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Writing Sample

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Includes "Gone Astray" and an excerpt from Shiniao.

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ZHANG YUERAN

A story and a novel excerpt

Gone Astray

The day I was supposed to leave, I overslept and missed my plane. By the time I'd changed my reservation to a later flight, touched down at Lianyungang airport and waited through a delay on the ground, it was already ten o'clock pm. It had taken me the better part of a day just to reach my destination.

I left my luggage at the hotel and walked down to the beach. The piece of architecture I had come to visit was sprawled inelegantly across the coastline like a slumbering sea lion. All around it, plastic beach chairs and folded sun umbrellas littered the sand like forgotten toys. The structure seemed to be snoring in synch with the tide, as if long years of proximity to the sea had given rise to a tacit understanding between the two. The spirit of the building was as melancholy as I had expected, although its physique was sturdier than I would have thought, more muscular. I gazed at the building sadly, as if it were an old friend fallen on hard times.

Both of us owed a debt of gratitude to a certain female author. If it hadn't been for a story she had written, a little-known piece called "Gone Astray", we wouldn't be meeting like this, or feeling this sense of long-awaited reunion. For many years, I had been embarrassed to admit that I liked the author. It wasn't that her writing wasn't any good, but the few books that she had published in her early twenties tackled none of the big, meaty subjects - politics, race, or religion - that a man can publicly admire. Nor was there anything in her books to refute the charge that you had let your imagination run wild and developed an unhealthy fascination with the author herself, rather than with her fiction. Not that there was anything improper about it, but the fact that I had read every word she had ever written and pored over every website that mentioned her name and knew exactly how nearsighted she was and how old she had been when she got her first period...well, these things were bound to raise some suspicions about my motives.

The only person I knew who shared my fascination with the author was my college classmate, Song Er, who was as ardent an admirer as I was. Incredible though it seems, at seventeen, we would huddle in our dormitory beds, reading her books by flashlight, the beating of our "telltale hearts" making the pages flutter like butterflies. If Song Er were still alive, and if he knew about the existence of "Gone Astray", I have no doubt that he would want to come over immediately and read it. That's not to say that Song Er is dead, just that he and I lost touch three years after graduation, so I have no idea what happened to him. Based on a prediction he made in college, he wouldn't live past the age of thirty. Song Er was a poet, so maybe it was less a prediction than a romantic ideal.

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The story mentioned above, the one that led me to this island, was never published in any magazine, nor was it included in any of the author's short-story collections. It appeared only once, in a 2009 collection called *Odyssey: Architecture and Literature*, produced as part of an architectural exhibition. The collection included nine short stories by nine authors, each inspired by a different work of architecture. Because there were only three thousand copies printed, most of them sold at the exhibition, it is not surprising that I didn't learn about the existence of the story earlier. But its importance should not be underestimated, because it was the last thing the author ever wrote. One day, at the age of twenty-seven, she simply vanished into thin air. She stopped updating her blog, although her die-hard fans continued to post their comments ad nauseam. In the beginning, because I was so worried and heartbroken, I chatted with a few of the more active contributors, until I realized that none of them had actually read her books. They were just bored, and had started posting to her blog because they had nothing better to do. Like all the things you do when you're bored, it had become a habit. This went on until one day, the website changed hands, and the new webmaster took down the blog, which had become unruly in the absence of its moderator. The magazine for which the author wrote a monthly column replaced her photo and by-line with that of a certain has-been actress, whose new column revolved around reminiscences of her glamorous and exciting film career. Because I cherished a vague fantasy that the female author's photo would someday reappear, I followed the actress's column for nearly a year, until the publication underwent a face-lift and became a food magazine. On the page where the actress's column used to be, there was now a photo of a three-star Michelin chef in a tall white hat.

Every day, I searched the Internet for news about the author. I even called her publisher, pretending to be a journalist who wanted to interview the author. I made inquiries of several other writers who had claimed to know her well, but they were no help. No one had any news of her whereabouts. I felt as if something I'd loved had died suddenly, for no apparent reason. It was at about this time that I had my last phone conversation with Song Er.

“She’s completely vanished,” I told him.

“Yeah. I know,” he answered after a long pause.

Both of us fell silent. The telephone line buzzed with static, like moisture crackling through the air on a foggy early winter morning. Song Er suddenly seemed so distant. No words could bridge the gap between us. I hung up the phone. Later, I lost my phone book with Song Er’s number in it.

For a long time after that, I found myself immersed in a sort of manic grief. Knowing I had to do something to regain my composure, I did the only rational thing: I fell in love. I transferred my affections to another. It was a perfectly logical response. Time and again, I shifted my affections from one woman to the next, until one day I got careless, let my guard down, and ended up with a wife and child. I’m a conservative person at heart, so after I married a homely woman who aroused little interest in other men, I took a safe, steady job in the civil service. I think this conservatism is a quality I inherited from my hometown, where they’ve spent twenty years debating whether or not to erect a one-hundred-and-sixty-eight-meter-tall statue of Confucius in a local park dedicated to icons of traditional Chinese culture. What Chinese cultural figure could be more iconic than Confucius? Yet two decades later, they still haven’t come to a decision. Sadly, my conservative Confucian values have not met with the blessings of that great sage. How could I have imagined that one day, I would lose my job as a civil servant, and that the wife who had been so unattractive to other men would run off with another woman?

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Last month, I agreed to help a former colleague keep an eye on his second-hand bookstore for a few days. He had started the bookstore after being laid off from his civil service job. The shelves were stocked with old books, many of them looted years earlier from public libraries. They still bore the stamps of various small-town libraries, and on the last page, scrawled records of the names of everyone who had ever checked out or returned the book. These sorts of books were very popular with young people, and often sold for several times the price of a new volume. Because young people these days couldn’t imagine stealing a book from a library, they naively assumed that the stolen books must be extremely valuable. One young man with a knapsack and a fisherman’s hat spent the whole afternoon browsing before he finally selected three used books. Because he hadn’t brought any money, he asked me to set the books aside so he could come back the next day to pick them up. That evening, as I ate my boxed take-out dinner in the empty bookstore, I picked up the three books and began flipping through them idly. There, in a volume called *Odyssey: Architecture and Literature*, stolen from the Lianyungang city library, I found the author’s name and a story of hers that I had never seen before.

You can imagine the jumble of emotions I was feeling as I thumbed through the pages, moving my eyes over lines of type that seemed magnified by the pool of light spilling from the lamp. I read without comprehension, in no hurry to understand what was actually being said. In that moment, I missed Song Er more than ever. If I hadn’t lost his number, I would have called him right away to share the good news.

In the days that followed, I was on tenterhooks, waiting for the young man to come back and claim his books. I hoped it was an impulse he wouldn’t follow through on, because if he did come back, I didn’t know what I was going to do. I kept going over possible scenarios in my head, like I was preparing myself for a confrontation with a rival suitor.

One day turned into the next, and still the young man did not reappear. He never did come back for his books.

It was as if he had come into the bookstore for the sole purpose of showing me the book, knowing that I would find the author’s story. It was a chilling thought, so I put it out of my mind and tried to erase the memory of that face beneath the fisherman’s hat.

No matter how it had happened, the female author had come back into my life, just when I was at my lowest ebb. Though I had read and reread every one of her books, I still had no way of assessing their literary value. They were a part of me now, as vital as my own organs, and all we could do was coexist. I knew that her books, like my appendix, were things I could probably live without, but I didn’t have the heart to go under the knife and have them removed. I began searching the Internet again, and found some materials I was sure I hadn’t seen before. The author, of course, hadn’t been seen in a very long time, but I did manage to dig up some materials related to her short story and some press releases about the architectural exhibition. These bits of information, found so many years after the fact, were like pieces of a shipwreck that had floated to the surface and washed ashore (I will return to this flotsam in the next section.) I also found a photograph, photographer unknown, captioned with the author’s name and dated last year. The rather blurry photo shows the author in profile, holding a cigarette, her face half-hidden by her hair. She appears to have gained some weight after reaching middle age, just as she had predicted in her youth. Judging from the cigarette in her hand, she never followed through on her vow to quit smoking.

* * * * *

Getting back to the story the author wrote: the following is a compilation of all the background information and data I have been able to find about the piece of architecture mentioned in her story.

1. Construction of the seaside facility on Lian Island was completed in September of 2008, nearly twenty-one years ago. In the summer of 2009, it was the site of a summer concert which drew a crowd of thirty thousand, the largest number of people to ever visit the building at one time.
2. In August of 2009, the author made her first visit to the island. She and a group of several others were given a guided tour of the seaside facility by the architect himself. In October of 2009, the author wrote a short story that would be featured at an architecture exhibition later that year. She was one of nine authors to participate in the project. Each of the authors was given a different architectural site to visit and write about. In December of 2009, the organizers of the exhibition invited people who had read the stories and taken an interest in the architecture to sign up for tours and presentations by the architects. While the other architectural sites received an enthusiastic response, only six people signed up for the tour of the beach facility. This chilly response may have had something to do with the cold weather. During the tour, there was a minor storm, and all six tourists mysteriously vanished. (According to the exhibition publicity materials, both the author and the architect were scheduled to be on site for the tour, yet there is no mention of either in reports about the disappearance of the six tourists. While the author was never heard from again, the architect is alive and well and remains active in the field of architecture and design. He is currently one of China's most famous architects.)
3. In August of 2012, the structure was damaged by a tsunami. The whole building was inundated, and the two-story observation deck on the top-right corner was swept away by the tide and never salvaged. Because the observation deck was not in use at the time, the only casualties were an electrician who was on site to inspect the wiring, and four soldiers from a nearby training base who had skipped drill practice and snuck onto the observation deck for a game of poker. Other than some damage to the stairs and railings, glass windows and rooftop garden, the main structure survived intact. Because the tsunami occurred at night, and because there were no guests staying at the facility (the restaurant, banquet hall and twenty-one guest rooms were not in use at the time), the loss of life was minimal. The list of other casualties is as follows: a drunken man who was running up and down the stairs, singing; a young woman who was standing on the rooftop, looking out to sea (it was later learned that before leaving home, she had left her family a suicide note, but it is possible that by the time the tsunami hit, she might have already changed her mind); a couple who had pried open a window and snuck into an unused guest room for a private tryst; three Sichuanese migrant workers who had scaled the outer wall and bedded down for the night outside the beach facility restaurant, which was closed; and seven university students from Jiangsu Province (third-year students majoring in aquaculture) who, in violation of beach facility rules, had started a bonfire near the entrance to the building and were holding an impromptu barbecue. In addition to the damage to the beach facility, a number of neighboring seaside villas and tourist hotels were destroyed. All in all, damage from the tsunami was confined to a relatively small area.
4. From 2012 to 2018, the beach facility remained closed. Because the tsunami had shifted the coastline over twenty meters inland, each day at high tide, a small portion of the building would be underwater. The gardens became choked with seaweed. During this period, the structure was, for all intents and purposes, abandoned. This prompted some local fishermen, whose livelihoods had depended on the tourist trade, to begin moving off the island.
5. In the spring of 2019, the island saw an influx of young people who had grown weary of city life and longed to return to nature. At the time, rents on the island were so cheap that nearly everyone could afford a room of one's own with a seaside view. By autumn of 2019, the down-on-its-luck seaside facility had been given a second lease on life, and was the site of many gatherings, events and weekend flea markets. The new arrivals began building houses, farming empty plots of land and fishing with boats and nets they had made themselves. They even brewed their own alcohol. Although they couldn't support themselves solely from fishing and farming, for a while, it became a very fashionable way of life.
6. From 2019 to 2021, even more young people flocked to the island. Many of the new arrivals were artists. Before long, the place was crowded with creative bohemians wearing bizarre clothing, covering the walls with graffiti and putting on impromptu concerts and performance art. The island quickly became a Chinese hippie Mecca, and the once-abandoned beach facility was the place they held their concerts, exhibitions, performances and parties. In the summer of 2021, unusually high tides submerged the beach facility, leaving three-quarters of the structure underwater. Using snorkels and diving equipment, the young islanders began holding twenty-four-hour underwater raves. Word of the parties spread, and by late 2021, Lian Island had become a popular destination for Chinese and overseas backpackers.

7. In 2022, a large-scale government plan to redevelop the island caused land prices to skyrocket. Many young people, no longer able to afford the rents, were forced to leave. Stylish buildings and hotels began going up all over the island.
8. In 2025, after the seaside facility was designated one of the island's most important landmarks, the government decided to renovate it. In October of the same year, as the reconstruction was underway, another tsunami hit the island. The tsunami didn't affect a very large area, and the beach facility was fundamentally undamaged, although seven construction workers disappeared from the building site.
9. After that, public opinion (or was it divine will?) forced the government to halt construction on the project. The seaside facility entered another long period of disuse. At the same time, large numbers of young people left the island, and their houses were converted to private seaside villas. From 2025 to the present, the annual number of visitors to the island has dwindled steadily. Last year, four more luxury hotels and twenty restaurants closed their doors and went out of business.

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After making a circuit of the structure, I began the slow trek back uphill. Streams of sand trickled into my shoes. The broad stairs were jagged and uneven, some of them missing, like the teeth of some great beast. Seaweed tangled around the steps like bits of food stuck in the monster's teeth. I ascended to the highest platform, whose guardrail had collapsed long ago. As I stood there looking out to sea, I experienced a marvelous hallucination: I was riding the fog, traveling on clouds, crossing the ocean, becoming an immortal. In that moment, I could understand why Xu Fu, when he had set out from here on his legendary voyage to find the elixir of immortality, had brought three hundred young men and women to use as human sacrifices. In this place, hallucination became fact, and delusion became real. Twenty years ago, standing right here in the same spot, did the author experience a similar delusion? And if so, did it alter her fate?

"Life can devolve into a series of standstills and delays, a pile of bills and receipts you've hidden away and cannot find. But I can't look back, because I can't be certain that my glance won't turn the one who walks behind me to stone. All I can do is keep thinking *you walk your road, I'll walk mine...we come by different paths but end up in the same place...this is the only thought that takes the fear away.*"

In this conclusion to her short story, it seems clear that the author was experiencing some painful personal transition. Considering her age when she wrote it, I would guess that it probably concerned her love life. Of course, I realize that trying to extrapolate an author's life based on her writings is an unreliable method, one that I have always been cautious about. For example, although the author had written vividly about having an abortion, I was willing to believe that she hadn't undergone such a surgery. Or at least, I prayed that she hadn't. But this story was an exception. In this case, I trusted my instinct, which was as stubborn as Taurus. Like a bamboo slip drawn from a temple fortune-teller's stall, the short story seemed to hold some clue to the author's fate. So it was that, fortune in hand, I had journeyed to this temple to try to make some sense of it.

But what did the author mean by "the one who walks behind me"? Who could she have been referring to? From the new information I had found online, it seems that she had been invited by the organizers of the architectural exhibition to tour the beach facility, and had later written a story about it. She had been accompanied on the tour by the organizers of the exhibition, some local cadres and the architect himself. Of course, the news articles didn't mention whether she had come here alone, or whether she might have brought a friend, or a boyfriend. That meant that there were at least four possibilities, not counting the photographer, driver or any others who might have been there to assist them. Then again, "the one who walks behind me" might have been a complete stranger, someone she had met here by chance...

The ocean wind was cold, and delusions were a dangerous thing. I left the platform and began climbing back down the stairs, a million thoughts racing through my head. About halfway down, a strange idea flashed through my mind, and my thoughts turned to stone...Sun Wukong, the Monkey King from *Journey to the West*, was born of a stone. And in the Bible, doesn't it say that Lot's wife glanced back at the city of Sodom and was turned into a pillar of stone? Was there any connection between the two?

It was only natural to think of the Monkey King, because this was his mythical birthplace. Nearby was the famous mountain Huaguoshan, with the waterfall cave where Monkey and his disciples were said to have lived. At one time, the Monkey King legend had brought wealth and tourism to the area, but recent years had been lean for the locals and their simian benefactor. Nowadays, a lot of young people hadn't even read *Journey to the West* in comic book form, or seen the animated films about the Monkey King's adventures, so they weren't too clear about what sort of supernatural being he was. But I'm certain that twenty years ago, when the female author had visited this place, her tour guides wouldn't have neglected to mention the nearby mountain and its connection to the Monkey King. Was it this legend that had led the author to think of stone? Whether or not that was the case, I felt pleased with my guesswork. It was as if, by some feat of Freudian psychoanalysis, I'd peeled back a layer of the author's subconscious mind.

I returned to my hotel room. Before turning in for the night, I looked out my window and scanned the

beach below. Seen from a distance, the seaside facility looked like a complicated wooden jigsaw puzzle. I pulled out a stack of materials I'd brought, mostly photos of the structure when it was first built. One description of the building read: "Three long platforms, ranging from eighty to one hundred and twenty meters in length, are arranged at random on the seaside slope, giving rise to a Y-shaped structure." I realized that "Y" was the first letter of the female author's name. A lot of novels and short stories begin with a written dedication. Was it possible that this building had been dedicated to the female author? In that case, the architect and the author would have to have already known each other. If they hadn't, maybe it was sheer coincidence. Coincidence or not, it only reinforced my belief that there was some profound connection between the author and the architecture. I tossed and turned in bed, mulling these thoughts over in my mind, until at last I fell into an exhausted sleep.

* * * * *

The next morning, I was woken by the phone ringing. It was Lin, calling to see why I hadn't shown up for our ten o'clock meeting in the hotel lobby. Lin and I had met by chance two weeks ago, when I had stumbled across an Internet group dedicated to exploring the unsolved mysteries of Lianyungang seaside facility. On their website, they held animated discussions and shared stories about bizarre incidents that had occurred in or around the building. The stories were mainly second-hand tales, most of them preposterous and none of them very convincing. To say that most of them made the building out to be some sort of sea monster would be an understatement. But one of the group members seemed different from the others. He was very serious, and showed no interest in any of the tall tales. His posts contained factual data and photos of the seaside facility, taken from various angles. The materials seemed to be from his private collection, for I had never seen them before. I wrote to him asking for photos of the building, and that is how he and I became acquainted. I later learned that his name was Lin, and that he lived in Lianyungang and worked for the city planning department, a job which gave him access to valuable archival materials. Before my visit, I had written to tell him I was coming, and we had arranged a time and place to meet.

I could tell right away that Lin was a kindred spirit. But meeting him made me realize that two "kindred spirits" need not necessarily like each other. I wasn't even sure if I'd want him as a friend, but I knew we had a lot in common. Lin was older than I'd expected: forty at least, and he was small and rather scrawny. He didn't seem to have been born that way: it was as if a lifetime of disappointment had whittled him down to size. Though Lin was obsessed with architecture, he had never managed to become a certified architect, so opportunities to practice his craft were limited to designing public restrooms and chicken coops in his hometown. He later channeled his enthusiasm into architectural theory and immersed himself in the study of unusual buildings. Lin had begun researching the seaside facility on Lian Island seven or eight years ago, but he had found himself stymied by a lack of access. After wracking his brains, Lin had finally managed to secure a minor post at the local planning bureau, which gave him access to blueprints and other restricted materials.

Perhaps because we were such kindred spirits, Lin had resolved to tell me about his great discovery concerning the beach facility. He led me down to the beach, then up the seaweed-choked stairs, along the jaw-line of the beast. When we reached the building's highest point, he motioned for me to sit down. He pulled several folded, mimeographed sheets of paper from his black faux-leather clutch and handed them to me.

I unfolded the papers and read the title: "Lianyungang Sea-Calming Needle". I skimmed through the pages, just enough to get the gist. It seemed to be a proposal to build a two-hundred meter high needle-shaped structure on Lian Island's bathing beach. The exterior would be constructed of steel cables and glass, forming a semi-transparent membrane which could be illuminated at night or used as a projection screen for three-dimensional images. There was also a section detailing the significance of building this structure in the Monkey King's birthplace, and its connection to the magical "sea-calming needle" that the Monkey King had tricked the Dragon King of the Eastern Sea into giving him. Although I didn't really understand the whole thing, I could tell that it was an impassioned and wildly ambitious proposal.

"What...what exactly is this?" I asked, puzzled.

"It's the architect's original plan for the building we're sitting on."

"You mean, this was originally supposed to be some kind of sea needle?"

"That's right." Lin nodded.

"So what happened?"

"In the end, they decided it would be too expensive, a waste of money and manpower, and that it would probably attract too much controversy. So they scrapped the plan and built this instead."

"But why is this important?" I was still puzzled.

"The architect who wrote this proposal is the same man who designed this building."

"I still don't get it."

"Let me put it this way: after many years of research, I've come to believe that architecture is animate, and that each building has a life of its own. In the process of designing and constructing a building, an architect imbues it with certain ideas and intentions, giving the building an unshakable will of its own."

"Hmm," I answered. Lin's perspective on architecture seemed abstruse, but it had a powerful logic I couldn't argue with.

"When he wrote this proposal, the architect was pinning all of his hopes on the project. Even though he ended up building this structure instead, he had the sea needle concept in mind the whole time. If you think about it, this Y-shaped structure is a completely open architectural space. It's split-level, so there are no clear-cut boundaries between floors, and it blends right in with the beach, and feels connected to the sea. All of these things embody a sort of infinite expandability and flexibility, the same qualities that defined the Monkey King's needle or cudgel, which could shrink or multiply or grow to any size. So you see, the sea needle's 'will' is deeply rooted in this piece of architecture. Although its outward appearance isn't that of a sea needle, deep down, it believes..."

"Wait, so you're saying that this whole time, the building has been thinking it's a sea needle?"

"That's right. As you know, the original 'sea needle' was a stone pillar that the emperor Dayu used for flood control, so its destiny was to oppose the sea. During high tides or tsunamis, it was supposed to be able to shift position and move farther out to sea to restrain the waters and drive back the tide."

"That seems hard to believe," I exclaimed. Deep down, I found it impossible to believe.

"Look." Lin pulled several photos out of his bag and handed them to me. "These were taken during the 2009 tour. See how much closer the building is to the ocean? It's closer by a few meters. And if you look carefully, you can see a gap between the slope and the inland side of the building. It must have been because of the approaching storm. The building was already starting to shift position."

I stared at one of the photographs. I wasn't looking at the gap Lin had pointed out, but at something else that had caught my attention: a group of people passing in front of the building in single file. There was the female author, and a man walking right behind her. After looking carefully at the other photos, I was certain I could put a name to the man's face: Song Er.

I tossed aside the photo. My mind was in chaos. I tried to get my thoughts in order. Song Er must have read the author's story soon after the book was published, then signed up for the architectural tour because he knew the author would be there. Both of us had dreamed of meeting her, but clearly, it wasn't an experience he had planned to share with me. Had they both been killed, swept away in the storm? No, wait a minute, when was the last time Song Er and I talked on the phone? That couldn't be right, because we'd talked in the summer of 2010. So he hadn't died in the storm. But where was he now? And where was the author? When he and I talked on the phone, why hadn't he mentioned meeting her? Was it possible that they had run off together, and were living in some other place?

"*You walk your road, I'll walk mine...we come by different paths but end up in the same place...* this is the only thought that takes the fear away." This was the conclusion to the author's story, the words she had written before all of this had happened. For some reason, in the midst of my confusion, I began to feel intensely jealous. It was as if Song Er and the author had arranged to meet here and die together, and I resented them for it. *We come by different paths but end up in the same place.* The more I thought about it, the more frightened I became. In the end, fear triumphed over jealousy, and liberated me from love. I was free, and now all I wanted was to get away from here. I stood up to leave.

Then I saw the gap that Lin had been talking about, the gap between the inland side of the building and the slope. Only this time it wasn't in a photo: it was real, and right in front of me. There was a chasm, and it was growing wider.

Before I even had time to scream, we were too far from the mainland, already out to sea.

Translated from the Chinese by Cindy Carter

*

from *Shiniao*

The Paper Kite, Verse Two

1.

Nearly a year went by before they met again.

It was April, dry season on Lianyan Island, a time of year when all inclined to languor. The minister was no

longer taking pains in tidying up for the service and seemed to be neglecting himself on purpose, with uneven stubble, wrinkled shirt and smudged eyeglasses – this was how he looked the next time Congcong saw him.

Before the minister could give a thought to his own slovenliness, he noticed that the girl was in very poor spirits. She was sitting in the last row as she used to, clasping her knees, her feet pulled up, shrunken bodily into the chair. Though her eyes were tightly closed it was plain that she wasn't asleep but rather in the grip of some intense emotion, deeply unsettled. He watched her as he preached but she never once opened her eyes, her still body enclosed in a voluminous black hooded robe. He observed she was wearing no shoes and her bare feet were spattered with mud – he thought they might also be cut and wounded.

With the closing prayer the service concluded. He approached her quietly. She did not move. Teardrops were spill slowly from the corners of her eyes. Sure enough, her feet were covered in cuts, the bloody marks appearing all the more savage against her alabaster skin – he guessed the girl knew this, and was trying to maximize the pathos of her condition. He had no doubt, she was the sort who loved to cause herself pain.

The minister shifted his gaze from those distressingly damaged feet, and lightly placed one hand on the girl's shoulder. She slowly opened her eyes.

"You must be tired, you weren't singing the hymns as you used to." The minister sat down in the row before her, and turned in his seat to face her.

"Yes, I'm very tired," Congcong said weakly.

"Then why don't you stay and rest here for a while, I'll take care of you," the minister finally said. It was something he'd wanted to say for a long time, and his voice rang with deep-felt tenderness.

"I have tried to do as you told me, to come to ground and live a meaningful life. I have traveled long and hard, to very distant places, and I have done the thing that I had to do. But there are hidden connections between everything, I wasn't able to tug one thread from the skein without disturbing everything else. Oh, you won't have heard: I've met with disaster, I've met with terrible disaster. Now I'm suffering my retribution and nothing can save me." The girl had abandoned herself entirely to her mood, and continued muttering to herself.

The minister was distressed, she seemed to have experienced some deeply harrowing emotion during the past year. She must have hurt someone, made that someone wish he were dead, but her love was deep and she must have been hurt, too.

The minister scrutinized her. What kind of person could affect her so deeply? He was a little envious, but this was overcome by the pity that stirred at the sight of her so worn and pallid. Again he spoke to her softly:

"No, it doesn't matter what mistakes you've made, God will forgive you so long as you repent."

"That's impossible. You don't understand, I've caused a great disaster and I can't be forgiven." She shook her head fiercely, and began to sob.

He pulled her to him, consoling her:

"Believe me, no matter what you've done, it can all be forgiven. You are here now, you can live a life of peace, and once again see the light and feel its warmth. You will naturally come to forget the unhappiness of the past, it will no longer trouble you."

"But I don't want to forget, it was beautiful," Congcong murmured.

The minister sighed. Clearly the girl was deeply mired in her emotion, tormented but unwilling to let it go. Suddenly she turned her head and looked at the minister, her eyes shining.

"Do you mean that if I just admit my errors God will forgive me, and I can be saved – is that true? Then I will convert to Christianity, perhaps that will bring my heart peace."

"Of course. God will forgive you. If only you are willing, you can return to his side at any time."

The girl nodded.

"I am very happy that you will return to God."

The girl gave a strained laugh.

"Let's go, I'll take you to Miss Jian, who runs the congregation. She will make arrangements for you. Life here is simple, I hope you can adjust to it," the minister said. He sensed that it was only a temporary loss of direction that had brought the girl here looking for support. If he was to keep her here, he couldn't let her vanish again.

"Thank you," the girl said.

2.

The minister could scarcely believe how near to him the girl now lived. In the early mornings he would see her, dressed in a loose sleeping gown, expressionless and eyes heavy with sleep, passing by as though sleepwalking. She was still barefoot; he'd provided her with new shoes but she seemed determined to suffer this punishment, though she walked upon the sharpest stones or through the vilest mud.

Most evenings they dined together, and she would speak of her life on the boat. That life had not been honorable, but she spoke so frankly and innocently that it didn't seem squalid at all. He observed that Miss Jian and the two other middle-aged women who worked in the church listened with relish. She'd always had this gift of drawing out others' spirits, ruling them with a laugh or a crease of her brow.

But she was by no means happy. She seemed drained of energy, as though she'd experienced overwhelming hardship before coming here. She wasn't particularly concerned with the workings of the church, and only

attending choir activities out of a natural love of singing. She seemed to have lost interest in all else. She wanted only to close herself in her room and read the Bible or stare into space. He gave her books about Christianity, hoping that she might draw from them some deeper spiritual strength.

He was confident he could gradually reach her and lead her out of the shadow. Whenever he ventured afar he would always bring her back a gift, from Siam rich in silks, or from Java where woven rattan was common. He brought her all kinds of beautiful handmade shoes and skirts. Each time she received these gifts she smiled shyly and said:

“I’m not used to being treated so well.”

She accepted the shoes and clothing, but never wore them. She was forever dressed in that voluminous black dress. It had already lost its shape from washing and hung on her like a sack, hiding her torso.

Her mood seemed quite serene, but still it made him uneasy. He felt she was preoccupied with something. He speculated that she was waiting for someone, someone who might suddenly appear and carry her away. He imagined the scene as she stepped aboard that someone’s boat, once again wanton as before, her body giving off the fragrance of ripe fruit. It was a side of her that she would never reveal in front of him, a pleasure he would never know. His speculation ran wild and led him to anger. He became certain that she was waiting for someone, this place was only a way-station for her, and when she was fully recuperated her waiting lover would reappear, and she would depart without a qualm.

He felt these restless, endless speculations might drive him insane.

3.

But then he saw a ray of hope; a new path seemed to be opening up.

In July, the minister received an unexpected letter from his son, who was traveling in Europe. In the letter he wrote that he dearly missed his father and wanted to come to the tropical island to visit him.

The minister put down the letter and went walking in the garden. The seed which had been cast into the grass so casually had already put forth a tall sprout, and bloomed. Time had once again brought about its parturition, and so swiftly. It was not long after he first met Congcong, he recalled, that Sister Teresa had brought a bunch of flower seeds from somewhere and scattered them with a mysterious air in this empty spot in the garden behind the church. They said that as a young girl she’d been full of romance, but that was a very long time ago. When the minister first met her she was already dodderingly old; it was impossible to imagine her in the glory of her youth.

“This is an ill-ordered nation, even the seasons are jumbled. There is no flower season; or rather every season is flower season. Here, life is a casual thing. For children to be born, abandoned and die is an ordinary thing. But the plants and trees here exhibit such shocking vitality, they are bursting with life.” Thus the minister had once described this place in a letter to his son. It was a lascivious paradise of plants. The flowers were soon blooming, the little violet blossoms assuming the shape of tall-stemmed dishes, and giving off a faint perfume. They were very subdued little flowers, they did not attract notice. But when he again passed the spot two or three days later, he was astonished to discover that the little flowers, originally violet, had turned a very faint lilac. Some hadn’t yet finished changing, and the cluster of both pale and vivid flowers suddenly made the place much more lively, and much richer.

A few days later he found that the lilac-colored flowers had lost their hue entirely, and turned a pure white. Now the clump of flowers was made up of three different colors bunched and layered, from violet to white, as though it were passing through all the stages of life. He looked at the tri-colored flowers in tangled bloom and felt a rush of delight; bidding Sister Teresa to come, he asked her what flowers these were. Sister Teresa had already guessed at his fondness for them, and laughed with satisfaction:

“Those flowers are called ‘yesterday, today, tomorrow’. They seem to take me right back through my girlhood – gone by in the blink of an eye!”

As the minister looked down upon the brilliant, three-colored bunch of flowers he repeated their name, ‘yesterday, today, tomorrow’... yesterday, today, tomorrow. Generation followed generation. Yes, this was the orbit of the cycle of life. This was the will of God.

4.

The following morning, when Congcong opened her door, an envelope gently dropped to the ground. She picked it up, and distinguished the minister’s handwriting.

“It was the day before yesterday. My fifty-seventh birthday passed unnoticed and unremarked, a day like any

other. It occurs to me that I am thirty-six years older than you, and I feel so tired..."

Congcong slowly sat down at the table. She lifted her glass and took a sip, seeing the minister's face on the surface of the water. Why had she never considered his age? He was already fifty-seven.

"I think you'll be ready for your baptism. This is very gratifying to me; I have long anticipated it and I can imagine how happy I shall be when the day arrives. To see you enter into a new life, to once again take the Blessed Virgin's hand... There is one other thing I wished to tell you. In a short while, perhaps next month, my son will come to the island to see me. I remember once speaking of him to you, though perhaps you've already forgotten. He's an excellent fellow, tall and handsome and of very strong build. He's also less prone than I to worry; he's a very optimistic young man. I'm thinking that the two of you might meet once he's here, and if you should find him unobjectionable, perhaps you might come together... I mean to say, to live together. I'm confident you would both be happy.

"As for your previous life on the boat, I would help you keep it secret from him. Though this would be unfair to him, you were forced by circumstances to make those choices, they were not truly yours. And even supposing he should learn of it later, I think he would understand in the end. So there is absolutely no need for you to be distressed on account of the past. You are remarkably intelligent, and I imagine he will love you the moment he sees you... I can imagine your wedding, two beautiful youths standing before the Virgin Mary to exchange vows, rings, a kiss... I promise you, that would be the happiest moment in my life.

"But he is a single child, and his mother and I doted on him terribly when he was young. When he was older he became selfish to a certain degree, and he thinks little of others. I'm not sure he will be able to understand you, or care for you. I believe I understand you, and could care for you, it's just a pity that the time left to me is so short..."

The girl put down the letter, and was unable to suppress a sigh. She smelled a very faint fragrance wafting from the letter. It was subtle, and many-layered. She closed her eyes and the odor of childhood slowly rose to her, enveloping her. Then she saw herself as she was at that moment, and herself as she would be... She seemed to be mounting a spiral staircase, ascending higher and higher.

She slept with her head on the fragrant letter, and saw the entire course of her life in a fevered dream. When she awoke the thin paper was clenched in her hand, and she began to weep in desolation. It was her one assurance, the only proof that someone, somewhere, was willing to care for her.

Meanwhile, the minister was also waking from a dream. In it his son, tall and straight as a palm tree, was moving lightly towards him. They hadn't seen each other for years, however, and the minister could hardly recognize him. He was so lordly, his shoulders heroic in their breadth, the folds of his clothing rustling as he walked, grave and quiet, like a prince. The minister was painfully conflicted, and for a moment was unable to call his name. Only in his heart did he say it softly - Allan.

Trembling, the minister placed Congcong's hand in Allan's. Radiance burst upon the blessed pair, the air resounded with laughter and hymns. But where did he stand? There he was, at their wedding, the moment he once predicted would be the happiest of his life. He was smiling, to be sure, just like all the others. But why did the ceremony seem so long? They spoke their vows, exchanged their rings, kissed, but each detail seemed to be repeated countless times. They kissed long and deeply, like two trees grown intertwined. The minister sat alone on his hard wooden seat, and no one noticed his unease. He had been forgotten entirely.

He felt as though he had become a charred stick. The last drop of water in his body was being drawn out, and still they kissed. Oh, they were a kindred pair of poisonous snakes, and with their forked, scarlet tongues they pledged their allegiance. At last he couldn't help but cry out: why will no one give me a cup of water!

His voice was instantly sucked dry by their kiss, vanishing with no trace. He howled out loud, struggling, until he finally awoke and escaped from that terrible wedding.

5.

Very soon it would be time for Congcong's baptism.

It was an extraordinarily difficult time for the minister. Since having the dream about the wedding he'd begun to fear Allan's arrival; he hoped that Allan might suddenly change his mind and take another ship somewhere else.

He loathed his own weakness, that a mere dream of thirst could strike such fear in him. Allan was his future, the next in his line. The sentiments he held dear would find their continuation in Allan. The relinquishing of his love to his son would be like the mingling of two flowers' fragrances, their union leaving no trace behind - but why did he still feel such deep envy?

It was this absurd: deep inside him he feared that someone might take her from his side forever, and he was willing to use his son, to let her marry him, just to keep her near.

After which they would abandon him. The poor minister would be left on the island, to live out his life in solitude – but wasn't that what he wanted? When his wife died and he had resolved to stay on the island, hadn't he already prepared himself for this?

Though he knew this was the best arrangement, still his hands stubbornly stretched forth, trying to grasp something.

He administered her baptism. It was a solemn, dignified ceremony. Congcong wrote many letters inviting her sisters from the boat and the refugee camp to attend. Some among them had never entered a church before, but once seated they were taken by the stately atmosphere, as though they'd become actors in a grand opera. They couldn't help but feel moved, and congratulated their little sister wholeheartedly.

There was one other special invitation, which Congcong arranged to be delivered to someone living on the boat at the seaside. She looked very earnest as she did – it was plain that this was someone special to her.

The woman who arrived was blind, without a trace of moisture beneath her collapsed sockets. And not only her eyes – her entire person was bone-dry, wizened like a plant cut at the root. She came on someone's arm and walked slowly towards the girl. It was a handsome youth who accompanied her, looking particularly clean and healthy by comparison. He also knew the girl, and spoke to her before the blind woman did:

"So this is where you've been. We've been looking for you all this time."

His tone was intimate, the three of them must have been friends for quite some time. The minister wondered if this was the young man the girl was always thinking of, but then again it seemed not, because the girl hardly gave him a glance.

It was obvious that she attached much more importance to the blind woman; perhaps they were sisters. Despite the blind woman's destitution, her bearing was haughty, nothing like the song girls who sold themselves on the boat.

"Please watch the ceremony, we'll speak of other things shortly." He wanted to say more, but the girl cut him off coldly. They sat down to watch.

The girl wore a white baptismal gown, and looked like a swan in her beauty. She seemed to have suddenly grown older; she appeared solitary and noble as she awaited the ceremony.

The minister shrunk from her brilliance, waiting with his eyes closed for the ceremony to commence. At this moment he felt no more conflict, he was concentrated entirely upon conducting this ceremony for her, on passing with her through this rebirth. This rite was all he would ever be able to give her. It would not be long now until Allan arrived, riding the spring wind like a prince, to bring her a new and sweeter life.

The baptismal platform was an open balcony shaped like a half-moon, about three stories off the ground. Congcong stood in the baptismal pool as the minister read the rites, and only she, who stood close at hand, could hear how his voice trembled. What showers of warm sparks were struck from the meeting of their gazes, only they knew. After the reading of the rites, the minister and his assistants supported the girl as they lay her backwards three times, submerging her entire body.

When she stood upright again, with her eyes tightly closed and her soaked hair slicked down around her crimson face, she looked as young as a newborn infant.

The little wildflower he'd once gathered had at last drunk of the holy water, and put forth dazzling blossoms.

He said to her:

"You are now an entirely new you."

The girl slowly opened her eyes. Droplets ran from her lashes and the corners of her eyes. She glanced down upon the spectators, then back at the minister, and smiled slyly.

Then in one great leap, she sprang from the baptismal pool.

As she flew like a bird, the minister instinctively reached out to grasp her. He barely touched her feet – and then those chill, wounded feet disappeared completely from sight, and he caught nothing but a handful of holy water. It splashed his face, raw-smelling. When he leaned over the edge to look, the girl had already landed, her white gown turned dark red, spread beneath her like a peacock's fanned tail.

The crowd erupted in commotion, everyone surging towards that fallen peacock. No one told the blind woman what had happened, she'd only heard the abrupt thud of landing roll outwards like muted thunder – she didn't understand what had happened until the smell of blood began to spread.

The minister stood stunned for a time, then again looked down from the platform. This time the bobbing heads of the crowd covered the girl entirely.

He lowered his body into the baptismal pool, curling up, letting the holy water cover his ears and block out all sound. Then, gradually, he began to cry.

Translated from the Chinese by Eric Abrahamson

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