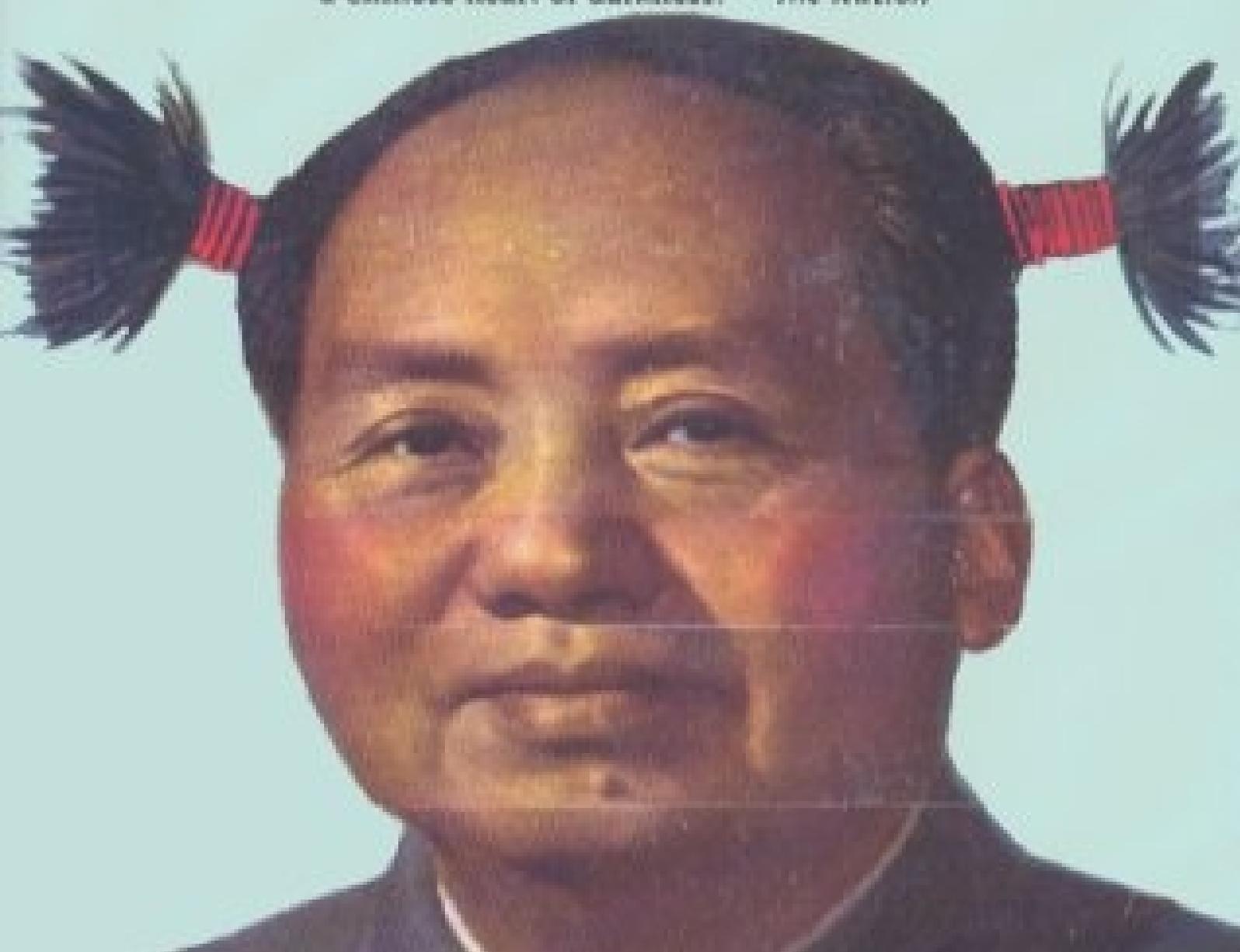


"Superstition, murder, abuse—Chairman Mao is a collection of pointers to a Chinese heart of darkness." —*The Nation*



C h a i r m a n M a o  
W o u l d N o t B e

A m u s e d

**Fiction from Today's China**

*Edited by Howard Goldblatt*

## Annotation

### *From Publishers Weekly*

In contrast to the utopian official literature of Communist China, the stories in this wide-ranging collection marshal wry humor, entangled sex, urban alienation, nasty village politics and frequent violence. Translated ably enough to keep up with the colloquial tone, most tales are told with straightforward familiarity, drawing readers into small communities and personal histories that are anything but heroic. "The Brothers Shu," by Su Tong (*Raise the Red Lantern*), is an urban tale of young lust and sibling rivalry in a sordid neighborhood around the ironically named *Fragrant Cedar Street*. That story's earthiness is matched by Wang Xiangfu's folksy "Fritter Hollow Chronicles," about peasants' vendettas and local politics, and by "The Cure," by Mo Yan (*Red Sorghum*; *The Garlic Ballads*), which details the fringe benefits of an execution. Personal alienation and disaffection are as likely to appear in stories with rural settings (Li Rui's "Sham Marriage") as they are to poison the lives of urban characters (Chen Cun's "Footsteps on the Roof"). Comedy takes an elegant and elaborate form in "A String of Choices," Wang Meng's tale of a toothache cure, and it assumes the burlesque of small-town propaganda fodder in Li Xiao's "Grass on the Rooftop." Editor Goldblatt has chosen not to expand the contributors' biographies or elaborate on the collection's post-Tiananmen context. He lets the stories speak for themselves, which, fortunately, they do, quietly and effectively.

### *From Library Journal*

The 20 authors represented here range from Wang Meng, the former minister of culture, to Su Tong, whose *Raise the Red Lantern* has been immortalized on screen.

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Chinese literature has changed drastically in the past thirty years. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) arts and literature of all sorts were virtually nonexistent since they were frowned upon by official powers so that attempts to produce any were apt to cause one's public humiliation and possibly even death by the Red Guards and other unofficial arms of the government. After 1976, in the wake of Mao's death, literature slowly regained its importance in China, and by the mid-1980s dark, angry, satirical writings had become quite prominent on the mainland.

In the wake of Tiananmen Square, dark literature faded somewhat, but never vanished. Now Howard Goldblatt, a prominent translator of Chinese fiction and editor of the critical magazine *Modern Chinese Literature*, has compiled a representative collection of contemporary Chinese fiction entitled *Chairman Mao Would Not Be Amused*. Even with my limited knowledge of modern China I feel certain the title of the book is fairly accurate.

Mo Yan is one of my favorite contemporary writers. His dark, no-holds-barred satires *Red Sorghum* and *The Garlic Ballads* detailed what he sees as the failings of both Chinese peasants (of which he was born as one) and the Chinese leaders. His short story "The Cure" is in the same vein, detailing how a local government representative-probably self-appointed during the Cultural Revolution, although that is never made quite clear in the story-leads a lynching of the village's two most prominent leaders and their wives. But, as in most Mo Yan stories, the bitterness directed at the lyncher is double-edged with the bitter look at a local peasant who sees the deaths of the two village leaders as a desperate chance to possibly rescue his mother from impending blindness. The story is coldly realistic and totally chilling in the rational way it treats the series of events.

Su Tong is the author of the novella "Raise The Red Lantern", the basis of the wonderful movie. His "The Brothers Shu" is a bitter look at some traditional character weaknesses of Chinese people, and particularly how they affect family life. The Shu family is incredibly dysfunctional. The father nightly climbs up the side of his two-family house to have sex with the woman upstairs until her husband bolts her windows shut. So the woman sneaks downstairs to have sex in the younger son's bedroom while the son is tied to his bed, gagged and blindfolded. Meanwhile the elder son abuses the girl upstairs until she falls in love with him. When she becomes pregnant, they are both so shamed they form a suicide pact, tie themselves together and jump into a river, where the boy is rescued in time but the girl dies. The younger son so hates his older brother-somewhat deservedly considering the abuse heaped on him by the brother-that he pours gasoline through his bedroom and sets it ablaze.

And so on, complete with beatings and torments worthy of the most dysfunctional American families. While not a particularly likeable cast of characters, the story is strong and thoughtful.

Perhaps the most moving part about "First Person", by Shi Tiesheng is in the brief author description in the back of the book. Shi is described as "crippled during the Cultural Revolution". So many lives were needlessly destroyed during that tumultuous decade, it is easy to feel that the arrest and subsequent conviction of the notorious Gang of Four was not nearly sufficient punishment for them.

"First Person" tells the story of a man with a heart condition-Shi frequently writes about the lives of

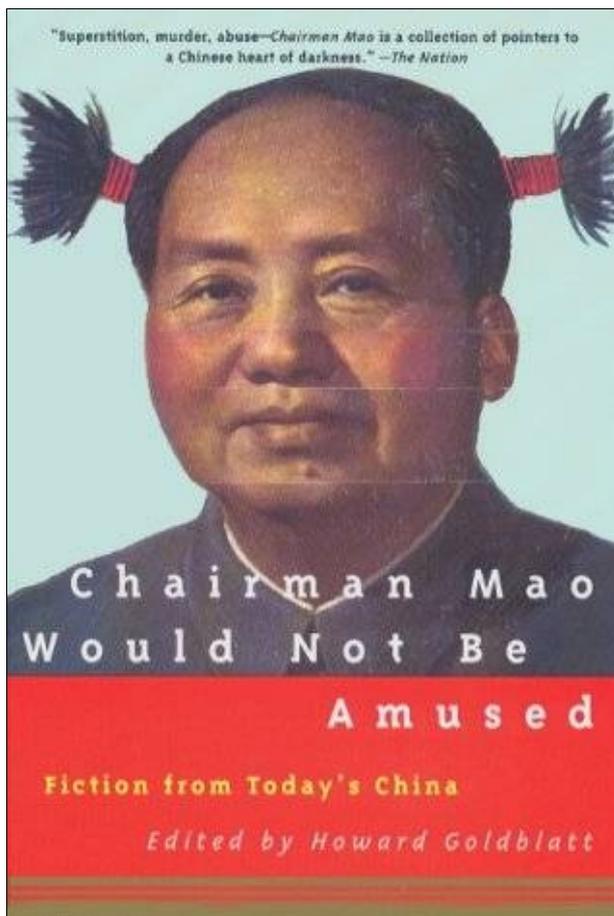
handicapped people, according to his description—who is visiting his new 21st floor apartment for the first time. While climbing the stairs very slowly, taking frequent rests, he notices a cemetery separated from the apartment building by a huge wall. On one side of the wall is sitting a woman, while on the other side stands a man. As the man climbs the stairs he fantasizes about why the couple are there, and why they are separated by the wall. Perhaps the man is having an affair, and the wife is spying on him as he rendezvous with his lover?

But then the man notices a baby lying on a gravesite, being watched from a distance by the man, and he realizes that the couple is abandoning the child. An interesting story about the fanciful delusions a person can have, but with no real depth beyond that.

Two stories involve fear of dentists in completely different ways. Wang Meng's "A String of Choices" is a very funny story that combines a bitter look at both Eastern and Western medicine with perhaps the most extreme case of fear of dentists imaginable. Chen Ran's "Sunshine Between the Lips" tells of a young girl whose adult male friend exposes himself to her. If that were not traumatic enough, after he is arrested for exposing himself to a complete stranger, he sets his apartment on fire and dies a brutal death. This event, combined with a near-fatal bout of meningitis, creates in the girl a deep fear of phallic objects such as needles and penises. So imagine her trauma when she develops impacted wisdom teeth at the same time as she gets married. While this description might sound a bit ludicrous, this story is very serious and very well-executed.

A strong satire on how history can be rewritten to suit the writers' needs is Li Xiao's "Grass on the Rooftop". When a peasant's hut goes on fire, he is rescued by a local student. The rescue is written up for an elementary school newspaper by a local child, but the story is picked up by other papers, changing radically with each reprinting until the rescuing student becomes a great hero of the Maoist revolution because of his supposed attempt to rescue a nonexistent portrait of Mao on the wall of the hut. While this story is uniquely Chinese in many ways, it resonates in all societies in which pride and agenda is often more important than the truth.

Anybody interested in a look at contemporary Chinese society should enjoy this collection immensely.



## Howard Goldblatt (Editor) Chairman Mao

# Would Not Be Amused – Fiction From Today's China

## Howard Goldblatt – Introduction

I sometimes wonder what Chairman Mao, who almost single-handedly launched, then single-mindedly derailed, the Chinese Revolution, might have thought of the literature published since his death in 1976. Taking the long view, I think he would have approved of "scar literature," a cathartic body of writing that voices the sufferings of the Cultural Revolution, for its success in pacifying the people at a difficult historical moment; after all, if, for the time being, they could not be united under the banner of permanent, violent revolution, why not keep them busy airing their collective discontent, mainly with one another? Mao knew the value and limitations of literature and writers, and he trusted neither. Yet he knew how to harness their power; over the years, he had used literature and the arts both to bring down his enemies-most of them erstwhile friends-and to keep the people's attention focused on his political agenda. If national events and socialist behavior remained the *raison d'être* of the writing, it served his purposes. The fiction that began appearing shortly after his death was, by any reasonable literary standard, rather badly written; but that would not have concerned Mao, for in his earliest pronouncements on literature, back in the Yan'an caves in the 1940s, he had said, "Literature and art are subordinate to politics, but in their turn exert a great influence on politics." By focusing on the evils wrought by the renegade Gang of Four, and thus deflecting charges of responsibility away from the Party and the current government, this generally amateurish writing played a significant political role in the days immediately following the Cultural Revolution.

"Scar literature" gave way in the late 1970s and early 1980s to "introspective writing" and "root-seeking literature," both of which would have fit nicely into Mao's plans to keep the socialist pot boiling. The questions posed in the fiction of this period-like, Why are we the way we are? and What are the origins of our Chineseness?-are just the sort of questions Mao would have wanted people to ask, since he could have been counted on to provide the answers. And if the writers went a bit far afield, or strayed into one form of heresy or another, then they would become grist for his mill, a mill that produced exemplars for the next generation. Indeed, there were some anxious moments, as when the avant-garde versifiers known as "misty poets" renounced a collective mentality with their imagistic, impenetrable poems; but who reads poetry anyway? Mao would have merely swatted them away with one of his famed waves of the hand, a superior smile on his face, smug with the knowledge that the "neo-realistic" prose then capturing the imagination of readers in China and in the West was highly politicized, making it one more potential weapon to be used by those in power to retain that power.

The literary scene in the mid-1980s was charged, as large numbers of readers were won over by the passion of writers hewing to the role of social reformer. Finally, people assumed, a literature of dissent worthy of the name was emerging: stories revealing the ugly side of the revolution, poems that sang the praises of romantic love, dramas that acted out some of the dangers facing the Chinese nation, even films portraying the betrayal of the revolution by people *within* the Communist Party and the government itself! But Mao, I think, would not have been concerned, knowing it

was only a matter of time before someone went too far and the orthodoxy of power could reassert itself. Mao must have known that the only truly dangerous writing in a totalitarian society is that which ignores politics altogether, literature that serves art, not society. Anti-Party diatribes? They would play right into his hands. Lurid sex and gratuitous violence? He certainly had nothing against either of those in real life. Utopian pie in the sky? What, after all, is Marxism?

But then China's new leaders turned their guns on their own students and workers, and the ensuing loss of faith, coupled with the supremely individualistic desire to get rich quick, changed almost everything in China, including its literature. I suspect that even the chairman's confidence would have been shaken by reactions to events of June 1989. The writers responded to the new realities by staking out territory independent of societal and political pressures; they were now more interested in mocking the government and socialist society than in trying to reform them, more concerned with the reception of their work by the international community than with their status in China. If Mao were still around and running the show, I'll bet that few, if any, of the stories in the present collection would have pleased him. At best he might have asked, "What's the point?" At worst... well, we mustn't get carried away. Most troubling to him, I suspect, would have been the artistry-the playfulness of some of the pieces, the angst-ridden introspection of others, and the layered possibilities of most; that, of course, and their lack of utility, something no socialist revolutionary could abide. No, if confronted by the literary offerings of the twenty men and women represented here, Chairman Mao would certainly not be amused.

All the selections in this anthology were written or first published in China proper; the earliest pieces appeared in 1985, the most recent in late 1993. Novelists who left China more than a decade ago, those who have moved on to other pursuits (most, in contemporary terms, to take the plunge-that is, become entrepreneurs), and those from other Chinese communities-Taiwan, Hong Kong, Southeast Asia, the West-are not represented here; their work can be found in translation elsewhere.

Many people have graciously contributed to this anthology: Colin Dickerman, who suggested the project; Shelley Wing Chan, who performed many important tasks for me as the project built up steam; friends and colleagues who either commented upon the growing list of authors and stories or made recommendations of their own; and, of course, the accomplished translators, who maintained their composure and humor even when I could not. On behalf of the authors whose work graces the pages that follow, I thank them all.

H.G.

## Shi Tiensheng – First Person

That year, in the fall, I was assigned housing. It wasn't a bad apartment, just too high up, on the twenty-first story, and a long way from downtown. I took half a day off work to go have a look. The trip took almost two hours by bus, and by the time I got there, it was already after four o'clock. I saw it right away. Just as I had been told, it was the only building for about a mile around. It was white and surrounded by a green brick wall. The area was pleasant, with trees on three sides and a river to the south. The river flowed west to east, just as I had been told. The wall ran right up against the riverbank, and a small bridge led to the courtyard gate.

Even so, as I walked through the gate, I was thinking I should make sure I'd come to the right place. Near the western wall stood a huge parasol tree; a young woman was sitting against its trunk in the quiet, concentrated shade. I walked over and asked her if this was the building I was looking for. I didn't think I was speaking too quietly. She lifted her head, seemed to glance at me, and then settled back down as before, looking with lowered eyes at the shifting dots of light that the autumn sun was sprinkling down through the shade. It was as if I no longer existed. I stood waiting for a while, and then I heard her murmur, "Go with the flow." Her voice was quite soft, but she spoke each word slowly and distinctly. I nodded. I was positive I no longer existed. Her thoughts were off in a fantasy land. Some vulgar noise had disturbed her for a minute, that was all. I felt a little apologetic and a little abashed, so I stepped back, turned away, and walked straight for the front door of the apartment building, thinking that this had to be the place.

The building appeared empty; people hadn't started moving in yet. No one was there to run the elevators, which were all locked. I have heart trouble, but since I'd come so far, I couldn't just leave after one look at the stairs. I figured that as long as I didn't try to go fast, I wouldn't have much of a problem climbing to the twenty-first floor. "Go with the flow" was what the girl said. That seemed to be sincere, appropriate advice, so I took a few deep breaths and started to climb. When I reached the third floor, I stopped to catch my breath. I leaned out the window and caught sight of the girl. She was still sitting there in a trance, her head slightly lowered, her hands resting casually on her knees. On her simple, elegant skirt, dots of sunlight and shade silently divided and then combined, gathered together and fell apart again. "Go with the flow" was what she said. Actually, when she said it, she didn't see me and didn't hear any vulgar noise. She didn't see anything and didn't hear anything. She was a thousand miles away. I couldn't see her face, but I could sense her tranquillity and enchantment. The autumn wind swept invisibly past the huge parasol tree, making a soft, dignified sound.

On a fall evening, when the sun was about to set, she left home alone, locking the gradually gathering twilight in her room. She walked where she pleased along paths through the fields. She followed the smells of the grasses and the earth as she walked where she pleased. Who was she? She walked to a remote, quiet place and sat down facing a tall, empty building. She leaned against an ancient tree. She sat in its deep, swaying shade, sat in the low, chanting sound it made. She made the place her

own. Who was she? She thought about things near and distant, about things real and illusory. Her mind and body slipped into a natural, mysterious realm... A woman like that, who could she be? A woman to be admired.

But I had to keep climbing my stairs. I didn't know what had been arranged for me by nature's mysteries. Take, for example, climbing stairs; take, for example, the fact that there was an apartment on the twenty-first floor that would belong to me. When had this been determined? How had it been determined? Fourth floor, fifth floor. I had to rest again. To tell the truth, resting was of secondary importance. As I climbed, I didn't stop thinking about the girl, even for a minute. I had no bad intentions, I just wanted to look at her again and was afraid she had already left. I just wanted to have another look at her, another look at the contented nonchalance with which she sat alone under that big tree, quietly lost in thought. I looked down. She hadn't left. She was still sitting there by herself, still sitting the same way. But now I saw someone else.

There was a man walking back and forth along the outside of the western wall. I hadn't noticed him before. The wall had blocked my view, and I couldn't see him. The wall was quite high. By this time, I was on the fifth floor; yet even so, I could see only his head and shoulders. He paced back and forth as if caged. He walked for a while, then stopped, looked into the distance, and puffed repeatedly on a cigarette. Then he started walking back and forth again, then stopped again, and smoked furiously as he peered toward the distant woods. I could hear his footsteps; they sounded irritated, restless. I heard the snap of each match he struck; he broke match after match. The spot where he stopped was also in the shade of the parasol tree; only the wall separated him from the girl. Along with the appearance of this man, I noticed that not far from him and the girl, in the northwest corner of the wall, there was a small gate. It had been there all along, of course. I had just overlooked it. Now it was especially obvious. Who was the man? What was he to her? One was inside the gate, the other was outside. There was no one else around, no one else in the vicinity. What was going on? The man was terribly upset and anxious, and the woman was in an absolutely silent trance. What had happened? What had happened between them? A slanting beam of sunlight came through the gap between the doors of the small gate and settled in the damp shadow at the base of the wall; it was bright and sadly beautiful.

"Go with the flow" was what the girl said, but what did she mean? To what did "Go with the flow" refer? Was she forced to leave him? Did she have no choice but to leave him? Yes, yes. If she had no choice but to leave him, then all she could do was go with the flow. No choice but to leave him. That meant she still loved him, but there was nothing she could do. "Go with the flow." Wasn't that the truth? When she said it, her voice was hollow, her eyes dazed. She didn't see me at all and, of course, couldn't hear what I asked her. She was overcome with sadness; all she could think of was the happiness and the bitterness of the past. But finally there was nothing she could do. And the man outside the wall? He was madly in love with her and wanted to make her happy. How he hoped she would be happier because of him. It never occurred to him that he would drive her to such suffering. It never occurred to him that things could end up like this. He had thought it was enough that he loved her and that she loved him, too. It never occurred to him that the world was so large or that everything in life was connected in so many ways.

"As long as you're happy, it's OK." Maybe that's what he said finally.

The woman sat under the tree with her head lowered. Restlessly, the man walked to her side, around her, in front of her.

"As long as you're happy, I'll be OK whatever happens," he said to her.

"But if you'll just not be afraid, if you'll just have a little courage.

"Will you say something? After so long, you must give me a definite answer."

The woman couldn't speak. Yes or no. The logic of it wasn't so simple.

The man said, "I'm waiting for you to say the word. Yes or no."

The man said, "What's important is what you want. What's important is what you think will make you happy."

The man said, "It's not that I want you to make a decision right away, but I have to know what you think is best."

The woman couldn't speak at all. What would be best? Maybe it would have been best if you and I had never met. Maybe it would be best if people didn't fall in love, if there were never such a person as you, never such an autumn as this, never such hollow afternoon light, and never such an expanse of shade. She didn't want any of it. Such long, slender, restless legs, such delicate, nimble feet crushing fallen leaves. She didn't want any of it. And the long, drawn-out sound of leaves ripping into pieces. She didn't want it. She had never wanted it.

"Are you going to say something?" the man asked. "I don't know what it means that you won't say anything.

"I don't understand why it's so hard to answer my questions.

"I don't know what else I can say. I don't know what to do.

"OK, OK, maybe I shouldn't pester you like this. Maybe I should be sensible and just walk away.

"OK, I'll go. I never thought I could make things so difficult for you. I'll just say one more thing. As long as you're happy, it's OK with me whatever happens."

He turned and walked out through the small gate. She didn't stop him. She really no longer had the strength to stop him. She heard him walk through the gate, listening with despair to the sound of his departing footsteps. She held her breath and listened, listened. The familiar sound didn't travel far, and she sighed in relief. Or maybe it was the opposite. Her despair deepened. She heard him walking back and forth outside the wall, heard him smoking, heard him sighing, heard him crying his heart out. She could fully imagine his pain, but she had no idea what she should do. The only answer left to her was "Go with the flow." The wind blew between the dense, broad leaves of the parasol tree and through the surrounding woods; it sounded like water, like splashing oars, like waves someplace off in the distance. Why? Were their parents opposed? What other reason could there be? It was better to keep climbing my stairs. I came to look at my apartment. All I could do was get myself up to the twenty-first floor.

Then again, maybe she didn't love him. Or once loved him but didn't anymore. "But why?" the man asked. "I don't want to pressure you, but I have to know why this is happening." It wasn't that she didn't want to tell him, but she truly didn't know what to say. There seemed to be many reasons, but when she tried to speak, she couldn't make any of them clear. There really were many reasons, but when she spoke, she couldn't find any of them. "Go with the flow" was what she said. It was what she always said to him. In her mind, she was still saying it to him and to herself. There

was no way to prove or disprove love; all one could do was go with the flow. The man went around to the other side of the wall. Maybe he was grieved; maybe he was angry. He just turned and walked out through the small gate. Maybe it was love; maybe it was hatred. Not wanting to say anything more, he walked out through the small gate. But he couldn't leave her. He didn't want to leave her. He was upset and anxious and didn't know what to do; he stood looking around helplessly. The sun had neared the woods. Gray magpies called back and forth. Inside the wall, the woman listened worriedly to the man's movements. She couldn't leave either. She was afraid he might be capable of anything. But what should she do? There was absolutely nothing she *could* do except go with the flow. That and pray quietly. It was the only wise thing to do, the right thing.

I reached the seventh floor. When I looked down, I could see over the dense treetops nearby. I saw a gravestone among the trees. First one, then two, then three. When I looked carefully, I saw they were all over, like stars in the sky or men on a chessboard, and I realized it was a cemetery. So *that's* what was going on. All along, the man had been gazing at the cemetery. That's what was going on. That's why the woman was dressed so plainly and neatly. Maybe it was the anniversary of someone's death, and they had come together to visit the grave.

Death has always been the most mysterious of affairs. A living, breathing person is gone. A living soul, someone who could think, could speak, could laugh, could love... suddenly is gone. You and he were once so intimate. You could see him whenever you wanted.

You could say to him whatever you wanted to say. But he died, and you'll never see him again. If there's something you forgot to tell him, it's too late now. But even after many years, when the woman came to the dead man's grave, she still couldn't accept this fact. She placed a handful of earth on the grave, sprinkled a little wine on it, and set down a bouquet of wildflowers. But the deceased? He was dead, gone, couldn't be found, couldn't be found anywhere, would never be found. The woman sat by the grave and felt chills run through her body and her heart, too.

The man pleaded with her. "This is the natural way of things. You've got to understand that this is the inevitable resting place for us all."

Looking at the irrefutable grave, she still could not believe death was so cruel.

"Don't be this way, OK? Don't be like this." He pleaded with her in a gentle, humble tone, as if it were all his fault.

"To live, you've got to learn to forget," the man said.

Looking at the grave, the woman also saw the dead man's likeness, smiling and very real. She still could not imagine what dying was.

The man said, "You have to keep thinking that he's gone, that he's been released. You have to keep thinking that we are alive.

"You and me," the man said, "we're together. I'm here with you."

After a long time, the woman left the graveside and walked blindly through the woods. Her long skirt drifted in the air like a ghost. She walked out of the woods. There was a white apartment building surrounded by a long, green brick wall. She walked through the small gate. It was a good place, with a big, lonely tree that calmed one down a little and gave one something to lean on. "Let me be alone for a while, just be by myself, OK?" she said. She didn't have to look back to know the man was right

behind her. Obediently, he turned and walked back through the gate. She sat down against the tree. It was a little better here, by the vacant building. Unfamiliar places help one forget the past. The gently sliding shadow of the tree and the softly falling leaves made just the place for a grieving heart. Go with the flow, just go with the flow, she thought. Really, he was right-death didn't have to be so scary. "Go with the flow," she said quietly. Maybe she thought the man had come back inside the courtyard, or maybe she was speaking to whomever it was who had died. She didn't see clearly who I was, didn't understand at all what I was asking. The man kept watch outside the gate. The woman's persistent heartache often left him at a loss. He didn't know if he respected the dead man or was jealous of him; maybe he even hated him a little. At such times, he couldn't say if he himself was decent or base and mean. He had come here with her, he had agreed to come every year. He knew he would live up to his word, but he also knew, and only he knew, that he truly wished that she would forget that man, forget him forever. He looked toward the woods and the grave they surrounded. He prayed to heaven either to bless and protect him or forgive him: let that man die for good, and let the two of them never come here again, never return to this place.

The ninth floor. It was evening, and the autumn breeze had stiffened. If there was a strong wind that night, by the next day most of the leaves on the trees would be down. By now, the rays of the setting sun seemed to be coming in on the horizontal. I could see that the man outside the wall was shading his eyes with his hand and staring at the woods, in the same direction in which he had been looking so expectantly before-toward the setting sun. In that direction, through the trees, I could see two roads that intersected. Where struck by sunlight, the roads' pale surface was dazzling. One of the roads ran east-west, the other north-south. At the far end of the east-west road-the west end-I could see a stop sign for a suburban bus. A bus was pulling in just then, and a few people got off. The man was looking in that direction. He remained absolutely still as he watched the people. He seemed to be waiting for someone. Then the bus pulled away, and the people dispersed. They had probably come to visit graves. Some carried fresh flowers. The man's hand came down slowly, fished out a cigarette, and placed it between his lips. As he lit the cigarette, he began to pace back and forth. But now he seemed to notice something else. He raised his hand to shade his eyes and looked off in the same direction again: a woman was walking this way. She had probably taken the wrong road; she turned around and headed back this way. Her snow-white windbreaker was striking as it appeared and disappeared among the trees. The man's head turned slowly as he followed the woman with his eyes. But she stopped, looked around for a minute, then turned, and headed north. The white windbreaker disappeared among the trees to the north. At this, the man finally took a drag from his cigarette. He was definitely waiting for someone. Who? A woman? So that's what was going on. He was waiting for another woman. They had agreed to meet below the empty building east of the woods.

"The building is white and has a green brick wall around it. After you get off the bus, go east. Pass through a grove of trees and a cemetery."

"A cemetery?"

"Yes, I'll wait for you there."

Maybe it was at the entrance to an alley. Maybe it was while they were both

rushing to work. Maybe the streets were already full with a crashing flood of cars and people. Or maybe there was only a handful of pedestrians on the sidewalk, and the city was still a pale blue.

"What did you say, there's a cemetery there?"

"Don't worry about it, don't worry. It isn't scary in the least."

Maybe it was a Saturday or a Sunday evening, at a bus stop near her dormitory, the last time they said good-bye. The sky was already very dark, and it was about to rain. The wind came in swift, violent gusts; dampness spread out through the black night. Or maybe it was after the rain, and everything was quiet, not a single person in sight. The streetlamps shone on the wet street, which was like a river reflecting festival lights.

"Honest, it's not scary. It's a pretty cemetery."

"Go east? Is it far?"

"No, not far. You'll be able to see it as soon as you get off the bus. It's a very tall building."

Maybe it was close to midnight, in a gloomy corner of a diner. The occasional sound of lonely whistling from someone walking came from the street. The little diner was about to close.

"The building is twenty-one stories. It's white."

"A green brick wall?"

"Right, I'll wait for you there."

But what about the woman inside the wall? Who was she? What was she doing here? Maybe she and the man outside the wall had absolutely no connection to each other. But did they really have no connection? She was sitting beneath the big tree, not making a sound. Behind it, actually. If you looked carefully, you would notice that she, the big tree, and the small gate all happened to line up perfectly. If you looked in through the crack between the doors of the gate, you wouldn't be able to see her. Why should this be? The man couldn't see her, but she could hear everything outside the wall. And why didn't the man go to the bus stop to wait for his friend? Why did he hide over here and waste all that energy peering into the distance? "Go with the flow" was what the woman said. If her husband had fallen in love with another woman and if she had found out, what could she do? Suffer, yes, she would suffer. She would cry, argue, throw a fit, but in the end what good would that do?

"Nothing like it, nothing at all," the man said. "There just isn't anything like that going on."

But after he said this, she knew that if he continued to see the woman, there would be little she could do. "No! No!" She would cry and shout. "No, this won't do! It won't do..."

"How can you be so vulgar?" the man said. "How can you be so petty?"

The man said, "I never thought you'd act like this. She's just a friend, an ordinary friend."

But he spent far more time with his ordinary friend than he spent with her. When he was with his ordinary friend, he laughed and talked excitedly, but when he was with her, he had less and less to say, and he grew more and more withdrawn. What could she do?

"For the children," she said to him. She didn't want to argue anymore, and she

didn't have the strength to cry anymore.

She said, "You don't have a thought for me, but you must think of the children."

"OK, OK," the man said. "Since you refuse to believe me, I won't have any more to do with her."

But after he said this, he kept seeing the other woman behind his wife's back. If that was how things were, what could she do? She could take him to court. She could cause a scandal, raise such a fuss that everyone in the neighborhood would know. She could walk away. She could leave him. But she loved him. Love was as difficult to explain as death. She didn't want to hurt him, and she didn't want to leave him. What should she do? Obsessed, she followed him here. She watched him walk back and forth along the outside of the wall, anxiously waiting for that ordinary friend of his. Quietly, she went around to the other side of the vacant building, crossed the little bridge, and came in through the main gate. She walked over beneath the big parasol tree and listened for a while. She could hear that he was still outside the wall. Not wanting him to discover her, she hid behind the thick trunk of the parasol tree. She wondered what it was she thought she was going to do. Make her existence known to the other woman?

Talk face to face with her? Expose the man's lies there and then? But what good would any of that do? What would be the point? If he had already fallen out of love with you, if he longed for another woman, what more hope could you have in him? All you could do was go with the flow. Let him go, all you could do was let him go. "Go with the flow." When she said this, her heart was like a cemetery. She was unaware that somebody had walked over to her, unaware that somebody had asked her a question. The sun had sunk completely behind the trees. The evening breeze was stronger with each gust. It grew gloomy and lonesome beneath the tall tree. The shadow of the tree and the dots of light that had swayed and pulsated were the same as the past, the same as yesterday; they passed away quietly, unnoticed. Of course, tomorrow they would do it all over again in the same place. Let's go, but where? Let's go home, but what is home? Were you just going to wait? Wait until when? You didn't care? You were indifferent? OK, OK, go with the flow. But I had to be on my way, for I still had a dozen more floors to climb.

As I'd expected, my new apartment wasn't bad. Two bedrooms and a living room. The bigger bedroom was close to 180 square feet, sixteen feet long and eleven feet wide. The smaller bedroom was sixteen feet long and eight feet wide, 128 square feet. It was a miracle for a bachelor like me to have an apartment like this. The living room was 75 square feet. The kitchen was only 54 square feet, but there would just be me cooking and me eating, so it was big enough. To my surprise, the toilet was in a different room from the shower. I hadn't expected that. The closet was so large I could sleep in it. The balcony? Four feet by seven feet. (How many square feet would that be?) From it, I could look down to the woods.

Under an unfathomable autumn sky, the trees were a riot of color. The maple leaves were already red, the ginkgoes were completely golden, the pines and cypresses were so green they were almost black, and numerous white tombstones ornamented the spaces between the trees. I wondered if in the future I would want a gravestone. If I did, where would it stand? Would I want words engraved on it? What should I have engraved? Over the years, a number of people are likely to come to my grave, on rainy

days, on windy days, on snowy days, on clear days. They will pass by my grave, read the words on the gravestone, and then walk away. Who will they be? Will they wonder who the person buried in the grave might be or wonder about the experiences he might have had? Will it occur to them that the person in the grave once imagined their coming? Perhaps some of the people destined to walk by my grave have already been born and are walking toward my gravestone. Of course, they have a long way to go, and many things have to happen in their proper sequence. There is no way to predict which road they will take to get to my grave, because I have yet to die. There is no way yet to determine the place and time, but this sort of thing is certain to occur. Someone who is certain to pass by my grave has already begun his trip. Maybe he is in Africa, or maybe he is within my field of vision. As I was thinking about all of this, I suddenly noticed a child in the woods.

It was a baby. You could see him only from the twenty-first floor. He was lying behind a gravestone in the pale red light of the setting sun. There was a baby carriage beside him, filled with many colorful toys. He was wrapped in a pink woolen blanket so that only his little face showed. He was sleeping soundly and peacefully, as if nothing could disturb him. Who was he? Whose child was he? Where were the adults? Where had his mother and father gone? Why had they stayed away so long? There was no one else around; I could see clearly from the twenty-first floor that there was no one else anywhere in sight. Why wasn't the child in the baby carriage; why was he sleeping on the ground? Heavens! I understood: an abandoned infant! In a flash, I realized what was going on. The man outside the wall! And the woman inside the wall! The man was gazing steadily in the direction of his child. He paced back and forth beyond the wall, looking off into the distance at his child. He watched the bus stop to see who would come take the baby away. He had no choice but to abandon his child, but he was uneasy; he wanted to see with his own eyes what sort of person would take the boy. Why are you doing this, young father? And you, the mother, why are you doing this? She couldn't bear to watch, so she hid. After walking in through the small gate, she no longer had the strength to stand, and so she sat down beneath the big tree as if at the center of a nightmare. She listened to hear if the child was crying or not. She wondered if she had brought along enough toys. She listened for any movement from the distant woods. She wondered what sort of fate was in store for the child. Yes, when she looked at me, her eyes were full of alarm. It never occurred to her that someone might come in through the main gate to the south. "Go with the flow," she said in a voice heavy with despair. Maybe I look reasonably honest and decent, but I didn't go toward the small gate, and she couldn't say to me, "Go into the woods. Thank you. Please take care of the child for us." She thought with resignation, Go with the flow, just go with the flow. The sky grew darker and darker, but the child was still lost in his sweet dreams. Did he dream? What did he dream of? No, no! This could not be! No matter what had happened, they could not do this. I went down the stairs. I have a little heart trouble, but going down stairs is always easier than going up. I rested on the fourteenth floor and again on the seventh. When I reached the bottom, it seemed that other than the fact that my heart was beating a little faster than usual, nothing was amiss.

The woman was still there. Her hands were on her knees, palms up. She was sitting with her eyes closed, beneath the big parasol tree, absolutely motionless. I stood

beside her for a while, but she seemed oblivious to my presence. It occurred to me that as a man, I should go talk with the man. I walked over to the small gate and pushed it, but it didn't open. I pulled it, and it still didn't open. It was locked; there was a great big lock on the outside. Strange. Then how did the woman get inside? My head, like my heart, is not particularly good. I thought for a minute before recalling how I myself got inside. I ran over toward the south gate, planning on circling around to the west side of the building. It would be best to first go have a look at the child. It was late and getting cold. The child had to be kept from getting sick. I would go have a talk with the young father and then maybe speak to the child's mother also.

What is it you're doing? Just what are you doing? What calamity has occurred? You're not married? If you're not married, then hurry up and get married. There's still time. You simply cannot do this. You were pretty daring in the beginning, so what are you afraid of now? There's no need to be afraid of anything. Let people talk. "Go your own way and let others talk." An important person said that, so it can't be wrong. Look, you two, this is a wonderful child, so well behaved. Illegitimate children are all smart. He could grow up to be a great man. Great men shouldn't just be tossed aside in some cemetery.

But, but! There was a river in front of the main gate on the south side. I had all but forgotten it. The river flowed right up against the green brick wall; there was virtually no space between them. The bridge could take one only to the south bank, and there was absolutely no way to circle around to the west side of the wall. I crossed the little bridge and walked west a long way but didn't find any place where I could cross the river. Then I followed the riverbank east. I walked a long way, but there was still no place to cross. Now what was going on? The wall around the compound was so high that the man would have had a hard time jumping over it, let alone the woman. I continued on, figuring that sooner or later there had to be a place where I could cross the river. By the time I'd gone another considerable distance, it was deeper into the twilight, and still I hadn't found a place to cross. If there were such a place, I reasoned, it had to be on the west side; so I turned and headed back. After I had walked for a while, I met up with a woman.

"Excuse me," I said, "where can I cross the river?"

"Cross the river?" She glanced all around. I realized she was the woman who had been sitting beneath the tree.

"Go west. After about five hundred yards, more or less, there's a big bridge," she said.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

She looked at me for a moment with suspicion. "I'm going home."

"Well, what about him?"

"Who?"

"Who's that man on the other side of the wall?"

"What? What man? What do you want?"

"OK, we won't talk about that," I said. "But what about the child?"

"Child? What child?"

"The child in the woods to the west."

She laughed. "You're not feeling well, perhaps?" She turned and was about to leave.

"There's an abandoned child over there! Listen, no matter what, it's getting late, and we have to get that child and take it home. Tell me again, where is the bridge?"

Events proved my heart was OK, for I jogged all the way to the woods, and it kept working normally. I found the gravestone. I was positive it was the one. I could swear my eyes hadn't deceived me. I couldn't have been wrong. But there was nothing in front of the gravestone-no child and no baby carriage. I hurried off to find the man. He was still outside the western wall. He was just then in the process of tidying up a pile of painter's things. Brushes, portfolios, paints, bottles, and jars were spread out at the base of the wall, and a finished painting titled *Cemetery in the Woods* stood to one side.

I walked up and asked him, "Did you happen to see a child in the "Woods?"

"A child? What sort of child? How old?"

"Very small, a couple of months."

"Good Lord, aren't you a case? How could you lose such a small child? He couldn't run away by himself, could he?"

We looked off toward the woods simultaneously. I walked back and forth along the green brick wall, from south to north and north to south. I couldn't see it; from there, I couldn't see the gravestone at all. Then the woman showed up. I described for them everything I had seen.

"Please believe me, my eyes work better than anything else in my body," I said to them. "Please don't look at me like that, like there's something wrong with me."

I said to them, "If we spent some time together, you'd realize that I'm quite normal."

I said, "Will you go with me to have another look?"

The man said, "I don't doubt your sincerity, but how can you guarantee you saw everything there was to see? As for me, I'm sorry, I have to go home."

The woman said to me, "All right, I'll go with you." I could tell she said this only because she wasn't entirely satisfied that I was OK.

We went into the woods and walked to the gravestone. Sure enough, nothing. There was nothing there at all. I sat down beside the grave. I said, "Go on home. Weren't you on your way home? Go on." She sat down beside me. I said, "Don't worry. You don't have to worry about me. I'm a little tired. I think I'll rest here for a while." She reached out and felt my pulse.

I said, "Maybe the painter was right, maybe the child's parents were nearby."

I said, "But maybe I wasn't wrong, and someone took the child away while I was looking for the bridge."

I said, "Shall we take another look around?"

We walked through the woods together. We walked until the sky was completely dark.

I said, "What sort of person do you think took him away?"

I said, "I think it was a good person who took him away. What do you think?"

I said, "What do you think that child's fate is going to be?"

She said, "Go with the flow."

And that's how we met. Who would have expected it? Two years later, she became my wife; three years later, the mother of my son.

Translated By Thomas Moran

## Hong Ying – The Field

Only at daybreak did the gunfire finally stop, if ever so reluctantly. Li Jiming heard the distant rumbling of a tank. He crawled up to the rim of the crater, hoping to get a look, but heard only the sorrowful cries of the wounded. Though no snow had fallen during the night, a bitter wind swept across the field, blowing about bits of frost that resembled gunpowder smoke.

At the base of the crater, Junni rolled over. She murmured, then slept again, knocking off in the process one of three field coats that covered her. Li Jiming slid back down the slope and replaced it.

"I dreamed about Chinese New Year." Junni did not open her eyes. "The crowd at the Daweiwu opera was going wild, and the fireworks were so bright they hurt your eyes." She smiled. "Jiming, did your dad let you go that year?"

"What year was that?"

"What do you mean, what year? When did my dad come back with the militia?"

Li Jiming was about to answer when a muffled voice called out, "Big Brother." A man holding a rifle appeared at the rim of the crater and came slithering down. Junni sat up. "You're wounded. Where were you hit?"

Sonny felt his face, his hand sticky with blood. "Fuck, this smells." He took off his large, blood-soaked coat. "It's not my blood. This coat is completely ruined."

He pulled something battered looking from his pocket. "These are all I could get. It's motherfucking incredible-people getting killed right and left for a few measly crackers."

Junni picked a coat up off the ground and draped it over his shoulders. "What's wrong? We'll be going back soon."

"No way to cut through." Sonny looked over to where the shells continued to explode and shook his head. "I don't think there's a single man left from the Thirty-fourth." He turned to Ji-ming. "Give me some water to wash down these crackers."

As Junni searched through the heap of coats for the canteen, Jiming said, "Look, don't worry about me and Junni-get to a village, dress up like a native, dump the rifle, and make a break for it when you can."

Sonny smiled. "In all these years, I've never known you to give up like this." But the enemy lines were in fact closing in, and the few villages in the area had long ago fallen to the regular forces. Militia stragglers had little choice but to tuck themselves away in a shell hole like the one that sheltered them now.

Jiming lowered his head. "If I'd known this was going to happen, I'd never have left Xuzhou with the Nationalist retreat. Let's wait till the regiment has gone by, then watch for a chance to run."

"And go where?"

"Back home."

"Too risky," Junni said. "The tenant farmers are out of control these days; if we get caught, they'll cut us to pieces. You want us to get our heads chopped off like our dads did?"

She walked over to the two men. "Don't be so depressed. Why do we have to go

anywhere? Isn't it nice here, all of us together?" Making a bed out of the coats, she said, "Sonny, why don't you stretch out for a little while; you haven't slept all night."

Sonny lost no time lying down and was soon buried in the pile of coats. "Head or no head, I need to get some fucking sleep."

"How about you, Jiming? You haven't slept a wink either."

Jiming squatted down, holding his head in his hands. He was silent. Junni walked over to rub his scalp. His bandage was caked with dirt and crusty blood. Never before had the two been so close.

Jiming looked up at her. "If I'd known, I never would have sent Sonny to Xuzhou to rescue you from the whorehouse. At least in that hellhole, you'd still be alive."

"Don't go on about what could have been. My uncle was just trying to help me survive. What with all the fighting in the village and the bad blood, I couldn't stay near those people. He said that an orphan girl without a name was bound to run into a kind man eventually, and that way I wouldn't starve."

"Yeah, right, so look where you ended up! Here-with us-at the mercy of your fellow villagers' evil spirits after all." He forced a smile, looking straight at Junni. "I always thought there'd be a day with banging gongs and a big red sedan chair, when I could marry you the proper way."

"Oh, Jiming," she sighed, lowering her gaze. "I got myself dirty a long time ago."

"Nobody at home knows that."

"Nobody at home, maybe, but heaven and earth know." She pressed his head to her breast. The cold wind carried the smell of death in their direction, wave after wave of air so thick that it was impossible to breathe. Jiming pushed her away gently and, with his hand on his head wound, lay down on the ground, sinking into the heap of overcoats rank with blood and smelly shoes. Before he dozed off, he heard what sounded like Junni urinating and buried his head even deeper.

On January 7, 1949, the thirty-eighth year of the republic, snowy winds whipped across the plains of Xuhuai. At about three-thirty in the afternoon, the frozen and hungry militia camped between Chenguanzhuang and the Lu River awoke, stunned by sudden attack. <sup>[1]</sup>

As artillery shells whined overhead, Jiming tossed aside the coat covering him and jumped up but fell right back to the ground.

The bombing grew louder, as if the shells were about to drop on their heads. It was a gray, wintry day, and evening had set in imperceptibly, the low clouds illuminated only by the explosions. Out on the field, voices called out, soft and feeble. It seemed almost that several hundred thousand soldiers had all perished, leaving behind only these three civilians.

"There's no fucking way out tonight," said Jiming.

Sonny lay on his back, inert, lifting his head from time to time to watch the bursts of light. He knew in his heart what the others were thinking: "Don't run; there's no point."

"It'll be a lot worse for us if we get taken back to Daweiwu by the Communists."

"Who can say what will happen? Let's wait and see."

All three lay there, at the bottom of the crater, no longer speaking. The sound of shelling moved slowly eastward; the sky, red and black, smoked and suffocated till it

could no longer support itself. Perhaps it would come crashing down and crush everything beneath it.

Softly, as if to herself, Junni said, "When I first got to the whorehouse, all I could think about was murdering somebody. Then I was going to hang myself."

The others did not reply. Sonny began to sob silently.

"But then I thought, What am I doing? They were soldiers far away from home, so lonely and sad, without very much time to live. Why should I go around killing people-why not give a little pleasure?"

Li Jiming sat up suddenly and turned to Junni. "Huh? Is that what you think? You were better off at the whorehouse? Where there's pleasure!"

Junni pushed herself up to her feet and, forming her words slowly, said, "Don't get all worked up. Look, if we're going to die, why not die happy?" She pulled at Li Jiming. "Come on, Big Brother. You first."

Jiming jumped up from the pile of clothes. "What are you saying? 'Me first!' You stinking whore!" He ran over to the far side of the crater and, opening the pocket of one of the coats, pulled out a hand grenade. "Goddamn it, I went through hell to save a fucking whore like you!"

In no time, Sonny was on his feet, too. "Just calm down; let's talk things over. Don't be messing with a fucking grenade." He was trembling.

"Slow down, Sonny. Your brother didn't mean anything," Junni said.

Sonny walked over to try to take the grenade away, but Jiming wouldn't let go. The two of them rolled around against the wall of the crater, covering themselves with snow and mud.

When the grenade rolled to the ground, Junni picked it up and put it to the side. "What the hell are you boys doing? That's not how brothers act!"

Jiming, weakened by his injury, was soon pinned beneath Sonny, who bound his brother's hands behind his back with one of the coats. Jiming cursed between gasps for air. But the two stopped suddenly at the sight of Junni, who had begun to undo her buttons. They watched her remove the soiled jacket, the flashes far in the distance irradiating her breasts, fine and white. It was as if her body did not belong to this blood-spattered field.

"Don't let the fact that I'm a little dirty bother you. Let me take good care of you one last time." She leaned over, straightened the coats the men had scattered during their scuffle, and then sat down, covering her lower half with an old quilted jacket. "Jiming, come lie down next to me."

Li Jiming's mouth dropped. After a moment, he stammered, "I wanted you to be my fucking wife."

Junni smiled. "I never said I'd marry you. What's the point of bringing that up again. Now is now." She turned around and pulled at Sonny's leg. "Sonny, I'll take care of you first. You've been to a whorehouse before, right? You're not an old hen like your brother."

Sonny nervously turned to look at Li Jiming, then quickly unbuttoned his tattered shirt, revealing his smooth, slight frame. He crawled under the pile of clothing.

A sudden burst of fire; the action was getting closer by the minute. Li Jiming, who had wrestled himself free of the coat, leaned against the crater wall, dully looking in the direction of the clothes. Occasionally a leg appeared, or an arm, and then he