

The Poleflower
Jia Pingwa

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Night sky

That evening, after I scratched a mark in the cave wall for the 178th time, the crows all started shitting all over the place and Old Man Shunzi died. That's when I met Great Gramps.

I already knew about the whole business with Shunzi's family, because people were always showing up in the courtyard outside the cave to discuss this and that, about how Shunzi was unfilial.

He used to go out with them to look for poleflowers, even though poleflowers were basically extinct now, so you were lucky if could find five or six every couple weeks. But at least he was spending time with family, you know?

But then, right after Padlock's wife was stung to death by the giant hornets, Shunzi decided to go looking for work in town, leaving his own wife behind in the village. That was four years ago now, and they're saying he hasn't written home even once.

So when Shunzi's wife had her kid last year, the villagers all asked Shunzi's old man: Is he your grandson or your son? At 73 there's no way Old Man Shunzi could still get it up, right? But then some people said, didn't Codger Zhang over in East Gully Springs manage to get that girl pregnant at 80?

Other people said that Codger Zhang was Codger Zhang, but Old Man Shunzi was Old Man Shunzi. Codger Zhang ate blood onions after all, and Old Man Shunzi had just had a stroke, leaving him with two lazy eyes and this weird sneer.

Even if he was still getting up to that nonsense, how could daughter-in-law have agreed to it? And if it wasn't Old Man Shunzi, then it had to be someone else in the village.

There was no shortage of men in the village, single ones, too, so everybody started pointing fingers at everybody else, and when they'd meet each other they'd say: You're the dogfucker who did it, aren't you?

It went on like that for three days straight, until Old Man Shunzi's daughter-in-law ran off with her kid and the poleflower-seller.

After that everyone started to think that Old Man Shunzi was probably innocent after all, and nobody accused anybody of anything for a while. Only, now they were all cursing the fact that none of the girls from the village were willing to marry their own kind.

Just look! Even the daughter-in-laws are running away now. If Shunzi wasn't reliable enough for you, you could've picked one of

us, you know? Why the fuck did you have to run away with an outsider? It's like you were trying to insult us!

After that, you could hear crying from either end of the village: on the hill to east, you had Padlock still sitting on his wife's grave, sobbing away, totally nuts for four years straight now, saying that his wife was still alive, actually.

And then on opposite side of the village, Old Man Shunzi sat in the courtyard outside his cave, slapping himself in the face with the shame of it all, sobbing about how his good-for-nothing son hadn't been there to protect his daughter-in-law.

The way people thought about it was if you're gonna cry, cry already, so nobody really paid much mind to either of them. But then Old Man Shunzi drank a bottle of herbicide and died, blood running out of the seven holes.

When news of Old Man Shunzi's suicide got around, Shiny-black ran out into the courtyard to yell at Three-lobes, Twelve-eight, and Always-water who were in the middle of loading up the tractor with blood onions to take into town.

When they heard what had happened, though, they all got off and, because they felt sorry for Old Man Shunzi and because Shunzi wasn't there to do his duty as a son, the four of them decided to take care of the everything themselves.

Shiny-black went to collect the body and set up the funeral hall, and then one person from each house came, some men and some women, but each and every one of them carrying a bunch of incense one hand and a roll of hemp paper pinched under the other arm.

Shiny-black's old man and uncle went too, but their big black dog stayed home, laying out on the ground in front of their cave, and Great Gramps didn't go either.

Great Gramps was sitting on the millstone, which was set right up against the edge of the courtyard, with the four pine trees all full of crows cawing and shitting all over everything. Same thing every day, with the crows all shitting in the same spot, but tonight seemed especially bad, and they were noisier too, because the smell and the noise came crawling right into my cave.

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There were mice in the cave and they were always gnawing away at the trunk. There wasn't any grain in there though, just a bunch of torn up rags and old cotton batting, but they keep gnawing and gnawing.

Mice grow little bones in place of teeth, so I guess they were gnawing on the trunk to grind their teeth bones, because otherwise they'd grow too long they wouldn't be able to eat.

So I didn't get up and shoo them away, or slap the side of the bed to scare them off. Go on and gnaw! Let the mice have their hate, let them gnaw the trunk right into the junk pile, let them gnaw right through the whole fucking night!

It's been almost six months since I scraped the first line in the wall with my fingernail, and every day since I've done the same, one day, one line. Sitting in this cave as Shiny-black's wife, my whole life has been turned into a piece of cardboard hanging on the wall.

'Shiny-black' what the hell kind of a name is that? Can the last six months of my youth really just be scratches on the wall?

Humiliated, furious, suffering, helpless—when I was carving the last line in the wall I pressed down so hard that I split the nail of my pointer finger in two. When the blood came out I wiped off on the picture of the pin-up model.

The pin-up was glued on the wall next to my scratch marks. It was obvious that it had come from a calendar, but with the year / month / day cut out so all was left was this big picture of a beautiful woman.

She looked like she'd been cut up all over with a knife—big, deep cuts going all the way into the dirt wall.

I asked Shiny-black: You put this up?

And he said: I want her.

I said: You want her so you cut her?

He said: I hate that she ain't mine.

I spat on the ground and said, There's a whole lot else in this world that isn't yours to hate.

Just then a mosquito flew in through a crack in the door and buzzed right past my ear, landing on the pin-up's face to suck on the blood I'd smeared there.

I watched the beautiful woman and the beautiful woman watched me. Then I went into a fit again, shouting and screaming and trying to tear the picture off the wall, but it was already stuck on, so I used what was left of the nails on both of my hands to tearing up the wall and picture together so that they rained down in little bits before resting on the window sill to catch my breath.

Outside, Great Gramps was where he always was, plunked down on the millstone.

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I'm talking to you, yeah, you! Aren't going to go offer your condolences huh? Or is it cause they asked you to watch me?

I'm not watching you, I'm stargazing. You see that bright bit there? Right after Old Man Shunzi died one of those stars fell right out of the sky.

Ha! Let em all fall then! And tell em to hurry up about it!

If the stars all fell down there wouldn't be no sky left. Twelve degrees around there's the Eastern Well, five more degrees after that comes the Ghost Star, the Head of the Quail, from the Fifth Earthly Branch of Chen to the Eighth of Wei...

Ask the way? You guys are the ones who've got me locked me in here, so how the hell am I supposed to ask the way?

I said 'Eighth of Wei,' not 'ask the way.' I'm talking about the constellations.

What's a constellation?

The sky above is divided into constellations, just like the earth below is divided into different regions. They fit together, like a pair. You really don't know what a constellation is?

All I know is that I want to go home!

Huh. Shiny-black said you've been to middle school. But you don't know even something as simple as that?

Wasn't on the test.

Well that explains it.

I want to go back! Let me go, I want to go back to the city!

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After six months I was still locked in the cave, with the same old stale air, and the villagers all coming to look for Shiny-black's old

man to do stonework. He was a stone carver, so he could chisel out doorstops and stools, or make feeding troughs for pigs, or stone mortars.

Soon as they arrived they'd be at the crack in the door just the like the flies, making a fuss about Shiny-black's pretty young wife who'd been to middle school and had come from the city.

I'd stand there by the window, making faces at them, and then I'd turn around and show them the back of my head and shoulders, saying, Seen enough yet?

They'd say: She's human after all!

And then I'd roar at them: Fuck off!

But Great Gramps lived in a cave not far from mine and he never came to look at me through the crack in the door, even when he was standing right outside.

Great Gramps was as withered and dried up as old piece of kindling. He moved slow and didn't seem to ever have much of an expression on his face, or maybe he did, but it got hidden in his beard which was so thick that I sometimes doubted he even had a mouth underneath there.

He'd whole days inside his cave, or under the trellis with the gourds, or writing characters with a brush on little pieces of cut up red paper, the same character over and over again until he was finished and he put them away.

Sometimes he'd braid five-colored twine together until he had a big ball of the stuff, his whole attention focused on braiding the twine over and over again, day after day after day.

But Shiny-black called him Great Gramps, and everybody else did too.

I asked Shiny-black: Is he actually your great grandpa?

Shiny-black said: He's the whole village's great grandpa.

I asked if he was the head of the clan or the head of the village.

Shiny-black said: Neither, he's just the oldest person in the village. He used to be a school teacher but he couldn't find proper work so he came back to the village to be a farmer.

He's got a lot of book learning, and he's not the upsettable sort, neither. He used to do the first plowing of Spring, and he'd paint the pupils on the lion at the lion dance.

He was the first person to discover poleflowers, so he'd named them, too. But now that he was an old man the villagers had started calling him Great Gramps.

I didn't really believe Shiny-black though, since I knew that most of the old folks in the village had grown up poor and married late,

if at all, which put extra years between the generations. With population of the village shrinking like it was it wasn't much of an honor to be called Great Gramps.

And anyways, no matter how great he'd been once upon a time, wasn't he just an old man waiting for death? I was locked in the cave and he didn't pay me any mind so whenever I saw him I just pretended he was rock or a stump.

But that night Shiny-black and his old man and his uncle all went to Shunzi's to offer their condolences and I tried to think of a way to get past the dog outside the door and run away again, but Great Gramps was sitting on the millstone the whole night keeping watch, which really pissed me off.

He said he was watching the stars, but I couldn't make heads or tails of where the Eastern Well or what a constellation was, and then he kept talking, words falling out of him like his lips were a pair of double-hinged doors.

He was making fun of me!

When Shiny-black and his old man locked me in this cave they locked up my body, but his laughter was like a knife to my heart.

Maybe I was kidnapped and sold, or maybe I got in that truck and came to the village of my own doing, but I don't want to hear another person say I should have known better cause I went to middle school!

Grabbing up the chunks of the wall I'd scraped down, I started throwing them out of the window at him. One hit him in the shoulder, but he kept sitting there, not looking back at me, striking a match now, the flame jumping up and shining a light on the paper in his lap, and his face too.

An ugly half-face, like a shriveled eggplant hidden in the mess of his beard. When the flame went out the night got darker. In the

middle of all the stars in the sky the moon was already half way across, with half way more to go.

He said, I'm going to bed.

I couldn't sleep though.

The light from the oil lamp was getting thicker and thicker, shining on the wall of the cave, which looked like a whole wall of snot. The big black dog who had seemed to be talking in his sleep fell silent after a single bark. The crows were still shitting away up there, but you couldn't see them with the black of their feathers mixing in with the black of the night and the dark shadows of the pine tree blotting out everything else in the courtyard.

When I first got dragged into the village, I was struggling but the first thing I saw was those four pines, standing tall against the cliff. I had no idea what kind of terrible place I'd ended up in, cause the whole village was like a big hollow hillside that had been

dug inside out, with caves running up and down the whole thing. I thought I was worm getting carried into a hole by a group of ants.

I shouted for Boss Wang, cause Boss Wang had been the one who was leading me the whole way so far, and he was one who promised me a job, but now I couldn't see hide nor hair of him.

Cover her eyes, don't let her remember the way!

Just then I remembered something my mom said, that back in the olden days if you went into the afterlife all the little devils there would make you drink a bewitching potion—one drink and you'd forget where you came from.

They pulled off my suit jacket and put it over my head but I got it off and started shouting: Boss Wang, Boss Wang!

They laughed and said: Boss Wang's hit the jackpot! He's off counting his money. Then someone punched me in the chin and I

passed out on the floor and the next thing I knew I was locked in the cave.

I'd never lived in a cave, never even seen caves that could be homes. There wasn't one stick of wood for support in the whole place, and even with the window in the front the light that entered wasn't much bigger than a dustpan.

Without a back door the air couldn't circulate: it was narrow and dark, and smelled like sweat and mold. Shiny-black was always bragging about how they'd lived in caves for generations, since it not only saved on wood and bricks, but it was sturdy and reliable too.

Give me a break, I thought, what kinds of things live in caves: snakes, scorpions, beetles, ghosts and demons.

If you aren't a snake, scorpion, beetle, ghost or demon in disguise then I guess you've been buried alive.

But then I was buried alive, too.

I'd heard rumors of people kidnapping and selling kids forever and ever, but I never would have thought it could happen to me. And besides, who would think that a grown-up like me with an education could be kidnapped, too?!

Locked in the cave, the only thing connecting me to the rest of the rest of the world was that single window, broken up into 48 squares, so those 48 squares became like 48 separate eyes for me.

From the courtyard you could see a haze of smoke, and you could hear chickens clucking and dogs barking, people cursing each other, but you couldn't see their caves.

In the distance, the yellow loess rose and fell, spreading out to the horizon like an enormous leaf that had rotted out, leaving only

the ribs and veins. Those were the valleys and the forks, the terraces and gullies.

Every day, clouds formed above, while below farmers went out on the terraces with donkeys pulling plows, plowing from all directions toward the center, deep brown furrows against the yellow, as if a rope had been coiled tightly round in smaller and smaller circles, with the people and their donkeys tangled in the middle.

When the clouds moved all of a sudden, the sun was red and the wind whistled past, and with the opening of a proverbial curtain, shadows rushed across from some faraway place. The courtyard became dark below the black of the pine trees, and the face of Old Man Shiny-black got even darker and less clear.

When he wasn't doing stonework out in the courtyard, Old Man Shiny-black did needlework by the doorway to his cave. No

matter what he was doing though, I knew as soon as I made even single-grass blade of movement he'd look over at my window.

I couldn't much of what was around his cave from my window, since the cliff was in the way, but everyday Shiny-black would take a bucket full of shit and piss over that way and come back with an empty one, so maybe there was an outhouse or maybe they kept pigs or chickens over there.

To the right of me there were two more caves. A donkey slept in the one closest to me, but the donkey wasn't like the dog, who spent all day laying on the doorstep.

As soon as the dog heard me moving around he'd start to bark and then the donkey would start to make a ruckus, too.

Shiny-black's uncle lived in the further away cave. During the day he was always up to something: patching the donkey's cave with straw and mud, carrying firewood. The first time I saw him was at

night and I thought I'd seen a ghost, only later I found out he was blind, and that blind folks can't tell the difference between night and day.

In another corner of the cliff, across from Uncle Shiny-black's cave, you could see a trellis with maybe six or seven gourds hanging down inside wooden boxes and tubs and blocking my view of the doors and windows of the cave just behind.

A couplet was pasted on the either side of the door, but I could see that one side was torn, so that it flapped in the wind like a little bird, flapping away forever and ever there. That was Great Gramps' cave.

I'm not sure what his actual last name was, but I guess it was White, since Shiny-black was called that cause he had a great big black dog in front of his cave, but on the trellis in front of Great Gramps' cave there were always white flowers.

Whether the crows that took over the pine trees each evening belonged to the Black family or the White family, I really can't say.

I heard someone say that these four pines had been growing there for the last hundred years and that crows were the only birds that had ever perched in them. The pines were a part of the village's *feng shui* that made sure the people did well and stayed healthy, and besides that, crows were said to be signs of good luck.

These crows were as black as a burnt pot but their shit was pure white. Every night they'd start shitting just everywhere, until the courtyard was shining as white as if it had been painted with a fresh coat of lime.

The only other two things in the courtyard were the millstone and the well, with the millstone on the right and the well on the left. Sometimes they called them the White Tiger and the Blue

Dragon, since tigers have teeth like a millstone, and dragons come from the water.

The millstone was split into two parts, a great big mouth for chomping grain. Maybe it was because it was too old, but only the top half moved anymore, and it wasn't even half as thick as the bottom. Nowadays they had to put a big stone on top so that they'd be enough weight to grind the grain.

The stone around the well was showing its age too, with deep rope ruts all around the rim. The spool of rope on the wheel was so big that it took nearly half an hour to unwind it, and then another hour of creaking and groaning to bring it back up, like you were dragging a demon up from hell by its neck, and then you only had half bucket of muddy water to show for your efforts.

Coming into summer now, Old Man Shiny-black kept grumbling about how it hadn't rained even once in the last eight months and how the water kept dropping lower and lower: Heaven above, I heard him say once. You still plan on letting us live? There wasn't

enough to eat to begin with, and now there's not enough to drink either!

I often cleaned the windows of my cave. If someone was born without ears and eyes and a mouth, they'd be like a lump of meat, same as if this cave didn't have a door or windows then it'd just be a hole in the ground.

The great big door was surrounded by three-foot by three-foot window, and above the door there was another window, in the shape of a half-circle. At first I thought that it looked like a mushroom.

Shiny-black said: It looks like a *shizu*, a stone ancestor. I asked him what that was and he said a carving of penis, the symbol of life and power.

I spat in his face and said, No wonder you're all single!

Shiny-black ground his teeth and said: Motherfucker!

I said: Cursing me now, huh?

He said: No! I'm talking about the city! I said: You really think the city gives a shit about you?

He said: The government only cares about developing cities. They're like a big, bloody mouth that's sucking up money from the countryside, sucking up our stuff, sucking up all the girls!

I didn't know what to say to that—I'd been sucked up by the city too, after all. But if there weren't any girls left in the countryside then why didn't the men just go to the city and find a girl of their own? Why did they have to kidnap me?

Shiny-black must have noticed I was unhappy, because he changed the topic. Taking a stack of flower paper cuts out of a

chest, he said: The windows could use some softening up anyways, so I thought I'd put these up for you.

After pasting them in the all the panes of the big windows on either side of the door he put the rest in the half circle above.

The paper cuts had been brought over by Auntie Pockmark. Short with fast feet, Auntie Pockmark passed through the courtyard so often you never knew when she was going to show up—and you never knew when she was leaving, either.

Last time she'd come by she'd brought a pile of paper cuts for Shiny-black to paste up but Shiny-black had said: The last one you gave me, I stuck it right on my two-wheeler, but it still flipped over in the middle of the road anyway, didn't it?

She said: And just think, if you hadn't stuck it on, you probably wouldn't have lived to tell the tale.

Old Man Shiny-black seemed even less happy to see her. He was hunched over the fire making a pot of tea the way the locals all did, in big clay jars, but he didn't even offer her any.

Auntie Pockmark didn't care though, cause she'd come to ask Shiny-black if he had any colored paper in his shop and to complain about her husband, who'd been beating her again. She cursed him saying that he'd was going to get jaundice, lose the taste for water, get 'sand in his guts'—like cholera but without the shitting—and when that day came she'd be just fine with it.

After she'd finished and wiped away the tears it was like nothing had happened at all. A little bit later she came over to my window to look at me inside my cave but Old Man Shiny-black went over and pulled her away from there.

She said: She still behaving then? Old Man Shiny-black shoved her out of the courtyard and she was already out on the street by the time she'd said: Is she pregnant yet?

I couldn't see many flowers from my cave, just the vines on the trellis out in the courtyards, which had those skimpy white flowers but Auntie Pockmark's paper cuts were in the shape of all sorts of flowers.

When the moon was out at night the shadows of all the different types would dance across the *kang* like they were growing right out of the bed. But then Shiny-black had to go and say: You're the most beautiful flower in my *kang*!

So right after he said that I got up and ripped them all down.

He didn't put anything up in the windows after that, and most days I just lay on the window ledge looking out, knocking on the glass when I got bored. No sooner I'd start than the bell ringing would start too.

It was hung around the donkey's neck, but Shiny-black had had the bright idea to attach it to the door and the window with some twine. Once it started ringing the chicken would get set off and the dog would start barking, the donkey would cry out and Shiny-black's old man would run out of his cave.

If the bell rang and the Old Man Shiny-black didn't come running out and the chickens and dog and donkey were all quiet, that meant that Shiny-black was back from the store.

He kept the keys tied to his belt, and he was always saying that whenever he heard the bell he always felt especially happy, but I'd just sit on the mud *kang* ignoring him, picking the cotton stuffing out of a pillow and flinging it all over the bed.

Shiny-black didn't get mad though. When he got home he'd usually first take out the piss bucket and dump it in the toilet, then he'd go help his dad get dinner ready, or if his dad had already finished he'd bring it over to me.

Afterwards, no matter if I ate the dinner or not he'd always joke:
Don't get up, I'm going back to the store.

One time I said: I hope you're enjoying yourself.

He said: Well, at least I've got a wife now.

He laughed and a dimple flashed across the corner of his mouth, but I didn't find it cute at all, shouting: Who are you calling your wife?!

After he locked the door of the cave and it turned back into the Bull Demon King from *Journey to the West*, cause locked inside I was like Sun Wukong when he got trapped in the Bull Demon King's belly.

I started to go crazy in the cave: snarling and making a ruckus, breaking anything that was in my way, throwing the sheets on the

floor so that'd smell like Shiny-black's shoes, throwing the smashed up things into the back of cave.

I even managed to break open one of the clay jars and beans spilled out everywhere. I kicked the stool, hurting myself but breaking three of its four legs.

The two picture frames on the wall shone out from the darkness, one with a pressed poleflower and the other with Shiny-black's ma. I didn't understand the meaning of the framed poleflower, but I started to curse his mom: you ruined my life when you gave birth to that thug!

When I got tired of yelling at her, I lay on the bed, sniveling and tears rolling down my face, realizing that the cave wasn't the Bull Demon King anymore, but it was great big clam instead that had swallowed me up like a grain of sand, the sand grinding away at the clam and the clam grinding away at the sand until it turned

into a pearl, a pearl for Shiny-black to hang around his neck to brag about and make himself look good.

* * *

Great Gramps!

I was really starting to hate the old man. Every time he teased me my face would turn red and my ears would start to burn and I wished I could take all the broken fragments of the wall plaster I'd broken off and throw them right at him, bullseye. But then I suddenly had an idea that was so smart I actually snapped my fingers. I did my best to cheer up before quietly calling out: Great Gramps!

So, you're calling me Great Gramps now, huh?

Great Gramps!

That's my name! But I still don't know yours...

I'm Butterfly.

Oh, Butterfly—butterfly. Butterflies are flowers after they get reborn.

Great Gramps, didn't you say that the ground is a mirror of the sky?

Well don't you think that the clouds in the sky are the same as the rivers and streams on the ground?

And birds are just fish wearing feathers in the sky, and fish are birds underwater that got their feathers plucked?

Huh, huh.

I couldn't tell the difference between when he was laughing and when he was coughing, but I guessed he was paying me a compliment, even though birds and fish are both free, while I'm locked up in this cave. I wanted to cry a little but I forced myself not to.

Are there mirrors of people too?

For every person on earth there's a star in the sky.

Well, which one's mine then?

Looking up and out the window I saw the upside down wok, with countless nails inside, each flashing with silver light. I counted, then again and again but the numbers were never the same.

You aren't any of the shiny stars up there, and I'm not either, nobody in the village is. You can only see our stars after we die.

But I want to see my star!

Huh, huh.

I want to see it!

Finding a spot in the sky without any obvious stars I fixed my eyes there, saying to myself if there was a new then star then it was mine.

The upper parts of the pines were dark, so I started looking there, quietly saying, What kind of star would I have to be to have such a sad story? My eyes started to hurt and the bones in my neck felt like they were going to crack but the spot stayed dark as before, without a single star in it.

Maybe you hafta be in the city to see my star?

Oh, the stars are the same everywhere, Butterfly.

Well, if the local star is the East Well then where's the boundary line and what's the village called and what's the township and what's the province?

Huh, huh.

He huh-ed a few more time and for a moment I got worried cause I knew that he had seen through me. I was like a television set that's all black cause it's been turned off, but then you turn it on and everything is as clear as day. I started to sweat and without meaning to I started to shake behind the window, calling out Great Gramps, Great Gramps.

Dummy!

Hearing the word dummy all of a sudden it was like I'd blown a fuse, I was dumbstruck, but it wasn't Great Gramps who said it,

cause when I looked up at the gate I saw Shiny-black's old man standing over there.

He'd just come back from Shunzi's house and so he'd already heard everything that Great Gramps and I had been saying. Then he sneezed extra loud to just to shut us up.

I didn't say anything after that, and Great Gramps didn't either and the whole night died right there, with a string of nose blowing, cause he wanted to embarrass Great Gramps, saying: Looking at the stars eh? Still no sign of rain?

Great Gramps said: There's no water *qi* in the East Well.

Shiny-black's old man said: If it doesn't rain soon we're goners. Time was there was a temple you could go to pray for rain...

But all Great Gramps did was get off the millstone and stand there, wobbling. Bending over he rubbed his knees and said it was time to go to bed, that he was going back to his cave.

I hammered on the window for a while and the dog started barking and jumping around for something to bite on, but Old Man Shiny-black glared at my window and kicked the dog, saying what the hell are you biting at and then called out to Great Gramps to hold up.

He said: I wanted to ask you something. When Shunzi's old man was laid out I put a coin in his mouth so that he'd have some spending money for the trip to the next place. But then he had to go and scare me half to death by sitting up! I almost thought he'd come back to us. When I looked back a second time he'd toppled right back over, dead and stiff as ever.

He coughed and said: They're saying since he died a violent death it was an injustice, the kind that keeps you around. And with the

temple gone there aren't any monks around to do a ceremony to help his soul find peace...

Great Gramps said: Was anybody born under the Tiger standing next to where he was laid out?

Old Man Shiny-black slapped his forehead said: I was born in the year of the Tiger!

While he was groaning and slapping his forehead Great Gramps quickly threw a crumpled ball of paper right through the window and it landed in my cave without even the tiniest sound.

Then Old Man Shiny-black asked Great Gramps: So I can't go to Shunzi's house anymore? But when he turned around Great Gramps was already gone.

There was a red glow out on the courtyard, cause they were burning spirit money for Old Man Shunzi, the red glow getting brighter now and Shiny-black's old man looked towards the red

glow and grumbled something I couldn't hear before spitting out a mouthful of snot and going back into his cave.

* * *

The wick of the oil lamp coughed and sparked.

Even today the village didn't have electricity. The village head was always complaining that their road had turned into a mud pit but they couldn't find the men to fix it, and then he'd curse Mayday, Twelve-eight, and Stopper for not contributing to the electrical pole fund, which meant that the whole village was as bad off as Two-pot.

Two-pot was Shiny-black's uncle but Shiny-black didn't want the village head making an example of his uncle so he said: My uncle is blind but what's so bad about being blind, huh? He doesn't put food in his nose does he?

And then, as a jab at the village head, he added: Or go in the wrong cave and get in someone else's bed by mistake!

They really started arguing then. It wasn't until it was all over that I found out that the reason the village head was in such a huff was that Shiny-black had been talking about the village head and not his uncle, cause it was known that village head had been hoarding several of the village widows for himself, so there was a feud between the two of them.

When the business of the electric poles came up Mayday and Twelve-eight had just started selling blood onions so both of them didn't have any savings left, which meant the three of them all didn't put any money into the pot and nobody else did either when they saw what they were doing.

After that the village head didn't have a choice, so he set aside the electric lines for the time being and they kept lighting oil lamps like they always had.

When the price of oil went up again Shiny-black's family started only lighting the lamps at dinner. Once they were done eating and had washed the plates they would blow them out and talk for a while and when they'd talked enough they'd go to bed.

I couldn't take it though, so I always lit the lamps even in the middle of the day or the middle of the night.

I'd been in the cave for 178 days and lighting the lamps was pretty much the only thing I could do beside cry and swear and break things and think of ways to run away, so sometimes I'd blow them out just to light them again.

When Shiny-black got back and was refilling the lamps one day he said, How come it's out already again? Have you been lighting the lamps during daytime?

If the cave is dark I can't light them then? I said, giving him a look. He just bit his lip and but he didn't say nothing.

Then he handed me a towel and told me to wipe out my nose, cause my whole insides were probably black from all that smoke I was breathing.

But I just laughed and went and re-lit the lamps pulling on the wick of the big lamp and saying: Anyways I just want to waste your oil!

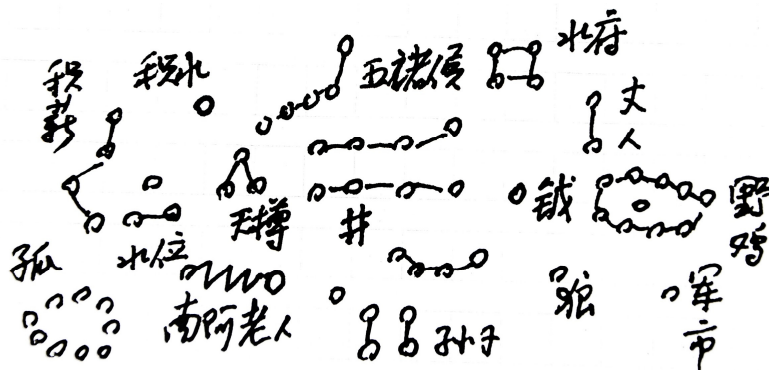
But every time I lit the lamps all they did was show how scared and chickenshit I was, all that red light, white light, or actually yellow light coming out of a little teeny flame no bigger than a pea, trembling and shaking.

But now I was spreading flat Great Gramps' paper ball under the lamplight.

When he'd thrown it to me behind Old Man Shiny-black's back I thought it was probably because he felt bad for me so he wrote what village this was in what township and which province.

I thought he wanted me to know this stuff so that I when I had the chance I could send news that I'd been kidnapped to my ma or I thought that maybe that he'd even drawn me an escape route.

But instead there was a strange looking picture:



I couldn't make heads or tails of it, but the best I could tell it was something he'd drawn for watching the sky. Looking through the window again the whole sky was filled with millions and millions of stars but no matter how I tried I couldn't get the stars on the paper to match up with the real stars up there.

So gave up and I spat in the direction of Old Man Shiny-black's door.

Just then though he opened the door of his cave and walked over to the well carrying a pair of high heels.

2

Village

Those were my high heels.

I'd bought them in the city, real leather, for five hundred yuan. I had to sell two whole cart loads of scrap that my ma had collected for them.

My ma really blew up at me after that, because she said that high heels were something for city people, and, What are you wasting money like that for?!

It really bugged me to hear her saying things like that, so I told my ma: I'm a city person now! I just borrowed the money from you, okay? I'll pay you back, five hundred times five, that's two-thousand five hundred yuan!

I put on the high heels and all of a sudden I was way taller, and my butt was sticking out more too, and I couldn't stand being

stuck inside, so *clop clop* I walked out to the street and *clop clop* I walked back to the courtyard of the place that had the room we were renting.

Mister Landlord said that I looked like I was walking on air: Wah, wah who would think that Butterfly comes from the countryside?

My ma said: countryside people are countryside people just like crows are birds—their bones don't lie.

Mister landlord said: Butterfly was born to be city person. All the girls in the city are copying foreigners now—they've even getting operations make their flabby faces pointy, but just look at her... she's already got a pointy one!

My face was so small you could cover it with one hand. It always made me feel bad that it wasn't full enough but it turns out I had the most fashionable face for a city person all along!

Later when I was doing the shopping I kept some of the money to buy a mirror and whenever I didn't have anything else to do I'd sit in front of the mirror and look at my face and my high heels, saying to the mirror: City person! City person!

My ma would say: I hope that mirror eats you up!

But now my high heels were in Old Man Shiny-black's hands.

Starting from my first day in the cave, Shiny-black took away my high heels and gave me a pair of cloth slippers to wear instead, saying that when his mom was still alive she'd made them for her future daughter-in-law, putting them together stitch by stitch in the lamplight.

I wouldn't wear them though, because losing my high heels was like losing who I was. I kicked the cloth slippers across the room and said I'd rather go barefoot.

Wear them, Shiny-black said, picking up the slippers and handing them back to me: If you wear them then my ma will smile way up from the nine springs.

I said: So your ma gets to smile while my ma is crying!

After that I fought Shiny-black for my high heels but no matter how fierce I tried to look, gritting my teeth and cursing and swearing and crying I still couldn't get them back from him.

Shiny-black said: I spent thirty-five thousand yuan on you, and five thousand of that was extra.

I said: Just cause you saw that I'm a city person and young and pretty so you spent an extra five thousand? I don't care if you spent one hundred thousand or one hundred hundred thousand, do you really think you can put a horse saddle on a donkey? Or that flowers look good in cowshit?

I saw Shiny-black collapse a little then and his ruddy glow seemed to fade leaving him standing there all dark and skinny. But he still stole my high heels and put them in his old man's cave.

After that every evening Old Man Shiny-black would take a rope and hang the high heels in the well and the next day he'd take them out again, day after day. He didn't seem to ever get sick of it.

Later I found out that was because it was one of the customs in the village: anybody who had lost someone, or who had someone leave and not come back they'd hang something belonging to the person in a well so that they could find them and bring them back.

I already knew most of the customs of the village, like that you couldn't point at the sky with your middle finger, or else your ma's brother would die.

You couldn't piss in the road, cause if you did your kid would be born without an asshole.

At night when you went out at night you had to spit everywhere, cause ghosts aren't afraid of anything except for people's spit.

No matter how much or how little food you had you always had to lick the bowl cause having anything leftover was wasteful.

Going to birthday parties for old people you had to bring grain, which they called a the 'grain cure,' cause people who eat more grain live longer, so you were supposed to bring a quart, or at least a pint, but if you gave a hundredweight they said you'd live forever.

If you lost a tooth or shaved your head you had to throw away the hair and teeth in a high up place.

If you got sick and wanted to make a brew of herbs then you had to borrow a medicine jar from someone who could only leave it in the road in front of your cave and as the borrower you could had to put it back the same way, on the road in front of their cave.

If you raised pigs and you found one with a tail that was even a little bit flat then you had chop off the tip, cause everyone knew that flat tails attract wolves.

And whatever you did, you didn't want to put a wooden stake in the courtyard at the front of your cave cause a wooden stake meant that the person living there wasn't ever going to find a woman to be his wife.

There were so many customs that all made it possible for the people in the village to live here, but I was always thinking, what year is it we're living in and they're all still like this?

I thought it was nuts but kind of funny, too. I'd been kidnapped and sold which was from the start illegal, and Old Man Shiny-black was hanging my high heels in the well so that I might decide to stop resisting and not run away, just quietly and peacefully being a good wife for Shiny-black, dying of old age in this broken

down dirt cave in a village of bachelor thugs who only knew how to eat and fuck.

The first time Shiny-black beat me was when he hit me upside the head as a warning me not to insult them. It was a clear as a thunderclap. There was blood in my mouth and a pain like I'd been knifed in the gut. I rolled around on the *kang* and didn't eat or drink for two days straight.

Shiny-black got scared and didn't know what to do other than say he was sorry. Actually my stomach hurt cause of my period—every time before my period starts it hurts so bad I get light-headed and can't see straight but I wasn't about to tell him that.

After two days of watching me not eat and not drink he thought maybe I couldn't handle the buckwheat flour and potatoes so he went into the township to buy a thing of steamed buns made from real wheat flour and then every six or seven days after that it was the same so that'd I'd have enough to eat two every day.

He put the steamed buns in a willow basket that he hung from the ceiling of the cave, but to keep the mice from getting into it he tied a wooden plate on the string, so even if the mice got that far they still wouldn't be able to get around the plate on into the basket.

Every time he brought me the buns he'd tell me about his family and the village: After a while you'll warm up to me and you won't want to leave anymore.

* * *

Shiny-black said my ma left us eight years ago, but when she was alive his ma was the most beautiful girl in the whole village, but she was as mild as anything.

When he was three his ma and him went to the hot springs at East Gully Fork where they ran into a guy from the provincial tourist

board who saw his ma and said: Good women are all like her, first of all neat and second of all quiet.

From that day on his ma's good name started to get out and before anyone knew it she was like a role model for all the neighbors for miles and miles all around.

His ma was pretty because every day she lit incense at the spirit tablet of the five masters of Heaven, Earth, Emperor, Parent, and Teacher, giving them potatoes and even digging up a whole poleflower and putting that up there too.

Because his ma paid her respects to the poleflower his ma was pretty and she would say: My daughter-in-law will be pretty too!

His ma got proved right though, and ever since I'd been brought into Shiny-black's cave the whole village had started putting up framed poleflowers with their spirit tablets.

But all they were doing was putting up the poleflower cause they really had no idea how much care Shiny-black's ma had put into those cloth slippers, or the ten catties of cotton that she'd scraped together and hung in the cave right above the door. That's what the new comforter on the *kang* was made from.

Other people thought his ma was pretty cause she didn't do any chores at home but that's not true, cause his ma was a really good cook, and she was good with a needle, or a shovel when it came to that but the craziest thing was when she went digging for poleflowers she never came back empty-handed.

Whatever cliff she when to, she'd find them, like they were already there waiting for her.

One day when they were eating and everyone had sat down his old man said: Shiny-black, when you look for a wife just look for one like your ma.

He said: I'm afraid it won't be that easy!

But three months later his ma was dead. She went out to dig for poleflowers like usual and found one on the ridge of the south slope.

A plane was flying overhead and Mayday had just headed back with his newly married wife Zi Mi, who said: Look, a plane! A plane! I've been on one of those!

So his ma looked up she slipped and fell downhill and spent three days in a coma before she died.

And after his ma died there weren't any women in the house anymore and that was the beginning of the end of their good fortune.

* * *

Shiny-black said, you see that picture frame? That dried-up thing is a poleflower.

It's like the ghost moth fungus from Qinghai—bug by winter, grass by summer. It was a kind of worm that looked just like a caterpillar but it was brown instead of green, with six fuzzy stump legs, so they called them woolies.

As soon as winter arrived the woolies went underground to hibernate, but when spring came the woolies didn't come out and become moths, because they didn't grow a pupa-skin like other insects, they grew into a kind of plant instead, with a stalk maybe four or five fingers high, with a bud shaped like a kid's hand on the end. To start with it was purple but when it opened it turned blue, so they called them fist-bud flowers.

But then ghost moth fungus all of a sudden got famous as the best medicine of all, good for everything from cancer to the bedroom,

so the price went sky-high and people started saying: Well, don't we have a bug-grass of our own?

And then before you knew it outsiders were showing up and getting them to dig up fist-bud flowers, but cutting off their legs so that they could be passed off as ghost fungus.

The outsiders were too stingy though—you could get twelve yuan for a real ghost fungus, but they were only paying three for fist-bud.

So they all quit selling them to the ghost fungus buyers, giving the fistbuds a new name so that they could sell it themselves. Great Gramps was the one who came up with the name, he said: when it's winter in Qinghai they're bugs, and in the summer they become grass, but ours are bugs in the winter and flowers in the summer. In Qinghai they call it polegrass, so we can call ours poleflowers.

After that of course the big wigs in the county started saying that poleflowers were even rarer than polegrass, and more powerful medicine too, putting up ads all over the county and township, with the ones in the county seat saying in letters as big as baskets: Poleflower Capital.

Soon as poleflowers started to get famous wholesalers popped up all over the place and every village had its own buyer whose job was taking the poleflower to the county seat to sell, which is what Shiny-black did for awhile in the village.

The poleflower craze lasted for ten years after that, with just about everybody in the village going out and digging for them and nobody caring even to plant crops.

But poleflowers had been rare even from the beginning, and after the hillsides all around got dug full of holes they went and dug up all the faraway valleys and gulches too until they had to keep going further and further away, all the way to the Bear Ear

Range. Mist and clouds covered the place year round with wild beasts appearing and disappearing in the great whiteness, all of it making it harder than ever to dig for poleflowers.

Eventually it got to the point that if someone saw a woolie crawling on the ground they'd snatch it up and stick a piece of grass in its head and dry it out so they could try and pass it off as the real thing until even woolies started to get hard to come by.

Even though some people still went to dig for poleflowers and dream of striking it rich most of the people in the village gave it up and life went back to the way it was before.

After that Shiny-black started buying and selling things people needed from the county seat and the township, making a little money on the mark up until he had enough to set up a shop.

* * *

Shiny-black said his old man had suffered more than most in this life, with his old man and his ma dying when he was little leaving him to build things up to where they'd gotten to today, in spite of having to take care of a blind little brother, too.

About fifteen years ago he'd tried to find somebody that his little brother could marry but there weren't any girls around who wanted to marry a blind guy.

That was when he heard about the stone carver in the Wang family village with an idiot daughter. She never knew when she was hungry or full and she was always falling asleep standing up, so Shiny-black's old man agreed to be his apprentice just so that the stone carver would let his idiot daughter marry his blind little brother.

In the end his little brother didn't get a wife out of it after all but his old man learned some stone carving.

Then, at forty-five, he tried to find a wife for his son, asking matchmakers from all around, always having to buy them matchmaker shoes first, so back then it seemed like he was always carrying around a pair of shoes wherever he went.

After Shiny-black's ma died he just kept getting older and older and his old man got so worried he seemed to be losing his mind—every time he met somebody no matter who they were, he'd say: You'll help Shiny-black find a woman, right? Don't care what she's like as long as you lift her tail and check that's she's a she!

His old man was afraid that if his son ended up like his little brother then the Hei family line was going to end then and there.

Ever since old man Shiny-black learned how to carve he started making all the new millstones and grindstones in the village. Even the stone well-rims and door stoops, and mortar and pestles for grinding rice flour, and the feeding troughs for pigs and donkeys, all of them were being made by Shiny-black's old man. It got to be

that stone was like dough in his old man's hands so whatever he wanted to make it into that's what it was.

Over the last few years there'd been less and less people in the village but the single men had been more and more. The first person to ask old man Shiny-black to make him a stone woman was Zhang the Rake who said that he wanted to put it by his door so he wouldn't feel so lonely going in and out so Shiny-black's old man did it.

And then Wang Baozong, and Liang Shui-lai, Liu Quanxi and the brothers Mayday and Twelve-eight asked him to make them ones too, and Shiny-black's old man did those for free too.

After that whenever Old Man Shiny-black had free time to kill he'd make a new stone woman and when he was finished he'd put it by the road at the entrance to the village so now there were dozens of them in the village.

Not long after they their got stone women Mayday and Liu Quanxi got real wives, and Wang Baozong did too, even though Wang Baozong's wife was a cripple who wore shoes on her hands to crawl around, but she was a wife after all and what's more she'd given birth to a son.

All those single men without wives gave the stone women in the village different names and argued about whose wife was whose based on how tall or short or fat or skinny they were and the faces of all the stone women turned black from being touched all the time, black and shiny, like Shiny-black's dog.

* * *

Shiny-black said, if you look out the window far off that way you can see a lot of big hills, right? The four of them to the east and the west are all longer, going up and down like that.

But the one to the south goes across, all long and square like.
Behind the place where the clouds are always coming from there's
another hill that's round.

Don't you think the six of them put together look like a woman
with her arms all stretched out and her legs all stretched out
showing off her breasts?

That's something people here have been saying for a long time
now, that there used to be a sea here, and their ancestors used to make
their living by catching fish in it.

But then a monster appeared in the sea and he was called Grasp,
and he made the sea rise and flooded the whole area so the gods
killed Grasp but the sea disappeared forever so now it's a
wasteland.

After Grasp died his bones were left behind and they grew up out
of the ground becoming the six big hills. More than ten miles

from here is are the Bear-ear Mountains and so to make sure these six hills don't turn into mountains like they have over there they built a temple on each hill.

Great Gramps says that they used to be all smoky with incense cause every day the people from the village would go at daybreak to pray for rain, or pray to get better when they were sick.

Or if so and so wasn't getting along with somebody and nobody could get them to agree, they'd go and kneel down in the temple and to cast spells and lay down curses, saying: Gods up above, if I've done something shameful let five bolts of lightning strike me down!

After communists liberated everybody they forced all the monks in the temples to get married and knocked two of the six temples flat.

The other four got burnt down during the Cultural Revolution and there weren't any others on the other hills, only on the one of the four long ones there were the ruins of a wall running lengthwise all around, with a locust tree growing out of the middle.

The locust tree is rotted out and looks like it's drying up but it still manages to put out leaves every year and so people go there to pray to the tree and hang red ribbons for luck from it.

One night last summer Aunt Pockmark fell asleep after eating dinner outside her cave and she thought she felt a monster was pressing down on her but no matter how she tried she couldn't cry out.

Then later on she found out she was pregnant and she gave birth to a baby with one head and two bodies. Of course she drowned it right away in her piss bucket but after that Aunt Pockmark has

always been afraid of giving birth and so she goes to the old locust tree to pray at least once a month.

Well, when she was praying there she got to know an old woman who knew how to do papercuts and so Aunt Pockmark learned how to do them too. She got hooked on it right away, cutting paper flowers to give to every house in the village and not paying attention to the work around her house anymore.

Her man is a half-talker who can't win an argument with her to save his life so all he could do was beat her. So that's why her face is always swollen-looking and her nose is that color and she's always going around complaining that her half-talker of a husband beats her for not cooking by day, and then he beats her again at night to try and force her to have kids.

But the first time they heard her complain they all just laughed, saying: Just cause he rapes you doesn't mean he wants to have kids. That Half-Talker is a real live bull!

To which she said: He's real live bull alright but I can't take it.

Then they asked: Why can't you just stop making paper cuts of flowers?

And she said: You ate a meal this morning but that don't mean you'll say no to the next one, right? Same as you already ate your fill yesterday but you're still eating today. You think you'll ever get sick of eating?

That said she took out a pair of scissors cause that's what she always did sooner or later and started another papercut saying: I'll cut his thing off tonight, see if I don't!

There were fights every day in the village but when a fight got bad with punching and kicking the village head would said he couldn't handle it anymore and he was going to call in the police from the township, but then pretty much every time someone

stopped him by saying that it'd look bad for the village if they were always calling the township police.

So they'd take the two people having the disagreement up to the ruins of the temple with the locust tree and pray to let bygones be bygones.

But sometimes they thought that was too far to walk so they'd do it in front of Auntie Pockmark cause Auntie Pockmark was always going there anyways, so she could represent the gods on their behalf, couldn't she? She's was like that old locust tree, or maybe just a part of the tree now.

* * *

Shiny-black said his family cave had been built by his great-grandparents, and just like if a wooden house has good *feng shui* then it'll grow a shelf mushroom on it well if a cave has good *feng shui* then you can tell by the 'wa webs.

Do you see it, over there? The little web has got dust as thick as your finger on it so it looks like a frog right? Frog is 'wa' like Nüwa with the snake tail from the legend about the how the first people were made from mud and clay.

Ever since his cave had the 'wa webs he got into middle school and his mom went digging for poleflowers and one time she even dug up twelve in one day, plus when a weasel made off with the chickens from thirteen separate families in the village they didn't lose even one and all of their hens keep laying eggs every day.

Everyone always says dogs can live for ten years but Shiny-black's namesake is already ten and he's still as fierce as a wildcat.

The thing that everybody is the most jealous of though is how smart the old donkey is, she's smarter than most people, probably. When the donkey was little Shiny-black was still in middle school, so he was living at the school, only coming home on Saturday night and going back again on Sunday night.

Every time he made the trip the donkey would come along to carry his food and things right up to the front gate of the school but then she was so smart she'd walk back all the way home by itself.

She didn't get lost or daddle even once.

When the donkey was all grown up they took her ten kilometers to the breeding station in Brightsun Village to breed for mules to sell. Whenever breeding day came his old man would start off leading her to Brightsun but she'd always end up running ahead of him so Monkey Ma scolded her, saying: We're bringing you here to get you pregnant. What do you think this is, a brothel?!

With the money from the five mules she gave birth to they bought a two-wheeled tractor. When you breed donkeys with horses what you get aren't horses and aren't donkeys—they don't look like

one or the other and they didn't recognize her either, but she didn't care or throw a fit about it even once.

She really was a good donkey. Basically the whole household now depended on the income she brought in, that plus Shiny-black's store.

* * *

Shiny-black once said, I bet you've already heard that East Gully Fork has a hot springs—if you behave I'll take you and maybe later on you and Mayday's wife Zi Mi can start running things there.

The hot springs have something magic-like about them—the water comes out of the rock right under a big red cliff and all year-round it's at least 50 or 60 degrees and there's a beach that was made by digging out two sand quarries worth of sand so that people would have a place to sit.

The tourism office says that there's lots of sulphur in the water so if you go there on a regular basis it can cure rheumatism and scabies and white spot and can even turn black folks into white folks.

East Gully Fork belongs to our village but everybody comes from all around to use it.

Nowadays it's like it used to be, with odd days for men and even days for women. For a long time, Codger Zhang was living there and he was charging one yuan to go in, so he put up a wall in the middle of the hot springs so that men and women could go in at the same time.

Codger Zhang was a widower, and when he first went to live there he was already seventy-three. He didn't just charge to go in the hot springs, either, cause he also had chickens and planted blood onions.

Blood onions are the other specialty of our village, just like the eleven-seed lotus that grows in the pond at Brightsun Village.

Blood onions don't grow as tall as other onions but they're bright red so that's why they're called blood onions. They're really strong too—you'll start crying when you just cut the flowers even and if you put a little in lamb stew it covers the gaminess right up.

If you eat blood onions in the winter, you'll be able to stand the cold better, and if you've got a cold you can boil them in some water and drink it to give yourself the sweats.

Best of all, blood onions help men get it up—— there's an old saying in the village that goes, "One onion stalk, hard as a rock."

Everybody already knew that our blood onions are the best, but Codger Zhang was the one who really made them famous. When he saw that blood onions grew really well near the hot springs he started planting more, and since he didn't have a lot else to eat he'd have scrambled eggs and blood onions pretty much every day.

Didn't you know it but he started looking more upright and healthy right away.

After six years a woman from Qinghai who was maybe thirty years-old moved in. She'd originally come to dig poleflowers but they were already hard to come by even back then so she started helping Codger Zhang keep up the hot springs in exchange for food and a place to sleep.

Nobody paid it much mind cause they all said it was good to have someone there looking over Codger Zhang. But then two years later Codger Zhang got chopped up with an axe.

When the police came down from the township to find out who'd done it turned out that it was the woman's husband. He'd shown up at the hot springs looking for her only to find out she was pregnant with another man's baby.

After beating her black and blue she'd finally told him Codger Zhang was the father, so he picked up an axe and killed him with it.

Nobody believed it of course when they heard it, cause who was going to believe that Codger Zhang could get someone pregnant at eighty-two?

But it really was Codger Zhang, and it was because he ate blood onions every day, and the more people talked about it the more incredible the blood onions started to sound.

After Codger Zhang died, they all stopped going to East Gully Fork and the hot springs went to pot. At night a bird which everyone said was Codger Zhang's soul would call out Cuir——
——Cuir———!

Which was the name of the man's wife who Codger Zhang had gotten pregnant.

That same year Mayday came back from working in the county seat with his new wife Zi Mi.

Just from looking at her clothes and her way of talking it was obvious that she was different from the girls in the village— Mayday was rough and dark, and he had a scar on his face, so he wasn't a match at all for Zi Mi, but she came to the village with him all the same and he didn't have to lock her up or anything like that.

They'd even go out together, hand in hand.

Wang Baozong said that one night he went over to Mayday's place for a drink and he said that when Zi Mi came out during the day her face was all rosy cause she was wearing powder on her face, but at night she washed the powder off her face and she was as ugly as a ghost.

Zhang the Rake said: And here I am dreaming of ghosts every night but they never show up.

Zi Mi was really smart though, because when she heard about the business with Codger Zhang she got Mayday and his brother Twelve-eight to go to East Gully Fork to grow blood onions: Why not, after all, since Codger Zhang had done such a good job with the advertising and all, so they had to make the most of their big chance to make some money!

So the two brothers went to East Gully Fork and set off firecrackers to scare off Codger Zhang's ghost and then they really did start growing blood onions.

Meanwhile, Zi Mi took charge of the hot springs and although there weren't many bathers anymore but with the water from the spring the whole area got plenty of water meaning the area for growing onions could be as big they wanted, and pretty soon East Gully Fork got to be known as the home of the blood onion.

* * *

Shiny-black said that he opened the store three years ago, and that it was still the only one in the village.

He got the stuff from in town and the county seat. Whatever the people in the village needed he had it——needle and thread, pots and pans, bowls and cups, kerosene, cigarettes, booze, brooms, buckets, kettles, sifters for sifting flour, shovels, threshes, rope, rakes, axes, umbrellas, sun visors, strainers, oil, salt, soy sauce, vinegar, and tea and sugar.

He was also a licensed reseller of pesticides, fertilizer, and seeds, and since he was going that way on his two-wheeler anyways he took produce from the villagers to sell in town, like potatoes, garlic, and pumpkins.

There wasn't any shortage of potatoes up on the plateau, but all the potatoes in the village were different from the kind you normally see.

First, they were purple skinned and starchy, almost like chestnuts, and second, there was something in them cured itchiness, no matter whether it was ringworm or eczema.

Even if you already had sores with pus and whatever, all you had to do was take slices of the purple potatoes and spread em all over and ten minutes later you wouldn't itch anymore. And after eight days even the sores would be cured.

The garlic from the village, meanwhile, was single clove, and super spicy, too. Their pumpkins weren't very big, but they were all odd shaped, and could be kept for two years without going bad.

At first Shiny-black bought poleflowers to resell too, maybe three to five at a time and once he had enough he'd take them to a

wholesaler in town, but nowadays he hardly did that business anymore, although he was still selling blood onions of course.

Mayday and Twelve-eight had their own reseller, so he just took them into town for them, plus any that people in the village grew on the side.

Originally they would've just eaten them themselves but when they saw how well Mayday and Twelve-Eight's blood onions were selling they stopped eating them and started selling them, so Shiny-black took care of it for them. But actually he just sold them to Mayday and Twelve-eight's reseller at only three yuan a catty.

He'd built the store up on the hill to the west side of the entrance to village, so to get to village you had to go right past where the first thing you'd see were the words GENERAL STORE written on the side of the three-room tile roof mud brick building in quicklime.

The store faced the main road, so everybody going into the village and everybody coming out had to go right past it. Whether or not they bought anything they'd still come in to talk and rest their feet, and Shiny-black always made sure to have cold tea at least for them to drink.

A store like wouldn't make you a lot of money but he was still better off than a lot of other folks in the village at least, even though he couldn't just buy whatever he wanted to but if he needed to buy something then he could usually make do.

* * *

Shiny-black said, That's enough for now, you'll figure out the rest for yourself later on.

What later on! I shouted, This isn't my home!

Isn't it all China just the same, wherever you go?

I want to go back, take me back!

Shiny-black didn't argue but outside you could hear Shiny-black's old man setting down his chisel, like the chisel didn't want to argue anymore either.

His blind uncle was running around with the broom, going after the chickens and the dog and the donkey, and after the hub-bub died down they stopped arguing too.

A couple of crows took off from the pines flying over and across the courtyard, but they didn't leave a trace of where they'd been.

3

Soul

When I got carried into the cave I was so hurt and ashamed that I just curled up on the straw-covered *kang* until I was a little insignificant lump.

This your bed now, Shiny-black said.

Out in the courtyard the villagers were celebrating, wiping the soot from the bottom of the pot and oil from the pan on Old Man Shiny-black's face.

It was custom in the village when a son brought back a wife that whoever was going to be an old man now had to get his face rubbed dirty, the dirtier the better.

You know why they call him an old man? Because he used to be a man before he got his junk cut off and became an old man so he won't be getting up to any nonsense with his daughter-in-law!

Just then someone was calling out: Break out the booze, where's the booze?!

Shiny-black's old man said: Here, everybody take a glass, I'll go make some cold snacks!

There were three clay jugs in the cave and Shiny-black had to move them all out into the courtyard but first he said: Let's drink a glass first, you and me. And like that he poured out some wine from the jug until the cup was overflowing.

It spilled out on the low table on the *kang*, so he bent over and slurped it up. The wine in the cup caught the light a little and it was the color of amber, and I went to reach for it but instead I grabbed Shiny-black by the face until it felt like my nails broke

the skin, until I had his blood and skin underneath my nails when I pulled my hand away.

He wriggled around like a fish but didn't drop the cup, putting it back on the table and saying: You're just as pretty when you're mad.

I saw there were scratches on his face, and one of was a red as an earthworm, but I hid in the dark away from the light and wouldn't let him look at me.

Shiny-black pulled the door shut behind him and I heard cursing from out from courtyard and when from my window I saw when he carried the jug past his old man's cave he was hunched over, and then on purpose while no one was looking he tripped over the harrow.

Everybody out in the courtyard said: What happened, what's wrong?

And Shiny-black stood up straight and said: I tripped and scratched my face, but I didn't spill the booze and that's all that matters.

So they all sat back down again, joking, You're supposed to be breaking *her* pumpkin tonight, not splitting your own damn face in two, pour the wine already!

The wine was the strong wedding kind, but the villagers were probably already used to drinking this kind of stuff, cause they went after it like a pack of dogs or wolves more than people at a wedding or a party.

Just then I thought that there are a lot of people in the world who look like people but really aren't, they're animals.

Someone shouted, just one jug of wine? I bet that cripple of a wife that Wang Baozong bought already drank three jugs herself today—look at her over there lying there on the ground!

Shiny-black said come on now, no need to rush, there's plenty more! Come on, drink up! You're not leaving until you're drunk!

But Wang Baozong said, You're in there drumming on the headboard to fucking make it sound like you're fucking someone and you've got the balls to talk shit to me?

To which the voice said, Why the fuck would I do that? I might as well cut it off!

The two of them went on like that, fighting back and forth with Wang Baozong pulling on his sleeves to show how tough he was until Shiny-black said alright, line em up, line em up, starting with you over there who started with the business about Wang Baozong's wife, everybody's gotta drink six glasses as punishment, six-six, it's a lucky number, right?

Let's play guess fingers! they shouted. But Shiny-black was clumsy with his hands, so even though in six rounds he lost four he was an honest drinker, tipping the cups over to show everyone he'd finished the whole cup.

By the time he'd only finished half of the cups in front of him he'd already started to slur his words and was asking his neighbor to take over, to which his neighbor said, If you can't handle your liquor, it's no skin off my back. I can even take care of the stuff in the bedroom too, if you need help there!

Everyone laughed and one person laughed so hard he fell down on all fours to puke. Some of the vomit landed on the guy sitting across from him who cursed and said, Don't you ever chew your fucking food you little dog-fuck?

Sure enough, there was a vomit-covered noodle hanging on the guy's ear.

I won't ever forget that night because the villagers were all so drunk, three of them were just lying on the ground, puking, and not moving really, so the dog went over to lick it up and then the dog got drunk, too and went to lie down.

The ones that weren't drunk yet were still drinking and after they finished two jugs they opened the third so that they could get really drunk.

Meanwhile the whole time I was studying the door of the cave trying to figure out how I was going to run away.

As caves go it was really big, maybe about five meters wide, and probably at least fifteen meters deep.

The *kang* was on just the other side of the window, and sleeping side by side you could probably fit six or seven people on it. Posts had been added on either side to support a plank ceiling for

storage. Who knows what was stored in the jugs up there but I could see at least thirteen of them.

Next to the bed was a wooden dresser, with screens on the front, and a million different kinds of bottles with just everything you can imagine stuffed inside—I noticed a feather duster that didn't look like it'd been used just about ever, cause there was about an inch of dust on it.

Just in front of the dresser there was a pile of burlap sacks stuffed with probably grain or maybe clothing and tied up tight. Past that was a wooden chest.

I supposed that the middle of the cave was where you entertained guests, because there was square-shaped table there, with two benches, and the table-top was thick with black lacquer.

A blue and white China teapot had been placed on the table alongside a matching jar. Shiny-black had filled the teapot with

water and told me, Drink it if you're thirsty, there's sugar in the jar so you can have sugar water if you want.

Two wood-frame pictures were hanging on the wall of the cave behind the table with a poleflower in one and a black cloth bunched up on the top of the other, which was a picture of a woman.

I didn't understand the meaning of putting a flower in a picture frame, but only one look at the woman and I knew she was Shiny-black's ma.

She was dead, but she still got to look at me.

So I pulled the black cloth down to cover up his ma. Looking up at the roof of the cave I didn't see a skylight but there was a smaller cave in the back.

When I walked back that way the table reached out in the dark to gouge me in the side, and so did the dresser, so I got to thinking that all these wooden things were just the corpses of trees and I was in pile of corpses.

The smaller cave was full of more jars filled with corn, buckwheat, millet, beans or else turnips, cabbage, potatoes. But there wasn't any back door, so as far as I could tell there was only one door in the whole cave for coming in or going out.

When I pulled on the door I could tell that it was locked from the outside and so I tried to push open the window, but it was the kind that only opens halfway, and probably noisy too.

So after thinking about it I poured the water from the teapot on the hinges to loosen them up and slowly pushed it open.

Then I blew out the oil lamp.

Real quiet like, I watched what they were up to outside. Some of them were still drinking, but the others were lying on the ground and one person was waving his arms around shouting about this and that, telling the whole world what he thought about the village until the guy sitting next him suddenly said, What the hell are you talking about? Don't fucking touch me!

The shouter whined: I was just trying to get your attention! To which the other guy said, Touch me again and I'll kick your ass! Cutting in, somebody else said, Aw, Monkey's just drunk and talking out of his ass.

Monkey said, So I'm the drunk one, huh? Tell me then, tell me one thing that I said that wasn't true.

While they were distracted I kept pushing on the window, propping it open with the window bar. I let out a breath and stuck my head out of the window before realizing that there wasn't any way climb down from there so I pulled my head back in and

wriggled around, sticking my legs out first, so that they were out in the air and my stomach was on the window ledge.

With another push I broke my bra and popped the buttons off of my shirt, and it was like my whole body was stuck between a pair of pliers but I managed to squirm out before landing on the ground and making myself as small as possible in the dark shadow right under the window.

None of the drinkers had noticed me and one of them was saying, How come there more wine I drink the less drunk I get? Who wants to bet Shiny-black watered this shit down?

Shiny-black didn't say anything but a woman's voice said, You're drunk and your mouth is spouting shit.

He stretched his lips wide, saying, Is it spouting shit? Or is it your mother's cunt? You're not drinking anyways so shut your fucking face!

Instead of getting mad, though, she said, You know I'm not drinking cause I'm going to have a baby boy this year, no matter what!

To which another voice said: You have a boy and you ain't brung him into this world for nothing but trouble. Or maybe you think we don't got enough bachelors in the village already?

To which somebody else said, We might have too many bachelors but we can always grow more blood onions to give us hard ons big enough to fuck a mouse hole or a crow in mid-air!

I started creeping away, slowly inching to right of the window. The doorway to another cave was just up ahead but I wasn't sure what came after that.

As I snuck past the doorway I heard a snort like someone blowing their nose and I looked up to see a donkey pushing its head over towards me.

Just then I thought of my ma, cause her face was long too, like the donkey's, but I froze right there while the donkey smelled me, whispering under my breath, Please don't call out, please don't call out.

After letting out another snort the donkey didn't call out after all and I started to cry cause I thought that the donkey was my ma, or that it was a sign that my ma was looking for me, like her soul had floated up into this donkey.

After the donkey's cave there was another cave with a millstone set out in front and I didn't dare stay pressed against the wall anymore, so I tried to crawl past the millstone. But someone had set out a reed mat underneath and was sleeping there.

I almost shouted out in surprise because I thought that they'd seen me, so I jumped up and ran back to the wall. After a little while nobody seemed to be moving, though, so I stuck my head out and looked up at the sky and saw that the clouds were thick, with only

a hint of the moon all shadowy behind, like maybe you could see it and maybe you couldn't.

But then the guy sleeping on the mat really did get up and started looking for something in the pile of straw next to the millstone before throwing the straw in my direction.

I was trying to think who it could be, since he wasn't drinking but he was sleeping over there and none of the people drinking called over to him when he got up. He'd seen me but he wasn't saying anything to let the others know, so maybe he was trying to save me? But how could that be?

So I decided that he must have been sleeping there to keep cool and hadn't woken up all the way yet so maybe he thought I was one of the villagers who'd had too much to drink, and I'd stumbled over to take a shit.

And so he was throwing the hay for me to wipe myself up with—I knew that people from the countryside didn't use toilet paper, just rocks or clumps of dirt or leaves or straw.

Clenching the straw in my hand as soon as everything was quiet I got up and ran past sleeping figure under the millstone as fast as I could.

It wasn't until later that I found out that the person who'd thrown the straw at me was Shiny-black's blind uncle but I never did find out why he didn't shout out. But after that I always had a soft spot for him, so even though I never called Shiny-black's old man 'pa,' I always made a point of calling his uncle 'uncle.'

And that old donkey, after I was locked back in the cave whenever I punched or kicked the door of the cave the dog would bark and when the dog barked the donkey would call out and even though that made him an accomplice I didn't care, because I couldn't ever bring myself to hate the donkey after that night.

Her face really did look like my ma's and she was always blowing air through her nose like the way my ma was always talking.

But I did hate the cat, and the cat wasn't even part of Shiny-black's family, anyways.

When I got past the millstone I stepped on the cat who suddenly yelped like a monster and all the people who'd been drinking heard it right away, saying: Now that Shiny-black's got a wife you're in heat too, huh?!

One of them took his shoe off to throw at the cat but when he saw my shadow running past he called out, Who's that?!

In a flash, Shiny-black ran over to his cave and saw that the door was still locked but the window was open so he started shouting: She's getting away! She's getting away!

It wasn't until a big shiny squirt of white crow shit fell on my left shoulder that I realized I was running past the four pine trees out in the courtyard.

It was pitch black and I didn't know how deep it was and I didn't know what was down there. That was when the people who'd been drinking almost caught up with me so I jumped down without knowing where I was going, just trying to go anywhere, somewhere.

After jumping I fell on top of something, but it didn't hurt so I got right back up and then fell down again and banged my chin on the ground. My mouth tasted like salt and I figured out that I'd fallen on a pile of straw and then fallen on the ground.

I pulled myself up but I shouldn't have bothered cause the villagers had already caught up with me.

Someone grabbed me by the collar but got a handful of shit, saying, Well, what do we know, crowshit! Shiny-black's two-wheelers and his scythes and his shovels and his chickens dog and donkey are all white with crowshit— don't you know that's the mark of his whole fucking family? You're marked too but you're still trying to fucking run away!

While he was talking I got my legs ready to force my way out and I shed clothing like a snake sheds its skin but they grabbed me by the hair instead and my shirt was pretty much gone by then, so they picked me up by my hair and threw me back down on the ground again.

I don't remember how I got from the courtyard back to the front of the cave, if I was dragged or if they carried me like horses pulling apart a body like they did to traitors to the emperor in ancient times, one person on each arm and each leg but when I got thrown down on the ground of the courtyard I tried to get back up

but I was already surrounded by a circle of drunk men who started kicking me back and forth.

I sobbed out loud, because that was the only thing left for me to, while they shouted, Fuck your mother, trying to fucking run away? Well, run already, why don't you? Fucking run, and don't even ask us how many of you that we've bought have been able to run away!

I screamed and glared at them furiously but just they hacked and spit in my face so that I couldn't see out of my left eye.

I cried some more after imagining that my sobs were like knives that could scare them away from me. She's got spirit, this one! they said and then someone smacked me across the face which was like getting splashed with hot chili oil or like getting branded on the face with an iron. It felt like the skin was getting cut off with a knife, one piece at a time.

Hit me, kill me, see if I can't fucking take all of you! I screamed.

The more I insulted them though the happier they seemed to get though, laughing reaching out with their hands as they stepped on my hair, pinching and grabbing at me, until my hair clips were all gone and my ears had been stretched out so that my earrings were gone too.

I tried to cover my head and fight them off but they came at me from all sides and I couldn't cover my breasts so they ripped off my bra leaving me totally naked from the waist up and I couldn't cry or struggle anymore so I curled up on the ground but still they grabbed at my back and my arms and my stomach.

They touched my breasts all over, pulling on my nipples, twisting and pinching while they pulled off my pants and slapped me on the behind.

I felt like a potato in the fire, my skin bubbling and cracking under the flames, or a teapot that had been thrown into ice cold water until I froze into pieces, breaking up completely, leaving only shards of porcelain and dust.

Finally though Shiny-black shouted, Quit hitting her! That's enough! He pulled some of them off me and laid himself over me, still shouting, Leave off! Quit it already!

The drunk men all stopped mostly, but I remember that there was still a hand groping my breast. Shiny-black pulled me up like he was scooping up an armload of mud but he couldn't quite get it all.

Then he carried me into the cave. Out in the courtyard they were saying that I had to be a virgin, because my nipples were so small and my ass was so tight, ha ha ha.

* * *

After that my soul just sort of jumped out of my body and stood over by the table or on the oil lamp that was on the shelf that'd been dug out of the wall, watching sad little Butterfly laying on the *kang* in some old clothes that Shiny-black had given her, probably things his ma had left behind.

Even though they'd been washed, the spun flower-print shift was short and fat, and so it left Butterfly looking like she was wearing a burlap sack. Three-lobes' ma helped get it on cause she had happened to come back to bring her son home because she was afraid he'd drink too much.

While she pulled up the pants she scolded them for tearing up her clothes and roughing her up. Are you dogs or wolves? she'd yelled while also at the same time saying: My word, what long legs you have! Cause when she pulled on the pant legs she could barely get them to reach Butterfly's ankles.

Before all this I didn't even know what a soul was, never mind that a soul was part of a body, or that it could also get separated from your body. That night I could feel the very top of my head vibrating, as if a hole had opened up there and something was shooting out, and I thought maybe that when they'd been beating me they'd cracked my skull open so now I was dying.

But the next thing I knew I was standing on the table and Butterfly was over there, on the *kang*.

Now that I'd been turned into two was I still Butterfly or wasn't I? It really gave me a shock so I just stood there and watched Shiny-black bring Butterfly some water and then jumped over onto the picture frame with the dried flower in it where I watched the light from oil lamp on Shiny-black's face and Three Lobe's ma's face, their shadows behind them getting bigger and smaller like ghosts dancing on the wall of the cave.

After that Butterfly wouldn't drink any water, she just clenched her teeth so Shiny-black pinched her cheeks and held her nose shut to try to get her to open her mouth so he could pour some water in.

But then he gave up saying: If you run away again I'll break your legs!

After that he tied a rope around Butterfly's ankle. It wasn't a rope, actually, it was a chain. It used to be for the dog, but when he was putting it on Butterfly's ankle the ankle was still soft and white so Shiny-black was worried it would dig into her skin so he wrapped cotton wadding around the chain. Then he used a padlock to keep it in place and attached the other end to the doorframe.

The chain was really long, long enough that Butterfly could walk back and forth in the cave and reach every corner. He locked the

window shut from the outside, too, with an even bigger lock and nailed it shut, putting wood two bars on it for good measure.

Every day was long after that, and I wasn't sure who I was anymore: you could say that I wasn't Butterfly, standing on the table or the picture frame, watching Butterfly laying on the *kang* or the windowsill.

Or you could say I was Butterfly, cause whenever Shiny-black unlocked the door with a rattle as soon as I heard it I opened my eyes and made my hands into fists so that I'd be ready to fight back.

I was like an ant crawling along or a wasp without wings crawling and burrowing all day long, going in circles inside the cave.

When Shiny-black saw that I was rubbing the bruises on my legs he came over wanting to rub them too so I pulled them back in flash, holding them tight against my body.

The summer before I'd gone home from the city and fallen asleep on the bed right away I was so tired. When I woke up my ma was sitting beside me, rubbing my legs and saying, Look at those legs, like two rafters of a house!

My legs are long and so straight I can hold a paper clip so tight between my thighs that you couldn't pull out if you tried. But now they were green and swollen and covered in bruises and when you pressed the skin with a finger it left a dent for a long time.

I screamed at Shiny-black, What do you think you're doing?

Shiny-black said: I want to kiss you.

I'm your ma! I shouted, pointing at my clothes and so Shiny-black didn't dare get any closer, going to get dinner instead.

Putting the food on the table, he said, Eat.

I wasn't going eat, and even if I did eat I wasn't going to do it front of him. He had to go out to the store so he brought in the piss bucket telling me to use it for number one and number two and to put the wooden lid back on after, cause if I did it right it wouldn't smell.

When he came back again I was pacing around the cave so furiously that I was sweating and the sweat got my bangs stuck to my forehead but I didn't wipe it away so Shiny-black said: If you're hot you can put spit on your nipples and you'll cool down right away.

I just glared at him and he said: Sit down already, you're going to get all dried out.

But I wouldn't sit down, I couldn't sit down.

And there I was again, watching Butterfly march back and forth her body shooting off rays of red light like a lion, and when she

slammed her arms on the table they were purple and when she slammed her head into the dresser it didn't break open but the dresser shook and a glass bottle fell out and smashed open on the floor.

A fly landed on the wall of the cave and she ran over to kill it but it wasn't a fly it was a nail which pierced her hand when she slapped it. When the blood came out she rubbed it across her face, so Shiny-black went around taking away all of the hard pieces of furniture and anything that could be picked up and thrown on the ground and broken.

Then he took a burlap sack and filled it with loose batting, saying: If you get mad kick the sack, okay? And sighing he walked out of the cave, locking the door behind him and putting the key in his pocket.

Without Shiny-black Butterfly and I could be one person again and we could cry and hit and kick the sack and then take everything we could pick up: shoes, socks, broom and throw them

out the gap in the window, and then all the stored up potatoes and turnips, too.

Shiny-black's old man was out in the courtyard, and his blind uncle too, but they didn't say anything even though the dog was barking. Blindy shut the dog up and then one by one he picked up all the things I threw out.

* * *

At daybreak pretty much every day the crows started cawing in the pines and waking everybody up.

Shiny-black's old man opened the chicken coop, then put out the plastic tub which he filled with water until only a dipper's worth of space was left and forcing his hands under the tub he just barely lifted it and placed it halfway on the window ledge for washing up.

Once he'd scrubbed his face and shaved it was Shiny-black's turn, and then he'd shout: Uncle, come wash up!

Blindy finished feeding the donkey, and he was muttering about the donkey not doing what it was told and not eating when it was told, and it worried him that she wasn't farting as much as she used to at night either, because she used to fart like the air going out of a basket but now it was more like the soft puff of somebody blowing out an oil lantern.

By the time he got there the tub wasn't full enough to stay put on the window ledge anymore but it didn't matter because he usually just took a wet cloth to clean his dried-out eyes.

Actually he really only need to scrub his forehead and cheeks, since he was blind—what did he think, that I didn't know he was blind?

I think he washed his eyes for me to see, because he always looked in my direction and smiled.

Uncle, go get the firewood, Shiny-black said, taking what was left of the water into the cave for me to use. There's a drought, he said, so water's tight.

If there's a drought then I want to take a shower!

He said: Quit trying to piss me off, Butterfly.

Out in the courtyard there was a shout and a clatter of footsteps like roofs tiles, but no sign of any person at all cause they were standing down at the gate on the road.

Shiny-black, Shiny-black, they called out, when's your next trip into town?

Shiny-black said: Did you get the tea leaves?

The man in the road said: I bought one package but the price went up again.

Shiny-black said louder this time: The two-wheeler is broken, so I can't go today.

The man said: You didn't say anything about that yesterday and I've already washed my hair and scrubbed my face. You're really not going?

Shiny-black's old man said, So the price went up, big deal. Even if it keeps going up it's not like you'll stop drinking tea!

Shiny-black said, If I say it's broken it's broken. Or maybe you can tell me when you're gonna get sick?

But Shiny-black's old man muttered, Watch your mouth.

Blindy ran out from somewhere with an armful of beanpoles. Shiny-black's old man pulled my high heels out of the well and put them back in his cave before sitting out on his doorstep to slice potatoes.

Shiny-black chased a chicken into a corner, picking it up by the legs and poking it in the butt, saying, How come you ain't laid eggs the last three days?

Just then Great Gramps came out of his cave carrying his *kang* table, and Shiny-black wiped his fingers clean on his jacket, running over to take the little table and put it under the gourd trellis and saying: Are you gonna write?

Great Gramps said: I need to do a poleflower pressing for Shui-lai. He asked me to do one for him too.

There was a crash and Old Man Shiny-black said, Shiny-black, did that fucking pig get out again?

Shiny-black said, Shuai-lai huh? Guess he's copying me but good luck finding a wife!

Then he shouted: I just put new wood stakes in, and the dog fucker still jumps right out!

He disappeared around the corner of the cliff and there was the sound a pig squealing and then he came back and filled the tub with slop and carried it back around the corner.

Great Gramps had already placed a poleflower on the table and was carefully laying out the leaves and petals between two blocks of wood.

After feeding the pig, Shiny-black came back to watch Great Gramps work and so Great Gramps said: Your ma asked me to press a poleflower to frame in your house and now you've got Butterfly. Other folks, they see that and they put two and two together.

After a pause, he said, Can you hear Padlock crying over at the grave?

Shiny-black said: Crying everyday like that I don't even think he's crying anymore.

Great Gramps said, I'm just saying he's going to come and ask me to press a poleflower for him. He hasn't come yet, but Shui-lai did. You all shouldn't be so hard on him.

Shiny-black said: He's got ten cattles of poleflowers that he's just sitting on, saying that they belong to his daughter-in-law and if he doesn't have any money how is he supposed to find a man for her?

Inside his cave Shiny-black's old man worked the bellows and I imagined the puff of black smoke that came out of the chimney up top his cave.

For breakfast every morning they had millet gruel that was so thin you see yourself in it with flattened beans floating on top. When the beans were still tender the villagers would smash them flat before boiling them in a pot so that they looked like flowers, which they called bean money. Was bean money really money though? Even if you had three bowls you'd get hungry again as soon as you took a piss.

Shiny-black liked to give me slices of steamed potato which were dipped in salt but even though they tasted better and sweeter than potatoes in other places, they still stuck in my throat and gave me gas so I couldn't stand eating potatoes for three meals a day.

Old Man Shiny-black did his best to find new ways of cooking them, but anyway it was still always just stir fried potatoes shreds or stewed potatoes or mashed potato cakes or potato flour pancakes or maybe a bowl of spicy sour potato noodles.

After eating and not having anything to do Shiny-black's old man went back to rock carving. In the sun his back was two rows of dark circles from the cupping he'd just had done.

He sat in front of a stone that came up to about his waist standing and after about a noon I could see a woman's head and then her neck and shoulders like she was going to walk right out of the stone.

Blindy went and got the millstone same as he did every four or days cause it seemed like they never ran out of things to grind up, but really there was just corn, buckwheat, beans of all different colors. Blindy seemed to do all the work out in fields and at home, too, like there was nothing to it, just pushing the millstone, like that was what he was made for.

Shiny-black helped him carry three trays from the cave and saying to his old man from behind: Don't you think there are already enough of those in the village?

But his old man said: This one's for you.

Shiny-black said: Don't I already have a real one in my cave?

His old man said: When I've got something on my mind carving helps me set it aside. After dumping a tray of corn onto the millstone, Blindly shoved three chopsticks into the feeder and began to push on the driving rod, turning the stone.

Watching it turning and turning I started to get dizzy and the chopsticks in the feeder dancing up and down left me with a nervous and fluttery feeling in my chest.

Back home I always hated doing the millstone, but I remembered watching my ma sifting the fresh ground flour and sound of her thimble drumming on the sifting basket and I remembered when my little brother would fall asleep holding the driving rod and

stop in mid-step and my ma would say, Hey! What are you stopping for?

And my little brother and I would get back to pushing with our eyes half-closed, not even really waking up, really.

But Blindy didn't have a thimble, and he didn't sift it after grinding it, so there wasn't any sound like that.

A dried-up snail was crawling on the windowsill. I thought that maybe he'd started from the right corner sometime last night and was headed toward the left corner leaving a silver trail but he'd only made it about halfway.

Out on the road somebody was arguing with somebody else about something that I couldn't quite hear but it sounded like it was about their chicken stealing food from the other person's drying mat.

It started getting louder and they started up cursing each other and every curse had something to do with the male or the female parts.

Later someone came over and hollered, The village head just finished his new cave and wants to know if you're coming over to drink or not? I don't care what you bring but I bought a quilt and I'm talking my wife with me, too.

Shiny-black hollered back, Since when have you got a wife?

The voice said, Just cause I don't have a wife doesn't mean I can't bring someone else's wife!

From off in the distance I could hear them calling Shiny-black to come over and drink.

Shiny-black's old man muttered to himself, Are they asking you to drink or are they asking you to bring a gift?

Shiny-black walked down from the courtyard giving his old man a look but didn't say anything, just said he was going to the store to talk to Mayday and Twelve-eight about the wholesale business.

The two brothers were sneaky, so back when they'd first been looking to wholesale they'd planned on doing it direct but now they'd asked him and so he'd only asked for a twelve percent cut.

His old man didn't seem to have anything to say about that, so he came into the cave carrying a half-full bucket of water and said, Do you know what this is for?

But I just ignored him like always, and so he said, I'm watering down the vinegar but don't tell anyone, okay?

After Shiny-black left he didn't come back the whole afternoon and Old Man Shiny-black brought both lunch and dinner to the

windowsill. When he set down the bowl he rapped on the window before going back to stand beside it, shouting, Come and eat!

This was for Blindy, and for me, too. Flies were landing on the edge bowl and he put out his hand to wave them away. Why not eat, I thought, my belly had been making noises for a while now anyways, so I went over to the windowsill to bring the food back and wiped the edge of the bowl clean with my sleeve.

But Shiny-black's old man said, Don't worry about them, those are just food flies. Like there's a difference between flies that eat food and flies that eat shit!

But I didn't say anything to him.

It was almost dark and the crows in the pines had already started shitting when Shiny-black came stumbling back carrying an empty bucket. He'd gotten drunk, maybe at the village head's or maybe not, but when he walked into the cave he slammed the door

behind him and waved a wad of bills in my face, saying, Here, motherfucker, take it!

Usually when he came back at night he'd sit over there, counting out the day's cash and muttering about the village head buying things on credit again. First he'd put all the paper bills to one side and the coins to the other and then he'd count them one by one before turning his back to me to put the money in the dresser and lock it up.

But drunk like this and waving his money in my face it made me think of how when my old was still alive he'd done the same thing to my ma.

She'd crawled right over and grabbed the money from his hand and then ladled out some of the pickle juice from the cabbage jar for him to drink before helping him into bed. Taking off his shoes, she complained about him drinking so much, saying, What's so great about the taste of booze?!

I remember watching my ma and thinking she was making a fool of herself, but my ma said to me: If your pa didn't drink too much sometimes then he wouldn't still be your pa. But I wasn't going to do like my ma did for my pa for Shiny-black, waving his money in front of my face, back and forth like that, fuck.

[End of Chapter 3]

Translated by Nick Stember.