



2:00 A.M., I wake to rain, apartments dark where other travelers sleep.

In my dream my father came back, dressed in the clothes we'd buried him in, carrying a jar of blood in one hand, his suit pockets lined with black seeds.

His gray wool suit seemed hardly worn, except for the shoulders and elbows, which were buffed smooth, I guessed, from rubbing against his narrow coffin. And then I saw his shoes. They were completely wrecked; their leather cracked, nicked, creased, cross-creased; their puckered seams, where the stitching came unraveling, betrayed his naked feet. Sockless, his ankles were frightening, and only the thinnest soles kept him from walking in bare feet.

I began to cry, realizing He walked the *whole way*. I thought of him climbing alone the hundreds of identical stairs up from his grave in Pennsylvania, and then, obeying some instinct, walking west to Chicago, toward his wife, children, and grandchildren. When did he begin his journey, I wondered. In the dream, I felt ashamed, disturbed by the thought that while he looked for me,

for us, his family, we were quite unaware of his arrival, which might have taken him years for all I knew, since no one ever told him where to find us. It hurt to think of him walking for years along the blind shoulders of highways, through fields, along rivers, down sidewalks of North American cities and villages; walking day and night; talking to no one; walking; a dead Chinese man separated from the family he brought to this country in 1964; a stranger to most when he was alive; an Asian come to a country at war with Asia; now a stranger in death. I kept looking at his shoes.

The family began to gather for a photo to commemorate his return, during which commotion he seemed distracted; he had an appointment to keep. While everyone stayed busy seating and reseating before the camera, crowding to fit into view, I saw he sat not in his accustomed place, at the center, but, instead, at the end of the front row where he seemed not only comfortable but uninterested. I thought to myself, I hope his shoes don't show up in the photo. That *would* shame him, such shoes, and the raw ankle *bone*. And then I was certain he'd soon ask me a question and I wouldn't know the answer.

Immediately after the photo was taken, he stood up and walked over to me, who, come to think of it, had been sitting in the dead man's accustomed place. He told me to say good-bye. We had to go. I would be going with him. His words were a blow. I didn't move. Noticing, he asked if I wanted to come with him after all. I answered, of *course*. I lied.

He said, Very well. I'll wait for you *by* the locks. Then he went out the door.

I looked at the thirteen people I call my family, and felt suddenly excluded. But then I felt, like miles of water rising in me, a feeling that I could never leave them.

But my father's shoes. How wrecked they were, how old and battered. I said out loud, He's so poor. *His* shoes, poor father, his shoes. I felt I should go with him, and began to think over the many names and faces of people I'd have to say good-bye to, concluding that going with my father was what I must do. But when I walked over to say good-bye to you, Donna, I could not touch your face.

If it meant leaving, I could not bring myself to touch you. I began to tremble; trembling, I needed to touch you. Yet, I could not, no matter what if.. .yet it meant. . . as it is. . .

Love, what is night? Is a man thinking in the night the night? Is fruit ripening in the night the night?

I remember fishing with my sister by the light of paper lanterns, the bamboo jetty at the beach in Ancol. Lying on our stomachs, we peered over the edge down into the seawater, and saw, below a surface of many tiny waves, schools of octopi, their eerie bulb heads glowing.

Night is night as is, without hands. Night is night even if it's a basin of fire. Night is night though it's tentacle and maelstrom, night even a bloody custard, the body, dear trough, even if my hand a possible face . . . night past the color of archipelago. *O*, how may I touch you across this chasm of flown things? What

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won't the night overthrow, the wind unwrite? Where is the road when the road is carried? What story do we need to hear, so late in childhood? This early in the future, roses exact all our windows, night the wound and way in, night my pink, rude thumb stopper and sink, mustard and ache, my club and good yam, the radish king in his red jacket and green embroidered slippers, writing his letter to the queen of the snails, saying, **I crave your salty foot, suffer me a drink from your horn.** Night, mobile, changes. Though night is night. Even if it's fever and teaspoons, hobbyhorse and train track, the train car empty except for our family and two passengers at the other end, a young woman in a trench coat and the baby in her arms, wrapped in the piss-sodden pages of a Spiegel catalog.

The woman and child had obviously not bathed in days, and the child, who had been bawling on and off for hours, would sometimes convulse, its arms and legs making a frantic swimming in the air, its hands now clawing, now stuck inside its mouth. The woman sometimes opened her coat and unbuttoned her dress to give the child first one breast, then the other, but both were dry. We guessed that both the mother and the baby hadn't eaten in a long time. The woman's eyesockets were bruised by lack of sleep; her teeth and jaw jutted under her skin. The child looked sickly, thin, but its cries were strong. And when it grew exhausted from crying or sucking at its mother's dry paps, it whimpered in her lap, while she stared out the black window, past her own face, to the country passing outside, the country in

which our family had so recently arrived.

Earlier, at the station in Seattle, we'd seen the woman peel layers of cold newspaper from the infant's naked body, then wrap the freezing child in a drier, more recent edition someone had left folded on the waiting-room bench. The child's sallow, puny body was smeared with newspaper ink. The mother, dirty, gaunt, looked wild.

On the train, she would almost nod to sleep, but the baby squirmed on her knees, nearly falling off, and she would start awake, and pull the child closer. I realize now she herself was a child, not much older than my sister, who was fourteen at the time.



WE HAD BEEN living on butter cookies. We had two tins of them we'd eat among the six of us, my parents and their four children. Butter cookies and the sixty dollars in my mother's purse were to see us through the next few days until my father found work. But my mother decided we could spare the unopened tin. So she untied it from our bundle, and rummaged a sweater from her suitcase and gave the things to my sister to take to the girl, who wrapped the child in the sweater that must have smelled of my mother's perfume. And then the girl began to wave a cookie in front of the baby's face, meaning to feed him. But he, who couldn't have been more than four or five months old, wouldn't eat the cream-colored square held before him.

The girl grew more impatient, the baby bawled

louder. Finally, she, who'd said nothing all along, not a word, not even to hush the child, looked over her shoulder at us and, exasperated, pleaded, "He won't eat." Only my father spoke English back then, and he told my mother what the girl said. After a few seconds, my mother went and sat down beside the girl. She asked if she could hold the child, asked in a language the girl most likely had never heard before, and one mother passed her burden to the other. I saw my mother chew up a biscuit and, all the while humming to the child, and lightly rocking, pass the spit-brightened, masticated paste of her mouth into his.

At first the child didn't take it, but after a few more tries, he ate. The younger mother followed the example. Mouthful by mouthful, the girl fed the child, and eventually they both slept. That woman and child had a further destination than we had that night. When the train stopped in Chicago, we gathered our belongings and walked past without waking them, and continued out through the waiting room of Union Station, and passed through the vaulting arch flanked by statues of two women, one holding her head bowed and bearing an owl on her shoulder, the other raising a naked arm, on which is perched a rooster.

Night is the night and restless. But whose restlessness is this? Mine or night's own? What is night?

My mother and my night are deciding which portion of my fate they'll keep, she in a jar with her celeries and bitters, he in a coat pocket, next to his liver and other vestigial organs. Either she'll divide me with a kitchen

knife, or he'll filter me through his teeth. Soon, I may have to rock them both to sleep.

My mother and my night are weighing the separate portions of my fate they own, she as the darker wing to her black hair, he as one more finger to his scary hand. Will she fuss to sew what's mine to me? Will he join me to my shoulder bone? Don't they know I've hidden my fate inside a peach, which isn't round because it's in search of a theme, or a stem, or sugar, or a leaf, but a destiny? Whose night is it forming inside the fruit? Night is the night's peony and monstrous forehead, so our brief bowls, shattered, might spill the sea.

Night is the night carried, death by the rectangular, black-lacquered trunk my father hauled on his back until he got tired, and then my brothers and I took turns shouldering it. It sits now under the livingroom window of my mother's apartment, its lid inlaid with jade and mother-of-pearl, depicting a scene from a Chinese opera. I'm dying of the white bedsheet my mother uses to cover it, and the potted white begonia that sits on the sheet, dropping its flowers that lie like lopped ears pressed to a story. Inside the trunk, between many layers of blankets, wrapped in cloth and old newspapers, are the cool jades and brittle porcelains my parents carried over the sea, and a box that used to hold a pair of women's boots. In that box are hundreds of black-and-white photographs of people I've never met, pictures like the one that sits in a gilded frame on the cabinet of my mother's big screen TV. It is a picture of my mother's family, a complicated arrangement of aunts and uncles,

first and second cousins, concubines and slaves, and each member sits or stands in strict accordance to his or her relation to my mother's grandfather, the Old President, Yuan Shih-k'ai. It is a feudal hierarchy impossible for me to understand completely, but which my mother grasps at a glance, remembering exactly if it was the Old Man's sixth son, Supreme Virtue, by the fourth wife, Rich Pearl, or the second daughter, Jade something, of the ninth concubine, Have Courage, who killed with a slingshot all the goldfish in the ponds that decorated the twenty acres of formal gardens my great-grandfather owned. And she knows exactly which wan face belongs to the uncle who, forbidden to marry his thirteen-year-old niece, in grief gave up his inheritance, left for Mongolia to live in a hut, let his hair grow to his knees, and wrote page after page of poems and songs about the one called Exquisite Law, who, in the photograph, is carried in the arms of a servant whose face has been blacked out, as all the servants in the photograph have been blacked out, so that the babies they hold (not their own, but the children of the masters) look like they're floating. And my mother remembers who it was that hid among the peonies to avoid having to kiss the corpse of the Old President's fifth wife, who was mourned publicly when she died, as befitted her station. Her fists stuffed with money, her mouth filled with pearls and coins, she was arrayed in her best silks, laid in a coffin of one hundred lacquer coats, and displayed in the living room for one hundred days, during which a procession of mourners, professional and personal, made their way in from

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the southern door and streamed out through the circular northern portal. Meanwhile, in the chrysanthemum garden, a population of paper figures were erected to mourn in silence this lady who had ruled the fifth household. Her family, as was custom among the very wealthy, had hired artisans to construct out of paper life-size figures of ladies-in-waiting, eunuchs, warriors, scholars, magicians, servants, courtesans, goatherds, and gardeners in every possible posture and attitude of reading, pontificating, viewing flowers, singing, grooming, meditating, sitting, standing, and serving tea. A host of paper mourners and their dogs, cats, peacocks, monkeys, and horses. An acre of figures so detailed and finely made each bore a different expression and distinct hairline. On the one hundredth day of mourning, the day of burial, all of them were to be burned, sent into the next world to attend the old woman whose death had demanded they be cut, creased, folded, and glued into presence. But my mother remembers that on that day, while monks from the local monastery prayed and chanted, sixteen elders banging and blowing shrill instruments in the smoke of thousands of bundled joss sticks reeking bitter sandalwood, a smell only a god could love, clanging and singing amid the smoke, all their words getting blown away on one of the windiest days of the year, while the family members began to dismantle the paper throng in order to carry them to the pyre, a wind came and began to blow the paper statues away. The figures were not made so flimsily that they could not withstand a little wind; in fact, the best arti-

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sans were so skilled at their craft that their handiwork could stand for months outside their shops as advertising. But the wind that attended my great-grandmother's burial was so great it lifted an entire paper pavilion, weighing several hundred pounds, along with the members of the court inside it, and straight up carried it away over the walls my great-grandfather had built to enclose the nine mansions of his nine wives and the satellite buildings where the servants were quartered. Family members, frantic, ran all over the grounds chasing paper ladies and paper oxen of assorted colors. But the old lady would have to make her final journey alone, for not even one of those mourners was left intact. The wind set them all free, and tearing.



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WHEN MY MOTHER, Jiaying, is a girl in China, she loves the summers in the mountains. The rest of the year, she lives in the city below, in the haunted mansion ruled by her father's mother, a woman as cruel as she is small and desiccated, and as selfish as her feet are twisted to fit into tiny hoof-shaped shoes of brocade. It is because of this woman, my mother insists, that drafty ghosts inhabit the countless rooms and myriad corridors of the old house, whose ceilings and rafters are so high that light never reaches them, giving Jiaying the feeling of living perpetually under a great, dark, impenetrable hood. It was from the rafters in the sewing hall, the darkest room in the entire complex, that a maid, four-

teen and newly hired, hung herself after only three months of waiting on the old woman.

The sewing hall is a building whose front face is wood and whose other three walls are windowless brick. Two double-door front entrances lead into a cavernous room of stone floors and two rows of three pillars each, painted thickly red, and spaced ten feet apart. Lined with tables at which thirty women sit behind mounds of various fabrics of any color, the room whines and rings with the rapid pounding of several hand-operated sewing machines. Forbidden to wear against their bodies any piece of cloth cut or sewn by men, all the female members of the nine households have their clothes made by women in the sewing hall. Thirty seamstresses, every day all year round making and mending the clothes of births and deaths for every female Yuan, cutting and sewing from patterns handed down generation to generation without mutation for nearly a century, so that almost everyone in Tientsin knows that the less fashionable you are, the older the money you come from. Thirty indentured workers, bought or born into bondage of cloth, sew in the great hall, drinking little cups of tea that amount to green seas, gossiping and telling stories. All day long, necks bent and fingers crooked to meticulous mending or making, by machine and by hand, embroidering, and weaving, and stitching, threading endless miles of spooled thread of all different colors and thicknesses. All different ages, the workers sit according to years of servitude and age, the oldest, having been there the longest, and whose eyes see the least

after years of strain, sit at the front of the room where there is the most light from the windows and doorways, while behind them in progressive densities of shadow sit the younger and younger ones less and less blind. Deepest, where the sunlight never reaches, sit the youngest ones, twelve and thirteen, the newly arrived, the tenderest with their sharp, clear eyes, sewing in shadow. Soon enough, though, they'll get to move forward more and more as the very oldest grow so blind they have to quit, just as they themselves, the younger ones, will see less and less, even as they move nearer and nearer the sunlight. By the windows sit a few women old and almost completely blind and whose hands are so twisted as to be not recognizable as hands anymore. Useless and used up by years of service, they tend to the countless cats that live in the sewing hall. Cats of all different sizes and shapes and colors, living on a gruel of rice and fish, or mice, or sometimes their own litters, they far outnumber their keepers, none of whom knows how they came to live there in the first place. Nameless and nondescript, they endlessly prowl along the walls and the legs of the tables, so that the workers sense a constant motion at their feet, a continual brushing past of fur.

Jiaying hates the sewing hall because of the cats. She hates the smell and the hundreds of little eyes behind the tables and in the shadows. She hates the countless tails curling and brushing past her when she is there on an errand. There are so many of them they can hardly be called pets. The ones who have the job of tending the brood sit by the windows sipping tea, chewing their

gums, and squinting. The oldest of them, who swears she remembers having sewed the President's scholar's robe for graduation, sits absently grinning to her toothless self. Whether she is recalling better days, or smiling in the knowledge of the fate of all those young pretty girls in the back, no one can tell.

It was here one morning someone looked up into the ceiling and there, where the swallows build their high unseen nests in the dark of the rafters and brackets, was one white sock dangling in midair. It was the white-stockinged foot of someone hanging from the rafters. Screaming and turning over chairs, the women cleared the sewing hall like frantic birds sprung from a box. Members of the nine households assembled in the yard and someone took the body down. The fifth wife's new maid had hung herself. Judging by all signs, she'd done it early in the morning. It must have been just light when she climbed up on a chair set on a table and scaled the rafters and scaffolding. Everyone speculated on what insanity made her go to so much trouble to hang herself from the highest ceiling in the whole complex. For days afterward everyone kept looking into the ceilings of whatever room or corridor they were in. And then people began to see the girl walking around. Even Jiaying's grandmother, who used to make the girl stay awake entire nights rubbing her feet, and beat her pitilessly if she fell asleep, claimed to have seen her once, but just once. She said she woke from a restful afternoon nap and had the feeling someone was in the room. Furious to have an uninvited guest, she opened her eyes to find the Little

Ugly, as she was fond of calling her because of her pocked face, sitting next to her. What did you do, *Nai Nai*? the granddaughters gasped who were listening to the story. What do you think I did? she gloated. I told her if she didn't behave I'd make her mother **who** sold her to me my maid **as** well. The girl never visited the old lady again, although others continued to see her.

But, Let's *not* talk about old things, is my mother's response most of the time I ask her about her childhood. Don't make **me** go back there. Like those evil-smelling, greenish black potions the servants cooked **and** served hot to me in winter for coughs **and** headaches **as** a child, the past is all one bitter draft to me, she says as my sister combs my mother's hair in the morning, by the window looking onto her garden. When I press her, she says, I can't tell if your head is an empty house, *or* a pot of boiling glue, and then inserts the alabaster comb into her loosely piled-up hair, a black nest, and waves a silver stray back with her hand summarily, as though to dispel so much cobweb or smoke. *Now* let's go buy some *fish*.

At the Beautiful Asia Market in Chicago, the refugee grocer is a bent, brown-colored man with a big black mole on his right jaw, and the fish tank is empty, except for some filthy water. The only fish I see are two carp afloat in a bucket propping a mop in it. So we'll buy the gnarled man's perfectly trimmed napa cabbages, but have to get our fish elsewhere. Elsewhere, my mother says, your head is always elsewhere, in the past *or* in the future. Why can't you *be* here? I wonder about an answer while I push a tinny cart with a crazy wheel down the

fragrant lanes of tea, aisles of lemon grass and sandalwood, musty narrows of spices and medicinal herbs, rows of shelves, and shelves of jars of chopped pickled mudfish and shrimp ferment, soybean paste and preserved monkfish, eel eyes staring out from brine, sealed stacks of biscuits and cocoa from Belgium and England, and cartons of instant noodles stacked to the ceiling. I browse with my mother, each of us keeping the same things we need for dinner as different lists, Chinese and English, in our heads, and my mother, because her eyes are bad, inspecting the goods with a spyglass.

In my mother's dreams, she wanders that old ground, the family compound, and it's evening, and becoming more evening. She's on an errand to the sewing hall, and the cloth in her hands is poorly folded. And I know by her description that it's the same path I walk in my own dream. In my mother's dream, she walks in the general direction of the sewing hall, but avoids it. In mine, I'm sitting on the steps and the doors are locked. In my dream, I sometimes stand among trees the way I stood three summers ago on Fragrant Mountain, and look across the valley to another mountain face, where my wife leads our children up a winding path. Below, my grandfather's bones scattered by the People's Army.

In my mother's dream, she is again a girl of sixteen in China, where she spends summer with her family on Fragrant Mountain, making the final two-day leg of the serpentine ascent through dense forests on muleback, in a train of twenty-five mules bearing her father, her mother, her father's concubine, three aunties, one

brother (the other having been banished by the grandmother), two of her sisters, fourteen and thirteen years old (the other two attending boarding school in France), her favorite cousin, the same age as her and recently orphaned, two of her brother's friends whom he met in New York while attending school there in the fall at Columbia University, three bodyguards armed with rifles and pistols, four household servants, one cook, three dogs, and various equipment and supplies. On the trip up the narrow path, while one of her sisters reads aloud from Zola or Balzac, Jiaying nibbles on fresh lychees, which they carry up the mountain. The mule bearing the burden of Jiaying's favorite fruit can't tell as that burden imperceptibly and gradually lightens, as Jiaying fills her mouth with its sweetness.

When she is a little girl in China, Jiaying's favorite food is lychee. For one brief season a year, the markets are full of that globose, hard-skinned fruit tied in pink string at the bundled stems, and her father sends the servants to buy them for her each morning. Unlike all the other fruits that smell and taste of sunlight compacted, then mellowed to sugar, lychee yields to her tongue a darker perfume, a heavy redolence damp with the mild edge of fermentation. How wonderfully fitting it seems to her that such milky, soft meat should be surrounded by a rough, brown reptilian leather of a slightly red cast when ripe, and made almost impenetrable by being covered in tiny rivets and studs. Summertime, she grows thin on nothing but lychee flesh. She waits each morning for the servants to bring bundles of it home, and

rather than have the fruit peeled and served to her in a porcelain bowl that fits precisely the bowl of her hand, she prefers to peel for herself the tough skin, rough to her fingers. Using her fingernails to puncture the exterior, she splits it open and takes with her teeth the white meat slippery with nectar, the whole plump bulb of it in her mouth, and eats it to the smooth pit, which she spits out, leaving on the verandah each morning a scattering of black stones and empty husks, sticky with sugar and swarming with bees. A servant sweeps the verandah, scolding her.

Ordinarily forbidden to go out beyond the confines of their home, a complex of nine mansions and attendant satellite buildings housing the families of the nine wives of Jiaying's grandfather, Jiaying and her sisters' only contact with the rest of the world has been for years through the private school they attend, where they make friends with girls who, while their families can afford the cost of private school, do not belong to titled households of rank, and who, as a result, are not bound to traditional ways and attitudes the same way Jiaying and her sisters are so strictly bound at home. When each of the Yuan sisters distinguishes herself in her studies, and is encouraged by her parents and her grandmother to continue her education after middle school, naturally, each of them takes advantage of the opportunity by enrolling in fashionable French and British boarding schools. All five of them except Jiaying, the oldest, who decided to stay home, where everything that surrounded her was so old, she was certain it must be permanent. The poems she

read were thousands of years old, the calligraphy she practiced was practiced by smart refined girls like her thousands of years ago, the house she lived in and the grounds surrounding it looked to be as old as anything else in the whole country, and as half buried. During the summer sand storms, when all the tiles, the latticed windows, the carved railings and figured eaves were packed with sand, and little dunes formed against the buildings, she knew it was sand broken off eternal mountains and then driven the whole way from the Gobi, that old fabled desert, and was on its way to that most ancient of bodies, the sea. And her grandmother, only forty-five but already walking with the aid of a cane and three or four servants, seemed to be some eternal fixture in the universe with her medicinal odors and old ways. How could she conceive of a future when everything around her felt like the end of things, the world's very culmination.

Of all the things packed onto the sweating mules, Jiaying writes in her diary dated June 6, 1939, an individual lychee is probably the lightest. Or else the calligraphy brushes. Only the little bamboo-handled goldfish nets are as light as the brushes. Next would certainly be the butterfly nets. Then Auntie's opium in its beautiful paper wrappings. Then the pipes. The weight of the rest of the things is distributed as evenly as possible: zithers and lutes, flutes, Ba's typewriter, and tea, mirrors, telescopes, fishing poles, and jars of embalming fluids, empty bird cages, dictionaries and books in Chinese, English, and French, subjects ranging from poetry and astronomy to The Art of War, and magnifying glasses,

boxing gloves, chess and mahjong sets, bows *and arrows*, slabs of salt- and sugar-cured meats, squat clay pots sealed in wax holding assorted preserved fruits and vegetables, and pages of rice paper bound in boards, ink blocks, and a monkey to grind the ink.

They ride slowly through increasingly clearer air, making frequent stops to picnic, shoot small game, and take photographs. The cool, immense night they spend at a rest station manned by servants they sent ahead days ago to prepare for their arrival. By candlelight, Jiaying writes in her diary, which she reads to her cousin: Miles *up from* the city. Many more miles to go. Here a place to rest. Ahead, another. And farther, another.

Their last stop before reaching the summit is the ancestral graveyard. An acre of meadow bounded on three sides by woods and on the fourth by the gravekeeper's small farm, on it stand the twelve-foot-high marble headstones of various shapes. The cemetery gate is a huge nail-studded crossbeam set by wedges into twin two-story posts hewn from whole trees, the entire thing tooled and painted with patterns, symbols, and signs resembling eyes or flowers or clouds, and flanked by a set of stone mythical beasts. Half dog, half lion, half scowling, half grinning, standing on their platforms taller than the gravekeeper's house, both guardians look as though they were peering over his roof.

Once at the site, Jiaying and her family burn incense and paper money, and pray to a long line of illustrious men and women whose severe portraits hang huge and

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forbidding in the tall, gloomy corridors of their home in Tientsin, a city far below them now as they stand in a high meadow in the mountains.

In the whirring and clicking of grasshoppers, they walk at the feet of the white marble stele. On each is carved a poem commemorating the one who lies underground shrouded in countless layers of silk and enclosed in a box filled with money and precious jewels. As well as flowers, birds, and animals, human figures are etched in various depictions of filial piety. Even as Jiaying stands bowed at the foot of a stone slab two and a half times her height and wide as a double door, above her eternally is the figure of a young girl not unlike herself, clothed in a style hundreds of years old, paying her dutiful respects to the unanswering dead.

While Jiaying and her family linger over the names and poems, no one thinks that Jiaying's father and grandmother will be put in this ground soon. Even less would any of them believe that on an afternoon years from now, a group of student revolutionaries will casually pass through the gates of this place, and dig up the graves and rob them, dragging up the corpses of her father and grandmother to strip and tie them naked to a tree. Jiaying, who will have left the country by then, will have to hear about it almost half a century after the fact, from the gravekeeper himself, who after so many years still recognizes her, and falls to his knees to bow to her, calling her by her title, when she comes back here a woman. She'll have arrived by car then, accompanied by her own children, her husband dead, to be greeted by

the man who has lived on this farm ever since the one day he climbed up the mountain to work for her family and never came down again. He'll walk with her over the ground, which has been turned into a pig farm. A few feet behind one of the sties, he'll take her through shoulder-high cannabis plants to see the few smashed and overturned monuments that haven't yet been removed. She'll stand in the glare of afternoon and squint to make out the pieces of names and poems in stone. She'll walk ahead a few feet and suddenly find herself standing dumbfounded at the gaping pits of concrete vaults of defiled graves. Then the old man will show her where he buried her father and grandmother after he untied them from the trees. He'll point to a strip of ground under three feeding troughs, apologizing that he can't remember who is under which trough. But they've all been punished by heaven, he assures her. One by one, he says, the looters died from wearing the silks they stripped off the corpses.

In my mother's dreams, she is always shocked to find the graves gaping. In mine, I'm sitting again in a green pavilion in the park in Ho Ping District, drinking tea of leaves my nieces picked in the mountains north of Tientsin, nibbling dates my uncle has brought back from Turkey, where he sailed with a cargo of radios. I'm playing go at a card table with my cousins Shwen-dze, Man-dze, and old Lao himself, go-masters every one of them. In my mother's dream, she sews a sail for a boat. In mine, I weave all day in view of night. Come night, I'm all alone, the material coming undone in handfuls of human hair.

Is night my ancestors' gloomy customs, then? Will I ever be free of their tortoiseshell combs and smoking punk, hand-tooled jambs that stalled and amazed me at temple thresholds in a provincial capital? Will I be free of my great-grandfather's three thousand descendants? Soon, there will be so little of me I may actually arrive. Soon, I'll be bom. Soon, I'll know how to live. Soon, **my** teeth may stop hurting me. Soon, I'll be able to sleep. At the moment, something I never read in a book keeps me awake, something the night isn't saying, the wind is accomplice to, and the rain in the eaves keeps to itself, an unassailable nacre my woman encloses, a volatile seed dormant in my man, something I didn't see on the television, something not painted on billboards along the highways, not printed in the magazines at the supermarket checkouts, something I didn't hear on the radio, something my father forgot to tell me, something my mother couldn't foresee owns an unbroken waist and several ankles, a stem proclaiming an indivisible flower, a lamp sowing a path ahead of every possible arrival.

How many nights have I been nudged awake by some thought, like a boat evenly rocking suddenly bumped from below, and hearing the hems of gowns shift outside the window, tuned to my wife beside me and said, *It's raining*, and she answered by setting her sole's arch against my instep. How many nights have I lain here like some drowned cabin of a ship through whose portals fish big and small swim in and out in the dominion of the octopus and clam, and allowed myself to remain an unguarded room, open to thoughts coming and going,

passing head to toe, no single thought as shapely as the course of a various thinking, no one idea as grave as this dark traffic, in whose current I drift, wondering, Did I close the windows downstairs? What time is it? **Is** the basement flooding? Did I put the garden shears away? Did I leave them in the rain to rust? Did I finish writing that letter to my father, **or** did I let the pencil fall from my hand? My love, why can't you sleep? Why does each night lead into a sister night? Is there nothing one can say about tonight or any other night the night won't unravel, every effort undermined by night itself? What were those seeds doing in my father's pocket? What is a seed?

I remember, as long as I knew him, my father carried at all times in his right suit-pocket a scarce handful of seeds. Remembrance, was his sole answer when I asked him why. He was pithy. He slept with his head on a stone wrapped in a piece of white linen I washed once a week. Up until I was nine years old, I napped with him, making myself as small as possible so as not to wake him. I remember how, when he turned over in bed, I made room, wedging myself against the wall, my left arm under my head for a pillow, my legs numb. I lay very quietly while he snored. I lay wide awake against his flesh while he slept with his head on the stone wrapped in the cloth which smelled of his hair, a rich oil. When he died, the stone kept a faintest impression that fit the shape of his head. My mother carried it out, and left it under one of the thirty-six pines that enclosed two sides of the property on which our house stood, the third side the fence where the morning glory climbed. Some days the de-

pression in my father's pillow must fill with rain, just enough to give a cardinal a drink. Or maybe somebody has found it by now, has used it as part of a wall, where it fits to another stone shaped like a man's skull. We burned most everything else before selling the house and moving. Out of the heap of his papers, notebooks, manuscripts, photographs, and letters, my sister Fei, almost obligingly, chose one scrapbook of newspaper clippings to keep, which none of us ever looked at after we left Pennsylvania. Everything else we fed to a roaring fire we'd made in the backyard between two apple trees. While we all stood about the fire, which we kept alive two days and two nights without sleeping, one hot mote shot out and creased my youngest brother's thigh, burning through the cloth of his pants and several layers of skin. His leg owns the scar to this day.



I NEVER ASKED my father in remembrance of what he kept those seeds. I knew better than to press him when I was a boy. Now I'm a man, and he is dead, and I feel a strange shame that I don't know what happened to those seeds. Did we bury them with him? Is morning glory breaking his pewter casket's tight lip this second? Is morning glory blooming on a cemetery hill in Pennsylvania? Didn't I one day kneel in the mud and snow, halfway up a hillside, halfway to my father's grave, and hold my wrist to an icy cataract, and see the shriveled vine and the gold seed pods?

Or was that last night on the stairs? A bird, perched on the spindled rail, asked the time. Or else told it, according to a stone of boundary, the dead moon, and a stone of next news, the seed. Deaf water fell unseen. Steep, it numbed my mouth, when on the stairs of an unfinished house I drank it, and you asked, my love, why can't you sleep? But I can't say. What restlessness is this? Is this the restlessness of the needle or the cloth? The wing or the journey supporting it? The oarlocks or the rower's arms? Does my hand move over your body to precede me home, and do I therefore, by its continual departure, arrive?

Nights like these I'm host to passenger seeds, burrs, and black hats. I'm that abandoned shed my sister and I came upon when we were children on the island of Java. One wall bore a poster of Sukarno, and it stood derelict, home to birds and lizards. With a spoon, we dug a hole in the dirt floor there and buried a jar of rupiahs we promised to return for, thinking for some reason our treasure would triple in the ground. Climbing in by one window, we left by climbing through another. Or I am like the broken-down shack in East Vandergrift, Pennsylvania, where Charlie November lived, the sloping front yard strewn with broken car parts, the table inside scattered with shotgun shells, the twelve-inch black-and-white TV on all day, and Charlie gone. The shed was built on the side of a hill at the edge of that river-town's limits. I remember summer evenings when I stood for a moment in his doorway and looked at the view he owned, the whole wide river valley. In the proper season,

I could witness hundreds of dandelion seeds float slowly over the valley, each carrying a spark of the late sun, each turned to gold by what it bore from one side of the river to the other.

I hold in my left hand a morning glory seed, a hard, wedge-shaped, odorless stone the size of a tear. My love, what is a seed? Is it its flower? Is it the leaves it utters? Is it a house? Where is the honey hidden, in which room? Where is the owner? How much room is a flower to a bee? Who could tenant a house so narrow as a seed? Only the least among us could live there. Its weight is imperceptible. Lighter than the flower, it is where the flower closes at evening. Yet, in it may be growing the flower that will overthrow all governments of crows or senators. This seed comes to divide me from all I thought I knew. This seed revises all existing boundaries to proclaim the dimensions of an ungrasped hour. This seed carries news of a new continent and our first citizenship, and I hold it.

Tonight, I am its ground, though my hand can hardly endure the next world lying inside it. And I must overcome my urge to whisper something to it, tell it something only a seed could hear, or something a seed has never heard, a human thing.

But if a seed is a house, is it a finished house, or the house unfinished? Is it my father's house? No. My grandfather's house? No. Has the clock in the hallway stopped? Will I have to get out of bed soon and wind it? Or have I, between two crests of the swinging pendulum, fallen asleep? What is night? Is it a ladder? Do we double the

night who sit inside it? Or does night pass through us on its way to fruit and other immensities? Does night own a hammer? Or does night build without equal? Are there more than two nights, yours and mine? Is that my father in his undershirt, bent at a table, studying a sentence, darkening the lamp? Is that my father cutting out pieces of colored paper to make lancet-shaped windows, the lamp and the scissors-bird winking and seeming to fly?

His one hand holds the scissors and slowly squeezes it closed, while feeding into its blades with his other hand the folded tissue papers colored red, yellow, green, and blue. Turning the little stack of them along the faintly penciled lines, he lets fall a little shower of tiny bright leaves. These he glues to the pieces of one-eighth-inch-thick cardboard he's painted gold, and into which he has already cut the window openings. Three identical walls and together they made the sides and the rear of the temple.

What it took a great king seven months to accomplish with stone and three hundred thousand slaves, it took my father nearly four years to complete out of cardboard and paper, a feat of love, or someone serving a sentence. And *there* it is unto *this* day. The speaker of the sentence is referring to Solomon's Temple. The sentence follows a long and detailed description of that fabulous house of the covenant. And *where* is it this day? One must not ask. Where is that magnificent temple? For it lives only in the sentences of its description, and only inside the imagination of the reader of those sentences.

He'd begun the project as a gift for my sister when she

turned eleven on the ship to Macau. That winter, Ba was being transferred from the prison in Jakarta to another in Macau. We would not get there, and Ba would not finish the gift in time for his daughter's birthday. Instead, due to a series of oversights and accidents on the part of the Indonesian War Administration, as well as a friend's timely arrival in a secret boat, we would end up in Hong Kong for Christmas, where construction on my father's temple continued; and then Japan, where building went on; then Singapore, and on, and on, each place new, while one thing remained the same: on a ship or in a tiny apartment room, a table was cleared where my father bent alone over his Bibles and dictionaries, translating his books of Genesis and Exodus; or else his wife and children sat by him while he resumed work on his temple.

There was no rest. Mumbling in Hebrew, Greek, English, and Chinese, Ba was moving us from one place to another. And he was building as we moved. What began as a toy for his daughter became the sole activity around which the family gathered, no matter where we lighted for a week or a month. And the real genius of the thing was not only its true-to-life, full-scale construction, nor its swinging doors complete with bolted locks, nor even the tenderness in the details of the faces of the seraphim, but its portability. For each piece could be gently dismantled, unfolded, spread flat, and put into a box to be carried across borders, barriers, into provinces, jungles, over seas and lands as language to language, landscape to landscape, we carried Ba's Temple of Solomon.

And Ba was dying. Something terrible must have hap-

pened to him during his time in prison, for he left that place damaged. Something about him persuaded us he was in the last of his wholeness. And the close air we shared in holds of ships and trains and little tenement rooms dogged us, his woman and children. Our clothes smelled musty, our shoes grew tight even as they disintegrated, the pages of his dictionaries grew yellow and water stained, our bodies smelled like . . . dying. We slept the sleep of the dying. We ate the food of the dying. We saw sores begin to erupt all over Ba's body. We feared, at one point, it might be a form of leprosy. We heard him complain about severe aching in his joints. Yes, Ba was dying. And we were dying to arrive, to put behind us the dying on the islands, the rounding up and dying en masse. So we made our escape. Out of forgeries we made our flight. Out of accidents and silences, out of the steps of the fleeing who went before us. And though our course seemed aimless, decided by nothing but fear, Ba assured us it was momentous, even predetermined. Our seemingly incoherent and stray roving across the horizontal plane of seemings and doings were, in fact, he convinced us, a continuous unfolding of vertical and ultimate meaning. And since the nature of moving is collecting, naturally, we collected: curly sea foam, scaly archipelagoes and leafy rain, lunatic moths, jeweled eyes of snakes, curled tails of monkeys, and the fangs of the monkey king, two snakes coiled on the back of a turtle, a cream-colored gecko uttering a concrete cipher, dawns the color of evening gongs, temple bronzes that owned the look of things having been too near the sun, black

zones of one or two seas, **thank-you's** and *please's* in different tongues. On Ba's scuffed, cracked leather accordion case, we collected colorful stickers of steamships and airplanes, and emblems of airlines and train lines and shipping lines, our whole wandering pieced together by such lines, the only continuity our bodies in time, and Ba's relentless work on his temple. We saved and collected anything at all that might be of use, from thin, colored tissue paper to the foil from cigarette packs or the beautifully colored envelopes of Christmas cards. And Ba built it. While Ba and Mu collected lines on their faces, he built it. While Fei, Go, Be, and I accumulated body weight and size, he built it. According to the instructions God gave to Solomon, Ba made it, his own splendid temple.

The front wall bore a wide, double-door entrance on either side of which was a tight grouping of four windows. And around every window of all four walls, my father cut with a razor a beveled edge to make a frame, exposing the gray cardboard beneath the gold paint. Then, around each frame, in fine lines of black ink, he decorated the windows with minute curlicues, leaves, vines, scrolls, waves, human and animal figures, no two sets of windows bearing the same motif, no two leaves of a single window alike.

The lintel and jambs of the doorway, as well, were embellished with profuse and singular details, indicating the obsessive and aching hand of a maker whose playfulness was surpassed only by his determination. The surface of the cardboard double doors was scored and cut to

look like thick planks of wood, while the studs and horizontal bands of metal lashing the planks together were made from colored construction paper. These were the walls of the outer sanctuary, which was further surrounded by colonnades. The columns were made by scoring with a razor blade a series of close vertical lines on a piece of cardboard, which was then folded along the lines to make a fluted shaft. Because the entire project was designed to be dismantled easily, the shaft was attached to a simple base and capital by a system of tabs and slots. Fourteen such columns supported a pitched roof whose gables were adorned with detailed renderings of scenes from the Old Testament up to the time of Solomon; mainly depictions of trials and slaughter. The roof itself could be lifted off to reveal the inner colonnade of the inner court, at the center of which stood the pillars Jachin and Boaz, guarding the cella, the final and innermost room in which knelt the two six-winged seraphim brooding over the Ark of the Covenant. The entire project sat on a cardboard stage ascended to from any direction by six such stages of succeeding size.

But where is it now? Gone. Like everything else. And even while we were moving, I was moving to eventual awareness that all was not right, that all we ended up amassing was ephemera: songs in languages we didn't know, memories of fragrances of indeterminate flowers, loose chants and charms, silhouettes of huts and minarets; while Ba was reenvisioning Genesis and Exodus. We carried our clothes in bundles, our books and shoes were rotten. We were sleeping standing, eating

squatting, putting the bowl to our lips, while Ba meticulously scissored, folded, tucked, and layered into existence his house of worship, while his little, gold, indomitable watch tolled the relentless hours. And naturally, we were casting off as we looked ahead. We were jettisoning luggage, names, and bodies. There was Tai, my brother. Then there wasn't. There was Chung, another brother, then there wasn't. Brothers swallowed up in some murk we called, conveniently, The Past, as though it were a place we could return to, as though we weren't leaving them behind with the passports we left behind, the jewelry and the books come finally undone. As though making the faces of the seraphim in the exact likenesses of Tai and Chung were a suitable memorial. And we were waxing tired, waxing bewildered, for we were departing in order to leave, leaving in order to leave some more, some more tired, some more old.

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And by the time we got to America, my feet were tired. My father put down our suitcase, untied my shoes, and rubbed my feet, one at a time and with such deep turns of his wrist I heard the water in him through my soles. Since then I have listened for him in my steps. And have not found him. Since then I hear with my naked feet, those lilies, fine-boned swans crossed at the necks, those ears. My father's feet were ulcerous, as was his body, diseased. And water denied him days at a time, administered in a prison cell in Indonesia, ruined his kidneys, and changed the way he lay or sat or knelt or got up to walk the whole way down the stairs.

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But if night is a stairs, it is also the last but one rung of

stars. If a fortress unguarded, also our native honey.

It seems I heard the pendulum's last tick a long time ago. Ages ago. As though it came out of childhood, where in my father's house, a clock counted passersby all night, and in the morning, I had to sweep up the strewn minutes from every corner, buttons, needles, and seeds, and no two alike. The last tick was long ago. I'm beginning to suspect I'll have to wait until tomorrow to hear the next. Between the last and the next, I sleep like a seed. Or I lie like a needle my mother fixed to the cloth, to mark the place she left off telling a story. How did it end? Where does that door in the ceiling lead? Will my brother come and wake me soon to say our morning prayers? I remember how we prayed. Stripped to our underpants, we knelt side by side and got on with it. We would fashion our souls to fit the grip of God, so had our work cut out for us. We would be used, would be raised up, good tools, and brought tremendously down, hammers warming in the great hand which uses, hand which giveth and taketh. Who would fashion ourselves thus were earlier than sparrows, though never earlier than our father, who would never have the light find him supine, and who was worn already by years of God's fierce fondling, worn almost to transparency by His use. Sons can only hope to be so used, pray to be so terribly singled out as that one who came before us, inhabited the earth before us, so that the world was unimaginable without him, and now the dwelling places of the soul, as well. Should both or either of us boys arrive at those hallowed reaches, we would expect to find our predecessor and

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better already there, preparing the ground for us, setting a table to include us. And our sincerest wish was, I know now, too late, not, in fact, to be acknowledged by God, but to be seen, truly seen, seen once and forever, by our father, Ba, who was earlier than light and later than the last each night, whose bloody God exacted love exactly at the body, leveled the force of his divine affection precisely at the fatty heart and fibrous lungs; the wild, old, hairy God wracked Ba's body to instruct Ba's spirit. And Ba got on with it, the labor with texts and thighbones, faith and torso, secrets and pain, numina and heartbreak; he got on with the fashioning. So did we, his sons, in order that we might be seen by him, in order that we might inhabit a room in our father's eyes, one small chamber in his black irises. It was, then, for love, that we got on with it; for love of him who was remote and feared, that we fashioned ourselves, we hoped, into vessels fit for the Holy Spirit to inhabit. We devoted ourselves to the progress of one another's souls. We hammered each other, risked dispersion into a shower of sparks and bright nails, in order to possibly transform ourselves into whole tense sheets of sheer curtain, metal so fine the Lord's light and logos could arrive through us unimpeded. So we got on with it. And though it didn't begin with pain, its end was pain, our delicious affliction. Its end was the strain and numbness our almost naked bodies could endure in long periods of static genuflection, summer and winter. It began with my brother Go and me praying just ten minutes each morning by our beds before leaving for school. I don't remember what moved us to that final

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prostration, hands and heads to the cold wood floor. With what were we so overcome?#at threw us down into that attitude?And did one of us, unsated by ten slim minutes, crave the full meaning of an hour? And then hours?Did the other simply follow?Or did we strive with one another, continually overreaching each other? We strove as lovers strive. We discovered the satisfying roundness of the clock, and began waking earlier, then earlier, moving deeper backward into dark and the previous night, both of us urging ourselves and each other, striving past the first hour, and then the second, and then beyond. And in fact, we weren't striving at all, but remaining in the separate closets of our prayers.



WHAT DID MY father mean when he said *Remembrunce*? I remember I was bom in the City of Victory on a street called *Jilan Industri*, where each moming the man selling sticky rice cakes goes by pushing his cart, his little steamer whistling, and by noon the lychee man passes, his head in a rag, bundles of the fruit strung on the pole slung on his neck, while at his waist, at the end of a string, a little brass bell shivers into a fine and steady seizure. I remember I was named twice, once at my birth, and once again after my father, in his prison cell, dreamed each night the same dream, in which the sun appeared to him as a blazing house, wherein dwelt a seed, black, new, dimly human. And so one moming, at a white metal table in the visiting yard, he and my mother