

蓬草：紅木馬

The Red Horse

By Peng Cao

Translated by Janice Wickeri

MY NAME is unimportant.

But obviously, that's not what my mother thinks. On this beautiful clear day, here's my gentle, stubborn mother wearing black head to toe. The black umbrella she carries was meant to keep off the rain, but has been pressed into service to guard against the fierce sunlight. The way she looks at my name on the stone, lips moving slightly, is heart-wrenching; when she gives the black umbrella in her right hand a casual twirl, it makes me think of the way the wooden horses in the amusement park moved, rising and falling in turn as they went their clockwise way. I told Mother that I liked the wooden horses. Their paint was peeling, but I knew they once wore dazzling coats of colour. Do you remember? The red one was my favourite. The day he arrived in the amusement park like a ray of blazing light, all the children ran to him, gathered round, and stood staring at him. The eyes of the red horse held ours and gave a few sly winks. I wasn't with you then so you didn't get to see how elegant he was. Too bad. That was a long time ago. I was another woman's son then. But I can't remember that other woman's voice or what she looked like anymore. To tell the truth, I'm tired of everything that happened in that life and I've decided to forget it. The one thing I can't forget is that red wooden horse. In this life, luckily, I saw him again.

On my third birthday you took me to the amusement park. When I saw that red horse, I recognized him at once, even though age had etched scars all over his

Peng Cao is the pen-name of Feng Shuyan 馮淑燕. Born and educated in Hong Kong, she went to Paris in 1975, and studied first in the Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle III and then in the Ecole Supérieure d'Interprètes et de Traducteurs. Her creative work includes fiction, essays and film scripts. She now lives in Paris. Another of Peng's short stories, "Wings", appeared in Renditions Nos. 27 & 28.

body and much of his fire-red paint had been worn away. I looked at him, waving my arms and legs about in excitement. I tried to tell you where the horse came from, but you're a grown-up. Same as every other grown-up, you're too far from childhood, you couldn't remember baby talk. You just smiled at me and, deciding I wanted to ride the red horse, sat me on his back. Mother, can you imagine how I felt? I was riding the red horse again at last! And I knew that what made this life different from that other one hinged on the colour of the red paint on that wooden horse. If a painter had come and given him a shiny new coat, I would have been bewildered: Had time reversed its course? Or had the years come to a standstill on that horse's back? I didn't have time to tell you all this. (But would you have understood?) The horse revolved, moving in the same direction as the clock. Every time round I spurred my horse on, sweeping past your smile and your endless admonitions of "Hang on! Be careful!" At that moment I was happy, but I couldn't help feeling sad too—why couldn't we ever really understand each other? You conceived me in your body; why couldn't I enter your mind? Later, you even thought that I was scared and you took me away and wouldn't let me ride one more time—Mother, that strange look on my face wasn't fear; it was simply sorrow.

Mother, just as before, can't hear what I'm saying to her. Why, on this beautiful clear day (the noonday sun is like red poison), has she struggled all the way here? I heard her coming, step by painful step, from the city; her with her black clothes and black umbrella, pitifully trailing her tiny shadow. First the bus to the pier, then the ferry across the harbour. She doesn't get a seat on either the bus or the ferry. Heavens, there are so many people all trying to get somewhere. The boat moves over the clear blue surface of the sea. She leans against the rail and silently watches a far-off bird in flight. I know she's missing me. There seem to be tears glistening in the corners of her eyes. But why does she want to spend a whole day just coming here? After the ferry, there's still the train. After that there's no public transport. She hails a taxi and I know that what she has to spend on transportation is no small sum for her. So at noon, she just grabs a bowl of noodles at a street stall. I want so much to tell her that what she ought to do on a day like this is go to the beach, to swim or sit on the white sand and soak up the sun. That would do her good. If she did go to the beach, she wouldn't wear these weird black clothes, wouldn't carry a black rain umbrella. Black is depressing in the sunshine. She should go to the seashore, wear her one red swimsuit and open up her parasol—red too—anyway, she would look prettier than she does now.

Whatever I may imagine for her, Mother's afternoon is completely wasted. She wouldn't believe it, but even if she hadn't come to see me, I'd be able to see her. This peculiar knack of mine will last until the moment I decide to forget about this world. So far, I haven't made that decision. Though I'm a bit perplexed by her coming here from time to time at tremendous cost to herself, huffing and puffing, I'm not totally unmoved by it. Yes, at times, my heart foolishly softens. Still, in my four brief years of existence, I managed to cling stubbornly to my one wish: to live only four years in this life and not a day longer. Tiny child that I was, I achieved my goal through extraordinary tenaciousness and left this increasingly unattractive world right on time.

This was why, then, on the day I turned four, I still couldn't say a whole sentence in grown-up language. As I'd rejected the idea of a long life, I refused to waste my time learning their vocabulary. For me, the words that grown-ups liked to use were mostly just for show, entirely meaningless. There was no sincerity in what they said. For example, when Mother saw that hateful woman next door (a loan shark) wearing an ill-fitting Western-style dress in a vile colour, to my surprise, she didn't dare come right out and tell the woman how terrible she looked. When the woman asked Mother's opinion of her dress, cowardly Mother said, "Very nice!" Furiously, I made an awful face: "What do you mean nice? She looks like a crazy old turkey!" As usual Mother didn't understand what I was saying, but seeing the face I was making, she scolded me: "Bad child, don't you know it's wrong to make faces?"

I had long ago given up worrying about or trying to understand the words "right" and "wrong" as grown-ups used them. One scorching summer night, Mother and a man who actually didn't care one bit for her whiled away the hours together, casually bringing me into this world as if it were something that wasn't worth thinking too deeply about. I think that when it comes to my own birth, someone should have asked my opinion. But grown-ups exercise complete control here, thoughtlessly inflicting all the sufferings of birth and growth on others. They always have excuses for their own actions. They are always "right".

Mother turns and gazes at the distant mountains. She is probably astonished at the pervading stillness. Most days and nights here are silent and lonely. A minute, a second, can take on infinite meaning. Sometimes I look all around in silence, without saying a word. On the far horizon, there's a river but the land beyond it is indistinct and I can't make it out. I hear the wind in the leaves, soughing like perpetual rain. But still I prefer to lie here all alone. I have no regrets. Human voices only irritate me.

For example, when grown-ups used to pat me on the head with their filthy hands, twittering with false concern "Poor fatherless child", I felt the venom in their tone. Mother would quickly blush, lower her head and start fidgeting with the edge of her garment. I would shriek: "Mother, Mother, don't put on that pitiful look. It only excites them all the more. These people spend their time trying to ferret out more human suffering, so they can persuade themselves that their own lives aren't so bad after all. You and I, Mother, have to stand up to them so they will shut their mouths and go away, leaving us in peace once more."

I don't know how many times I've said similar things to Mother, but she never listens. She was constantly in tears and I was always ashamed for her. I didn't understand why she couldn't forget that man who never cared a bit for her. Me, I'd forgotten him long ago. My eyes, nose, mouth are exactly like my mother's. Nothing in my face should stir any memory of "that man" for her, but when a woman is in love she's utterly irrational. I'd told Mother so many times that I didn't need a father, especially not that man. But still she hugged me to her sadly and a lingering sigh escaped her, "If only he would come back"

This really made me furious. Stupid Mother wanted him back yet! With my superb instinct I could have scouted out his whereabouts, but I never felt it was

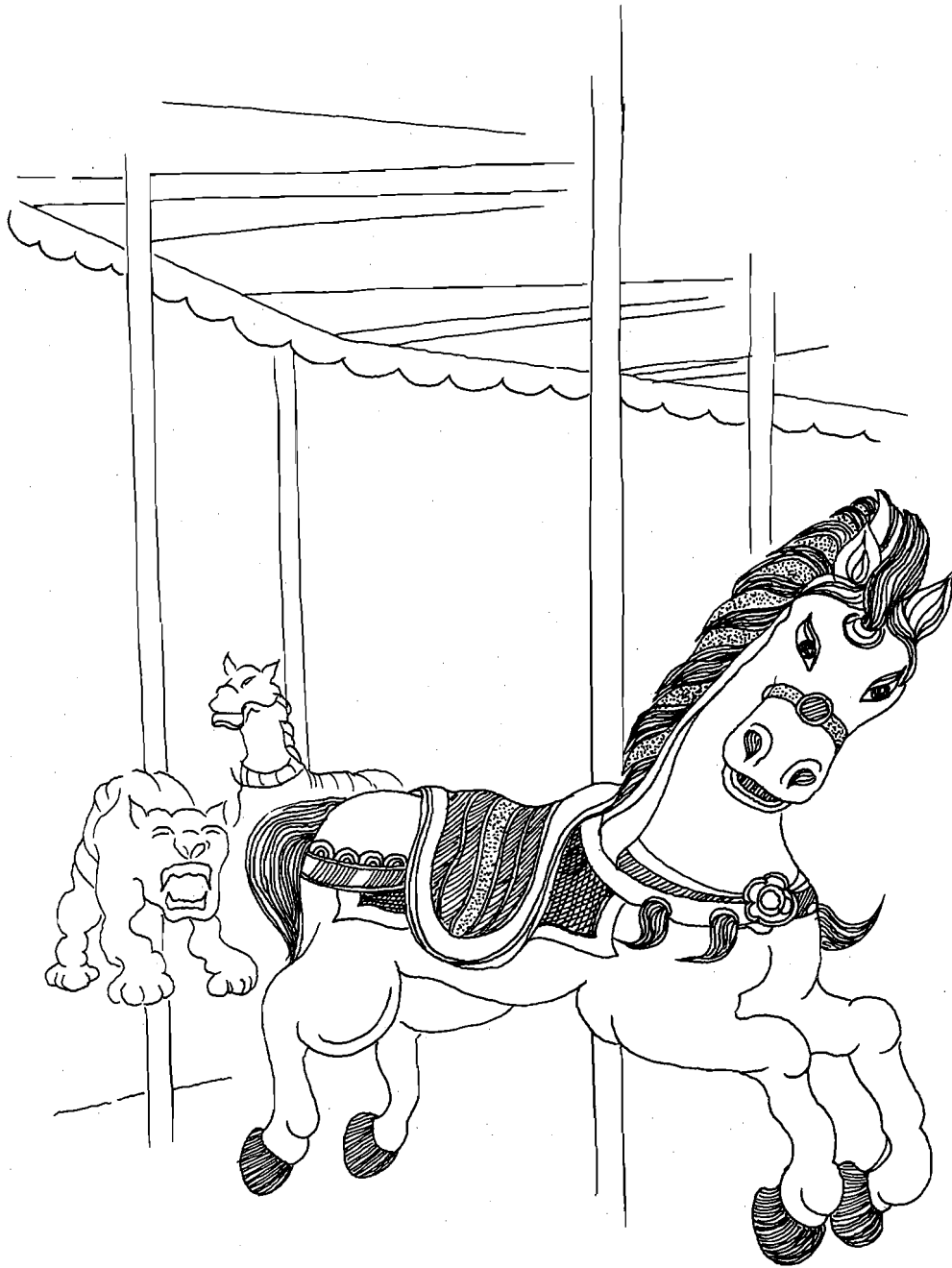
worth wasting my limited days on the "father" I was determined to forget. But obviously, Mother was prepared to spend years missing him. I think I finally understand why grown-ups' lives are so long and drawn out—fifty, sixty, seventy, eighty years, even a hundred occasionally—it's so they can repeat their mistakes, as if they're reluctant to part with them. In spite of bitter regrets for their errors, they relive them again and again in their minds. It's all so absurd, I can't help laughing to myself.

Human love and hate are even more pitiable. In the face of disaster, these have no more importance than dust. I have seen a city destroyed, its main streets split open, the surface of the roads crackled into poorly-woven spider webs, purplish slime oozing from each jagged vein, spreading copiously in all directions. In the sky above the city, noxious butterflies hovered and would not disperse. They beat their black-veined red and yellow wings about their blue-black bodies. I watched them through the window as they flew into the clouds, each one a person who had once lived in the city. The tremors that shook the cemetery had stirred their dreams. They'd sat bolt upright and in an instant were transformed into butterflies. Before entering the clouds, they had their last bereaved glimpses of the city. I pressed my face against the cold glass and let the strange scene unfold above and below me. At the same time I heard bells and drums sounding together, a sort of discernible melody amid the chaos. The sound ricocheted off the walls of buildings, from one to another, layer upon layer of metallic noise, clear, cold and awful. Fearfully, I buried my head in my pillow.

I explained to Mother that we should not stay too long on this earth, but she only held me tightly, "My dear, did you have a bad dream?" I told her I was tired of grown-ups' stupid obstinacy, but she only gazed into my eyes as solemn as marble. I knew why Mother had to stay on in this city where strange things happen one after another. She probably clings to the belief that if she waits long enough, that man will reappear, and even if she waits until the city falls, she will have no regrets. Only one decision was left to me: to abandon Mother and leave on my own.

This was a very painful decision. Mother's voice sounded constantly in my blood: "You're mine! I conceived you, I gave birth to you, I love you deeply, you can't leave me, you can't!" Like innumerable tiny snakes, these words sucked my blood. One day I said angrily to mother: "Okay, you want my blood my flesh my bones you can have them all back. You say you gave birth to me, why not take my life away then?" Mother frowned and looked at me closely for a moment: "The child can never get a whole sentence out properly. You're nearly four, I'm really worried about you!" I was astounded. Why was she evading the issue? I looked at Mother. Maybe she was teasing me on purpose? Why would she want to tease someone who had already given up on life? Even though she was my mother, she had no right to push me around like that. I decided to go through with my plan as quickly as possible. Once my blood congealed there would be no more of Mother's endless reproaches and I could rest in peace.

On my fourth birthday, Mother and I stood in front of the carousel, my hand in Mother's, her fingers gently rubbing the back of my hand, tickling. I giggled.



Mother laughed too and pointed at the cars, boats, horses, elephants, pigs, rabbits . . . spinning before our eyes. Finally, the carousel came to a stop and she said, "How about the white rabbit?" I gazed up at her in sheer astonishment. She should know I only wanted the red horse. I had a moment of intense suspicion: Had mother guessed what was on my mind? Had she decided to stand in my way, not let me go? I stamped my foot with all my might and screamed: "I don't want the white rabbit! I only want the red horse!" Mother tried persuasion, saying in a low voice: "You ride the red horse every time; ride the white rabbit for once!" I looked at the other children swarming onto the platform. One boy hesitated as if he were about to rush over to the red horse. Alarmed and in tears, I screamed: "I only want the red horse! the red horse!" I was crying so hard I nearly fainted. All the grown-ups around were flustered. "Let him ride the red horse, poor thing!" Frightened, defeated, Mother picked me up, sat me carelessly on the red horse's back, and only put the safety strap once loosely round me.

I held onto the horse's ears with both hands and, my face streaked with tears, laughed victoriously. The man who made the horses go round struck his little bell and started the motor and us kids, in our cars or boats, on horseback or riding other animals, began to revolve—slowly at first, then faster and faster. During the first two times round, I still sought Mother's face in the crowd. It wasn't because I couldn't bear to leave her. I just wanted to know if she had guessed what I was up to. But a smile creased her face, she was mumbling something, and I felt she hadn't sensed my intentions. I was being overly suspicious a moment ago.

Then came a feeling, boundless as the sea and sky, of other-worldly emptiness. I rose and fell with the red horse, racing with the wind. The fall of the city appeared before my eyes again. From the roofs of tall buildings grew cacti as tall as giants with arms upraised, their thorns glittering in the sunlight. They were covered with profuse, colourful flowers which emitted the scent of death—rotten and sweet. Small cracks began to appear in the walls of the buildings and the peculiar scent seeped in, shrouding every room. The children put on their prettiest clothes and carried all the food from their homes into the square to share with the animals that flocked forward. And the buildings fell, floor by floor, crumpling silently like houses of playing cards. I knew that this was the most beautiful vision of the city's destruction I had ever had. I asked myself what else I was waiting for. Slowly I took away my hands. The strap round my waist snapped in two under my gaze and my horse flashed away from me like a ball of flame. I saw my chance and rolled off the horse's back, closing my eyes in contentment . . .

Mother seems tired. She looks at the road leading down the mountain, hesitates a while. She ought to start home. It takes quite a bit of time and not a little courage, especially to go back to that lonely, empty room. But tonight Mother can go once more to the amusement park and renew her amazement at the disappearance of the red horse. The man who runs the carousel has already installed a donkey on the empty post. The donkey's appearance—stupid and dirty—draws laughter. Occasionally someone remarks, "There was a beautiful red horse here before," and follows that with, "and a child . . ." and then, suddenly alert to where this is leading, says no more.

Only I know where the red horse went, and as long as I don't mention the name of the place, the grown-ups will never be able to find him. Perhaps, before long, people will forget the red horse's disappearance, and the child's accident. Even my mother may forget all of it. Perhaps she'll even forget "that man". But if grown-ups persist in their infatuation with things dead and gone or embrace some pointless hope for "the future", then there is bound to be a time of catastrophe like the city's destruction, which will simply and brutally bury for them all their dreams and desires.

Mother, please leave. I need to be off on my red horse. Don't let his fiery mane frighten your tender heart. Don't let my coldness sour your affections. (Mother, what else can I say to you? Can you ever really understand?) When I say I must be off, I'm very serious. I'll circle the mountain a hundred times. All those people in their unquiet graves will slowly open their dust-shuttered eyes and watch me and my red wooden horse race around the mountain. And when they have counted a hundred passes in their unbeating hearts, my red horse and I will mount to the clouds, leaving not a sound or a trace behind.

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