

黃碧雲：豐盛與悲哀

Plenty and Sorrow

By WONG Bik Wan

Translated by Janice Wickeri

Prologue

“How I long for you. Like leaves long for the soil. Like a wild animal scenting blood . . .”

“He phoned me later. I said: Hang on, wait, I want to make a cup of tea. (Shots of Birmingham. A rooftop in Paris. An alley in Delhi, eye to eye with a cow. Shanghai.)

“He waited. I said: I think when I’m dying, all I’ll want is a nice hot cup of tea.”

He laughed: I hope I’ll be there (making a cup of tea).

“When he left, I was able to settle down. Loss is the only form of permanence.”

cut. There’s a shadow on your face. It’s the lighting technician’s fault. The filter paper’s caught fire. Make-up comes to touch up her powder.

You’re longing for him, yes, but keep your voice even . . . because you know you can’t have him.

Max Weber said *verstehen*, which means moving from understanding to empathy.

Whatever you do, don’t get excited.

What’s going on? My lover is late. I’ll use my fist as a stand-in.

medium shot.

*This story is taken from the author’s short story collection *Gentleness and Violence* 溫柔與暴烈, Hong Kong: Cosmos Books Ltd., 1994.*

Text in bold italics appears in English in the original.

cut.

“How I long for you.”

“How I long for you.”

“How I long for you.”

How strange. Over and over, until it does seem as if I’m really, really longing for him. And it’s only a fist.

Will that do?

The dog upstairs is barking. Someone go shoo it away.

Your lover’s here, in make-up.

Kill him.

I meant the dog.

OK.

“How I long for you. (There’s a shadow on my face.)”

Your expression is too mobile. Try the next line.

Hi, how are you?

Hello.

Ah, is this the first time you’ve seen each other? Check your scripts. Shanghai, in your youth.

“When was that?”

“The tram was passing beneath us. *Dingdingding*. We looked up to see the five-star flag unfurling above us.”

“We were beside the Huangpu River. We thought we’d have a new life.”

“But now we’re both old.”

The director said not to put too much feeling into it. Why’re you blushing?

I’m not. It’s blood.

Hit the lights. More gauze. Dark areas as before.

Slow *pan shot*.

You’re meeting again. You know a lot more about life now after all the hardships you’ve been through.

A still frame is better. It has a kind of dignified tranquillity.

Shoot both ways. I’ll have a look.

Her white silk cheongsam gets lost in the background. We should try switching to beige or something.

You and China have both changed, and there’s no going back.

Director, he’s bled all over himself.

It’s nothing, let it go. I’ll be all right.

When you’re working you shouldn’t do too much *cocaine*.

“When did this take place?”

“The tram was going past beneath us. *Dingdingding*. We looked up, the Union

Jack was waving overhead.” It was after the revolution. Read your history. The five-star flag.

Sorry.

You’re looking at Shanghai at dusk. The scene hasn’t changed in forty years.

There’s actually no love left between you. It’s nothing but an illusion. An illusion born of Shanghai.

Ah, it’s so painful, isn’t it? We’ve been cheated by a mere illusion.

But you don’t realize it. The pain is the business of the author.

And I have cancer inside me, and they have no way of knowing.

When they did the biopsy, I bled like mad.

“We were beside the Huangpu River. We thought we’d have a new life.”

Monologue

1

After they’ve been through so much, people grow callous. Once while making a film, we were going along when all of a sudden, my opposite collapsed. I was still acting to his character when he died. That same night we went out for a late night snack and I went home alone in the early morning. The lift was out of order. I toiled up the long flights of stairs, round and round, and I cried until my face was covered with tears. I thought about my future. Did I still have a future? It seemed as if I’d thrown away my future the day the camera first focused on me. All day I waited, waited to stand by, waited for make-up, waited to make it big. The waiting went on and the first grey hair sent me into a panic. I tried to get out and opened a small shop. No business all day. I sat there watching a portable TV. After several months of this, I became severely myopic and a great deal poorer. All my late hated rival’s movies showed one after another while I sat there doing nothing but getting fat, bored out of my mind. I resurfaced. It had only been a few months, but everything had changed—they wanted to cast *me* as a mother. I sat there, acting, and when the camera stopped, I cried and somehow after that I found myself being committed to a psychiatric ward. Actually, a sickness of the heart can only be cured by medicine of the same. You learn from bitter experience. After you take off your clothes in front of the lens a few times, it’s gradually OK. I lost thirty pounds, got my nose lifted and my bosom padded and never turned a man down. The weeklies called it my second spring. Slowly I changed—nothing fazed me. I knew none of it would last; it was just one day at a time. When I wasn’t working, I took the chance to go to Thailand, take in a temple or two, get in some swimming; it was great.

2

I don't know if I'll make it to the end of this film. Really, cancer is nothing, it can be cured, but you're on the defensive—you don't quite dare let people know. I'm not sure when it was that I began not to fear death, maybe it was that time I fell off the cliff. I started off as a singer and I sang until the teacher felt he couldn't keep quiet anymore: Don't waste your time and money. Stop singing. If you keep singing, my conscience will bother me. So I became a dancer instead and only then found out one leg was longer than the other. No wonder they say you find out who you are when you perform. *Kungfu* movies were popular, so I became a martial arts fighter and got kicked in the face until I was all over gore. But I figured I was young; it was no big deal trading youth for hope. When the *kungfu* trend faded, I was out of the movies for nearly two years. I even played a eunuch on TV. I didn't let my hair grow for two whole years. All I had to do was slip on my leather boots and I was the youthful *kungfu* hero. Then when comic martial arts pictures were the rage, they wanted a double to fall off a cliff. I was so hard up it was clear to me that if I had to risk my life, then that was what I'd do. I went over the cliff inside a tire; the speed of it gave me a real rush.

When I came to I felt very, very cold, cold as cold could be, because it was winter. I'd gone over the cliff at the beginning of summer. I looked down. I couldn't feel my own body—I thought there was nothing left of me but my head. It was a miracle I survived. Maybe that was when I started not taking life too seriously, poking fun at myself all the time. I was pretty good at self-ridicule. And contrary to the popular saying, my fortunes didn't improve for having survived a disaster, either. I was as unlucky as before, I was just much more laid back about it all. *Kungfu* movies had had it; category three films were the thing. It was my round firm ass that finally got me a starring role in category three films. The roles were a cinch: just work hard and give it all you've got. That's all there was to it. They didn't stint the closeups, closeups of my ass in particular. Then they wanted to tattoo a big duck there.¹ I thought my self-respect was long gone, but when *cut* was called, I felt like I'd mopped the floor with it and that duck on my ass burned like fire, red hot. Watching the midnight show, I was as anxious about my ass as female stars are about their tits. In fact though, nobody showed much interest in my ducky ass. I drifted along. And then somehow I picked up a role that someone else had rejected. I played an AIDS patient and was nominated for best supporting actor. As it turned out I didn't win, but presto change-o, I became a serious actor. They all said I had

¹Duck is Cantonese slang for male prostitute.

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LEUNG Kit Ling, Catherine 梁潔齡
Case Study, 1994.
Bronze and acrylic box, 45 x 53 x 22 cm.
Contemporary Hong Kong Art Biennial Exhibition 1996.

great skill. Actually, it wasn't me who changed, it was them; I was the same as I'd always been.

But there's no need to tell all. I came slowly to understand that as an actor, your responsibility is to act well. The audience just wants to watch the film; they don't want to see the actor's misery. Shouting out your pain doesn't accomplish anything. So . . .

When I got the results, I felt calmer than I thought I would. In the long film of life, I was giving another unrepeatable performance. Maybe this was how I'd die, then, or maybe there'd be a new scene. I sat there as always making-up, waiting for the lights to go up, bleeding all over, the inside of my nose overgrown with cancer cells. My heart filled with a dull sorrow of long standing, I said: It's just as if I was in Shanghai.

A Film is Just a Film

The reason I was aching to direct when I was young was because I had something I wanted to say. But by the time I was able to make a film I had nothing to say. What I had was a few stories, actors' faces, the artistic director's colours, a series of frames, the close, airless film studio. Love and desire, history and revolution, myth and illusion: it was all there. I could film any story: murder, sex, war, the underworld, love. I could use any actor: the mumblers, the cross-eyed, the druggies, the rapists and the rape victims. Over time, you become immune. When the last scene has been shot, the lights doused, the tracks taken up, goodbyes said to the crew, the light of morning is fierce and unfamiliar. I light a cigarette, shed a few hot tears and feel lonely. Other times it's OK, not good, but not bad either, like my films. Perfection is always destroyed—either by the world, or by its own devices. But my films, I think, can endure by very reason of their mediocrity. Just like my life. I'll live to be eighty. It's better to be long-lived, you can make more mistakes. *N* takes, until you get an *OK*.

The Story

Whether for Zhao Mei or for Yousheng, this evening was the temptation between heaven and hell: to stay in heaven, safe and stuffy, or close their eyes, brave the darkness and the scorching heat, and leap into hell. Zhao Mei shut her eyes, the old jazz man's saxophone moaned 'The Shadow of Your Smile', and Yousheng softly

grasped her hand and placed it on his chest. The lights were dim like the sun that set in her heart.

“How I long for you. Like leaves long for the soil. Like a wild animal scenting blood.”

They were really young then. Yousheng was studying in Jiaotong University, living in a little shed in Yongan Lane where he busied himself drawing plans every day. When he walked along the street he always seemed lost in thought, though he wasn't actually thinking about anything. Winter and summer were all the same to him, he invariably wore an old pair of peasant pants and cloth shoes. He was very tall and went about all day long with an air of awkwardness. Zhao Mei's antecedents were even more obscure. She had pale skin and eyes that curved slightly upwards. She lived in a quiet backroom where she sat all day strumming the *pipa*. It was known only that she was from Suzhou and that the ring-finger of her right hand wore a diamond the size of a bean. Sometimes, if you caught sight of her as she sang to her *pipa*, the diamond glittered with light. They each lived in their own worlds, history and love did not exist, and had nothing to do with them.

The story I want to tell is a Shanghai story. This came to me as I stood on the balcony of a hotel on Handan Road. Day or night, Shanghai is extremely quiet. You can't see the Huangpu from here. The sky is murky and it's hard to tell whether it's day or night.

How should you deal with the temptations of history and of love?

I remember. I ponder.

Zhao Mei never knew what history was. She'd only studied one year in an old-style school. After leaving Suzhou, she worked in the Great World Entertainment Centre like her auntie and when she found herself with time on her hands, she read the old news in the *Shen Bao: War—Breaks Out—in—the—Pacific*. Chen Qiuyu hadn't wanted her so far, and when he happened to come by to kill some time, he instructed her: It's *Pacific*, not *Prolific*. She thought him very nice, and in her happiness she sang for him. Chen Qiuyu was fifty-nine then; he said he was in the medicinal herb business. Her moving to Yongan Lane came about all because of a dose of VD. She spent ten days in Renji Hospital with a high fever and he was the only one who visited her. She gripped his hand and said in a low voice: You're all I've got now. Once she'd moved into Yongan Lane, Chen Qiuyu disappeared, but he sent money every month. Zhao Mei watched the days go by, neither anxious nor edgy, serene as a lotus; only her belly expanded day by day and the Japanese Army entered the city.

It was Yousheng who was affected. If he began to understand history, it was because there was no escaping it. The school went on strike, the streets were full of lines of people waiting to buy rice, the Japanese soldiers snapped their whips at

them. There were blackened corpses in the streets and people scurrying along pulling bags of military scrip, going to exchange it for new-issue currency. Yousheng studied in the completely deserted library and felt abandoned by the world. Someone on campus was playing 'Three Main Rules of Discipline and Eight Points for Attention'² on the trumpet. The song was rousing enough, but Yousheng still felt lonely and sad.

Returning to the lane, he heard Zhao Mei's cries. The lane was pitch-dark and deserted, as if some huge massacre had happened there during the day. War brings out the cruelty in people. He needed to get her to the hospital urgently, but there wasn't a soul in the street. He just stood there, overcome with anxiety. He thought Zhao Mei would die, her belly burst and a purplish fetus float out. So he gripped her hand tightly. In her pain, Zhao Mei felt that she was hanging on tight to something, something once familiar. Half-deliriously, she said: You're all I've got now. That this you was not the other 'you' she ignored.

At dawn he brought Zhao Mei to the hospital where she gave birth to a daughter, a very thin daughter, but alive. Yousheng stood there as if he was the father.

In times of trouble, formalities are dispensed with. Yousheng moved into Zhao Mei's place in order to save a little money and the two of them went to the Guangming Cinema as a way of celebrating their union. Halfway through the picture, the electricity suddenly went off and Japanese soldiers went back and forth with flashlights. Yousheng and Zhao Mei held hands in the dark: this was wartime, just staying alive was not easy.

Later I went to Changde Mansion. People say Eileen Chang used to live there. The building is about six storeys high with a dark, cramped lift. As the lift sways upwards you hear laughter, but it fades away in an instant. The flats in the building are, after all, post-liberation, shoes and bicycles are piled at the doors. There is a small balcony at the back door, and standing there, you can view Shanghai at dusk, a panorama of highs and lows. Downstairs there is a tram terminus, its electrical cables blocking your line of vision. The building is in the Jing'an District, the former French Concession, where the buildings are reminiscent of European callousness and loneliness. They say Eileen Chang went crazy. I think it's not easy to survive in a place like Shanghai. I wanted to stand high, high up and write a story about Shanghai.

When I got downstairs, it was already dark.

Zhao Mei saw nothing unreasonable in sharing one man's money with another. This month she received a large package of new currency wrapped up in an old

²An allusion to the Communist forces. The Three Main Rules and Eight Points formed their code of discipline, drawn up by Mao.

copy of the *National Salvation News*. She stared at it, nonplussed, and when Yousheng came back, she said: I hope it won't snow this winter. We won't have any coal to burn. In some way that she couldn't fathom, this made her think of the Great World. So she took the newspaper and read, word by word: The whole nation must resist the Japanese; Communists and KMT must cooperate. Proclamation to Shanghai compatriots on promoting the anti-Wang movement.³ Traitors beware! In the newspaper she saw a photograph of Chen Qiuyu. He was in uniform and didn't look as kindly as usual. Whether because she was illiterate, or because she was naive, she had no idea how the world worked. Her feelings in a tumult, she took up her *pipa* and sang. Yousheng was doing an assignment no one would look at, and hearing the *pipa*, he became exceptionally annoyed and shouted at her: So you still want to be a sing-song girl. At this Zhao Mei began to sob. Outside someone was firing a gun, *pop, pop*. Yousheng swept aside his pencils, thought of the war going on and on, and hatred welled up in him. He strode over to Zhao Mei as if he'd found an enemy and began to beat her, blow upon blow. If there were no love, there could be no question of harm. Zhao Mei really missed Chen Qiuyu. In the night, she gazed at Yousheng's sleeping face, his faint brows, his thin lips; he was only a child. And the tears started to flow. Thus it was that Zhao Mei grew up in the course of a night—in the savage throes of war, there is no place for children.

It did snow that winter. Zhao Mei, Yousheng and the child shivered in their rooms without coal. They kept a few chickens—with the Communists making revolution in Shanghai, they had nothing to do the whole day but straddle their stools and watch the hen lay eggs. Yousheng no longer went to school: sometimes he would sleep at home or go out into the street and watch demonstrations or executions, line up to buy rice or pick up a little something. If he was bullied by Japanese soldiers in the streets, he would beat Zhao Mei and the child when he came home. Zhao Mei's gold bars were sold off one by one and they were able to get by.

The day was especially fine. Yousheng, coming back from watching Communists being executed, was in high spirits, and there was chicken on the table. But the child was wailing, her little face burning hot. Zhao Mei said: That's the end of the chickens. It died. Everything's gone. Yousheng didn't even raise his head, he gave the chicken his whole attention. Zhao Mei dried her tears and said: Yousheng, I'm leaving you.

Huh? Just over a chicken, Yousheng said, chewing away on the delicious sweet and sour bird.

³Wang Jingwei, head of the puppet government under the Japanese.

Over a chicken, Zhao Mei said.

They ran into each other in the crowd when the Liberation Army entered Shanghai. The army marched down Nanjing Road, trumpets playing 'The Internationale', and the sun was fierce. (How happy we are.) Peace, can you believe it? Peace? No more blood and hunger? Zhao Mei saw Yousheng, as timid as ever and as pretty. Somebody set off firecrackers. Zhao Mei wanted to push through the crowd, but there were so many people there was no way she could get near him. She was afraid she would lose sight of Yousheng just like that, and shouted wildly: Yousheng, Yousheng, let's start all over again. Someone in the crowd heard her and took up the shout: Let's start all over again, all over again. Zhao Mei shed tears of happiness. She'd never done anything for the revolution, but hope was born in the midst of fine aspirations. Yousheng heard her shouts. He thought it was a dream, and he picked up his feet as if he were dreamwalking. They hugged each other tight in the midst of the crowd. Zhao Mei whispered softly in Yousheng's ear: I ate human flesh. Can you still want me? Yousheng laughed: Parted over a chicken, brought together by human flesh. Zhao Mei said: The child died. I was starving and I ate it. To which Yousheng replied: Then we balance each other out. After you left, even though I was starving, I'd throw up if I saw meat. I couldn't even look at lard. Zhao Mei thought there was no longer any hope, but there on the dancefloor with Yousheng, hope grew in the darkness. How she craved being near him. She and Yousheng had both grown older. They each seemed to be searching for the other's shadow, vaguely remembered, but never quite the same. The music had stopped. All the dancers had gone. Yousheng said softly, What about your husband? Can I stay with you a bit longer? Zhao Mei thought this over and laughed: It'll be another sleepless night.

At the dilapidated storytelling hall, I think of Peking's teahouses. There are only a few halls left in Shanghai for performing story-ballads; business is probably not very good and they also do video shows. In the Suzhou dialect version of the story-ballad, there's more storytelling than singing, and I don't know Suzhou dialect, so I just listen and after I've been listening a while, I fall asleep. But I still hear it in my sleep, the bitterness of the tea: My tears flowed e'er I spake/ Old memories cause my heart to break. Waking up, I realize the Shanghai I'm searching for no longer exists.

Zhao Mei said, All right. It's peace time. I can go to the storytelling hall as a regular singer. She didn't fritter away any time being sentimental with Yousheng. She cleared all the bits and pieces out of the little room and rented out half of it. Then she recruited a *qin* ensemble who plucked and strummed all day long. In the evenings she sang in the Peace Theatre. Yousheng returned to Jiaotong University where he read civil engineering. When he came back at dusk, he never went without

food and his clothes were always clean and pressed, but there was never any sign of Zhao Mei. Yousheng couldn't help feeling something had changed somewhere.

Yousheng hadn't been near Zhao Mei since she came back, he didn't dare; yet her belly grew day by day. Sleeping next to Zhao Mei, Yousheng wept.

Zhao Mei turned over and put her arms around him. She said: Forgive me. She kissed his ear: Actually, you're the one I love the most. Yousheng felt her belly. She said: You study hard. I'll take care of you and the baby.

It wasn't until the child's eighth birthday that Yousheng realized he hated Zhao Mei. He had always hated her. When he graduated she'd found him a post as an engineer at the Zhaofeng Cotton Mill. The job was called engineer, but it only involved things like making adjustments in the bobbin and yarn rooms and sending someone to start the generator when there was a power outage. So he carried some instruments along and designed auto turbines that he would never see produced. Over time he began to see spots in front of his eyes. After work he ate dinner with the child. Zhao Mei was busy with her "My tears flowed e'er I spake/ Old memories cause my heart to break" in the story-ballad hall. Sometimes when the sun went down, Yousheng, alone in the darkness, listening to the intermittent sound of bicycle bells, his eyes seeing only dimly, felt an obscure sense of resentment.

'Righteousness above family loyalty': he reported Zhao Mei as an old-style prostitute, the mistress of a KMT lackey, as belonging to the categories who should be 'executed; imprisoned; placed under surveillance'. Zhao Mei's story-ballad hall was closed down. She sat bewildered in the little room in the lane, holding her *pipa*. It was familiar, somehow, to something that had happened before. Yousheng silently ate sweet and sour fish. Shanghai was exceptionally quiet tonight. In the hazy twilight, Zhao Mei said softly: I know you hate me, Yousheng. Yousheng kept silent. He'd thought revenge would be sweet, but he felt only sadness. To the child it looked as if something terrible had happened, but it could not understand and began to wail. Zhao Mei held the child and said: When you grow up, whatever you do, don't let anyone hurt you. The child squirmed away from her.

Zhao Mei thought a bit and said: The child's clothes are all in the cupboard. I still have a little gold, it's in the rice jar. You can use it if you're pressed. If you meet someone suitable, don't wait for me. The child I can take when I get back. Yousheng's eyes reddened. All he could say was: I'll help you pack. Anhui is full of mosquitoes, I've bought you a dozen mosquito coils. Zhao Mei smiled and said, Thank you. Yousheng's face was covered in tears. Zhao Mei laughed. Look, look at you. If I was in a romantic frame of mind, I might think you loved me. Yousheng said through his tears, But I really do love you. Zhao Mei said softly, I know.

One day I went to Suzhou. Shanghainese like their food sweet, but in Suzhou they like it even sweeter. There's Han Shan Temple, of course (At midnight the

tolling of the bell comes to my boat). Even though I don't like China, I can't help sighing as I walk along, "Ah, lovely, lovely." (The moon goes down, the crow caws, frost covers all/ By riverside maples, amidst fishermen's fires, I sleep my anxious sleep.)⁴ (Gaze not from the high terrace/ for gazing into the distance makes one anxious/ Of mountain ranges there is no end/ Rivers multiply, on and on they flow/ Where is the one I long to see?/ Somewhere in Loyang/ One can gaze and yet not see/ How can this serve to dispel sorrow?)⁵ (Tomorrow may bring trouble/ Lips parched, throat tight/ Days of joy are numbered/ While sorrowful days mount up/ How can misery be forgot?/ With a lute, a song, a cup.)⁶ And the sad thing is: this fine scenery, this lovely hour, what's it got to do with me?

Yousheng went to the labour farm in Gushi, Anhui, to visit her laden with a dozen eggs, a Jinhua ham and half a bag of toffee. He brought the child and they searched for Zhao Mei in a fiery-red field of sorghum. He thought she was so different from other people that he would always be able to pick her out of a crowd. But the men and women harvesting sorghum in that field stumped him and he could not recognize Zhao Mei. They were all starving and silent. Yousheng stood there while the sun set little by little. A jaundice-faced woman came up to him and said: You're Yousheng. It's Zhao Mei. Did you bring anything to eat? The child greeted her: Ma. Zhao Mei was too busy cracking and peeling eggs to reply. For a while Yousheng couldn't say anything. He lit a cigarette, obscuring his vision with a cloud of murky blue smoke. Zhao Mei finished eating. Only then did she see the child and motioned to her: Come here. The child squirmed. When Zhao Mei touched her, she began to cry. Zhao Mei let her go, saying: She doesn't know me any more. Serves me right. She peeled her second egg. The cracking of the shell seemed so loud to Yousheng he thought he would go deaf; take your time, eat slowly, he said. I'll think of a way to get you out of here. I won't abandon you. Zhao Mei stopped and looked at him, pale yellow egg white in the corners of her mouth and asked: Do you know what you're saying? She crushed her handful of eggshells: It doesn't matter.

Despite the three years of 'natural disasters',⁷ Zhao Mei did not die in Anhui, but her body came more and more to resemble a tree. When she received notification to return to Shanghai, she hardly dared believe it was true. There was a letter from Yousheng attached: Come back. We'll start again. Reading it, Zhao Mei suddenly

⁴Zhang Ji 張繼 (mid 8th century) 'Night Mooring at Maple Bridge' 楓橋夜泊.

⁵Shen Yue 沈約 (441-513): 'Gazing from the High Terrace' 臨高臺.

⁶These lines are taken from the Han *yuefu* poem 'Song of Blessings' 善哉行.

⁷A common reference to the hardships and famine of the early 1960s, following the Great Leap Forward.

gave a bitter laugh. She poured a cup of water and sat. She was about to take a drink, then stopped, sizing herself up in the water. Suddenly she was extremely embarrassed and looked around frantically for a pair of shoes to put on. The leader came in, leaned against the bamboo doorframe and laughed in the shadows: Women have it better—they always have someone to fall back on. With a strength she didn't know she had, Zhao Mei grabbed him by the collar. She was barefoot, her face dark with anger and through clenched teeth she said: He and I have tormented each other nearly to death and it's all because of your something-or-other revolution, your anti-rightist movement, your great leap or whatever-it-is forward. But I won't change, the world won't change, when are you lot going to realize that?

Zhao Mei took up her *pipa* again.

She hadn't changed. Neither had Yousheng. He went as before to his nothing job. Zhao Mei sang her tapestries of woe as before, but there was no longer anyone who wanted to listen. Sugar and oil were scarce, flour like gold dust. There were no more window frames or door handles in the house; they had all gone to smelt iron. In the darkened rooms they sat across from one another, mute, peaceful and weak, as if they'd been smoking opium. The child was reading *Song of Youth*. If history really existed, history had left them tired and weak and hungry.

Perhaps because there is no history, I like JJ's. There are people in Shanghai who don't know any English and call it 'Jiejie'. It's a disco as big as a factory on Yan'an West Road that just opened a few months ago. The young have no memory of history; the place is full of happy faces, dancing in hot sweatiness: you'd think you were in New York. Maybe they were all born after the Cultural Revolution and grew up drinking Coca-Cola and going to Nanjing East Road to buy *Benetton* leather jackets. They tend to say: We've got this in Shanghai too, we've got that in Shanghai too, the *trendy*-est. I'll be all of 18 next year and I want to go to the US and look around, *OK?* Gays whisper together in the corners. There are young American students among the crowd, speaking accented *Putonghua*. My stomach hurts but I still order a real drink. It hurts so bad I groan in pain, but I still feel happy among the crowd.

Today is all we have.

He's the same as ever, cautious to a fault. "Mmm—I've got to go. Shuzhen will be waiting for me." To a certain extent, he was always the good husband. Zhao Mei turned off the light and said into the darkness: Do you think of me sometimes? Yousheng replied: Not normally, normally speaking, I don't. You know me, I'm one who doesn't give much thought to things that don't exist. Late at night there's something Manhattanesque about Shanghai. Zhao Mei said as she lit a cigarette in the darkness: You're so candid a person can't help laughing. He came up close to her and said: I'm not very good at putting things into words. But after you left—it

was so odd—I always heard someone crying in the night. Shuzhen said I was bewitched. I always felt it was because I'd made you cry. Finally I had to take sleeping pills and then I was sort of out of it all day. Life is so long—like during the Great Leap Forward, you never knew when it would end.

Your husband, the foreigner, is he good to you? He asked. It's OK. You know, American men are fairly straightforward and they really like housework and children. Hans knew she wanted to see her ex and let her go to Shanghai while he went to Hefei for a Chinese Studies conference. Zhao Mei was in fact filled with gratitude to Hans. She'd never imagined she'd marry again at fifty. Hans had proposed to her on the banks of the Hudson River. He slipped a ring on her finger saying, Look, we both have liver spots on our hands. We haven't got any more passion or illusions. All I can say is I so hope to be with you, until death do us part. It's because we're both weak and alone. Zhao Mei thought of hope. Suddenly she understood that there was still hope, no matter how great your years. She said, I'll think about it. She sent Yousheng a telegram and then made up her mind.

As they were writing a big character poster on their door, Yousheng shut it and took Zhao Mei in his arms. The big character poster about Bombarding the Headquarters⁸ was put up on their door. "They've decided to pick on us," Zhao Mei said. Yousheng said: "But I will never abandon you." They kicked up a fuss outside the door for a while and then left, maybe because it was late and they wanted to go home, or maybe they were thirsty. Yousheng continued to hold Zhao Mei tight. Far off, as if it was a holiday, the din of the gong and drum could be heard. A stiff breeze came up and the poster flapped on the door. Shall we take a look at it? Zhao Mei asked. Yousheng said, It's nothing, nothing beyond 'Active Counter-Revolutionary'. They'll show up tomorrow to struggle against us, won't they? Yousheng said: That's for tomorrow. Tomorrow we'll each find our fate and I fear it will be difficult even to save our own skins. Get a good night's sleep. We should get up early tomorrow morning for breakfast, because we don't know when we'll get another chance.

Later there was no more resentment. They were both ferreted out and became Cow Demon Zhao and Snake Spirit Chen. Yousheng went up on the stage lackadaisically to be struggled against, he almost nodded off. But Zhao Mei thought of their life together, and in the midst of the struggling crowd, her memories were as warm as the womb. The little soldiers felt struggling against them wasn't worth the effort, so they drove them into the cowshed and had done with it. Yousheng

⁸On 5 August 1966, Mao wrote a big character poster with this title, initiating a struggle against 'the top Party person in authority taking the capitalist road' (Liu Shaoqi) and his supporters.

had to scrub the men's and women's toilets and would stand in front of the women's with his mop and shout: Anybody there? So he acquired a nickname: Anybody There. Zhao Mei had her head half-shaved—the so-called *yinyang* haircut—and then she actually began to go bald and went from a *yinyang* pate to a bald pate. But there remained a ring of dark hair around her skull, so she was called Total Eclipse. Sometimes, running into each other in the cowshed, they would greet each other—Anybody There! Total Eclipse!—as if they were exchanging some secret message. Sometimes the absurdity of Anybody There and Total Eclipse struck them and then they couldn't help looking at each other and laughing. The haste and yet the rapport made it as peaceful and replete as if they had made love. After all, Zhao Mei would think, along the path of human life the prospect suddenly brightens and the way unaccountably opens up just where you thought there was a dead end. This was her epiphany.

She had realized at last the weakness and strength of love. They returned to their home. Outside it was noisy, but their small corner was timorous and tranquil. The two of them had become so thin, they were like two old dogs embracing, licking each other's wounds.

Shanghai is just a city. What is experienced in its byways is multiplied many times over and over without end. If experience repeats itself, it must be my fault. (Clearly it is a legendary historical city. History once past does not repeat itself, so why is it I always have the feeling there's something familiar about things?) (It is definitely my fault.)

Nothing seemed to have changed. The two of them were always very tired; evenings, they were in bed by eight. They didn't have sex, they didn't even think about it; perhaps they'd already lost both the ability and the interest. The young people had been sent to the countryside and the city was quiet and empty. Zhao Mei and Yousheng leaned on each other as if they were already old. Zhao Mei couldn't sleep at night. She got up to go to the toilet, slipped on the smelly latrine and got excrement all over her face. Meanwhile the moonlight shone exceedingly clear and clean. I'm only forty, Zhao Mei thought, is my life over, just like this? All at once her *qin* strings sounded in her ear. Covered in excrement, she went slipping and sliding along in the night like one possessed.

She would pay no attention to the ups and downs of history. She had to take hold of her own destiny.

When her story-ballad troupe went to perform in the US it was after the Third Plenum.⁹ Following the Gang of Four's fall from grace, Zhao Mei once again

⁹The Third Plenum was held in 1978.

performed in the Peace Theatre, but now she was performing her own programme: 'The Moon, How Bright'. Tomorrow may bring trouble/ Lips parched, throat tight/ Days of joy are numbered/ While sorrowful days mount up. She heard there was some kind of 'openness and reform' going on. All Zhao Mei knew was that you could get a bonus for performing and you could get FEC¹⁰ on the black market, good for buying diamond jewellery at the Friendship Store. And Yousheng had been transferred to a joint venture cotton mill where he was a consulting engineer. When Hans the sinologist came to invite her story-ballad troupe to perform in American university theatres on the east and west coasts, she didn't dare believe it was real. Hans looked to be about fifty. He was like a child, always exclaiming in his strangely-accented *Putonghua*: how lovely, how magnificent, how moving. It always seemed to Zhao Mei that he was extremely naive. He was almost completely bald but he still went into raptures. He liked children too and Shanghai croaker fish and all the bicycles and bicycle bells in the city.

The evening she said goodbye to Yousheng she was very calm. She felt it was farewell for good, even though they would be performing for only two weeks. Yousheng silently helped her pack. The child was already a young woman and she watched silently. Yousheng came across an old photograph of himself in his all-season peasant trousers, head half-lowered, smiling at the camera. He turned up some US dollars from somewhere too and stuffed them into her bag. And he helped her pack her music, her underwear, her toothbrush. He turned off the light and suddenly put out a hand to touch her. They hadn't had sex since the end of the Cultural Revolution. Suddenly afraid, Zhao Mei asked, You, you? But in the end she couldn't go on. And Yousheng didn't do anything, but he came anyway. He didn't move, and the rank-smelling fluid stuck to both of them. It was a long time before he said: If you get the chance, go and don't come back. Hans is a good man, find out if he's married. If not . . . when you get to America, find a way to stay. I . . . he stopped there. Seeing that he was still, Zhao Mei said: Go to sleep, don't dwell on it. As she lay next to him, it seemed as if they had come to a tacit understanding.

As they lay close together, there was neither desire nor bitterness. When she heard that Yousheng was going to marry Shuzhen, Zhao Mei even sent them a gift of US\$1,000 in her and Hans' name. But that night she had a dream. She dreamt that she was still in Anhui and Yousheng brought a young woman to see her. The woman was dressed in a cheongsam of a style popular in Shanghai before the war

¹⁰Foreign Exchange Certificates. A separate currency issue convertible to foreign currencies; not available to the general public in China. FEC are no longer in use.

and she had brought Zhao Mei some eggs. As she ate the greeny yolks, Yousheng said: I won't desert you. And the young woman joined in: I won't desert you. Because she spoke so sincerely and politely, Zhao Mei, her mouth full of egg, began to cry in her dream.

She turned over and put her arms lightly around Yousheng, as if she were holding an infant. Yousheng hadn't much to say either, he just hugged her and waited for dawn.

At a dead end. As still as that.

This night in Shanghai was particularly long.

It was still very early when they got to the airport. Departure time was 7:30 a.m. but the plane was late and the troupe stood in line until 10:30 without moving at all. One comrade got impatient, stood up suddenly and began to sing 'Socialism is Good', whether out of boredom or sarcasm, it wasn't clear. The others began to laugh and joined in raggedly: Socialism's go . . . od; socialism's good.

Zhao Mei had no idea whether socialism was good or bad. All she knew was that she'd had more than enough goings-on in her life. Maybe it'd had nothing to do with any 'ism'. I'm someone all kinds of things happen to, Zhao Mei thought. And in each thing that happened, there was Yousheng in the midst of it. Perhaps this was what people called love.

The Performance

Later . . .

When Zhao Mei returned from Anhui, she discovered that Yousheng was nowhere to be found. She sat in the dusky room in the lane, the child watching her silently. Where's Daddy? she asked. Da . . . dy. The sound echoed around the room, so very very lonely. But someone was sautéing soybeans, *pop, pop, pop*.

Here the actress stopped and said: I'm afraid he's never coming back.

The artistic director approached and put his arm around her gently, saying: It's all right. It's all right.

When they went to visit the actor at the Renji Hospital, he had just had surgery. He was really out of it. The script editor grimaced because he was thinking about the extremely difficult process of revising the script. The director sat scratching in his notebook, making notes. It's OK, there are only a few scenes left. The artistic director was matching up the colours of the flowers. The actress, in front of a great spray of lilies, was saying softly, Wake up and we'll start over again. The artistic director rubbed the heads off the flowers and scattered them over the actress, filling the room with their delicate fragrance.

The Peace Hotel was suddenly unwilling to hire out its old Jazz bar to outsiders. They said the Party was opposed to it. So the long rose-coloured dress couldn't be used. The artistic director came up with a dark-green cheongsam in a Miro print and stood her in green shade.

As Zhao Mei stood in a completely transformed Yongan Lane, a child came up and accosted her: Hey, old *Huaqiao*,¹¹ who you looking for? Got any FEC? Zhao Mei bent down to tease him: Did you know that someone named Zhao Mei used to live in this lane? And someone named Chen Yousheng? The child said: They're all dead and gone. Zhao Mei was taken aback. After a moment's thought she said, You're right. Then she pulled out a few coins and gave them to him. The child went away. She looked up, remembering fierce sunlight, but at some point a poplar had grown up there, its green leaves making shade. And then Zhao Mei knew: she should never look back.

There's no reunion for you, all you can do is look back, the director said with a bitter smile.

That's right. If you can't wear red, wear green, the artistic director said. The actress laughed, Then this is a career of compromise. The artistic director came up to her and said in a low voice: Mmm, there are times when you don't want to compromise, for example, how can I put this, for example, if there's love involved. The actress hung her head, thought a bit and said: How do you tell the difference between loneliness and love? The artistic director said: Loneliness and love are like red and green, interchangeable. The actress closed her eyes so make-up could touch up her powder. All she could see was shadow. Actually neither red nor green exist.

She said: In the end, is there or is there not such a thing as a new beginning? The lighting technician was arranging the lights in the Gushi labour farm: Don't turn your face. The artistic director said: There is, in the movies. Not in reality. Things only happen once; they can't happen again. The actress said: How old are you? And he replied: Twenty-nine. She said: So young, really, it's not fair.

Zhao Mei read Yousheng's letter: Come back. We'll start again. She gave a bitter laugh. Poured a cup of water and sat. She was about to take a drink and then stopped, sizing herself up in the water. Suddenly she was extremely embarrassed and looked around frantically for a pair of shoes to put on. The leader came in, leaned against the bamboo doorframe and laughed in the shadows: Women have it better—they always have someone to fall back on. With a strength she didn't know she had, Zhao Mei grabbed him by the collar. She was barefoot, her face dark with

¹¹Overseas Chinese.

anger and through clenched teeth she said: Let's start over. *cut.*

That night in the Jinjiang Hotel, the artistic director whispered in the actress' ear: I'll tattoo a pair of peacocks on your neck, OK? The actress started to giggle and said: I don't like anything that only happens once. The artistic director said: Then you wouldn't like me, for sure. Laughing, the actress said: In that case, do it again, do it again.

Once you have a physical relationship it's not the same. In the blue moonlight, Zhao Mei could not sleep. She got up to go to the toilet, and slipped on the smelly latrine. The artistic director asked the actress: Does it hurt? Is it bad? She didn't say anything, just a grunt that could be taken for a response. Then the director knew. He'd seen his share of such things after all. So he said to the artistic director: After work you'd better go to the Friendship Store and get a little something for the wife. Hearing this, the actress knew what he meant, so she said: I'll go along. I can buy something for my boyfriend. Taking it all in, the lighting technician laughed: Name any film you want, none of them are a patch on the drama of real life. Zhao Mei said: I'm only forty. Is my life really over? When she finished her dialogue, she turned her face away and gestured to the lighting technician as if to say: It only happens once—this sort of film and people, just once. The lighting technician, in some kind of response, turned off the lights with a click, saying to the director: We can try having the lighting from higher up.

The whole group went shopping for souvenirs. The lighting technician was looking for a silk carpet. Choosing among them, he suddenly discovered that there was a white film over his eyes. Distressed, he slumped down upon the pile of carpets. The artistic director bought a sapphire ring and gave it to the actress. The director thought of the fleeting nature of material things and lit up a cigarette among the reproduction Tang tri-coloured pottery horses; the filming would soon be finished.

Before leaving he went to visit the actor. The others had gone on a Huangpu River excursion. The director went to see him alone. The actor was conscious, but still couldn't talk, he just stared at him, wide-eyed. The hospital was very quiet in the afternoon. The director picked up an old *People's Daily* to read. People came and went. He sat a while and then left, saying to the actor in farewell: Your father's coming in tonight. Hang on. The actor looked at him. He had a feeling he wouldn't see him again, and said: You're a good actor. The actor was greatly comforted by this and closed his eyes.

Leaving the hospital, he stood waiting for a taxi when all at once he felt very sad, whether for himself or not, he didn't know. It seemed as if he was going to die. Someone next to him said: You're a bad director, awfully, terribly bad. Except for the fact that they sell tickets, there's nothing good about your films. He suddenly stopped dead in the middle of the street, saying, There's nothing I can do. It was

as if somebody was chasing him up for a debt. He wasn't sure if there were such things as debts of honour. Horns were blaring all around him. Suddenly he thought, I should turn down *The Strange Case of the Serial Rape-Murders*. Cars were passing by all around him by this time. In China, in Shanghai, you can't afford to hesitate over anything, because you only live once.

As the group was leaving, there was a sudden grand display of tears. The script editor had found a girl who exchanged currency on the street, the assistant director's girl was a graduate student waiting to go overseas, she was in nuclear engineering. The cameraman's was an unemployed youth. Even the script girl had a young man, a PLA soldier. The lighting technician laughed at her: Watch you're not cheated of your money or your favours. The script girl didn't respond, she sat in the back of the van snuffling and sobbing.

The actress turned on the radio. Her heart was empty and bare. She didn't see the artistic director among the group and she didn't ask. There hadn't been even a word of goodbye. There was Suzhou story-ballad singing on the radio and she switched stations. A voice was speaking in *Putonghua* with a Cantonese twang: I can portray a person's character and feelings through the use of colour. For example, a woman looking back over her life stands in green shadows wearing a dark-green cheongsam. To give more abstract expression to the flavour of the time, I use a print by a Spanish artist of the same period, Miro. The actress twisted the sapphire ring on her finger and, hearing the sobs of the script girl, she said *cut*. The film is over.

The film hadn't been finished in the way he'd imagined it. Other things, things both funny and sad, had happened outside the film itself. They seemed familiar to things that had happened before, but the way they were played out was totally unanticipated. People can't even control made-up stories, much less destiny, which is unknown to them, thought the director. He was just very tired. When he got back to Hong Kong he was going to have a good long sleep. When he got up he would be ready to prepare his next film, *The Strange Case of the Serial Rape-Murders*. He'd already forgotten his flash of insight and self-knowledge outside the hospital.

Only the lighting technician took stock of each occupant of the van through his filmy eyes. Perhaps from now on he wouldn't be seeing this world. He thought of the actor, put on his dark glasses and said: I wonder if he died.

He was a terrible actor, said the director.