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Second Son Lihao

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Abstract

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A train crashes in the Gansu Province during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, stranding a small group of Red Guards in the Gobi Desert. As they battle for survival against the horrors of the stony desert, revolutionary ethos comes into conflict with a ravenous traditional culture, driving a brother and sister apart.

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Table of Contents

Foreword.....	1
I.....	5
II.....	57
III.....	117
Bibliography.....	157

War can only be abolished through war, and in order to get rid of the gun it is necessary to take up the gun.

—Mao Zedong

The Cultural Revolution is dead and mostly buried, so dead that efforts to understand it risk being understood as either whitewashing or failure to show sufficient indignation toward the corpse.

—Richard Kraus, *The Cultural Revolution*

Foreword

The Cultural Revolution is a difficult topic. Many Chinese would like to forget it; yet its aesthetic is sneaking into Chinese consumer culture. Cultural Revolution-styled shoes, bags, hats, and pins have made an enormous resurgence in the last decade, and politicians invoke the rhetoric of the Revolution as they promise to root out corruption in the Chinese government. Restaurants themed on the Cultural Revolution have opened throughout the country. Vocabulary from the Cultural Revolution remains prominent in Chinese culture. When a child asks, for example, to get off the bus early for the restroom, a parent may tell the child to “be persistent” rather than to “hold it.” Quotations from Mao such as “Women hold up half the sky” and “Revolution is not a dinner party” continue to circulate in daily conversation. Yet the fact remains that this decade—spanning the formation of the Red Guards in 1966 to the death of Mao Zedong in 1976—killed millions and destroyed millions more lives. A deep remorse lives alongside modern nostalgia. These two perspectives cannot be easily reconciled.

The facts of the Cultural Revolution are more easily quantifiable, but still somewhat nebulous. Though most accounts start the Cultural Revolution at the formation of the Red Guards, the Red Guards themselves were a spontaneous development. As the political climate grew more and more revolutionary between 1965 and 1966, youth leagues of numerous names emerged and at high schools and colleges across the country. Children marched in military uniform with bright red armbands tied around their shoulders months before the Revolution officially began. However, the character of the Red Guards and the Revolution changed significantly when, in August 1966, Mao Zedong summoned the Red Guards to Tiananmen Square. He legitimized the movement, and poised himself as the Red Guards’ red commander-in-chief.

A flurry of developments occurred in the days and weeks both before and after the first reception at Tiananmen Square. Mao Zedong wrote his first “big character poster” or dazibao. The poster—titled “Bombard the Headquarters!”—called upon the revolutionary masses (in particular, the revolutionary youth or Red Guards) to root out corruption from the highest levels of government. Two weeks later, the Party passed the 16 Point Resolution defining the Cultural Revolution as a nation-wide struggle against bourgeois revisionism. “Class struggle” and “the dictatorship of the proletariat” became more than just Marxist-Leninist ideas borrowed by Mao Zedong Thought; they became instructions for walking the Communist road.

The first two years of the Cultural Revolution may be characterized by the mobilization of the Red Guards. Mao Zedong relied on what he saw as the ideological purity of youth to cleanse the country of revisionist and reactionary ideas. Though most Red Guard groups at first conducted revolution by painting dazibao and shaming local authorities, as Mao’s support of them grew, they expanded their operations to incorporate all aspects of the “lively application” of Mao Zedong Thought. They waged a campaign against the Four Olds—old habits, ideas, culture, and customs—renaming streets, raiding houses, and imposing a strict proletarian dress code on locals they encountered. Perhaps due to their minimal oversight, factions developed between guards. Both sides quoted often contradictory instructions and quotations from the Party as the basis of their actions; early fights involved throwing memorized speeches and declarations back and forth. When the ideological barriers proved impossible to break, many Red Guards took up arms against one another, culminating in hundreds of thousands of deaths. This continued until, in 1968, the Red Guards were separated from one another and sent out into the countryside to learn among revolutionary peasants. This marks the transition from the first part of the Cultural Revolution to its second, in which power moved from revolutionary youth to

revolutionary masses. It was not until after the two years of chaos concluded that the infrastructure leading to Deng Xiaoping's miraculous economic recovery started development.

In this novella, I attempt to capture a small slice of the first two years of the Cultural Revolution. The historical timeline has been truncated to combine two years of campaign and rhetoric into a brief period of time. The vocabulary developed throughout the novella appeared in force throughout the Cultural Revolution, but some concepts I have introduced were not present until later years. However, I have attempted to render the character of the rhetoric as vividly as possible. Metaphors such as "the spiritual atom bomb of Mao Zedong Thought" were not just clever bits of propaganda: speaking and repeating these metaphors was part of becoming a Revolutionary. The rhetoric employed by some children in this novella seems beyond their years only because they were exposed to so much of such speech on a daily basis.

A few specific allusions and plot points may require further explanation. The creation story given in part I mixes Indian and Han creation myth. The figure Chiang Kai-Shek discussed throughout the novella led the Guomindang (formerly transcribed as the "Kuomintang" or KMT), China's nationalist government, against the communists and Mao Zedong. The Long March was the famous two-year retreat across China during which Mao Zedong secured the hearts and minds of the Chinese people. The "five fleshy pillars" in part III refer to one of the most famous scenes in Chinese literature: after the Monkey King rebelled against heaven, the Buddha gave him an opportunity to prove his might and annul the charges. The Monkey King had only to leap out of the Buddha's outstretched palm. He took to the sky and leapt to the end of the universe and found the five fleshy pillars of the Buddha's hand.

I hope that I have portrayed the characters and events with a certain level of realism, but I understand that as an American writer, my resources and perspective are limited. Though I have

made an attempt to quantize and understand the Cultural Revolution, I do not claim any fundamental knowledge of it. In the end, the China and the Cultural Revolution explored in this novella are my own.

I

At the end of the Cultural Revolution, I wrote Bo Xinyi a letter. When I visited her at the Soviet Border, I intended to deliver it. Instead I slunk away, the wrinkled paper still folded in my jacket pocket, words warm against my chest.

She rejected me. In these middling years I am quick to anger. My hands trembled and my head ached. I tore the letter from my breast and threw it down in the snow, walked ten meters, then, shaking, doubled back to retrieve it from the white ground.

Three months and a half thousand kilometers have passed. Now, having walked from the edge of Soviet Kazakhstan to the town in the heart of the Gobi Desert¹, I have forgotten the words. A vague premise remains: something like a promise or a confession of love.

I revised the letter many times, each time with one eye on the present, one eye on the past. Now, in the early summer of 1991, I have returned to my ancestral home.

I stand in the abandoned foyer of an enormous house. I am here to answer for my betrayals. I am here to face my sister for the final time. A ruined rug spans the distance between the doorway and a wooden chair. An impossibly heavy chair stands upon a platform on four clawed feet. On the wall behind it, my ancestors carved four ornate characters into the wood. My spirit translates the inscription from ancient Chinese:

*Just as violence begets violence,
worlds beget worlds.*

My spirit shines like fire in my every cell; my epidermis glows. I feel young. My body fills the room.

¹ Or, as those who live on its borders sometimes call it, the Gobi Shore.

#

My spirit: the small ancestral thing that inhabits my body and mind. My spirit, which speaks through me and speaks for me, long ago prepared me for the Cultural Revolution. It prepared me by telling me the story of creation, and the flood.

I reiterate this story because it involves the core of my ancestry, the siblings Wu and Wu. I tell it in the voice of my spirit, but the narrative is my own.

Life began with humans, as it always has: a young people, naked and laughing; nameless, they clung to their Mother's body and laughed and danced and shared in the secrets of the new world. Their laughter delighted the Goddess. The goddess held Her large belly in Her hands so that the humans would have a place to stand. She was delighted by the little people, who seemed to share her form and voice, who radiated with laughter, a delightful sound.

Really, creation was not so simple. The Goddess lay down Her body and formed the world. Though Her skin was bare, an ocean filled Her stomach, eager to be born. In order to bring water to Her body the world, She gave birth a child: the half-goddess Nüwa. Nüwa was born between the Goddess's lips and when she emerged from the depthless ocean inside Her she brought the water with her. Water flowed from the Goddess's mouth and Nüwa guided it across the Goddess's great valleys and fords to create large seas in Her contours. Nüwa then walked around the rest of the Goddess, depositing red and yellow dust until the goddess's entire skin covered with earth. By the time she finished, the sun, still free and unscheduled, had completed its first revolution: the day passed, and the moon, a beautiful woman, stepped out from behind the sun's shadow, smiling down at Creation. Nüwa slept.

When Nüwa awoke the second day, vines crept out from beneath her fingernails.

Wherever she walked, the earth sowed bountiful seeds, and quickly forests and meadows appeared across the Goddess's body. Everywhere the plants grew wild animals soon after appeared: a somber ape, a black crow, and a fleet-footed monkey. Nüwa heard their calls and watched like species interact, but she could not comprehend them: she discovered loneliness. The dark half-laughter of hyenas unearthed an emptiness in her heart.

The next morning Nüwa went searching for a sound that she heard in a dream. Though she did not recognize it, the sound was the babble of a spring. The sun shone on her for many hours, stretching one day into many days as Nüwa searched. Nüwa followed the dream-sound until she reached a spring at the Goddess's navel. At the bed of the spring: yellow dust. The first dog, born overnight, watched wide-eyed from the ledge of the navel's rim.

She knelt before the water and sculpted the yellow soil into shapes that resembled her own, each with two legs, two arms, two eyes, two ears, a mouth, a nose, genderless with long black hair and eyes dark with every pigment. She made two people but had to stop, for this task gave her thirst. She stooped down and took a long swig from the spring, relishing each drop of the fresh young water. Nüwa then felt a strange pressure on her pelvis: she was not all goddess, that the Goddess had imparted on her something mortal. She was less than a child: she went back to her work, ignoring the discomfort. She shaped the faces until she could not tell them from her own. When her bladder gave, she was still working. Nüwa gasped in surprise, covering herself instantly, but the figures, struck by her urine, blinked and shifted on their feet. The mortal part of the immortal Nüwa gave life to inanimate dust.

So she brought more figures to being: figures tall and short, hairy and hairless, bulky and thin, and brought life to them all. By the end of the hour three dozen small and naked humans stood around the Yellow Spring, blinking at one another, making faces, playing with one

another's hair.

Then the first two humans clutched their bellies, rolled back their heads, and split into laughter. The laughter inhabited air like music and the other humans followed, singing with their laughter. The dog at the peak of the valley became immediately tame and bounded down the hill to join his human companions, baying with all the gusto of a thousand hounds. The monkeys joined, screeching shrilly from the treetops; the roosters cawed from their low perches and the eagles screamed from high above. But none of the animal's cries could outshine the laughter of these thirty-six humans: their belly-laugh sounded out across the whole of the Goddess, and Nüwa at last rejoiced with her kin. The Goddess beamed and cradled Her stomach in Her hands.

But the Goddess realized that if She moved, the humans living on Her large stomach would fall off and tumble into the void. She called Nüwa back to her lips were and whispered: "Child, you will be their first guardian," for the Goddess Herself gave up immortality to provide home for the laughing humans. She lay down in the ocean of chaos and, with a sad sense of benevolence, passed slowly into the other world.

Her eyes became lakes, her hollow skull the hollow sky, her ears and mouth vast caverns, her legs endless loamy plains, her spine mountains, her bones earth, her arms vast continents, her throat a valley, her stomach the globe, and her breasts great mounds of yellow dust. Her final dying breath progenerated the four winds just as Nüwa's lifeblood progenerated mankind.

We were the first two children, my spirit told me. We were the first twins, the first perfect humans. My sister and I were the siblings Wu and Wu.

I said Nüwa created many humans; however only the first two, the sexless long-haired siblings Wu and Wu, possessed her perfect image. Only Wu and Wu inherited the morals of the guardian. Only Wu and Wu lived justly in the world.

For one half thousand years after its creation, mankind spread like a contagion across the entire Earth. They razed forests and dug deep into the earth's belly to make homes for themselves and their families. They developed language both written and spoken, unintelligible by today's people. They harvested resources from the body of the dead Goddess without regard.

Nüwa awoke from a deep sleep to find her children at the brink of war: two great armies razed the world, marching against each other in an endless campaign. Nüwa panicked and pled to the masses that their militaries be stopped, but the bulk of humanity could no longer hear her voice. So she descended to Earth and roamed its hills and mountains, searching out her eldest and purest children, the siblings Wu and Wu. These two siblings, born first and made most just, had lived through the five hundred years with little aging. Mankind's great guardian found them in a hermitage outside a desert town. But she worried that her ethics had faded and that the siblings would no longer act in accordance to the will of their gods. So she came to them as an old woman, and, after joining them in food and wine, said, "Children, why do you live alone?"

The siblings Wu and Wu, Nüwa's ageless children, responded at once. They spoke in unison. Together their voices carried a timbre purer than the liveliest singer on Earth.

“Though we have seen war bloom around us
 and though both armies have come to our doorstep
 demanding our participation, summoning our expertise,
 we have denied all stake in civil war.
 Though our mother imparted us with power to thwart
 any threat, we prefer to live a simple existence. We prefer
 to live without war.”

The goddess smiled at her children. Casting off her cloak and revealing her true form, a

body identical to the two siblings, she said, “My children, I am glad to hear you speak with such eloquence. Now listen:

“I wish to rid the earth of unnatural violence.
I cannot bear to see my children slaughter one another.
But some must survive to be the progenitors
of a new mankind. Listen closely to the rain.
When the storm comes, return to where you were born
and seek shelter in the stone turtle. He will see you through
the flood.”

With these words she vanished, returning to the firmament, where she watched, and in the meantime created a kingdom in the other world. Centuries passed and the war raged on, soldiers marrying soldiers, babies fighting like sharks from the moment they left the womb; but the siblings Wu and Wu were both sexless and ageless, sterile and long-living. They continued on, recalling the goddess’s warning until one thousand years after the visitation, the sky opened to interminable rain. They fled into the vast desert where they found a stone turtle perched on a mountaintop. They crawled into its mouth and waited out the storm.

After the flood ended, the siblings emerged to find that it had merged with the mountain and become a cave. Gathering their things, they descended into the desert and searched out their hermitage, but nothing remained on the land; no human breathed the wet air. They felt a great loss: though they rejected the war, they mourned the death of so many siblings. So they again climbed the mountain, stood on the summit, and prayed to the gods and spirits for guidance. Nüwa no longer existed except as a murmur on the wind, but she lived through the gods she helped create. The mountain gods responded to her children’s prayers: they imparted the two

sexes on the siblings and instructed them to wed. The siblings Wu produced five children, and these five children contained all the world's great races.

This is the story my spirit has told me since birth. I have lived through it in more than one life. Sister, too, had a spirit. It appeared to her in the form of a gray fox but rarely spoke to me. When it did, it was always to my spirit, commenting on some unearthly matter.

The generations have separated my sister and me. When I lost her, I was twelve and she was twenty. Even then, I stood at less than half her 1.9-meter height. My hair was short and smooth, hers long and coarse, loose on her shoulders. Our complexions were not the same.

#

You will forgive me if I do not believe in my spirit's stories. My spirit has brought me far enough. Words are contagion. The words of my spirit are toxic. They spread from bone to bone.

I stand today in my ancestral home. My mind is clear and my body pure. Blood like water evaporates. Blood like water rises into the air.

#

I will tell you the story of my Cultural Revolution, but first you must understand me through my history, and my family's. Mao Zedong wrote that contradictions transform into one another; struggle and Revolution are eternal. They are predicated on my father, and my country, and my red blood.

I inherited my spirit as I inherited my soul: it was thrust upon me unwilling, and went

against everything I learned. From the first years of grade school, I was taught that spirits belonged among the superstitious, that religion was part of a system by which oppressors control the oppressed. Religion had no place in an ideal Communist society: it had no place in my body and mind. I worshiped the Revolution, I worshiped the Great Helmsman, and yet this small ancestral spirit dwelled in my soul.

Grandfather, too, carried a rich ancestral flame. When I approached him about my troubling contradictions, he said, "In nature, man is often weak: thus he seeks spiritual guidance and can be manipulated by whatever he reads. That's all. So long as your spirituality is directed toward your country you will face no conflict at all."

But Father took me aside and said, "Do not repeat what you have just heard. Do not repeat him. Do you understand?"

When Grandfather died, Mother said he returned to the Yellow Spring. He was given no caskets; already we called burials bourgeois affairs. We stayed at the crematorium for as long as we could but they would not let us take his ashes; mourning was a luxury reserved for the oppressive classes: it had no place in a Communist's heart.

#

I have been blessed, my spirit once told me, with an unusual capacity for memory. My spirit facilitated these memories.

For example, the day of my birth: before I left the womb, my spirit was watching. My

mother lay on the heated kang² in our house in village Lanzun, moaning. We lived in Lanzun for the first three years of my life. It was a town that Grandfather helped to liberate from his own landlord uncles; the Red Army redistributed property and we ended up with an acre of our own. Grandfather stood at the doorway interrogating the midwife before allowing him into the room. “You can guarantee that it will be a boy,” Father said, turning statement into question. The midwife looked at him strangely and continued toward the kang. “Honestly,” said Father, “I have told her again and again that she must give birth to a boy.” The midwife said simply that he would do his best.

Sister sat in the corner of the room on a wicker chair. Father dressed her in his own clothes: a large, buttoned shirt tucked into a pair of pants held up by a tight rope belt. While the pants would fit a gut twice her size, the legs barely reached the ankles. Even at seven she matched his height. She was skinny, like a girl, but her mother had no breasts and he suspected she would lack the same; even so her chest was bandaged. Her arms were muscular and she’d been trained in the posture of a boy. A pair of scissors lay on the floor beside her feet. Should the child be born a girl, Sister was to immediately chop off her own hair. But of course, I was born a boy. Father called me Second Son.

On the eve of my birth, Grandfather inspected me carefully. He held me from all angles, searching for birthmarks, moles, discolorations in the skin. He told my father to be proud of my mother, for she had produced a fine boy. Every pregnancy brought her womb closer; every miscarriage represented her body’s rejection of the imperfect. The seven stillborn boys before me could not have carried on the legacy of our ancestors.

It was not popular to talk about ancestors in those days. To do so implied a rich family

² A brick bed, with a fire burning beneath. One thing you learn to miss when you return to Beijing.

heritage: a bond of blood that threatened to overpower the connection to the country. One must be willing to cut all ties with his family at any moment should they act against the Party, and besides, whom but Four-types would remember family? Who but Four-types could afford to carry genealogies with them, to build shrines in the country? Ancestry was a legacy reserved for the landlord class.

My spirit's own accounts of history end at the turn of the twentieth century. In the last years of the 1800s, our family owned an enormous complex that employed ten dozen aides. My spirit sometimes fed me stories from the old home: tales festering with bourgeois influences. One involved a boy of thirteen choosing among his aides a future concubine to share the house with his future wife. Grandfather would not have approved of such excesses: by the time he was born, our nuclear family had fallen out with the Wu Clan. We lived as renters on the complex with our own cousins as landlords, a situation very well reversed by the Great Land Reform. Though we never inhabited the deepest chambers of the Wu Complex, we were given our own house.

#

My grandfather died crossing Luding Bridge³. Too often, he recounted the story:

“When Lin Biao⁴ arrived on 29 May 1935, Chiang Kai-shek's forces had already taken the bridge. We could have shipped across the river, but there were not enough boats to spare. We could have swum but the Dadu river rose high above its banks, unusually active, said our guide,

³ A bridge spanning the mighty Dadu River. The Red Army, pinned against the river by the Guomindang, made a daring siege that won the Long March. Without this bold retreat, Chiang Kai-Shek would rule China, and the oppressing classes would never have been toppled by the masses.

⁴ A fallen angel. There was a time when I, too, thought he was a true revolutionary hero. Had he not fought against the red flag while holding the red flag, he might have succeeded Mao.

a Sichuan local. And besides we could not expect our Chairman to swim.

“So we had to secure the bridge.

“When we marched in, town spanning both banks was already ablaze. The Guomindang army had removed most of the ancient bridge’s wooden planks, setting fire to the few that remained. Free of the planks, thirteen iron chains spanned the river, nine forming the floor; four, the handrails. Lin Biao sent twenty-two men to take the bridge.

“I, your Grandfather, was among the twenty-two selected.

“As we approached the bridge, the enemy yelled threats from across the river. They pointed their gleaming gun barrels at our feet. But Lin Biao said: You are doing this for the Chairman. And I thought, wasn’t he the greatest kind of man? Lin Biao told us that the Chairman worked every night on strategies for our survival, he told us that without the Great Leader there would be no People’s Republic. So we twenty-two abandoned our supplies at the shore. No canteen, no bag, no helmet and no rations, we stripped down to a shirt and pants, stuffed ammunition into our underwear, and clutching our rifles, holding grenades in our teeth, we crawled out onto the perilous chains. We crawled with nothing but our rifles and our camaraderie across bare iron chains.

“The Guomindang took notice of our remarkable valor. They had not expected any army, Revolutionary Communist or not to attempt to take the bridge by force. So for the first minute or so of our long crawl they stared with utter respect. Their general shed a tear for our resolve and then with a clouded brow and remorseful eyes he ordered his men to man the machineguns. The cowards opened fire on us all.

“Veiled by the smoke of the flames the Guomindang set, we progressed uninjured until a stray bullet grazed Team Leader’s side. He bore the bullet, shouldered the pain, so we too

shouldered the shrapnel rain. We clenched our hands on the chains until the chains bled, and we lay planks across the bridge as we progressed. The machineguns rattled from across the river. I drew, I fired, and a coward crumpled behind his shielded mount.

“Had we not taken the bridge, our army would have been cornered against the Dadu. Without this legendary victory the remainder of the Long March would never have been possible and the Chairman would never have reached Yan’an. The history of Communist China would have died with Mao. It was mortal struggle, grandson, and I, your grandfather, did not die without cause!

“Team Leader slipped. His boots came loose from the bloodslicked chains. He hung, dangling from his bad hand as his rifle swung beneath him. He tried to raise it, aiming for the Guomintang, but he could not draw a bead. Drop the gun, drop the gun! his soldiers cried, extending hands toward him. A bullet grazed Second Leader Deng but he did not flinch; keeping his arm extended, he yelled, Drop the gun! Drop the gun!

“But Team Leader would not let go his resolve. He let loose of the chain, took the gun in both hands and falling, fired on the opposite bank. His bullets found nothing but the air above.

“For a moment the machinegun fire ceased. The Guomintang looked up from their sights and watched our most honorable leader plummet into the river. Then Second Leader Deng yelled, Charge! and, miraculously, we ran.

“The Guomintang returned to their guns and redoubled their fire but nothing could halt the advance of the people’s Red Army now. We would liberate the country of its serfdom! And we would capture any bridge between us and a Red China! I drew my rifle and shot. Ahead of me true revolutionary heroes smothered the flames on the remaining planks, making safe the way for the men behind. We switched duties every sixty seconds, ensuring that no one soldier to squat

in the same position for long enough to get shot. Bullets whizzed by soundlessly, only once or twice striking as we continued our approach.

“I turned back at one point to gauge our progress across the bridge. We came from the eastern bank, now as distant as the west. There, the flames subsided, our soldiers running from house to house with buckets of water and fire blankets, rescuing the town from its peril. Our soldiers rounded up the Guomindang stragglers and stripped them of their weapons. The area would be secure by the time we captured the bridge.

“Returning to my advance, I stepped out onto a charred and splintered plank. The wood gave way beneath me. I shouted and like a coward I dropped my gun. It clanged against the chains and then fell into the frothing river, which swallowed it like vaporous cloud. Second Leader Deng looked back at me for a moment, his gaze incredulous, deep disappointment apparent in his eyes. I swallowed hard.

“I, your grandfather, was no coward in life. I joined the Red Army to help right the wrongs our family has suffered at the hands of landlords and the oppressing classes, our bastard aunts and uncles. I would not allow this bridge to strip me of my dignity.

“I took at my feet and ran.

“Child: Your grandfather placed no hand on the handrail. I did not crawl across the chains hand over hand or wait for the rear unit to lay down their planks. I bounded ahead of the entire squad until I ran not just through gunfire but through the living fire of the burning planks. I made it three quarters of the way across the bridge before they shot me. The bullet pierced my stomach and I doubled over. The chains beneath my feet swung wildly. I was shot. They shot me, your grandfather, and I fell, clutching my wound.

“I died on the rocks in the river below. But don't believe them when they say there were

five casualties—we fought on. Team Leader and I and the next three who fell shook off death, retrieved our guns from the depths, walked back along the riverbed, and supported our comrades from the uncaptured bank.

“We crossed Luding Bridge through the Providence of our Chairman. We achieved greatness through our subscription to the People’s ideals. We proved through this feat that the will of the people is immortal.

“We passed, undying, into victory.”

After he finished his story, he demanded a bowl of wine. Serving him, I wondered what he meant by death. As a young child I thought he was immortal; later, as a revolutionary I saw it as some sort of living martyrdom, a death symbolic of the sacrifices of revolutionary heroes. Neither explains him completely: contradictions circle the truth.

Father secured our residence in Beijing by citing this war story. He pointed to Grandfather and said: this one of the five that fell. The cadre⁵ Father negotiated with was hesitant to believe the story but was persuaded by Grandfather’s glowing dossier. “I’m sorry,” the cadre said. “I didn’t realize anyone from Luding Bridge still lived.” Grandfather snorted. I was barely a child then, still hanging from my mother’s arms.

“There are many peasants who do not even make it this far,” the cadre in charge of our case said. “It was only because of your exceptional file that I was even able to read your request,” he continued, waving a pile of papers on his desk at us. “Not one bad mark in the last three years! And even a commendation. Unusual, unusual.” All five of us sat or stood in his office: Father, Mother, Sister, Grandfather and I. Mother, Sister and I stood along the wall as Father and Grandfather conducted business from the cadre’s two mismatched chairs.

⁵ A skinny, ugly man with narrow teeth and a well-pressed uniform.

Mother died the same year as Grandfather. This time as we sat with her at the crematorium, we knew what to expect. A family sat on a bench nearby us, mourning loudly as they clutched the small purple box of a child's ashes. A policeman stopped by to silence them. He looked at us suspiciously but Father returned the gaze level-eyed and the policeman left us to our business. Sister sat beside me, hand around my shoulder, contemplating the ash.

Sister never moved out. She threatened to, several times. But because Mother and Grandfather were dead and because Father worked hard at his work unit, a local cadre pulled for her to apply for college. She was admitted on her academic merit, but her admission letter praised her political background—that is, her grandfather's heroism—more than anything else. The cadre helped secure her a commuter slot, so that she would be able to study from home and cook and watch after her brother.

Sister had no love for our father. On the eve of my eleventh birthday she drank our father into a stupor and laid him to bed. In the morning she snuck out leaving on the floor by his bed a pair of scissors and a long lock of her hair and a picture of mother from the years in Lanzun. In this picture I was not yet born. Father awoke. He locked his door and I waited for Sister to come home.

#

Beijing's streets are arranged in a series of rings, connected by spokes that center on the Forbidden Palace in the Old District. Our apartment was off of the eighth spoke, a short distance from the historic center of the city. Sister would take me on walks between the third and fourth rings as she went from vendor to vendor, sampling books, often covertly. She showed the ones

with pictures: mostly mythologies and scientific texts. Before the Cultural Revolution we did not know the extent of revisionism in the publishing industry: meaningless sciences and ivory tower superstitions paraded themselves as intellectual while the practicalities of agricultural, industrial, and social production were left unattended. By second grade I learned the grave errors of revisionist education. Ancient novels and storybooks disappeared from the shelves. In Beijing we were at the center of the Party: we felt first its every breath; we painted posters of a China short to come.

#

Sister was among the first Red Guards—the Old Red Guards, they called themselves—that formed in colleges along the coast in the late spring of 1968.⁶ They found their roots in Beijing and then spread out across all of China. Small, independent coalitions unified into national brands. Professors and teachers monitored the phenomenon closely. Some interfered while others merely observed. Leadership organizations were formalized and named; revolutionary youth groups became Red Guard teams and intellectual study developed into revolutionary action.

On the first day of the Red Guards, Sister returned home wearing a bright red silk kerchief. Her long hair was braided into two tight ponytails. As she walked she puffed out her chest and pursed her cheeks, half-marching up the apartment steps. She carried a half dozen books, all bound in red: she said, “These are my studies now,” and lay down in our bed with them. Sister did not sleep that night.

⁶ They pitted themselves as intellectuals too, until that label came under fire as rightest.

Over breakfast I asked her about the books. They were softbound collections of Mao Zedong Thought: essays, poems, and speeches spanning his military and political career. Most came from his tenure in Yan'an. She said her political instructor distributed these books to the class; she said they were the key to the Red China, that soon I would study them as well. Meanwhile in fifth grade we began learning English: phrases like "Long live Chairman Mao!" and "Down with the Japanese Devils!" Our teachers taught us very carefully how to pronounce words like "bourgeoisie" and "capitalism;" we were taught the Chairman's most famous quotes in both languages. In the last days of the school year, a Red Guard coalition was formed in my middle school. Student leaders came down from the high school, wearing sharp, belted uniforms, bright green sneakers, and radiant red armbands. They rounded us up in the auditorium, counted to ensure perfect attendance, and then read off a list of names. Teachers dared not approach the stage: this was not their show. "Wu Lihao," a high school boy read: I perked up and joined the others called in a line at the front of the auditorium. "These are our first Red Guards," a girl announced, addressing the students who were not chosen. "They have been selected due to their family's commendable political situation. You would do well to model yourselves after them."

I looked up and down the row, swallowing heavily: I only knew one or two of my fellow guards by name. They were not the friends I hung out with; they did not live in the same apartment complex as my family. We were not in the same class. The boy who'd read my name marched down the row, wrapping silk armbands around our outstretched arms. They said, "Paint the Universe Red." The next day our homeroom teachers distributed thin red books packed with Mao quotations. From now on, every morning looked upon the Chairman's portrait as a class and asked him for instructions while holding high our little red books. In the afternoon, we took action. At night, we reported and self-criticized.

That summer the Red Guard movement spread to the countryside. While we painted banners in Beijing, hundreds of thousands of children began their pilgrimage to Tiananmen Square. Some came by train or bicycle; the reddest among them walked, surviving on the kindness of strangers. A few walked the entire length of China with nothing but their friendship and political love.

#

Sister brought home friends from time to time. The most frequent guest at our dinner table was a boy named Dong Hi. Two years younger than Sister, his political affiliations had given him a bright future and an accelerated path in the university. He kept his short hair beneath a cap. At first he would not speak to me, except briefly while serving tea. “A revolution is not a dinner party,” he said to me in a teacher’s voice, smiling as he flipped open the beige flap on his khaki bag. “You have got to come prepared.’ They teach you that, right? It’s under ‘Classes and Class Struggle’ of your little red book.” He produced a steamed bun wrapped in wax paper, a teapot, a series of collapsible cups, and a folding tray. Sister boiled the water. Dong Hi ran the water through the strainer twice and poured equal servings into every cup. Cutting the bun into three equal pieces and looking at me he said in a sing-song voice, “For brother and sister and me.” When I began to eat, he turned to Sister and together they poured over an essay, studying long into the night.

I had to memorize the basic speeches, entire essays. Whenever my memory faltered, I was forced to write a detailed self-criticism. This was part of “summer training,” a program founded by the high school guards. Miss one day and you fall behind; miss two and you are lost

forever. We occupied several classrooms. Teachers living in nearby dormitories occasionally walked by our rooms during sessions but never spoke to us unless spoken to, sensing the coming change.

“Wu Lihao,” Sister said one night as Dong Hi served tea at the table, “we would like to talk to you about something.” Dong Hi pressed a cup to my breast. That day, Sister cut her hair short; she seemed even taller than before. She rarely used my full name.

“Wu Lihao,” said Dong Hi with great seriousness, “are you aware of revisionism?”

Revisionism: the greatest threat to our rebellion. A revisionist twists Party ideology into counterrevolutionary action. A revisionist leads an unsuspecting revolutionary into counterrevolutionary action through double meanings and subtle misdirection. “Yes,” I said.

“What they’ve been teaching you at school,” Dong Hi replied, “is revisionist.”

The next morning the high school guards again gathered us in the gymnasium, counting off our ranks. They distributed uniforms: green pants, green shirts, and leather belts. We would need to put on the best face for the Red Guards, portray it as a valorous institution. We would paint the teachers’ dormitories red.

By the time we arrived, the teachers had caught wind of our revolutionary plan. Most had moved out in the night, taking all their personal affects. We found little imperialist iconography in their offices, no hidden supplies of money or gold. One teacher left behind a note saying goodbye to her students; many more left eloquent self-criticisms, filled with prostration and reverence for the Chairman. “To have become a revisionist accidentally,” one read, “is no less shameful than to have killed a child accidentally, or to have criticized falsely. I can only conclude that a history of improper thinking and a bad bloodline have contributed to my failures. Until I am better, I will not expose myself to the children. I can only hope that the Party will

rehabilitate me.”

The next day, the high school team leader brought us to our school’s gymnasium. While we rooted out the revisionist threats, other guards diligently arranged enormous reams of paper and cloth, some across folding tables and some across the floor. Baskets of brushes sat with buckets of red and black paint at intervals throughout the room. We went to work at once: today would be a poster-making day. A poster for every teacher, listing all of their offenses.

Some former guards say they were under pressure to make up crimes for their teacher, but we found no shortage of true and provocative claims. Teacher Wang failed to bring his little red book three days ago. Teacher Zhang failed an essay upon which a student wrote “Long live Chairman Mao!” in bold characters. Teacher Chen assigned enough homework to disrupt revolutionary activity. And so on. Our accusations were endless, but they were grounded in the truth. I lost myself in the posters. I became the characters from my brush.

“Teacher Wen,” I wrote, “once marked an exam answer as ‘incorrect’ although it quoted the texts exactly. She argued that the quotations were irrelevant. But every sentence the Chairman speaks is worth a thousand sentences! She discouraged revolutionary activity by failing to interpret the Chairman’s words broadly enough.”

I signed the poster Paint the Universe Red and hung it on the wall outside the school alongside ten dozen others.

I returned home to find Sister poring over Mao Zedong Thought. Quietly I steamed vegetables and made rice. When I served her, she looked up from her materials and said, “Didi, eat first. Don’t worry about cooking for me. We have one big family now, and that family is the revolutionary masses.”

Sister was popular in her college because she had lived so much of her life in Lanzun.

Coming from Gansu Province made her not so much an outsider but a revolutionary peasant. And our grandfather's Long March heroism was brought up at every assembly, mentioned by every teacher. Even as a child she was lauded for her revolutionary spirit.⁷

That August, our team leaders instructed us to assemble. For what reason? They did not tell us immediately, but we surmised that it was a reception with Mao.

#

We joined the thousands at Tiananmen, Sister, Dong Hi, and myself. For fourteen hours we listened to speech after speech, practiced songs, marches, waiting for a voice on the wind, any sign of the Chairman, any movement along the northern wall. Although I was growing too heavy and too old, I squatted on my sister's shoulders, surveying the masses. Dong Hi stood beside us on tiptoes, at times stopping to polish his thick glasses.

Sister's spirit emerged from somewhere beneath between my legs and Sister's neck. It settled on her head, sitting straight, its fox-ears perked and its eyes focused on me. *You are a long way from home, Wu Lihao*, it said. I felt my own spirit concur.

I shrugged these spirits off. They were engaged in a lifelong conversation that I often ignored. Though my sister's spirit was a fox, I had never seen my own. Always would it look through my eyes.

I shifted. Sister grunted under my weight but did not presume to push me off. Today was the most important day of a revolutionary youth's life. Revolutionary songs buzzed around us. Everywhere below me—below us, really; Sister towered over almost everyone—stood gray and

⁷ Our identity was defined as “revolutionary youth.” Nothing need exist beneath that moniker.

olive uniforms, gray and olive caps, red books, and red armbands. I was one of tens of ten-thousands⁸ gathered in the square, waiting, waiting Red banners hung from every wall. A procession of soldiers and politburo cadres marched along the red wall, occasionally stopping to speak, as police, paramedics, and political instructors combed the ten thousands of us, searching for trouble, searching for weapons, instructing on proper class struggle, and above all else, waiting, too, to see the Helmsman.

Look. A murmur rippled through the crowd as he stepped through a doorway, walking slowly to the wall. He was trailed by his cadre, saluted by his guards. The murmur became a scream, a chanting, an incantation. Every guard held his or her little red book high in the air—*Look: mine, highest of them all*—like Christian bibles. I waved with such fervor, thinking I could draw his eyes toward me. He stood at the edge of the wall. The crowd chanted: “Long live Chairman Mao!” The books were a god at our hand-ends, the man, our god-head.

He said nothing, the Chairman. He only stared.

He was framed by his inner council. Shutters clicked from all directions. Professional photographers, Party journalists, young guards who’d spent their family’s savings on a Polaroid camera. The Chairman looked upon the crowd appraisingly, his gaze sweeping slowly from left to right.

To my right a young boy fainted. The guards around him lifted his unconscious body and passed it off toward the perimeter, where ambulances waited. People cried as they touched him: he radiated with revolution.

In front of me, a group of guards scrambled into a pyramid. Body after body rose into the air, vying for a better view, assembling to attract the Chairman’s roaming gaze. Then a pillar of

⁸ We count in ten-thousands: an appropriate scale.

girls emerged from nothing, shooting up suddenly like a rope into the air. I yelled at my sister to raise me higher but the cries of Red Guards drowned out my hoarse voice. I watched his gaze sweep across their masses, watched it linger on the pillars and pyramids; vertical human masses were now appearing throughout the crowd. I called out to Sister again. I tried to stand on her shoulders but was too heavy; she bucked and I fell into the girl behind me. She had rough hands, but a pretty face. She hugged me and then thrust her red book back into the air. When I clambered back onto Sister she tensed up but did not stop me. From her shoulders I waved my book wildly, crying out: "Chairman! Chairman! Chairman!" Pillars and pyramids of revolutionary youth smashed into one another, combining into a spontaneous writhing mass, an anthill, a human mound that eclipsed Tiananmen and soon swallowed us too.

The hot sticky bodies pressed against us; rough wool uniforms chafed our cheeks. I felt a heartbeat, a pulse inside the mound: life flowed from the outside in. The loyal guards lining the floor, yielding their shoulders to so many feet, smiled upward, breathing the Chairman, breathing through the other's feet. I tapped my sister's shoulder, asking for her to boost me further; in response she took Dong Hi by the hand and, propelled by the hands of adjacent guards, launched us three upward. We slipped like eels among the interlaced bodies from the ground to the writhing outer skin. When we emerged at the head of the horde, the tip, the peak of the tower, we had the highest vantage point on Tiananmen, save the wall itself. The bodies formed an impossibly solid platform: I dismounted Sister's shoulders onto the back of a comrade and took both my sister's and Dong Hi's hands. We stood twenty children tall. Our revolutionary mound would be documented as a miracle of class struggle. Today was the Chairman's first reception of

the Red Guards; every subsequent group would attempt to emulate our passion, but fail.⁹ Sister's face appeared in many of the photographs. Her height placed her above any other guard, almost at the height of the Chairman himself.

Figures emerged beside me. They, too, were propelled through the human mass. Another brother and sister, both younger than Sister and I but with an equivalent age gap. They wore strange clothing, their shirts thicker than ours and their pants dyed a richer shade of green. I could see streaks of dark amber in their hair. The sister's was even somewhat curly and their eyes were piercing brown. Sister looked at them too, momentarily distracted. I'd never seen Uyghur children before—

“Wu Lihao,” said Dong Hi tersely, tugging on my arm. Dong Hi pointed toward the Chairman: his gaze was coming round. Bodies surged up beneath us, grappling for a better view. I let go of Sister's shoulder and raised my red book—

He saw me.

He must have; I could not see his eyes from the distance but I know that he must have seen me: he stared directly at me, peeling away layers of clothing and skin like an x-ray, thinking: —of course, I could not read his thoughts. His gaze reproved, counseled, and advocated all at once. His aura was the autumn breeze; his eyes were the rising sun. I thought: *This is as close as I will ever come.* I would be able to say to young children someday that, “Yes, I did see the Chairman, and he saw me.” I made the connection: the deaths in my family and the move from Lanzun to Beijing were justified as I reached out to the Great Helmsman and felt his air brush against my sleeve.

Sister thought that he saw us as a disappointing bunch, that he regretted summoning our

⁹ I will always own that I attended the first reception, that I was among the first guards to be truly legitimized by the Chairman's eyes.

guard. She thought he took a greater estimation of the strength of revolutionary students than their backs could ever carry. She believed—she told me—that he was an angered father. But I saw a Light, a messiah. We were to follow Chairman the way that sunflowers follow the sun. *This is as close as I will ever come*, I thought, my face warm enough to melt wax. If Mao could only look into his own distant eyes, he would understand: his own eyes were colored mirrors.

#

We waited at the platform for the train to arrive. Our destination was Ürümqi, the capital of Xinjiang province. From there we would take the bus to the border at Kazakhstan and begin a long march home, spanning the entire country from east to west.

The long march was Sister's idea, and it came sudden to us: as we left Tiananmen Square after the reception, she pitched the idea that tonight, like so many others, we should journey to the west. She too was struck by the Uyghurs: the thought they could have traveled the entire country just to see Chairman—surely we Beijingers could make the same route. And besides, our walk back would take us through Lanzun. We would receive a hero's welcome in our old hometown, catch up with distant family that our parents had only told us about, and work, for a few days, on our parents' farm.

We used the word *chunlai*—translated as “travelling the Great Circuit” or “revolutionary tourism.” Red Guards left constantly to participate in the Great Exchange.¹⁰ The Chinese Communist Party Center called upon Red Guards from the city to mix with those of the country

¹⁰ In these early days we were free to travel as we pleased: the Party paid for our train tickets and bus fares; revolutionary dormitories in every town housed and fed travelling guards. It was not until 1968 that Red Guards were relocated permanently: *chunlai* was a brief and exotic vacation in the name of the Revolution.

and learn from revolutionary peasants: Sister subscribed to this campaign.

When we left the apartment, Father had still not come home. Sister picked through his room for a map. Once she found it she laid it out on the kitchen table and drew a line along the major rail lines with her finger. “We will travel west through Gansu,” she said. Depart the train at Ürümqi, make our way to the border, exchange ideas with the peasants there and then begin a long march back. It would take us months to make the journey east: we would endure snow, harsh winter and unforgiving terrain. “What struggle,” Sister said. “We will make Chairman proud.”

Dong Hi had left the city with his classmates several months ago on a pilgrimage on foot to the Chairman’s hometown of Shaoshan in the Hunan Province, and thus took charge of our venture. He coordinated the packing, counting out rations, going with us to purchase water filters and spare bottles, advising on packs and coats and blankets to lie on, even extra armbands in case ours were damaged or we found the occasion to recruit new youth to Mao Zedong’s Revolutionary Line. Dong Hi himself packed his folding tea set, his collapsible cups and plastic bowls, somehow fitting an infinity of goods into a pack no taller than his shoulders. So many children boarded the trains without food, without clothes, and no money with friends and schoolmates, utterly reliant on the Party and the goodwill of others, but Revolution was not a dinner party. We would not travel unprepared.

Grandfather lived in the decision too. Though she did not say it, I knew that Sister had not forgotten his part in the Long March. Our route was not the same as the famous retreat, but it covered a similar distance.

Sister tasked me with writing a note for Father. I was not sure what to write, but Father had correct political thoughts. Eventually, I settled for a simple message.

Comrade Father,

Binjiang, Dong Hi, and I have departed for revolutionary tourism. We will be home in several months.

Love, Sincerely,

Your Son Lihao

I was sure he would understand.

We stopped by the college dormitory, where Dong Hi bid his four roommates farewell, and then together we left for the railway station. We breezed through the ticket gates, flashing our Red Guard armbands. Thousands of guards accompanied us on the platform; porters counted and recounted. How many children would fit on the train? The workers and cadres waiting in the station turned away as we surged in, realizing that there would be no room for them among us on the train. Too many Red Guards swept by to be documented; officials had hours ago “misplaced” their paper trails.

Dong Hi split a steamed bun with Sister and me. Seeking conversation I admired the many Mao pins—I had collected only two myself; my sister three—that he wore across his chest. Before college he lived a sheltered life: his parents held good positions and consequently he only left his apartment complex on the weekends. The complex enclosed a school, public works, and stores of all necessities, but now he would absorb some red and yellow.¹¹

The porters began tapping the soldiers of guards at random, telling them that they would have to find somewhere to go. Political instructors buzzed through the crowd, offering the displaced youth bunks in schools converted into Red Guard bases; disgruntled guards yelled

¹¹ Southern China is red dust; Northern China is yellow dust. In old maps, the poles are reversed: south is rendered north and humanity moves, through its history, from the low yellow deserts to the high red plains.

viciously at the porters, who, under this red sun, were utterly unable to retort. Over the next half hour, two- or three-fourths of the guards asked to leave grudgingly departed; thinning crowds yielded space to breathe. I peered out down the rails but the train was not yet in sight; I turned back to the platform and nearly sat down on its edge when I saw the Uyghur girl's curly dark brown hair.

“Sister,” I said. She stood and turned and Dong Hi turned with her. The Uyghur siblings from Tiananmen stood several meters down the platform. They were subject to much curiosity: most of the children watched them from a distance, squinting at their darker complexion and lighter hair, comparing the siblings' eyes with the eyes of Hans; several guards approached them directly, scrutinizing their features, coming close to sniffing the girl's hair. Before I could act, Sister glided toward them. “To rebel is justified,” she said, extending her hand. She thus participated in the Great Exchange.

The Uyghurs blinked vacantly. The brother hung close to his sister's hips; his sister took Wu Binjiang's hand delicately. The siblings' armbands were nothing more ragged kerchiefs, blank of any characters, simple and cheap. “To rebel is justified,” the girl echoed. Her repetition of the greeting bore a distinct accent, twisting itself around tones she was not wholly familiar with. Sister snapped her fingers at me: I produced two of my extra armbands—“Paint the Universe Red,” the bright yellow characters read—and handed one to Sister, who untied the girl's kerchief and replaced it with the bright silk banner. Next Sister moved toward the boy but he shrunk behind the girl. Sister handed the band off to the girl instead, and after whispering something into her brother's ear, she tied it to his arm. Guards pooled in the background to watch, many critical, few understanding. While we saw peasants often, Uyghur guards were a rare sight in the city. Some Hans snickered at the girl's poor approximation of Standard Chinese.

One yelled that the unification of China means the unification of its people and the crowd shifted uneasily. Stepping forward as if out of a stupor, a red-faced guard cried that we were conducting the Great Exchange.

Blushing, the boy emerged from behind his sister's hip and looked at me uneasily. I smiled, proud of Sister and curious of this Uyghur youth. "To rebel is justified," I said. He did not speak in return.

Sister told them our names, asked where they were from. The sister was named Bo Xinyi, the brother Bo Biming. The two travelled twenty li on foot from an unnamed hamlet in Xinjiang Province to a bus that brought them more than halfway across the country. From Yinchuan, some thousand kilometers west of Beijing, they walked. Now, they readied to return home by train.

We boarded together, Sister still entrenched in conversation, asking probing questions, searching out the revolutionary quality of peasant life. So crowded was the train we were forced to pile into a single bench, first Dong Hi, by the window, then Sister, then me, and then Bo Xinyi with Bo Biming on her lap. I felt the softness of Xinyi: younger than Dong Hi and not much older than me, she must be in high school. I imagined immediately a relationship, but then pushed the thought from my mind: lust at such a young age was a bourgeois luxury that revolutionary youth do not have time to explore. Besides, I was attracted to any woman I brushed up against; my hormones were at that developmental stage. I looked around our immediate vicinity to distract myself: my pack and Sister's occupied the entire rack overhead; the peasant siblings were forced to stuff their belongings beneath our feet. Dong Hi held his own backpack in his lap, cradling its rough edges. Another half-hour passed and still the train did not depart; another wave of Red Guards appeared outside, many of them ones whom had been turned away before, demanding space on this last westbound train of the night. Porters ran up and down the

length of the train, counting rapidly and ejecting guards who could not find space to sit. Most of those asked only feigned leaving; the surging crowds prevented the porters from following through on their threats to kick them out.

The train took half the night to depart. After the second hour Dong Hi drew a book out from his bag. Sister glanced at him strangely but Dong Hi snapped that when the Chairman packed for the Long March, he packed his books first, even before food and bedding. The book was covered by a blank red paper jacket—a technique we sometimes used to hide a banned book. I wondered what he could be reading; likely, he would say it was “study,” emulating the language of cadre. More books were banned during the Revolution than not.

Bo Xinyi was slow to speak at first, but as gawkers lost interest and as Sister’s questions developed, she grew less restrained. Sister asked about the siblings’ town: if it was truly unnamed, what the county government called it if it didn’t have a name, how the Party was represented here, how fairly the land was distributed, how aware they were of Chiang Kai-shek and his rogue Guomindang government. Her brother Biming still said nothing beyond small pleasantries.

“There were only seventeen children in our school,” Bo Xinyi said. The Great Leap Forward struck them late, arriving only seven years ago. I struggled to imagine a childhood without Communism. “I was in school when the soldiers entered the town. My brother was still too young to attend. The soldiers marched in, inspected our classroom, and handed our teacher a new curriculum bound in a thick red book. We started studying Mao Zedong Thought. The State brought in a teacher to teach us English. That teacher took an interest in me two or three years later and started giving me political instruction tutorials after school. Father sent brother to join me and we became our town’s model revolutionary youth. . .”

By this point I'd acclimated to her accent. What at first sounded harsh now hinted at music; her occasional digressions into a regional dialect reminded me of the foreign songs we were no longer allowed to sing. Before long I drifted off, her sonorous voice lulling me into a deep sleep. Sometime later the train lurched and I awoke to see Bo Biming staring down at me with his wide brown eyes. Guards yelled from all directions; there were still some who had not boarded, still some struggling against porters on the platform for a space on the train. Both sensing the upcoming chaos, Dong Hi snapped his book shut and Sister rose to her feet. I shook off my grogginess and stood, Bo Biming and Bo Xinyi after me: we looked at the tense faces of our comrades. As the train began its long crawl out of the station, the cries of guards drowned out all other sound.

#

Guards stormed the station and seized the rails. One thousand—literally, one thousand—voices yelled from both inside and outside the train as the porters swung shut the heavy doors. Five, six, seven guards squeezed into every bench, young thin guards tied themselves to luggage racks, and even then, dozens in each car were left standing, jockeying for luggage space, jostling through the aisle, and studying their little red books on their feet. The train car sweltered and stunk with the heat and sweat of a hundred guards. The train lurched again, steam billowing out from the wheels. “Big Jin still hasn’t boarded!” one guard yelled at a porter who apologized again and again; “We had to cut off somewhere, have to get going. We’re already running four hours late.” The train began to move, and the throngs of guards outside took flight.

The siblings Bo could not contain their worry, their heads jerking rapidly from left to

right. When Bo Biming was kneed in the stomach by a passing guard, Xinyi snapped at the offender, but her voice was silent against the cries of the masses. So many guards sought the snow, the border, the true revolutionary peasants at the edge of China. They sought to stare across the border into a fallen soviet, the remnant of a once-great collective destroyed utterly by revisionism. True loyalty was to visit the Aksu and Altay prefectures in Western Xinjiang. Truer loyalty still was to stay there. The guards would not be called to the countryside for another year at least, but already groups were forming and ideas swarming that the lively application of Mao Zedong Thought entailed not just exchange with distant provinces but *life there as well*, life among revolutionary peasants. Those reddest of all guards did not think of home or career or friends—only of serving the Party, serving the New China. Others, like we would, demonstrated loyalty through a journey on foot across the country. Its deserts and badlands would temper us as it did the Red Army; we would experience some small but vital approximation of the unlimited potential of Mao Zedong Thought. But for every guard in this station, loyalty required boarding this train. There was no thought of waiting for tomorrow: revolutionary conduct must not be delayed.

I looked to the peasant siblings and tried to imagine others in their situation: returning home rather than departing from it, their parents without phones or radios waiting for any news of their sons and daughters. Outside at the fringes of the gray-olive-navy masses pushing toward the closed-door train ran the provincial students, slow-witted and fenless, fenless and without accommodation. Although the Party provided housing and food it could hardly meet the demands of the eight or nine thousand guards that flocked into Beijing each night. These poor rural students had no connections: if they were stranded here tonight, they would have to rough it on the streets. I could hear them through the open windows; I could hear the desperation on their

voices as they called and called. I watched the thousand—no, ten thousand—guards outside campaign against each other and against the train itself, the youngest no older than elementary school students, the oldest, barely older than Sister. A thin brown boy wearing a white skullcap charged through the masses, outpacing the train itself. He threw his luggage at the metal beast, watched it ding uselessly against the aluminum roof, fall back, and opened: jackets, pants, and shoes fluttered through the air. But he continued to run. He was no Beijinger. What if his parents were to wait at the station but he did not arrive? They would have no way to reach him; so flooded with guards was Beijing that a single peasant-child would never be found among the masses. The boy bounded luggage-free toward the train. Guards spilled out of the naked space between cars, extending arms, shouting excited slogans and chanting: “Jump! Jump! Jump! Jump!” The boy was the first to leap aboard.

Somewhere in the locomotive cab, the driver pulled a lever, and the doors between cars locked. Children rushed to our carriage’s door, pulling at the handle, but nothing happened, no click; the porters watched the struggle despairingly, offering paper tiger apologies, saying “The train is full, you should all be grateful,” as the guards between cars with nowhere left to go climbed ladders to the roof, feet clinging against ceiling. Yellow dust kicked loose from their shoes and spread on the wind. “Open your window!” someone was yelling at Xu Li and me.

“Open your window!”

Sister pushed through into the aisle. Bo Biming had crawled up onto the bench, hugging his own standing sister around the neck as she shielded him from the chaos. Xinyi screamed as a guard clambered over her knees, trampling over her luggage, pushing Dong Hi’s bag into his face as he made for our window and undid the latches. Sister’s high-perched head floated like a pale moon above the throng of guards. The train was full chaos. Guards swept from side to side,

shouting out the windows, pulling bag after bag through the threshold. A paper-wrapped parcel was thrown into my arms by someone out of sight; I tossed it toward the middle of the aisle and then slipped past the Bos, weaving through the crowd to find Sister's long legs and arms.

When I found her, I called on her to boost me, but she said, "You're too old for this," and continued down the car. Instead I pulled myself up onto a bench; just as I looked out a window, a young girl fell face-down past it in a blur. A boy stood by the window. He was meant to catch her, but had become fixated with some quotation or the other¹²—an older girl pushed him out of the way, and taking his place thrust her arm out the window, yelling "Jump! Jump!" Another guard dropped; this one, a middle school boy, she caught with one hand.

The girl at the window shrieked. Her arm jerked out the window and the boy outside swore loudly. Sister dropped me from her shoulder and took a step toward the girl but was blocked by a swarm of guards. They saw the child hanging, trying to scramble up the side of the car, and the girl struggling, her arm extending forever, longer than rubber and longer than arm. They saw, but they could only ask for guidance in the morning, act in the afternoon . . . the girl screamed viciously and the small group snapped to action, wrapping their arms around her free shoulder.

She shrieked again. Her shoulders unfolded like plastic wings, three guards pulling on one, the boy hanging on the other. Sister forced her way through the crowd toward the pullers, tugged on their shoulder and yelled into their ears to stop. They did not listen. The boy's triumphant face appeared in the window for a moment but then gravity took him. The girl lurched toward the window, but the guards did not let her fall. They inhaled deeply and pulled.

With a crack her shoulder dislocated. Shoulders sprawled she fell as the boy flew through

¹² A common affliction and a natural response to stress for the revolutionary youth. Lose yourself in study, value Mao Zedong Thought above all else and all else will surely follow.

the window, arms tucked in, knees locked and eyes closed. He crashed into Sister, but she deflected the collision, pointing his momentum at the three guards. She then turned to the broken guard, the guard whose shoulders jutted in arcane directions. At her university, Sister was trained as a field nurse, a skill her Red Guard group deemed vital for the lively application of Mao Zedong Thought. Dong Hi made his way past me, lingering for a moment at my side, and then helped the middle-school boy to his feet. “One at a time,” she said, speaking gruffly to her patient. Leaning closer, she whispered something calming to the poor girl—I could almost hear it—whispering the same sweet words she would over my bruised body, promising, promising.¹³ She said it would hurt for a moment, but the hurt will give way to health. Pain made way for spiritual recovery; spirits entered every wound, bending. . . . With my sister’s help, the girl rose to her feet and stood draped in my sister’s arms.

Sister stepped behind the girl and held one long arm firmly against her side. She said loudly that she would count to three. “Three, two,” she said. Skipping the number one, Sister jammed the shoulder back into its socket. Before the girl could react, Sister spun around to the opposite shoulder and did the same: the girl’s knees buckled. She wailed. Sister held her and said, “I know, I know, I know.”

A flying piece of luggage struck the boy next to me just above the forehead. Something in the bag shattered as it struck him; the boy groaned and buried his head.

#

Festivities ended. Through the exchange some three dozen trunks were thrown into our

¹³ Every blow for my benefit. I understood her; I was the privileged child. She was violent, but secretly violent: violent only for a cause, a lesson.

car and subsequently left unclaimed, their owners having failed to follow them through the window. The question of this unclaimed luggage was first debated by the older boys (and by one tall, thin-lipped girl). It was then distributed across the train as evenly as possible. I found myself wearing a stranger's hat.

The driver took the first ten li slowly. He did not release the locks on the doors until after we had passed through the first tunnel to ensure that the stragglers on the roof would be forced to disembark. "Tell your roof-clinging comrades to disbar themselves before the tunnel disbars them," he said over the intercom. But the stragglers were an enterprising bunch. They were revolutionary youth. They packed themselves down in the space between cars, clinging to ladders, door handles, relying on one another for support and straddling the rails. The driver either did not know or did not care: he unlatched the doors and allowed the guards through. There were not enough seats. Everyone would have to stand, sit, and sleep in shifts.

As the commotion died down, Sister and I drifted toward sleep. A new guard—a pudgy boy with a monk-like haircut—came to join us on our bench and, as the siblings Bo and Bo remained, I was pushed up onto my Sister's lap but soon fell, half-intentionally, so that my head lay on Dong Hi's lap. Dong Hi himself pinched his brow again and again to remain awake as he looked out the window. Desperately he fought back his tired eyes. Bo Biming slept soundly in his sister's lap but Bo Xinyi kept her eyes wide open, narrow neck snapping her head from one position to the next as she surveyed the train. No dark bags betrayed her eyes; no yawn escaped her lips. She remained this way until long after I fell asleep.

But before I could, the pudgy boy with the monklike haircut drifted into a vocalized dream. "But I will defend myself," he said. He moaned and delivered speech. "The interior of things," he said, "is independent of the exterior. Our observations can tell us that things are

larger on the inside. For a window to work, it must be larger going in. Otherwise, the inside would end up smaller than the outside, and we would lose all sense of scale.” I drifted off listening to his voice.

Sometime later I stirred. The chubby boy had stopped talking and the train fell into silence, save for the low growl of wheels against the rail. Save too the sound of a few guards’ Mao Zedong Thought recitations, a background I had lived against now for several days. Some guards slept standing up; others packed the aisle floor. Sister sat stiffly in the seat, whispering to Bo Xinyi and stroking my head.

Porters passed quietly from car to car, creeping over limbs and little red books, forever counting. *Somewhere, I imagined, a porter performs calculations in a complex ledger. Somewhere near the head of the train he weighs the efficiency of steam locomotion against the weight of five to six thousand soldiers. Six thousand passengers split across forty-six cars, two hundred sixty to each car, four squeezed into every square meter, perhaps more. At fifty kilos a head—is that weight too high? These are, after all, children, waifs, boneless children, but their luggage, their luggage.*

I dreamed of the gymnasium filled with paper: an endless classroom. Paper and brushes and canvas and markers and red paint and black paint but more red than black, photographs and records, photographs of Chairman, large pictures, finished posters, drying posters, and works of Absolute Art lined the tables from one end of the gymnasium to the horizon, itself indoors. Behind me stand a window, a chalkboard: on the chalkboard the face of a teacher crossed through with red paint: DOWN WITH TEACHER WEN. I turned from the chalkboard to head for the exit but the tables and tables were endless and unordered; I took the left path and right path and tracked north in my head but the directions did not seem to add: tables split at strange

angles and paths once solid became liquid. The end of the room had become horizon. In all directions I saw endless supplies and endless supplies. The voice of my spirit came through and closed the tables around me: *You are not long from home*, it said. A pen waited by an empty sheet. *Write*, it said. Dong Hi appeared. He wrote.

Sister entered the dream—or more likely Sister’s spirit in the shape of Wu Binjiang. She was a large force. Her presence consumed the present. *Tables wilt like flowers and brushes paint no ink*. Like Sister the spirit towered over me. Her braided hair swayed past her hips. Her hair precedes me. Since my birth she had not cut my hair.

She, her spirit, said *No. I am not long from home*.

In the dream she stood nearly three meters tall. Refusing to acknowledge her, Dong Hi instead wrote furiously. Sister walked through the tables, crushing them underfoot. Ink trailed in her wake. She left footprints as wide as rice bowls. Dong Hi wrote swiftly a big character poster, a dazibao titled

WU BINJIANG, SPECTER, TRAITOR TO THE PEOPLE, ANTI-COMMUNIST PIG.

*WU BINJIANG, REVISIONIST SNAKE AND CAPITALIST ROADER*¹⁴

A porter emerged from the next car, the same image and the same man. His feet fell lightly; in his hand a small mechanical device clicked, counting. As he passed, Sister straightened. Taking me beneath the armpits, she helped me to my feet. She kissed my forehead and took a bundle of clothes from her bag and then inched out into the train proper and with the porter’s same deliberation progressed across the field of sleeping children. Her long legs were like spiders. She pulled on the latrine handle but nothing happened. She pulled again and a body tumbled from it; sleeping, it clattered to the ground. I watched Sister pull the body across the

¹⁴ A once-communist who has now chosen the capitalist road.

floor, propped his head against a bench, and vanished into the latrine.

Something dripped down my leg. I'd wet myself. Blushing, I dug through my bag for a change of pants. I figured I would find a second latrine, sneak in before anyone else woke up with a full bladder. I slipped out into the aisle. My first step pinched skin but the girl underfoot did not stir. A flashlight bobbed in the next car; the porter was returning from his rounds so I blushed again and slunk edgewise across the valley of bodies. The first red ray of sunlight cracked the horizon and split the window's glass like a hair. As red fell across the floor, the bodies began to moan.¹⁵ Red Guards rose with the sun.

At the end of the car I stood dripping. There was no second latrine. I looked toward the door to the next train but Sister must have heard me; through the door she called upon me to stay. And await. The porter passed me without smile or word as I waited for Sister to finish up inside.

#

Another day passed. At our stops guards were allowed to exit, but no new passengers were permitted to board. Guards paralyzed the country's entire rail system, prompting officials in the Party Center to order stations to issue tickets to Red Guards and abide by seating limitations; guards were called to give up their place on east-bound trains if they could walk instead. We remained aboard, watching as the numbers thinned, though they never thinned enough for everyone to take their own seat. Bo Xinyi commented that the situation had not been so desperate when she and her brother travelled east. They came before Chairman announced his reception. Though many ten-thousands made the journey, few came from so far as Xinjiang.

¹⁵ After all, Red Guards rose with the sun.

The next morning we crossed the border into the Gansu Province. My sister's spirit stole a glance at my own as the train glided into the Gobi Desert.

#

Our morning cock was the voice of a Red Guard. A red-faced, boisterous boy, lean but not skinny, dressed in the sharpest olive army shirt, an honest to god Liberation Army jacket sized for a child with its sleeves rolled up, yelled: "Attention comrades! Glory to the Chairman! Wake up and hear me, comrades, you will want to hear this!" Dong Hi rose uneasily from my side and Bo Biming, already awake, stared intently at the boy. "Listen, comrades!" he cried from the doorway, looking first at one half of the train, and then the other. He held a big character poster—a dazibao—before him, rolled up like a yamen's¹⁶ scroll. Outside the yellow dust of North China glistened like a sea.

An entourage surrounded the boy. Six children: three boys and three girls, all wearing prim military shirts and pants and caps and red scarves and, somehow, flamboyant red sneakers, red as the Chairman, red as the rising sun. The girls pulled suitcases down from the rooftop bins and stacked them into a platform, a small pedestal, which the lean boy alighted. The boys scattered through the rows, kicking guards that still lay sleeping on the floor, shaking the shoulders of comrades in seats, shushing the hushed whisper. Another girl, this one too tall and lean but not so tall as Sister, dressed in her sharpest uniform with the brightest shoes, appeared at the door, revolutionary masses pooling behind her. How many children could fit in a train car? They pushed at the doors, jockeying for position, crawling over one another; buzzing about in

¹⁶ A magisterial assistant responsible, in part, for conveying messages between houses in days long past. I invoke this image because I imagine it now, no longer limited.

anticipation.

“Comrades!” yelled the boy, standing on suitcases, first to the front half of the car, and then again to the back. “May we consider the wisdom of the Chairman a guiding principle, for he is our morning, he is the morning light itself!” The boy’s forehead shone with sweat and his cheeks flushed red, but the voice did not timbre; the voice did not break. “I hold before you a most important dazibao,” he said. “We acquired this dazibao from the porters’ sleeping rooms, where it had been hidden after the staff tore it from the station walls! This dazibao incriminates a man that has in his own way violated all of us, all of us *today!* Long live the Great Leader. The man this dazibao incriminates holds our very lives in his hands, comrades!”

The girl joined him on the platform. Neither could be older than sixteen. She bowed to the train’s occupants, then closed her fist over her chest and stood at the boy’s back. Between them they could see the entire train, each facing opposite sides. From where we sat, in the center, we could see both. “We are the Gale Force Seven Brigade!” she proclaimed. Her sneakered compatriots whooped. “We have come to the sweep away the Four Olds with a Gale Force Seven Hurricane of Class Struggle! A Gale Force Seven Hurricane of Revolutionary Activism!” More whoops. “His name,” she said, motioning to the lean boy with her head, “is Jin Shao, and he is our team’s political leader!”

Jin Shao returned: “And her name is Lin Shihuan. She is our operations leader and the first officer of the Gale Force Seven Brigade!”

“Long live the Chairman!” the entourage chanted. “Long live the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution!” Their voices rang in unison: such organization, such orchestration! I joined in the chants along with Sister and Dong Hi; the Bo siblings followed several seconds later, masking their exotic accents in the sound of the masses, O revolutionary masses. I felt the

souls of every guard on the train glow as these words ignited our revolutionary passion, pumped blood into our red hearts. Nothing hid behind our rosy cheeks and proud smiles, no figures crept in the darkness except . . . Dong Hi stared without seeing . . . Sister's face smacked of heaviness . . . Bo Xinyi's eyes were open unnaturally wide, her cheeks unnaturally taut . . . Bo Biming looked like a dog . . . I shook myself and the moment passed. We were all of one face, one pride. Tears of joy tore at the corners of my eyes . . .

“We have travelled through this train, speaking to the guards in every car to bring you loyal comrades a most important dazibao!” cried Lin Shihuan. “Our political leader Jin Shao, a true student of Mao Zedong Thought and loyalty-ication, fetched this poster expertly from the porter's sleeping rooms, where it had been hidden from us! He must be loyal indeed to have roused such an important piece of paper from its hiding place! A piece of paper hidden by revisionists, hidden because of the traitorous truth it reveals!”

“Lin Shihuan exaggerates my achievement!”

“A true revolutionary does not give praise lightly. Jin Shao could see only the smallest corner of the paper sticking out from beneath a box as we inspected the porters' quarters. A ragged edge, barely visible. He had to move seven boxes to reach it, but Mao Zedong Thought drew his hands along, drew him toward this vital dazibao!”

“It was the lively application of Mao Zedong Thought that allowed me to procure such a dazibao!”

“It was indeed through the lively application of Mao Zedong Thought that the poster arrived here, thank the Chairman, in the hands of Jin Shao, who will read it, loyal comrades, and then identify the subject!”

“The identification of the subject was no easy task,” Jin Shao said, dropping his voice

down an octave. “We had no idea who the poster was about when we first obtained it. Our operations leader Lin Shihuan worked tirelessly through the night exchanging communications with fellow guards. She searched through vast amounts of information to find the single owner of a single name. And the information she discovered would make the Chairman himself flush with rage!”

“Jin Shao flatters me!” Lin Shihuan cried. Tears appeared at the corners of her eyes. Her fellow brigadiers stood resolutely at the platform’s base, but emotion showed in the youngest: tears, too, welled in his eyes. Tears welled in my own, and in Sister’s, and in Dong Hi’s. “I have only practiced the lively application of Mao Zedong Thought!” Lin Shihuan proclaimed, voice cracking. “I have only served Chairman as best I know how!” Something inside her would not keep still. Hot wet streaks shot down her cheeks. “I’m sorry,” Lin Shihuan said, voice crackling like a firecracker, “for opening up these tears! I will report this. I will self-criticize!” With her head in her hands she stepped down from the platform; the youngest brigadier could no longer take it: he began to cry. I broke down with him, opening into full sloppy sobs. *What beauty.* Dong Hi and Sister and I think Bo Biming started crying around us and soon the whole car was lost to tears. How could we even contemplate the loyalty displayed by these seven guards? Dong Hi moaned in falsetto like a singer in Peking Opera. My eyes were blinded with tears. I felt . . . Bo Xinyi’s arm against mine, heard her choke back tears . . . thought . . . cried. Even Jin Shao let a tear fall. The masses launched spontaneously into a revolutionary song:

The east is red, the sun is rising.

China has brought forth a Mao Zedong.

He works for the people’s happiness,

He is the people’s great saving star.

I raised my voice to the song, singing alongside my fellow guards, my Sister, Dong Hi. Even the peasants Bo and Bo knew the words and belted out the song. Long live the Cultural Revolution. Long live the Chairman Mao!

“What a revolutionary!” Jin Shao shouted. “Let us all look at Lin Shihuan’s example, comrades! The slightest praise has pushed her to tears! Let her serve as an example of all the great things we are capable of achieving through Mao Zedong Thought! Do you think I would be able to speak to you of such things if not for the involvement of the Chairman’s wisdom in every facet of my life? There would be no voice because without the Chairman there would be no concept of sound! And is it not a thing of beauty to see one so affected by Mao Zedong Thought as Lin Shihuan? No revolutionary need feel ashamed for shedding tears.”

In the corner of the car Lin Shihuan fluttered, alternating between clenching her stomach and covering her face. She turned toward the corner and then away from it. A guard nearby offered her a hand but she rejected him with grand gesture. She wiped her tears with her scarf and watched Jin Shao address the train.

“Now,” said the political leader, addressing both halves of the train in turn. His entourage stood in sharp attention. “Enough preamble. It is time to show what was promised to you.” He unrolled the paper in his hands. Dramatically: “Time has come to read the dazibao.” Beginning at the top, he read in a deliberate tone:

“SHAME ON YOU, LU YANG.

“Let us first paint a picture of Lu Yang. He is an unworthy man. He is fat, boisterous, and does not know how to take care of his health. Once, when we saw him on the street, we could not fit a bottle between his pantsleg and his ankle, so fat was he and so tight his pants we had to cut them off with scissors. It was the fault both of his bourgeois lifestyle and his bourgeois fashion.

A bourgeoisie lifestyle results in a decline of moral integrity.

“Let us tell you that he is an ugly man. He has eczema. His face has at any point as many as fifty pimples filled with pus and black blood, and he scratches them constantly because instead of buying medicine, he spends his money attempting to impress women. Yes, women. Yes, comrades, Lu Yang is a womanizer! He was never handsome enough to marry and now takes it out on everyone that passes through his sight!

“Let us tell you too that he is an IGNORANT man! He does not believe in the things we believe! His grandfather was a landlord! His bloodline is corrupt!

“Today—*comrades, this poster is dated just three days ago*—we completed a thorough and justified Red Guard inspection of Lu Yang’s apartment, and IMAGINE what we found!

“A collection of questionable books. Children’s tales, mythologies, irreverent religions and pornography.”

“I knew it!” shouted a boy behind us. Jin Shao did not stop speaking.

“An apparatus for gambling.”

Bo Xinyi yelped softly, her mouth twisted with disgust. Her brother drew closer to her.

“Two treasure boxes containing ten pounds of gold between them.”

The bourgeoisie were obsessed with hiding their money. They thought the Revolution was temporary, that if they lived pretending to embrace it for long enough they would find a way to profit—but when does mass revolution end? When the people make it so? A revolution is not a dinner party. Class struggle is eternal. It should be discussed every month every week every day at every meeting every event every lunch and dinner and breakfast . . .

“A coffin,” said Jin Shao, “filled with a woman’s funeral clothes. And a single sheet of paper”—silence fell over the car, dread building—“one side bearing a euphemism for the Leader

. . . I hesitate to read this, comrades . . . the characters ‘down with.’”

An audible gasp. Even Sister seemed shaken. Dong Hi dry heaved. The unthinkable horror—yes, Jin Shao let that one hang for a while in the air. A piece of the Chairman lived in his every written name. To wish harm to such a figure The guard who wrote this dazibao must first have mustered great courage. Even recounting such a heinous crime could—

“And finally,” said Jin Shao, “a slave.”

Stunned silence.

“Remember that I am reading this,” said Jin Shao. “Remember that these are the courageous words of a revolutionary youth.”

In the corner of the train Lin Shihuan had regained her composure. She watched with a blank face. Having read this poster already, she braced herself for the blow.

“An actual slave,” read Jin Shao, “in Lu Yang’s basement. A woman chained by leash to a bedpost. Unthinkable, in these revolutionary times! We are not Americans, or Russians, or Japanese with their bizarre fetishes and moral depravity! We cannot stand for such evil!”

We guards were too stunned by this Lu Yang’s offenses to know how to react.

“We gave chase to Lu Yang,” read Jin Shao, “but he escaped through back alleys and bourgeois ties. Then we alerted all nearby Red Guard teams and sought him for the entire afternoon to make him pay for his crimes. But alas, the snake eluded us! He vanished into grass! So please, if you see him, ENSURE he PAYS for his CRIMES! We cannot let such a perverse influence run free in our society! We repeat, if you see him, ENSURE THAT HE PAYS FOR HIS CRIMES!” With these words Jin Shao closed the scroll and looked about expectantly.

I shook. Wandering across my shoulder Sister’s arm sought to comfort me. Dong Hi approached as well, lacing a hand around my side but drew it back as Bo Xinyi moved in to do

the same. The young Bo Biming wrapped himself around both my sister's and his sister's legs, sobbing. Bo Xinyi herself was a shuddering wreck. *DO NOT LET WORDS DEBILITATE YOU*, I wanted to shout, but I had no voice; Sister stroked my hair.

“Well, comrades,” said Jin Shao, “I believe these words have covered everything you need to hear. We will gladly submit this poster to your scrutiny after we have alerted the remainder of the train. But you look confused. You wonder, perhaps, why we, the Gale Force Seven Brigade, have read you this horrible thing. Well, comrades I ensure you that there is a reason, *one that will draw from you the breath of horror and simultaneously call you to arms*. We will take Tiger Mountain by strategy once you have heard these words.

“Comrades, praise the Chairman, do any among you know the name of the driver of this train?”

“The name of the first in command of your safety, the *authority figure* that dictates your safety, your very lives?”

“The name of the man responsible for taking us, revolutionary students, on our revolutionary tour?”

“Comrades, that name is Lu Yang! We are being driven by the womanizing capitalist roader and venomous snake Lu Yang!”

The siblings Bo and Bo fell back into their seats. Dong Hi pressed past me into the aisle, yelling. I ran after him, Sister following; guards from all over the train amassed at the central platform, swarmed the seven brigadiers. “Please,” Jin Shao was saying. “Please, everyone!” he shouted, standing on tiptoes; his loyal guards slipped another briefcase beneath him and he emerged taller than any of us, taller than anyone but Sister—“Comrades, hear me now!” he called. The operations leader Lin Shihuan muscled her way from the corner toward the middle of

the car, swimming through the revolutionary masses. Climbing onto the seat, I stood over the siblings Bo and Bo and shouted *something* indescribable, fiercely patriotic. The train creaked and groaned under our shifting weight. Like a shark's fin Sister's head passed through the crowd, Dong Hi hanging close behind her. The Uyghur siblings, at first hesitant to join in revolutionary struggle, now worked their way to their feet, Bo Xinyi's eyes still unnaturally wide.

“Comrades!” Lin Shihuan yelled, ascending the luggage, cupping her hands around her large mouth. “Comrades!” Jin Shao called out after her, stamping his foot and tripping; he fell but a half dozen guards catch him in the air. Gale Force Seven brigadiers looked to one another worriedly—our reaction had taken them by surprise—whispering to one another about whether each train car would be more charged than the last. *The outrage in this car*, my spirit said, frowning; I was filled with anger. Anger that the railroad . . . that the state rail company could harbor such a VILLAIN, an outlaw hunted by the Red Guards . . . that the evidence of his transgressions could be intentionally hidden by *employees of the state* . . . The most corrupt voices were the voices from within the Party; Mao Zedong's call to revolution enabled us to remove corrupt powers, to rebalance the government in the hands of the youth—four months ago, would I have thought this? Or would I continue to defend revisionist institutions? Believe in reactionary falsehoods? Above the chaos Lin Shihuan rapidly bound her hand in her scarf. She reached for the ceiling and unscrewed a light bulb with deft precision. Jin Shao righted himself and stared up at her, smiling.

“Comrades!” Lin Shihuan shrieked, smashing the bulb against the ceiling. Fragments of glass scattered across the ground. Lin Shihuan stood atop the luggage, one foot resting on a tall box, the other on a suitcase, poised across the length of her leg with her hand taut in front of her, her thumb pointed along her fingers like a soldier climbing the mountain. She looked like a girl

on a propaganda poster. “Listen to me!” she yelled. From beneath her scarf snuck red blood from a glass-cut wound. Even Jin Shao looked shaken: they may have been performing car to car, but *this*, this trick was new. “We have already gained control of the train! By covert means we have taken care of the porters, the staff! We have cleared all shifts of supervisors and we have ejected the second-shift driver—the scoundrel that allowed this *snake* to sleep through the night—; now only the driver *Lu Yang himself* remains!”

A mad energy coursed through the car. The sight of the blood on Shihuan’s hand fed the guards like sharks who surged from their pregnant positions. Guards coursed through the door as Lin Shihuan and Jin Shao clambered down from the luggage-pedestal, crushing shards of broken glass beneath their red sneakers. “Charge!” Jin Shao yelled, holding his little red book in the air.

Free space evacuated from the train car, like a vacuum in reverse. By the time I found footing, there was no side of me not pressed against the body of a guard. The masses shifted but could only move in small spurts; I gasped for air, reaching for the space above their shoulders, but the guards seemed to rise to the ceiling, guard stacked upon guards, bodies twisted and swaying and sweating and holding little red books. *Revolution, revolution*. The spiritual atom bomb of Mao Zedong Thought reverberated through the train, passing from body to body through a sort of spiritual conduction; my skin against a stranger’s skin glowed red with the exchange of revolution. The cries deafened me, strangers all around me. I searched for Bo Xinyi or Dong Hi or my sister but could not find them. Then, for a moment, the group unclogged and a narrow space opened around me. Between tall children I could see my sister looking toward me, her head above the many heads. I could read her lips; barely could I hear her words, saying: “Wu Lihao, these people will eat you alive.”

The train shifted. I spun, searching for Sister or someone I knew but the guards lost

footing; body fell against body and I found myself in the arms of a brigadier. One of the six, one of Jin Shao's entourage, a city girl with dull eyes and a bright red kerchief. I did not have time to ask her name or call her comrade before our arms swallowed one another. The train careened on one set of wheels like a cat stretching in the sunlight, ground rushing toward one window and the horizon vanishing at its opposite. Revolutionary chants were replaced with shouts of fear, and I held the girl close to me. She could not have been more than two years older, and she too was separated from her comrades. Luggage fell from the racks. *A man threw his back out while tending his farm. He did not know how he would continue to contribute to his society. He stayed up the entire night reading Chairman's quotations, wisdoms, essays, and speeches. By morning he could work again.* I reached for an appropriate quotation; I muttered rapidly words like "loyalty," "struggle," and "war." They filled my heart with a transient grace.

Drunk in revolution, I felt the train hang weightless in the air. My stomach floated up my chest. Our car's three or so hundred guards lost all sense of others, screaming for their parents, their homes and their lives in Beijing.

In this weightlessness, I perceived all. Through the eyes of my spirit I saw Sister bound toward me but her long arms and legs were caught in the crowd. I saw Dong Hi with the siblings Bo and Bo, holding them close to him with his head down as Sister clawed against the crowds. Then gravity took hold; the entire mass of guards tumbled from one side of the car to the other; the coupling behind us snapped and the back of the train began to push our carriage up into the air.

I turned to the girl in my arms, and I knew her. I had never heard or spoken her name but just as the language lives only in the present tense I lived in the eternal present. Once or twice in my life I have through my spirit accessed memories not just of my past, but of my future as well.

So I looked deeply at the girl whose name I knew was Du Hong and whose eyes were large and round and flat as the moon. I knew her, and I felt great sadness. The car jolted against the ground. There came a sound. For a moment guards were thrown entire off their feet into the strange space between floor and ceiling. Scarves unraveled; hats fell improbably along every vector and vomit spilled like blood from many mouths. But I focused on Du Hong, I focused on her surprised yet unsurprised eyes as our bodies were flung into the air—who was she? How did I know her? How did I know that for her, the train crash was but one joke of hundreds? Was it the clarity of my spirit or the clarity of my revolutionary thought?—I thought she whispered my name.

There came the sound of metal scraping against stone, sand, and an unlimited force. I heard the sound of breaking away, of flying and falling, the discordant screams of two hundred children—

There came the sound, the one big sound of the last and final strike against ground, but before it, in this austere weightless moment, in the space between my eyes and Du Hong's, I heard a terrible voice. Embracing this almost-stranger I heard a terrible voice. She heard it too: I could see it in her eyes.

We flew like a flightless bird across the Gobi Shore. We skidded against gravel and we bounced and we rolled. Seats crumpled. Entire rows were lost in shattered glass and twisted metal. I felt every collision, every crash of ground against the floor, the wall, the ceiling in turn. I felt the guards as if they were my fingers, small fragile bodies twisted and snapped and bled. Loose paper flew between my eyes and Du Hong's; we mirrored one another's expressions. Our shock, our disgust. I pulled her red body toward me and felt a pressure on my chest. She sputtered. She spat.

When it was over we lay atop each other, neither sure which direction was up. Though it was over we felt the pull of gravity in all directions; her loose hair still surrounded her like a halo, as in freefall; her lips moved; she coughed blood; I vomited on her shoulder, and realized I was on top. What was the floor was now the ceiling; the ceiling upon which she lay was now the floor. I must have been above Du Hong: a dead guard lay across my back. I looked back to Sister clawing her way toward me but Du Hong grabbed me by the scarf. She pulled until I turned to her, crying, her tears falling upward, topos and kronos, I would say today, Aristotelian physics, everything vying not for heaven but falling to its natural place beneath the firmament, falling from the ceiling to the floor. Crashing against my face.

“What a horrible declaration!” she was saying. “What a horrible name!” She broke down. Her tears, now the size of golf balls, splattered into puddles against my face. I felt the wetness and warmth of blood and blood between us, soaking our mutual wound. She shook her head; “I can’t believe it,” she said.

My breath caught, and I heard it, I heard the terrible voice echoing in my head and fell into a deep and longing dread:

It is the moment before the crash. The sound of the final strike against the ground has not yet reached our ears.

I hear a voice clear and distinct. A child’s voice, neither male nor female, calling out. It speaks an unutterable phrase. Wishing life to the enemy, threatening Mao’s own Red Revolutionary Line—

It said, “Long live Chiang Kai-Shek.”

II

I spent years after the Cultural Revolution tracking down the siblings Bo and Bo. I started in Beijing, dredging out contacts I made during the Cultural Revolution. Asking them questions, peeking at records. Nobody had heard of them, even with the aid of a photograph. One former guard said he remembered seeing the pair at Tiananmen Square, but he listed the wrong date. We attended the Chairman's first reception; he, the third. As the years passed curiosity grew stronger. Finally, in the early fall of 1990, I called in a favor at my work unit (a Beijing press), requesting permission to conduct a report on the progress of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in Western China. I would need, I told them, a ream of introductory letters covering every county in Xinjiang, Qinghai, and Gansu. My team leader provided me one and told me to copy the rest myself. So I took the train to Ürümqi and began the hunt anew.

People had heard of them. In her hometown I met a man that had been their teacher; he recalled Bo Xinyi fondly. Her criticisms had been gentle, he said. The siblings' parents died shortly after the Revolution. The teacher said that Bo and Bo left, but did not tell anyone to where. I drifted from town to town, asking questions, showing photographs. For the first time since the Revolution I toured the countryside on my feet, bearing long nights in the cold with nothing but a scarf and jacket. By the time I found her, I had grown a beard for the first time in my life. She lived alone in a prefab house at the edge of a small town some ten kilometers from the Soviet border. Near the doorway she'd hung a collection of Mao pins, Mao plates, Mao pictures and revolutionary posters. Above her table a large portrait of the Chairman looked down on the whole house. "How is your sister?" she asked immediately. Her smile faded when she saw my reaction; she moved on to a brief letter she'd received from Dong Hi five years ago. It was addressed, simply, to Bo Xinyi of the Xianjiang Province. I could not believe it had arrived. But

it was not the letter she had been hoping for. It talked about his family, his art, and asked if she had ever settled down. She never responded, but she kept it in a drawer with a photograph of her family. It was crisp enough to have been delivered last month.

I asked her for her thoughts on the student rebellions on Tiananmen but the news had not reached her here. She listened to me describe them with glazed eyes, only half-interested. At the end of the story when I praised their spirit, she stopped me and said, “Yes, but they were not as revolutionary as us,” gazing longingly at the picture of Chairman Mao. I let her words soak like laundry and waited until her eyes lingered to ask where Bo Biming ended up.

Sighing deeply, she rose from her chair and walked over to her cupboard. She put a kettle over flame and began a slow preparation of tea. Among her mismatched cups, I recognized one of Dong Hi’s. Did I ask her about it? No. I accepted tea in a porcelain cup and drank in small sips. It was bitterer than I had expected. A musky undertone. I asked her where the leaves came from and she said they grew in the terraced fields surrounding the village. I wondered if she had worked on building those fields.

After a long time she told me that her brother had returned from the Cultural Revolution to a successful political career. When I gave my congratulations, her face whitened and she put down her tea. She walked to the window and stared out at the snow. “His name is no longer Bo,” was all she would say.

One night I walked with Bo Xinyi to the Soviet border. The Union was falling; its borders had been revisited, gaps in the fence replaced. A lone soldier patrolled his side of the fence, swinging a flashlight through the chain links, lingering for a moment on our faces before moving on.

We carried provisions to camp overnight. When I began digging a hole in the snow to

serve as a fire pit, Bo Xinyi said, “What are you doing?” Her excuse was that we were too close to the border in an unstable time; camping was a bad idea. The revisionist monster was about to collapse upon itself and anything could happen to those in its wake.

I told her about Sister’s plan to walk from the border to Beijing. She snorted. “Yes, your sister told me that too, on the train.” I was surprised that conversation had stuck with her: I was so tired that night I kept drifting in and out of sleep. I waited for her to say more, but she said nothing: only walked back, following our footprints across the snowfield, squinting for the hill that marked her house on the distant horizon.

Revolutionary spirit is a funny thing, coming back to you at the strangest times. It never truly leaves you. Class Struggle is eternal, Mao Zedong Thought is the sun itself For the first time in more than twenty years I considered that the pilgrimage might be tenable. I had already grown a beard.

“I know what’s on your mind,” said Bo Xinyi, cutting into my thoughts. Then, halting, she said, “I won’t.”

I walked up beside her, put an arm on her shoulder but she shrugged it off, saying, “In those days the most terrible thing was to be alone. Who would stay up through the night keeping watch? Who would vouch for us if we were struggled against? Lihao, you were the one willing to see us home.”

“But now—”

“I am no longer afraid of being alone.” She walked ahead, gliding expertly over the snow. I called out for her to wait, but she quickened her pace. I tried to catch up to her, but she left me far behind. I found my things outside her door, with a note, reading: *Go on your journey, Wu Lihao. I already walked that distance twice.*

#

I awoke to a wet bed. I was six. Grandfather had not yet died so Sister and I slept under the same blanket in the cramped apartment. The characters of my spirit's message swarmed around my head as I shivered, waiting for Sister to awake.

She swam into consciousness slowly, first rolling over then slowly opening her eyes. "It's still night," she muttered, rolling over. Mid-roll her shoulders stiffened. She swung back, sweating. Incandescent light through the window illuminated the wide wet spot.

"Shit!" she said quietly. "Shit!" Turning to me: "You little shit!" I shook, edging myself under the blanket, pretending to sleep, but she drew the veil from me; she peeled the blanket back. I could see in the incandescence yellow liquid dripping from her shirt and pants. She raised a fist. "Please," I muttered, "please, please!" She panicked, opened her hand and cupped it over my mouth. "You shit!" she said, clenching her other hand. My eyes opened wide; I squirmed. "Promise me," she said, "that you won't make a sound," then waited for me to nod. I closed my eyes. I relaxed my neck and she released her hand from over my mouth. I dared not look, nor squirm; I let free only an umph as her fist struck my stomach, a brief cry as her nails dug into my back. She raised me by my collar and threw me on the bed, slunk back to the kitchen, retrieved a few napkins, and began to wipe us both down, muttering, "Wu Lihao, you little bastard." She dragged me out the front door, down five stories and across the street to the public bathroom where she peeled off my clothes and submerged them in the sink. I shivered as Sister splashed water across me; I moaned, but no one was out so late at night. She made watch the door naked as she herself stripped and cleaned our clothes. After what felt like hours of wringing she gave

me back my shirt and pants half-soaked. We both shivered as we made our way up the stairs.

#

I fainted soon after the train crash. The last thing I saw before passing out was Du Hong struggling underneath me. When she pushed on my shoulders we both grimaced; something sharp shifted between us. Blood soaked the ceiling where we lay. My head became light, my body heavy.

When I awoke I felt sand against my back, my body ten meters at least from the overturned train car, the sky above vast and blue. I could not move my abdomen; Sister knelt beside me with her fingers on my wrist, measuring my pulse. I coughed painfully and then moved to prop myself up—“Down, didi,” Sister said firmly, pushing against my right shoulder. I was shirtless, a bandage wrapped around my chest, a bandage Sister worked on. Dressing my wound.

“Your sister dragged you out here,” said Dong Hi as he wandered into my periphery. “Wu Binjiang is a model revolutionary.” Sister smiled wryly, moving down to my gut, pressing uncomfortably against my sides, muttering about a fractured rib. As she examined me I could see a large bruise on the side of her neck and blood all over her outfit, some fresh and red, others dried. “She’s treated a dozen guards,” Dong Hi explained when he noticed my eyes lingering on Sister’s olive shirt. Dong Hi’s own face was marred by a long but shallow cut on his forehead, partially bandaged and not much bleeding. “How much do you remember?” Dong Hi asked. I did not answer: my thoughts were foggy. Again I tried to raise myself up on my shoulders. Sister flashed a weary glare but did not try to stop me; she finished with me and moved on to the next

injured guard. Feeling no pulse, she frowned and moved on.

“The Bos?” I asked Dong Hi.

He rubbed his temple. “The Uhygurs . . .” He nodded over his shoulder. The Bo siblings sat in the shade of a train car, sipping water from the same canteen. The desert was hot, but this early in the morning, not unbearable. At some point we would all have to move into the shade. Passing a bag to me, Dong Hi said, “Here is some food and water. Drink conservatively. Let me or your sister know if you need anything.” Then he followed Sister to the row of the injured, began taking pulses and tying splints.

The wreck formed a semicircle around us: the engine almost directly to my left, the fourteenth, fifteenth, sixteenth car to my right. Our own car, the second, lay on its roof somewhat in front of the others. With sheered couplings on both sides, the carriage rolled a quarter revolution further than the rest of the train. Through the windows I could see bodies along the inside of the car but little motion. Guards periodically crawled through the windows and recovered a survivor, but they pulled back fewer and fewer with every attempt. Sister remained near the car, bandaging wounds and administering first aid. Few guards aboard the train were medically trained; Sister, Dong Hi, and the handful of others could not keep up with the victims, accumulating along the entire wreck. I wondered how the cars beyond the border of the semicircle fared. Less damage? More? A group of guards gathered in the shadow of a train car. A few paced, shaking their heads; a few more buried their heads in their lap. All seemed dull and confused.

I tried my legs, but my body was not yet ready to move. Wiping sweat from my forehead I inadvertently scattered dust in my eyes. I coughed and rifled through the bag for a water bottle; instead found a thick-skinned canteen. The water did not taste filtered so I took only a small swig

and once again worked my way up to my feet. The morning sun was not unbearable: the Gobi Shore accepted its visitors kindly. My spirit would tell me that something greater was at work, but it did not appear. Busy, I thought, was it with recovery: he suffered wounds just the same as me.

A sob registered above the background noise and I turned away from the wreckage to see it. A girl stood a few meters away, her back framed by the blue sky and midsection bisected by the southern horizon. (Swamps in the distance and somewhere . . . the Yellow River . . . snaking through the Great Country from East to West.) She stood with a hunched back and bent neck, facing away from me, her hair a mess and her head it seemed in her hands. *You were on top of her*, Sister's spirit said from nowhere. It floated in front of me, speaking, I thought, directly to me: *You're so small*, it said, *but you held on like a tick. Even unconscious you would not let her go*. Weakly my spirit stirred in my gut and peered out my eyes. Coughing it answered, *No fault of mine*.

The girl lifted her head, blinked at the horizon, and then dug through her pocket for a kerchief. She withdrew a scrap of red cloth—probably somebody's armband—and blew her nose into it. Weakly she began to whistle "The East is Red." Closing my eyes I sang along quietly, my voice high and my notes sharp.

The east is red, the sun is rising.

China has brought forth a Mao Zedong.

He works for the people's happiness,

He is the people's great saving star.

As I entered the second verse, the girl's whistle trailed off. She looked first to the ground and then turned to face me: sunlight glinted off her wet cheeks. Her mouth opened, her throat

quivered, and she shook her head quietly as if to say, *Not you*. I recognized her now: the girl was Du Hong.

I took a step toward her. As her eyes widened her body stiffened. A sound much smaller than a word slipped from her mouth and she turned away, hugging herself, muttering softly. I had to approach to hear her. Her shirt darkened, drenched in sweat in seconds as I approached, listening; her body trembled. She repeated herself. We stood far enough away from the wreck that no one else could hear. She whispered a mantra. Whispering, “Long live Chiang Kai-shek.” What was she saying? Her breaths ragged, her neck tight: “Long live Chiang Kai-shek.” Hands on her head: “Long live Chiang Kai-shek!” I could not comprehend. On the train, was it she who—

No. It wasn't. It was the voice of a child, genderless; I felt something boil in my gut. “Long live Chiang Kai-shek,” she said, hot tears streaming down her cheeks. She was not in control of herself. I felt sorry for her. I did not understand why she was saying the Enemy's name, but her anguish was clear: something else spoke through her. I placed a hand on her shoulder to try to comfort her but her entire body convulsed. “You!” she yelled, reeling toward me, her face red, her pupils pinpoints, sky at her back. She thrust a finger in chest, barely missing the bandage; my throat burned. “You did this to me!” she hissed. I did this to her? I looked at Du Hong. Her deeply bloodstained shirt was unbuttoned indecently; beneath it, a bandage wrapped her breasts. Blood soaked the bandage. Blood covered her chest. “This is bad blood,” she said, darkly, tracing her finger across it. My spirit gave me a vision of the moment after the wreck:

Soon after the train struck ground I lost consciousness, but my spirit watched for me, my spirit watched through me. Du Hong's horrified face as she squirmed and squirmed and clawed at my arms. My arms wrapped around her in a vicegrip. Her face filled with contempt and

disgust. Not to mention pain, pain—before I embraced her a shard of glass had fallen, filled the space between us; the wound on my shoulder and the wound on her breast were the same wound. We bled the same blood. I lay atop her on the ceiling, my grip inexhaustible as she clawed against me. “Help! Help! Help!” she cried until Sister managed to unclamp my hands, remove us, and drag me out across the desert, Du Hong following at her heels. As Sister dragged me through the desert Du Hong circled her, still saying, “Help! Help me!” She pointed at her breast.

Her mouth twitched and again, she said those dreadful words: I flinched, but somehow did not turn away from them. Hers was not the voice I heard on the train, but the intonations were the same, unmistakable. Her voice too quiet for anyone else to hear, she said, “Long live Chiang Kai-shek. You did this to me,” she said. “You did this to me.”

“You have to stop saying that,” I hissed, looking back at the masses.

“I would,” Du Hong said, “but.” Her voice was interrupted by Jin Shao’s boisterous call:

“We have tracked down the black demon!” Jin Shao yelled, his voice hoarse but booming. The thousand living heads turned to three bloody figures emerging from the wreckage of the locomotive cab. First came Jin Shao, his leg bleeding but his spirits tempered. In his hand he held the arm of an aging man. Lin Shihuan followed him from the capsized engine, holding the engineer’s other shoulder. The engineer’s face was smashed and bloody, one eye swollen shut. He walked with a slow limp, shouting that there are many named Lu Yang. I cast a glance at Du Hong and saw that she stared in rapture of the ox ghost; I left her to approach the guards already swarming at the front of the crash site. There, jerking Lu Yang’s shoulder in his socket, Lin Shihuan addressed the crowd.

“This class enemy,” said Lin Shihuan, “chose to flee rather than face criticism. He

imperiled the life of every guard on this train by driving it off the rails at the first sign of struggle! He is guilty not only of would-be murder, but of attempting suicide to escape punishment! We must give him his just deserts!” Guards walked from as far back as the end of the train to watch the spectacle unfold. I pressed through the crowds, jockeying for a better position. In the distance Sister continued treating the patients that could not stand, but her ears pricked like antennae: she would miss none of the action. I knew Dong Hi and the Uyghur twins were somewhere among the crowd, but I could not hope to find them; instead I slipped between close hot bodies toward the circles’ front.

“Look at him!” Jin Shao yelled, raising Lu Yang’s arm comically into the air. He moaned. “Look at Lu Yang: womanizer, capitalist roader and moral demon.”

The driver protested again: “Please,” he said, “there are many named Lu Yang.” Lin Shihuan boxed him hard on the mouth. A tooth fell loose into the desert soil.

“Watch him cry,” Lin Shihuan said. “Only a coward cries. *Kneel*,” she commanded coldly. Groaning, the engineer fell to his knees. Jin Shao unrolled his dazibao, relinquishing the prisoner to his comrade. She wrapped his shoulders with her fist.

“Look at him,” Jin Shao said, sneering as he circled the treacherous Lu Yang. The old man’s throat made a sort of clicking sound; his eyes darted furiously, his hands quivering. “Is he not fat?” he asked, reading from the dazibao. “And is he not ugly?” He laughed, then, turning the old man’s chin up with his thumb and forefinger, he asked: “Do you spend all day scratching the pimples on your face?” Lu Yang blinked rapidly.¹⁷ “And did you not keep a woman chained in

¹⁷ He was none of these things, but it hardly mattered; everyone knows a revisionist is skilled at hiding his spots. The enemies of the Party hide in plain sight, we were told in the sixteen directives. Enemies of the People permeate both the highest positions of government and the least likely work units; surely there must be some bad elements among every group, et cetera, et cetera, we were told.

your basement?” His face flushed red.

“The evidence!” cried Lin Shihuan, tearing the dazibao from Jin Shao’s hands. “None among us here should question this ox spirit’s crimes!” Lu Yang’s eyes became suddenly sharp. At about this point, I emerged in the front of the group. I was stunned to see Bo Biming beside me; a moment later, Xinyi and Dong Hi burst through the crowd to secure him. Though he was a Red Guard, he was a *young* Red Guard, too small for such direct participation. What if Lu Yang were to snap, make one final desperate attack on the Party? He stood not five meters away. With a single leap, he could snap poor Biming’s neck.

Lu Yang stood—or tried to. A brigadier appeared at each shoulder, pinning him fast against the ground. When he spoke his words did not rise above a dull growl; spit flung far from his mouth and stained Lin Shihuan’s sneakers. “The nature of a relationship between a man and his wife—”

“Your wife?” Lin Shihuan asked. “How many do you have? Two? Three? Four? You are utterly perverse! A sexual offender! Promiscuous! Abusive! Only a coward cries!”

“Please!” cried Lu Yang, banging his head against the hot ground.

“Old culture!” cried Bo Biming, pointing. “Old Culture!” he yelled again. Jin Shao smiled and the rest of us joined in. Lu Yang moaned *vividly*.

“Your staff of porters did not resist,” said Lin Shihuan. “They submitted to the dictatorship of the proletariat like sheep, as you should. It will go better for you if you submit to the will of the people.”

“There are other Lu Yangs,” he croaked desperately. “There are many Lu Yangs!”

“But is your name not Lu Yang?” Lin Shihuan asked. Her black ponytails swayed as she tilted her head and cracked her knuckles. “And are you not fat? and ugly? and pock-faced?” His

entire body convulsed. “Just what were you planning to do with us, Lu Yang? Were you running away after being caught? Were you going to kidnap a girl from this train and start it all over again in Xinjiang?”

Please, I found myself begging, *accept dictatorship, and accept your fate*. Judgment, struggle. The body twisted on the floor, bleeding from the mouth. “Please, please, please, please,” it pleaded to no one. Then it lurched toward me. Grabbing on to my pants leg, it looked up at me and said, “Please.”

Bo Xinyi took a step away from me, pulling her brother with her. Across the throng Dong Hi whispered the name “Allah.” His black-brown eyes had the firmness of a thick wooden branch. *I’m sorry*, they seemed to say.

Framing him Jin Shao and Lin Shihuan looked at me with great expectation. The effective completion of lively action of Mao Zedong Thought eclipsed her every thought, filled every gap and wrinkle of her brain. Mao Zedong Thought was more than thought: it was a spiritual atom bomb and Spirit was the currency of all action.

I searched for my spirit in all of this but Mao Zedong Thought had replaced it, the small ageless creature subdued by the will of the people. When Grandfather said that spirituality must be directed toward my country he meant the spiritual atom bomb. He may not have known Mao Zedong Thought when he served in the Red Army but he felt its effect on the Long March. He was there in Yan’an when the Chairman developed it, when Chairman bled his heart onto paper and drafted our nation’s soul.

I kicked hard against *the* Lu Yang. Its frail body deflated like a dead bird and fell back across the floor. The brigadiers whooped and clapped and cheered. Jin Shao raised his eyebrows at me affectionately and then with Lin Shihuan lifted the half-conscious driver from the floor.

Between two rebels at the peak of their youth, the ox-ghost weighed no more than a cloud.

Lu Yang said something quietly. Dong Hi blushed, his entire body stiffening. Shihuan and Shao dropped the driver on the ground. “What did you say?” cried Jin Shao in disbelief.

Lu Yang spat and shouted: “Long live Chiang Kai-shek!”

My spirit shuddered. It sensed Du Hong raise her head. But this graveled, frail and masculine voice could not have been the voice we heard . . . I had heard the voice of a child; I saw on the train Du Hong’s eyes light up in fear . . . “Long live Chiang Kai-shek!” he yelled. This was not the same voice from the train.

“Long live Chiang Kai-shek! Long live Chiang Kai-shek!” he chanted toward heaven at a desperate pace. The veins in his neck pulsated; his eyes bulged. Such fervor! So stunned were the guards that we let him go on, we let him say the vile words ten times. Then a voice broke through the crowd:

“Down with Lu Yang!”

I turned. It was Bo Biming, standing on a pile of scrap, pumping his red book in the air. “Down with Lu Yang!” he chanted. His sister pulled at his arm, but as the other guards began echoing his statement, she reluctantly joined in. The brigadiers recovered, Jin Shao and Lin Shihuan standing, taking Lu Yang up into their hands. Our collective voice drowned out the capitalist roader’s treacherous words.

Lin Shihuan whispered something into Lu Yang’s ears. His face turned pale and he stopped chanting; seeing this, we redoubled our efforts, pushing toward him, waving our little red books. A spiritual atom bomb coursed through my veins.

Jin Shao shouted something. We could not hear it. So he held his book up straight in the air like a sign. The crowd grew quiet, ready to listen. “What should we do with the traitor?” he

cried.

A voice broke through the crowd. I did not recognize it. I never knew who said it. But, it said: “Kill him!” The whole of the guards erupted in support.

Lin Shihuan said, “Whoever wants to may throw the first fist!”

The crowd surged forward, bodies pressing on all sides. I rode the wave of bodies forward without moving my feet; from the front of the crowd I glided swiftly toward Lu Yang. My revolutionary spirit called for me to strike. Standing now less than a meter from the capitalist roader, his head at eye level, I raised my fist to strike, but before I can—

In an instant my sister’s monkey-like grip closed over my shoulders and tore me back from the crowd. I yelled at her but she caught my cheek hard with her open hand. “Your mother’s cunt!” she said, slapping me hard on the face. In the frenzy of fists nobody noticed. I spat on her leg. She glared at me blindly, rage building, but suddenly turned away—mounting Bo Biming’s pile of debris, she said, “We are not killers!” Dong Hi looked at her strangely and backed down from the mount: he did not want to associate himself with revisionism. “Mao Zedong Thought says to struggle with reason, not violence!” But the deaf masses heard only their own cries.

I spent the next ten minutes pushing against the crowd, but I could not penetrate even its most outward layer. By the time I saw the traitor again, guards stood staring at his lifeless and bloody body, wondering what happened next. At length the struggle session was called to conclusion, Lu Yang’s body left to rot beneath the sun. “We have enacted class struggle,” said Jin Shao as part of his closing words, “and sealed a moral wound in this desert. When help arrives, we will have proven ourselves worthy not just as Red Guards, but left-thinking rebels as well.” The masses wanted the capitalist roader to die and then fulfilled its own mandate. I could

imagine my report already: *The Dictatorship of the Class Traitor Lu Yang*. I would copy it ten times and hang it at every station we crossed through. I would shout it across the Soviet Border, when we reached it. This was our achievement: *Democracy Enacted on the Villainous Lu Yang*.

Of course, I said no such thing when I finally arrived at the border with Bo Xinyi. Lu Yang's face had long faded from my memory. That is not to say I regret. I regret nothing I did in the name of the Revolution. I stand in judgment of my ancestors, not my Revolutionary Line.

Sister tried to justify why she pulled me away from the violence, but it took me hours to forgive her. "A revolutionary puts revolutionary matters first and filial matters second," I said to my sister. "I appreciate your concern for me, Comrade, but I do not need your support."

#

Throughout the day, the violence escalated. Following their leaders model, the surviving Gale Force Seven brigadiers launched a "Campaign to Purify Our Own Ranks." Several voices asked them to wait until help arrived, but with no sign of motion on either horizon, the brigadiers grew impatient. "If we have had one counterrevolutionary among our ranks," argued Lin Shihuan, "who knows how many more we might have?" Jin Shao produced a list written sometime before of potential counterrevolutionaries and rattled off names of those to be rounded up and interrogated. When a young boy—I recognized him as part of the entourage that followed Jin Shao and Lin Shihuan through the train—finally confessed to having pickpocketed numerous guards as he traveled, he was stripped of his sneakers and armband and forced to ride the jet-

plane for an hour on end.¹⁸ Other groups began similar processes with their own members, each striving to make a more egregious display of revolutionary spirit than the last. The Taking Tiger Mountain group tied a sun-heated sheet of metal to a boy's bare back; Sailing with the Helmsman forced a girl to kneel on broken glass. A dozen cars down the train, one group accused another of harboring black elements. Small fights and skirmishes began up and down the rails.

My sister, busy in her makeshift medical tent, sent Dong Hi to look after me, but I quickly evaded him. Hiding in the capsized locomotive cab, I watched him wander between struggle meetings until at last he walked past our small semicircle out of sight. I crawled out of the cabin and took a survey of the surroundings. The only comrades I recognized among the masses were Jin Shao and Lin Shihuan, both busy shouting accusations at a stripped brigadier. Dong Hi's large bag lay unattended by the medical tent. Coyly I rifled through it, searching for his banned book. *The Dream of the Red Chamber*.¹⁹ I tore the pages from it and spread them in the wind. By the time I finished, I saw her in the distance, doubling back along the train. Quietly, I ducked past the makeshift tent, slipped between cars, and wandered out onto the rails.

I walked toward the western sunset. Besides two guards relieving themselves a few meters away, the rails were free of guards. Several had journeyed out into the desert, braving the heat and rough terrain, but these spirited guards had long disappeared from sight. I stuck to the tracks, watching thick yellow cloud on the horizon. An approaching train? No, a distant dust storm, blowing past but not toward us. Three li down the rails, sand overtook the tracks. I walked another li or two until I could no longer find the rails: no wonder relief had not yet come. The

¹⁸ The jet-plane: two guards held his arms up in the air behind his head as a third forced him to bend over by planting a heavy shoe on the small of his back.

¹⁹ One of the four classic Chinese novels, filled with emperors and yamen and generals and drifting Daoist monks.

trains that plowed through sand could only crawl across the desert. If the conditions were similar behind us . . . I walked back down the length of the wreckage and found the same sight on the other side. Whatever sandstorm spread this yellow dust around us left only the sliver of track around us. How far did the sand go? Would it delay our relief by hours or by days? When I showed Jin Shao, he said, “Aid may not come quickly. Dig down your post and maintain Mao Zedong’s Revolutionary Line.”

#

Alone I stood on the buried rails when I let it slip: “Long live Chiang Kai-Shek.” The words were small, my reaction subdued; I whispered them as if they were the most natural shreds of conversation, and then I wondered how I had come to say them.

As a revolutionary youth I was under tremendous stress. I had heard the phrase uttered too many times; I was acting out on it. The words were like a virus or a cough: they would fade with time, I was sure.

In my isolation, I was remarkably level-headed. With no guards nearby, I could think without restraint, consider my options, prepare a face for the revolution.

At least, that is what I think happened now. When I look back to the moments where I said, “Long live,” I do not remember emotion. But when I think to seeing others saying it . . . I had been exposed to counterrevolutionary influence. The symptoms would pass. I rationalized the world away.

I looked back to the distant train crash and saw a figure framed against the horizon, walking slowly toward me along the rails. Putting on my revolutionary face, I turned back along

the tracks and marched, prepared to say, “Comrade, a report!” I would tell the guard that the rails were buried in the sand as far as I could see, that the entire railroad from here to the horizon had disappeared. But I did not need to. As the guard entered my sight, she took the hat from her head and held it in front of her chest.

“Du Hong,” I said. I could not help but feel the same brief sadness as on the train. My eyes dropped and my mouth slipped into an unconscious frown. Du Hong’s own eyes widened, and she looked at me strangely.

“Stranger,” she said, “how do you already know my name?” By this point, she was within an arm’s reach, but did not extend her hand.

“My name is Wu Lihao,” I said. She said that she knew, that my sister had told her—

“Your sister is a fantastic medic,” she said, running her hand across her wounded shoulder. “I see she did the same for you.” Slipping my hand between shirt-buttons, I felt the dry bandage wrapped around my wound. “But I don’t forgive you.” I raised my eyebrows as she waited for a reaction; I refused to give her even the smallest signal to track. “For crushing me on the train,” she said. “For mixing your blood into my wound.”

“Do you still claim I said it?” I asked, and she said—

“Oh, Wu Lihao, everyone is saying it. You should hear them. They’ll be in the middle of a struggle session when suddenly one of the leaders will say, ‘Long live—’ And suddenly the poor sap being struggled doesn’t seem so bad—”

“It’s not just me?” I asked.

“Oh, you’re saying it too now? Would you look at that. Mm, yes, everyone is saying it. The environment is toxic. Guards are fighting against guards. But I bet you’re wondering why I’m here.” Again, she waited for a response but I gave her nothing. “Your sister sent me,” she

said earnestly. “Do you want to know why?” I shifted on one foot and scratched my head with the opposite arm. “We got to talking while she was stitching me up. She told me where you were from.” She unfolded a map from her pocket and held it in front of my eyes. “Do you know where we are on here?” she asked. I scrutinized the paper but nothing leapt out at me. The map was topological, probably the result of a survey of this region during the Great Land Reform. Toward the west was a wide valley with a sunken dimple in the center; above it, a mountain—my ancestral spirit fluttered through my mind and I recognized it: Lanzun. The village of my birth. A narrow road led from the entrance to the valley all the way up to the rails. “We’re very close,” Du Hong said. “We find a single one of these landmarks, and we can make it to Lanzun.” I stared at the map for a long time and then squinted at the horizon: could this railroad be the same railroad? This expanse of desert the same clear lines on the map? If we were anywhere within the map’s borders, then we couldn’t be more than a week’s walk from the town.

“But why you?” I asked. Hours ago, she had accused me of an unspeakable crime.

“Wu Lihao,” she said, smiling darkly, “I can’t stop saying it, and neither can you. Gale Force Seven is on the verge of internal war. I’ll get eaten alive if they hear me say it. And besides—*I have the map.*”

That night after sunset we met. The desert’s sweltering heat gave way to a cold northwesterly breeze that blew the scent of corpses out from the wreck and into our noses. The bulk of the guards had laid their conflicts aside for the night in order to burn the dead, but a few groups still struggled, and at least two were at war.

We numbered six: Sister, Bo Biming, Bo Xinyi, Dong Hi, Du Hong and myself. Du Hong had already replaced her Gale Force Seven armband with Paint the Universe Red. Dong Hi and Sister followed suit, replacing their college teams with the one from my middle school. Then we

were all six, members of the same faction, our fates sealed in each other.

Among us, Du Hong and I were the only known to be saying “Long live” at unexpected times. “We must protect the Bo siblings,” Dong Hi said. “We trust you and Du Hong to control yourselves, but we don’t want to see the Uyghurs fall into the habit.”

“Once we are isolated from the masses,” said Sister, “the contradiction among us will fade.” She meant that the further away we were from other guards, the less we would utter the horrible phrase. “So it’s been decided,” said Sister, “that we will go to Lanzun.”

“Recuperate,” Dong Hi said, “among revolutionary peasants. Then, when you and Du Hong are cleared of this sickness, we will make our triumphant return.”

Did I have a stake in this plan? No—Sister would have dragged me with her whether I wanted to or not. But I needed her protection, I could not live here saying, “Long live.”

At the mere thought of the words, “Long live” welled up in my throat. I excused myself to find a place to piss and then, alone, said it again and again. When I turned back to the circle, Du Hong was watching me from a distance. She sensed the words hot on my tongue.

In my dreams that night I saw the faces of the seven stillborn sons that came between my sister and me. My ancestral spirit fed me images of Wu Binjiang wandering through town with her hair short and tied behind her, wearing men’s clothes in the days leading up to my birth.

Father saying, “Look at my beautiful boy!”

Years after the Revolution ended, I asked my father why he chose to make Wu Binjiang his first son. Had I been born a girl surely it would have been easier to pretend I was a boy than to change her gender before the entirety of Lanzu.

He said that he has always wanted to raise a daughter. He dabbed his eyes with tissues, voice cracking as he spoke. At the beginning he had loved her so much, but the death after death

of his possible sons wore too heavy on him. He felt that he irrevocably ruined their relationship. He wanted a chance to start again.

#

We left before dawn, bedrolls and backpacks fixed snugly to our shoulders. No one attempted to stop us: they were busy fighting, or else slinging quotations and counter-quotations at one another, no one yielding ideologically. A number of other small groups made the same choice we did overnight, but we were the only ones to head west.²⁰ Weary from the train wreck, revolutionary tourism was no longer their pleasure. They thought only of their homes in Beijing.

As we walked, the Bo siblings asked Dong Hi and me to explain certain quotations of Chairman Mao. Their school's political instructor, they explained, had been outed as an imperialist just after the start of the Cultural Revolution, and their town's cadre was slow on replacing him. The idea of gaps in political education baffled me: for the past six months, we had learned nothing aside from politics. I could recite any of the three important essays by Mao Zedong at any point and identify his quotations from the red book given nothing but the page and paragraph number. I worried about the remedial state of their education: if pressure was put on them at some point, would they execute revolution effectively? Or would they be forever followers, reliant on the success better-raised guards? Ay, Biming followed me blindly and Xinyi's eyes opened a bit too widely at the sound of politics: how easily a motivated revisionist could lead them off the socialist road.

²⁰ That made us more revolutionary than the masses, I remember thinking. The communist wind blows from east to west; continuing even after great hardship on a journey west meant embracing the struggle of revolutionary life. Really, we were the reddest of our comrade guards.

Our own road vanished quickly beneath us. The sand covering the rails grew deeper until we could no longer feel the metal and wood beneath our feet. Every ten or so meters we dug holes with our hands, searching for the track, but we could not find it. By the tenth kilometer, we relied solely on a compass. We did not find the rails again.

In the late afternoon, Bo Biming collapsed. His small body fell face-forward into the sand. Xinyi swept in before the rest of us even realized what had happened, wresting the backpack loose from his body and turning him over. She placed a hand on his head and called out for Sister, who walked several meters ahead. By the time Sister reached the boy, Xinyi had already wet a cloth for his forehead and was now filling a cup of water from a canteen to drink. Her peasant lifestyle prepared her for handling heat exhaustion; she gave Sister directions, and eventually implored that we pitch camp for the night.

Though I felt for Bo Biming, I was not proud of our progress. Neither was Du Hong. We had covered less than ten kilometers; moreover, there was yet no sign of a recognizable landmark. We could not tell how close we were to our destination! But Dong Hi declared this first day of our exodus a success. He compared our journey to the Long March. “We have gone further in a single afternoon than the Guomindang could in a month.” I helped him and Du Hong pitch the tent—a small, canvased unit that we were fortunate to find among the wreck. Evidently one of the dead was prepared to take on China’s wilderness; we gladly accepted his or her contribution to our common good. Once the tent was up we all welcomed reprieve from the beating sun. Once Bo Biming was inside and tended to, Dong Hi sat on a rolled bedroll and gave an inspirational speech. “Now do not deceive yourselves: the true struggle is yet ahead of us.’ Surviving on this Gobi Shore will require every iota of wit and revolutionary spirit you possess. It will require loyalty and unity. The principal aspects of a Red Guard.” As he spoke, there came

the question of who would sleep inside and who outside. Sister resisted the idea of mixing men and women in such a small tent, but our genders were divided evenly. We could fit four bedrolls into the tent; it made no sense for more than two guards to sleep in the naked chilly night. I volunteered, saying that women and children needed the shelter more than me. Dong Hi followed my lead, citing that “‘Sacrifice and self-preservation are both opposite and complementary to each other.’ We will live to do revolution.”

At our final count, we had enough rations to survive in the desert for two weeks. Du Hong was much to thank: she knew where to look among her comrade’s bags for anything we might need.

That night I did not sleep well. Twice Bo Biming awoke in a cold sweat, shouting out the lyrics of *the Internationale*:

Workers, peasants we are

The great party of laborers:

The earth belongs only to men.

Wood in the desert was scarce; we burned no fire that night. Bo Biming began to cry out and thrash in his sleep; Sister and Du Hong crept out of the tent to give him more space to move around. Together we lay beneath the cosmos, pressed against each another for warmth—Sister to my left, Dong Hi to my right and Du Hong beside Sister—and watched each star glimmer in the distance. We had never seen such starlight. We were Beijingers, learning the true shape of the night sky.

Much later, after we all fell asleep, something shifted to my right. A body crawled into the space between my Sister and me and lay there for a moment before disappearing back into the night.

#

We awoke to our first day of pure desert. Winds shifted the sand overnight, covering our faces with dust. Mountains wavered in the northern distance. Squinting, I could almost discern their ice caps. The land nearby was flat and duneless; nothing but the stray gazelle disturbed the horizon and the wind, whenever it picked up, darkened the sky with sand. Small rodents with large ears kept us company through the night.

The Long March passed through the grasslands, not the desert, though the terrain was just as harsh. Our rocky flats and relentless weather were their neck-deep grass, endless snakes and native ambushes. I channeled Grandfather's resolve with every footstep, maintaining a marching rhythm. We had all taken on extra load to lighten Bo Biming's. We did not want to see him faint again.

At midday we came across a gold digger sitting beneath his upturned cart. The shadows across his face prevented us from making out whether his eyes were open or closed, but he sat rigid in his chair. A long wooden rod held the cart up. At his feet was spread a blanket, and upon it lay a shovel and a small leather bag. He clutched a rifle across his lap but did not stir.

At twenty meters we stopped and murmured amongst ourselves. His cart stood directly in our path; we could make a safe, wide circle around him but our compass was unreliable. We could end up askew. Dong Hi suggested walking by him, but Bo Xinyi, eyeing the man's rifle, had reservations with this plan. "Would he hurt a *revolutionary youth*?" asked Bo Biming proudly, volunteering himself to go first. Xinyi plucked him from his march. "Now brother," she said, then began to talk in low voices with my sister and Dong Hi. As they discussed our options,

Du Hong slung her pack onto the ground and began advancing on the cart. Sister ran out to stop her, but stopped cold when she saw the gold digger's blank face. Instead, she motioned for us to follow Du Hong slowly. Du Hong whistled a revolutionary song.

The old bronze man made no further movement on our approach. What he must, if his eyes were open, have been witnessing! A Red Guard group—*Paint the Universe Red*, I thought proudly—approaching on the tune of the Red Guard song. Wind kicked sand between us and the sun; the shadow across the gold digger's eyes grew darker with every step. His hands gripped his rifle as if he were prepared to strike, but his fingers did not betray his stillness. I wondered briefly if he were dead.

“Old man!” Du Hong shouted. The gold digger did not move. “Old man of this desert, we, revolutionary youth, students from all walks of life, and of all backgrounds, we, the Red Guards, we *Paint the Universe Red*, have come to hear the news!” She emulated Jin Shao and Lin Shihuan's swagger as she spoke, but still the gold digger did not move. We must not have been more than twenty meters away. We'd come close enough to see that the bag at his feet was filled with something: gold? A canteen of water waited behind his chair. “Can you hear me, Kind Old Man?” Du Hong asked loudly. The gold digger did not move. “What have you heard of the progress of Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in this desert? What news can you bring us of the Party and of Mao Zedong Revolutionary Line?” As we pierced the threshold of shadow I saw that the gold digger's eyes were open, but unnaturally focused, unmoving. Sister struggled against her near-sighted eyes to see the same. The gold digger's gaze seemed fixed at the distance, staring through our bodies straight into the horizon. His brow remained unfurrowed; he did not contemplate; rather, he watched, emptily, with the gun in his hands.

When Du Hong saw that his eyes were open, she froze. When she did not move I fanned

out beside her. “We could easily overwhelm you, old man!” I yelled, beating my chest. “But we don’t!” Sister’s hand shot out to stop me, but Dong Hi implored her to allow me to conduct revolution.²¹ Bo Biming trotted up to my side. His ashen sister followed, standing somewhat in front of him. Sister and Dong Hi fell into ranks, taking Du Hong’s opposite side. The gold digger spat on the ground. His sudden motion startled Bo Biming. The digger pushed his satchel toward the back of the cart with his feet and then stood up from his wooden chair.

Du Hong broke from the line. She took the gold digger by the rifle and pushed him against the side of his cart. His arm struck the wooden plank and the cart fell down with a thud, taking both Du Hong and the gold digger with it. A muffled cry through the wood: I bounded over, took the cart by the handle, yelled for Dong Hi to take the other handle and lifted as Sister and Bo Biming crouched at the cart’s mouth. As soon as we raised the cart, Du Hong sprinted out, the digger’s rifle hot in her hands. The gold digger followed, and we pulled back. Du Hong drew a bead on the man’s golden head.

But the gold digger did not attack. He simply stuck the plank back under the cart’s lip and propped it just as it was before. He took his shovel in both hands, and, staring at Du Hong, he smiled. He took a single step outside his cart, plunged the shovel into the ground, and cast the sand over his shoulder to the right side of the cart. He cocked his head wickedly and struck the ground again. Throughout his motion he never looked away.

Dong Hi and the Bos lost their nerves, falling back behind our line. My heart leapt through my chest and I followed. We crowded behind the double threat of imposing Sister and the rifle-wise Du Hong.

The gold digger spat again. A glob of red mucus slipped out from his nose and stained the

²¹ “Revolution is *good for him*,” he justified rapidly. “We need to get your brother away from his counterrevolutionary spasms.”

yellow dust. The shovel plunged again and again, every strike equal to the first, going no deeper, yet producing no less sand. The digger laughed without moving his mouth. *This is the hyena*, said my spirit. *The one animal that laughed before man.*

We became used to such waking nightmares. On the same day we watched an eagle shoot straight up out of the sand. Du Hong decided to test out her rifle: her aim was true but the eagle turned to sand as the bullet whizzed through it. Then, reforming from dust on the wind, it screeched and flew off toward the midday sun. *These plains are not for humans*, my spirit said to me, *but for gods to traverse.* That night we saw lightning crawl across the distant desert like a spider with many legs. I found it hard now to refute such superstitious ideas.

Meanwhile my spiritual atom bomb flickered in the night-wind. The days were unbearable: we learned to sleep in the sunlight and walk beneath the moon. We should have seen Lanzun by that second night, but the desert, flat and featureless, extended in all directions. Whenever we looked away from our compass it seemed to change directions—or else, *we* changed directions with every turn. When Bo Biming asked how soon we would arrive, no one dared tell him we were lost. No. Xinyi said we were looking for fertile land. By that morning we had found nothing on this shore but a lost and naked corpse.

Sister seemed worried as she replaced Du Hong's bandage on the third day. I peaked over at the wound on her breast. A long dark bruise fanned out across her chest; my own injury had already faded.

I lay awake beneath the bright sun and wondered how Father was reacting to our absence. He understood chunlai—revolutionary tourism—but we had not told him where we were going or for how long. I loved my father: I had not intended for him to worry. That day I wished I was home.

Late in the afternoon, an hour or two before the others awoke, Du Hong shook me from my sleep. She looked down at me appraisingly, like she was trying to figure out a puzzle. She wore no shirt; her bandage was enough for decency given the bearing heat of day. "I've been watching you recover," she said quietly. "You've healed so quickly. I have a theory. Can I share?" She crept out of the tent and motioned for me to follow. I closed my eyes and pulled my blanket over my head, but it was too hot; I soon had to peek out over it. Du Hong still hung over me, motioning for me to leave the tent. So I shook my sleepiness off and crawled out through the flap. I felt Dong Hi awaken; he watched from inside, keeping an eye on any developments.

"I have good blood," she said, "and you have bad blood." She waited, as if I were meant to respond. "Your blood is the reason my body hasn't healed, and I think it's the reason we're both saying, 'Long live.'" Again, she waited for a response, but I would not give one to her. I waited for her to continue. "Your wound has already healed. Am I right?" She was. "But we were pierced by the same shard of glass. Look." She pointed to the dark bruising that peaked out from the bandage. "That's your blood," she said, "infecting the wound."

Then her face took on a strange air. She twisted her mouth as if she were holding back vomit, but the compulsion she resisted came firmly from the mind. Her brow reddened, sweat glistening on her forehead, and her neck bulged. She whispered through gritted teeth: "Long live Chiang Kai-Shek." She fought the words back, swallowing them one by one, never allowing her voice to rise above the barest whisper. I was the only one who could hear her uttering the evil name. "You are a terrible person, Wu Lihao!" she said when her spasm ended. "You did this to me! Your bad blood did this to me!" Du Hong kicked sand into my face and I swore.

Dong Hi wheeled out of the tent—"What are you doing?" he asked viciously. "Why are you fighting?" Meanwhile Sister rose from her bedroll and took Du Hong by the arm. "Please

stop!” shouted Xinyi. Dong Hi shouted, “Rule seven! Rule seven! We shall not fall victim to internal strife!” Then, quietly, he said, “Long live Chiang Kai-shek.” I blushed, saying the same.

“Look,” I growled to Du Hong, “whether we like it or not, we are all acting counterrevolutionaries right now.”

#

Dong Hi visited me in the early evening, a half hour before we left for the night’s walk. My mind was groggy, still acclimating to the inversion of day and night. A soft breeze blew across the desert, chilling my bare shoulders. He poured some of his canteen into mine, saying that I looked thirstier than he. I thanked him. He placed a hand on my thigh, squeezed gently, and then excused himself to check up on the rest of the camp.

#

Every time we looked at the map, its contours seemed to shift. No matter how long we stared we could not make out any topography we encountered. Bo Biming and I dug a few holes in the sand but did not find the buried rails. I wondered how many landmarks we’d failed to see by progressing at night. But that was a useless question: we could not cover half the distance in the heat of the sun that we did each night. No point regretting, no point changing our course. Although the temperature at night *did* grow more extreme each day. . . . A cold wind swept the desert. How long would we be able to continue under darkness?

We counted our remaining supplies. Water ran out faster than we had imagined: only two

days of fresh water remained. We would have to come across a town or a spring soon. As we made the transition from sand to endless gravel, Du Hong groaned. The horizon reared up into small cliffs and valleys. A river cut through this desert millennia ago: what flood it must have taken to see it change its course. My spirit seemed restless, leaping from one vein to another, borrowing all of my senses. Sister said the terrain seemed familiar: she marched with a renewed enthusiasm, swinging her arms wide with every step. We first progressed through a wide valley, but soon it tightened into a canyon and we mounted its cliffs. At daybreak, exhausted, we mounted a final crag. Sister took me by the shoulder as Bo Xinyi pointed and yelled, "Water!" Two, three kilometers away rose the shadow of a wooden yurt and beside it stood a well.

As we closed the distance between the crag and the yurt we noticed thin white smoke billowing out its chimney hole. The scent of warm food wafted across the desert. Each step on sharp gravel took me closer to relief.

On the Long March, Grandfather went once for a week without water. He composed a poem; he was once quite the free spirit.

I felt the glass body of nature,
 Figures play in the grassland & we waited for the rain.
 When it came, the shadow figures faded light dulled
 & the senses sharpened. I opened my mouth for the first time.

#

Dong Hi pounded on the hardwood door. The wall was far less solid than it appeared from a distant, made of little more than scrap: ragged pieces of wood, stone, and industrial

plastic woven together into the shape of a yurt. Through a gap in the window's screen I saw the silhouette of a middle-age man tending the fire inside. Dong Hi knocked again. Bo Biming and Bo Xinyi shivered beside me. The sun was rising but had not yet warmed the Shore.

Dong Hi slammed his open palm against the door and yelled, "Revolutionary youth demand that you open your door!" He pounded against it. "Consent to the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution!" A chair screeched against the floor inside. The middle-aged man coughed and muttered something in a dialect that I do not understand.

The door swung outward on a loose hinge. A large man hovered in the doorframe, pantsless: Sister jumped between me and the man's cock, crying out for him to dress himself decently. Xinyi turned her brother away, but Du Hong and Dong Hi were not shamed by the sight. The bearded man barked a rough word in his alien dialect. His language sounded like nothing I had heard before. He barked the word again; I think he was saying, "What do you want?" He said something else, something I could almost snatch. More male voices shout from inside the house: I make out one word: "Cold! Cold!" The man shouted some brusque reply and then gestured angrily toward Dong Hi. He tried to straighten out his accent, minimizing his Beijing drawl.

"Comrade! Do you speak Standard Chinese?" No response. "Standard Chinese."

The man grunted, said something rough-edged but melodic. I caught words here and there—"children," "desert," and "guests"—but not enough to follow him. His dialect incorporated strange tones that I did not recognize, more than Mandarin's four, more even than Cantonese's nine. The harshest words constituted the bare metal of a subtle melody; the syllables in between echoed rhythmically. As his strange speech approached song, it broached the threshold of my understanding. His bearded mouth cracked open into a wide smile and he threw

his hands beside him as his poetry burst into song. “Won’t you join us?” I thought I heard him sing with outstretched arms.

“This,” whispered Dong Hi to Sister, loud enough for the rest of us to hear, “is not a revolutionary song.”

“These are not revolutionary people,” Sister replied in a loud voice. The nomad paused for a moment and cocked his head toward her, but he did not repeat herself for him. So instead he continued to sing.

“How do they live?” Bo Xinyi asked. “I don’t see a farm. Do they hunt?”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Dong Hi. “We must carry out our revolutionary duties. These are not revolutionary people.”

I asked Sister: “What do we do?”

The nomad’s eyes opened wide, and he said, “Eat!” His voice rang clear. He nodded twice then ducked back into the yurt, shutting the door loudly behind him. Uncertain glances all around: do we follow him inside? Wait here? Our throats ached and our stomachs growled we had not eaten more than rations in days. Dong Hi glanced from the house to its unguarded well, biting his lip. At his side Bo Biming searched through his little red book for an applicable quotation. Sister and I echoed the motions, opening our little red books but reading little. “—and drink!” the nomad yelled, exploding through the doorframe. The heavy door nearly swung off its frame. He put on a pair of ragged and colorfully-patched pants. We felt comforted by them: they were the clothes of a working man, a peasant. Three boys appeared beside him: his sons, no doubt, the oldest perhaps twenty, the youngest around my age. Sister shuddered: all three were naked. “Get dressed! Get dressed! We have more guests!” The three boys stared for a moment longer before running back inside: “I’m sorry for them,” the man said cordially—

“I understand him!” Du Hong blurted out suddenly, loudly. Her face shot red when the nomad turned toward her.

“And you as well,” he sung, tugging on his brown beard. “We all come from the same yellow spring.”

“That’s old culture!” Biming snapped, rounding on him. “Old ideas!” But Sister reached for him and said, “Slowly, Young Bo. Class struggle is forever. No battles are won overnight.”

“Struggle!” cried the man. “We know no struggle here.” He turned over his shoulder and called into the house: “I hope you’re dressed, you useless little shits!” then turned back to us and beckoned, *come in, come in*. Du Hong took the first step through the threshold. The boys inside stared at her ravenously until a sharp glance from their father turned them away. The Bos stayed back, shivering in the morning cold. I smiled sympathetically and Bo Biming beamed back. His sister imitated my own sister’s protective stance. The difference between the two girls’ heights was vast. *Come on, come on*, the bearded nomad beckoned, meanwhile humming a melodious and unfamiliar song; my spirit aches the music on his lips. *Yes, Wu Lihao*, Sister’s spirit said to mine, and then whispered beneath my hearings. Walking slowly, the Bos entered the yurt. Dong Hi followed. Sister ducked as she walked through the door, though—as I followed her inside—the ceiling eclipsed her. It rose in a cone above our heads.

Smoke billowed from a large brush-fed bonfire through the hole in the ceiling. An enormous cauldron boiled on the flame. The yurt glowed. Its quality was a contradiction: the pristine floor was polished and of a single cut of wood; the beige walls were without blemish or seam. Had we stepped from one world into another? The décor was astonishingly simple: a table, a fire pit, some stools and a large kang occupied by a sleeping old man. He wore a style of dress I had never before seen: a cloth tied round his waist and neck that seemed to change color

depending on my angle of observation. These nomads possessed no revolutionary symbols—no posters or slogans or pins—nor did they possess old symbols. They had no religious icons or books or decadent furniture. *The ancient do not concern themselves with decoration*, said my spirit. They were untouched, wholly, by the Communist State.²²

I wondered where they found the brush for their fire. Perhaps there were farmable lands nearby. The three boys, now dressed bizarrely in homespun leather tunics, sat cross-legged around the fire, drinking slowly from stone bowls. The bearded nomad beckoned for us to join them. Immediately the boys sprang up from their seats and faded back toward the wall, staring at us intently. We spaced ourselves evenly around the fire. The boys filled in the gaps between us, one by Dong Hi, one by Bo Xinyi, and the most daring by Du Hong. Dong Hi, on her other side, wrapped an arm around her before the boy could do the same. They chattered in the unfamiliar dialect; I could not understand them the way I could their father. Only Sister escaped their attention. Then the bearded father spoke:

“Whatever struggles have brought you to this place, leave them behind. Come, join us for our hearty broth.” He then made rounds around the fire, distributing stone bowls filled with the boiling broth. When he sat, he forced his way between Sister and Dong Hi, laying a flat palm on either of their thighs and laughing loudly, “Ha haha, ha haha, What a gift it is to have company tonight of all nights!”

The soup was viscous; I did not recognize its base. Sister sniffed hers suspiciously while Du Hong swallowed it without pause, muttering *mmm, mmm* as she drank. I raised the bowl to my mouth; its lip was warmer than I expected. The soup slid down like water but its trail was

²² A casual observer does not realize the extent of communism in China. Yes, rural regions were backwards, but there was no town without State administration. The idea that even one single person avoided the Cultural Revolution is difficult for me to accept.

complex. I did not recognize the spices. Seeing us enjoying the meal, our server clapped; his sons joined the applause. Sister finally took the first sip of her soup; I looked around the circle and everyone was busy at their bowls.

A sudden cough from the kang made a few of us jump; Dong Hi spilled his soup onto his lap. "Ha haha." The nomad patted him hard on the shoulder and then nodded toward the old man half sleeping on his kang, hand draped over a bowl. "Don't be alarmed by Grandpa," our bearded benefactor said. "He is a kind old man." He switched freely between original speech and his own melodic verse. He turned toward Grandpa: "You're going to die soon, aren't you, you big old shit? Ha haha, ha haha." He patted both Sister and Dong Hi's laps. Sister seemed irritable; Dong Hi crossed his legs.

Only one of the three boys shared his father's curly hair. He was the only one that looked remotely like his father: the other two could be adopted. Were they even the same race? I squinted at the father and the boys but could not say for certain whether they were Uyghur, Manchu, or Mongolian. "Oh yes," our host said, following my eyes. "My *boys*." He withdrew his left hand from sister's lap to scratch his beard; his right wandered crosswise around Dong Hi's leg. "Ma Diyi, Ma Dier, and Ma Disan.²³ And I am Ma. Just Ma." Withdrawing his advances on Dong Hi and laying his palm flat across his chest: "Just Ma. Easy to remember, easy to understand."

Discomfort grew: I took another sip from the soup. Du Hong banged her empty bowl on the floor and drummed the still-wet rim. Bo Biming beside her sulked at his soup, refusing to drink more. His sister took only small sips. Boldly, Du Hong made eyes at Bo Biming's soup. He glanced at his sister but she was not looking; Xinyi stared across the fire into the eyes of one of

²³ Ma the first, Ma the second, and Ma the third.

the sons, Ma Dier, who watched her from beside Dong Hi. Sister hissed at Xinyi, vying for her attention, but she was distracted as the father Ma's hand slid up her leg. She crossed her legs loudly; Ma pulled his hand back quickly, laughing. Sister rose to her knees, took another sip from her soup, put it down on the floor in front of her, and stood—"Don't go," Ma plead, placing a hand on her waist, but she left the circle regardless. Without my sister to distract him, Ma turned his full attention toward Dong Hi: I was glad to have him as a buffer between the nomad and me.

I sipped from the soup again: the stuff was like rice wine, like smooth liquor: past a certain point, I could not slow down. The texture of the bowl came to mean many things. My thirst and my hunger and even my chapped lips fled from me as I sipped from the bowl, its warmth spreading through my lungs. Father Ma was now making rounds about the circle refilling bowls, but I could not watch him; I felt his hand slide across my back but saw only the soup, felt the soup slide slowly down my esophagus like his hand in the back of my shirt, felt warmth in my stomach, felt a quickening pulse.

I looked up from the final draught, emerging slowly from a drugged state. Ma lectured us on the medicinal properties of a well-prepared kidney, said there was no meat so versatile and affecting, said we can credit the achievements of our ancestors to none other than the careful preparation of the kidney. Kidney soup dripped from the corners of my mouth.

Ma the second—Ma Dier—had left the circle by the time I emerged from the first bowl. He crawled along its inner perimeter, the space between the flames and our legs, luridly. Sister stared coldly as he made his approach on Bo Xinyi. "Jiejie," Biming said, tugging at his sister's sleeve, but she merely sipped from the edge of her bowl without taking her eyes off the lewd boy. The youngest, Ma Disan, abandoned Xinyi on his brother's approach, slinking over to

where Sister stood against the wall. I wanted to speak out but Father Ma came around with another spoonful of soup and I found the bowl to my lips; Dong Hi focused singularly on his soup. Even Sister had crawled back to her bowl. Du Hong only laughed, already getting lusty with the boldest and oldest son Ma Diyi, drinking soup from his voluptuous lips—my mind willed action but my legs remained locked in place.²⁴ Sister resisted Ma Disan’s advances, walking around the perimeter of the yurt. Ma Dier cupped his palms over Xinyi’s knees then advanced up the legs. “Excuse me, Uncle,” Biming said, tapping Ma Dier’s shoulders, but the boy did not respond. He licked his hideous lips as he lowered his face directly in front of hers.

“You little shit!” Father Ma cried, snapping a switch in the air above him. “You dirty little shit!” he yelled, pushing himself between the siblings Bo and Bo, striking his second son hard on the back. “You pervert!” he roared. “Is that any way to treat a guest?” Ma Diyi uncoupled himself from Du Hong; Ma Disan stopped following my sister. Father Ma struck Ma Dier again on the wrist. He hissed, sucking air through his teeth, and retreated back into the inner circle, scorching his leather tunic on the edge of the flame. He crawled around until he found a gap in the circle and then clambered over to a rug where he sat, saying something in that arcane dialect. Dong Hi emerged from his soup at about that time and began speaking in midsentence: “—completely inappropriate! Your son should be ashamed of how he treats a revolutionary peasant—”

Father Ma cut him off with a song.

Please, please: have another bowl.

We must not fight over dinner.

No fighting over dinner.

²⁴ My spirit tells me that I allowed my body to control my mind, but is my mind not the body? How can my spirit unmarry the two?

Please, take another bowl.

Soup splashed again into my stone cup. Dong Hi stared into his bowl with a troubled expression. Several times Sister refused Father Ma's attempts to refill her bowl, but finally at last she yielded, taking a long draught. I turned back to my own soup. The rich, earthy scent gripped my nostrils like a bull's ring. Though I let it sit, the bowl felt warmer than my first two. I scanned the room to ensure that the others were drinking as well—even Sister sipped her soup from the border of the yurt—and then lifted the heavenly bowl.

#

When we awoke from the soup slumber, Father Ma had gone. Du Hong stood alert with the rifle slung to her back—thankfully, it had not been stolen. Worries about the Mas only now crept into my mind. Grandpa sat in a heavy wooden chair smoking a long cigarette. He took a heavy draught from a bowl of wine between each drag. The soup hung in my stomach like a weight. I did not remember thirst, or hunger, but I felt sick with satisfaction.

“You ate too much,” said Sister into my ear as she knelt down beside me. “Ma has gone to gather more firewood. And he has more of his kidney soup that we can bottle up and take with us.”

I squinted. The fire had burned down to embers and the three boys long ago left to sit on a rug in the corner of the room. They held hands and talked excitedly to one another in their unintelligible dialect. They seem to be comparing their exploits with our women.

Grandpa spoke: “We have not yet taught the boys to sing.” I felt awkward in his sudden waking presence; I waited for someone to acknowledge him. When no one did, I flashed him an

acknowledging grin. He nodded his head a few degrees in reply. Du Hong and Dong Hi rubbed the crust from their eyes. Our stomachs were finally full, our muscles recharged. And we could keep coming back here as often as we needed. If the well dried up, the Mas had already begun to dig a second. “Our water,” Grandpa said, “will never run dry. This desert was once a floodplain for the Yellow River. Dragons still sleep beneath the earth, sweating fresh water, kneading water up through the ground. We will never run out of water. You are welcome to come back as often as you like.”

I asked Sister if we had started the Cultural Revolution here yet. Sister’s face clouded. She called over Du Hong to explain that “. . . we have decided this house is a strategic location. The Chairman says to fight intelligently, and it would be unfortunate if we were . . .”

“If we were cut off from such a strategic resource,” Sister said. “This house is invaluable to our survival in the desert. So we have decided”—she glanced over to Dong Hi to confirm his approval, but he was too busy talking with Bo Xinyi—“to let this family stand until such a time comes that we are, uh, better equipped to address their situation. Now I do not suggest we wait for Ma, as we may still reach Lanzun by sunrise—”

You were last to wake up, her spirit said to mine bitterly. You greedy, greedy boy.

My spirit shrugged, mumbling that my actions were out of its control.

They’ve been up for hours, planning their departure, waiting for you and that drunkard Du Hong?

Drunkard? Had I ever seen her drink? I turned to find her sleeping on her side, drooling onto the floor. She seemed to notice me watching her in her sleep: she awoke with a start and made her way to her feet. Her shirt was stained with the red soup. Du Hong complained about her chest and Sister took her outside to unwrap it and examine the wound. I followed them as far

as the doorframe, from which I heard her ask, “How long has it been like this?” Her voice feigned a competence and bedside manner that I had seen many times growing up: Sister was out of her depth. Grandpa Ma listened to the exchange with me and then, extinguishing his cigarette, he began sweeping the front of the yurt.

When Sister and Du Hong re-entered the yurt, he pulled them aside to say: “I could not help but overhear that you suffer from an affliction.” Waiting for a reaction, he took a draught of wine. “My son’s soup has miraculous medicinal qualities. Why go to market when what you have is close at hand? Let her stay. My son will prepare it fresh for her each day.”

“Stay?” asked Du Hong. “I don’t—”

“We are revolutionary youth,” interjected Dong Hi. “We travel together or not at all.”

Grandpa laughed heartily, adjusting himself in his wooden. “I won’t get into the affairs of *revolutionary* youth,” he said. The “revolutionary” was new to him: he spoke it in clear, standard Chinese. “We wouldn’t want to get into trouble. Just remember to take some with you.” He pointed toward the pot. He needed not say: already Sister had filled several bottles. It would do better than any ration. “The kidney is god of all meats. It has the power to heal any affliction. It will bring good luck on the eater. You will leave here vital and young.”

#

We packed our bags and prepared to leave. Xinyi, Biming, Sister and I went to the well to fill our bottles and canteens while Du Hong and Dong Hi bottled soup at the yurt. I walked straight to the handle like a good revolutionary and turned it with some effort. It did not give as easily as I expected; putting my other arm into it I redoubled my efforts until the bucket chain

slowly began to unwind. Children giggled behind me. I turned around irritably, saw the Bo siblings laughing with their hands on their mouth. “Please, didi,” Bo Xinyi said, sauntering over to take the handle.²⁵ With one arm she did twice the work of my two together, bucket gliding effortlessly into the well. But by the time the chain ran out, we had not yet heard it strike water. “Strange,” said Bo Xinyi, pulling the bucket up. “It’s not feeling any heavier.” It returned as dry as it descended. Bo Biming tossed a rock into the mouth of the well, but we heard no splash, only a dull thud.

In despair, I looked up from the well and saw that Sister was looking back at the yurt. Her spirit standing on her shoulder with its fur on end. “Does it see something?” I asked of the spirit, but Sister shushed me, watching intently. Smoke rose through the chimney from the fire burning within. “What are you looking at?” Xinyi asked, and then came a husky scream, unmistakably Du Hong’s. Then a gunshot, another scream.

Sister ran toward the house without hesitation and I charged after her. Bo Biming tried to follow me but his sister scooped him into her arms, standing her ground firmly. A second gunshot. Du Hong lunged through the doorframe clutching her hurt shoulder, her bleeding chest. She collapsed onto the gravel. Sister felt for a pulse and then, looking into the doorway, dragged Du Hong away from the yurt. I saw Dong Hi inside with the gun in his hand and took Du Hong from Sister. Looping my elbows beneath her armpits I pulled her back to a safe distance. Blood pumped out of a fresh chest wound, somewhat above and to the right of her previous injury. She drifted in and out of consciousness, muttering the name Chiang Kai-Shek. Sister rapidly examined Du Hong’s chest, told me to wrap it with whatever I could, and then turned her attention to the yurt.

²⁵ Didi—she called me brother.

Dong Hi passed in front of the doorframe, levelling the gun at the Mas, but Grandpa ducked underneath the range of his gun and, with remarkable strength, threw him out the door. Wearing dark glasses, smoking another cigarette, Grandpa Ma followed him out the door, beating his right and left shoulders alternately with his cane. He staggered, falling backward; Sister, spring toward the yurt, caught him beneath the shoulders as the old man cracked his staff against his head. Dong Hi cried out in pain as Sister held him awkwardly. Every time she tried to adjust her position, the cane struck again. Absorbing the force of each impact, Sister could neither let go of nor defend Dong Hi. The blows came down harder and harder, Grandpa yelling: “This is the power of kidney stew! Look at this old man! This is the power of kidney stew!” Dong Hi cried out again and again. “*Look at this old man!*” Grandpa yelled at the tenth blow across Dong Hi’s forehead. His mouth began to foam.

Bo Xinyi ran over to me from the well and left her brother at my side: “Listen to anything Wu Lihao says,” she said curtly. Then without looking to me for confirmation or advice she leapt into the fray. Dong Hi gurgled and spat blood. Xinyi pushed them both aside and took the final blow: it was her smooth dark brow upon which the old cane shattered into ten thousand wooden splinters. Grandpa gasped and reeled forward, his dark glasses dropping to the ground. Time froze and in its non-passing, Sister slipped out from behind the unconscious Dong Hi. She snatched the cane’s largest fragment from the air and drove it into Grandpa’s stomach. Ten thousand splinters fell around them; Dong Hi staggered and fell himself to the ground, gun clattering on the gravel beside him. The old man cursed in his mother diction; he yelled something unintelligible to the boys in the house. Sister reached down, took the gun into her hands and fired, bullet ripping open Grandpa’s chest. His cigarette dropped. Although he clung to life, he would no longer offer a threat. The three boys watched nervously from the doorframe

as he fell back against the side of the yurt. Sister leveled the gun at them and said that she would shoot. From a safe distance, I watched as I wrapped my shirt around Du Hong's shoulder.

At that moment Dong Hi leapt back to his feet. His eyes burned with delirium; he was not in control of his actions as he wrested the gun from Sister's hands. Firing off into the air, he said, "Revolution is struggle! I am struggled!" Sister turned toward Bo Biming, Du Hong and me and said, "Go! Go!" But even as Sister called upon us to leave, the three sons tumbled out the doorway and grabbed Xinyi by the waist, arms, and legs. Plucking her out of the air they charged back inside, slamming the door behind them, chanting something familiar in their mysterious dialect, something they said earlier that day. Biming charged the yurt before I could stop him, before I could even process what happened. He pounded against the door so hard his fist bled.

I finished tying my shirt across Du Hong's chest and then stood, intending to go after Bo Xinyi. "Run!" Sister yelled to me as she struggled to disarm the delirious Dong Hi. Gunshots went off, firing at nothing. I ignored her, running toward the yurt. Sister finally pulled the gun from Dong Hi's hands and knocked him down. This time her friend did not rise. Xinyi screamed shrilly from the house as Biming moaned, both his hands bloody and run through with splinters from the door. When I joined my sister in front of the yurt, I could feel Du Hong's eyes watching me. I wondered if she wanted to be involved. Sister pulled Bo Biming forcefully from the door and threw him into my arms. I caught him—surprised that my sister would throw anyone besides me—and watched her kick the door from its hinges. Grandpa sat with his back against the wall, calling out the names of his grandsons: "Ma Diyi! Ma Dier! Ma Disan!" He pulled at the large splinter in his stomach but could not free it. "Avenge me!" he yelled. "Avenge this old man!" Sister stepped into the yurt. I wanted to follow, but Biming struggled against me:

"You are too young," I said to the little Red Guard.

“Jiejie!” he yelled to his sister again and again. I heard my own sister’s voice, booming:

“Drop her.” A thud and a soft moan. Then, three gunshots. No pause or cry between them. “Grandbabies, grandbabies!” the old man yelled. He coughed and then vomited blood. I could no longer hold Biming back. He took for the yurt and I followed just behind.

Sister kneeled on the ground with Xinyi trembling, but unhurt, in her arms. Several meters away, a trapdoor lay open. It had been covered by the rug the brothers sat on this morning and last night. Stairs were dug into the stone beneath. The dead boys fell next to this trapdoor, Ma Disan’s hand hanging down past a whirring gasoline generator sat at the top of the steps, and a string of lights. I looked to Sister, and I looked to Bo Xinyi.

When Xinyi saw her brother, she cried out his name and broke from Sister’s arms. They embraced on the wooden floor, laughing and rolling and crying together. I looked to Sister, imagining doing the same, but she ignored me, instead, examining the rifle’s magazine. “Grandbabies,” said Grandpa weakly. His time would come soon to pass.

After Sister slung the rifle over her shoulder, she mounted the steps and ducked beneath the floorboards. I joined her at her feet, shivering in a sudden cavernous chill.

Six naked bodies hung from metal hooks mounted to the ceiling. One was a bearded and half-frozen stranger with a thick tan. The other five were children, three boys and two girls, their bodies far more fresh. I recognized one of the girls immediately as Lin Shihuan. Then I realized that Jin Shao was among the boys. Their stomachs were slashed open, entrails hanging out. They had been raided of their kidneys, and now their salted bodies awaited further consumption. The bearded man’s head was scalped and his skull cracked open. Meat was cut from his legs. A metal table stood in the center of the room, lined with butcher’s knives and cutlery. Beneath the table was a pot identical to the one still sitting atop the fire. I vomited, spilling my kidney soup across

the cold stone floor.

Sister and I ascended to the yurt. Xinyi and Biming remained in one another's arms warming themselves by the fire. Outside, Dong Hi and Du Hong lay together on the gravel plain. Shutting the trapdoor behind her, Sister said, "Comrades, it is time for us to go."

I have never had the sort of closeness with my sister that Biming had with Xinyi. Perhaps Binjiang remembers something before, but by the time we arrived in the city, our parents were both good and sexless revolutionaries. "It is much easier to maintain a marriage," my mother once said, "when politics are in command. We don't fight over personal matters like we used to."

I had no reason to expect comfort from Binjiang: I could count on her if I was dying, or lost, or hurt, but I would rarely feel her affectionate touch. No, I had not forgotten the way she treated my wounds or the image of her swimming through bodies to meet me in the wreck. But seeing the sheer magnitude of emotion between Biming and Xinyi left me empty. "Lihao," Sister said, staring down at me. "Time to go." I forgave her for her heavy hand. Three Mas lay dead on the floor: her handiwork. How fast and level her shots had been.

Outside we found Grandpa dead. Du Hong and Dong Hi chattered Chiang Kai-shek's name to another. Sister unpacked her first aid kit and began to assess their new injuries.

While Sister worked, the Bos came up behind me. "Wu Lihao," Xinyi said quietly, crossing my shoulder with her arm, "we should discuss our situation." Bo Biming beside her looked upon Sister gravely. "Lihao, I'm worried," Xinyi said. "Your sister looked possessed, holding that rifle. Her eyes were blank. Her face was pitiless. She shot all three straight through the forehead. I am scared." My sister's spirit watched me, its eyes intent. I was afraid to speak. "Lihao," said Xinyi in a whisper, sliding down next to me, "I know she saved me, but I'm afraid of her. She is violent. Has she hurt you?" Her spirit's cold gaze paralyzed me; I could not

answer. "Listen," said Xinyi, "I'm not trying to turn you against your sister. But I think that we should get away from her. We should get away from all these violent people before we have blood on our hands."

I looked at her: "Don't you remember Lu Yang?"

"You aren't like them," Xinyi said resolutely. Sister moved on to Dong Hi. "You didn't have a choice." Then, as Dong Hi stood and rubbed his temple, Xinyi whispered quickly, "If you leave her we will go with you." She fell silent as Sister approached.

Sister said, simply, "I will carry the rifle from here."

We did not wait for the bearded nomad to return to the yurt, nor did we show the others the hung bodies of our fellow guards. Sister placed Du Hong in the front of the group, saying that as it was her bad map that led us to this place, it was her duty to navigate us away from it. "If we encounter more trouble," Sister said, "you will take responsibility." She chose a westerly route. As we marched, we alternated walking forward and backward, watching ourselves on all sides. Before morning, a dirt road rose out of the gravel. Shapes loomed on the horizon. Sister squinted, struggling against her vision to make out their form. "Lihao," she said. "Describe them to me."

I made out a farmhouse on the left with a large low stone fence. A sign was hung above the road, it seemed, and houses were scattered on the right. "Yes," said Sister. I consulted the map, saw a dirt road leading to Lanzun. It had the same bend we just passed through, and there was a hill on the left, exactly as the map described. "I don't believe it," said Sister dryly. "This can't be Lanzun."

Dong Hi pressed the knot into his forehead. "It's so small," he said. "I didn't think it would be so small."

#

Lanzun was located within a valley in the desert. When the rare rain came, it flooded the fields. We lived off of a spring at the city's northern tip, producing hot water that we carried home day after day in large metal bottles. Life was not easy in the desert, but struggle tempers revolutionary spirit. In another history, our suoyang fields might have been a model for desert farming. But in this life, our village was deserted.

#

Five kilometers or less from Lanzun's front gate, Du Hong shrieked. She clutched her arm, crying out in pain. She begged for us to stop, citing new pains in her injured arm, but Sister denied the request. The sun had not yet risen, and besides, there would be food and shelter and welcoming beds in the town ahead of us. Half the village would be delighted by our triumphant, revolutionary return. We simply could not afford to stay. When Du Hong continued to complain, Sister found a wooden stick on the side of the road and gave it to her to bite down on.²⁶ I could feel Bo Xinyi breathing nearby me. Du Hong raised no further objections.

My spirits rose as we approached the town. "So it really is Lanzun?" I asked my sister, but she remained silent. The geography seemed familiar, the craggy slopes of the valley rising on either side. *We're going home*, I kept saying to myself, wondering if anyone would recognize us. How proud they would be of our revolutionary return: they would give us a hero's welcome, a parade bathed in Mao Zedong Thought. Guards would approach us from the local school and ask

²⁶ Really, it was a gesture of goodwill. You must understand my Sister: when the goal is ahead of her, she becomes harsh and far-sighted. She thought only of the common good.

us to speak at assemblies; revolutionary committees would see to it that we ate not well but justly as we joined the peasants in their work.

After a complaint from Bo Biming, Sister yielded and we stopped to piss about a kilometer from the village gate. I walked some distance, hoping to stand behind a rock or a shrub. Dong Hi followed me for a distance, but then turned away. As we scattered among boulders and dips in the valley, I accidentally stumbled across Du Hong, squatting, facing the opposite direction. Then a hand clapped down on my shoulder—Bo Xinyi stood behind me with her brother. “You shouldn’t be watching her,” she said quietly enough that Du Hong would not overhear.

My face flushed red as I tried to stammer out some excuse, but before I could speak, Bo Biming muttered, “Long live Chiang Kai-shek.” Bo Xinyi and I snapped our heads toward him. Luckily he was speaking quietly enough that we were the only ones to hear. Immediately we distanced ourselves from the group—

“What did you say, didi?” Bo Xinyi asked. Bo Biming looked up at her with doe-like eyes, shaking his head sorry. Something caught in his throat. He swallowed, he tried to stop it, tears forming in the corners of his eyes. He looked like he was holding back a sneeze.

“Long live Chiang Kai-shek,” he said as quickly as he could.

“Why would you say that?” Bo Xinyi asked. “Why would he say that?” she asked, turning toward me. “He wasn’t saying it before.”

“Long live Chiang Kai-shek.” His words were like hiccups, sudden and uncontrollable.

“Shh, shh!” Xinyi looked over her shoulder to check that we had not yet drawn the others’ attention; *Why would he say that?* I asked my spirit, and my spirit said:

Why would you?

Dong Hi appeared beside us and said, “Long live Chiang Kai-shek.” And I remembered.

“Listen,” I said urgently, remembering and remembering, “it is the stress of the desert.”

Du Hong wandered into earshot. I was speaking too loudly but continued speaking at a rapid pace, remembering: “The stress of survival. Of running out of water. Of near-death experiences. Lanzun will revitalize us. Lanzun will—”

But it was not the stress of the desert. I remember that now. I remember clearly the moment of the crash:

There came the sound, the one big sound of the last and final strike against ground, but just before it, in this austere weightless moment, in the space between my eyes and Du Hong’s, I heard the terrible voice. Embracing this almost-stranger I heard the terrible voice. She heard it too.

“What a horrible declaration!” she was saying. “What a horrible name!” She broke down. Her tears, now the size of golf balls, splattered into puddles against my face. I felt the wetness and warmth of blood and blood between us, soaking our mutual wound. She shook her head; “Why did you say it?” she said.

My breath caught; I remembered, I remembered the terrible voice and fell into a deep and longing dread:

It is the moment before the crash. The sound of the final strike against the ground has not yet reached our ears. I hear a voice clear and distinct. A child’s voice, neither male nor female, calling out.

I said, “LONG LIVE CHIANG KAI-SHEK.”

The words were pathogenic. They spread to Du Hong immediately, and she never forgave me. At the time these words seemed so far away but now

I could not ignore what the voice inside me had me say.

I asked why, but my answer was nil.

My ancestral spirit spoke of a genderless past, a pure and clean earth on the belly of a goddess. We walked the four limits of Earth, Sister and I, climbing every mountain and meeting every creature. Everywhere we went, we introduced ourselves and sowed seeds that would someday become cities or myth.

When Nüwa came to warn us of the flood, she could not tell who was Wu and who was Wu. Sister and I had the same name, same face, same hair, same bodies and textures. We have come forward and grown apart across these millennia, branching out to separate genders, names, bodies, and thoughts.

When I heard the voice neither male nor female it was the old voice speaking through me.

But what did that voice know of Chiang Kai-shek? What did it know of today?

Look where these words have brought you, Wu, my ancestral spirit said, drawing me toward the gates ahead. I told the Bo siblings, I told Dong Hi rapidly that we must forget that phrase.

#

The road dipped down into the front gate. Lanzun is spread across the bowl of a valley. At its centers stands a stone tower once used as a grain mill. Local legend said that it was once a lighthouse for a long-lost sea. In modern times, the tower was ruined. The topmost levels were demolished during the Three Difficult Years to provide materials for housing and agricultural

development. When I was young, some people contested whether it was ever a lighthouse. We had no library and no cameras, so the past quickly faded. Besides, in the years before and after the Cultural Revolution, it was unwise to talk about such things.

As we passed through the front gate, clouds covered the moon and stars. We looked up at the dark sky: it had been nearly cloudless throughout our trek in the desert. Tonight would be a special night.

No one greeted us at the gate. “Just as well,” Sister said: it was well after midnight. In a town this small there might not be an around-the-clock patrol. But as we wandered through the houses near the gate, we realized something more fundamental had occurred.

Open doors swung on their hinges. No smoke rose from chimneys. What windows existed were broken; debris littered the street. A chunk of stone here, a rotting beam of wood there, the blue cover of a four-old book . . . We ventured into an open house and found it ransacked, shelves and beds overturned, holes knocked into walls and bits of plaster scattered everywhere. The home beside it looked the same, and the next . . . “What happened here?” Xinyi asked, but no one responded; no one understood. Sister held back tears. These homes resembled those searched by the Red Guards in Beijing, but where were the people? Class enemies were kept under close surveillance; they would not have been able to leave. So what drove these people out? I struggled to remember these houses, to place myself in my childhood Lanzun, but my memory was blank and my spirit did not assist me until we entered the home of my birth.

It had a low ceiling and minute yard. Another house was connected roughly to its side; I remembered my father saying that his brother, my Uncle Liu, lived there while going through his divorce. Sister asked the others—not me—to wait outside. She explained that we once lived in this house, and that it was therefore private to us. Caught up with my sister’s tears, none of the

guards pointed out her bourgeois undertones. We entered, closing the door behind us, and looked around.

Whatever family moved in had kept all of our furniture and introduced little of their own. I remembered this main room because it was the room that my mother gave birth in. This was the single memory of Lanzun that my spirit played for me again and again. Sister sat in the same corner of the room in that same wicker chair. She ran a hand over her body, feeling her curves as she sat where she once had in a large unbuttoned shirt tucked into a pair of her father's pants. Her chest was bandaged. She imagined the thought of not having breasts. What lengths would father have gone to in order to alter her figure? Her arms were still muscular; she still kept the posture of a boy. She reached for the floor where the scissors had lain, and I could see her anger toward her parents boil under her skin. I crawled onto the cold surface of the kang, curling up on the once-warm stone. Dust clung to everything. I sneezed and got up.

This home was not our ancestral home. During the Great Land Reform, the Wu Complex was appropriated into communal housing and our family was moved across town. Fortunately we were not landlords on the estate: our family's favor had fallen out with the clan's leaders years and years ago. We lived as peasants when we were forced out of the complex and continued to live as peasants after. We would visit this home in time, but for now, we moved on to the fields.

The first drops of rain struck the ground as we looked out over the farms. The hungry ground absorbed the rain: likely the first it had felt in ages. The suoyang looked nearly ready to harvest, but weeds had cropped up across the fields. They had not been tended for some weeks. I tried to put a timeline together in my head; the call to smash the four olds came just ten days before we left Beijing. This could not have been an effect of that campaign. Then, when Bo Biming complained of thirst, we made our way to the town's spring.

This spring sat in a basin beneath a cliff at the northern tip of Lanzun. The cliff was the highest in town visible from anywhere you went, and a small mountain loomed over it. Centuries ago our ancestors carved an enormous bodhisattva into the cliff face. Because it was carved directly into the stone, no bandits or Japanese devils had been able to remove or deface it. The bodhisattva reclined and stretched twenty meters across. Beneath it, the hot spring still bubbled. I dredged my bottle into the warm water, filtered it, and drank. Others did the same. When Bo Biming took a bottle of kidney soup from his bag, I looked to Sister for guidance, but her eyes were glazed over. This was not the homecoming she expected. Thunder rumbled in the distance. Drizzle became light rain. After days in the desert we did not complain. "What a rare blessing," Dong Hi was saying. Du Hong snorted loudly from a ledge nearby.

I wondered what Dong Hi was thinking about as he sat perched on a stone wall. The bruises from his beating were severe, spreading like flowers across his forehead. I did not want to imagine how dark the bruises on his two struck shoulders must be; I had heard the crack of his bones as his cane struck them again and again. The bump on his forehead shimmered in the rain. His frown deepened. I did not have to think hard to figure out what troubled him. He could not protect Bo Biming from Chiang Kai-shek.

If I said it, Du Hong said it, Bo Biming and Dong Hi said it, then there were only left Sister and Xinyi. Soon there would be no need to hide this heresy. We could be sick together, and live our lives out in this dead village . . .

I stopped myself. Those thoughts were not my own. My ancestral spirit shrank back into the recesses of my mind, but I could feel its tug and pull. *What do you want with these people?* I asked it; of course it did not reply. It only drew me toward the bodhisattva, told me that ten Wus spent eighteen years carving on the cliff and another fifty forming the path up the mountain.

Thousands of my ancestors worked to build this town, that I had lived the lives of hundreds of them. My own earthly hands went into the construction of the bodhisattva behind me. I looked over to Sister, wondering if her spirit was telling her similar superstition, but her blank face betrayed nothing. She sipped from her water bottle and ate a few morsels from the train. Everyone else now was sipping soup. It was important that the children drank to preserve their strength, but I could not bring myself to watch. I slipped away to find somewhere to piss.

You heard about cannibalism if you grew up in the time I did. The emphasis on the kidney was universal. The kidney was said to be a general cure of all ailments as well as male impotence. Some said you would become immortal, but only if you ate it with its donor's permission. In some regions, during the Three Difficult Years, peasants laid traps for tourists and gobbled them up when they stumbled inside. I have read several accounts of old men scooping or sucking the brains out of the recently dead. Despite the passing of more than 25 years, I have not forgotten the taste of that soup.

Sitting alone, I heard myself say, "Long live Chiang Kai-shek." Were we truly the cursed? Was this village cleared out for our arrival? I had a brief fantasy of starting a life in this village, marrying . . . marrying . . .

I shook the fantasy from my head. It was given to me by my spirit. Years of stories were amounting to something in this town.

#

Dong Hi found me sometime later as I sat beneath an awning in an abandoned courtyard, eating a stale bun. "Have the others gone?" I asked. He smiled.

“It’s just us.” A long second passed. I chewed my bread with labor. “We split up,” he explained, “to search for supplies and food. Camp is back at the houses just past the gate.”

“Thanks,” I said, getting up. He stepped toward me.

“I thought we could search together,” he said. He smiled generously: no longer was he short with me like he had been when I first met him. I imagined that our week of travel gave him a reason to respect me.

I followed him into a one-classroom schoolhouse. Chalk lessons were still written on the chalkboard: English translations of Marxism and Mao Zedong Thought. Yet there were no dazibaos on the walls. This town either had no revolutionary youth or lost them before the revolution started. I tried to imagine Sister going to school here but could not; the chairs and tables were so small, the room suffocating. How could anyone learn in such squalor, I wondered haughtily. Dong Hi swept by, passing close by me. “Let’s look for the principal’s office,” he said. He thought here might be something worth salvaging there.

My mind was inundated by half-memories, my thoughts swarming with my ancestral spirit. This schoolhouse had suffered little damage; it could be repaired easily. What better place to start remodeling a town than its school? I did not think as Dong Hi led me into the hallway, hand on my shoulder; “Here it is,” he said quietly, indicating a door labeled Fan Zhisui.

I turned the knob and stepped in. The window was boarded and books were strewn about the floor. An overturned office chair lay next to a dust-covered desk. As I leafed rummaged through its drawers, Dong Hi swept the dust from its surface, saying “mm” and “ah” like he found something interesting. I felt the pretenses but denied their possibility.

When I turned to show him a small Mao pin, his mouth was near mine. I had not expected his kiss, though looking back, I knew it was inevitable. I should have turned away, but I

let him push me against the principle's desk and suck my mouth dry. When he finished, he smiled and asked me if I enjoyed it. When I did not answer him, he resumed searching, digging out artifact after artifact, hunting for useful supplies.

Sister slept in our childhood home, but the clamor my spirit made about that house was too strong. I stayed instead two houses down the street, where Bo Xinyi and Bo Biming had set up their bedrolls. They welcomed me like a brother, sharing their blankets with me. But that night I could not fall asleep.

Strange ideas danced across my vision. Bo Xinyi stood before me in traditional wedding clothes. I understood that her hometown was behind the revolutionary curve, but did she really think such an old culture costume was a good idea? The image passed and Dong Hi's replaced it. He puckered his lips at me, whistling; I swatted at the vision with my hand and emerged into consciousness. Pale, cloud-covered light streamed in through the window's frame, falling across my eyes. Xinyi slept with her hand around my chest, her brother burrowed behind her. Softly I moved her hand aside and rolled out of the bedroll. Rain clattered against the roof, forming small pools in the street. I donned a tarp the Bos had scavenged from a warehouse and ventured outside.

The cloud cover and rain kept the temperature down. If we were to stay here long, soon we would have to switch back to waking up with the sun. Water rolled down the street toward the center of town, where it collected at the base of the ruined tower. I walked the opposite direction toward the fields and found them already flooded, the squat suoyang roots barely showing over the surface of the water. A wolf stood on a ledge overlooking the fields and howled.

Gradually the real reason for not sleeping emerged from the periphery. I asked the spirit

if I had enjoyed the kiss, but it kept quiet. I don't believe Dong Hi's approach was part of its master plan. The kiss *was* erotic—the horrible thought encroached upon me that I was unnatural, perverse. Not just because he was a man: sex was a shameful act. Revolutionary youth had no time or allowance to explore other bodies. Many of us experienced our first sexual awakening watching ballet dancers in shorts.

Youthful sex was a bourgeois legacy. Lives of leisure demoted the marital act into a perverse pastime. Yet kissing Dong Hi . . . watching the brothers Ma . . . even falling with Du Hong's body pressed against mine, tumbling through the car, her arms wrapped around my waist and mine around her wide shoulders—I knew that girls were pretty, but I had never thought of one this way. I thought, as we fell, that two bodies could be one.

I have not touched a woman in almost fifteen years. These past two decades have not treated me well. Whenever I have the thought, I slip into a certain vertigo. My stomach slips up my ribcage and I must suppress the urge to faint.

Du Hong, I thought. Dark thoughts ran through my mind as I paced through the village, feeling running water drift over my feet. Anger manifested itself as violent fantasy: I saw myself chopping at Du Hong's neck with a knife. *But she was telling the truth about you!* I yelled at myself. Stress made my back ache and my stomach lurch; my spirit tried to distract me with thoughts of my mother, with thoughts of homecoming but I pushed everything out of my mind. I began imagining women's bodies in the abstract: breasts, hips, and asses flashed before my mind. I could not imagine in detail what a vagina looked like. I wondered briefly, fleetingly, if I could be gay.

At the beginning of this trip, I thought that I might try the play of cloud and rain with Du Hong, with Bo Xinyi and even for a moment Lin Shihuan. On the train all I could see were the

bodies hidden beneath masculine uniforms, waiting to be released. A Red Guard did not have time for sex but that did not mean it didn't happen. Just because it was shameful—

Had I been home, I would never have been driven to these thoughts. My spirit did not speak, afraid to betray its idea that Lanzun was my legitimate home. Could I have had Bo Xinyi if she were just a little closer to my age? I thought of her arm around me: could she harbor more than a sibling-like love? I walked the neighboring streets again and again, leaving deep tracks in the mud. My lips ached. I wandered in and out of houses. The idea crept into my mind that I would hide in one and stay up until evening thinking about breasts and asses and touch myself and thus cure it, but every time I thought of breasts, I saw my sister's, and my mother's; I pushed the thought out of my mind and opened the door to the nearest house. I was about to start talking to myself when I realized I was not alone. Du Hong reclined with her back against a window, eyes open and vacant. Black veins crept up her right shoulder and onto her neck. "I suppose you've come to put me down," she said, morbidly, and then laughed. I swallowed hard, head swimming. I did not know what to say first. She looked at me for a few seconds and then looked away, smirking. Then a black thought . . . "You'll get better," I said, crawling forward.

The rain outside intensified, water dripping through the paneless windows. I saw myself from afar and could not reconcile my actions with my mind. *Sex was a shameful act*, I told myself. But my hands and arms prevailed.

I did not think of touching her. I only wanted to see if her body could incite the feelings I, a boy, was supposed to feel. She did not resist.

"Ha," she said. Sardonic laughter. "Ha, ha. Wow, really now. Really, Wu Lihao."

Once the thought came, it became inevitable. I felt sorry from the beginning; we kissed, and I could no longer walk away.

I unbuttoned her shirt and slid it down her shoulders. Big mistake. Black lesions crawled out from it like veins across her skin, encroaching her shoulder arm neck and stomach. Her whole right arm was black and seemed to hang loosely from its socket. I thought of unravelling the bandage, but that was a step too far. The smell of dead flesh affronted me; I steeled myself and moved down her body, unfastening her leather belt. I ached, thinking of Dong Hi. I pulled her pants down to her ankles and stared.

She did not try to cover herself or fold her legs. Instead she laughed bitterly and unbuttoned my jacket. Blushing, I stepped back from her and reached into my pants. I stroked myself, focusing on her body. Where was the sensation and satisfaction? My eyes kept casting back to her grotesque breast; my ears could not block out her vindicated laugh. Her warm kiss. Rotten flesh. Had I really poisoned her? Could my blood have infected her thus?

I closed my eyes, focusing on the thought of women's bodies. I filled the gaps with Du Hong. Every time I began to feel pleasure, I opened my eyes to see her stricken state. She asked if I were going to do more than look.

After a time—five, ten, fifteen minutes; I do not know—Sister appeared in the doorway, utterly drenched. She saw me standing before the stripped guard, crying as I stroked my flaccid member. Du Hong laughed from her belly. Looking to Sister she said, “I suppose you've come to kill me too.”

#

I remembered, sweating, the first time my sister struck me. It was summer. I had lost my place in line at the cafeteria. Each item had its own queue and it took a family to make a meal.

When she found that we had no rice, she took me to the latrines. She marched me behind them, and, baring my bare ass, beat down on me. “Wu Lihao,” she said again and again, using my full name, her voice strict but filled with sadness: “I wish this would not happen. You could do so much more.”

By the time we returned, my mother and father had finished their dinner. They did not question where we disappeared to, only offered some portions from their plate. I ate heartily, but Sister, in a foul mood, barely touched her chopsticks.

“And now you’ve come to kill me,” Du Hong said. Where she found such clarity, I would never know. Perhaps my spirit spoke to her through the bad blood infection; perhaps through her suffering she gained a more subtle perspective. “I promised I wouldn’t hit you,” Sister said to me later, explaining herself. She’d made this promise numerous times.

III

Before I traveled to the Soviet Border, I found Bo Biming in Shanghai. Follow a successful career as a political cadre lasting well into the late 80s, he retired from political life and started a business that apparently did quite well. His face seemed to glow when I appeared at his office door. He shuffled the papers on his desk, waved for me to come in, fished out a bottle of expensive foreign wine, and served two glasses on the couch across from his window. “Tell me, friend, how *have you been?*” He stroked his chin, imitating my ragged beard.

“Ah, yes,” I said, scratching it. I must have looked like an old man. “Comrade Bo—”

“We are brothers!” Bo Biming said, opening his palms warmly. “Act like your left hand talking to your right hand, Lihao. My name is Biming.”

I tried to produce just half his radiant smile. “The years, Biming, have treated you well.”

“Ah, you think so?” He leaned back into his couch—real leather, I think—swirling wine in his wineglass. Through his window the smog seemed not so bad as it did from outside. The roofs of many buildings were visible below. “I suppose I’ve made a meager living.” He took a drought. I matched him. “I own three houses, you know.”

I raised my eyebrows, taking a sip of wine myself. This wine tasted harsh, far darker than I liked. As I drank I wondered if he was merely stating his wealth, or offering some charity to me. The rough letter I sent him must have seemed remedial next to the executive documents that crossed his desk each day. I wanted to ask him what his exact position was, but was afraid of offending him. The books on his bookshelf were all newly bound.

“I’ll tell you, Lihao,” he said, “I don’t think I would have developed such a successful sense of politics, such an amicable countenance had I not met you and your sister. *I owe you a*

great debt.” He said these last few words in English, and then translated into Chinese.

I checked the time; my watch disagreed with Biming’s clock. I drummed my fingers on the table, searching my mind for words or an appropriate reaction, but I did not know what to say. I was not used to hearing the Cultural Revolution discussed so easily.

“Of course,” he said, in an attempt to save face, “despite certain advances, China would have been better off without the Cultural Revolution. I know that. I simply mean that my exposure to hardship within our little Red Guard group weathered me for the challenges ahead. Now, I own a controlling share in a business I helped build from the ground up.” He looked again at his bookshelf. I followed his eyes to a row of English books whose titles I could not read. “You know, Lihao, it is a pity how many young Chinese forget English as soon as they leave high school. It really *is* the key to conducting business internationally. I don’t think I could have achieved as much as I did if I hadn’t spent the time mastering it *to a tee.*”

At this he looked at me expectantly. I avoided eye contact, turning over words slowly in my mind. I took a long sip of wine and wondered who this stranger was.

“Lihao,” said Bo Biming, “I worry that your anchoritic lifestyle is putting you behind the curve.” He sipped from his wine glass and then moved closer, sitting on the table directly across from me. “Brother, why don’t you take some friendly advice? The key to succeeding in China is to keep up with the changes. It’s as simple as that. Everything changes and you have to change with it.”

We made eye contact. I could tell he expected to be thanked. But instead I finished my wine with one long swig, deposited the glass on the table and stood. “Lihao,” he said in a reproaching tone. When that did not turn me, he repeated, somewhat more softly, “Lihao.” When I turned back to him from the doorframe, his eyes appeared to be genuinely clouded. “I sincerely

advise you to adapt to the times.” But I needed no adaptation. “Lihao,” Biming said as I walked out into the corridor, chasing after me. I slowed my pace but did not stop and did not look at him. “I know it is hard for you to cope with change. I could tell it from your letters. The way you still address people as Comrade. I am saying this for your own good. I just want you to know that beneath everything else, I am grateful to you. You saved me from that desert.”

“Your sister saved you,” I replied, stepping onto the lift. As the doors closed, I saw him with his guard down, face raw and childlike.

I collapsed in the elevator, thinking about Xinyi. My heart grows weaker every year. Today a stray thought drives it to palpitations. Someone called the floors above when they found me in cardiac arrest; Bo Biming cleared his meetings for the afternoon and saw me personally to the hospital. He assured me over and over again not to worry about the bills: “I talked to so-and-so, I did a favor for him once . . .” Or perhaps he paid the bills with his own money. I only know that when I left the hospital, they handed me a blank receipt.

#

My spirit told me that our home in Beijing was the furthest East any of my ancestors had ever resided. We began in the heart of the Gobi Shore, among vast plains of stone. We were there from the beginning, Sister and I, the original siblings Wu and Wu.

In that era we had no given names. When a god or man called for us, we would both answer. Our faces were indistinguishable. Both our black manes fell deep over our shoulders. We spoke in the same androgynous voice. This my spirit told me. I could not repel the voice.

#

Sister levelled her gun, aimed, and shot point blank through Du Hong's stomach. The sky came out from under her; her eyes deepened into crescents and, mustering her strength took to her feet. I stood there, staring stupidly. I did not think to button my trousers, or to move. Du Hong put her left arm in front of her, cracking her neck, while her right, wholly blackened, swung limply at her side. "I said I would not hurt you brother," said Sister, turning the gun backwards in her hands, aiming the gun directly at her forehead. Du Hong raised her one good hand to fight. I could not comprehend Sister's actions: *I* was the one acting shamefully. She should have confronted *me*, not her, not this simple revolutionary—"Sister!" I called. "Stand down, please!" But she acted deaf. Growling, she circled Du Hong, waving the gun around like a baseball bat.

"Go ahead!" Du Hong shouted. "Struggle me! Lock me in a cowshed!" Blood pittered out from her stomach, staining the dusty floor. "The Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution now unfolding is a great revolution that touches the people to their very souls. I see our souls have been *touched!*" Sister shot again, and Du Hong fell.

Then Sister turned to me. She closed the distance between us in one large step. I turned my head away but could not hide my guilty expression. "Put it up," she said tersely. I shook and fumbled with my pants. "Put it up," she said again, smacking my face hard with her bare palm. Before she could hit me again, I slipped the button through the hole and looked down at her feet. I could feel her presence towering over me. I could sense her violent impulse, feel the anger coursing through her mind and body. "This is shameful," she said.

#

As we walked away from the house, both of us beneath the single frayed tarp, I realized that we were no longer revolutionaries. This revelation was a long time coming. “Long live Chiang Kai-shek,” I muttered. We were acting counterrevolutionaries, rather by will or by nature. Nothing could be done to change such deep-seated, unconscious counterrevolutionary behavior. We could only hope for rehabilitation, dictatorship, struggle . . .

No matter where we went or what our dossiers read, we would have to live with this impulse, live with “Long live Chiang Kai-shek.” I looked to my armband—*Paint the Universe Red*—and I wondered, would it be so difficult to give it all up? This tight belt, these green sneakers, my two small Mao pins, and the red armband. The army hat. I saw them already as artifacts of another self.

There was the thought of Lanzun, of starting over. But with Du Hong gone, our numbers dwindled. Could we found a village without provisions? Could we live on this land free of the Revolution? *Of course you can*, I thought. But soon I recognized the voice was not my own. The longer we stayed in Lanzun, the stronger my ancestral spirit’s grasp became.

I reached out to Mao Zedong Thought but found a blankness in my mind. Walking next to Sister I could think of no quotation, no essay, and no song. All that remained was a snatch of poetry. I would need to study my little red book. Too many days had passed since I last opened it. I began to sweat, afraid I might have lost it, but I found it in my breast pocket and sighed heavy relief. We would leave Lanzun next morn and reunite with Mao Zedong Thought.

I asked Sister: “Do you think we need rehabilitation?” She looked down at me sagely, her eyes turning like a clock.

“We’ll go home, and we won’t talk about it.” The rain lapped at her heels.

“What happens when one of us says it?” I asked. She did not respond.

When I visited Xinyi at the border, she said, “Would you believe that I still say it sometimes? I wake up halfway through the night, and the words are on my lips.”

Minutes passed, but my face was as dead as a stone sculpture: I could not find the correct expression nor eke out what narrow words could bring closure or peace. Instead I waited rigidly for the moment to pass, until, by no will of my own, I said, “Long live Chiang Kai-shek.”

She frowned. “I could not sleep at all that night in Lanzun, not after the gunshot. As soon as you fell asleep beside me, I opened my eyes and watched the doorframe. I thought at any moment your sister could have walked through that door, levelled her gun, and shot both my brother and I.”

#

Dong Hi woke up in a cold sweat and panic. His bedroll was drenched and his hands shook. The bump on his head doubled in size overnight; it throbbed in sync with his heartbeat. By the time I fetched Sister, Dong Hi was vomiting out the window. When he spoke, he spoke nonsense. He was already too far gone. I wondered if I broke him. Sister forced him down to the floor, held his arms back and studied his forehead. Dong Hi convulsed when my sister touched the lump. He foamed at the mouth more than he had outside the yurt. The only cogent words he managed were “Long live Chiang Kai-Shek.”

This phrase no longer carried its old weight or gravitas. It sounded more like a sickly cough than a counterrevolutionary slogan. Among our Red Guard team these words had been

said dozens of times. Du Hong was sick, and she said it often. Dong Hi was dying, and it was all he could say. A silent question hung over me: would we all suffer the same fate? . . . distortions of the body . . . shattering of the psyche . . . some words come from my spirit. Words planted by this ancestral flame. I traced my lineage. Throughout my life my spirit had implanted brief memories and thoughts and practices of a hundred generations, but there were no names, dates, faces, just images of deserts, grasslands, seas. I racked my brain, searching for my most recent lives. My spirit interrupted me, telling me to stop worrying. I have finally come home.

I could not bear Dong Hi's screams, so I took again to the rain. I saw candlelight aglow in the Bos' house. The smell of kidney soup wafted through the windows. Retching inwardly, I made my way down the block and wound around to the spring. Diluted with rainwater, it flowed over its bounds. The water no longer seemed so pure: in the basin, the water was yellow with the desert's yellow dust.

I looked out on the sky and the town. The sun had set, and slowly the clouds and air were growing dark. Water flooded the fields entire: it would wash out the suoyang crop. Water rushed down the sides of the valleys, rolling in broad sheets across the ground. Where could this much rain have come from? There was no sea or ocean for hundreds of kilometers. In the lowest point of town, water pushed against the walls of our dragon complex. It would soon enter the ancestral home. I thought: *I should go see it before it's too late*. No: *You should go see it*, my spirit said, not me, *before it is too late*. I shook off the thought. Where worse to be stranded? It sat in a bowl at least ten meters below sea level. It was the lowest point on our map. *Go anyway*, my spirit said. In the shadow of the reclining bodhisattva, I found my spirit difficult to suppress.

By the time I returned to camp, Dong Hi was dead. The siblings Bo stood outside Dong Hi's doorstep, as Sister explained from the doorway. I came along just in time to hear, "He

attacked.” Sister pushed up her sleeve to reveal a bite mark on her arm. “Dong Hi was rabid. Out of his mind. Something snapped inside him so I had to put him down.” I was sensitive to my sister’s lack of revolutionary language, but at that moment, I did not feel particularly revolutionary.

“Was Du Hong rabid too?” Xinyi asked darkly. Her brother looked at her, shivering in the rain. She kept her eyes locked on Sister’s, refusing to return his gaze.

“Yes,” Sister said simply.

Bo Biming squeaked, “Du Hong is dead?”

Then Sister noticed me. “Ah, Second Son Lihao,” she said, “I have been waiting for you to get back.”

“Second Son?” Biming asked. He was surprised; I was stunned: this was not a name my sister used.

“Did Du Hong bite you too?” Xinyi said, cutting in. What was going on here? I had never seen Xinyi so aggressive, so confrontational. Sister returned her gaze with agitation.

“No.”

“How many bullets do we have left?” asked Xinyi. “Two? Three?”

“What does it matter?” Sister asked.

“Did you really need a bullet to kill Du Hong?”

Sister turned back to me. “Second Son,” she said—

“Say we have three bullets left. What if four bandits attack? Wouldn’t we be better off with a bullet for each head?”

—“I want you to come with me”—

“I am speaking to you, Wu Binjiang.”

—“To our ancestral home. I worry this rain will flood the corridors”—

“Will you not defend your actions, Wu Binjiang?”

—“and destroy the relics within. We may never have another chance to see our history, Second Son.” Bo Xinyi growled and began walking toward the doorframe. Sister’s eyes darted between her and me. She continued to speak, rapidly. “Please, Lihao, we need to go before it’s too late.”

Yes, my spirit said: go with your sister.

“Second Son?” Biming asked again.

Xinyi slapped Sister hard across her face. Silence fell over us, our spirits included. My sister stared down at Xinyi in disgust. Xinyi, with her hand still in the air, looked back with equal contempt. Bo Biming and I cried our sisters’ names as Binjiang clutched Xinyi’s hand in her wrist. Without hesitation, my sister lifted Xinyi off the ground, raising her up above the doorstep with one hand. Xinyi struggled, clawing out with her opposite hand, and Sister pulled her back into the house, throwing her on the floor. I saw Sister’s body descend on Xinyi and I could no longer stand by. Crying out her name, I sprung into the house. My spirit, feeling my rage, was at a loss for words; my sister’s was nowhere to be seen. Bo Biming followed behind me, his small fists in the air. She had Xinyi on the floor, struggling beneath her. She pulled back a closed fist. My sister had hurt enough innocents. Du Hong. Dong Hi. And now Xinyi. My eyes glowed red with the revolutionary sun.

“Wu Binjiang!” I yelled, leaping onto her back. I tore at her eyes with my hands, and my sister bucked, throwing me back against the wall. As I fell I tore at the fabric of her gun strap, splitting threads beneath my fingers. She turned and slapped me so hard across the face that I spun and fell. Dazed, I watched as Bo Biming pounded his child-fists against her thigh. She

swept him up by his armpits and threw him across the room. He struck his head against the kang and fell, unconscious, to the floor. Then she turned to Xinyi, kicking her in the gut over and over again. The damage I did to the gun strap was more than I realized: the gun careened across her back, gun strap half-torn and ready to come apart. I tried to stand, but staggered. I tried to summon up my ancestral strength, but none was prepared to help me.

So I imagined the spiritual atom bomb of Mao Zedong Thought. It exploded somewhere between my mind and my soul. I took to my feet, and shouted, "Enough!" Revolutionary spirit radiated from my soul to my fingers, from the most central me to the most distant, most peripheral. Before she could turn and face me I tore the gun from her shoulders, disengaged the safety, and pointed it at her. I emulated the pose of a revolutionary soldier. I channeled my grandfather as he crossed Luding Bridge.

Sister turned around at a glacial pace. "Lihao," she said. I raised the barrel from her chest to her head so she would know I was serious. "You will not shoot me," she started to say, but her voice trailed off as she made eye contact. She raised her hands slowly and stepped back from Xinyi. Tears welled in her eyes, but I would allow no sympathy to color my judgment; I colored my judgment red. I saw a revisionist standing over two bleeding guards. I said, "Why, Binjiang, have you taken the capitalist road?" Xinyi sidled over to her brother. She took the unconscious boy into her arms and cried.

A beat of sweat slid down Binjiang's forehead. The corners of her eyes welled with tears but I did not trust them to be legitimate. *Stop this*, my ancestral spirit said, but my soul was infused with the Revolution. *I must maintain Mao Zedong's Revolutionary Line*. I could feel a "Long live Chiang Kai-shek" rumbling up my diaphragm, but I swallowed it whole. I would not give in to psychoses. *I must defend the Revolutionary Line*. "On your knees, Binjiang!" I barked.

“Slowly! Don’t try anything!” Ashen, my sister kneeled. “Hands on your head!” She followed each direction slowly, her eyes wide and fixed on mine. “Now tell me why you have taken the capitalist road.”

“Lihao,” she said, “what are you saying?” Her ancestral spirit peeked out from her shirt and swam around her head, clouding her vision with thoughts of the old culture, thoughts of home. *Forgive her*, her spirit pleaded, but I denied its request. “We’re home,” she said.

“Our home is our Nation. Our banner is the red flag.” Inwardly, my hands shook, but Mao Zedong Thought gave me the strength to hold the gun steady. “You are fighting the red flag while holding the red flag.” Her breaths became rapid.²⁷ “Remove your *Paint the Universe Red* armband,” I ordered. She blinked, looked at me strangely, processing my words, then reached for her right arm with her left arm, still holding her hands above her head. With her land hand, she untied it, and then threw it to the floor. Was this wretch my sister and my filial love? Revolutionary thought drowned out all filial obligation, leaving only cold hatred. This was the strength of Mao Zedong Thought: singularity of purpose and intentionality of violent threat. Sister raised class struggle as a shield to defend me; I raised it as a sword to defend all revolution, to cleanse and purify our ranks.

She said: “Please, Lihao, let us go home.”

How quickly can consulting Mao Zedong Thought transform a revolutionary youth from disillusionment to shining redness! How embarrassing that only hours before, I thought we were no longer revolutionaries! Had my ancestral spirit so manipulated me that I stood beside the Snake Devil Wu Binjiang blind to her temperament, blind to her disregard of Mao Zedong Thought?

²⁷ There were few claims more damning than the one I had just levied. If we were among other guards, my words could have sentenced her to death.

I pitied her, my sister. She spent too much of her childhood among the spirits that inhabit this town. They abducted her soul and transformed her into the enemy. Had she only spent more time in an atmosphere with correct politics, had she only had more education in Mao Zedong Thought, would she be the counterrevolutionary kneeling at the barrel of my gun? Her lips quivered as her tears ran freely. She was disappointed that I did not follow her onto the capitalist road. “I bet you said it first,” I said. “I bet you implanted this idea of Chiang Kai-Shek, counting on me to say it, counting on me to spread your poison as it could go.”

You are wrong, said my ancestral spirit. *You said it first.*

I could not have said it, my revolutionary spirit replied. *If I had said it, it was forced upon me by a snake demon’s breath.*

“Please,” said Binjiang, “we’re so close to home.”

Wu Binjiang introduced me to Mao Zedong Thought. I spent long hours watching her study, beginning to study myself. I became a revolutionary because I believed that she was a revolutionary. But now I saw that her study was a veneer hiding a hideous truth. She was a demon. Her spirit possessed me and led me astray. “You want to go home, Binjiang?” Choking on her tears, she nodded. I spied a rope among the rubble in the corner of the room. “Cross your arms behind you.” I looked over to Xinyi. Her brother had regained consciousness and was crying in her arms. “Take that rope,” I said to Xinyi, “and bind up her arms.” Xinyi kissed her brother on the forehead and then left him leaning against the kang. She took the rope from the rubble and tied Binjiang’s hands behind her. “Now stand, Binjiang,” I said. She was slow to rise, so I shouted, “Stand!” and she shot up. Xinyi returned to her brother as I led my sister out the door. Sweet Biming watched me with dazed eyes. “You will go home,” I said, jamming the gun into her back.

We stepped out into a deluge of rain. The water rushing down the street was over a centimeter in depth. I wore a tarp over my head, but left Binjiang to face the elements. Her long hair clung to her clothes. We progressed downhill, winding through the small streets toward the Wu Complex. The steeper hills ran like rivers. Water pooled in every impression upon the earth. She stayed silent for most of the trip, and when she spoke, it was to defend herself. "It's not my fault," she said. "Our mother made me carry hot coals in my bare hands. She punished me for not being you." I jabbed her with the gun. "I was defending you," she said. But she made no appeal to the Revolutionary Line.

"Keep quiet, Snake Devil." Her arms pulled against the rope, but the knots held.

"I regret everything," she said. Regret was not enough.

As we waded through the rising water, Binjiang began to plead. "You have no idea what you are doing, Brother!" she said. She was right: I did not think. I followed only my revolutionary heart. "Let us walk these halls together, arm and arm like we are meant to." *Like we are meant to.* As if fate were tangible, as if the idea of destiny was more than feeble superstition. Her words sounded old, like the voices of these infernal spirits. "Please," she said as I kicked open the door, begging as I had never seen her beg before. "Brother, I will do anything to win back your favor. I regret everything, I regret everything."

"Your regret means nothing, Binjiang! You are no longer a Red Guard."

At this she fell silent, head tipping forward. Water flooded the foyer, current sweeping us nearly off our feet. A ruined rug spanned the distance between the doorway and an impossibly heavy wooden chair. The chair, standing on a short platform, withstood the full force of the water running past it. On the back wall, even in darkness I could make out four ornate characters carved into the wood, an inscription in ancient Chinese. Binjiang channeled her spirit and read,

*Just as violence begets violence,
worlds beget worlds.*

Beyond it, the water knocked open the door to the inner courtyard. The stone garden that once stood there had become a stone lake.

We walked along the elevated balcony that framed the garden toward our ancestral home's main tower. It loomed three stories tall over the flooded courtyard, and it was built in the shape of a squat pagoda. Stone shingles swept by rain plonked into the water or else shattered against rock. Seeing this place, it was no wonder that our spirits mislead us. Our parents may have been peasants, and our grandfather a war hero, but our ancestors were landlords. They lorded over Lanzun from this towering estate. My spirit wanted me to explore this place with my sister as an equal; it wanted to remind me of the alleged glory of feudal life. But I knew to remember past bitterness. Our family were peasants. At some point in the last seventy years we were cast out of the Wu Complex and forced to live among the common folk. This was our great salvation: through the struggle of peasant life, we shed our landlord ideals and affected Revolution. Our family's moral improvement was incalculable. Grandfather would never have crossed Luding Bridge had he lived as benefactor of such a posh estate. "Look at this place," I said to Binjiang, "and contemplate your ancestors. Before you leave here, you must make a clean break."

We entered the main tower to find it relatively undamaged. Wide windows let in the faint light, and fresh torches stood ready to be burnt. Enormous silk tapestries still hung from each wall. I looked upon it with disgust. Had this place been untouched by the Land Reform? Did some local official defend it until the end of his town, preventing the army and the revolutionary youth from reforming its halls? Binjiang's shoulders relaxed; the tension bled out of her body.

She was no revolutionary. She took pleasure out of this place.

In another lifetime I would have come here with four dozen guards. Had it not been for these poisoned words, we would not have gone into the desert as such a small group. I imagined leading a grand alliance charging through the halls, tearing the silk from the walls, setting fire to the bourgeois rugs, and destroying the feudal furniture, converting it into scrap for the masses to develop. As we climbed the three stories, Binjiang admired the aesthetics, taking everything in with her eyes. I spat on the china, the tapestries, the inscriptions. If only I had a team behind me, and if only this place were not held up by flood.

From the third story I looked down upon the complex. I could see the entire town. Water lapped at the edges of the courtyard balcony. It carried uprooted crops, rubble, long planks of wood, all the things that had been stripped of the houses and the fields. Very soon the courtyard would be unnavigable. The complex would be flooded, and those inside it trapped until the waters recede.

Beside the staircase was a thick wooden bannister. I tested the strength of slats and then turned back to Binjiang. She looked at me wide-eyed and pleading, but obeyed when I motioned toward the bannister with my gun. Sitting on the landing, her face waiting for me to tie her to the slats, her face darkened. "If my own brother is willing to betray me so utterly," she said, "then so be it. I am resigned to my fate." *Listen*, my spirit said, *to your sister's sincerity. Don't leave her here*. I brushed these words away, tending the ropes. At first I tied them so tightly I knew she would never break her bounds, but then, appeasing the principles of revolutionary humanitarianism, I loosened them just enough that, with an hour or two's work—long enough for her to be stranded in this place for the duration of the flood—, she might be able to escape. I left her with a steamed bun, three bottles of water, and my portion of the kidney soup, all within

reach of her mouth. “I am resigned to my *fate*,” she repeated as I mounted the stairs. “Lihao,” she said desperately, pleadingly, but I did not turn. My spirit clouded my judgment, but the headlights of Mao Zedong Thought pierced through the mist. I took one step, and then the next, each easier than the last. “Lihao!” she yelled from the top of the staircase, struggling against the ropes. “Lihao!” she yelled after me. “You bastard! Don’t leave me!” I turned a corner and passed out of earshot.

My spirit hung somewhere distant from my heart, consumed by stunned silence. For the last hour it had cried for me to stop. It could not believe that I had gone through with the deed. It could not believe that my fragile body, tempered by Mao Zedong Thought, now waded through the courtyard, now forded the foyer and climbed up out of the flooded dimple. Its voice, now hoarse, said, *You are travelling the wrong path*. But there were no paths except the unfolding of present into future. History is forged by class struggle and class struggle alone.

#

I made my triumphant return. Xinyi spent my hour’s absence dragging together the bodies of Dong Hi and Du Hong. They both lay on the ground outside, confiscated blankets covering their bodies and faces. Xinyi did not seem disturbed by the thought that the rain might wash their corpses. We could not burn them in this weather, nor bury them in time to escape the flood. Rain would be their only memorial.

As she conducted this grim work, her brother picked through the remaining supplies, preparing three packs.²⁸ Bo Biming leapt up and down when he made my figure out through the

²⁸ “I had my reservations,” said Xinyi, “but my brother never doubted that you would return.”

rain, waving wildly, yelling, “Sister! Sister!” She greeted me with a warm smile: for years, I remembered that red smile.

“I’m glad you came around,” she said.

I stopped to examine the rain-soaked bodies. Only when the siblings Bo were out of view did I pull the blankets back. Du Hong’s veins continued to darken even long after death, the right side of her face now a spider-web of black threads. Dong Hi’s face was blue: he’d been smothered to death. His body was still somewhat warm. I covered their faces again and then followed Xinyi into one of the houses. There, our three packs lay ready on the floor. “The village is going to flood,” she said. “We have to make it to higher ground.”

Stepping outside, I surveyed the town. Water at the complex now rose as high as its one-story wall. The boundary of the flood encroached the town’s streets. Soon water would be lapping at our door. So I slung a pack over my shoulder and stepped out into the unending storm.

We took a path around the village perimeter, avoiding the rapids and the deep puddles. At one point we chose to wade through a suoyang field instead of braving an angled slope. We made our way around to the spring, filled our bottles in the overflowing basin, and then walked about to a path up the northern cliff-face. The carved mountain loomed above, a spiral path dug into its wall. I looked down on the town: water reached the school, tearing away its shutters. The spring billowed beneath us, its reclining bodhisattva tracing the progress of the flood with its enormous eyes. Looking back to the mountain, I said, “There is a temple on the summit. It’s not a difficult path.” I did not know this. I spoke on instinct alone.

The siblings did not ask about my sister as we climbed. Xinyi stayed close to me, occasionally rubbing her forearm against my shoulder. Biming walked on the inner boundary of the mountain path, gripping his sister’s hand tightly. A few times we slipped navigating the rain-

slicked stone.

Every few dozen steps, we passed a new stone carving, some depicting heaven, others depicting hell. Each of hell's eighteen circles received its own treatment. In the first, a legion of sinners must climb a mountain made out of knives. In the second the dead are fried alive. In the last the most heinous spirits exhaust their bad karma over eons of pain. I believed in no heaven and I believed in no hell. I was there only to shepherd these children—a brother and sister, one older one younger than me—to safety, to reprieve from this earthly desert and its unlimited expanse.

So I told myself as I ushered the siblings past depictions of the four celestial kings, wicked-faced generals charged with protecting the Buddha from outside intrusion. My spirit blinked woefully in my chest, begging me to return, but in its own soul it knew the time to save my sister had long passed. Gradually its elegy gave way to a slow resentment. But its disdain could not dislodge from my heart the atomic spirit of Mao Zedong Thought.

At times the mountain seemed infinite in height. In the thick and heavy rain we could not tell how far away rose the summit, or how far we had already traveled. Our vision narrowed to the few meters before us and the few meters behind. "There will be shelter," I reminded the siblings. Biming quietly cried. Looking down toward Lanzun I could see only a thick mist. We would have died had we stayed behind. Despair gripped Bo Biming: his steps slowed and his hand slipped from Xinyi's. She took a deep breath and began to sing:

The east is red, the sun is rising.

China has brought forth a Mao Zedong.

He works for the people's happiness,

He is the people's great saving star.

Her words pierced the darkness like sunlight and illuminated the great, shining path ahead. Bless her for her devotion; bless her for the brightness of her voice. In all these years I have known not a single soul to invite the song so beautifully. Her red armband shined from her shoulder. I knew she sang for her brother, but I imagined she sang for me. My sister deserved to be left behind, I kept telling myself. I was with new Sister now.

#

A few days after leaving Xianjiang, I wrote Xinyi a new letter.

1990 November 30

My long-lost Xinyi,

For years I have loved you. For years I have yearned to be your brother and lusted at your memory. I have turned you into a fetish, and for that, I apologize.

I cannot mail you the letters I write because they become too dark, too subversive from the first line. You might think that I write such perversions because I cannot contain them, but I don't. I write them so that I do not have to send the letters.

I wanted to tell you that I have met a nice girl. We had dinner several times last week. She is a little younger than me, but that does not matter. She wears lipstick and keeps her hair long.

Someday I will muster the courage to seek you out in Xinjiang. You must wait, patiently, for me to settle my affairs.

I'm sorry. I will not send this letter.

Eternally yours,

Wu Lihao

Evidently my sexuality had not been misplaced. I was never with another man—I could not imagine the thought—but sometimes I dreamed of Dong Hi. Did he act out of rabid delirium, or was he expressing a true affection for me? I imagined what would have happened had we gone further—and then I remembered, nauseously, Du Hong.

Xinyi was my one pure love—the only woman I knew growing up that I did not taint with my own action. I recognize that I have idolized her, that I have treated her as a sacrificial object upon which my salvation depends. Perhaps I should have taken Biming's advice and departed from my hermitage—but I felt one of few among many. I cannot swim upstream forever.

#

At the mountain's summit stood a stone temple, carved into the rock itself. Its mouth opened like a yawning turtle. The stairs inside ascended to a cave and a hollow shell. No light penetrated its domed roof; we could barely see one another. Bo Biming shivered violently as his sister hushed him; I cast a blanket over their shoulders and set about exploring the temple-cave. It consisted of a single large room with six brief staircases, the first leading out toward the entrance and the others terminating in small cramped rooms. I felt around in the darkness and found paper, linen, incense in the chambers: cells for bygone monks. Most of these places were used to house soldiers after the Liberation, but the comforts of the chamber felt greater than what

a soldier's condition dictates.²⁹ Running my hand across the wall, I found a bookshelf, and on it, many dusty tomes. I selected a few and brought them out to the central room, where the Bos sat talking in hushed voices about the storm. "I don't know how it's possible," Xinyi was saying. "Remember the blizzard last year, no one predicted it. Maybe this is the same."

"But it's the desert," said Bo Biming. Xinyi could not address his concern. "When do you think it will stop?" he asked.

"Soon."

In the center of the central room, I stumbled across a fire pit. If this temple had a fire pit, then it must too be ventilated for smoke. Tossing the books into the pit, I dug around in my bag for a book of matches. When the tomes caught flame, the light from the fire illuminated the room. We saw along the wall eloquent earthen carvings of demons and dragons, bodhisattvas and arhats woven together like a stone tapestry. As I hung our wet blankets on tent poles by the fire, Xinyi placed her hand against one of the stone dragons. "Listen," she said. "Water's draining through it." I looked up to admire the handiwork.

"Don't we smash it?" Bo Biming said. "Old culture." I felt a warm, protecting nature bubble up beneath my skin. But I did not act. This attitude was my spirit summoning strength.

"We'd need hammers," Xinyi said. "Or axes." This cave was carved into the mountain itself.

We decided that frail Biming should be the first to dry himself by the fire. At first I began to strip too, but Xinyi stopped me, said male or female, he would be more comfortable around a sibling than a stranger. Her words stung, but I understood them. So I buttoned my wet shirt and descended the twenty steps to the entrance of the cave.

²⁹ They would have stripped bourgeois luxuries from the temple before ever considering its occupation.

Standing in the threshold, I looked down upon Lanzun. A thick mist hung around its circumference, but the temperature had begun to cool from the center out. Water surged above the cliff face and lapped at the mountain's foot. I could see only the narrow tip of the Wu Complex's tallest tower; soon this too was consumed by the growing flood. A pang of guilt. And then, the voice of my spirit:

The entire world taken was taken by flood.

I shook my head but the words rattled in my brain. Lanzun before looked like a bowl of soup, debris floating like vegetables at the surface of an unending broth. The narrow hills that framed the valley ran over with water. Searching through my little red book, I asked Chairman where this flood met with his Thought. Knit your brows and you will hit upon a stratagem. But I found nothing. I floundered through the pages, seeking guidance, seeking radiance, by the sky grew yellow. The water, tainted by the Gobi desert, took on a yellow hue . . .

Wu and Wu took shelter in the stomach of the stone turtle.

Another pang of guilt brought me to my knees. Squinting out down into the valley I searched for the shadow form of Sister swimming for shore and saw nothing but debris. A deep moan loosened from my chest. Where was my spiritual atom bomb? Where was my resolve? Could I not banish the class enemy and stand behind my actions in the morning?

Wu and Wu were favored by Nüwa. She created them first, out of dust.

I imagined her body floating in the water, her arms still bound to the handrail. Then I felt what my spirit was going to say before it said it; I felt the words sting against my cheek.

She did not name her first children Bo and Bo.

“Stop!” I bellowed. “Stop! Stop!” I yelled, throwing my head against the ground.

You have abandoned her, said my spirit with contempt.

“Purify the ranks!” I said. “Smash the four olds! Long live Chiang Kai-Shek!”

I gasped, cupped my hands over my mouth and fell onto the steps. “Long live Chiang Kai-Shek. Long live Chiang Kai-Shek!” The words escaped through my fingers though I did not will them; my mouth was not my own to close. “Long live Chiang Kai-Shek!” I shouted, my voice echoing in the valley. “Long live Chiang Kai-Shek!” Xinyi appeared above me, wrapped in a blanket—“Sister,” I shouted at her deliriously, “it’s trying to turn me away from Mao Zedong’s Revolutionary Line! Long live . . . It wants me to die, it wants me to die!”

“Shh, shh,” said Xinyi, cradling my head in her breast. “Sister,” I moaned, “I was the favored child, now I have betrayed my own blood, I have betrayed my country, long live Chiang Kai-Shek! I betrayed everything! I could have saved her, Sister! I could have saved her! Oh, it wants me to betray our Leader! It wants to, it wants to . . .”

I broke away from Xinyi, leaping to my feet. Ten rain-slicked meters spanned the distance between me and the edge of the mountain; the flood beneath glistened in the rain. Digging one foot deep into the stone I took off from the cave-mouth and sprinted toward my death. In my mind I saw myself make the final leap. I would leap higher and further than the Monkey King from the Buddha’s hand and I would execute the most graceful turn in the air, somersaulting ten times before striking the surface of the endless sea. If I survived this fall, I would be immortal. I would see just as the monk Xuanzang did my body drift by; I would ask, who was that we just saw? and my immortal spirit would tell me that it was *me*, and I would greet the Lord Buddha himself in a palace beneath the waves. How sweet tasted this final freedom. How sweet the stories of the past!—to never again remember past bitterness, to deliver, by hand, the 5,048 lost scriptures to the Chinese people, to rebel against heaven, and at last to take the first naked step from figure to Man. I could be purified of history. I could return to the

original Wu and Wu.

But I did not reach the edge. Shouting, Bo Xinyi tackled me to the ground. As our bodies lay on stone, I felt my mind slip. How many times in these eight days had I been pinned down? Too many. The Marxist inside me absconded my will to take my own life. *What a petty idea*, the Chairman said. *All men must die, but death can vary in its significance*. Xinyi was saying something, but I could not hear her. I could hear only my Chairman: *Wherever there is struggle there is sacrifice, and death is a common occurrence. Nevertheless, we should do our best to avoid unnecessary sacrifices*.

My spirit asked, *Was your sister not a sacrifice?* I struggled against Xinyi, beating my own head against the stone. She thrust her fingers into the space between my skull and the mountaintop, bearing the brunt of each self-inflicted blow. “Let me die, let me die!” I yelled, my voice otherworldly. Suicide to escape punishment by the party was infinitely irreprehensible, but I sought death to escape my own guilt—

“Lihao,” Xinyi said, “I need you to be strong!” I opened my mouth and let rainwater flood it, hoping that I would drown. “Lihao,” she said, “you saved me! You saved us! Don’t forget what she did to you, Lihao—”

I opened my eyes into the childhood, Sister kneeling on the floor, scissors in hand as my body struggled through my mother, my father shouting at the midwife. Three years later I saw Beijing children tease her for her accent, her slowness, her trusting nature. She stuck her tongue to a pole in winter and could not get it free. Then I saw her waiting in our ancestral home, still bound, not struggling, her eyes clear as water lapped at her feet. “You gave me the gift of a slow death, Lihao,” my vision said. “It has given me time to contemplate my life.”

I blinked and I stood on an unfamiliar mountain. The great classic of China stretched out

in all directions for ten ten-thousand li: green tracts of grassland, yellow and red deserts, seas wider than the ocean; creatures and gods inhabited every outpost. The ground was clear of people; it was wet and fertile.

Beside me stood another me: a figure alike in size, stature and depth. A face that mirrored mine in its blankness, its godly symmetry. Hair hung from the figure's brow to its waist; robes, fitting loosely, dragged across the ground. The sun shone high above, hanging forever at midday. From the mouth of the stone turtle, we looked upon our claim.

I did not need to speak to Wu: I knew her. Every thought echoed in our two-one minds. What I felt, she felt; our every action mirrored the other. We were identical, and though old, were children also.

Already, we had asked the mountain gods what to do. As we stood facing one another, we blushed, and then our thoughts diverged. When Wu shed her robe, I saw her womanly figure for the first time; when I shed mine I discovered an appendage. No longer could I see into her mind: I felt only the thoughts that she directed at me. We took names and gave birth to the whole of mankind.

"I've seen it," I said aloud to Bo Xinyi. "The entire expanse of human history, I've seen it, and it relies on me."

I saw a general dressed in a blue-collared shirt. He wore the insignia of the Guomintang on his arm. Another Wu stood at his side: a pretty girl with a ponytail, his girlfriend or his wife.

"I was once the Guomintang," I said. "I have been the Guomintang and I have been the Red Army. I have lived ten thousand lives."

Far from shattering me, the memory of this most recent life gave closure to the arcane verbal pathogen, to the impulse. When the train crashed, I remembered this life and I called out

in support of my generalissimo. When I die in my next, I will remember the Revolutionary Line.

Mao Zedong Thought teaches us to learn through contradiction. The struggle of opposites is ceaseless. By identifying the primary and secondary contradiction, we can free ourselves of dangerous thought. Only through recollection of my crime against the people could I hope to self-criticize and rehabilitate myself to the Revolutionary Line! “Oh, Xinyi,” I said, glowing, “I am filled with a will to live.” *In the morning I will take up paper from the cell and begin my self-criticism. I will get right with the Party and settle my inner contradictions.* “I have seen the expanse of history, Xinyi! And I am on Mao Zedong’s Revolutionary Line!”

#

We were taught that coming to terms with one’s own contradictions was both the most difficult and rewarding task. To prostrate yourself before the Party, full of self-criticism, was to cleanse your mind of all incorrect thought. So long as you sided with the will of the people, you would find no agony inside your mind.

I accepted my ancestors and I accepted the loss of my sister. I accepted that to survive cut off from the village, we would have to eat soup made from our comrades. Every small and large crime contributed only to my self-understanding; the dialectic constructs the whole. I spent every hour of daylight drafting my self-criticism. At six hundred pages, it dwarfs anything I have written since. Its language surpasses the most beautiful and unforgiven poets of my country’s exiled past. Bo Biming checked upon the progress of my work hourly, taking it upon himself to audit my rehabilitation. It’s no surprise he adapted well to the Cultural Revolution; he was adaptable. Not only could he watch a former hero admit wrongdoing, but he wanted to

participate in the process as well.

I apologized, principally, for failing to settle the two warring sides of my mind. A true revolutionary would not have let himself be led in two directions for as long as I did. I apologized also for spreading the words, “Long live Chiang Kai-Shek.” I explained that they were deeply rooted in my ancestry, that though my grandfather served in the PLA, some other relative served against him. I would have to work hard to overcome such a burdensome inheritance, but it was a struggle, I wrote, that I was physically, mentally, and spiritually prepared to undertake.

Near the end of my apologia, the rain stopped and the sun pierced the clouds. “We should go out there and salute the Chairman,” I said, gathering up the siblings and stepping out onto the summit. The sun shone brilliantly above us, its rays red and warm. We raised our red books and honored the Chairman; then we looked down to the desert below.

I would like to say that a rainwater sea spanned from horizon to horizon, glistening in the new dawn, but that image existed only in my mind. Instead, we saw water pouring out of the bowl-like valley, draining into the desert’s vast expanse. As the waters receded from the town’s outer rim, I saw that the houses had all been swept away.

The remainder of the water drained slowly, leaving me ample time to finish my self-criticism. Every morning and evening under the rising and setting sun I waited for the tip of the Wu Complex to show itself, but it never did. Once the ruined schoolhouse was uncovered I thought that surely the water should be low enough to see the Complex, but nothing. The only relic that rose from the center of town was the skeleton of the old lighthouse. The Complex’s tower should have stood just as tall. When the water finally receded entirely, there was nothing left of the Wu Complex but the skeleton of its foundation.

In 1981, a Party report attempted to give the recent history of Lanzun. It said that a massive earthquake in 1974 knocked Lanzun to the ground. The report did not explain why the town was abandoned when we arrived and it did not acknowledge the flood of 1966. I spoke to one of the cadres that contributed to the report; he said, “Comrade, we do not doubt your testimony, but the explanation you give is too complicated to put on the record.” I wondered for some years if the flood were even possible. Perhaps I was mistaken; perhaps the official record was correct.

I carried my self-criticism diligently as we descended the mountain. For a few hours, we wandered through the waterlogged remains of Lanzun, collecting food, supplies, and searching for Sister in the ruined Wu Complex. Holding my self-criticism close, I sifted through the ruins, hoping but not hoping to discover her body or some evidence that she had made herself away. I could not find traces of the tower at all: I thought perhaps the flood swept the structure away. Had I found Sister, I would have broken entirely. As it was, I could list her as an unresolved question, report her disappearance to a relevant cadre, muster a search effort in ten or fifteen years if I felt so inclined . . . I did not tell the children that the soup we survived on was made from the flesh of our comrades. I did not tell them either that I left my sister bound to a handrail.

Containing all of these contradictions in myself was by no means an easy task. My ancestral spirit still rambled about the Beginning, feeding me memories of the first goddess and the flood, but these memories, these beliefs were joined in dialectic by Mao Zedong Thought. Mao Zedong’s Revolutionary Line trumped my spirit’s superstitions; likewise our continued survival mattered more than the unfortunate circumstances by which the soup was obtained. I basked in the light of moral relativism: applied correctly, it was a revolutionary’s great weapon. I would see these children home, and I would maintain the Revolutionary Line. After a day of

fruitless searching, I concluded Lanzun a loss and set us out on our way.

I thought of my grandfather taking Luding Bridge. In their most desperate moments, soldiers of Mao were not Great, but Immortal. Through the Chairman, they achieved Great Works, Works of Mao Zedong Thought in the New China, Works I have learned by heart.

Men under Mao may perish but they do not die. I know that now. His truest soldiers achieve the impossible through sheer faith, blood-sweat, and Red—red angels sing of a country so lush and fertile that an entire people could spring from its Yellow Spring. Mao Zedong knew the secrets of his ancestors; his studies of ancient poetry and war allowed him to see through the old culture to what lay beyond, the emblem of a mind, an ancestral world that has waited long between inscriptions and practices, encoded on tablets as thick and reflective as the Chairman's Red Brow—without Contraries is no progression. I could love my sister and fear her too. I could believe her immortality while consenting to my part in her death.

Mao Zedong turned to ancient scholars for guidance, just as I followed my spirit to Lanzun. And it was thanks to my spirit leading me there that I was able to make a clean break from my sister, to expose her as a bad element and rescue the children from her grasp. That had been the purpose of Lanzun, hadn't it? At least, I told myself that it was.

Xinyi spoke to me little in that last day.³⁰ She relied on me for my navigation, my ability to follow roads washed away by the flood, but she no longer seemed to love me. The poor, peasant girl: I must have frightened her off with my revolutionary fervor. No matter: over the years she would come to understand. My spirit did not interfere with our departure: with Lanzun gone and my sister washed away, there was no new life for it to start. I spoke to it as I would speak to a child, chiding it for causing us to stray from the revolutionary road.

³⁰ Yes, it took only a single day to find the county seat. Just as Xuanzang spent only eight days returning from the West, we spent only one returning from the Gobi Shore.

I do not think I have felt closer to anyone as I did with the Bos, writing my self-criticism. I felt Biming's presence at my shoulder hour after hour, remarking on my style, and imitating officials he'd seen. Xinyi recognized the graveness of my task and my devotion to it, heating my portion of soup for me every night and serving it in a small stone bowl. "I see you as a sister," I said to her quietly as we descended the mountain. She smiled at me briefly, asked if I still had the map, and then edged toward her brother. I did not then sense her discomfort; I thought she was worn thin by the long days of isolation in the temple-cave.

On the road, her brother fell and she took him into her arms. He cried like a babe, saying that he wished they would go home soon, asking her how far we had left to go. Had I known how far they would grow apart—ha! I could be a better brother to you, Xinyi, than your brother would ever turn out to be—ha! Had I only known when we parted ways, I might have laid my claim—ha! I might have loved you then, and maybe, if I told you, you would never grow to resent me—ha! As if there were any action I could take, as if my wish could save us.

I thought fondly of them—I still do—as they were in the desert, as they seemed on the platform. When I think back, the large ambiguous part of me regrets not going with them. There was a life waiting for me in Xinjiang, a life away from my sister, my father and my Chairman.

But I had to return to Beijing. There I could present my self-criticism and meet with my Red Commander-in-Chief.

#

It was funny, the scene at the station: both brief and indistinct. Biming broke down into tears as the west-bound train rumbled up to the station. Xinyi kept her composure, holding her

lips tight and her nose high. Was I hurt by her coldness, her unapproachability? No. I thought only that the pain of our parting was too great for her to bear; we were raised to contain tightly our feelings of love. “Xinyi,” I said as the train moaned to a stop. People began milling about the platform—peasants, mostly, with a few Red Guards mixed in; a scant crowd, nothing like the bustling group at the opposite platform where, in an hour, the train to Beijing would depart. A boy came by selling Mao pins. Of course he did not sell them, but offered a trade: five small pins for one large badge. Xinyi stooped down to talk to him. “Xinyi,” I said again. People trickled out of the train cars. “Send me a letter,” I said when she finally looked up from the boy. I shoved a folded sheet with my address into her hands. “I’ll come to visit after I check on the situation in Beijing.”

“Lihao,” said Biming, “I’ll miss you.” He embraced me from the side.

“Bring what you’ve learned back with you. I’m counting on you to uphold the Revolutionary Line.” I looked back to Xinyi. She averted her gaze, turning over her ticket in her hand.

#

“You scared me,” she said without making eye contact. We’d at last breached the core issue, the question of why she never wrote. “You changed completely, Lihao. I didn’t think you were one of those revolutionary nuts.”

I did not think that I was a revolutionary nut either. When I handed my self-criticism to my father for his feedback, I did not expect him to hit me with it.

“Lihao,” he said, “you cannot attach your name to this!” He burned it before I could

protest.

I wrote a dazibao denouncing him, claiming that he stifled revolution. But I did not include the details of his crime. I did not say that I wrote a self-criticism; I did not say that he burned it, or that I left my sister to die.

I left home to live in my middle school dormitory. I tried to live the life of a model citizen, applying to join the Party and the PLA. Eventually I was sent to settle the Great Northern Wastes in Heilongjiang, but I did not complain like my comrades. Every day, I worked on the terraced fields, and every night, I reported to the Chairman. I gave him my every word.

Chairman rescued me from a life of utter tradition. After resolving my inner conflicts through the lively application of Mao Zedong Thought, I could see the intentions of my ancestral spirit clearly: to isolate me, to bind me to my sister, and to recreate the ancient myth of the brother and sisters Wu and Wu. It missed the Old China and wanted to start anew. I wondered: had my sister been with me, had we, instead of the Bos and I, taken shelter in the stone turtle, would my spirit's flood have consumed the world? Some nights, I believe that it did, and that the people I see now are mere figures of the life that I once knew. After Heilongjiang—I left in 1978, making me one of the last rusticated youth to leave—I made a living for myself on a farm twenty kilometers outside of Beijing, preferring a life of isolation to involvement in a work unit. How could I consent my fate to the dead? You see, as the years progressed the contradictions morphed. For a time Mao Zedong Thought dominated my ancestral spirit, but the impact of the atom bomb dulled. Gradually, neither side took precedence over one another . . . that was about when I started writing letters to Xinyi. The years after the Cultural Revolution are a blur, even as I work through them now.

One month ago, I stood on the border of what would not long be the Soviet Union. Xinyi

had left me; Soviet Kazakhstan spanned the white horizon like an open hand. I imagined the Buddha, questioning my claim to power, the border spanning the five fleshy pillars of his outstretched hand. We both knew that one day I would return to the palm.

One month ago, I told Xinyi that I wanted to take Sister's journey from Xinjiang to Beijing. The course would take us back through Lanzun. We could experience again the Gobi Shore, and attempt to reawaken some part of our lost youth. And one month ago, Xinyi rejected the plan.

So I left on my own from the snowy border, bedroll, bottles, and rations on my back. I told myself I was making the trip out of some duty to my sister; really, I wanted to remember my application of Mao Zedong Thought. Too long had I lived in isolation and relative comfort; the desperation that produced clarity was long-lost and bleeding on the wind.

Really, I listened to my ancestral spirit as it called me back to Lanzun. Its voice was as warm and seductive as it had ever been, and with nearly two decades between me and the Chairman's death, I had little to fight it off with.

When the Cultural Revolution was declared a mistake, and the Gang of Four prosecuted for its crimes, I felt a deep, fundamental betrayal. Through the Revolution, the Revolutionary Committee favored the liberal, the liberated, the left-leaning majority. Then we were told that the left was wrong, that more conservative thought would guide this country forward. Socialism with Chinese characteristics: I spit on this revisionist plan. The road Deng Xiaoping took was too easy. China will never again have a leader as idealistic and morally pure as Mao Zedong. Biming would tell me that I failed to adapt when it was the world that failed me. So caught up was I in the loss of my revolutionary spiritual guide that I did not notice the old culture encroaching. I did not question its call.

So I left the former Soviet Border; I buried my feet in the snow. Ten thousand li stood between me and my hermitage. I would journey across this land the way Sister wanted, and I would pass through the desert that forged my youth.

You ask me: did I ever feel guilt? Of course I was guilty. Without my presence on that train, Du Hong, Dong Hi, and my sister would be alive. But did I *feel* guilt?

Today, passed through the valley and entered Lanzun. The first thing I saw was the old lighthouse, reconstructed. Concrete was poured in to fill its empty shape. Around it rose row after row of squat houses and courtyards, a schoolhouse, a market, and fields rich with citrus, manned by heavy equipment. Chickens squawked as they shuffled past me. Hundreds of people walked through the town's narrow streets.

At its center, the Wu Complex had been rebuilt. It was surrounded by a tall fence: "Tourism strictly prohibited," read a sign in more than one language. I waited for the locals to go to sleep and then scaled the wall. Landing lightly on the other side, I made my way to the front door. Yellow tape spanned the boundary: "Reconstruction in progress, do not disturb." But the tape had already been torn: someone had entered this door.

Revolutionary thought fades entirely. We enter the present. As I step through the threshold, my spirit takes hold of my body with a passion I have not felt since my youth. It fills me with conviction and reverence. I cannot believe how thoroughly this house has been restored. The wooden chair still stands impossibly heavy on its four clawed feet. On the wall behind it, my ancestors inscribed four ornate characters of ancient Chinese:

Just as violence begets violence,

worlds beget worlds.

My spirit shines like fire in my every cell; my epidermis glows. I feel young and my body

fills the room.

The door to the stone garden opens. As my eyes adjust to the blinding rays I make out the figure of a woman, shaped like my mother, hair hanging down to her waist. She wears a red silk dress embroidered with valleys and flowers. An enormous phoenix crown spans her brow. The headdress is made of many layers, the outermost an arrangement of flowers, carved out of topaz, the innermost a series of pearls on taught red fibers. Woven seals hang like earrings from the crown's side; thick cords of pearls and red ropes dangle from the seals. I have in my lifetime ever seen in person a woman dressed for such a marriage. In my past lives, I have wed many wives, but none in such beautiful garb. Was she a member of the imperial family? A vision of a Wu that walked through this door centuries ago? The woman approaches, expressionless. She resembles my mother; she resembles my sister. O spirit, what lifetime do I remember now?

She reaches out her pale hand to stroke my face. As her palm touches my cheek, the room fills with light: paper lanterns hanging from a thousand strings illuminate the grand foyer. A regal family surrounds me: a grandmother, a grandfather, two aunts, two uncles, three young cousins and the female servants. They clap as thick music plays; the woman and I dance with elegance as the hall watches, as bowl after bowl of wine is served and poured. I wear a red gown and headdress matching my wife's, our sleeves running into one another, our faces both painted a pristine white. I recognize the face behind the make-up. "How are you here?" I whisper as we turn. I can hardly believe that we are surrounded by so many loving faces, by such a powerful and noble family as Lanzun's Wu Clan.

My sister does not answer the question. She draws me close and then spins away from me, her dress pirouetting around her. The feast has ended; our vows have been spoken; we are married under imperial law.

In the naked lightless foyer, Sister and I weep into one another's arms. I barely recognize her, so thoroughly has she aged. Though her body is young, her hair has already started to gray.

In another light, she smiles lightly but does not betray a nuanced expression. I weep into her shoulder; she holds me without speaking, she comforts me without words.

We stand brother and sister on a mountain described in *the Classic of Mountains and Seas*, looking out on the world we have just married into. Beneath us, the endless plain of antiquity blooms with human life.

"How did you survive?" I ask in one lifetime. She does not answer. In another, she weeps and says,

Your love for me is more fundamental

Than the ruin of the world, Lihao.

Her dress shifts from red to blue. In some lights, the hall is well-lit; in others, mere candles cast it in a somber haze. The clawed-foot chair on the center of the platform never changes, but the rug leading up to it portrays a series of designs.

In some lifetimes, our love for one another outshines the din of voices, overcomes the smell of wine and cooked food; in some lifetimes, Binjiang's scent occupies all five senses. In others, our tears are the last emotions left of our lives. I can no longer tell which is present and which is past. If I squint hard enough, I might see our future lives, but the future lies blank before me. I see my body wrapped in my sister's arms, as she stares expressionless over my shoulders. Something grave has come undone.

In our original lifetimes, we did not take one another's arms for love or fellowship. We wed out of duty. We wed to populate the human race.

When we married in red garb, we married in love. No force political or filial could

separate our bond, and of course, the ancestors approved. Binjiang was my cousin then, not my sister. Why had she been born my sister now?

For as many lifetimes as we lived, we had not been born brother and sister since the original Wu and Wu. What did it mean that we were born brother and sister now?

Sister still wears the clothes of Revolution: the green shirt, the green sneakers, and the belt around the waist. But she has shed the red armband. She no longer calls herself a Red Guard.

Which Sister is the present? The one that sobs with me, barely capable of speaking, or the one that holds me blankly, that assures in some vague and spiritual way that I will be alright?

I ask: "How did you survive the flood?"

The first Wu answers:

We hid in the mouth of the stone turtle

The red-dressed Wu says:

No rain could separate

our love so simple and pure.

My sister sobbing says, "By a miracle."

My sister staring says, "I did not."

In the dark room I break free of her embrace and stare. Two Sisters occupy the space of one: two postures, two pairs of gleaming eyes and two opposing faces. One sits with her knees splayed out, her hands on the floor and her face twisted into a deep-set frown. The other kneels in perfect posture, her hands folded on her lap, a serene smile across her face. "We died again, and again, and again," one says; I cannot tell which. Then the disheveled sister speaks: "We drowned, we spat out water and then we drowned again." Our grandfather suffered the same fate crossing Luding Bridge, rising from the Dahu River to walk across the opposite bank.

The complex fades into a grassland, where a general of the Guomindang officiates a military wedding. Binjiang now takes the role of a young, enterprising officer, myself a sergeant. We wear our gray Guomindang uniforms with pride.

Sister approaches me: the true Sister, the double-Sister; I cannot reconcile the contradictions in my mind. Red-dressed sister kisses me unashamedly; blue-dressed Sister looks up from under her veil. Guomindang Sister smiles so brightly. It has always been Wu and Wu.

But when I open my eyes to the present, when I see Sister for one single entity, she does not approach with enthusiasm, but dread. Her wide panicked eyes betray the sureness of her steps as her out-turned wrists spread into embrace. It has always been Wu and Wu, from the beginning of mankind to this place here today. I step back but find myself stepping forward, opening my arms and mouth, my spirit in control of my every action.

In heaven we approach each other in solemn white robes, hair dressed in gold fibers, our expressions and faces and figures identical. We both bear the same crown of governance. We are the most fundamental union of all the world's life.

In the present, as our faces grow close, our eyes leak. *Please*, we say. *Our lives are not meant for this. We have grown apart.* But our spirits would not have that: in this room, they act in their full domain. Smashing our bodies together, they feed us visions of our marriage under heaven, the marriage of our souls. "I'm sorry," Sister says from her absent mouth. Sister becomes many, and, fading into the thousand loving unions, the sense of wrongness begins to slip away. I see now why my spirit wanted her and me on the mountain: with no other woman could I share this history. To no other woman could my soul be wed.

How long have I said we are not controlled by our fates? How many times have I resisted my spirit, have I buried its advice under Mao Zedong Thought? Why, now, do I watch myself

slip into my spirit's will? I have almost faded into the sea of my many lives when—

“Class struggle,” I say. Sister's eyes shoot open. I do not know where the words come from, but more well up. “Revolution. Dictatorship of the masses.”

Sister stares at me astonished, and then contributes: “Mao Zedong Thought.”

Ah, I can hear her voice echo in my mind. My thousand lives begin collapsing like a waveform, approaching a single point.

“The east is red,” I say.

“The sun is shining,” she replies.

China has brought forth a Mao Zedong.

Instantly my thousand lives collapse into a single narrative, coalescing into the fiber of my history which I now cast off like a cloak. My spirit moans as the Complex falls down around me; my sister withdraws from my arms and then redoubles in a sibling's embrace. “Marxism,” I say.

“Leninism,” she answers.

“Loyalty.”

“War.”

The atom bomb explodes and the Wu Complex collapses all at once. It was never restored to begin with: it existed only as an illusion to fool us both. Sister and I stand in the last remaining ruins, arm in arm, united but unmarried, in love but not lustful. Whatever thought our spirits harbored of preserving our lineage evaporates in the desert heat. Standing today in my ancestral home with a clear mind, I tell you: laughter is not the gift of humanity.

Laughter is a contagion, spread from lesser animals to us.

Listen to the hyenas craze and laugh from the desert in pursuit of their prey, and tell me:

does that laughter sound human and does it sound pure?

Xinyi: I know somewhere you still wait through me. I have seen things through on my end, now allow me to love you. Together we will break a cycle of ten thousand years.

With Sister at my side, I return to the revolutionary road. I pay for her provisions and show her the plan on my map. "I've already been to the border," I told her, "but if you are willing, we can walk the rest of the way."

Bibliography

The sources listed here served primarily as background literature of relatively minor impact with a few notable exceptions. *Red Dust* by Ma Jian introduced me to the Gobi Shore. *China's Creation and Origin Myths* gave me the background in Chinese mythology I needed to construct this novella's creation myth. *Scarlet Memorial* by Zheng Yi challenged my creativity in rendering the violence of the Cultural Revolution, and *Collective Killings in Rural China During the Cultural Revolution* by Yang Su helped me understand the extent of this violence. *The Cultural Revolution: A Very Short Introduction* by Richard Kraus proved to be an invaluable reference for organizing the events and actors of the Cultural Revolution. *Mao Cult* by Daniel Leese gave me the theoretical background to employ Mao Zedong Thought in dialog and rhetoric.

This bibliography is meant to provide factual reference and does not include works of fiction. Throughout my research period, I read several Chinese novels, both classical and modern. Most notable among them are the classics *Journey to the West* and *Dream of the Red Chamber*, which both shaped the structure and allegory of this novella.

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