

Master of Songs

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First Story

Beginning

Deep in the Southern Mountains, there is a river which flows backwards, from east to west.

Everybody knows the Kitchen God Festival happens once a year, on the 23rd day of the 12th month. In the villages of the Southern Mountains, the locals have their own custom: they follow the river back toward its source. The path winds along the river bank, over boulder fields and through briar patches.

The two great rivers of China, the Yangtze and the Yellow

River, flow from the high mountains of the West to the deltas of the Eastern shore.

But high in the Southern Mountains, walking along the Back-flow River, the mind loses its way. The further they walk the younger they feel:

Are their bodies are getting smaller?

If they keep walking, will they arrive at their

mother's cunt?

Will they climb back inside?

When they arrive at Lantern Festival village, some one hundred and twenty *li* distant, high up in the mountains, if they look closely they can see a cave. It's too high to reach by climbing, and even too high for birds.

The strange thing about the cave is that whenever a person of nobility or talent happens to be in the vicinity, a great stream of water will flow out of the cave-mouth. The Master of Songs can count the number of times it's happened on the fingers of one hand:

- I. Once before the war, when the warlord Feng Yü-hsiang led his troops past this place, marching through Storehouse Valley and around the Seven Li Gorge, over the Great Shelter Mountains and Broken Ravine, to arrive in Beijing, where they drove out Puyi, the last emperor, from the Forbidden City.
- II. It flowed again, when General Li Xiannian made the long march from the central provinces of Hebei and

Hubei to the communist stronghold in Yan'an, taking Stone Trough gorge via Walnut plain under the shadow of Red Cliff. He spent three days in Lantern Festival village and a great jet of water appeared just once. Sure enough, General Li went on to served three years as the chairman of the nation.

III. It flowed when Mei Lanfang, the famous opera singer, came in his sedan chair to see the golden snub-nosed monkeys.

IV. And it flowed once more, when the great Monk Xuyun visited the area.

The Master of Songs said that the villagers had forgotten all about these times, and that he was the only one who still

remembered. All they cared about was Kuang San, the commanding officer of the northeast. It flowed for Kuang San alright, when his troops marched through the village the first winter after his assignment. The water froze solid from the cold, leaving a curtain of ice, bright white against the dark mountain.

Seven years ago, when the governor of the province had visited on an inspection tour of the drought, everyone had come out to see the cave give water again. Only the Master of Songs had stayed in his cave, drumming on his stomach and singing:

My bamboo pole is soft and thin

Wandering the mountains where'er I go

The gate of the Hsiao family is all I know

The Hsiao family asks a tune...

The villagers looked dumbfounded and said: Master of Songs, Master of Songs, the governor's here! Aren't you going out to watch the cave give water?

The Master of Songs stopped singing and pointed at his belly: The governor isn't noble and he isn't talented. The water won't flow.

And what do you know, the cave really didn't give water that year.

This set the villagers to discussing the Master of Songs. They had all long since decided he was bewitched, something they said you could tell just from the way he looked:

A small head, with eyes that seemed to take everything in. His face was whisker-less, and everybody, no matter how old they were, said he looked the same as he always did.

He lived in a cave that had been dug into Cudgel Mountain. It had passed through countless generations of poor folk until it had ended up in the hands of the Master of Songs. Then one day he just disappeared. The stone roller turned into an azure dragon and the millstone turned into a white tiger, which everybody knew meant that he'd already died.

He came back just as suddenly as he'd disappeared, with his drum on his back and his walking stick under his arm.

When he left, it was still winter. He had been wearing sandals stuffed with cotton batting. He said the cotton was clouds, so he was on cloud nine. When he came back it was summer and he was carrying an umbrella, which he said was the sunshine.

All his life, no one never saw him eat after midday. He drank water, though. When someone asked him about it, he said: If water is good enough for trees then it's good enough for me.

Once, he left his pestle out in the rain and it sprouted branches.

Another time when he was singing at a funeral for the Hsiao family there was loud noise from inside the casket. He

took a black handkerchief and found a real live mouse, which he wrapped inside.

Holding it over the casket, he threw it against the wall and said: Begone! If you're dead you're dead and take your poverty and your pain with you, too!

And just like that the mouse turned into a bat and the casket went quiet again.

He was famous for saying he had to go back to his cave because: I forgot my mouth!

And other times, when he was thinking about friends living far away he'd stick a stamp over his heart.

As far as the Master of Song's stories went, you could take or leave the crazier ones, but you had to acknowledge he was a

shaman of sorts. He travelled between the light and the dark, talking to the living and the dead.

Sometimes he said that you had to be nice to be people with dimples. That was because when it came time to be reborn, people with dimples would rather jump into the sea of ice and fire than drink the waters of forgetting. That's how committed they were to finding their previous lives.

Other times it was that when we died we actually just crossed a bridge to the other homeland, because people are made of earth and water. The other homeland was deep in the place of earth and water, and we could stay in touch with our families there by observing Tomb Sweeping Day, through giving sacrifices, and in our dreams.

More practically, when it came to secular matters, he could lead you from horse post to horse post across the Southern Mountains without crossing paths with single bandit. Not only that, but he knew what was needed to complete the marriage and funeral customs of every village, and he was fluent in every dialect. He could describe all manner of flora and fauna, in shape, habit, color, and song.

He even knew the family history of Kuang San: ascending from head of the country military service to chief of staff of the sub-district, to commissar of the province, until he was finally named regional military commander, and true king of the northwest. The oldest of Kuang San's two cousins, meanwhile, had gone from mayor to vice-governor of a

neighboring province. That same cousin had a secretary who later served as the head commissioner of Shanyin county.

The younger cousin, meanwhile, served as director of the provincial Justice Department, and his daughter-in-law was made director of the provincial Women's League. Kuang San's nephew was the municipal police chief and his wife's nephew was head of the armory. Kuang San had another cousin who was director of the provincial Civil Affairs Bureau, while his secretary was appointed director of the Traffic Bureau and his brother-in-law was made vice-secretary of the provincial government. Of Kuang San's three secretaries, one was made chairman of the municipal Political Consultative Conference, one was made head of the

Provincial Department of Agriculture, and one was made director of the Forestry Department. Kuang San's oldest daughter first served as the director of the municipal Women's League, and later as the deputy-director of the municipal People's Congress. Kuang San's oldest son, meanwhile, had first served as chairman of the provincial Labor Union, and then deputy mayor for a spell, before finally being appointed vice-chairman of the municipal Political Consultative Conference. Kuang San's youngest son first served as municipal foreign trade commissioner, before being appointed chairman of the local power authority, his son's wife was president of the Association for the Promotion of Foreign Culture. Kuang San's youngest daughter was

deputy director-general of the provincial Department of Education, and his son-in-law was the commander of a division in the Army.

Kuang San's oldest grandson was manager of big company in Beijing, and his second-oldest grandson was mayor of a city in the south. In total, twelve director-level cadres had come out of his family, mostly in the ten counties of the Qinling mountains, eight provincial-level officials, and in one-hundred and forty-three villages and townships some seventy-six leaders could trace their lines back to Kuang San.

The Master of Songs knew these stories like the back of his hand. Sometimes he would even use a stick to draw out the

complex web relationships on the ground, pausing to take sips of liquor from a teapot he kept in his robes.

He'd say: What do you want to know?

Even though he was always drinking, the teapot never seemed to be empty until someone asked him if there was any left.

But he never got mad about it, because he always just said: Just name it, anything at all that's happened in these here mountains in the last two hundred odd years. What do you want to know?

But more times than not, the person who was asking would get cold feet and the Master of Songs would go back to his home

on Cudgel Mountain. He could ask the shepherds about a sheep, or just enjoy the sunshine while watching the lambs play.

The shepherds were father and son, both widowers. Just before the younger shepherd's wife had died, she gave birth to a son. Unnaturally gifted, the boy had tested into the county high school.

The grandson's father and grandfather, on the other hand, were so bad at math they didn't even know how many sheep they had. When the sheep came back in the evening instead of counting them, they pointed, saying: This one, that one, this one, that one... That's how they knew which ones had come back and which one's hadn't yet.

Also, when guests came to visit, it didn't matter who it was, sooner or later they would always ask: Have you eaten yet? And whatever the answer was, they would always respond by offering you a drag on their tobacco pipe, the mouthpiece shiny with saliva.

Nobody ever took them up on it, of course — the usual strategy was to distract them by making small talk about the sheep. Across the ravine, you might see the door of the Master of Songs cave open up to reveal a gaping black hole and so you would have something else to talk about: How old is the Master of Songs, anyway?

If you asked, the old shepherd would say: When I was little he carried me on his shoulders. I remember holding on by his head and seeing that his hair was all grey even then.

The guest would say: So how old are you now?

The old shepherd would say: How old do I look? Guest:

Maybe fifty?

Shepherd: If my boy is fifty then I'm seventy.

At which the guest would turn to the shepherd's son and say: Well, how old are you?

Who would say: If my pa is seventy then I guess I'm fifty.

Since spring an enormous cloud had been parked in the sky above Lantern Festival village. Standing on the bank of

the East Fork, to the Master of Songs the colorless mass looked like nothing else than a big, white balloon.

In the fourteenth straight month of drought and the Backflow River was more sand than water. When the Master of Songs vaulted over the river with his bamboo walking stick, none of the people working the fields asked where he'd been.

All they wanted to ask about was the cloud.

Instead of answering, though, the Master of Songs said: Look at all that gold in the river!

Later that summer, when the Backflow River dried up completely, the path that wound alongside it turned hard and needed to be leveled with sand. The price of sand per cubic yard shot up to six *yuan* per cubic foot, and everybody who

missed out regretted that they hadn't done a better job of listening to the Master of Songs.

The rest of the summer and autumn after that, if the Master of Songs wasn't singing funeral songs for the Hsiao family down the North Fork of South Gully, then he was up in the mountains gathering five-flavor berries, wild sour dates, ground cherries, dead man's fingers, and kiwifruit. Shouting at the crows, he stuffed his mouth with whatever he came across.

In the distance, he heard a woodpecker. The Master of Songs clicked his teeth right back at him.

By autumn the whole village had come down with malaria.

When it got cold, they set to shivering like grain huskers. Only

the people who ate fruit like the Master of Songs did were left unaffected.

The Master of Songs liked to lay on the hill in the sun. It spooked the musk deer out of the woods on the far side of the mountain, and the villagers took advantage of the disturbance to break out their guns and give chase. There would be a bounty of musk in Lantern Festival village that year.

One year later, there was an earthquake in high plain just over the Southern Mountains. It set the door knockers of the whole village knocking, and scared the villagers into sleeping outside in lean-to tar paper shacks. For seven days straight they heard rumors: The aftershocks are coming, the aftershocks are coming! But they never came and everyone got

so sick of it that they started to wish they would so that they could just be over with it.

Then, on the eighth day, there really were aftershocks. Nobody died, or got hurt, though, and nothing fell down or got damaged. It wasn't until they'd all calmed down that somebody remembered that the Master of Songs hadn't come out of his cave the whole time.

They villagers thought he'd stayed in the cave because he'd predicted the earthquakes, but that wasn't the case at all. When the shepherds went to his cave where they saw that four blossoms on the dove-tree dogwood were blooming, each as big as a bowl and whiter than snow. Inside, the Master of Songs

was lying on his *kang*. A squirrel was curled in one of his straw sandals under the bed.

When he saw them he got up to wash his face, but his movements were slow and lethargic. That was when they figured out that the Master of Songs hadn't left his cave because he was sick. He almost never got sick, but this time it was really serious: his legs were all swelled up, and when he puckered his lips, so well-suited to singing, round as a baby's butthole, no sound came out.

Leading a sheep behind them, the shepherds walked in town to see the doctor. When the doctor heard the state the Master of Songs was in he just shook his head and said: I afraid I can't help him. Man can cure disease but he can't cure fate.

The shepherd said: He's a living spirit! A spirit in a human body!

But the doctor said: Even saints don't live forever.

The shepherds sighed and walked back to the cave to wait for the Master of Songs to die so that they could bury him. For twenty days, he didn't eat or drink, but he didn't die. His drum was hanging on the wall, and he spent whole nights crying out to nobody at all. His bamboo walking stick was behind the door but when daylight came it was lying beside the stone roller out in the courtyard.

It just so happened it was summer break, meaning that the children were all back from school. The shepherd and his son

needed to watch their sheep, so they put the boy in charge of watching over the Master of Songs.

They warned the child: This is serious business. When the Master of Songs draws his last breath, don't cry. If a dying person hears the sounds of grieving in his final moments, then it's easy for him to get confused and end up on the wrong path. They'll get turned into a wandering ghost. You have to burn the paper money, so that little ghosts all have money for the long trip. Then you need to run outside and call for us as loud as you can. We'll come right away.

So the boy sat in the cave keeping watch. After a while he went over to check on the Master of Songs. When he saw that his eyes were closed, the boy thought the Master of Songs was

already gone. He placed his fingers under his nostrils and felt the breath still coming. When he went and checked again awhile later, the breath was still there.

After three days like this, the Master of Songs was still breathing. The boy got bored. He hadn't been doing very well in classical Chinese, so he thought he might use the time to catch up. He asked his dad to send a tutor from the village, who said he'd take five *jin* of lamb in exchange for lessons.

The tutor was an educated type, who used the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* as a textbook: one lesson a day, two chapters a lesson. Through it all, the Master of Songs lay quietly on the bed, unmoving but listening, his mind a complete blank as he listened to the old teacher lecture the boy.

On the first day, a gust of wind from outside blew into the cave, invisible except for the wisps of cloud it carried with it. A rare perfume filled the air, drawing in a single butterfly.

The Master of Songs had spent his life singing the funeral songs, and he could weave the histories of the dynasties and ages present into them. But he'd never read the *Classic of Mountain and Seas*. He hadn't even heard about it, and knew even less about the things he heard the old teacher explaining.

The Master of Songs had never been to the sea — he only knew the word from local sayings like “hungry as the sea, thirsty as the ocean.” In the Southern Mountains, large bowls were called “sea bowls.”

But mountains, he knew mountains. There probably wasn't a single mountain in the Southern Mountains that he hadn't climbed. If he didn't know every gully and every cliff, then who did?

And so Master of Songs wanted to interrupt, but found himself unable to do so. All he could do was breathe, sometimes faster, sometimes more slowly. He felt his tongue growing, every hair and follicle and his body growing, like grass. He could hear an ant crawling under the *kang* table, the fifty beats of the butterfly's wings it took to travel a single step, as it moved toward the door of the cave.

When the boy saw the butterfly, he jumped up to go after it. But the old teacher rapped the boy on the skull with his pen, saying: Pay attention!

Meanwhile, the butterfly flew out of the cave, landing on a bush where, out of sight and out of mind, it turned into a flower.

The First Story

The *Classic Mountains and Seas* is a miraculous book, covering, among other topics, geography, astronomy, history, mythology, meteorology, animals, plants, mineral deposits, medicine, religion. Composed of eighteen volumes in total, five volumes are dedicated to mountains, eight

volumes to seas, four more to “the great wasteland,” and a final volume to “the world.” The book records the names of some five-thousand three-hundred mountains, two-hundred and fifty bodies of water, one-hundred and twenty species of animals, and fifty plants. Today, we will be studying the first mountain of the first range in first volume: ”Mountains of the South.”

Let’s take turns reading.

The foremost mountains of the south are known as the Magpie Range, beginning with the Mount Splendor. Rising up from banks of the West Sea, it is prized source of cassia, gold, and jade. A singular grass grows on the slopes of the Mount Splendor: resembling a chive, its blossoms are deep black. It is known as the

Grass of Wishing Abundance, and it sates all hunger. Elsewhere, a tree resembling the paper mulberry can be found, with a fine, dark grain, that when polished, shines as fine as any wood.

Known as the Tree of the Lost Valley, whoever carries it on them will never become lost. A beast lives on Mount Splendor, resembling an ape, with white ears, it can walk upright like a man when it chooses. Known as the Orang-Orang, whoever eats of its flesh can walk with superhuman speed. The River of Beauties has its source on the Mountain of Splendor, travelling westward before emptying into the sea. In its waters the Grows-a-Lot can be found, which cures all wearers of the intestinal worm.

Travelling another three hundred li to the east, one finds the Mountain of Halls. In the lush forests of its slopes, there are a great many white apes, while its soils are rich with crystals and gold.

Three-hundred and eighty li to the East of the Mountain of Halls, is the Mountain of Approaching Wings. The great many strange beasts dwelling on this mountain are rivaled only by the even more bizarre fish that can be found in its streams and lakes. A rich source of white jade, the Mountain of Approaching Wings is also known to be riddled with poisonous insects, and peculiar snakes and trees. It is unclimbable.

A further three-hundred and seventy li to the east is the Mountain of the Ugly South. The side of mountain in sun is rich

in gold, while the shaded side is rich in silver. There is a beast on the Mountain of Ugly South, which resembles a horse, except with a white head, and stripes like a tiger. The tail the Like-Deer, as it is known, is red, and its call is like the sound of a person singing. Whoever wears its fur will be blessed with a great many sons and grandsons. The River Strange has its headwaters on the Mountain of the Ugly South, flowing east into the waters of the Presenting Wings. A dark red turtle makes its home here. While its body is like that of any other of its kind, it has a head like a bird and the long snake-like tail. Known as the Whirl-Turtle, its call is like the sound of splitting wood. Whoever wears its skin will be cured of deafness, and callouses of the feet.

Three hundred li to the east of the Mountain of the Ugly

South is Mount Root, with a great many streams, but no flowers

or trees. In the streams of Mount Root there is a fish which

resembles a cow in shape, with the tail of a snake, and wings

growing out of its sides. Perched on hillsides of its home, its call is

like the bellowing of a cow behind the plow. Known as the

Bluefish, it hibernates in winter and is active in the summer.

Whoever eats its flesh will be cured of boils of the skin.

Four hundred li to the east is the Mountain of Sincere Love,

which, like Mount Foundation, has great many streams, but no

flowers or trees. It too, is unclimbable. A beast resembling a

wildcat lives on the Mountain of Sincere Love. With long hair

like a man, it is known as the Lay. A hermaphrodite, it has both

male and female sex organs. Whoever eats its flesh will no longer suffer from jealousy.

Three hundred li to the east of the Mountain of Sincere Love, is Mount Foundation. The side of the mountain in sun is rich in jade, while the shaded side is covered in strange trees. A beast resembling a sheep dwells on Mount Foundation. With nine tails and four ears, it has eyes on the front and back. Known as the Chuff-hound, whoever wears a coat made of its fur will not be afraid. Mount Foundation is also home to an unusual bird. Resembling a chicken, it has three heads, six eyes, six feet, and three wings. Known as the Pay-pay, whoever partakes of its flesh will not tire.

A further three hundred li east, is the Mountain of Green Hills. The side of the mountain in sun is rich in jade, while the shaded side is cut with veins of azurite. A beast resembling a fox with nine tails lives in the Mountain of Green Hills. Its call is like that of crying child and is an infamous man-eater. Whoever partakes of its flesh will be impervious to the toxins of all manner of beasts. A bird which resembles a dove can also be found in the Mountain of Green Hills. Its call is like the sound of people arguing. Known as the Pour-Pour, whoever is adorned with his feathers will stay clear-minded. The River of Heroes has its headwaters in the Mountain of Green Hills, flowing south into the Marsh of Wings. There are a great number of Crimson Row Fish there, with human faces. Its call is like that of the mandarin

duck, and whoever eats of its flesh will not be afflicted with scabies.

Three-hundred and fifty li east of the Mountains of Green Hills is Mountain of the Basket and Tail. Located along the East Coast, it is known for its sandy soil. The headwaters of the River of Inkwater are located here, flowing south into the River of Births. The River of Inkwater is known far and wide for having a great quantity of white jade.

In all, from the Mount Splendor to the Mountain of the Basket and Tail, the ten mountains of the Magpie Range stretch for over 2,950 li. Its gods are birds with the heads of dragons. In the ceremony to honor them, livestock are buried along with jade

*tablets, rice is given as offering, and thrones are woven from
fragrant white grass.*



Did you have any questions for me?

Q: Isn't this book also known as the *Shan Hai Ching* (Classic of Mountains and Seas) like the *Tao Te Ching* (Classic of the Way) or *I Ching* (Classic of Changes)?

A: For this book, "Ching" is used in the sense of "passing through" rather than "classic." That's why we call it the *Passage of Mountains and Seas* and not the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*.

Q: How come there are so many strange minerals, trees and plants, birds and beasts on each mountain?

A: This book was written before the unification of Nine Provinces of the Xia and Shang dynasties! At that time, mankind had only just begun to understand nature: which mountain is which mountain, what body of water is what body of water, and what vegetation, which minerals, which birds, and which beasts can be found on which mountains. For people back then, everything was strange! Here in the Qinling mountain range, legend has it everything began in darkness and chaos. Then Rat gnawed open the heavens, and Ox plowed up the earth, didn't they? That's how they people got to know what sky was, and what ground was. And how mankind got to know Rat and Ox. *Passing Through Mountains and Seas* can be said to be a history of mankind,

going from everything being strange and foreign until there was nothing left to surprise us anymore.

Q: How come there's all this stuff about "whoever eats it will be sated of all hunger," and "whoever eats of its flesh can walk with superhuman speed," and "whoever eats of its flesh will not be afflicted with scabies" and "whoever partakes of its flesh will not tire"?

A: Meat is for Tiger, Panther, Eagle, and Hawk; just as grass is for Ox, Horse, Pig, and Sheep. But when the Heavens made man, they didn't specify what we would eat. As a result, man is always hungry and must find his own food. Man will eat anything—that old hunger is always pushing us to find

new things to eat, pushing us to break the web of life. The history of mankind is the history of eating.

Q: The book says that the Chuff-hound has nine tails and four ears, and eyes are on its back. How come “whoever wears a coat made of its fur won’t be afraid?” And what about the Like-Deer, whose fur will give you “sons and grandsons?” And what about the Lay, with “both male and female sex organs?” How come “whoever eats its flesh will no longer suffer from jealousy?”

A: Probably they thought whoever wears a Chuff-hound fur wouldn’t be afraid because it has four ears, and eyes on the front and back, so it can see and hear in all directions. So

they started to think that it was because they wouldn't get mixed up and scared over nothing.

And maybe some of the people who wore Like-deer furs proved to be unusually fertile, with lots of sons and grandsons. And since the mountain the Like-deer lived on had “more gold the side in sun, more jade in the side in the shade,” that's how they came up with the idea of light and dark—what we call *yin* and *yang*. Two complementary forces, brought together to help mankind prosper.

And who knows, maybe they thought that “whoever eats the flesh of the Lay will no longer suffer from jealousy” because they found out it was a hermaphrodite, and they got they got the idea that jealousy was created by gender. That's how they

figured out the only way to have peace is to have men and women in harmony.

To survive, our ancestors had to observe and adapt to nature.

That's how the Chinese way of thinking developed. Those some concepts have been passed down all the way to today.

Q: Does every mountain have its own god?

A: There's a saying that goes, 'what God created, he delegated.'

Q: When they wove the "thrones from fragrant white grass," why did it have to be white, and not some other color?

A: White is clean, so it demonstrates piety. We've kept up this tradition up to today. Funerals are white, and we use white in

mourning: white headbands, white clothing, white curtains, and door couplets on white paper.



What a bunch of crap! The reason why we use white cloth and white paper for funerals is because black is heavy with *yang* energy. When you die, impermanence tries to take hold of your soul. If your whole family wears black, all that heavy *yang* energy will keep impermanence at bay. Your family wears white so that soul can drift away. And how can the Magpie be a mountain? She's a person! Blackie's ma was called Magpie. When she died, I sang at her funeral. Magpie was still waiting for her coffin then, and Blackie's old man was writhing around on the ground, like a twisted up ball of

dough. I placed a white hat on his head and he came to, just like that. Everybody knew that Old Man Li was a fool. For as long anybody could remember he had worked as a hired-hand for Party Secretary Wang Shizhen's family, pulling weeds out in their corn field from dawn to dusk. One day before Blackie was even born the locusts came, blotted the sun and the sky right out. But Old Man Li just stood there, looking up. There were so many of them, you couldn't see the green on the corn anymore. Just like that, the top half of the cornstalks up and disappeared, leaving behind half-meter stumps. Old Man Li was so scared he ran home, where his wife, Magpie, was in the middle of giving birth to Blackie on their *kang*. He was bruiser, and the first part to come out was

a leg. Old Man Li helped pull, until the *kang* was covered in blood. He said: What a tan little child!

And just like that, Magpie's eyes rolled up into her head and she died.

Blackie really was dark-skinned, like he'd just come out of a brick kiln. Whenever anybody saw him, they would always pinch his face to see if any of the dark came off.

After his ma died, Blackie and his pa moved in with Wang Shizhen's family. Like a wild sapling growing into the wind, by fifteen Blackie was already as tall as a door frame, with broad shoulders and thick eyebrows that met in the middle. It was around then that he started helping his pa grow poppies in South Gully. Wang Shizhen had just been

appointed Party Secretary for the entire Lightside town.

After that, Wang Shizhen took his concubine to live in town, leaving the management of the fields and forests to his wife.

Wang Shizhen's wife had always had a soft spot for Blackie, so she made a point of sticking a few extra flatcakes and handful of garlic in their bag before he left for the gully with his pa every morning.

Old man Blackie said: We can't take this, it's too much!

But Wang Shizhen's wife just laughed and said: He's a growing boy! Then she'd grab his hand and pressing a miniature wooden sword into the palm. Carved out of peach-wood, the sword was a good luck token.

The land that had been allocated to Lightside town included a great deal of forest with big, mature trees—camphor and pine, maybe four hundred or five-hundred feet tall. The forest was home to wild oxen, boar, and even bears and other big game. The bears liked the poppy fields, so Old Man Blackie always brought two pairs hollow bamboo tubes to put their arms in. He said that if the bears ever attacked they'd grab them by the arms first. They'd be so pleased with themselves, Old Man Blackie said, that the bears would forget what they were doing. That would be Blackie and his old man's chance to pull their arms out of the tubes and run away. His old man also said that when they went to the poppy

field they had to make sure be extra quiet. Not a peep, he said.

Only, every time Blackie saw the poppies in full bloom lit up on the ridge with their colors all bouncing off the rocks he was got so happy and excited he couldn't help himself. Right then and there he'd shout out as loud as he could.

One time he shouted so loud his old man thought the he was going to scare the rain out of the clouds overhead.

Old Man Blackie said: Any day now, you're going attract us a bear!

Then, that autumn, they really did run into a bear out in the poppy field.

Just like Old Man Blackie had said, the bear grabbed Blackie by the arms, but instead of running away Blackie just stood there, trying to kick the bear in the chest.

Old Man Blackie yelled, Play dead! Play dead!

But instead of playing dead, Blackie stood stock still and the bear started laughing, just like Old Man Li had said he would. That bear was laughing so hard it was crying.

Then, lo and behold, as Blackie stood there watching, it really did pass out. When Blackie took his arms out of the bamboo tubes he didn't run away either, saying, Stupid bear! Then he took out a knife wanting to lop off a bear paw and he would have done it too, if his old man hadn't dragged him off.

Only, this time leaving the mountains they were in such a rush that Old Man Li slipped and fell off a cliff.

The cliff was about thirty feet high, which would have been bad enough, but at the bottom of the cliff there was a big stump and nothing else. When Old Man Blackie fell, he landed on his head, right smack on the stump. After Blackie climbed down, he scratched his head and said: Where's your head got off to pa?

As it turned out his old man's head had gotten shoved clear up into the chest cavity.

After his old man died, Blackie was an orphan. Wang Shizhen helped him bury the body, saying: Guess you're all

alone now. Come on then, you can count on me for you grain ration from now on.

‘Getting a grain ration’ was slang for carrying gun in the army, which is also why soldiers were called ‘grain.’

At any rate, that’s how Blackie became a policeman in Lightside town.

When they gave Blackie a gun, it seemed so natural in his hand it was like it had grown there all on its own. He didn’t clean the gun but he was always saying that the gun had to eat: whether it was an eagles or a swallow, he shot at them just the same. Once he saw a dog lying in the road in the street, so he shouted: Scram! But the dog didn’t have the good sense to scam, and Blackie’s gun was hungry. So he

pulled the trigger, and the bullet came out all shiny and salivated over. It landed square in the dog's head, which blossomed crimson, with a piece of tongue flying out and landing by Blackie's feet.

At the time, the Communist Party was occupying Yan'an in northern Shaanxi, and out on the plains just over the mountains, everybody was turning red, which is to say communist.

Although there was no shortage of troops in the Southern Mountains, strict precautions were being taken in terms of joint security. Wang Shizhen went to each village personally to lead the preparations himself, arriving in the village of Barbarian Plain on March 24. Barbarian Plain was

on Grass Mountain, near the old mule track. Pack teams and porters were often passing through, and just like how you can't get wheat without straw, the bandits on Grass Mountain were as notorious and they were numerous.

Some of the bandits had guns, and some had pieces of wood wrapped in red cloth pretending to be guns. Some of the bandits living in the mountains used to be farmers. Maybe it all changed one day when they were planting potatoes and a passing porter stopped to call out: Brother, a word if you please!

To which the farmer undoubtedly said: You're not from the Southern Mountains, are you?

Porter: How do you know I'm not from Southern Mountains?

Farmer: People from around here have full faces and sound like a gong when they talk. But you're all skin and bones and you talk like a foreigner.

Porter: Hey, I'm thirsty. Where can I find water?

Farmer: There's water in that gourd, over there. Take as much as you want.

When he saw there was full gourd on the ground, he said a few words of thanks, taking out his wallet from his pack to compensate the farmer for his trouble.

Just as the porter was bending to take the gourd though, the farmer's hoe caved in the back of his head.

The farmer took the valuables and dug a pit to bury the porter in. As he dug, he said: What kind of head is that, anyway? Might as well have been made out of egg shells, you ask me.

After he was done he probably went back to planting potatoes.

That's why Grass Mountain isn't safe, Wang Shizhen told Blackie. You gotta pay attention up there, you hear?

Blackie nodded, his thick neck bending as he said: Who dares rob me? I'd like to rob him, see if I didn't!

That night they were staying in the home of the police chief of Barbarian Plains. Wang Shizhen and the police chief were drinking while Blackie stood guard out in the courtyard.

Around midnight there was a sudden spot of light on the wall.

At first he thought it had been a cat, so he took a shot at it.

There was a thump on the other side of the wall, and someone shouted: Murderer!

Because the thing he'd shot was actually a person and not a cat at all.

It turned out that some of the village idlers had found out that Wang Shizhen was staying at the police chief's home. They'd all heard rumors that Wang Shizhen was so fat his trousers were wider around the waist than they were long in the leg. So they'd climbed up on the wall to sneak a peek. One of them had been smoking a cigarette, which explained

the strange light Blackie had seen. The bullet had gone in through his mouth, and come out the back of the head.

Three months later, the police chief of Barbarian Plains had come to visit their office in the county seat. He said that grave of the man who'd been shot was already covered in thick grass.

Wang Shizhen asked Blackie: Do you ever have nightmares about that night?

Blackie said: No.

Wang Shizhen said: Still, you should go to the man's grave and burn some paper money just in case.

So Blackie went, but instead of burning paper money when he got there he took a long piss. Before he left though,

he made sure to plant a peach-wood stake in the ground, just in case.



A half-year later, three strange occurrences took place in Lightside town.

The first was an old woman in Tea Aunt Village who lost her son and daughter-in-law after they were stung to death by hornets while collecting pig forage up in the mountains. They left behind an infant son who wouldn't stop crying for milk. Finally, the old woman stuffed her dry and withered nipple into her grandson's mouth. Still not finding any milk, the infant went back to crying.

Trying to soothe him, she said: There, there, listen to granny!

The infant didn't understand but the cat cried: Granny!

The second time it did it, she was out discussing the weather out in the lane with some of the other villagers. Up came the cat, mewling: Granny, Granny.

The villagers were scared stiff, saying that a talking cat was bad omen. Later, when she wasn't paying attention, they strangled the thing. The Master of Songs met the old woman while singing funeral songs in Tea Auntie Village. She brought up the cat straightaway—he could tell it was sore spot for her.

After Tea Auntie village, the Master of Songs headed for Three Steps county, with the old woman and her grandson in tow. She said she was going to live with relatives. At the time, the cornstalks were half as high a person, and it rained every day. They walked together, her carrying her grandson on her back, her hands clamped on the two little feet sticking out on either side of her waist.

The woman spent the whole trip nattering on, saying:
Hold tight to my neck, love, so that the wolves won't be able to steal you from behind!

The Master of Songs asked her about the business with the cat, and she said: If people can talk like pigs and look like apes, then how come a cat can't learn to talk like me and you?

The Master of Songs smiled and thought that her grandson looked a little cat-like: pointed ears, big eyes, and just sitting there, not moving except to scratch his nose with both hands.

Later on, her grandson settled Windswept Lodge village in Three Steps county. His name was Liu Xueren, and he was a cadre in the local commune.

The second strange occurrence was a series of shooting stars. Each time, the sky was clear and bright. But the people on the ground were afraid that they were going to be hit, so they hid under the stone weirs along the river banks, or lay down in the furrows of their fields, hands over their heads.

But every single one landed on Mount Truth.

When word got out that shooting stars were actually called meteors, and could be worth something to collectors in the capital, people rushed over to Mount Truth to bring them back, making a tidy profit for themselves.

One man, a Mr. Lei, got up early and arrived at Mount Truth before the sun was up. Since it was still early, he sat for a time on a fallen tree, smoking his pipe. He sat there, smoking and smoking, until finally the bowl was spent and it came time to ash. When he knocked the hot bowl of ashes onto the dead tree though, he was scared stiff when he saw it move!

That's probably about when he realized he had been sitting on an enormous python all along. Even though the

python didn't hurt him, he was so scared he passed out and fell into a coma. When the sun came up and the others arrived they carried him back to the village.

And that's how Mr. Lei turned into a human vegetable.

After hearing about the giant python on Mount Truth, the people living up in the mountains sent out hunting party after hunting party until they finally tracked it down and killed the serpent. It's said that all the trees withered and died in the valley where they killed the python. Afterwards the wind would whistle through the place, carrying a rank stench with it.

The final strange occurrence was the business with Kuang San.

Everybody in the Southern Mountains knows the stories about Commander Kuang San during the revolution, but who else can tell you about what he was like when he was just a child?

Even when he was little, Kuang San had a mouth so big he could stuff his whole fist inside. As they say in the Southern Mountains:

A great big gob always does the job

It opens every door

East, west, and the rest

But try telling that to Kuang San's pa, who was always complaining the boy was going to eat them out of house and home.

He really did eat more than most kids his age. If the other kids could make do with two bowls of millet, Kuang San could polish off four bowls and still not want to set his chopsticks down.

Every meal at their house ended the same way, with Kuang San's father saying: Enough already! And then he would snatch the chopsticks and bowl away from the child.

The family sold everything they owned, putting the money into food and drink, and it still wasn't enough. Seeing that things couldn't go on like this, Kuang San's father found a piece of rope, wanting to strangle the child in his sleep.

But instead of strangling him, Kuang San's father took the boy out to beg with him.

Knowing that a father could have no love in heart for a son like this, Kuang San decided his goal in life would be to contradict his father, no matter what:

If his father said white, he said black, and if his father said that the moon is round, then Kuang San said it was flat. When they were out begging and came to a fork in the road, if Kuang San's father wanted to go to this village, then Kuang San would want to go to that village. Always at cross purposes, father and son always thought they knew best.

In the village, every household had a dog, so father and son took to carrying cudgels for self-defense. Kuang San wasn't afraid of dogs, though—whenever dogs lunged at him, he would lunge right back, stopping them right in their

tracks. It didn't matter what dog it was, after that they'd just sit there, wagging their tails at him.

When he was out begging, he took to stealing the dried persimmon hanging from the eaves of strangers houses, or pulling radishes from other people's fields. When the rightful owners gave chase, he would throw his begging basket to one side and hop over a wall. Without the basket, he could jump thirty feet straight up in the air, high enough to clear even the highest garden walls.

When he was thirteen, his father died. Just before he died though, he got to worrying that his son would bury him in the soft mud beside the river to save trouble. Knowing how stubborn his son was, he decided to try a little reverse

psychology on the boy, saying: Son, when I breath my last, whatever you do, don't bury me up in the mountains. Just wrap me up in a mat and bury me by the river bank.

But when father died, Kuang San said: For more than ten years now, I haven't done what my father asks even once. This time, for once, I should listen to him.

So Kuang San buried his father on the banks of the Backflow River, just he'd asked. And just like his father had feared, in late autumn, when the river flooded, the grave was washed out and disappeared without a trace.

When he heard what happened, Wang Shizhen joked about it for months. He said: I'd rather have raised a fucking pig than have a son as dumb as that!

Of course, Wang Shizen was only saying that because he didn't have any sons of his own.

Not having any sons was the whole reason Wang Shizhen had taken a concubine in the first place. The concubine had been a performer in an opera troupe. She was uncommonly beautiful, and had a fine hand for the *huqin*, a two-string fiddle fitted with a snakeskin sound box and played with a horsehair bow.

Even though, in all the years since their marriage, she had never gotten pregnant, whenever Wang Shizhen was upset, the concubine would calm his nerves with a tune from the local style of opera.

One time, Wang Shizhen and the concubine had been drinking wine and playing music out in the courtyard under the grape arbor. Around midnight Wang Shizhen called for Blackie to go into his study and bring out the heavy wool jacket to drape over his shoulders. The jacket, cut in the style of Sun Yat-sen's, had four pockets to represent the four social virtues of the legalist classic, the *Writings of Master Guan*: propriety, righteousness, integrity, and shame. It had five buttons, one for each branch of government provided for in the constitution of the Republic: Control, Examination, Executive, Judicial Legislative. And it had three buttons on each cuff, to represent Sun Yat-sen's three principles of the people: nationalism, democracy, and welfare. A fine coat like

this was mark of a high official, and as the Party Secretary, Wang Shizen was the only person in the whole of Lightside town to own one.

When Blackie went to get the coat, he couldn't help but try it on. Standing in front of the mirror, the concubine caught sight of him in the coat from her vantage point in the courtyard. When he came out to drape the coat over Wang Shizhen's shoulders, she made a face and stopped playing, saying: Come on now, shake the dirt out!

Blackie said: What dirt? I don't see any dirt.

The concubine said: There's dirt on you!

Wang Shizhen didn't know what they were talking about, but Blackie understood what she meant right away. He

hurried over and pulled the coat off of Wang Shizhen's shoulders, shaking it out before putting it back, making sure that the concubine got a good look. As he did, he told Wang Shizhen about the business with the giant python on Mount Truth.

Wang Shizhen said: Was the python really as big as they say it was?

Blackie said: You should get them to use the skin to make a new *buqin* for Miss Meng.

Wang Shizhen: That's right! I really should!

So the next day, Wang Shizhen took Blackie to Mount Truth. Just before they left, Blackie told the concubine: That python was probably over a thousand years old when it died!

The concubine didn't look impressed.

But Wang Shizhen said: Blackie, tell me the truth. Isn't she as pretty as a flower sometimes?

When they got to Mount Truth, they learned that the man who had led the group to kill the python was called Lei Bu. He was none other than the son of Mr. Lei, the man who had been turned into a human vegetable.

Blackie walked right into his home and said: The Party Secretary is here to see the python skin!

But Lei Bu wasn't home. Instead, an old woman sat on the *kang*, massaging an old man. The man, presumably Mr. Lei, was unconscious, his body shrunken like an infant. Walking

out the backdoor, Wang Shizhen saw that the python skin was nailed to the cliff opposite the house.

The cliff was only thirty feet from the back door, but a deep gully was wound past the base of the cliff. The gully was so deep that when Blackie threw a stone down, he could count the time before he heard it hit bottom on two hands.

The old lady came out and motioned him away, saying: That python skin doesn't belong to no man. My son put it there to bring his pa's soul back.

Blackie said: How did your son even get over there?

The old lady said: There used to be an old hanging bridge. After he hung up the skin, he was worried someone would try and steal it so he cut the ropes on the bridge.

Blackie wasn't going to give up so easily though, so he walked up the gully until he found a log that had fallen across. It hadn't been put there by anyone, though, so he guessed that it had been struck by lightning and just happened to fall into place. Already rotten, the surface of the log was thick with moss and bracken.

When Wang Shizhen saw what Blackie was planning, he said: I won't allow it! It's too dangerous!

But Blackie said: We need that python skin!

And just like that, he jumped out on the log. Just as he did, clouds of steam wafted up from the gully, and Blackie stood there, cursing: Dog fucker! While waving back and forth to try and keep his balance.

After squatting for a while he stood up again, this time using his rifle to balance. Step by step, he walked over to cliff face on the opposite bank, where he retrieved the python skin.

Using the same trick to get back, he had just stepped off the log with the python skin in hand, when there was great crack behind him as the old log broke into three pieces and fell into the gully.

To reward Blackie's bravery, when they got back to town Wang Shizhen wanted to promote him to platoon leader. Only the concubine disagreed, saying: It's really frightening if you think about it. If Blackie cares so little

about his own life, then why should he care about the lives of his men?

Wang Shizhen said: He was only risked his life on my behalf, though!

So that's how Blackie became an officer, with a Mauser box-pistol at his side. When people asked about crossing the log all he could say was that he had been given a tough lot in life and he had to make the best of it.

He might be a platoon leader today, but that wasn't going to satisfy him, not by a long shot.



When December rolled around again, Wang Shizhen started complaining about his back. Blackie said that the thing for it

was to fortify the kidneys, so he took him to Cool Breeze Station to eat ‘coined meat’ — a local delicacy.

Cool Breeze Station was located to the west of the Lightside township. Even though it was just a village, it was more impressive than the township, with two main streets, and stores stocked with everything you could imagine. It was especially known for the quantity — and quality — of its donkeys. The donkey meat business was booming, especially donkey dicks, which they boiled and cured for a month at a time in a special mix of forty-eight spices. After taking them out and slicing them crossways, they would serve them cold, arranged on a platter like copper coins, round on the outside

and square on the inside. That's where the name came from.

There were six different places in Cool Breeze Station that served coined meat, which they promoted for its fortifying effect on the *yang*, or male, energy. To attract customers they had taken to setting the penises in wine jugs, with the tip flopping out top.

As was his custom, Wang Shizhen went straight to the Yan Family Restaurant. Only it just so happened that Chef Yan had died just the day before. The family was in the middle of holding the funeral, so Wang Shizhen headed over to Developing Virtue across the way instead. When the owner of the restaurant saw Wang Shizhen coming he made a show of

taking out a young jack ass setting it in the wooden frame they had built just for this. Then he brought out a pretty little jenny and walked her around the jack, who had no sooner gotten stiff than the cutters snuck up from behind with a sharpened paint scraper and hacked off their prize. This was meant to prove that his restaurant only served coined meat that had been made fresh, from fully erect donkey dicks cut from real live jacks. As they worked, they sang a song:

Heaven help the woman

Whose man had a belly full of coined meat.

And take pity on the man

Whose woman sneaks a bite coined meat.

But worst off of all

Is your poor old bed

After husband and and wife

Share a meal of coined meat!

When word of all this got back to the Yan Family

Restaurant, the faces of whole Yan family twisted up all

unhappy. I was there that day, singing funeral songs. Chef

Yan's brother made a point of coming over to ask me to do

my best to open up a path to the underworld that day so that

Wang Shizhen might come over and take a look.

Opening a path was something that every funeral singer had to do at the start of the rites. Standing out in the middle of the intersection of the two main streets, I lit up a bonfire and bowed to heaven and bowed to earth. I wasn't me anymore, I was the Master of Songs, I was an officer of the Jade Court.

Boundless energy flowed into my body, and I saw a halo appear over the head of every person in the crowd. My bamboo pole bucked like a stallion that had been tied fast to the stoutest tree and the sound of my drum was like thunder and rain. My eyes closed, I was drumming and singing as I walked back the hall of mourning that had been set up in the Yan Family Restaurant.

Even though my eyes were closed, I didn't trip or stumble and I was standing stiff as a ramrod the whole way. Chef Yan's sons followed behind, taking the folded strips of hemp paper, meant to represent money, and setting them on the ground, where they burned them to send them into the next realm, with their father.

First, I called for the heavens to open up their doors.

Second, I implored his sons to pick a good site for his grave, and not stint the expense of a good casket and a fine set of clothing.

Third, I beseeched the gods of the three realms and the ancestors of the Yan family to join us in the funeral hall to pay respects to the late Chef Yan.

Fourth, I reminded the assembled guests that life and death are the only constants and to not be sad.

Fifth, I praised the deceased for setting up the family business, pride and joy of the whole Yan family.

By the time I had arrived at the entrance to the hall of mourning, my back was already soaked with sweat. Chef

Yan's were already inside, pouring libations, and burning incense and paper money. Sobbing, they beseeched the heavens, and I saw the tracks of the gods and ghosts in the ashes. Each was in his or her place.

Only Wang Shizhen was still missing.

All night I sang: *The Song of Respects Paid, the Song of Flattery, the Song of Remorse, the Song of Begging for Good Fortune.* Arriving from the busy thoroughfares of Cool Breeze Station, family and friends arrived from far and wide, and neighbors came from all around. Some brought incense and hemp strips, while others brought rice and dried meat.

Wang Shizhen still didn't com, but Kuang San did.

Kuang San showed up while the family was serving food to their guests. He took a bowl and fished out a pile of noodles.

He fished out so many that his bowl couldn't hold them all, so took hold of the ends and shoved them into his mouth, just like that.

Then he shouted: Where's the salt? Where's the vinegar? You got any chili oil to spice this up?

Someone sitting beside him hissed: 'This is funeral! We're here to pay our respects! What are you shouting about?'

Kuang San stopped shouting and shuffled over to the far wall, where he sat down, still muttering about how there wasn't even any garlic.

This was the same Kuang San I'd met three days earlier.

At the time, I'd already spent a month in Cool Breeze Station. I was staying the Temple of Lord Guan, at the east end of Station Street. All the servers at Developing Virtue knew who I was, of course, but I got along best with old Baldy. Besides for coined meat, Developing Virtue also sold

donkey burgers. All day long, they sent their servers out on the streets to with boxes of the things, fresh out of kitchen. At night though, it was Baldy's turn. A lantern was fixed to the food box, and in the dark like that, nobody looked twice at Baldy's head.

One night, I was on my way back from singing funeral songs for another family in Cool Breeze Station, when I ran into Baldy, who said he would walk with me back to the Temple of Lord Guan.

Suddenly Baldy said: How many families have you sung for around here this month?

I said: Five.

Baldy said: If I was head of a clan, I wouldn't let you come and sing for us. As soon as you show up, people start dying!

I said: If I didn't come, the dead wouldn't be able to start out on the Six Paths and the whole village would be full of ghosts.

When I said that, Baldy looked all around, like he was afraid there really were ghosts. To help calm him down I decided to teach him how to keep the ghosts away: When you're walking

at night, touch your thumb to the base of your ring finger. If you make a fist and hold it tight the evil spirits wouldn't be able to worm their way in.

Baldy has just balled up his fists when we walked past an earthen threshing shed with a pile of wheat straw inside.

Suddenly, we both saw a wolf crawling out of the straw pile. It went straight for my donkey burger. But when we looked more closely we discovered it wasn't a wolf at all—the tail was curved, like a dog.

Even more surprising though, was the man who crawled out after the dog. When he stood so that we could see his face,

Baldy said: Kuang San? What were you doing under there with that dog?

Kuang San said: The dog was cold, eh? If I didn't hug it, it would have frozen death!

Not entirely voluntarily, we threw him the donkey burger.

But it wasn't enough, so he asked for more, saying: Gramps, if you give me one, I'll pay you back, I swear!

He picked up a handful of roof tile shards and buried them in the ground, patting the earth down with his foot. Then he pissed on packed dirt, and said: When you come back to dig

this up it'll be gold nuggets! But Baldy and I ignored him, taking the box of donkey burgers with us.



Kuang San of course had an appetite like a wolf, so when he finished the first bowl of noodles he went and served himself a second bowl. When he saw that I was there too, he came over to talk. He said: So you eat, too, huh?

I said: I got a stomach, don't I?

He said: Eat, eat. Don't matter how hungry dead men are,
they can't eat, can they?

He asked again: When people die, that's really it, huh?

I said: That depends on if they leave or not.

He said: Ain't that that one in the same thing?

I said: Some people die, and people go and forget him. Some
people die and people still remember, so they never really
leave, do they?

He said: That's gonna be me. I'm gonna die but I won't leave.

They'll remember me when I'm gone.

I said: I bet you're right. People will be telling stories about you for a long time after you're gone.

A strange feeling came over me all of a sudden, and I looked over at him, remembering what he'd said about the buried tile shards turning into the gold. That's when I first started thinking that Kuang San wasn't like other people.

But instead of telling him that, I just laughed and said:

They'll remember you alright! Who could forget that mouth of yours?

He scowled and said: They hate me and my big mouth, always begging for food. But they should be so lucky to feed mouth like mine! That's why in my book, the Yan Family Restaurant is worth ten Developing Virtues!

I laughed again: So they wouldn't give you food, huh?

He said: They can all fuck off and die for all I care!



Before he'd come over to the Yan Family Restaurant, Kuang San really had gone to Developing Virtue.

Wang Shizhen had been there, eating coined meat. The owner had heated up a bottle of his best wine, and called for fried peanuts and strips of cold pressed tofu to be brought.

The last dish still hadn't been set on the table when Kuang San barged in and said: The rats are fighting up on the roofbeams!

While everyone was looking up, Kuang San made off with the plate of cold pressed tofu. The owner rushed after him and

had just caught up with him when Kuang San hocked two loogies onto the plate of food.

Wang Shizhen just laughed and said: Don't bother, let the boy eat. Come on now, tell me a little about yourself!

The owner of Developing Virtue said: He's a common beggar. Who knows where the bastard came from. He's already been bothering us for a good half year now.

Wang Shizhen said: How the world did you end up like this, boy? And I say, that mouth of yours really is something else! It takes up half your face!

Wang Shizhen continued to eat his coined meat and drink his wine, while the clouds up in the sky wove together like a great piece of roughspun cloth. As he watched the sky turn red and then yellow, he suddenly caught sight of a young woman sitting in the doorway opposite the restaurant, selling bean sprouts.

He guessed she couldn't have been a day over eighteen, and he noticed that as she held the steelyard with one hand and measure out the bean sprouts with the other, she leaned backward ever so slightly to stretch out her leg to keep a rogue chicken from running past.

Nonplussed, the chicken pecked at the embroidered flower on the girl's shoe.

Wang Shizhen was immediately overcome and wondered if he had stumbled into a dream. He coughed twice, and said:
My word! What a pretty sight!

Blackie said: Oh, the clouds in Cool Breeze Station are like this all the time.

But Wang Shizhen ignored him completely, not eating or drinking. Instead, he moved his chair to front steps of the restaurant for a better look.

While she weighed the bean sprouts, he noticed that she kept a hair clip held her lips. As she fixed a loose tuft of hair, she seemed to become aware that someone was watching her, and she around, her gaze darting blindly like a tongue feeling for a sore spot. When she saw Wang Shizhen, her face flushed a deep crimson, and she yelled at the chicken: Shoosh!

But the chicken didn't move, and she hurriedly gathered up the basket of bean sprouts and retreated into the courtyard, leaving bean sprouts scattered on the ground.

She left the twin doors of the courtyard open, however. Two door god prints had been pasted on either side of the doorway. On the left was Qin Qiong and the right was Yuchi Jingde, both mighty generals of Sui who had remained loyal against the traitorous general Wang Shichong, and helping to found the Great Tang.

Wang Shizhen sighed and went back to his table and the coiled meet. He said: A work of art!

Blackie looked confused: A work of art?

Wang Shizhen just laughed.

The next day, the clan elder of Cool Breeze Station took fifty silver dollars to the family of the young woman to propose marriage. When her parents learned he was inquiring on Wang Shizhen's behalf, and that the dowry would be so generous, he said: What can we do?

The clan elder said: You have to agree!

But the young woman's parents had expected that at dawn of the day after the marriage proposal, when the chickens were still in their roost, Blackie arrived with a sedan chair to take their daughter to town hall in Lightside village. It threw them into a panic, to see their daughter taken away just like

that, but Blackie wouldn't budge. So, seeing nothing for it, her mother picked out two blue-on-white porcelain bowls and filled them with rice noodles, telling her daughter to take them with her. They said:

With rice noodles in your bowl,

Hunger and thirst you'll not know

That night, Wang Shizhen had braziers placed in all four corners of the two side rooms of city hall. He arranged for a bath to be drawn, using handfuls of dried plum blossoms to scent the hot water. After she had finished bathing, he had a sturdy wood-framed bed carried into the room, which he

surrounded with red candles, each as thick as her arm,
lighting the room up as bright as day.

After carrying the young woman onto the bed, Wang Shizhen went and sat in the antique folding chair to smoke his water pipe. She asked for a blanket, but Wang Shizhen refused. She asked for clothing, but Wang Shizhen refused again. So the young woman curled up in a ball, hiding her face from him in shame.

Wang Shizhen said he would join her as soon as he had finished smoking his waterpipe. She watched as he rolled the shredded tobacco leaves between two fingers, his movements

slow and methodical. After packing the bowl of the pipe, he lit the punk, blowing softly on the open flame until he had coaxed a deep red ember to life. Pressing the ember to the tobacco in the bowl, he took short, sucking draws from the pipe, exhaling blue curls of smoke high into the room.

That whole night, Wang Shizhen only said two things: 'soft jade' and 'damp snow.' He sat there smoking and watching the young woman until the sun came up.

Then Wang Shizhen put the pipe down, and walked out of the room. Stretching and yawning, he said to Blackie: She

didn't want me to see. Well, I've seen all there is too see. You can take her back now.

Blackie said: Take her back?

Wang Shizhen: I'm going to bed.

When Blackie went into the room to tell the girl what Wang Shizhen had said she broke into tears and before he could stop her, she had smashed her head into the headboard, causing a blood blister to form on her forehead.

Grabbing hold of her shoulders, Blackie told her not to cry.

He tried to get her gather up her things, but she wouldn't get

up. Taking the blanket, Blackie scooped her up only to have her throw the blanket open.

That was the first time Blackie had seen a naked woman.

He grabbed her again, pushing her long legs back into the blanket.

When Blackie went to report to Wang Shizhen, his face was as red as a beet. He said: She tried to kill herself by slamming her head against the bed. If you don't want her, why don't you give her to me?

Wang Shizhen stared at Blackie for a moment, his eyes as wide as saucers: If I don't want her, that's my business. Don't tell me you want to be my in-law!

So Blackie went back into the room and knocked the girl unconscious with a single blow. Taking the blanket, he wrapped her up and started the long trek back to Cool Breeze Station, carrying the bundle on his back.



The girl's name was Fourth-phoenix, and her brother was known as Three-seas. Three-seas was knife-man who gelded pigs and fixed dogs. He had just gotten from a job in another village back the day before Blackie showed up with his sister and the two of them quickly fell to blows.

Finding him to be a formidable opponent, Blackie said: I've got a gun! Thank your sister that I'm not going to use it!

Three-seas parents pulled their son away, saying that Blackie had nothing to do with. Falling to the ground, they knocked their foreheads against the earth in grief, crying: What an evil act, what an evil act!

Three-seas stopped trying to fight Blackie, cursing the sun instead: I swear I'm going to castrate Wang Shizhen if it's the last thing I do!

After that instead of turning into enemies, given their similar temperaments, Blackie and Three-seas became friends.

A few days after the fight, Blackie showed up at their house again. Since he had a gun, he could take chickens from any house he pleased, so he brought a chicken and told Three-seas to break out the wine. When the two of them had gotten into their cups, Blackie told Three-seas that he wanted to take Fourth-phoenix as his wife. To which Three-seas said: If you finish this jug I'll bring her the news myself!

And just like that, Blackie took the great earthen jug in two arms and drank it down.

Just then, Three-seas' old man was outside, arguing with someone. As it turned out, Three-seas kept a dog that had made a habit of visiting the bitch next door. Every time they kicked him out, he always came right back, even sooner than the last time. Last night, the two of them, the dogs, had been crying on the roof.

Old man Three-seas said: I didn't know dogs could cry.

To which the neighbor said: Well, they can!

Old man Three-seas: In that case, it must have that bitch of yours that was crying.

Neighbor: She wouldn't be crying if your mutt would leave her alone!

Hearing raised voices, Blackie came out and said: Which one is your bitch?

The neighbor pointed and said: The one on the left.

And before anyone could stop him, Blackie pulled out his gun and shot the dog on the left in one fluid movement. They watched in silence as it toppled off the roof and landed with a dull thud on the ground.

Then Blackie pressed his gun to the forehead of the neighbor, saying: Do you know who I am? If you bother my father-in-law again I'll give you a bullet to chew on!

The neighbor was so scared he fell to the ground, and Blackie did too, blackout drunk.

Blackie spent that night at Three-seas' nursing a hangover.

When he was out of earshot, Three-seas' old man asked his son: How come Blackie said I was his father-in-law?

Three-seas said: Oh, he was just drunk is all.

When Blackie woke up the next day, he thought he might pay a visit to Fourth-phoenix but she was in the side room and wouldn't come out.



On the 15th day of the 7th lunar month, Blackie went into the provincial capital to take care of some business for Wang

Shizhen. While visiting the City God Temple, he was surprised to run into his cousin.

There wasn't anything special about the City God Temple, other than the ginkgo trees outside the gate, which were a famous sight in the province. They were so big around you had to have four people holding hands to fit all the way around, and more than three-hundred feet tall. Every autumn, after the leaves turned, the reflection of the golden yellow foliage lit up the whole City God Temple splendidly.

Only, for the last two weeks, the ginkgos had been giving off a thick, black smoke which could be seen from clear across the capital. Actually, it wasn't smoke at all, it only looked

like smoke. It was a storm of gnats of some sort that had taken to the air just above the trees. From time to time, the gnats would clump up like a great big straw hat, and fly around the city, while at other times they would break out into wavy lines which looked like smoke at first glance.

The phenomenon had been occurring once a day, and lasted about as long as it took to smoke two bowls of tobacco in a waterpipe.

Blackie had been watching the strange sight, when he was suddenly realized someone was poking him in the back.

Spinning around, he pulled his Mauser out and raised it to fire. Just before he did, though, he saw that it was his cousin.

His cousin came from a wealthy family that lived on the Plain of Ten-thousand Bays. They'd sent him to university in the provincial capital, and he hadn't been back home in over ten years. Blackie thought he looked as handsome and well put-together as ever, and noted the new pair of glasses which gave him an air of scholarly refinement.

He told Blackie that since he had started working as a teacher in the capital middle school three months prior he had changed his name, to Li Desheng, or Li 'Virtuous Victory.' For his part, Blackie told his cousin about how he'd

been working as a police officer in Lightside town, and that he had just been promoted to platoon leader.

Reunited by happy coincidence, the two men, one a man of letters and the other a man of the sword, made their way to a local tavern for a round of drinks.

Just before parting ways, Blackie said: Whatever you need, just come find me and I'll take care of it!

And after that Li Desheng really did make a habit of coming to look for Blackie — always for drinks though, and never

for favors. Once, he brought a him a book. Blackie couldn't read, and didn't own any books.

He liked the wide leather belt Li Desheng wore though. Ever since he started wearing a belt his vest was always falling open, and the Mauser's heavy wooden gun holster was always weighing him down and making him lean forward when he walked.

When they drank, Blackie was always asking Li Desheng about life in the capital. Li Desheng said China had fallen to the warlords and nobody knew who was in charge anymore. It was a total mess.

Blackie said: Hell, even I know that. The man with the gun is king these days.

Then Li Desheng started talking about how all the young people in the capital were going out on the streets to march against corruption and support progress. There had been bloody clashes between the students and the military police, and many of the protesters had fled to communist stronghold in Yan'an.

Blackie said: The KMT cadres are always shouting about how we need to oppose communism. The less we say about them the better, eh?

Li Desheng didn't say anything but instead suggested that they go out for a drink.

And as usual, as soon as he got drunk, Blackie started going on about Fourth-phoenix.



One day, the two of them took a day trip out to Green Oak Dale. Li Desheng had a craving for potato cakes, so Blackie

went and knocked on the door the first house he saw and asked them to whip up a batch.

The house had been home to family of four: the son had left to work as a carpenter in town, and his wife had taken their child back to her village to live with her parents. The only one left was the carpenter's father, a crippled old man of about sixty. He proved friendly enough, though, and he readily agreed to their request.

When the potatoes had finished boiling, he took out a stone mortar and wooden pestle to mash them up. Li Desheng

volunteered to take his place, asking the old man: How are you keeping up out here, all by yourself?

The old man said: What d'ya mean, keeping up? I just live day by day, that's all.

When the potatoes had been mashed well and good, the old ma put them in a steamer to tray to finish them off.

Then he took out his pipe and said: You boys look hungry alright. The potatoes cakes will be done soon enough. So Blackie and Li Desheng went to sit and talk out under the tree just outside the entrance to the house.

A pair of eagles circled high overhead, emerging from behind the opposite ridge. Their wings were long and narrow-looking, and they looked like sticks twirling through the air.

Li Desheng asked Blackie how things were with Wang Shizhen in town hall, saying: He's got a bad reputation, you know. But what do I know? He gave you a gun, so how bad can he be?

Blackie said: Don't bite the hand that feeds ya, that's what I always say.

Li Desheng said: When tadpoles swim with fish they tend to lose their tails.

Blackie said: Fuck it. Can't predict the future, no point in trying.

Li Desheng laughed: You're a big man now, though! You've got a gun! That's power!

Blackie said: That's what everybody says. Guess that's the why people carry them, huh?

As he spoke, he unholstered the pistol and aimed in the direction of a trellis of hanging gourds: Which one should I try and hit?

Li Desheng said: Let me try this time.

So Blackie handed him the gun, saying: Be careful that it doesn't go off on accident!

But before he'd even finished warning him, the gun had already gone off, hitting one of the eagles square on.

Blackie look stunned and said: You know how to use a gun?

In response, Li Desheng pulled a gun out of his tunic, an even more expensive model than Blackie's Mauser. Blackie's jaw dropped.

That's when Li Desheng told him that he'd just gotten back from Yan'an.

Blackie said: So you got that gun from the communists?

Li Desheng shook his head and said: I am a communist!

When he heard that, Blackie jumped up and snatched his gun back.

Li Desheng just shrugged and handed own his gun to

Blackie, saying: Here, take it. You won't report me, will you?

Blackie stood for a moment, a gun in each hand, before he handed Li Desheng's gun back to him. Then he sat back down and said: As long as you don't kill me, what's there to report? Now we're equals — we both have guns! Who cares who you're carrying it for, we all gotta make a living, right?

But Li Desheng said: There's more to life than just making a living though! Don't you want to take something for yourself?

Blackie's eyes got as big as copper bells and he said:
Something for myself?

Li Desheng said: I'm game if you are!

He'd just finished speaking when there was a sound from the house behind them. The looked back just in time to see the old man running away as quickly as his crippled legs would carry him.

Li Desheng's face got dark and he said: You suppose he heard something?

Blackie said: Even if he did, what does it matter?

But Li Desheng jumped up. Before running behind the house, he shouted: You don't get it, do you?

The old man had already reached the peppercorn tree halfway up the slope when Li Sheng shot him down.

When Blackie ran over though, he saw that the old man was still alive. The bullet had hit him in back, and blood was coming out in rhythmic spurts. A peppercorn flower was in one hand.

Blackie said: Fuck me, he was coming out for peppercorns to put in your potato cakes.

Li Desheng looked at Blackie and stammered: Why didn't you try and tell me that before I shot him?

But Blackie knew that Li Desheng wasn't making sense.

Emptying a round into the old man's head to put him out of his misery. A splatter of brains and bone and the body stopped moving.

Turning, Blackie said: I guess we're on our own now! I guess you could say the old man decided that for us.

[...]

Translated by Nick Stember.