage. She only sat to one side, her own tears running, as if she meant to soften Da's heart in turn.

Just as the whole family sat there with long faces, at their wits' end, Grandpa Six arrived. Grandpa Six belongs to the oldest generation in the village,¹²⁴ and everyone trusts his word and his judgment. He spoke up: "Changsheng's da,¹²⁵ the girl has to study. Without learning we can't even follow the words of an opera. We can't do that to the child. As for the money, everybody will chip in. After all, this is the happiest news our village has ever had. Look — I've brought money already." And he drew a wad of banknotes from inside his coat.

¹²³ Squatting on a chair, feet on the seat, is a common, comfortable posture for older men in the North China countryside.

¹²⁴ "Grandpa Six" — the sixth son of his generation — is an honorary title for a senior elder in a village where most families are related.

¹²⁵ In the village a man is often called by his son's name; Changsheng is presumably the little brother.

Missing Mother Again

I MISS MY mother again. All of a sudden it is as if something has stabbed me hard in the heart, and the pain wraps itself around my whole body. I don't know why. The feeling had stayed away a long time, and now it has all come flooding back at once, and I can't hold it off. Loneliness, helplessness and grief have soaked through the whole room. I feel as if I have dropped suddenly from a great height.

My mother has been gone seven years now. Time hasn't made me forget; sometimes the memories are even sharper. I only wonder whether she is all right in heaven. At the Dragon Boat Festival, are there zongzi there, and five-colored threads, and those pretty, sweet-smelling sachets?¹²⁶ When she was alive we always had them, because she made them for her precious daughter and for her grandson, Xiaoyu. Just now I must have dozed off, and in my dream she was fussing over me as tenderly as ever: during your month of confinement¹²⁷ you must be careful about this, and that. When I woke I realized she didn't know — she still doesn't know that her daughter has married and has a baby of her own, only fifty-odd days old. When I married, she had already been gone more than three years. I will never again get five-colored threads from her. I wonder whether they keep the Dragon Boat Festival where she is. Is she lonely? Is she cold?

My mother was born on the eighteenth day of the first lunar month of 1958. In those hungry years she never had enough to eat, and she was thin and frail from childhood. Her parents always gave what little grain there was to the children and ate wild greens and tree leaves themselves. The disaster that

¹²⁶ On the Dragon Boat Festival in early summer people eat zongzi, sticky rice wrapped in reed leaves; children wear threads of five colors on their wrists and scented sachets to ward off sickness.

¹²⁷ Zuo yuezi: the traditional month of rest after childbirth, with strict rules about food, cold and washing.

history calls the Three Years of Natural Disasters¹²⁸ — I don't know how the family got through it. The fear of hunger stayed with their generation for a long, long time; they could never forget it. Grandma had three sons and two daughters, five children in all, and life was so hard that a full belly was the only thing they hoped for.

Storms come out of a clear sky; fortune turns overnight. Grandpa was found to have stomach cancer, an incurable illness. He went to Changzhi for a test, and that was all; where would the money for treatment have come from? In less than a year he was gone. Grandma was just thirty-nine. The eldest daughter was nineteen, the eldest son only sixteen, the second son twelve, my mother nine, and the youngest son three. The pillar of the house had fallen. Imagine how hard each day was for that family. But hardship couldn't crush those tough country people. Stubborn by nature, they went on living, hard as it was. Grandma was a great mother. She never remarried; she held on with her own thin body and raised her children, through more hardship than words can tell. Besides her work in the production team, she climbed the mountain to pick forsythia,¹²⁹ gleaned the Sichuan peppercorns left on the slopes, and dug wild greens in the fields, working day and night so the children would have something to eat. If she let up for a moment, the whole family went hungry.

Hardship is not catastrophe. It left my mother a precious inheritance of the spirit that served her all her life. Growing up in a poor, struggling family, she understood gratitude better than most, and she understood helping others, because to help others is to help yourself.

She remembered how Second Great-Uncle came down from Heshangfen to Pengzhuang to see Grandma, lifted the lid of the pot and saw wild greens with a token sprinkling of cornmeal, and with a pained face shouted at Grandma: "How can you feed the kids this? This won't do. They're still little!" Without another word he turned round, went home, filled two sacks with corn and millet, and pushed them down to her through the night on his wheelbarrow — more than ten kilometers there and back.

¹²⁸The Great Chinese Famine of 1959–61, which followed the Great Leap Forward and killed tens of millions.

¹²⁹Lianqiao, the fruit of the forsythia bush, is a common remedy in Chinese herbal medicine; village women gathered it to sell.

She remembered how Grandma was caught by the village security team gleaning the Sichuan peppercorns left at the edges of the fields,¹³⁰ and how, back at the office, Chang Fenxian sorted through the peppercorns one by one and said: "These really were gleaned, not stolen." She spoke up for the widow and her orphans, and my mother never forgot it.

In the season of soaking rains Grandma draped a plastic sheet over her shoulders and went up the slopes to pick the forsythia one berry at a time, to trade for money for salt and oil. She dug wild greens and pickled them sour for winter and spring; every ear of corn and every bean left behind in the fields she brought home, washed, dried and cooked.

All through that long season the kitchen was full of the thick, medicinal smell of boiling forsythia: the green berries had to be scalded in boiling water and dried before the supply and marketing cooperative would buy them.¹³¹

We all struggle through life, and time teaches us so much, so very much.

¹³⁰Under the collective, even leftover crops belonged to the production team, and gleaning could be treated as theft.

¹³¹The state-run rural shops of the planned economy, which bought farm produce and sold daily goods.

Give Civilization to the Years

GIVE CIVILIZATION TO time, not time to civilization.¹³²

Life taught her to be kind and upright, and to give without counting the cost. In those days brothers and sisters stuck together, because survival came first. The grind of hardship taught that generation to be hardworking and brave and to face life's bitterness calmly; after a while it no longer tasted bitter at all, and there was even a hint of sweetness in it. Give civilization to the years, not years to civilization.

A hard life and an innocent age gave birth to a beautiful love; plain, simple people longed for a good life too. My father and mother were introduced by a matchmaker, and fell in love in that season of flowers. After they married they were happy — poor, but warm — and they loved each other through countless springs and autumns, respecting each other, working side by side, building their own cozy little nest. In the eighties reform and opening up had just begun; the land was divided among the households,¹³³ life got better, and people had enough to eat. My father took over the village starch-noodle mill, grinding the starch and pressing it into vermicelli. My brother Mingliang was only two or three, and the family was so busy that they had to send him to my uncle and aunt to be looked after. My brother was a good little boy. As long as he'd had enough to eat he would play by himself. He was no trouble at all.¹³⁴

¹³²The line from Liu Cixin's *The Three-Body Problem* that Yanlin also quotes in "Making Hard Days Taste Sweet": what matters is what you fill your time with, not how long it lasts.

¹³³Under the household responsibility system of the early 1980s, the communes' land was contracted out to individual families to farm.

¹³⁴Yanlin's draft ends here.

The Opera Stage and the Old Tree

EVER SINCE I was small, whenever I had to write a school composition called "My Hometown," the first line was always the same: "My hometown lies at the foot of beautiful Teapot Hill..." And now, in the great tide of "rural revitalization" and "building a beautiful countryside,"¹³⁵ our village has built itself a little public square — complete with a giant teapot! "Hanging out the pot to heal the world," "a heart of ice in a jade pot!"¹³⁶ It very nearly became the internet's favorite teapot selfie spot for the May Day holiday.¹³⁷ (Facepalm.) (Facepalm.) Sigh~

My grandma's home was at the foot of lovely Teapot Hill. The soil there is poor, but it has fed one generation after another, and there are enough village stories to fill days and nights of telling. Listen, and I'll tell them to you one by one.

For as long as I can remember, my mom and dad worked for the geological service and were forever away surveying and prospecting, with no time to look after me, so I grew up at Grandma's.¹³⁸ I spent my happy childhood there, and some of my most precious memories are fixed in that lovely place: Pengzhuang village.

Pengzhuang lies on the southeastern flank of the Taihang Mountains. There is the beautiful scenery of Banshan Mountain, the moving legend of the

¹³⁵ National campaigns of the 2010s and 2020s to improve villages, often with new squares, paving and public art.

¹³⁶ Two well-known phrases with pots in them: "hanging out a pot" is an old idiom for practicing medicine, and "a heart of ice in a jade pot" comes from a poem by Wang Changling (698–756).

¹³⁷ The Labor Day holiday in early May, one of China's busiest travel weeks.

¹³⁸ The narrator's "Grandma" is her mother's mother; Pengzhuang is her mother's home village.

Ear-Washing River,¹³⁹ and Old Spire Mountain, standing firm like a rock in midstream. There is the temple of Second Granny of Xiding, and the great, sweeping Cloth-Drying Cliff. Wherever you look, there's a view. At the south end of the village stands the Dragon King's temple, which kept the villagers safe and guarded the thousand-year-old village from being swallowed by floods. Next to it is the South Gate shrine, where they worshipped Our Lady Guanyin — or some other god, I can't remember. Anyway, I often played there when I was little. Once I squeezed through the creaking wooden door into the shrine above the South Gate: clay figures stood against the pitch-black walls, and the smell of old incense ash hit me full in the face. Tiny me and a few bigger boys — it was new, it was thrilling, and I pushed my enormous fear down deep inside, because if they laughed at me for being scared they'd never take me catching shrimp in the river or climbing trees for birds' nests. I went in only that once. I felt the god's eyes fixed on me, shivered from head to toe, and was so terrified that I never went back.

¹³⁹The Xi'er River takes its name from the legend of the hermit Xu You, who washed out his ears after the sage-king Yao offered him the throne.



Sun after snow, a sharp peak beyond. Photo by Yanlin Zhao.

Right beside the South Gate shrine was our playground. Never mind the stacks of pressed oil cakes from the oil mill, black as soot, the greasy wooden posts, the great thick press-beam and the blocks soaked shiny with oil — to us those were toys finer than anything money could buy.

And never mind the starch-noodle mill and the grain mill next door, fun as they were. Just beyond them stood an old, broken-down opera stage, and that was what we loved best of all. Four tall pillars held up the whole broad roof; the east, west and south sides were walled with sun-dried mud bricks, and the mottled walls wore every one of their years. Around the smooth bluestone bases of the pillars we flipped paper squares, won paper ingots, flicked apricot pits, played hopscotch and pitched tiles,¹⁴⁰ too busy to stop. A few naughty boys had already shinnied up the pillars like monkeys into the rafters, and sat

¹⁴⁰ Folk games of the Chinese countryside, played with folded paper, apricot stones and broken roof tiles.

on the thick beams swinging their legs for all they were worth, their eyes full of showing off.

We girls ignored them. One of us played the young scholar and two played the maids, singing opera — ee-ee, ah-ah. One girl was the third child in her family, so we all called her Third Girl; her name was Sanmei. She shouted, "Come down right now, or I'll tell your mom, and she'll whip your bottom with a switch!" The boy laughed and pulled faces. We joined in the teasing, but all of us knew Sanmei would never really tell. She was only afraid he'd fall; from that height a fall could kill you. The rest of us were too silly to think of it. Only she did. Because she cared about that naughty boy more than anyone, she was always covering for him: "No, Erwa didn't go down to the river today, and we didn't go to Little Well Flats either."

Unforgettable memories. In the middle of the village stood the thousand-year-old locust tree. In summer people cooled off in its shade and ate their meals there, while the farmers talked about the crops and the odd goings-on around the village. When the talk got heated, someone would set down his bowl and shout: "It's true! It really happened! If I'm lying, I'll walk the length of the street on my head!" Sometimes two of them would argue over who was right until they were red in the face, neither one giving way, until an old man came out of the Corner Inn by the locust tree: "Aren't you ashamed of yourselves? Go home and get on with your work." And the two of them would cool off, lower their flags and silence their drums — to fight again tomorrow. The villagers have never stopped loving a good argument, but they never hold a grudge. There's a saying here: "We all live on the one street — what else can you do?" They say it to others, and they say it to themselves. People on the same street are family.

Unforgettable — Grandma's village, Grandma's teapot. Next time I'll tell you about Grandma's village, and Grandma's teapot.

Thank You, Neighbors

WHEN I WAS small, sweetness was a thing you waited for a long, long time — and when it came, the delight, the joy, the flutter of nerves. A feeling I can't put into words, anyway; mostly happy memories of childhood. Spring comes, and everything wakes. First the wild grass along the roads and the field edges races to push out its pale green shoots, peeking shyly at this brand-new world. The willows and poplars flaunt their tender green too. It's a gentle season; the biting cold is gone, and a padded jacket is enough against the chill of early spring. In my memory the winters of my childhood were bitter, bone-cracking cold, but by this time of year they had lost their bite. "Well, we won't freeze to death now. Now it's only a question of whether we starve," sighed the lonely old bachelor who lived next door to Grandma.

Grandma's home was a big shared courtyard that had once been a carters' inn, where the mule caravans coming from far away stopped to eat and rest for the night. It was called the Getai Inn — the Inn on the Step. I don't know how it came by such an odd name. The village had lots of carters' inns: the Corner Inn, the North Inn, the East Inn, the New Inn, and the Gedao Inn — the Inn in the Lane. Our clever forebears always found vivid, easy-to-remember names for their inns, names that sounded good and rolled off the tongue.

An old trade road once ran through here. In the last years of the Qing and the first years of the Republic¹⁴¹ it carried goods between Wuxiang and Licheng: everyday wares, coal for the winter, fruit in season. Later, in the sixties and seventies, in the days of the people's communes, the cadres led the way with their own sweat, and after years of hard struggle they cut a gravel road for trucks across Banshan Mountain, which towers into the clouds. Only

¹⁴¹The Republic of China, founded in 1912 after the fall of the Qing.

then was the winding goat track abandoned. Many moving stories happened on that old road, handed down by the old folks from generation to generation and still told with relish.

One of them goes like this. When two caravans met head-on, the track was so narrow that one had to stop and let the other pass first. Otherwise the laden animals would be shoved to the edge, lose their footing and fall into the gorge, thousands of feet down. People could die, and those goods were what families lived on, their whole livelihood. So whenever it happened, the leaders of the two caravans would call out to each other well ahead of time, and one would let the other pass before going on. But if it was the Pengzhuang caravan, the others always stopped first, of their own accord, and let Pengzhuang go by. Not because the Pengzhuang muleteers were so tough, but because generation after generation of their caravan leaders had been public-spirited and generous; they had settled many quarrels for others and helped many fellow travelers in trouble on the road. People respected them, and so they stopped and let them pass.

At such moments the Pengzhuang caravan leader would put his hands together, thumbs crossed and palms cupped, bow from the waist¹⁴² and call out loudly, "Thank you!" Then he would lead the way, holding the tall chestnut horse by the bridle — harness bells jingling softly, hooves thudding — his head high and a smile on his face, and once he reckoned the whole caravan was past, he would call back in a ringing voice, without turning his head: "Thank you, neighbors!"¹⁴³

¹⁴²The *zuoyi*, a traditional salute of cupped hands and a bow.

¹⁴³*Xiangdang*, a warm old word in Shanxi and Shaanxi for people from the same home country.

The Red Tin Box

MY MEMORIES OF sweetness come from my childhood, when our country was going through hard times. The Soviet revisionists and the American imperialists had us under blockade;¹⁴⁴ the country wasn't yet rich or strong and was only beginning to build itself up, and the farmers had to sell the grain they grew to the state. The slogan went: hand in enough for the state, keep enough for the collective, and what's left is yours.¹⁴⁵ By the time it was shared out among the families there wasn't much left — not enough to eat. But that couldn't defeat clever farming folk, people like my clever, capable grandma. It was her hard work and her wits that raised my five uncles, my aunt and my mother. Once my mother starts talking about Grandma, she can never stop.

Spring was slow to come. But the moment the wild plants poked out of the ground — just you watch — Grandma would dig up every wild green there was, from the fields, the cracks along the walls, the roadsides and the field edges: dandelions, thistle greens, wild chives, and others I couldn't name — maybe the one we called bun-root, which I think is shepherd's purse. She'd sort them clean, wash them in the river at the edge of the village, then steam them, boil them, dry them into winter greens, or pickle the tender shoots sour. First she'd get out a big crock, half as tall as a person, scrub it and dry it in the sun — not a drop of unboiled water could get in, or it wouldn't keep. Then she'd lay the greens carefully in the bottom, a layer of washed and boiled greens, and pound them down hard with a wooden pestle until a deep green juice welled up in the crock, then add another layer, and another, on and on for ages, until I lost patience: "Grandma, I'm hungry again."

¹⁴⁴ The Mao-era names for China's two great adversaries after the split with Moscow around 1960.

¹⁴⁵ A slogan of the state grain procurement system.

Me being hungry was a very big deal, of course. Grandma tottered off to the kitchen on her little bound feet¹⁴⁶ and brought me back a vegetable pancake. "You must be a starving ghost reborn¹⁴⁷ — you've only just eaten, and you're crying hungry already!" Really I wasn't hungry. It was just that Grandma had worked so long without once looking at me. I wanted her attention. Was a good little granddaughter like me really less important than those strong, bitter greens?

Later, when I grew up, I understood. From early spring until the radishes and sweet potatoes came in, those greens were the family's main food; the grain had run out by New Year. And there was a long stretch from early spring to the wheat harvest. What would a family of eight eat? Soup tonight, or steamed sweet potatoes? Those were the great questions that filled Grandma's mind.

I snatched the dry, hard, black-green vegetable pancake that had been warming in the ashes of the stove and walked out of the big courtyard, with Ahuang trotting obediently at my heels. Yes, I had a good friend called Ahuang. Yes, she was only a puppy, just weaned, two months old. But the moment I came to Grandma's we became best friends. Sometimes I'd talk to her: "Did your mommy dump you at Grandma's because she was busy with work too?" At first the puppy didn't understand. She stared at me for ages with her black-bean eyes, then turned her head away and wagged her little tail hard, very scornful: I'm not unwanted, thank you very much. And it was true: the puppy's mother was a big, fierce village dog who lived in the yard of the ironworks at the edge of the village, and she had a frightening name: Landlord.¹⁴⁸

That day I went to play in the ironworks yard. I was crouching on a heap of slag left over from the days of the Great Steel Drive,¹⁴⁹ trying to decide which lump would make a sculpture beside the garlic shoots and scallions by the pear tree in Grandma's yard, when a huge dog came charging at me. I froze with fright. For a long while I couldn't decide whether to cry or not, and while I was

¹⁴⁶Footbinding, the old practice of breaking and binding girls' feet to keep them tiny, was banned in 1912 but lingered in the countryside for decades.

¹⁴⁷In Chinese folk belief, people who die of hunger become "starving ghosts"; a greedy eater is teased as one reborn.

¹⁴⁸In the Mao years "landlord" was the most hated class label of all — a joke name for a fierce dog.

¹⁴⁹In 1958, during the Great Leap Forward, villages across China built backyard furnaces to make steel, mostly producing useless slag.

still making up my mind, Ahuang came bounding up, her little tail flying, ran to the big dog called Landlord, snuggled up to her, rubbed against her legs, and happily let the big dog lick her all over. I knew that had to be her mother. Ahuang hadn't told me, but I knew it. Even a dog had it better than me. I made up my mind at once: I would cry, as loudly as I could. By the time I ran home and found Grandma sorting the bracken and wild onions my second uncle had picked on the hillside, my tears were a foot long, and I was howling as if heaven and earth were caving in: "I want my mommy! Even Ahuang has a mommy! I want my mommy!"



A faded slogan on an old wall: "...all out... more, faster, better, cheaper..."¹⁵⁰ Photo by Yanlin Zhao.

Grandma's little feet carried her over in a flash. She dropped the handful of wild onions she'd sorted and held me tight. "Poor Qiqi, my heart, my treasure."

¹⁵⁰ From the 1958 General Line of the Great Leap Forward: "Go all out, aim high, and build socialism with greater, faster, better and more economical results."

Grandma was in a panic. She didn't know what had happened or how to comfort me, so she started scolding instead: "Those two heartless things, hearts of stone, dumping their child here and never giving her a thought! There, my good baby, my little sweetheart, don't cry. We'll go and find those two bad people." Yes, I was Grandma's heart and treasure — but not Mom and Dad's. All they ever saw was their work, never their good little Qiqi. I was so sad. I cried and cried.

To comfort me, Grandma unlocked the cupboard and lifted out a red tin box — a big round one, probably meant for biscuits. For a long time — truly, for many years — I remembered that tin box. I have been to so many cities and looked in every kind of shop, supermarket and corner store, and I have never found that beautiful box again. I know it isn't really the box I'm looking for. I'm looking for a sweet memory of childhood. And where would I find that, in a strange place? Even back home, I can't find Grandma's love for me again. (Sob.) (Sob.) (Sob.)

I remember sitting happily on the edge of Grandma's kang, my two little feet kicking for joy, hugging the tin box she had given me: candied fruit, rock sugar, all kinds of sweets. Mom and Dad, or my uncles and aunts, had bought them for her. She never ate a single one. She saved them all for me. Yes, I was Grandma's heart and treasure. I laughed so hard the tears flew.

All a six-year-old girl wants is for someone to love her, and Grandma knew every one of my little thoughts. Now I'm a grandma myself. This year I took my grandchild home to the village. Pengzhuang has changed so much. After all the campaigns to "civilize" the countryside, there's a trick teapot in the little square that catches everyone's eye.¹⁵¹ We had our picture taken in front of the pool, and the little one played at the water's edge. But Grandma — I have come back to your village. Can I come back into your heart? Grandma, are you all right in heaven? Are you lonely? Are you cold?

¹⁵¹ A daodaohu or "reverse-flow pot," filled through a hole in the bottom — here a fountain sculpture in the new square.

Grandma's Village, Grandma's Teapot

IN MY MEMORY Grandma is kind and gentle. From my very first memories I lived in Grandma's village, Pengzhuang. That was my first hometown. Then there is the hometown I can never go back to, in the countryside of Huaibei,¹⁵² but that's another story. How I miss them, the people in the old photographs of my early childhood. Are you well? I miss you a little. More than forty years have gone by. I wonder how you all are. And Grandma, are you all right in heaven? Lonely? Cold? There must be no poverty there, no hunger, no hardship. Childhood in the countryside was happy; the love of family was the one clear sweetness in a warm life.

Grandma lived in the middle of Pengzhuang, at the Getai Inn. I don't know why the village had so many inns — the Corner Inn, the Gedao Inn, the New Inn, the East Inn. Was this out-of-the-way village once a posting station, in some long-ago dynasty?¹⁵³ Walking on this ancient ground, I feel as if I'm touching my ancestors — their warm chests, their stubborn faces — and the tears well up. That's where my happy childhood was, where a young girl dreamed of the life ahead of her: Grandma's village, my home.

When I was little, life was hard. In those years of scarcity people often went hungry. The one clear sweetness I remember is Grandma reaching down treats from the cat basket that hung up high, while my uncles and aunt were out working in the fields, and handing them to me: "Here, eat up, you little greedy cat." How could that magic basket hold so much, and never run out? I used to wonder. It was woven from split withes of chaste tree, polished smooth and finely made, with a round belly that curved in at both ends and an openwork

¹⁵²In northern Anhui, far to the southeast.

¹⁵³A relay station where imperial couriers changed horses.

pattern on top. People called it a cat-spiter: the cat could only look, and never get a bite.¹⁵⁴ I have been to so many cities and villages since, and never found another so fine.

¹⁵⁴ Qi si mao, "enough to make the cat die of rage."



PART SEVEN

A Thousand Lines of Poetry

Two Short Poems

I

A village at the foot of the far hills; the last of the sun on the rim of the sky.

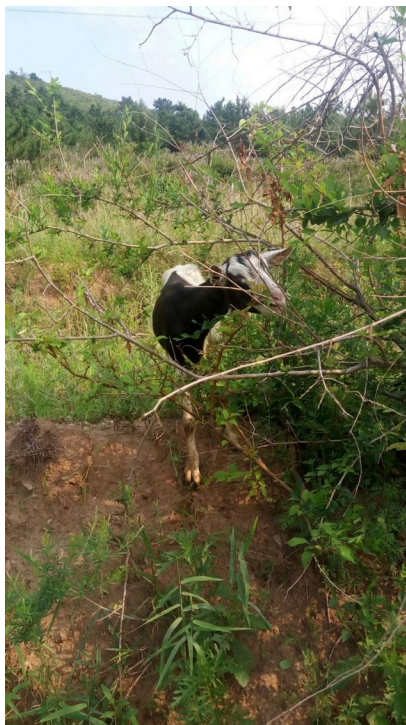
The old ox plods home at dusk, its bell beginning to ring; children with their hair in ram's-horn tufts, their song drifting on the air.

Smoke rises from every kitchen; at the edge of the village, home at last, a man stands still and stares.

Have we ever met? White-haired, I envy them.¹⁵⁵

A sigh. I turn, and go.

¹⁵⁵ An echo of He Zhizhang's (659–744) famous poem on coming home old: "The children see me and don't know me; smiling, they ask where the stranger is from."



A goat browsing on the hillside. Photo by Yanlin Zhao.

II

In the still of night I rise alone and pull on a coat against the dew.
The Mid-Autumn moon is bright tonight;¹⁵⁶ still I think of all who are
far from home.
Wordless, alone with the waning night, I keep all its sorrow inside.
Wind and cloud as they always were; the green hills grave and still.
No sooner gone from my brow than it rises in my heart.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶The Mid-Autumn Festival, at the full moon of the eighth lunar month, is the great night for family reunion.

¹⁵⁷After the Song dynasty poet Li Qingzhao (1084–c.1155): "No sooner gone from my brows, it rises in my heart."

My Father's Face at Wheat Harvest

LOOKING OUT OVER the endless wheat, I want to write a thousand lines of poetry.

The high-summer sun throws up wave after wave of heat, and still my father loves that blazing sun. The joy of harvest is written on his face; wrinkles carved deep as if by a knife melt away the weathering of the years. My father — now I can see only his blurred back, walking through the home I've been gone from so long; that familiar face.

The roar of the combine drives away the long days of toil. Two hundred and thirty days of waiting,¹⁵⁸ and today the harvest is hope. He reckons it up: the child's university fees, far away, are taken care of, and the sickly mother's medicine can be paid for again. I see it — I see again my father's face as I once knew it.

The wheat is barely in, and the fields are busy with people again: watering, rotary-tilling, rushing to get the corn in the ground.¹⁵⁹ They can't bear to let this land rest for a single moment. Oh, the heart of a farmer — sometimes so careful, so kind. Home again after so long, I seem to see once more, at wheat harvest, my father's face.

¹⁵⁸ Winter wheat in North China is sown in early autumn and harvested in early summer, some eight months later.

¹⁵⁹ In North China a crop of corn is planted straight after the summer wheat harvest.

Scenery in the Distance

—

I

Year after year the Double Ninth, and once again the Double Ninth;¹⁶⁰
I climb the heights, and my spirit soars.

II

A stranger in a strange land, I remember home;
deep in the night, missing my brother, I feel the sorrow rise.¹⁶¹

III

I do not try to remember; I cannot forget.¹⁶²
The festival's joy breaks my heart.
Tonight in a dream I went home again,
my accent unchanged, and two lines of tears.¹⁶³

IV

Grey clouds, white dogs; an old road, the west wind, a lean horse.¹⁶⁴
One man walks on alone; I laugh at him, roaming to the ends of the
earth with a sword at his side —
I'd rather stay home, beside the mother of my kids.

¹⁶⁰The Double Ninth Festival, on the ninth day of the ninth lunar month, when people climb hills and think of absent family. The line echoes a 1929 poem by Mao Zedong.

¹⁶¹After Wang Wei's (699–759) "Remembering My Brothers": "Alone, a stranger in a strange land, at every festival I miss my family twice as much."

¹⁶²From Su Shi's elegy for his wife: "Without trying to remember, impossible to forget."

¹⁶³Another echo of He Zhizhang: "My accent is unchanged; the hair at my temples has thinned."

¹⁶⁴Two old images run together: white clouds that turn into grey dogs, a saying for how fast the world changes, and Ma Zhiyuan's (c.1250–1321) "Autumn Thoughts": "an old road, the west wind, a lean horse."



*Even where the sun can't reach,
a tuft of wild grass is pushing hard toward the light.*

Yanlin Zhao (1970–2026)