

劉索拉：尋找歌王

In Search of the King of Singers

By Liu Suola

Translated by Martha Cheung

Translator's Introduction

“In Search of the King of Singers”, written in 1985 and first published in *Zhongshan* (January, 1986), reveals the tormented consciousness of a woman torn between pragmatism and idealism, between down-to-earth, realistic considerations and the yearnings and aspirations of the soul. Written in a language which is deceptively simple and full of self-mockery and skepticism, the story, nevertheless, achieves moments of sublimity. Many Chinese critics hold the view that fiction in mainland China has come of age in the mid-1980s and will, hopefully, secure a respectable place in the arena of world literature. This story can perhaps lend credence to their view.

Liu Suola, born in 1955, is a writer and a musician. She has published a collection of novellas and various other short stories.

IF anybody had wanted to find out where the two of us were on this earth then, they would have to use a magnifying glass to enlarge the map twenty times; still, they probably wouldn't have been able to locate our whereabouts. It was a tiny little place, not far from the primaeval forest, but it wasn't shown on the map, though the primaeval forest was. We circled round and round, and nearly walked our legs off. I grumbled and grumbled, but B just kept quiet. The skin on our noses had peeled off I don't know how many times, but the King of Singers still eluded us. B, do you really have to see him, to plead with him? Why are you so sure he's better than you are, in what way is he better? I've never come across a mountain as difficult to climb as this one—the soil slips and gives way for no reason. You walk and you walk, you only want to push on. A tree crashes to the ground. What a pain in the ass you are! The plants up in the mountain were so weird I dared not

touch them. My shoelaces came undone as we walked, I stooped to tie them and found several leeches clinging to my shoes. What a pain in the ass you are!

B had his run of luck while he was still at university. The scores he composed were published in magazines, as if they were recipes. Some called him *avant-garde*; he went mad when he heard this. I'd say he was a fool, just as he was a fool when he courted me. At the time, people said he was fooling around with me; when he got a bit of fame they said I was fooling around with him. If it were possible, I'd quite like to go back to the past. The problem arose not because of that outdated label, "*avant-garde*", it started with the quest for the King of Singers. He considered this more important than getting the Nobel Prize, though of course Nobel simply didn't care a fig for composers. At first I thought it was good fun and went around with him for a bit; but, after a few months, I began to find the whole thing more and more absurd. They said the King of Singers was up in the north, we went to the coldest places—even our snot froze into icicles—only to learn that the King of Singers was in fact down in the south, in places where leeches thrive. We didn't know where in this world leeches thrive. As we crossed the *primaeval* forest, the leeches even bit B's vital parts, but the King of Singers was still nowhere to be found. The strangest thing was, the illiterate village people all said they'd seen him, and what they said sounded convincing: he was dressed in black and his head was shaven. You'd ask them where he was, they'd say he'd just left. So we trailed after him, like two lousy wriggling worms.

After much difficulty we made it to the top of the mountain. A bunch of bare-bottomed kids surrounded us, jumping and shouting. A group of farmhouses made of bamboo and straw came into sight. A bare-breasted woman was sitting on the balcony of one of these houses, her skin like the old trees in the forest. On seeing B, she disappeared into the dark room behind her. These were all two-storey farmhouses. Animals and men lived together there—animals downstairs, men upstairs. Gesticulating all the while, I asked one naked child whether he'd seen a man passing through here, dressed in black, his head shaven,

singing about whatever he saw.

The kids all laughed and there was quite a hullabaloo. B took out a handful of sweets and passed them around. One of the kids pointed at a place half-way down the mountain and shouted something, the rest joined in. But we had just come from there! Desperate, I shouted, "An old man down there said he's at the top of the mountain, said he lives at the top, how could he be down there?" The kids started to play amongst themselves; a dog strolled over, stretching himself lazily in front of us. I screamed and shouted. One of the kids looked up at me, and then looked at the place half way down the mountain. I flung my knapsack to the ground; a dark cloud drifted slowly across the sky, darkening the village. I sat glumly on the ground; the cloud passed, the colours of bamboo and straw returned to the village. I started to cry.

I wasn't keen to see the King of Singers; I only wanted to help B, to fulfill the duties of a girlfriend. I was dying to fulfill my duties. Perhaps love was a transparent vacuity; it needed to be embellished by something solid and colourful. I was obsessed with this kind of fanatic embellishment, but the King of Singers seemed to be sneering at me for my vacuity. There was a foreign magazine on the ideal home. It had photographs of every single thing a home needed, from shorts to fur coats, from cutlery to bedroom items. The magazine was on sale at a special department store for forty-five *juan*. I was a student and couldn't afford it. Even now I wouldn't want to fork out so much money for a lousy magazine, but at that time I really hankered after it. I kept thinking about it whenever I felt bored. It was only after B had proposed the plan to go in quest of the King of Singers that I put it out of my mind. But as I sat crying at the top of the mountain, I thought about that magazine again. I wanted the food pictured there, wanted one of the dresses they featured, wanted to abandon myself to three days of sleep on the huge bed, to spray myself all over with French perfume, to get a new haircut and have a manicure Oh the city, the city, the city!

To people in the city, B was an odd fish, he was too full of enthusiasm. He tried endlessly to improve himself and was too busy to think about

life. As far as I was concerned, he hadn't yet attained complete success, but he'd rushed off to complete, to perfect, his self. I felt, however, that the self and success were two totally different things. Composing music was no religion. All that talk about character and spirit, the heart and the soul, enlightenment and inspiration; about true music being pure, lofty and sublime, and so on and so forth As I saw it, B was full of talent, full to bursting; but he insisted upon seeing himself as a monk and looking up to the King of Singers as Buddha. At university, this King of Singers had been my sworn enemy; B was gripped tightly in the King's clutches, a glazed look in his eyes. I could feel that he couldn't concentrate even when he was kissing me. But now it seemed that it wasn't such a good thing after all for the King of Singers to have acquired this disciple. B hadn't given any concerts since his university days, when he received recognition from the public, and no more was heard of his work. He spent all his time on this quest for the King of Singers. Orchestral music had brought him fame, but, years later, he dressed himself in rags and mixed with country people, his whereabouts completely unknown.

We went our separate ways a long time ago. I looked upon this quest for the King of Singers with increasing despair. That day when I sat crying at the top of the mountain, B came over to help me up; I didn't move. He dropped his hands to his sides and squatted on the ground. Still crying, I started to splutter, I didn't know what I was saying. Words just tumbled out of my mouth, like tiny smoke rings smokers make by pouting their lips and tapping their cheeks. One sentence tumbled out after another. I kept feeling that we were like two somnambulists who had climbed up a high mountain. The wind at the top blew away all sound, so that you suspected this was really a world without sound and that there was no King of Singers after all. Then the wind stopped, I heard a few dogs bark. Several months later, when I was in the amusement park wearing a long dress made of pure Hangzhou silk and laughing merrily in one of those electric whirling chairs, I suddenly remembered that the wind up in the mountain could blow away all sound. Yet, amidst the sound of the swirling wind

round the whirling chairs, I could hear pop music. It was loud and triumphant, powerful enough to drown everything.

After I left B and returned to the city, I felt an urgent need to cast off my old self. I got in the bathtub and soaked for so long that I nearly fainted from exhaustion. I did everything I had wanted to do when I was on the mountain. Then I frittered away my days in shops, amusement parks, exhibition halls and social gatherings. Everyone wanted to know whether we'd actually managed to achieve anything. I exaggerated and dramatized my experience. I became a heroine and a super-woman in people's eyes. But I saw another "me" on the mountain, one who soon drooped under the light of the sun, like wild tropical flowers that bloom but for a while. I simply don't know what I've been doing these few years. I haven't seen my Buddha.

Everybody in the city had paired me off with B and reacted to our breaking up with amazement and disapproval. They thought it was temporary, a matter of getting back to the city at different times. I knew, however, that this was a choice for life. He wanted to find his King of Singers; I wanted simply to be a singer. People kept coming to consult me about B's works. This made me see our differences even more clearly. I didn't think much about whether I'd been right or wrong, but I did miss the time we spent together. I dreamed that he had married a country girl; she had a sad, supple, beautiful singing voice. I cried in my dream. When I woke up, I rushed to the theatre to sign payment receipts.

B said he'd never come back until he found the King of Singers. When we parted, he turned a wide empty stare on me. He was totally preoccupied with the King of Singers; there was no room for me.

Down in the Central Plains, an old woman told our fortunes with six chopsticks. We sat face to face, each holding two chopsticks, two pointing straight in front, while the third was jammed at right angles between the two, at the near end, to keep them apart. The tips of my chopsticks were pressed against the tips of B's. Having reminded us to hold the chopsticks as steadily as possible, the old woman began to recite a spell, and we saw the chopsticks in our hands start to move.

Through this we learned our marriage prospects and our chances of meeting the King of Singers. We couldn't control the chopsticks, their coming together or moving apart, even if we tried. At the time B and I both insisted that the other had failed to keep a steady hand, even now I don't understand what really happened. Anyway, we got negative prognostications to both our questions, about the King of Singers and about our marriage. I don't know, maybe we were too nervous. Involuntary tics of the eyelids are usually thought to augur good or ill fortune, but I often have tics in both eyes simultaneously.¹ On our way in search of the King of Singers, B spent night after night playing patience, trying to gauge his luck; never once did he get the game right. He was driven quite mad, and played even more persistently. My nerves couldn't stand it; I messed up the cards and I even ruffled his hair, hoping that he would forget this thing altogether. But he took up the cards, tore them into pieces one by one, and tore up the box as well. Sometimes I felt I was his unlucky star; if I wasn't around, perhaps the King of Singers would see him and grant him his wishes. To the King of Singers, I was an outsider.

One evening, we were travelling on the path along which the King of Singers was supposed to have passed. The rain fell heavily and disappeared at once into the earth under the cobblestones. The rustling of the pine forest was like the sound of children sobbing. The wind was again turning us into its playthings; it brought with it the moaning of trees and a rancid humid stench. As the rain pelted down, puddles gurgled in the hollows among the rocks, like a mass of stomachs and guts lying there writhing with indigestion. The cobblestone path came to an end farther on, giving way to a small river, wild and turbulent. We waded across, still wearing our shoes, and then stepped on to a narrow track. Elephants had trampled it, their footprints formed tiny reservoirs. My hiking shoes were cushioned

with felt insoles, now a mass of soggy waste. This, together with the water trapped inside, made me feel quite sick. All the leeches had come to life. Raising their heads, they crawled up our bodies. Those on the leaves would fall onto the back of your neck without warning. I pulled up my collar, wrapped a scarf around it, and tied it tightly round my neck. Suddenly, the rain poured down, separating B and me. We lost sight of each other. Equally suddenly, the rain stopped. B's body was covered with blood stains. We got off that hellish road. I took off B's clothes and saw masses and masses of leeches feasting on his body. Black and bloated, they were all over his chest, his back, his legs, even the soles of his feet. Their heads were stuck deep into his body, their tails wriggling about. Or was it their tails that were stuck onto his body, their heads wriggling? I couldn't tell; I could only see that they were growing fatter and fatter. Their feast finished, these meat balls dropped to the ground. Damn revolting they were, these dark shiny meat balls bloated with human blood. Insects always scare the living daylights out of me. On that occasion, I hit out at them like a madwoman, my teeth biting deep into my lips. We smacked them, slapped them, stamped and stepped on them. What tenacity those leeches had!

The damp mouldy smell became unbearable when the evening sun shone on our wet clothes. I tore out the soggy insoles as I would some rotten weeds, and threw them away. How I wished I could take off all my clothes, change into a swimsuit, and bask in the sun and, in the heat of the sun, walk on and on! Colourful swimsuits reminded me of diving boards and beaches. Are swimsuits meant for covering up the body, or are they worn out of sheer feminine vanity? If I went on like this, all the things a woman needed would be completely useless to me. I began to hate this King of Singers. The evenings were particularly long here; it didn't start to grow dark until about eight o'clock. When we could still distinguish the sky from the mountains by their colours, we saw a bamboo cottage. B went inside, I sat by the roadside looking at the balcony. A little while later, B and a boy came out on the balcony together. The boy had a bow and arrows in his hands. He stood with his thin legs well apart,

¹Tics in the left eye are believed to foretell good fortune while those in the right foretell ill fortune. A more sophisticated guide to such prognostications can be found in the Chinese almanac, which takes into account the time of day the tics occur.

drew the wooden bow, and let off a bamboo arrow into the sky. I called to B to come down. I wanted to take him out of this picture. Laughing, he came down and out into the open. The boy was still standing on the balcony, not moving. He looked at us, drew his bow again and let off another arrow into the sky. Against the darkening sky, the boy and his bamboo cottage and his bow and arrow looked like a black sculpture. B didn't fit.

What I really wanted to talk about was the present. I was lying in bed going over the innumerable letters that had arrived, mostly from my fans. At first, I was surprised that I should have made such a hit singing popular songs; later, I came to feel I deserved it. But when I opened a large envelope, I found inside it only a slip of paper with the words: "Your songs are crap." I crumpled up the paper and threw it away, then picked it up again and smoothed it out. I knew what kind of a singer I was, I knew where I stood. I'd never done anything seriously in my life. Easy come, easy go; always doing things by halves. I was like a sick bird that soared high into the sky one moment and came straight down the next, that hiccupped at the sun and farted at the stars. Everything I did was for fun. When I came back from the mountain, I suddenly wanted to have a go at this business called singing—not arias, of course. It so happened that a friend of mine wanted me as a partner, I agreed, so singing became my profession. There are all kinds of fairy tales in this world. Standing on the stage and relying on the lighting, the colours and the microphone to make people think you're a somebody is one such fairy tale. Cut a leech in half and you have two leeches. Two times two makes four, four times four sixteen—one has to come up with a few tricks in order to survive. I was pleased with myself for my ability to earn good money, when in fact I had been made a fool of by the King of Singers.

The phone rang. Knowing full well who it was, I picked it up and said straight away:

"It's about time you rang!"

"Are you still in bed? I only slept two hours yesterday I'm ready to drop I've got so many things to do my clothes were all moth-eaten I'd forgotten about the mothballs I sunned my clothes

all day yesterday my costume now has a large hole in it how sad how sad how sad and I went out to fix up two shows just the taxis cost me a fortune well, shall we go?"

"Pick me up in half an hour. I'm still in bed."

"You sleep too much. Be quick. I'll come right away."

Before I could reply, she hung up.

Mimi was like this: impatient, always on the move. She had five phones in that small flat of hers—just so she could pick up the phone anytime, anywhere, she said. She even had a phone in the bathroom, and she would read fashion magazines and talk on the phone while sitting on the loo.

When I had the time, I loved reading fashion magazines about fashion trends abroad. I had quite a collection of such magazines. One day my girlfriends came and divided them up amongst themselves. Collecting fashion magazines was like going in search of the King of Singers: labour in vain, that's what it was! In the end, I thought better of it and simply went and bought myself a pile of cheap sportswear—it was still fun, I thought. But Hanna, wrapped in that expensive dress of hers that was worth over a hundred US dollars, never stopped telling me I was too sloppy. Hanna was a beautiful woman with a slim figure, poised and elegant. She had just come back from England, and was so loaded with good breeding and good manners that she seemed to find it hard even to laugh in public. She spoke with a perfect accent, was impeccably dressed, and showed a proper disdain for discotheques. This "aristocratic air" of hers threw Weiwei completely off her stride, and she worried endlessly that she might be shown up for her "vulgarity". Weiwei was as clever as a rat, but she had a face like a cat. With an impressive flow of Peking dialect at her command, with the slang and colloquialisms of different countries at her disposal, Weiwei did exactly what she felt like in front of anybody and everybody, in defiance of good manners. Yet, when Hanna was around, even if the whole world was dancing to the beat of disco music, she'd only dare to wriggle her shoulders stealthily when Hanna was not looking.

Hanna loved lecturing me. "You can't see beyond your nose! Don't you know there're

other countries in this world—Paris, New York, London? Of course, New York doesn't count. Americans are so common," she said with a wave of her hand. "Here the most you can do is to sing, or interpret B's symphonies for people. Now that you've broken up with B, why don't you marry into Europe? But don't go to America, Americans are so common." She paused, "This quest for the King of Singers—it's unthinkable, simply suicidal. You've seen nothing of the world. Go abroad, go abroad! But don't go to the States, Americans are so common!"

True, we had seen nothing of the world. I rather feared B would have to spend the rest of his life in the wild mountains. I, too, was entangled in this absurd business of his: I could neither follow him, nor leave him. Hanna had married a descendent of an English aristocrat. People said her lucky star was smiling on her; she was the "aristocrat" among us. Perhaps the family she married into could be counted one of the true aristocratic families in the world, that was perhaps why she could speak with such absolute certainty about the Americans all being "common". But, when she fell asleep, that wonderful heritage which could be traced back to her father and her grandfather would manifest itself, making her snore and mumble in her sleep. What was more, that faint trace of a moustache round her mouth, and her gnarled knuckles, all reminded her mercilessly that she was her father's daughter. Her eyes were dark and bright, but they only shone when she forgot that she was her husband's wife and her mother-in-law's daughter-in-law. I knew how absolutely charming she was when she opened her mouth wide to laugh, twisting her nose and baring her teeth, and she had in her a real treasure of sophisticated vulgar language. Her husband had certainly fallen in love with these wonderful qualities of hers, only to discover that they were all gone after he married her.

I was too lazy to argue with Hanna about my future. She said I made life difficult for myself and that I was simple-minded; I just stuck to my own opinions. The word loneliness might be rubbish, yet it never stopped niggling me, shamelessly, stubbornly. I thought about finding myself a new partner, but I couldn't forget B. I could

have married a good husband, yellow or white or black, it would be fine by me as long as he loved me; but I felt completely at a loss, not knowing what to ask for. My private life was a complete mess.

I got out of bed, went to the kitchen and cooked myself a couple of eggs, washed my face, brushed my teeth, put on some make-up, brushed my hair, and prepared to get dressed. Today Mimi and I had arranged to go and sign a recording contract. To tell the truth, it was exhausting trying to keep up with the pace of city life. Day in, day out, you were so busy making money, and you exhausted yourself spending it; there was no sense of enjoyment whatsoever. I laid all my clothes out on the bed, there wasn't one thing I liked. Eventually, it was the sportswear that won. I put on a sport shirt, a pair of slacks and canvas shoes. This outfit made me look like I was about to go hiking, but in fact it was for getting about on the busy and crowded streets. I opened the drawers and dragged out a heap of jewellery. There was a pair of gold-plated ear-rings in the shape of beetles which I'd bought at the flea market. The hawker insisted that they were genuine Qing-dynasty. He took them out stealthily and said he would sell them only to me. I couldn't understand why he did this. Weiwei had once come across a hawker selling shoes who said to her, "For a pretty girl like you I'll knock off ten cents." But I wasn't so pretty that a hawker would save his goods for me! Nonetheless, I bought the ear-rings. It was like that time I bought a pair of purple sunglasses because, while I was trying them on, the hawker said, "You look like a movie-star in them." I put them on then, and felt dizzy all the way home. Only later did I understand why: the surface of the lenses was rough and uneven. So it wasn't because of my looks but because people's gullibility showed in their eyes, and fakes looked more genuine than the real thing.

I sat down for my eggs and orange juice. Mimi had told me to keep off coffee, because it would give me blackheads. She gave me a whole lot of tips on skin-care: you mustn't do this, you mustn't do that. Once she told me her worries about how married life would affect her looks, and then said that the whole business of trying to look young was too tiring. She herself was never sure which

should come first: caring for her skin or enjoying life. These two things didn't seem to go together. But, after she had recited in one breath a long list of skin care treatments, she heaved a big sigh, let me make her a cup of strong coffee, and treated herself to a large bar of chocolate. I was worried that the coloured pigment in what she was eating would, as she said, really settle on her face then and there. Mimi was a famous concert musician who took up singing on a sudden impulse. She was a remarkably gifted musician, skilled in playing the flute, the *guqin*, and the *erhu*. I always liked to hear her play the *guqin* when I was upset. Its sound floated about my ears like the coolest and sweetest spring water, whatever was filthy and vile in me would soon be washed away. As her long slim fingers moved about on the *guqin*, peace and harmony would envelop us. Our ancestors had left us a legacy:

Light winds on the lake,
Moonlight on the mountain,
These, and these only, are for your use,
Take them freely, they are always there.

But we had handed back to our ancestors this treasure with which we had been endowed by the creator. Only money was real. In Mimi's words: you need money to keep the light winds on the lake and the moonlight on the mountain. So, she became a singer.

After breakfast, I sat at the piano and practised different rhythmic accompaniments. I wasn't a star, just a singer. I relied on my unexceptional songs and my equally unexceptional voice to see me through. Even so, lots of people still said they couldn't understand me. Whoever it was that sent me that slip of paper telling me I was "crap" must have been a person of true wisdom. Listen to the melodies. So simple, so undemanding. Even I myself found them boring, and I loathed to listen to my own recordings. Mimi hadn't come yet. She had told me that she was going to the beauty parlour first; she would go and sign the contract after she had made herself pretty. The photograph of B on top of the piano disturbed me no end. All my new boyfriends ran away because of it. But I didn't want to remove it. Perhaps this image no longer existed in this world, perhaps B had already been transformed into a completely different

person. But I still hoped that hundreds of years later, I'd be able to find, on an entirely different face, traces of this image.

I laid the picture frame face down on the piano. Only a solitary oil painting remained on the piano now. I stood the frame up again. I really should find time to remove the photo from the frame and put it in a drawer, then start going out with a boyfriend properly. Someone had said that I had something feline about me. I didn't want to hear this. I had always adored women who could tame gorillas in the primaeval forest and hunt lost treasures in the desert. But, when I was in the south, I lay screaming on a tiny bed in a wooden hut and couldn't go to sleep. The mosquito net was small and filthy, and stained with the blood of bedbugs. It couldn't be tucked under the mattress and mosquitoes got in through the gap. At night rats danced about on the net, making it rustle. When they had done, they peed all over the net. Itchy all over, I switched on the torch and saw a huge, round bedbug lying on its stomach on the mosquito net right beside me! I tore off a piece of paper, trapped the bug against the wall with it, pressed it hard, and pop! the bug burst, and a spot of blood was added to the mosquito net. Not daring to lie down again, I knelt on the bed, raised my head, and proceeded to examine the net carefully. Only then did I discover that there was a nest of purplish red bedbugs of all sizes in one corner of the net. The bed was damp; the quilt, a mass of frayed cotton wadding, was wrapped loosely in a dirty sheet, which was simply folded over to make a cover. You only had to turn over and you'd be left with lumps of cotton wadding, the cover having slipped away. I got out of bed shivering, gooseflesh all over. I heard scuttling noises, and saw rats with bodies over a foot long scurrying into hiding. This was an inn in a country town; apart from us there was also a group of school children who had come to give a performance. Every morning at five, we could hear the sound of an accordion and a violin. This was their two teachers practising the musical accompaniment. The violin hadn't been tuned properly; it was a semi-tone lower than the accordion. Still the two of them played enthusiastically. This performing troupe had come from the neighbouring mountain, which was even higher

Five Deadly Poisons
by Shao Fei

Material not available
due to copyright restrictions.

than this one. There, one could hear the harmonious sound of gongs, drums and mysterious horns. Here, however, the school children only sang tunes that were popular in the city while their teachers revelled every day in that cacophonous duet of theirs, the violin always a semi-tone flat. They drove B and me round the bend. Every day I looked for a chance to pick a quarrel with those teachers, but they always greeted us with such warm smiles.

On the mountain, B and I slept in the bamboo house of our host. We lay on a grass mattress on the floor in the central room. The women slept in the next room, the one with the mosquito nets. I preferred to sleep there in the central room, like the men. I lived in mortal fear of mosquito nets. They made me feel trapped. I sprayed myself with insecticide from head to foot. Fully armoured, I went and lay motionless among the men. Here you could at least have a breath of fresh air, though down below us there were pigs and cows. The pigs grunted and the cows snorted. The mosquitoes flew up from down there through the slits between the floorboards, slits big enough to let a huge locust crawl through. A light breeze came in, bringing with it the smell of dung, the sweet fragrance of plants, and the barking of dogs in the distance. How peaceful and soothing the

night was, hardship and aloof unworldliness had blended into one.

Had B been easier on me, I might still be with him now. He couldn't put up with my squeamishness and often lost his temper with me. Each time we had to spend the night in a village inn, I'd invariably examine the beds with a grim look. Every time I went to the loo, I made him stand guard outside. The maggots and the huge spider webs gave me the creeps. In a village up in the north, there was, just in front of a latrine, a tree with thick fat worms covering the lower half of its trunk. Every single inch was covered, and the bark looked like a layer of skin with blisters all over, moving blisters. I stood there shrieking and screaming, and couldn't possibly go into the latrine. I screamed and looked at B, but saw only contempt on his face. Even if I hadn't told him I wanted to go back, I knew he'd been thinking about asking me to leave for some time. Eventually I became completely hardened as far as toilets and village inns were concerned. I wasn't even daunted when the ground was swamped with layers and layers of dark chrysalises, giving out popping sounds as I stepped on them; or when several square metres of ground were covered with heaps and heaps of maggots. But I started to wonder whether pushing on like this was fair for

a woman. We were searching for an illusory idol, and I didn't need this King of Singers in my life. Without a word, I packed my bags and told B I was leaving. B replied, "I've been thinking, it's about time I took you back." I forced a smile, "Don't bother! I can go on my own. I'm well-trained now." "All right then," B looked at me with an empty stare, as I said before. I gritted my teeth and tore myself away. And as I turned, I had the feeling that this was going to be our last farewell, even though we said "See you" to each other. The blood drained from my face. Slowly, I began to plod my way from that unreal world in the faraway south back to reality. Only when the long and gruelling journey was over and I stepped into my room did I finally burst into tears.

Mimi arrived at last, wearing a trendy bat-wing dress. I once used to like this style, now that the streets were flapping with loose flowing sleeves, I felt I'd had enough. Of course, fashion is to women what frames are to pictures, and who was that kind soul who said that material things were created for women? To be a woman is to be blessed with a thousand honours, but add a thousand worries to that and you might as well get yourself an injection of male hormones. Mimi shouted: "Are you ready? Let's go, let's go."

"You were late and now you're rushing me."

"Oh, don't remind me. I couldn't get a taxi and had to take a bus. I'm completely washed-out."

"Well, well, our prima donna's gotten into the habit of taking taxis!"

"Come on, give me a break. What else can you do? It's so tiring riding a bike, there're so few taxis, and it's impossible to buy a car. Your outfit looks nice."

"It looks all right. I'm exhausted. I want to quit."

"You ought to wear a red scarf. A silk scarf, it goes with what you're wearing."

"Are you going for a manicure?"

The lift swooshed down to the ground floor.

We waited for a taxi in the street. Finally, one stopped for us. But the driver drove off when we told him we were not paying in foreign exchange certificates. Mimi cried, "Look at that! Even the Chinese bully the Chinese. Look at that!" She

rattled on and on, saying how she had to go abroad, that she couldn't take any more of this shit. Another taxi stopped, the driver didn't ask for foreign exchange certificates. We jumped in, and I put my cassette in the tape deck. There was a kind of superb rapport between music and speed.

"Hey, just now you said you wanted to quit. Do you really?" Mimi shouted over the music.

"Well . . . I don't know!" I shouted back.

"Can you turn the music down a bit?"

"No," I turned to look outside, not wanting to talk to her anymore. I had never been in a spaceship, I didn't know how its speed would harmonize with my music. Space could add a certain nobility to music, even the sound of sawing wood would be sublime in the vastness of outer space. If the atmosphere could be turned into an amplifier, there would be even more pop stars.

"Have you got any good songs at the moment?"

"Some folk songs."

"Don't be crazy. You can't get the feel of them."

"No. No one can get the feel of them, except the 'singing spirits'."

"Then what are you going to do?"

"Don't know."

"Look! A shop selling fishing gear."

Mimi's business card was full of titles. There was a long list of associations which she belonged to. With the exception of the "Association of Singers" which she really should have joined but which didn't exist yet, she'd joined every other association there was in the country. I kept bumping into "experts" in that tiny flat of hers. Once, I was invited to a dinner party at her place. A music aesthete was brazen enough to plunk himself down next to me. "Please tell me the special features of B's music," he said.

"Have you got a pack of cards?" I asked Mimi.

"What are you going to play?"

"Blackjack. I'll pay you five cents if I lose."

I disliked being asked by anyone and everyone to explain B's music. It wasn't my job. I put the cards on the table: "Quick, pick a card."

The aesthete cleared off and started talking to another expert sitting in the corner, this time about social consciousness and anthropology. I

relied on my intuition and turned over one card after another. At times like this, I always felt that the cards were transparent—it was as if somebody was holding a coin in his hands and I had to guess whether it was heads or tails. In fact, I was using my mind rather than my eyes to see. The correct image on the card or coin would suddenly appear in my mind. But if I hesitated or turned the card or coin over and over in my mind, I'd be sure to make mistakes. But I kept doing this at crucial moments in my life.

"Blackjack." The woman opposite flung her cards down.

Rotten luck, she'd won.

"Xiao Lu, why don't you go abroad?"

"Soon."

"It's so easy to go abroad now, as long as you have money there."

"I know this fiddle player who went to America. There you can make enough money to get yourself a car by playing in a bar."

"Hey, give me some change. This is a five-yuan note."

"Why don't you get some change ready before you play? One, two, three, four. And here are some dimes . . ."

"There was a conference at Pigtail Lane recently."

"Anthropological consciousness will . . ."

"Look at this hand!"

"Can you tell me the similarities and differences between the art forms of the past and those which have recently emerged or the insight provided by sociology anthropology film aesthetics long shots close-ups and a 420 foot film stock?"

"If you don't go for Brecht, what else is there? Tragedy? Primitivism? Time and space? This hand . . . I give up."

"The game is over, really. You'd all better give up."

"Got to pay again."

"Tell me, what's the use of having eyes as deep as the sea if they keep encouraging obscure and incomprehensible poetry?"

"I simply don't see that point of taking shoes as the main theme."

"Pass."

"Oh, you don't understand, the point is . . ."

I've lost again!"

"Count me out. That's it for tonight. I've got to write a review for Lao Zhang."

"My female protagonist has eyes as deep as the sea, she stood on the top of the cliff waving a white gauze scarf at her boyfriend . . ."

"That's beautiful!"

"Blackjack!"

"Oh my heart's dream oh my beautiful dream, who wrote that masterpiece?"

The taxi slowed down in the busy street. Crowds of people from all over the country had gathered outside the fence surrounding the large restaurant to take a good look at the foreign big-noses inside. Hong Kong tourists, with oversized knapsacks on their backs and short legs, were particularly eye-catching. The city was gradually changing. If you went away for several months, you'd find it incredibly exciting on your return. But if you stayed here all the time, you'd be bored stiff. The mountains were just outside the city, grey and hazy; you could just make them out. That was where we should be heading, not here. It was much less crowded there, the mountain ridges were wide open, empty and spacious. In the pine forest, layers of last year's branches carpeted the ground, providing a cushion for people to sit on and talk about love. The car door opened; the beauty parlour was right in front of us.

My singer boyfriend Lin Xi said I was a typical product of the city and shouldn't make things difficult for myself or ask for trouble. He loved to listen to me tell stories, for a while I had been really good at that. It didn't last long though, and I soon lost the knack. I forgot all my stories and became obsessed with playing cards. I wondered whether the day would come when I'd even forget how to sing and read the score, forget everything and fall instantaneously into an oblivious, comatose darkness. That would be great, and B, music, the King of Singers, and what-not, could damn well go to hell. Lin Xi had the makings of a good husband, he was full of love for me. I had seen that expression in B's eyes before, but B's love for me had been snatched away by the King of Singers. Lin Xi wasn't stubborn, he lived for the moment.

"What about Lin Xi, then?" Hanna cocked

her head and spoke like a member of the Committee on the Assessment of Art Works.

"First, he could be my nanny. Second, he could be my brain. Third, he could be the father of my children. Fourth, he could be my father." I ticked them off on my fingers.

"Where in the world can you find such a husband?" Hanna struck the table, very much her father's daughter. "But my husband's like that too," she now sat there calmly, having recovered her aristocratic air. "Do you love him?"

I couldn't answer.

I loathed saying the word "love". I'd said it so many times, I love, I love—B, Lin Xi, the city, singing, and so on and so forth. To these and many other things I applied the word "love". But I'd better go to the beauty parlour first, and then to talk terms with my agent and sign the contract.

I went in and bought two tickets that cost at least one third the salary of a teaching assistant. The beautician, soft-spoken and wearing heavy blue eye-shadow, offered me a chair very much like the type you find at the dentist's, though a little plusher. She came over and slowly tilted the chair back, placing me into a reclining position. She spread a heap of what you might call cream all over my face and started to massage gently. How soft her fingers were, they glided back and forth on your face, making you feel that your skin would be like silk when you sat up again. Then "vacuum cleaners" of different sizes swept the surface of your skin, and layer upon layer of face cream filled the pores of your just-cleansed face—the latest beauty treatment imported from abroad, so it was said. The beautician's fingers then lightly massaged your forehead, the corners of your eyes, and the various parts of your face. How clean, how gleaming, how young and how beautiful your face would look when you sat up again. A masque on your skin, a layer of gauze over your face, and then you began to feel the steam. It was aimed at those parts you most wanted to be steamed; you felt relaxed, soothed, drowsy. When I sat up again, I was sure I would look radiant and glamorous.

The beautician turned on the wash basin tap in the corner. The quartz clock played two bars of "Für Elise". Then there was only the sound of steam. The melody of the two bars of "Für

Elise" edged its way into my ears and droned on and on.

"Isn't it nice?" The beautician adjusted the direction of the steam; those parts which had been steamed began to feel cool.

I wanted to ask her not to adjust it, but my mouth was covered with gauze. I couldn't open my mouth, so I just nodded.

"Close your eyes and rest." She said softly.

How wonderful it would be if everyone in the world talked to you like this.

"Not ready yet?" The door opened. It was Weiwei.

"Please wait outside. She'll be done soon." The beautician was gentle and soft-spoken as always.

Giggling, Weiwei closed the door.

Basketball, tennis, cold baths, head-stands, beauty treatments—these were all strongly recommended by Weiwei. I swung round and hit out, but the ball still didn't make it over the net. I injured my opponent at basketball by scratching her eyes. Taking cold baths made me ache all over. Practising head-stands made my body feel like a lead weight and I fell down flat before I could get my legs in the air. You're getting old. If you want to stay young, you've got to fight hard. Come on, stand on your head! The result? Weiwei nearly broke her neck and ended up with a minor concussion.

The steam was switched off, the gauze removed, a cool wet towel was wiping my face. I felt a chill run through my body, how this spoilt everything! The towel was taken away, I sat up, opened my eyes wide. When I sat up I knew my face would be clean and smooth and gleaming and young and beautiful. I looked in the mirror, my face was flushed and gleaming.

"Come over here for your make-up, please." The beautician pointed at the lighted mirror.

I went over. That's right, there's still my make-up to do. When I left I'd be even more glamorous.

This time I saw clearly. All my facial pores had expanded to at least twice their normal size, my face looked like a lump of sponge cake, red, bloated and shiny. I stared blankly at that face.

"Don't wash your face with soap for three days. When your pores close up again, you can use make-up on your face as you wish." As she said

this the beautician made my eyelids as blue as her own.

With "blue" eyes I left the beauty parlour. Weiwei burst out laughing when she saw me, "Well?"

"Well?" I felt extremely unsure of myself.

"They're blue enough."

I smoothed my eyelids, "And?"

"They look a bit" She wagged her finger.

"Finished This time I'm finished." I dared not touch my face.

She giggled.

"It's all your damn fault." I took out my pocket mirror and scrubbed those blue eyelids. Not even blue eyelids can help a face that looks like discoloured pig skin.

Giggling and pointing to the pimples on her face, Weiwei said, "It has done wonders for my face."

"Serves you right!" I couldn't, however, be sure whom the "you" referred to. I picked up my bag and left.

"Want to join me and live like a decent human being?" Weiwei shouted at my back, "Twelve-thirty, same place."

Mimi and I got into a taxi again and hurried off to sign the contract. Once inside, I closed the windows tightly, for fear that dust would be blown into our clean and much expanded pores. Fortunately, we weren't on our bicycles, or else dust would settle on our skin and our faces and our noses would have black spots all over. And in three days when our skin returned to normal, it'd be too goddamned late to try to clean it up with soap!

"How much do you think we should ask for?" Mimi asked me.

"The mountain folk songs I sing have lovely melodies and go down well with the audience," I squinted at the young chap who was the agent for the recording company. He had just finished stressing to us the grand and important role played by popular songs in the making of profits.

"No, no, no. Your folk songs are too primitive, too barbaric. And it's so difficult to pick up the tune. Just imagine, you're picking your teeth after dinner, you switch on the cassette player and, in no time, you learn to sing along. That's what

popular music's all about. Look at Hong Kong and those soap opera theme songs. They're just beautiful. You make things odd and complicated—no one listens, and they're impossible to learn. We Chinese are civilized people; we must do things in a civilized manner."

"How?"

"Sing softly, make your words sweet. Let people feel, the minute they hear you, that you're always smiling."

"One can't be smiling all the time!"

"It's just acting. It's acting from start to finish."

"Then I could let them laugh till they have hysterics."

"That you can't. What's more, you need to smile gently. Don't forget you're a Chinese woman. Keep your eyes wide open, don't relax because you're smiling, or you'll mislead people into thinking you were born with small eyes. Spread your lips just a bit but don't turn it into a grin, or your mouth will look too large and your face out of proportion. That's also misleading. So, gentleness is the word." He showed us what he meant. It really was the look you saw in film magazines.

"Sing softly! Well then, I'll have to restrain my voice when I sing." Mimi always sang with a clear, full voice.

"Of course you'll have to. You've got a mike. Loud breathing sets off terrible reverberations."

"Then get somebody else. You don't have to have me," Mimi said in a mincing voice.

"You're pretty," the young chap smiled sweetly at Mimi. "But your voice is too loud. That makes things difficult for us. The singers from Hong Kong don't have your problem. That's why I'm not sure I should sign you up for a recording."

"There are plenty of singers with big voices in Europe and in America."

"But we don't know how to appreciate them here, do we?" He waved his hand, "Your voice is a problem. But you're pretty." He looked at Mimi, his head cocked to one side.

I handed him a score.

"Why doesn't it give the key?" He tried to pose as an expert.

"But this is in staves. Here's the key signature."

I flicked my fingers at the score.

"Of course," he loosened his tie slightly, "But why are there so many sheets for just one song?"

"This is the orchestral score!"

"Oh! What? Who did the arrangement for you? Did you do it yourselves? No, this is not on. How can you be so self-confident? Hong Kong is our model, we're just a copy. How can we be so disrespectful? All right, if this is going to be a joint effort, you'll have to give me your word on the following: no crazy ideas no tricks no putting on airs, no shouting no screaming no wild singing no complexity no difficult music no disregard for the audience no projecting too strong a personality no striving to be original and different no showing real feelings no holding back no singing without smiles no squinting your eyes no showing your teeth no distorting your muscles no demanding melodies no fussing with harmony no refusing a bit of flirtation no aiming at impossible standards no displaying knowledge in everything no need to write the words no need to compose the melody no arranging instrumental music forget about operatic trills forget about polyphonic harmony that doesn't pay forget about vulgar mountain folk songs unless they've been sung or re-arranged by Hong Kong maestros sign if you agree forget about it if you don't stubbornness doesn't pay whether you sign or not is for you to say will I treat you shabbily if you do?"

If I'd had a gun I would have shot him then and there. But three times three makes nine, seven times eight fifty-six. That's simple arithmetic. How else could I make this sum of money if I didn't cooperate with him?

None of us said anything.

"Make us an offer," I yielded.

I had always thought that my views on popular music were original, my style of singing unique. I couldn't be bothered to argue about these things now. You keep a tight rein on your temper if you want to survive. Should there really be a heaven and a hell in the world to come, how would the petty demons judge me when I die? Vexation, vanity, stupidity, I was guilty of them all, and in my lifetime I was a celebrity, adored as the moon by the stars. Why was it that songs which so touched me should fail to move the recording company agent and the audience? Was it because

I wasn't good enough to imitate those spirit-like mountain people? On our way in our quest for the King of Singers, I nearly fell into the trap of a "singing spirit". It was a woman. She told us she could find the King of Singers. She led us up a high desolate mountain, and sat down at the edge of a cliff. From the heart of the dark valley gusts of cold wind blew up; a huge lime crag in the distance shone with white light in the dark of the night. The "singing spirit" was shivering all over, a loud moaning came slurring out of her mouth and rose and fell like the tide. The mountain wolves started to howl at the sky, the moonlit night became desolate, all too desolate. Suddenly, the moaning of the "singing spirit" gave way to a clearer sound. Gently she raised and lowered her voice. It glided in the saddest and most beautiful portamento I'd ever heard in my life. Much as I hated the hardships of that life, I couldn't hold back my tears. But when I played what I had recorded that day to my friends in the city, they broke out in hoots of laughter. They all said she sang out of tune. That night, B and I really thought the singing was a prelude to our meeting the King of Singers. But, to our surprise, when she finished singing, the woman picked up my cassette recorder and put on the headphones. She cackled. Then she put the cassette recorder down and, through the vines and creepers along the side of the cliff, she slid down into the valley. B and I just gaped and stared, completely dumbfounded. Later we heard from the villagers that she was a "singing spirit", a sprite in the service of the King of Singers.

I now played the part of a nondescript sprite: I could neither climb and slide away, nor could I gather people together; and when I tried to model myself upon the "singing spirit", the agent wouldn't even make me an offer. When I accepted the agent's terms, I was in fact bringing my relationship with the King of Singers to an end, an absolute and irrevocable end.

I arrived at a big hotel in the city. This was the place where, according to Weiwei, one could "live like a decent human being". They came here often to "live like a decent human being". I walked slowly into the European restaurant. The carpets on the floor were thick, the room itself grand

and sumptuous. Most of the men there were businessmen, and the women were all wearing expensive jewellery. Hanna's French suit was quiet and elegant, Weiwei's gorgeous long dress distinguished and graceful. Here the class distinctions of the material world was obvious. Lots of pedestrians pressed their faces against the windows to take a look inside and then walked away. The waiter began to stare at me, no doubt because my sportswear was worth only five *yuan*.

I had just sat down when I saw Gu Peng sitting alone at a table on the far side of the room. He came from a wealthy family of tycoons. He had got his inheritance and had recently taken up a career in business. At that moment he was staring blankly at a plate of prawns.

"Hi! How are you?" I walked over to him.

He was slightly taken aback, but smiled immediately. He pointed at the empty seat opposite him. I sat down. He pushed a glass of beer in front of me.

"How are you doing?" I asked.

"As well as this prawn here."

"I've just been to sign a contract. It was misery."

"Still, you've got to sign," he looked at me slyly. I knew what that look meant.

"What can I do? I've got to live. I'll get used to it soon, and I'm sure it'll be fun." I pushed the beer back to him.

"Fun when they lift you to the skies or when they dump you on the ground?"

"Both," my temper began to rise.

"Good show!" He lit a cigarette.

"Just wait and see, I've just started." I stood up and walked away.

"Don't lose your natural self," he said to my back.

I stopped and wanted to turn back; I hesitated, oh damn it!

I felt a bit sad. A small ensemble was playing chamber music.

I walked swiftly back to where Hanna and Weiwei were, wearing a smile which I only wore when I was sad. Weiwei never stopped once she started on beer.

The chamber music complemented the drinks with its civility, it came courteously to a half-close, a close, a plagal cadence, and a final close.

"Place your order," Hanna handed me the menu.

I closed my eyes and pointed at something on the menu. The waiter came and jotted down something, I didn't know what.

Beethoven was stone-deaf, yet audiences still applauded him. He didn't want to show off. But now there are many Beethovens who do. At an International Concert of Young Composers, a youth orchestra from abroad was invited to perform. Our boss here was a woman trained as a dancer but, for some unknown reason, was put in charge of orchestral music. One day, while putting on her lipstick, she threw away B's scores and those by a number of other young composers, and kept one that looked impressive. The concert started. When a foreign piece was performed, members of the orchestra all played properly, paying full attention to the conductor and the scores in front of them; there was not a hint of slackness anywhere. The audience was overwhelmed by their virtuosity and praised them highly. But when that "impressive" score of ours was performed, the entire orchestra, players and conductor alike, became Beethoven in his old age: all closed their eyes, and smiles appeared on their faces. The first violin simply put his left hand in his trouser pocket, showing off his powerful neck muscles. Da-dum, Da-dum, Da-dum, Da-dum . . . the same chords were repeated for dozens of measures without variation. There was but one rhythm from beginning to end. Everyone on stage and in the auditorium was in raptures. Da-dum, Da-dum, Da-dum, Da-dum . . . Applause broke out before the orchestra finished playing, and when the piece finally came to an end and the players opened their eyes, the audience went mad with delight. They felt they were in the presence of real maestros whose performance had touched them with a sense of familiarity, like that of an old friend. Those on stage felt, in their turn, that it was even more satisfying than playing a part in a film. Never in their lives had there been an occasion when they received such total admiration.

"Hello!" A Chinese woman sitting at the next table came over to greet us in English. She had shoulder-length hair, a flat nose, and a face so heavily made-up you couldn't tell how big her

eyes were.

"Surely she speaks Chinese," Weiwei rolled her eyes.

When the orchestra returned home, its members wrote an article saying that there was no orchestral music in China.

"Would . . . would you please . . . pass the, the, the, the salt?" the woman asked in halting English, her eyes fixed on Hanna's dress.

The musicians were now playing a work by Bizet. The sextet made it sound graceful and elegant, one, two, three, four, the old man playing the clarinet had transformed Bizet into Haydn.

Weiwei pushed the salt across the table. But who transformed a toreador into Bizet?

The woman held the salt-cellar in her hand, her eyes still fixed on Hanna's dress. "How-much-is this-dress?" she asked, still in halting English.

Hanna pretended she didn't hear. Weiwei asked in pidgin English: "You ask me me ask who ah?"

The woman took the salt-cellar and went back to her table.

Later, the boss—the woman in charge of orchestral music—acquired a nickname "Youri".² She loved it and thought it sounded exotic. Later, someone mentioned something about going abroad for a competition, and she went on and on asking how the prize money would be divided. Then she learnt from her superior that prize-winners at competitions were not necessarily considered representatives of the people, and might in fact be seen as representatives of the reactionaries; she also learnt that the award, the foreign currency, would be confiscated. She at once developed an aversion to competitions and would shake her head the minute she heard that word. Later she would shake her head the minute she heard the name of a foreign country. Later she would shake her head the minute she heard music.

"Let's be serious," Hanna took a sip of her whisky and soda, "you know what Weiwei and I are planning to do?"

"Find me a husband." I laughed.

² According to the author, "Youri" is the name of a pig that figures in a translation of a Hungarian novel which she and her friends had read. Anyone they disliked was called "Youri".

"You think too little of us." Weiwei tapped her cigarette lightly on the table, then placed it between her lips.

The bassoon sounded too dry, he should have a beer.

"Come on, guess!" Hanna smiled and sat up straight; she looked like a saviour.

How could I possibly guess? I'd sooner go and play the bassoon.

The woman who borrowed the salt-cellar a while ago was now quarrelling in Peking dialect with the waiter, and "Son-of-a-bitching" in every sentence. The waiter was trying to throw her out.

"I don't know," I put a piece of beef into my mouth.

"To hold a concert for B," Hanna flicked the ash from her cigarette.

"A concert for B?" I swallowed my beef whole.

"Ha, it never occurred to you, did it?" Weiwei looked smug.

The piece of beef was too big and stuck in my throat. I tried desperately to wash it down with water.

"Yes, a concert for B. You're the only one who can help him, and we're the only ones who can help you. We know lots of people, we can send out dozens of invitations, get together some local reporters and foreign correspondents, and get the project off the ground with a bang." Hanna sat there, she had it well thought out already.

"Will it work?" the beef remained stuck in my throat.

A minuet started. This was the big-noses' country music. This damn place had been taken over by foreigners.

"Of course it will. Why do you have so little confidence? Don't you know by now that B's music is in a class of its own?" Weiwei was so excited she forgot her beer.

The woman who'd just been thrown out came in again, strolling to the rhythm of the minuet. She was clinging to a man who looked Vietnamese. The waiter who had quarrelled with her went up to her, still intending to keep her out. She pointed at the man and said loudly in English: "He is a French! He is a French!"

"What about the orchestra? What about the venue?" I tried again to wash down the beef.

"What about you? This is what you'll have to

do. Make a few more recordings, do a few more shows. Use the money you earn to pay for the orchestra, rent the venue . . . and there you are!”

“Why didn’t I think of it?” I stood up abruptly. The beef slid down my throat and plopped into my stomach.

I really wanted to know how many of the virtues of an oriental woman I possessed and how many of the “obsessions” of a modern woman I had in me. “Don’t model yourself on what you see in films and pack your bags and go and stay in a hotel the minute you get home,” as one model husband said to his disgruntled wife. All the women in the world were competing against one another in madness. I had packed my bags, stayed in hotels, but I still became B’s official representative. I wanted to leave him, yet I also wanted to do something for him; I knew I wasn’t capable of being his able and virtuous wife, yet I also knew that there was something in his innermost being which held my soul in tether. There’s a fairy tale about a pair of shoes. Whoever put them on would find himself at a loss as to where he’d go and what would become of him. It was said that the shoes were put away by a goddess. I suspected that the goddess was a shoemaker. She must have gone home and produced innumerable pairs modelled on them. They were now sold at a high price in shoe shops, throwing everyone into confusion.

All right, I’d be B’s representative and hold a concert for him. B wanted to channel art towards purity and sincerity, but was utterly forgotten by the people. Holding a concert for him now was like excavating an ancient tomb. Everyone likes to sing the praises of dead geniuses.

I was helping in this excavation and working a lot harder than when I dug holes in the ground to plant trees. I was excavating the B in my heart and his colleagues as well. Real musicians are the biggest blockheads in the world. Equipped only with the twelve notes of the scale, they hover above a stretch of marshes. The rest of us can only look up at them from the marshes. But, even more pitiful are those who tend to think too much in words. I’ve never come across that type; I only know that the marshes are full of the bubbles they’ve thrown up. May music bless us and keep us.

There were people who loved to argue about what sort of art was the greatest. I wouldn’t dare participate in such lofty debates. Before I put *that type* of shoes on, I could say anything I liked. Now, giving my views on this subject was suicidal. A long time ago I had a dream about my former self, what I used to be, and what I grew out of. It was a thick, white, bean-curd-like lump. It lay on a stretch of salt-soaked wilderness. Nothing could grow there. But soon the sun, rain, tides, mountains and rocks came one after another to change it. And then there were flowers, plants, and trees to decorate it, the spirit of heaven and earth to nourish it, and the practical education of the human world to shape it. So it became me, lying on a huge, warm and comfortable bed. This I knew with certainty. But I could never make out when I had mistakenly bought those shoes and let them gain possession of my feet, leading me I knew not whither.

What was B’s former self? What did he grow out of?

“All my life I have wanted to do this,” he looked at me but was not talking to me.

“All my life I have wanted to see this King of Singers,” he did not look at me but could only be talking to me.

“You really believe that those prehistoric cave paintings were done by extra-terrestrial visitors?” After all it wasn’t you and it wasn’t me though of course it could be you or it could be me.

“Do you believe that without the mountains the sky would fall?” How could that happen? Even without anything to hold it up, the sky wouldn’t fall.

“Every year the King of Singers holds a gathering with his disciples.” I know, it’s the same old story again, a gathering with his disciples in the wildest and most primitive region. “All the people go there to hear the King of Singers; the singing spirits dance as they sing, the singing spirits of the entire world are there.” It would have to be an enormous stretch of wilderness, wider even than the sea, or the singing spirits would all fall into the sea. “The entire wilderness is packed full of singing spirits, they sing and dance, sing and dance.” Sing and dance, sing and dance. “For five days and five nights non-stop. It’s earth-shaking.” Like a landslide and a tidal wave. “All those who

love the King of Singers go there to see him; they go in groups, carrying torches, bringing provisions. It will take days or weeks, or months, or years." I know there were people who set off on this journey from time immemorial. "They sing all the way." Yes. "They do sing all the way." Yes. "Thousands of years have gone by like this." Yes. "Would you go too?" Yes.

Did I buy those shoes then? What made me do it? It was midnight now, a whole pile of B's scores were lying in front of me. "Don't you know by now that B's music is in a class of its own?" I had never studied them carefully in the past. I read over these scores under the lamplight, and listened to the tape recordings. The scores were filled with notes like the prehistoric cave-paintings, like those mountains taller than the sky. The mountains collapsed, becoming the wilderness. The wilderness collapsed, becoming the sea. The sea collapsed, becoming—I switched off the light—the place which gave us birth and nurtured us.

The mountains in the south were shrouded in thick, eerie mists; people there seldom saw the sun. Like a rising tide, waves of mists rose from the valley, obscuring the fields and villages at the foot of the mountain. All the mountains were alive and exhaling steam, steam which carried with it monotonous, long drawn-out calls that echoed everywhere. People said these were the voices of the "singing spirits"—the followers of the King of Singers—calling to one another. Trees in the burnt-out wasteland, deeply scorched, stretched out their long fingernails to clutch at the soil. Crash. Crash. Everywhere huge boulders collapsed and came rolling down from on high, swallowing all living things.

"Is this rosin the fragrance of pine? Just pine. No fragrance." A "singing spirit" was holding a piece of rosin in his hands and sniffing at it again and again. He hunkered down on his haunches and walked about, trying to amuse the others.

In the rainy season the turbid water of the rising river was filled with desire.

"Come on, get drunk, drink yourself to death," a man gave B a bowl of wine. A fish, stuffed with vegetables and chilies, was being roasted in the fire.

The "singing spirits" had bright, child-like eyes, eyes that made you want to cry.

This one made a move to leave as soon as he saw us.

"No more for me, I'm going back," he said to the host, his mouth full of fish.

"Wait, do please sing us a song first," I said. "Wouldn't you like to have your voice here?" I showed him the cassette recorder. B just sat there, poking the fire.

"It couldn't stay long there," he pointed at his throat and went over to the side of the mat to get his shoes.

I stood up. "Where are you from?"

"Don't eat the grain I sow, or the eagles will come and eat you whole." He looked at me and winked mischievously.

Like one bewitched, I put on my shoes and followed him out of the bamboo hut, out of the stockaded village. Though it was past midnight, one could still hear the clapping of cows' hooves and the screeching of rusty wheels. The children were all asleep; the river continued to rise.

He walked so fast that I soon lost him in the fog. Through the fog there appeared pairs of dark bright eyes, thick dark brows, and long thick eyelashes. It was a group of women, short and small built. They were carrying heavy bundles of firewood and examining me quizzically with raised heads.

"What do you want?"

"I want to record his voice," I pointed at the thick fog ahead.

"The temperature of your tongue is different from his. The two of you can't have children."

"I want to record him."

"Hens hide their heads, pigs lie on the ground, bulls point their horns at the sky, people sleep with their legs crossed . . ." They disappeared, laughing loudly.

I ran back to the hut.

"Is this rosin the fragrance of pine? Just pine. No fragrance."

The "singing spirits" had bright, child-like eyes, eyes that made you want to cry.

There was nothing transcendental about B's music. One would probably have to break away from one's body before one could "transcend". When I was travelling in the long-distance bus, I kept getting the feeling that my head was weighing me down. I only wanted to find some way of

holding my head up, and didn't care a damn about worry, resentment, music or happiness. Perhaps that was what transcendence means? B's music made me think immediately of the mountains; the mountains made me think of the bus; the bus made me think of the heavy feeling in my head. What if I held my head up and simply walked? I would end up huffing and puffing, no doubt. Oh, the mountains, the mountains!

Hanna said that "B, the young composer" should be printed in large archaic calligraphy on the programme—how daunting, I thought! B wasn't around, so it was impossible to ask him to write his own introduction and provide a synopsis of his career. I had to make use of my feeble command of the language and write about him. In the style of pop-music lyrics, I wrote: "B is a man. Years have passed since he went away and disappeared into the foggy highlands of the south. Praise him, damn him. It's up to you. He can't hear you anyway."

It was the middle of the night. When I switched off the cassette recorder, there was no sound, only a cat scratching the floor upstairs. From out of nowhere came a sweet fragrance. Strange, for I never kept any plants. I switched on the light and looked around. The smell was coming from the cupboard. But there were only a few bottles and glasses, a tray and an opened packet of tea leaves there. It was the tea leaves. When I drank the tea during the day, it had no fragrance at all, and now, in the dark of night, it gave off a fragrance that filled the entire room. Hell, it was really late. All of a sudden, I felt extremely sad. Soon it'd be another day. Day is the space for facts and people. I could only think about the next step, the next step, and the next step. It's often said that man relies on his hands and a dog on its hind legs. I never could understand what connection there is between a man's hands and a dog's hind legs. After all, every living thing wants to triumph over something and possess something. What is it that I want to triumph over? What is it that I want to possess? Do I want to triumph over the King of Singers? Impossible! Do I want to possess B? Equally impossible! Why did I organize this concert then? I had to. For B, for myself; not for B, nor for myself.

Who was the fool who said reality was what

women chased after? He'd certainly lost his head over a woman. Perhaps reality is what women are after in the first place, but then they learn pretence in order to attract men. Men learn pretence too in order to chase after women. In the end nobody cares about reality at all. Was it men or women who first chased after reality? Was it men or women who first invented pretence? One can never be sure which comes first, like the chicken-and-egg question. But pretence is spreading, everyone is doing things that distort reality. I've left B; I hated the King of Singers. Yet here I am, organizing a concert for B, that's pretence enough. But what about B? He has left the city and gone to the wilderness, his mind filled with music scores and composition techniques, to become a disciple of the King of Singers. Isn't that pretence too? Heavens! He must be very lonely, since he'll be the only pretender in the wilderness, unless he's forgotten all about musical notation and composition techniques. He wasn't born a saint. Nurture and formal education turned him into a favourite with the people. Will he count at all, there in the wilderness? He's left this place, where attention was paid him, where people called him a "composer"; what would the King of Singers call him? A sham perhaps, or a loafer living off music, or a bullshitter, or . . . unless he's forgotten everything here. What value will these scores have then? Won't they be mere rubbish? We've raised him to the status of a great composer, but he might long have forgotten what composition means. Why bother to invite the reporters; what have reporters got to do with him? He's gone chasing after reality, and here I am creating for him the biggest unreality of all.

Morning had come. A pigeon flew onto my balcony. It stood on the window ledge cooing; its red eyes were fixed on me and its concentrated stare made me uneasy, like the stare of a third-rate secret agent. I got up, opened the window and scattered some beans on the window ledge. Go on, go and eat your beans. I began to plan what to wear and how to make myself presentable in order to pull a few more strings and fix up a few more performances. Money, the concert, B. B thought he could get away from material things by running away, but in fact he'd left behind him a long rope, one end of which was still fastened to him. The

other end was fastened to the music that was created out of money. I always sang about "the birds, fishes, the wind", but that pigeon irritated me no end. To make money with lyrics like "I love pigeons" was as synthetic as margarine, protein substitutes, nylon and polyester. "Don't lose your natural self." I made myself smart and trendy, there was nothing wrong with that, but there was less and less of the natural woman in me.

The phone rang. It was Gu Peng. He said he was coming right over in his car. He was having a party in the country and wanted me to go and live things up for him. I had a very special relationship with Gu Peng. He had been an old friend of B and mine for many years, we were like brother and sister. But today I really wasn't in the mood for parties. I'd have to waste two whole days just to live things up for them.

I mumbled something. Gu Peng said, "You must come. It'll do you good."

"What good?"

"I'm not kidding. You'll find out when you get there."

"You mean money?"

"Ha, ha . . . Hey, don't-be-like-that." He put on that familiar drawl of his.

"All right. I'll come."

"I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

He hung up.

I packed into my bag my pajamas, make-up, and various other things I needed.

All right. I would have to go, to idle away my time at a totally meaningless gathering. The pigeon was still pecking away at the beans. Looking at it, I couldn't help feeling that it must have been sent to watch me by those busy-bodies upstairs who made up the Residents' Committee—why else would it keep looking in at my place? Eat your beans if you want or fly away; why behave so suspiciously? I drew all the curtains. The pigeon jumped to the side of the window and peeped in through a small hole in the curtain.

A car honked outside, I picked up my bag and dashed off.

Gu Peng was in a well-tailored suit and ostentatiously sporting a tie. I got into the car, slammed the door, and said, "How low you've sunk!" He laughed, "Well, I'm a businessman. I can't look

the way you artists do!"

The minute we left the city, Gu Peng started showing off how fast his car could go. I put on a cassette, the electronic sounds blended with the screaming tyres. Gu Peng was a man who, discreet and adventurous at the same time, always wanted to be spontaneous and also to do things tactfully. Even when he had his girlfriend on the back of that motor bike of his—the most terrifying one in town—and was hurtling madly over ditches and bumpy roads, he could always tell whether she was screaming out of fear or delight. The fields and forests of the north passed rapidly before our eyes. There was an ornamental pine branch hanging from the rear mirror. I tore it down; I couldn't stand it, because B and I had once chopped down a tree . . .

We were trudging over a mountain ridge in the north when the wind suddenly started to blow wildly. B wanted to chop a tree down and make a walking stick for me. He picked out a small tree, went over and started hacking at it. I wanted to tell him the tree would be too big for a walking stick, but I realized that what he actually wanted to do was to try out a knife which a minority tribesman had given him as a gift. It was sharp enough to chop off a man's head. B felled the tree with a few strokes. I was about to applaud but, suddenly, he stood stock still. I ran over, and found that he was caught on an old tree. It was black and ugly, its body gnarled and covered in thick, spiky thorns. Its long claw, which had B in its clutch, was also black and thorny. I picked the thorns quickly from B's clothes, took the knife from him, and lifted the claw with it. B dragged the felled tree with him over to the clearing. I lowered the long claw gently and it fell to the ground. How did B get caught like that? I turned to join B. All of a sudden, another sharp claw appeared before my eyes. I had no time to dodge it; it scratched my face and I started to bleed. This claw was thorny too. I stumbled towards B, terrified, then turned around to look in horror. There stood the tree, with its long claw which I had lowered to the ground myself. There was no other tree in front of it. Who could have done it? A gust of wind whistled eerily out of the pine forest behind it, dark clouds moved ominously across the sky. The old tree suddenly raised its

claw and pointed to the sky. I wiped the blood off my face, but it started to bleed again. The pain nearly killed me. Several months later, a fortune-teller in the south told me that this was retribution for my relationship with B.

Gu Peng's "country party" was held at his rural chicken farm. He had built himself a wooden house near the farm. When we arrived, a herd of pigs came round the back of the house, headed clumsily towards our car, and stood respectfully beside it. Gu Peng got out of the car and gave one of the large pigs a slap on the back, while his Alsatian, which could only understand a North-east dialect, barked furiously at me.

"We've got a guest. Don't bark. We've got a guest." Gu Peng spoke to the dog in dialect, "Shake hands with our guest." The dog gave me its front paw.

"You damn Manchurian bumpkin."

The dog jerked back its paw and barked furiously at Gu Peng.

"It's great here!" I was so envious.

"Would you like to live here all the time?" Casting a sidelong glance at me, Gu Peng asked.

"Sure!" But I took it back immediately, "No, I can't! I won't be able to record, or do shows."

Gu Peng smiled slyly.

In the evening, I took a stroll along the village path. This place was dull compared to the other places I'd visited. The fields were divided into regular plots. The farmhouses sat comfortably on the soil. The pigs ate their dinner to waltz music. The hens laid their eggs to the rhythm of electronic drum beats. The kind and cunning Gu Peng had found his Garden of Eden here. Had B found the King of Singers? B was the only one among us who cared nothing whatsoever for his own comfort and safety. Gu Peng had a car and a motor bike parked outside his little village house. The house had a shower and the floors were covered with synthetic wool carpets. By now, B would certainly be able to go without food. Bury him in the ground for a whole week and he would, when dug out again, still be alive.

I was chewing a piece of gum. By the time I walked back to the house, I felt quite sick. I spat it out in disgust, and a pig came over and picked it up in its mouth. It snorted and snorted; it chewed on the gum, stretched its neck, and

simply swallowed it whole. It then gazed at me in admiration, and broke into a slit of a smile. The piglets, seeing their mother befriending this somebody, came over and surrounded us. Gu Peng was just coming out of the house. He laughed and said: "They're pretty fond of you." Fearing that Gu Peng might take this opportunity to offer me a few piglets to rear, I gave a loud scream and scared away all my admirers.

I hadn't expected such a lively party. In spite of the distance, a group of artists had come in their cars. The little wooden house was absolutely packed. In the candle-light, the ceiling looked unusually low. A mass of tall shadows flickered on the ceiling. I suddenly remembered the fortune-teller who specialized in telling fortunes by looking at splashed ink on paper. He was also good at pasting shadows onto the ceiling to create atmosphere. It seemed strange, but I kept feeling that a few people in this group had some sort of affinity with the fortune-teller. There was, for example, that dark man with the long hair, sharp snout, fang-like teeth and sharp triangular eyes. He gesticulated wildly when he spoke, and, when he smiled at me, I felt flustered.

I retreated into a corner, hoping to avoid attention. Later, Gu Peng invited me to sing a song, and Sharp-snout applauded loudly. As I stood up, moved to the centre of the room and took the guitar which Gu Peng had got ready for me, I thought about the conversation I'd had with the agent, and that slip of paper—"Your songs are crap."

I sang a pop song.

There was no response from the audience.

I sang another pop song, simple, sweet and happy.

The audience started talking, even joking and laughing among themselves. Before I finished, I heard somebody say: "Hands off my wine, you son of a bitch!"

My face went scarlet, I closed my eyes and finished the song. Then I said to Gu Peng: "That's it. No more."

All the time Gu Peng sat in the dark with his eyes fixed on me. He now shook his head slightly, "You didn't sing your best songs."

"I haven't got any."

"You've got so many wonderful songs. Why

don't you sing them?"

"No. No more singing."

"You didn't sing well."

"Even if I did, they wouldn't appreciate it."

"You're wrong."

"Anyway, I don't want to sing anymore."

Gu Peng shook his head again, "Here you go again!"

I threw down the guitar in front of Gu Peng, pulled a long face and walked back to my seat with as much dignity as I could summon. Your songs are crap.

Everyone was so happy, it was as if I had never been there, never sung at all. Sharp-snout took out a few masks, all human faces, and put them on. He screamed and shouted, and he shook and swung his body. His shadow flickered on the low ceiling like the spasmodic contortions of some demon. Someone was tapping on the wooden table, others were clinking the plates. There was revelry everywhere, but I stayed out of it, feeling depressed because of my failure.

Gu Peng came over and handed me a drink. I gave him a stare. He laughed. I lowered my voice and said:

"Why did you bring me to this god-damned place? Why did you ask me to sing those god-damned songs for those bastards, those god-damned sons of bitches? You wanted to see me lose face, didn't you?"

Sharp-snout was singing with even more gusto, and others had joined in. It was like that gathering of the "singing spirits". Sharp-snout was singing and shouting and talking. Gu Peng and I had to shout at each other above the din.

"Do you want me to introduce you to that man?" Gu Peng said, raising his voice.

"No!"

"You would if you knew what he does for a living."

"Impossible."

"You ought to get to know him and have a look at his house."

"I don't want to."

"You're a fool!"

"No, you're the fool."

I took my drink with me to the room Gu Peng had prepared for me. I shut the door tightly, made sure the curtains were properly drawn, and

blocked my ears with the ear-phones of my cassette recorder. Painters, poets, demons, geniuses, bastards and arrogant sons of bitches: in this peaceful haven, so like hell and so like heaven, no one was content to remain quiet; everyone wanted to show off. Barbarity-civilization-philistinism: which defeated which? Which was stronger? Let the most learned of this world come and be the judge: in what had I failed? My drink had become warm. I opened the window to throw it out, and was greeted by the foul smell of pig dung. In what had I failed?

I lay in bed. The fortune-teller was once again before me. He pointed his long finger at the wall and said:

"Do you see the tombstone? I do."

I'd forgotten in which small town I met him. He was then sitting on the ground; before him was a splash-ink landscape painting. He was staring at B and me. When we went over, he raised his eyebrows and laughed. Then he stood up and invited us to his house, which was up a narrow winding lane in the small town. We went inside, and found ourselves surrounded by splash-ink paintings on the wall, by rolling clouds baring their fangs and brandishing their claws. I sat on a low wooden stool and gave him my hand. He held my fingers. With glaring eyes, he started to speak, though it was impossible to understand what he was saying. I gave him my other hand. He examined it and then examined my face. He then spread out a piece of *xuan* paper on a huge wooden table, took a bowl of black ink, and splashed it onto the paper. The ink spread out and soaked into the paper, forming a huge blot. Lines that looked like cracks began to appear. He made some clucking sounds and said, "Do you see the tombstone? I do." I couldn't quite understand him, but I was horrified. I moved closer to take a better look, but all I could see were black ink and some lines like cracks. He looked away from the paper and stared into my face so fiercely that I dared not look up. Suddenly, he asked me, "When did you get that scar?" I knew he was referring to the scar left by the sharp claw of that old tree. I told him it was in the north. He shook his head and asked, "Do you know what karma is?" I was just going to tell him about the tree up in the mountain when he waved

his hand, heaved a sigh and said, "Every action has its consequences. These consequences are the causes of other actions. They're not simply consequences. You'll have to be careful." I quickly gave him some money. He pressed the money back into my hands and patted them gently. I smiled at him, pretending to be calm. On that occasion, when I lifted my head to look at the ceiling, I also saw huge gliding shadows, just like those I saw tonight at the party. I looked carefully about that small house, but couldn't discover the tombstone, neither on that splash-ink painting nor on my palms.

Why was I so afraid of that fortune-teller? B said I wasn't quite myself for the next few days. I put it down to the fact that the fortune-teller looked so strange. But lots of people look strange. Why was I so disturbed by him?

I got out of bed, opened the door and, seeing that the group of artists had quieted down, I walked into the sitting room. They were lounging and slouching about everywhere, deep in their own strange thoughts. Gu Peng alone still looked quite sober, and was smoking calmly. I sat down beside him and whispered, "I want to have a look at Sharp-snout's house."

"Why?" Gu Peng asked, startled.

"I keep thinking that I've seen him before."

"Where?"

"Well, actually I haven't."

"I see." Gu Peng stood up and went over to speak to Sharp-snout, who was sitting on the floor. Sharp-snout jumped up immediately and gave me a big grin. Those stained teeth of his quite overwhelmed me with this unexpected honour! By now, you could hear the croaking of the frogs outside, and who knows what the artists inside the house were thinking. Silence reigned. All the villagers had entered the realm of dreams. The night grew heavier; the croaking of the frogs was like moaning from another world. I wanted only to hurry on and test my speculation; whatever the outcome, what lay before me was the most important thing.

"Right, let's go." Sharp-snout stood up.

We stepped over the artists sprawled all about the floor and left.

The fresh air outside was just wonderful. For no reason whatsoever, I felt excited; like a fool,

my heart beat wildly. I thought: I didn't belong to B, nor to Lin Xi; I was neither an artist nor an insect. Why, I could just let those shoes on my feet take me anywhere and choose for me any kind of beginning and any kind of end! The light from Gu Peng's torch flashed here and there but never lit up the way for me. Without light, I was as good as blind. I wondered whether the way to hell was equally dark, equally difficult. If people remained in this world after death, they should give careful thought to where they want to live. They should choose a place with mountains and rivers and shops and streets and cars and street lamps. When B and I were in one of the mountain villages in the south, we met a carpenter, who told us that ghosts often appeared in the low-lying areas, walking beside living men, while the souls of the living would go to the burial ground and cry there. There were certain circumstances in which the soul of a living person would leave his body, though of course crying in the burial ground was never a good omen. But it wasn't too horrifying a thing for a soul to leave its body. In the village, one could often see the body of a living person cooking in the kitchen, while his soul would be seen moving about the hillside. Since the soul and the body looked identical, it was impossible to tell one from the other, so no one could say for certain whether it was the soul that was cooking and the body that was moving about the hillside, or whether it was the other way round. Logically speaking, it would of course be the soul that liked to move about in the open, while the man liked to stay indoors. Certainly that was how everybody distinguished between the soul and the body. According to the local people, if the soul left its body at night, it was a sign that that person would soon meet his death. However, if the soul left its body in the morning, it had merely gone for a breath of fresh air. But what if it left the body at noon, or in the afternoon, or in the evening? And what if it stayed away from the body all day and all night for several days, months, or years? At the moment, I couldn't tell whether it was my body or my soul that was walking in the dark; perhaps my body was still in the little wooden house, or perhaps it was in fact in the city, or at a show, or making a recording? If I was me and not my

Material not available
due to copyright restrictions.

Yin, Yang, Taiji
by Shao Fei

soul, where was the tombstone mentioned by the fortune-teller? Was my soul with me now, at this moment?

What about B? Was he at one with his soul? Was the B that I had followed for so long merely a soul? What about the King of Singers? Was he human or was he a soul? If B was a soul, what was B the man like? Where was he? If he was a man, why didn't he give up chasing after a singing soul? What was the natural connection between the King of Singers and B? Was the King of Singers B? Was he B's soul? Only when one was in pursuit of one's soul could one be so determined. If the King of Singers was B's soul, why did he leave him and run away? Why did he keep evading his master? Why did he play tricks on his own body? Why did B want to go to university and be a composer, while his soul went into the mountains and became the King of Singers? Under what circumstances would the King of Singers see B? Did the King of Singers detest me? Was he waiting for B to reveal his original form? And what was B's original form? The King of Singers, or B? Was B the body and the King of Singers the soul or was the King of Singers the body and B the soul or were both human bodies or were both souls or were both waiting, waiting for what? Which of them was more real?

Sharp-snout's house was an ordinary farmhouse. We went into the central room. There was, as usual, a cooking stove; to its left was a small room, to its right, a much larger one. We lifted the door curtain of the larger room and saw children of different ages lying on a *kang*. They were all sleeping contentedly; their necks, backs, little hands and feet, as well as their little buttocks all showed signs that they were not in the habit of taking baths. Sharp-snout invited us in. We tiptoed about, not wanting to wake the children. To our surprise, Sharp-snout said loudly, "It's all right. Do sit down. Have a cup of tea!" Startled, I covered my mouth with my hand and took a look at the children. None stirred, though one let out a loud fart.

Still speaking loudly, Sharp-snout said: "Raising children is like raising horses. One is as much work as a whole herd."

The room was full of Sharp-snout's paintings, bright and wild. Frames, easels, oil paint, canvases and paper were scattered everywhere. The place was a dusty mess.

I couldn't make sense of the paintings, I only wanted to look for that splash-ink painting. But it seemed that Sharp-snout wasn't interested in splash-ink. His were all oils and were bright and colourful. There were no black and white splash-

ink paintings. The place was too full of colours.

I took a look at Sharp-snout, and then at his paintings thickly covered with oils. In most places, one could see that paint had been daubed straight onto the canvas with a spatula. If there were tombs, the spatula would have smoothed them out. Bury the burial ground, don't let it bury you.

I cried, "These paintings are beautiful."

Gu Peng said, "You know how he went about doing his paintings? He took a child in one hand, his paint box in the other, and fodder for his pigs on his back. Then he worked on his painting and, at intervals, he'd cut grass."

Sharp-snout spat on the floor and said, "One of my children has been ill for the last few days. I had to go up to the mountain to get him some herbs for medicine. I've been too busy looking after him to do any painting." He stretched a canvas on a frame.

On top of the frame was a large bottle of water with herbs in it. I asked, "Is that herbal medicine?"

Sharp-snout burst out laughing, "That's the perfume I made for my wife."

"You made it yourself?"

"Yes, smell it," he brought the bottle over to me. "City people love French perfume and what not. A tiny bottle costs a fortune. This bottle here will last a few years and costs nothing. It's got a lovely smell too."

I sniffed—a strange smell it was.

"Now, my dear girl, do sit down."

I sat down, baffled. Sharp-snout dipped a spatula in paint and daubed it on the canvas.

"Why do you want to paint me?"

"Your eyes are so strange."

I laughed, "What's so strange about them?"

"They're all different colours."

"What?"

"I can see red and green in your eyes. The colours keep changing, like a kaleidoscope."

I froze.

Gu Peng told me that Sharp-snout also came from the city, but no one knew why he had come here and fathered a whole brood of children. Sharp-snout's spatula bounced mercilessly on the canvas. Actually he had stopped looking at me. I stood up, walked towards the canvas, and saw a figure that looked very much like me, except that

the eyes were like kaleidoscopes.

The children started to stir. One child was lying on top of another, who started to swear; and the little girl next to him began to cry. Still painting, Sharp-snout said to the eldest, "Wake up, calm your sister down." The eldest, a young child with a bald head, was still half asleep; he climbed over to where his sister was and stroked her head. She quieted down immediately. He also gave his brothers a few slaps in passing. But they just went on snoring, as if nothing had happened. Then, rubbing his eyes, the eldest went outside to pee.

When the plane took off, I felt a great relief. I was finally on my way to a big show and I had also signed a recording contract. The profit would be considerable, certainly enough to hold the concert for B. I could leave all trivial matters behind. The plane carrying this lump of chaos that was me glided through the atmosphere. "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's." No matter where the shoes led you, surely there would have to be an end somewhere; wouldn't there? This smartly dressed lump of chaos in a plane, was it flying back to its original form, or on its way to completing its rebirth? Who could tell? Once you started walking in this pair of shoes, you found yourself in a complete muddle. Confusion and clarity, clarity and confusion; contradiction and paradox, paradox and confusion—these would entangle you and throw you into turmoil; only the pair of shoes knew for certain; they'd tell you all hesitation was futile.

The plane made its way through masses of clouds. I'm glad I'm a human being so I can sit so high up in the sky, and yet it's also human beings alone that can sit so high up in the sky without being able to touch the clouds. But birds are not happy either: though they can fly, they're held tightly in their own physical substance. This is the misfortune of those whose original form is clearly defined. The basest swallow and the noblest phoenix have a clearer conception of their own value than a lump of chaos. But neither heaven nor earth could do anything to disperse solid physical substance, or make it undergo

various transformations. Chaos often envies clarity; little does it know that after it has been dispersed by an air stream, it can merge with the upper atmosphere and fly even higher than the birds, or dissolve into the mire and descend to the depths where ghosts and spirits dwell. Chaos doesn't know itself for what it is, and it never knows what it should or should not do, whether it's right or wrong; it always envies clarity but is always dispersed by the air stream.

I pretended to be a career-woman and sat there with a rapt look on my face. Was B dependent on me for help? One moment I'd say yes, another, no. The B I knew was a living person and I rushed about on behalf of this living person. Everyone needs some sort of support to keep going. If B wasn't dependent on me and if I wasn't organizing this concert for him, I didn't know what I should do. Surely B depended on me. As the plane flew higher and higher, so did my aspirations. How I wished I could move the King of Singers. But what for? To give B back to me?

The plane landed. My self-confidence was greater than that of all the passengers put together. I quickly got myself a taxi, asked the driver to take me to the hotel as quickly as he could, had the receptionist arrange a room for me as quickly as he could, took a hot shower as quickly as I could, dried myself as quickly as I could, slipped on my comfortable pyjamas as quickly as I could, settled myself in bed as quickly as I could and went over my songs.

I hadn't been in bed long when I noticed it was dinner time. I changed and went down to the restaurant, which faced the hotel lobby on one side and the garden on the other. The garden was neither Chinese nor western. It was vulgar, delicately refined, confused, glamorous, mean, and sumptuous all at once. The waiter came over to me and asked in English, "Tea?" I said yes in Chinese. A look of contempt flashed over his face. I said, "Could you take my order, please?" "Sorry, just a moment." He then went straight over to a foreigner and asked respectfully, "Tea?"

All the foreigners around me had been served, but I was still waiting "just a moment".

A compatriot with a big nose was sitting by himself at a table across from me. He too seemed to have been kept waiting for a long while. He

came over and said: "I know you. You've performed here, haven't you? I really enjoyed it."

"Thank you."

"You see the way Chinese treat Chinese?" He looked at the waiter, "You won't find this anywhere else in the world. No self-respect at all!"

I smiled a forced smile.

"I like the way you sing."

"Thank you."

"And your songs too."

"Thank you."

"They're really marvellous."

"Thank you."

"Natural."

"Thank you."

"You are casual, unpretentious, not stagey. Some singers are too much like actresses I don't like it songs must be sung with feeling must be sung naturally properly a singer must take the audience through many different emotions must express his distinctive personality in the singing must convey sentiments that are moving you want to make people feel as moved as you are you have to exert an influence over the audience you have to be natural to be real to reveal your true feelings to . . ."

In the valleys late autumn set in. Mountain winds entangled themselves with the evening light; tree branches disturbed the peace and quiet of the night. Still searching and still unsuccessful, we were each deep in our own thoughts. Lying on the ground beneath a starry sky, with the winds blowing around us, we felt relaxed, numb. The winds dispersed one's spirit like an anaesthetic; it was as if they wanted to take your physical substance and dissolve it into the vastness and haziness of the surroundings. Breath melted, conversations melted, gestures melted, leg wounds melted, desires melted, feelings, too, melted. The solid physical substance moved near the stars one moment, fell to the ground the next; the four limbs reached out into their surroundings one moment, retracted the next and disappeared. Perhaps all original forms were making themselves visible at this moment. The stars, trees, weeds, stones, human beings, hares, wolves, pheasants—none of these could actually talk, each was a particle in the air and each had simply borrowed a physical body in order to wander about the

earth. Why do human beings insist they can talk? Why is it said that stars can talk? And why is it said too, that wolves, hares, pheasants, and even the sea can talk?

At that time, there were only two colours on earth: darkness was trying with all its might to hold the atmosphere in its grasp, while a silver colour poured down trying to save the living. All of a sudden, a strange sound came on the wind, came moving through the air currents. It seemed to have come from under the earth, it also seemed to have come from the sky. It seemed as if hundreds and thousands of spirits were there match-making for all things and for heaven and earth, bringing enlightenment to all living creatures and awakening them from oblivion and ignorance.

"Do you hear it?" B asked me.

"Yes."

"He has finally come," B's eyes brightened with excitement.

We followed the sound and walked towards that place, we kept walking towards that place. The sound came intermittently, so did the silver colour in the sky. B, you've finally found what you wanted. You're going to win. You feel great, don't you? You've found what you wanted. We can go home now.

A cliff appeared before us. At the top of the cliff a huge rock jutted out, forming a platform. A group of singing spirits were sitting in a circle; others were climbing up the cliff from the foot of the mountain. Those on the platform were swaying their bodies and calling sonorously, their eyes fixed on the moon. The slow crescendo of their calling was like the rising tide swallowing the dark night. There was no leader here, and no audience; everyone was enveloped in the solemn atmosphere, the naked bodies reflecting the silver light.

I was still standing there stunned when I discovered that B was taking off his clothes. He stripped himself naked and ran towards the cliff. I wanted to shout after him, but was afraid that I might destroy the harmony of the night. B had gone over and climbed up onto the platform. He now stood among the singing spirits, and called sonorously to the moon.

None of the singing spirits looked at him; no one paid him any attention. All the silver light

of the universe was gathering there on the platform. A group of dark naked bodies were swaying and dancing: it was impossible to tell B from the others. Fatigue, cold, damp and the insects began to attack me. I stood in the shadows, enveloped by darkness. I did not have the courage to go naked to that platform where the light was, and I could not go back. The singing spirits never stopped swaying, never stopped calling. Everything was singing, was the spirit of the universe. This lasted until the darkness gradually faded and the calling of the singing spirits, and their human forms, gradually disappeared into the clouds. Then the fog rose, everything was enveloped in white. Suddenly, the light of dawn and B appeared together before me. He was the only one on the platform who was still looking at a moon that had long lost its lustre. Down in the valley, the sun had risen; people were up and about. Up here, everything was still enveloped in white.

"Well, here comes your food. Time I went and had mine." Noticing my strange look, Big-nose returned, embarrassed, to his table.

I wanted to say, "Sorry, I was distracted." But I said nothing and just leaned slightly forward; the words wouldn't come.

It was a huge stadium. Since the show featured all the top performing artists, it was completely sold-out, and the stadium was now packed. The singers, male and female, were all gorgeously dressed, everything they were wearing was a masterpiece created by a top craftsman. A female singer was noisily complaining about her pleated skirt not being properly ironed. A big-eared, fat-headed male singer, who'd just had plastic surgery to give him double-fold eyelids, kept rolling his eyes at people. Electronic sounds darted back and forth, whistling through the auditorium. Flashes of laser light dazzled the eyes. The footlights kept on changing colour. I sat alone on the floor in a corner backstage, my head buried between my knees. I felt more nervous than I ever had before, not knowing what this performance would bring. Perhaps it was time to seek my fortune with cards or by divination; but at this moment I wouldn't have taken anybody's word for anything. I had a protective talisman from Lin Xi—he had given it to me as a gift specially

for this occasion, wishing me success. Gu Peng had given me a photo which he took of me five years ago, you could read that face at a glance. I had even brought B's photo along. I took all these things from my pocket. At first I had wanted to go on stage wearing this coat with large pockets. I had bought it from a peasant in the mountains. It was made of coarse hand-woven cotton, printed and dyed with large decorative patterns by the peasants. I took all my things from the pockets to reduce my burden. Then, after careful consideration, I took off the coat too. My trousers were also made of homespun cloth. With the coat off, I was left with a printed short-sleeve jacket—the type worn by peasants. The only fancy thing I had on was a gold chain with a purple spar on it. It was my turn now. I went out in my short-sleeve jacket and the trousers made of homespun cloth. The minute I went on stage, there was a commotion in the audience; I couldn't help but take a step back. Electronic music roared like thunder in my ears. I looked at the vast crowd before me, but felt only emptiness in my heart. I forced a wry smile, then I drifted towards the microphone. Still the same songs, the same stereotyped songs that earned loud applause. People never seem to tire of these songs. They're so easy to learn. All you need to make a living as a singer is to control the tone colour, stay in tune, and sway a bit with the music. I swayed gently and looked around me. There was no one I knew. Everyone was smiling; everyone was enraptured. When the first song came to an end, there was applause and loud whistling. Same for the next

one. How long would I have to sway like this? How long would I have to smile like this? My throat went dry. My eyes swept over the audience, but I saw no one I knew, no one whatsoever; there would be no miracles. Amidst the applause, I retreated backstage, but was invited by the announcer to take a curtain call. I took a deep bow, hoping that the audience would stop applauding. After all, I only wanted to make some money for B's concert. The songs I sang were all "crap". But people were still whistling and applauding, and the electronic music rang out again. I gestured to the band and they stopped playing, looking at me in bewilderment. The audience, too, suddenly became quiet. I walked up to the microphone and said, "Please switch off the overhead lights; please switch off the footlights, too. Thank you." There was darkness everywhere. Then I said, "Please give me a spotlight over there." A beam of white light appeared to my left. "Thank you, thank you." There was complete silence. I really wanted to walk naked into the white light, as B had done, but I hesitated. I didn't move. Standing in the dark, outside the white light, I felt surrounded once more by the cold, the damp and the insects. I saw innumerable singing spirits calling to the moon. I would never walk into that beam of silver light; I would always have to stand on the outside, in the dark; I would never be a singing spirit, never see the King of Singers; all I could do was stand here, waiting, waiting. B, will you appear again with the light of day?

7th September, 1985