

趙振開：稿紙上的月亮

Moon on the Manuscript

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SUNLIGHT SLID ONTO the glass desk top. A warm band of orange trembled lightly as I lowered my eyelids. It was a still morning. At intervals the oppressive sound of popped rice spread through the lane. A war was going on in Afghanistan. A jumbo jet had crashed in southern France The world was so concrete, as if meaning only existed in a given concrete time and place. The tired and drawn face in the mirror when I was washing this morning resembled a cornered beast. At the public lecture a few days ago, the university students had started to hiss, and someone handed up a slip saying "You represent us? How disgusting!" The grating sound of the microphone's alternating current gave me the opportunity of silence. What more had I to say to those fellows, who considered themselves so superior?

I opened my eyes and blew lightly, and the snow-white cigarette ash on the glass top was like a flock of seagulls skimming over the water. At low tide I would almost invariably go hunting for shellfish with my playmates. We would knock off

oysters from the rocks one by one and pour them into our mouths. There were also small crabs that hid in the seaweed or under the rocks I'm a fisherman's son, but it seems as if this was no longer a fact but only a line in a dossier. Had my mother not died and her brother taken me to Beijing, at this minute I would probably be sitting on the deck of a chugging, throbbing motorized junk, smoking a long-stemmed pipe and surrounded on all sides by fishing nets full of salt slime and the odour of fish. I spread out a hand: pale, slender, not a single callous. Fate is incomprehensible, perhaps the only thing that is incomprehensible

Someone knocked on the door, so lightly that at first I thought I'd heard wrong. It was a girl with short cropped hair that had a brownish tint.

"Is Mr Ding here?" she asked timidly.

"That's me."

"I" her round face flushed.

"Come in and tell me what's on your mind."

She almost kicked over the thermos flask on the floor. "I'm sorry"

"It doesn't matter. Please sit down."

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After some hesitation she sat down on an old stool beside the couch, placing her old satchel on her knees. "My name is Chen Fang, I'm a student at the Normal College. I came because I like your stories." She laughed apologetically.

"Which ones do you like?"

She thought it over. "I like 'The Relic'."

"As far as I'm concerned that's become a relic itself. What about the more recent ones?"

"Er," her tone was a little uncertain. "I haven't read them yet."

I got on my guard, thinking she might be one of the students who had been booing. "What's the reaction of the students around you?"

"I'm not sure. Some people seem to think they aren't as deep as before."

"A hole in the ice is deep," I said.

The girl seemed to be a bit nervous, continually fiddling with the frayed strap of her satchel, twisting it back and forth around her fingers.

"Would you like some water?"

"No, please don't bother, I'm going in a minute." She took out a thick manuscript from her satchel. "I tried to write something. It's fairly poor. I thought I'd ask you to read it, is that all right?"

I took the manuscript and weighed it in my hand. "Are you in the Chinese department?"

"No, physics."

"Your first try at writing?"

She nodded earnestly.

"Take my advice, stick to your own field and don't waste your efforts on this."

She shrugged "Why?"

"It's sour grapes."

"Really?"

"I say that because I've tried."

She laughed, very sweetly, and for a moment her ordinary-looking face appeared beautiful. "But I've always liked sour things since I was little."

I bit my lip and remained silent.

"And you can make sweet wine with sour grapes."

"Sweet wine?"

She stood up. "Anyway, I'd still like to try."

"Very well then, I won't say any more."

At the door she turned her head. "I thought, I thought you would be full of confidence."

"Confidence? The word is too abstract."

"What is a concrete one then."

"Life, writing," I grimaced, "and confidence, too."

After seeing my visitor off, I sat down again at my desk. Perhaps this was the beginning of a story, starting with the conversation about sour grapes, and then what? I picked up my pen, screwed off the cap, and stared at the metal nib. What was the matter? It was fine weather outside, and I was shut up in a room, like a fly in winter. I used to be able to write eight thousand characters a day, "like a fountain", to use the old lady's expression. She saw herself as my protector. One look at that stupid face would make anyone contemplate suicide. Perhaps a difficult labour is a good thing, a new beginning. How droll, a man approaching forty still talking about new beginnings. Emperors build their mausoleums when they're still in their teens. Ordinary people are lucky, you can go for a walk after work, or slip off and have a drink, you don't have a load of worries The pen slipped between my fingers and poked a hole in the right upper corner of the manuscript, splashing a big blob of ink on it. Idly I drew a crescent moon.

THE SIGHT OF Juan coming in aroused a feeling of time fleeting. It was as if in that second, memories of the past welled up and swirled around me, forming a background in disharmony with our everyday life.

"Why're you looking at me like that?" she asked.

"Nothing," I said dully.

She pulled out Dongdong from behind her. "Say hello to daddy."

Dongdong stood between me and Juan, looking glum and gazing blankly at the floor.

"Say hello." Juan's voice was a little impatient.

Dongdong still stood there, not budging.

"The teacher says he had a fight with the other children this afternoon, he grabbed someone's car I'm exhausted." Juan settled her bottom on the couch and sighed.

I went over and hugged Dongdong, prickling him with my moustache as I kissed him. Not saying anything, he dodged aside, detached himself from me and toddled over to the desk.

"Moon," he muttered, stretching out his small hands to the manuscript.

Juan bustled over. "Ah, the great author, he can't produce a single word, but he knows how to

doodle. There'll soon be a mountain of letters piled up demanding stories. I wonder how you're going to meet those debts."

"I don't owe anything to anyone," I said stiffly.

She smoothed a crease on my sleeve with her fingers, giving me a quick glance.

"I only owe myself," I said then.

"What's up with you?"

I stayed silent.

She walked over, patted me on the shoulder and stroked my face. "You're tired."

I looked into her eyes and gave a forced laugh.

"What's bothering you?"

"Nothing."

"Then why this?"

I grasped her hand. "I'm tired."

"You've got such a terribly gloomy expression. Shave off that moustache tomorrow. I'm going to chop up some meat, I bought some chives."

I sat down at the table and stroked Dongdong's downy head. This time he did not dodge away.

"Daddy will buy you a car tomorrow."

"I don't want one," he said, staring at the paper.

"Why not?"

"Fatty said the car was his grandad's." He suddenly lifted his head and asked, "What's my grandad?"

"A fisherman."

Dongdong turned his head to look at the goldfish bowl on the side table.

"What sort of fish?"

"All sorts."

"Where does he live?"

"He's dead."

Dongdong raised his eyes in surprise.

"He drowned at sea."

"Wasn't he careful?"

I shook my head.

"Were you sad?"

"I was only three then."

"I'm four and a half."

"Yes, you're a big boy now."

Dongdong drew his forefinger back and forth on the manuscript. "Teacher says the moon is round."

"She's right."

"Why didn't you draw it round?"

"Each person has a different moon."

"Grandad's moon?"

"Quite round."

I remembered the small dark cottage piled with fishing gear. I often burrowed myself in there, to lie alone on the dried fishing nets. Moonlight filtered down from the cracks between the rafters, murmuring in the sea wind, an accompaniment to the monotonous sound of the waves.

"POSTERITY EQUALS zero," Kang Ming smacked his lips and threw the matchstick into the ashtray. "Zero, old man."

I shook my head, reluctant to continue the argument. All arguments were meaningless. I knew he was needling me, trying to draw me into a game that I was already tired of. Every Saturday evening as a rule he would occupy our twelve square metre room in his own unique way.

"There's no need to feel any responsibility in regard to posterity. The question's very simple, no-one has to feel responsible in regard to anyone."

"Do you have a responsibility to yourself?" I asked.

"That's a complicated question."

"No, it's also very simple. People now tend to put the responsibility on society all the time. In fact, society is composed of individual people. If each individual refuses to accept responsibility for his own acts, how can we expect any social progress?"

"OK, I give up. Your wife?"

"Taking the child back to her mother's."

"Writing coming along well this time?"

"No."

He turned his head and looked at me. One eye was very bright, reflecting the light from the standard lamp, the other was in a dark green shadow.

"You've changed," he said.

"Really?"

"Probably it's the conscience of the artist pressing on you so hard you can't breathe."

"I'm not an artist, never have been."

"Your name is big enough."

"It'd be bigger if I started a fire on the street."

"Don't set your demands too high, old man."

I stayed silent.

"The question is not how you or I think, of course it's a good thing to develop your own

brain." He got up and walked to and fro, his shadow slipping across the wall. "One thing should be understood, we are merely society's luxuries."

"I don't understand."

"It seems that only we 'commercial' editors know how the market works . . ." He walked over to the desk and picked up the sheet of paper. "Interesting. Do you know what makes the moon appear full or not?"

I gazed at him.

He turned around and leant against the table, smiling enigmatically. "It's the result of the earth beneath our feet blocking off the sunlight, common knowledge."

THE PAPER AT the end of the cigarette began to curl up, covering the red fire that was gradually darkening, the blue and brown wisps of smoke mixing together. Although technically deficient, the girl's story still touched me deeply. The tragedy was certainly her personal history, the beginning and the end of love. To search for love in this loveless world is very difficult, but loss is something instant and eternal. "The business about the room, haven't you been keeping up the pressure for it? The application's been in for months." A rustling sound, it was Juan taking off her clothes. The cigarette ash tumbled off, falling in separate flakes on the manuscript. "Go and see Xu tomorrow, one word from him is more effective than you making ten visits to the Association." "I'd prefer not to." Was that my voice? People can never hear their own voices accurately. How long can this voice linger in the world? At most seventy years, then it will disappear along with me. But the noise of the sea never ceases, never ends. I write something, it is printed in a book, but who dares guarantee that twenty or thirty years later people will still be reading it? Not even just twenty or thirty years, the younger generation have begun shaking their heads right now. "Ge's wife, he works in our factory, she's in a washing machine factory, they're having a trial sale, only a hundred and fifty . . ." What lasts forever? Eternity in art is too terrible, the sight of it strikes fear into people's hearts, like a cold gravestone. It demands a writer stake everything on a single venture. The bed boards creaked, Juan was turning over. Seagulls staked everything on a single venture. No one who has heard their full-

throated, doleful wail could doubt this. Why am I always thinking of the sea lately? I drew a deep breath, smoking relaxes me. A piece of cigarette ash fell near the moon. Ah, the result of blocking sunlight. Yes, artists are still men. I really shouldn't look down on Kang Ming, we're all the same. And he has his own reasons, too. Perhaps lying is man's basic nature, and being sincere is acquired; sincerity must be studied. Is the problem only in speaking truthfully? "It's getting late," Juan said in a muffled voice. This was a hint. She was waiting for me, just as primitive tribal woman waited for the hunter, no, fisherman. The fishing spear in his hand, an animal skin around his waist, he utters a full-throated cry answering the summons. "Yes, this month it's our turn to collect the water and electricity bill, last month the electricity was so dear, there must be someone stealing the electricity . . ." I wonder if the small dark cottage still exists? The pungent fishy smell, the slippery floor, the small iron bucket hanging from the ceiling to catch the rainwater. Haven't been home for many years, I really should go back and look around. "Tomorrow evening you should go to our place and pick up Dongdong. I may be working overtime." My father, to me, will forever be a mystery. How he drowned not even I know. He didn't leave a single thing behind. No, he left me. And what shall I leave behind? I stubbed out the cigarette and switched off the lamp. Everything disappeared, the moonlight poured in, I remembered the girl's smile. "Why don't you say something?" Juan snorted, and turned over facing the wall. She was angry, but it was a pretence. I turned down the quilt and pulled her over by the shoulder, watching her quivering eyelids in the dark. "All right," I said. She slowly lifted her arm, moving her face nearer. "The business about the room . . ."

"HERE'S TO YOUR creative work, may it be an eternal fountain!" said the old lady.

I put down my cup.

"What's up?" the old lady looked at me.

"We should drink to Xu's health."

"May as well, I suppose. To my reluctance to go to the grave," the old man said.

The old lady placed a piece of fish on my plate.

"Try some, it's yellow croaker, my own work."

"Excellent."

"Compared with your stories?"

"Much superior."

The old lady moved closer, with a mysterious air. "There is something you must thank me for properly"

"What?"

"Guess."

I shook my head.

"Go on, guess." She trod on me with the tip of her foot.

"That's enough." The old man impatiently knocked the plate with his chopsticks. "Stop making such a fuss, if you've something to say, come out with it."

"It's none of your business!" The old lady gave him a baleful look. "A few days ago, Mr Zhang, the director of the press, was here; I mentioned you to him. He's agreed to publish a collection of your work."

"Oh."

She waited for me to make a better response.

"Thank you, but" I knocked the table with my knuckle. "Why don't we wait a little, we can talk about it later."

"What?"

"I haven't put together anything decent yet."

"Ho, here am I burning joss-sticks and the buddha turns his backside to me."

"He's looking ahead," the old man mumbled, sucking on the fish head. "Mm, mm, wait and see."

"You've been waiting all your life, and in the end, all you've got is a name with nothing to show for it except your memoirs, huh?" the old lady said indignantly.

"What're you yelling?" The old man thumped the table. "At least I've got something worth putting into memoirs."

"Humph," came from the old lady.

The old man's good humour revived after a minute. He dug out a dark brown fish eye and looked it over carefully.

"Think it over, don't let this opportunity slip by." The old lady clasped her arms around her shrivelled chest and sighed. "I'm going to take a look in the kitchen."

"The old nag," muttered the old man, waiting until she had gone out the door. He turned towards me, "Don't listen to her gibberish."

"She means well."

"There must be something bothering you."

I gave a noncommittal smile.

"It doesn't matter, literary men are given to over-sentimentality." He concentrated again on the fish eye.

"I'm just a little unwilling."

He lifted his head and gazed at me expressionlessly. "How old are you?" he asked.

"Thirty-seven."

"Do you know how old China's history is?"

I didn't answer.

"Five thousand years." He stretched out five crooked, trembling fingers. "There's no harm in waiting a bit longer, young man." As he finished speaking, he downed the fish eye in a single gulp.

I SAT DOWN at the desk. I knew this would be the inevitable result. I could not go back to the deck, to the rocks, to the small dark cottage where the moonlight rang out from the rafters. I had a slight headache, it was the wine—the sun-dried grain was to blame, the sun was to blame. I felt a sadness I had not known before, and felt like crying although I hadn't cried for years. Perhaps my tears were saltier than others'. I was a fisherman's son. My father died at sea. His boat overturned, and there wasn't even a corpse, but they set up a wooden tablet for him in the village graveyard. There were many wooden tablets there, facing the sea, facing the sunrise every morning. I was fortunate. I wonder whether authors who have been published often go past bookshops and look at their own books behind the glass. Hardback and paperback. The hardback editions have characters stamped in gold on the outside, and the cover is made of soft, pliable leather. They are more fortunate than I. Fortunes can change, however. I shouldn't stop. I didn't choose this opportunity, it chose me. Actually, nothing is of much importance in the end. My nerves are weak, I'm always being troubled by nightmares, nightmares that trouble my peace of mind. That fish eye has seen everything there is in the sea: seaweed, electric eels, mother-of-pearl . . . yes, oysters too. Don't stop, I'm only thirty-seven, that's still an up-and-coming age for writers. That girl's smiling face didn't hold beauty and purity alone. A smile can cover up anything. But where the smile has been, a scar or wrinkle will remain. I pulled open the drawer and gingerly touched the

dog-eared corner of the manuscript. Sour grapes will only ripen and turn into wine if there is a sun. She had hope. Although the students' booing was not very pleasant, it nevertheless held a sun-like sincerity and honesty. Oh, what's the point of thinking of these things, life is always concrete. I have known love too, I have the right to describe this love too. It was a secret, a secret that couldn't be transcended in a tragedy, but I've had my brush with it. This isn't plagiarizing; nonsense, of course it isn't.

I spread out the sheet of paper with the drawing of the moon and began to write.

HOLDING A TOY car in his hand, Dongdong was kicking a stone, humming snatches of a song which

seemed to be a story about a cat and a butterfly.

"Hurry up, Dongdong," I pulled his small hand. "Stop kicking that stone." He looked around at the dark shadows of the pedestrians and traffic around us, still humming.

"Daddy, look at the moon," he said.

The moon was big and round.

"That isn't your moon."

"No, it isn't."

"Where's your moon?"

I said nothing. We were walking under the dense shade of a pink siris. I knew he was looking at me intently, but he couldn't see my face clearly.