

*The*  
GRASSHOPPER  
SHOE



CAROLYN LEACH-PAHOLSKI

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*For Mark and Gabriel*



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## *Acknowledgements*

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# PART ONE

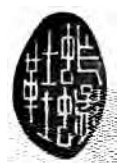
Between the earth and man arose the leaf. Between the heaven and man came the cloud. His life being partly as the flying vapour.

John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*,  
vol. V, part vii, ch1.

The mountains were great stone bells; they clang together like nuns. Who shushed the stars?

Annie Dillard,  
*Teaching a Stone to Talk:*  
*Expeditions and Encounters*

1846



The year the first daughter was born, a daughter after four sons. She was born feet first, her lips pulled back in a toothless roar, her black hair capped close to her skull, six fingers on one hand. Later, her mother said she was born already standing, her two plump feet paddling the air.

The pains came quickly. Her gut contracted as might a girdle pull to its limit. She gripped the back of a chair and stood for a while braced, her arms rods and her back arched, as a beast in harness strains against a load. The bullock finds the plough works easier after the first steps; there is a grease applied by momentum which builds on itself, and as though this thought fully occupied her mind she released her hold on the chair and stepped out. She walked an uneven route about the room, touching the walls as she came to them, seeking their cold impress. She took to her

bed, lay on her side, there were no easy postures. She felt the baby in her back. She had a clay brick heated and lay with it propped between her thighs.

By midmorning she was all red heat and bellowing, her pulse clapped into spires. She had a notion that the walls sweated and their paper curled and darkened, as before leaping into flame. By lunch she was easy. The baby had not come. She climbed back on her bed and tried to fix her mind on some pleasant thought, clouds wadded into pretty patterns, crisp shadows in the pleated neck of a gown, oranges. She counted the alternate branchings of a potted tree. She ate a little lunch, she pinned her hair under a hat. It came to her that her maid's torso had the profile of a carved table leg.

By evening she was nearly split in two. First the feet were born, then an arm, next the back and shoulder. The child rushed from her in one great evacuation.

'Wrong way, wrong way,' Ma put up a hand, her voice notched a full octave over its proper station. 'Ahhh! Wrong way.' She wagged her head but caught the red shining grub of a thing in her apron, the child's eyes sealed like steamed pastry, her too many fingers closing like a fan.

Later the woman would not look at Ling. She hauled in water, brought up a feeding gown; she reset a lacquer tray to tempt. Ling lay on her back and watched the lamplight flick into corners. Ma would not bring her the swaddled packet.

'Is she dead?' Ling asked. The voice came from some distant part of herself — from behind her ear perhaps, from the tip of

her right hand. She had already given birth enough times to unmoving children, their eyes sealed against the world, their tiny blue fists balled in silent protest.

Ma assured her that the baby was vital, hungry for the breast. 'Almost as big as a boy. And strong. So strong! She had my finger in her fist. I let her carry it. A baby must fasten ...' Her voice trailed.

'She is dead?' Ling asked again. There was a flatness, a lack of contour in her speech. It should not surprise her, a dead child, only bring on weariness and the discomfort of leaky breasts and some sort of hollowing. Confirmation would allow the putting down of hope. It would be as a breath sucked in — let go.

'I did not know that I was seeing right,' Ma was heaving out. 'She is such a size at first it did not trouble me. The hand ...' she puffed. She put up her own for illustration. She made a loose fist with one hand and with the other folded the fingers back.

'I uncurled the fingers ... even then I looked again ...' She stopped there, made a circling in the air with the heel of her hand as though polishing a surface. Ling understood this gesture to mean that what had gone before had been erased — confusion lifted like prints from glass. The maid attempted a fresh interpretation, holding one hand out, putting a finger of the other beside it. Ling could count, could she not? But she got a blank look blinked back. Why was she playing this guessing game?

'There is an extra finger.' She whispered it. It was no good thing to be the one to have discovered it.

Ling, her mouth opening to protest, closed it again, biting down on air. This was something she had not expected, seemingly more direct, more deliberate than a stillborn child.

‘Don’t say it. Don’t speak of it again, we must not give it voice,’ was all she could think to say. Ma brought the baby and they looked. As if not saying it could stop it. As though if the breath stopped in her nose, if the words stayed unsaid, time could fold back like a paper screen. The baby could climb back inside her body, shrinking to a grain of rice, her fingers contracting to nubs, to bumps, to petals on a small flower of a hand. Too late, she thought, for these things.

She had perhaps been overly proud of her sons, dressing them before their first birthdays as little men in quilted coats and hats that sat up on their sweet heads. Number one had worn pieced trousers from the first, a horsehair bracelet tied across his wrist. In the first year of his life she could not bear to be away from him. He sucked at her breast rather than on his nurse. He puked and sweated through infant fevers in her arms, he was never out of them. In his second year she nursed him through a scabby summer illness, spots appearing and covering his hot body within hours, crusts forming over his eyelids. After eight long days his skin healed, his eyes again cleared, his fists unclenched and he bawled. By now she too was marked with a ribbon of red blisters, her throat raw. The ghost of her hand unbuttoned her dress, found her breast, put the baby to it. His mouth drew something from her like a splinter.

With each child she had learnt that it did not do to flaunt your luck, to parade good fortune. Perhaps she should have done as the village women did with their men children, giving them girls’ names, false footbindings, leaving their hair unplaited.



There were tricks. With each child she learnt to curb the excesses of love, channelling the rush of feeling into the grooves of habit. Separating herself from the grub of new life in the first days, handing the baby to a nurse, reserving, pooling her private self, refusing to play up to hope.

The child's hand was strong, seeming not to be weakened by the presence of an extra finger. She turned it over. It was plump, red, creased, the knuckles dimpled — a glove as yet too large, slack on the grid of small bones. The right hand was a little larger than the left, the palm subtly increased in size to accommodate the sixth finger. It was formed as the smallest finger should be, a full joint smaller than the finger next to it, which was the same size as its neighbour with a long finger in the centre, a smaller one and then the thumb. The fourth finger had a twin, that's what it was and looking closely she could see that this might have been so, the two fingers so closely resembling each other.

She looked up at Ma and to her surprise the Good Luck woman smiled. 'Thank the immortals that this has happened with a girl,' she said. Ling nodded, feeling diminished, reduced instead of comforted.

'My husband?' she asked.

'We have sent Hu after him.'

# THE DEER



Ling's husband, Xi, was away from home on the day that his daughter was born. He rode on an arc of happiness, as an arrow is shot from a sound bow, knowing its mark. He was visiting Wei, a friend and a rival collector of porcelains. Wei's house was at An Le, a river town, neatly arranged about canals. It was walled long ago to keep out horsemen from the north — men who slept and ate on their mounts, who burnt fields, forests, farms, consuming the land, swallowing up cities. Children in An Le are still told by their grandmas of bow-legged horse-people who sleep in shadows and feed on bad deeds, coming for the children who don't wash their faces, who can't learn their lessons or forget to bind their hair.

Xi leaned over the neck of his mount, urging every step as though to aid its progress. He burned with news, news which, of all his colleagues or acquaintances, Wei would be the only one to fully comprehend. He has of course a pretext for his business.

They will talk of the disturbance in the settlements, the foreigners' foolish enterprise built out of mud, tall ships caught on tide turns and heeling. He will work the talk as a knot works along a string. Without being conscious of having been played along, Wei will ask him to look over his pieces. There, with the picking up or setting down of a jar, will be his opportunity.

'I have a new piece myself,' he rehearsed as he rode, or perhaps, 'I have recently had a piece of luck.'

He loved this man in the same way that he might have loved a brother, seeking out his company, looking always for his blessing but at the same time unable to curb the desire to inspire his envy. He knew him as well as one knows a sibling, as conscious of his familiar outline as of one's own. Their minds mirrored the same aesthetic sensibility; the bond between them magnetic in its polarity. Metal to metal, this was how Xi thought of it.

Their friendship has over time observed an odd geometry, an abstract, unpredictable symmetry, as though some invisible but irrefutable law governed the courtly dance steps which made their lives collide and jump apart again. There were odd parallels, an impenetrable ligature of shared experience. They had shared women, lodgings, lice, army life. Once they had fought bitterly over a woman, a singer. Xi was already married and had a son not yet a week old when Wei and he had sat watching this strange creature strut and thrust across a plank stage. They were simultaneously intent on every hand gesture, her painted mouth, the heartache of her voice like a knife pulled across a painted surface. They returned each night for a week, buying up the

theatre so that she stepped from the boards and danced within hand reach. Their eyes, twin beams, travelled over her every surface. Xi dared not breathe as she passed him and passed him again, stroking across his bosom and along his neck an encasement of charged air, just shy of touch. Wei twitched and jumped in his seat, overcome with urgency, wanting her to acknowledge his manly rank over his friend.

Later in the street they drew knives, facing each other swollen with drink and lust, the hostile sensibilities thickening the blood in their temples and lips. Wei fell on his companion, his desire for the singer driving the knife across Xi's face, along his shoulder and down the chest in one unbroken line. His friend fell in increments slowed by disbelief, travelling through every degree of vertical.

Sober, Wei kept vigil by Xi's bedside, the cut cheek humming with infection. At first Xi seemed to be in a sleep from which he could not wake. He seemed to struggle, to pull against currents which sought purchase on his infected frame. And Wei looked on, tended his friend and was humbled by the consequence of wine and lust mixed to touchfire.

The singer was revealed, when brought to bed, to be a boy. Wei had him not once but twice, enjoying his exotic painted body, his flat chest, full buttocks, his silence, acquiescence, Wei's hands roaming excitedly over the strangely familiar terrain. This adventure he never confided to his friend.

'My life is a strange parody of yours,' Xi had once told Wei as they sat beside a shot deer, in the hills above Wei's home. Its

foamy lips were specked with grass and leaves. Xi was twenty-six, Wei twenty-nine. They had slept in a dry riverbed, the sky over them chock with stars. Before the sun climbed they had picked their way up the mountain, Wei studying damp earth for traces, his fingers seeking an invisible trail in the leaves. He noted silently the animal writing fanning out from the ridge — the bare saddles rubbed through the bark of trees where the deer had moved in an exquisite itchy rocking, the bitter scent of trodden bracken, the clay scars in moss where rutting bucks sought purchase — his glance gathered them in. A single hare bolted from a fresh dug form, stiffened, his spooned ears turning, and looped back along the ridge.

They worked their way through trees and into open country. Xi stumbling along, his leggings furred with sticky seed and burrs, his face scratched, the unprotected skin on his neck fodder for small blood-feeding flies. Raising his arm to shield his eyes from the sun, he saw Wei notch an arrow to his bow and draw the gut as far back as it would give. The arrow flew — a trail of moving colour — a bright, silver, winking bird. Xi moved in slowly behind his friend, his cheeks flushed; he had not even seen the deer. But from the shadow of trees came a grim thud and the sound of hoofs vainly searching for footing.

Moving together the men searched out the thrashing, bending to the great creature as if to bring it aid. Wei brought down a slab of stone as a mallet on its skull. The rich, salty smell of blood hung over the deer, citrine, as though all the sweet grass it had cud, all the flowering mosses, the fragrant lichen, medicinal tree bark were loosed from his pelt. The beast was still.

It no longer rolled its black eyes or turned up the earth with its knees desperate to stand. It no longer heaved or panted. Xi was so relieved a tear rolled from his right eye, across his cheek, along his jaw, slowing as it sought logical symmetry at the apex of his chin.

‘I look at you and see myself remade, altered but at the quick the same,’ he said, wanting to hear his friend confirm his observation, reassure him, turn from this grim work and smile. Xi wanted a less flinty Wei, a man disposed less to the kill and more to company. The arrow in the deer’s side fixed in Xi a narrow breathless pain. He watched Wei cut it free and thrust his knife into the creature’s breast, cutting below the sternum and a finger to the left. The knife plunged to its limit, he pulled against the meat opening a passage for his hand. And then he put his fist into the wound, his hand feeling inside the carcass, tunnelling out the heart. Wei’s arm returned a shining crimson glove, the shot beast’s essence resting, a terrible accusation in his hand. There is surely a curse on blood so uselessly exposed, Xi thought. He watched as Wei unmade the heart, his knife cutting away flesh from the fear bone, the fatty knot which stopped up the stag’s own fright. This was Wei’s trophy, he would clean and dry the chalky vessel, perhaps encase it in a precious housing for his wife to wear. A buck’s fear bone was a known cure for every kind of prenatal nerves.

How simple it is, thought Xi, resting on his heels, how simple to take life. Life for the buck had been an interlocking pattern of strength and speed. There were not many it could not outrun. But it could not outstrip a man. A clever hunter could track it in his head. This was the merit of imagination. A man

could cut out a heart with the twist of a knife, not for hunger or need but for fancy.

Without turning to his friend, without speaking, still at the business of paring flesh from the heart's core, Wei considered Xi's argument. Were they from the same mould turned out twice?

The heart bone was a dark agated mass. He weighed it in his hand.

'No,' he decided, Xi had none of his punch, his stamina. They might share an eye for women, for porcelain, their lives may have run twin routes but Xi was soft, easily fired to strong feeling — weak. This well of feeling, this flaw, he mused, lay in his friend like a seed, dormant, passive and yet dangerous, a packet of unreasoning emotion.

# WEI



Xi could not help but think that Wei had pulled him here, his thoughts flying across the water like a hook reaching after the bowl. He knew the cost of parading good fortune. But at this moment he could only feel glory, exultation and a desire which heated him like a rash. Xi was at times humbled by his friend's gift for porcelain, he had more than once been grateful for his superior knowledge, his passion for clay. There was no-one else alive to his knowledge who could so appreciate what it was he had to say.

Xi knew that Wei had at one time travelled north to the clay fields, spoken with dust-choked haulers, their tongues thickened by the chalky air, their hair white under cloth caps, faces dusted finely with mineral silver. He had talked with these men, at work from sunrise, half-spent before noon, their backs conformed by



labour, their step uneven, baskets brimming with the dense white clay tunnelled out of the hills. Attuning his ear to their pasty dialect, scooping mud from the channels and water-carved furrows which crisscrossed the plateau, he mined information. There was nothing the men could tell him that he did not greedily consume, recording it at night in his tent by the light of a grease candle.

He conducted trials at the potteries, calling for quantities of feldspar, silver, pegamite to be subtly altered. The alchemy he sought would increase the strength, shine and blue of the porcelain. His method would seal any painted decoration under a clear, hard transparency, the design remaining in perfect register. There would be no loss of integrity, every line would be as sharp as when it had been laid down. He incorporated ground quartz into the glazes, stoked the fires higher, hotter, cooled the pots slower. His experiments had lasted three years. He never increased the measure of blue, however he was credited sometime after with a poison composed of the compound of ash, arsenic, urine, ground silver and white clay. The admixture, if dropped daily for a month in incremental doses into the sleeping victim's ear, was found to cause a seemingly natural and painless death. The victim, it was said, became prone to vivid dreams, an unquenchable thirst and a desire to walk about at night unclothed.

Still Xi was able to unerringly seek the soft spot, the vulnerable point at which Wei ceased to have mastery. He could not help but enjoy the prospect of expanding on a piece he knew his friend could not but desire.

'I have acquired a beautiful object,' he began and was pleased by Wei's immediate attention. He stood, walked to the door and was aware of a sudden hammering inside his chest.

'You have brought it here?' Wei indicated for him to sit and Xi obeyed, pulling his chair closer. There was a tray between them; Xi's chin reflected in its shining plate.

'Alas it is too large for me to have carried on horseback.' He must slow the conversation, he realised, in order to fully enjoy the process. He surrendered detail in gobbets, one portion, one shining packet at a time.

'It is a bowl.' He left the image before them. His eyes searched the roof timbers, followed a fault; it prompted him to think of a fracture in old pottery. His gaze returned to Wei. He detailed his search to find the bowl, following clues for more than a month, the piece having been sold twice before he could claim it. He told him how thoughts of the bowl invaded him, its image floating across the papered walls of his study as he sat writing.

'I have not slept right since I first saw it. It has infected me.' Here he tapped his chest and Wei had a painful recollection of Xi's scar.

'I once dreamt that the bowl was set afloat in the river. I followed it, running beside the water on the tow path, my eyes fixed on the blue-and-white shape. Sometimes it bobbed out of sight, I was sure that it had filled with water and was sunk.'

'How did this dream end?' Wei had many times been victim of the allegorical dream.

'You must know how it is. Your feet catch on every root, your arms extend before you and yet your object remains always

a hand's breadth away.' At last, he told Wei, he had waded into the water, his shoes shucked off, the water oily and dark closing over his head. Eels flicked past his mud-filled eyes, he was hooked up by the river's current, the bowl spinning freely beyond his fingertips. He had been awakened, hoarse from crying, his wife alarmed, shaking him by the shoulders, peering into his sleep-creased face.

He delayed his description of the piece itself, first relaying hearsay, trade gossip, the price agreed on and then argued up, finally his triumph, the pleasure which fired through him as he held it for the first time, raising it with two hands and turning it in the light — the experience blurring his sight with tears.

'The porcelain is a good blue-white,' Xi told him, his hands describing a half-circle in the air before him, good square hands, capable, strong, Wei could imagine them clasped about the bowl. He nodded, smiled, his eyes slightly closed and his head inclined as if to listen more closely to Xi's words.

'The dish is large enough to carry a small child asleep and cool to the touch, deep as well and strong. It sits on a neat foot.' Xi laughed, the image of a child filling the dish delighting his sense of the absurd, his arms still extended before him.

'A fine example, perhaps the finest I have yet to see. The inside is plain except for some ornament and a painting of a tiny shoe — a pointed shoe, I call it the grasshopper shoe, you know the story?'

'The story of the lamp and the shadows?'

'You have it. I am thinking of the part where the shadows compete for the lamp's attention, each slicing themselves into

finer and finer portions until they are whittled to the size of a small shoe.'

'I thought it went that the lamp ordered a shoe so small that it would fit only the tiniest foot.'

'Oh, you know the detail ...' It seemed Wei wanted some contest here but Xi refused him. 'This little shoe,' he went on, with an urgency to his delivery as though he competed against some hidden timepiece. He picked up the hat on his knee, fed the brim through his fingertips, turning it through a perfect circle before he set it down. 'This little shoe sits beneath the rim and is not put on the level. It has the aspect of having been kicked off. This is the charm of the painting. It is as though the painter knows that your first thought will be to conjure the owner.'

'A woman,' Wei nodded.

'Beautiful, of course.'

'And we are free to have her as we will, tall, short, rosy-lipped ...'

'It has been most cleverly painted.' Xi returned to his theme. 'Although it cannot be larger than a nail paring it has all the detail of didactic illustration. The eye acknowledges a line of raised embroidery across the heel, the slightly upturned toe such as you might find on a Persian slipper. Across the outside there is the usual narrative scene. One begins with the wedding night.'

'The story begins with the consummation?'

'Perhaps not, but it is where I would begin. I feel the need to track the shoe. My eye begins, if you will allow, inside the wedding chamber. Beyond the bed curtains stands a maid.' Xi paused here, arrested by the rapt look on his friend's face.

‘Between the curtains peeps a tiny foot, raised as though on her lover’s shoulder, arched,’ and he searched here for some comparison, ‘like a stem of a rain-bent grass ...’

‘And wearing the other shoe,’ Wei finished for him. ‘It is a perfect match?’

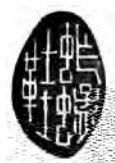
The men could not help but smile at this.

‘Perfect — I have looked at it through an ocular.’

‘Perhaps not a wedding night but an afternoon spent with a bought woman,’ said Wei, the idea pleasing him more than the thought of taking on wives.

‘An afternoon spent in complete idleness, bed curtains drawn and a well-formed woman, tiny feet, and hands and thighs ...’ Here he hesitated to find a word or words to describe smooth flesh. Xi leaned towards him, whispered something, smiling, slapping his knees, at the same time wanting to please his friend, amuse him but somehow steer the talk back to his bowl.

# THE BIG OLD'S WIFE



Their pleasant talk was too soon interrupted. A man had been sent to bring Xi home. His servant had ridden without resting through the night and through most of the day, not to tell him of the birth of his child, for she is a girl, but to hasten him home to examine her strange hand. Xi's smile disappeared. For a moment he seemed not to have heard the summons. He lowered his head into his hands and then, drawing a long breath, turned to Wei, 'The beauty of this piece is not its rarity or the exquisite nature of its execution, nor is it so marvellous for its strength and size — I have seen others. Its beauty is in the shape of its emptiness, in what it is not. Form.' Wei blushed, he understood as Xi knew he would. The painting is merely decoration — a titillation. For a moment it was as though he had held the porcelain himself.

Then Xi was on his feet. 'I have an obligation to go, you understand.'

So fired was Wei by this bowl which he had not even seen, that later he made notes for an essay on ceramic form based on its peculiar design. *Models and interpretations of natural phenomena*, he heads it: 1/ the branching of trees; 2/ women whose shape conforms to the vase or jar; 3/ eggs, there is nothing so well engineered as an egg; 4/ drinking from the hand: the vessel made by two palms pressed along their seam. He might conclude that all form strives to the enclosed and therefore piques our curiosity. What lies open or does not have a hidden side could be counted as formless. All that remains unjoined, the line which does not seek the satisfaction of unity in the circle, all this to aesthetics is dead.

‘A piece thrown from a single slub of clay,’ he began, ‘or pieces from which the centre nothingness falls from the potter’s hand, enclosed as a bulb in paper, these works are superior. Take nothing for the eye or table which has been cast and therefore wears a seam. Begin with the image of a well-pruned tree. See how the branches form to enclose stillness ...’

Xi had left his wife not two days before, happy, pink-cheeked, content in the heavy, vapid pleasure of late pregnancy. She knew her time was near but was for the first time unafraid. She had installed those near her whom she trusted. She had her mother, she had her Good Luck woman Ma. She had his mother, perhaps not a comforting presence, but necessarily auspicious, she had given birth only to sons. Her mother-in-law, faultlessly organised, had commissioned, paid for and installed her own coffin in her apartment. The coffin, it was said, was lined with a white metal

hood, tooled with phoenixes, butterflies, spotted leopards, bug-eyed fish. She could be entertained for eternity twisting her head this way to read the pictures, that way to take in the inscriptions engraved above her chin. She was a woman of some political ability, famous among her daughters-in-law for her temper, her exacting attention to detail which could focus on the folds of a child's coat, the fall of a stem from a vase. She could reduce a new wife to dust without speaking. Ling had been told that she shrank Xi's first wife to the size of a cricket and swallowed her whole. Her husband could not convince her that it might not be true. At seventy years she could still authenticate artwork, suggest its provenance, date it within a year or two of its creation, summon to her mind other works informed by the same brushstroke and composition. Her eyesight was formidable, perhaps unnatural — military in its precision.

Ling had been busy finishing hats bright and weighty with sewn-on charms, embroidered split-back pants — she knew this baby to be a boy. She was ready with small turned-up shoes. She laughed. She complained less. She was uncommonly affectionate with him, interested in his work. She had watched Xi execute a fine plum stem study, she praised him to her friends, she had contrived that his favourite foods be at hand, turned a blind eye to the presence of a pleasure woman in her home. He wondered how it would be when he returned. He did not like to imagine her anguish at the birth of a disfigured child. They had conceived many children between them, only a few living past infancy. He knew that she had suffered in this more than he, his desire for heirs being satisfied by two grown sons on his principal wife.



He had in total six male children who bore his name and others fathered outside his marriages. But Ling had already brought him eight children and had suffered badly when fever or lack of vigour took four of them.

For the present Xi was barely conscious of the talk around him as Wei arranged a private boat — safer he assured him than riding alone and less taxing. Servants were summoned and dispatched to the quay, Wei talked money with a man from the village, ordered carriers, a fresh suit of clothes. Privately, he promised himself the dish. His friend would pass it over, but he was not yet sure how.

They waited on the bank for the boat, Wei's servants carrying his baskets, Xi bowing deeply to his friend.

'I would like to see this porcelain,' he called after him.

Xi stepped from the quay, stepped from stone to water, unhooked from his intended journey as a horse is uncoupled from a cart. The Big Old and his family cleared an unroofed piece of deck and a small carved table was carried forward, two chairs set alongside, a woven mat unrolled, the boat loosened from its moorings. There was a measure of defeat in being conveyed thus. He would sooner have borrowed a fresh horse. His servant might have rested the night before returning. But the arrangement had been made and the boat was underway.

The Big Old's sons had set the table with thick dishes brim with clear, hot soup and steaming onion cakes. Xi nodded to the boatman's wife who peeked at him through a rattan screen hung between the kitchen and the hull. He was made to look away to preserve his dignity, although he felt her eyes on him still as he

tasted the soup. There was something in the boatwoman's face which grated on him. It was as though her gaze examined the tender private throbbing inside him, holding him suspended in her sight as music is held in the inner twistings of the ear. He saw that her children were grown, three of them working beside their father on the boat. He wondered if she had other children whose lives were now outside her orbit — perhaps on other boats. The river was chock with small craft. There were some he knew that lived out their whole span without ever stepping ashore. They were as likely put over the side without a burial when the time came — a listing parcel, perhaps ballooned with gas. He checked himself, his thoughts having an unpleasant habit of running on where there was little comfort. It came to him that he would like to hear the woman speak. He could not guess at the sound of her voice, its inflections, accent, dialect. The voice has its own music, he reflected, its own patterns. There is an undeniable truth in the way language is spoken, the way the words are shaped on the tongue. We have voices, he was once told, that sit poorly with our social disguises.

'Is it not true,' Xi said to Hu his servant, looking sideways at the woman, 'that after a certain age — when the child's piping enquiry is subdued and the brightness of youth fades from our faces — we have the voices and the features we deserve?'

Hu moved no part of himself to acknowledge this speech. Take Hu himself, Xi looked the man over wonderingly, he must be sixty years if he was a day and every line on his face spoke of servitude, of the sublimation of any desire, any original thought. He was spent in the same way that a tree throws off leaves.

But the Big Old's wife — that was a face he could not read. It was a pleasing conundrum and Xi loved a puzzle.

Strangely he wanted to tell her of his daughter. He saw himself lowering a small oblong parcel over the boat's side to be taken up by the fast-moving current. He has heard that once someone falls from a boat they should not be rescued — they will feel no gratitude for being pulled from the water, they belong to the river, having crossed over from this life into the next before drawing their last breath. He has been told that a near-drowning can sit like a stone in the victim's heart, weighing on him profoundly. The pull exerted being, like the water-finder's switch, arced towards lake, river or sea. There were stories of children hauled out of canals only to be found a day, perhaps a week later, their pockets filled with stones, head first in a well. Their small hands blue, fan-shaped fins budding along their backs, their lips having the kissy pout of pond carp. He busied himself at the table before him, lifted the lid from a pot and restored it. When he looked up again she was gone.

Small boats bobbed beside them and then slid away. The sun was in Xi's eyes. He shaded them first with his arm then turned his chair to face the stern and the shining water spread behind them like a skirt. They were through the mountains and the intense stillness that attends passage through rock. The river cut through fields, on one side blue with cabbages, the other spiked with waving spires sown almost to the water's edge. Herons fished the shallows, mud-thatched houses dotted the bank, the boat rolling smoothly through villages. Xi turned to his servant, the words forming on his lips to suggest a game of dice or perhaps some kind of wager. But before he could give voice to

this thought, in an instant, like a handclap, the air was thick and dark and full of falling ash. Yet there was not the smell of smoke, no rush of wind, no flames. The air was still but sour. They had moved in the space of a breath from light to dark as though they had passed under a bridge which cut the sun. The men were coughing, retching. The air was thick with butterflies, dark wings like cinders furred with silky dust, the boat nosing through a creaking soup of beating wings. The insects stupid with some misdirected instinct swarmed about the boat, some fell senseless to the deck, their wings like hinges stiffly closing. The men excited, frightened, batted them from their faces, swept them from the table, scooped them up with kitchen pots. Xi crunched them with guilty steps, finding the Big Old's wife weeping on the galley floor, her back a pulsing mass of insects. The butterflies were drowned in soup pots, in the washing bowl, their fragile bodies circling like leaves. Fixed by the feet in spilt cooking sauce, some flapped uselessly until they tired and were still.

And then the cloud had thinned. They were through the swarm. The men recovered and began to laugh, to slap each other on the back, pick broken insects from each other's necks and ears. No-one gave voice to the thoughts of doom which had rushed through every head. The river was ever alive with stories of shape-shifting ghosts, watery demons, devils composed of silt and stone who might chop through the wooden hull of a boat with their pebble hands, pulling the crew to the river floor. Still coughing, with faces dark with dust and fringed with broken wing bits, they went for brooms. Xi raised the woman to her feet and swept her clean of dust and wings. He set her gently against the water jars,

loosening the cover to ladle out a cup, pressing it against her lips — smiling, nodding for her to drink.

‘You were afraid?’ he asked, his voice an encouragement. It was both a question and an invitation, but she was wordless, dumb; she looked away from him.

‘Myself I thought the sky had split,’ he told her, ‘thought we would all be burned up or choked — but look at what invaded us,’ he pointed to the deck, still black with dying insects, ‘butterflies,’ he gave a chuckle, ‘or perhaps they are moths driven here by rain or wind upstream.’

‘There was no wind,’ she said, speaking to him he assumed, her line of sight grazing his cheekbone. Her eyes could not meet his own. He took a step back, felt he may have intruded somehow. Yet he was surprised by her voice, its lightness, seeming to belong to a girl. He was cheered that she had spoken, not dwelling on the import of her comment, not asking himself how it was that she could know the conditions on the river some twenty li away. Nor did he query her emphasis, her insistence that the insects descended unaided, that perhaps their purpose was to enclose them in particular rather than some other boat. Instead he turned to find his friend. Shaking the dust from his clothes, Hu pointed to the cabbages which lay like rows of knots along the bank and away across the hill.

‘They might be cabbage moths,’ he said, coughing the words out one by one, ‘a plague.’ His face was dark and streaked with dust.

‘These creatures are black — the cabbage moth is surely more commonly white!’

They picked the creatures from their bags and from the dishes on the table, Xi spreading one across his palm, flattening its velvet wings, examining its horned head, bug eyes and twiggy legs before discarding it. It was somehow fitting to be enveloped in a cloud, he thought, as the current took him to certain gloominess at home.

The crew swept the deck, prodded out the carcasses from under coils of rope and behind baskets. The Big Old yelled at them to bring buckets to the hold. There was another round of jokes and insults as they scraped out dust and debris from the boat's insides, until their father's vinegary reminder of their purpose silenced them. Then there was only the banging of brooms and the slosh of water on wood. The sky was clear again, the boat clean. Once the men had settled back to regular chores the woman reappeared to bring Xi and his servant tea. The journey assumed its gentle course once more, the men laughing quietly, poking fun at Big Old's number one for his undisguised alarm. The woman served the men, her face averted. There was no reading her. There was nothing in her carriage to suggest her recent display of anguish, no acknowledgement of Xi's concern.

'Wait,' he said, wanting to delay her, wanting to put his hand on her arm, but if the woman had heard him she gave no sign. Turning away from him without speaking, walking back towards the galley, her feet taking her, knowing the boards underfoot.

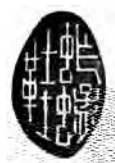
'She is blind,' Xi realised. His shoulders dropped, as though a catch had unhooked from a spring.

'Sure,' Hu said, pausing to spit a pearly gob across the bows. 'You didn't notice this before?'

‘No,’ Xi said, he puzzled it, ‘I didn’t notice.’ Didn’t notice a blind woman who knew her way about a boat. Knew it so well she never put a foot in the wrong place, never tripped over ropes, never lost her balance as the boat swung through troughs and swells. That explained her fright at the cloud of insects, her strange gait and averted eyes, her preternatural knowledge of weather conditions ahead of them on the river. He had heard of this before, that the blind increased their other senses. Sound, touch, taste augmented — taking the place of the useless eyes. There was some code in this, he knew, but he could not read it. A girl child, a disfigured hand, a plague of black flying creatures — it was too much.

He lay back in his chair studying the shoreline, his mind busy, hands spread on the table before him. Leaning across, Hu gestured *ch’uan*? He made a fist and nodded to Xi to do the same. It was a child’s game, Xi and Hu both knew it well. ‘Fist for a stone,’ Hu said, ‘hand held palm up and open: water. Hand cupped: sand bowl.’ They played to outguess each other, Hu was fast but Xi was on his mettle. They drank tea, talking softly as the sun descended, pausing only to call for more hot water or a pot of coals on which to warm their feet. Xi wondering aloud whether his mother had already taken steps to stem the flow of gossip from his house. The windows were still pasted over and Hu assured him that no-one but himself had left the compound since the child was born. They talked of removing the baby. Perhaps a life in the country? But Xi was doubtful. To get rid of a girl was a troublesome thing, but a girl with an unlucky cast, this could be bad. They might set her in the way of draughts or night air, this he has heard is something an infant is too weak to withstand.

# THE BLUE HAT



The litter which had brought him from the river set him down some streets from home. There was some obstruction, some disturbance which had caused a crowd. He was uncomfortable — tired, cold. The sway and pitch of the boat still affected his step; his shirt rode him uncomfortably. He was in need of rest, a wash, hot tea. He walked the remainder of the way through a strangely quiet crowd, Hu racing before him, clearing the way. Xi followed, stepping as through a tableau, reading faces, marking the collective sentiment. People were covering wells and pasting up good-luck paper over their doors. Outside his gate a crowd of people stood round-shouldered against the cold, hands in their pockets. People beckoned friends and friends brought aunts and sisters. Grandmas in their pompom hats hissed and whispered through bent or missing teeth while they scissored out of paper useful gods. News of the child was no longer contained.



A young man in a blue hat sat astride the portal lion. It was a liberty, an infringement which would normally be put down yet it was Xi who was uncertain. The crowd shuffled back to make a path to accommodate his passing, but the youth sat unmoving on the lion's back, his eyes meeting Xi's unabashed as though there was some shared understanding between them, some transfer of feeling. In the moment their eyes met Xi felt the blue-hat man had uncovered his intent, made his most private thoughts a badge. The look stayed with him, returning in the days that followed, becoming more ugly and exaggerated over time. He was reminded of Wei clubbing the deer, of the loose arm action which brought on darkness. Life, he reminded himself, was a fragile thing, a set of slipping, gliding boundaries which could by the will of another be forced apart.

To father a boy was to have made himself over, it put him in credit against whatever life might turn up. To father a girl was a drain both on himself and his household. What had he fathered here, he asked himself, but trouble. This tiny creature could sour his whole existence, both in the world and at home. He thought on it as he crossed the courtyard. He had heard his wife's maids laugh about hollow rods and paper tigers. Thinking fondly of his lover Silver Bell, her breasts swinging together like gongs above him, he almost turned from the door. He wanted comfort, assurance. He needed a prop. He had a mind to send for her. He would like to lie with her, unpin her hair, put his lips to her ear and tell her of the river trip, the Big Old's wife, how she had stared at him, the eyes lacking register. He wanted to convey the sudden tenderness that unfolded inside him as he pressed the cup

to her lips. It was his friend Wei, he realised, whom she resembled, not Ling. She would surely have his friend's gift for absorbing impulse, form, her body knowing its path by touch, her hands the primary organ of sight.

As he stood in the doorway he knew that he had expected to feel anger, expected to be pulled apart by emotions as stitches burst on a seam. To have a child who was not a week old mock his manhood was no small concern. He nursed it as an injury, an affront which might not easily be put by. He expected to be shamed by this hand, this disfigurement. He felt he might not be able to look on it without recoil, without his guts working. But to his surprise he smiled. At first faintly as at a face half recollected, familiar and yet not in full register. Then he was smiling broadly, he felt his face crease, his eyes made into slots. He was smiling at the baby and she was smiling back at him. In her eyes he saw his own eyes. Ma had brought her to him and she lay along his arm.

Xi felt himself erased in the presence of this new life. He struggled with this big love which bruised him suddenly, unexpectedly, which made him afraid to let go of the squirming fat grub cocooned against his breast. The smell of new life was at once familiar and foreign. In which part of the kingdom had he been, he wondered, when his sons were infants? What urgent task had kept him from them? He held her, while his face worked, wondered at the force that made her. For once in his life his yearning for perfection was sated. There was no place where he ended and she began. They were as halves of fruit once cleaved in

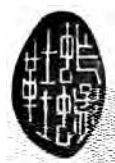
two may have independence from each other and yet are one. He could not look away from her.

‘I cannot look away,’ he told Ling, ‘there is nothing else to see.’

He announced, ‘She will be Xi Hsiao Yen.’ The name sprang into his head and the baby already drowsing seemed to perk.

‘Hsiao Yen,’ he cooed, ‘my Little Swallow,’ and to his wife, his eyebrows raised in mock alarm, his face covered in a lunatic grin, ‘Look at the big fat baby we have made.’

# SLEEP



That night there was a storm and in the first sleeting cold the crowd turned away. On the lion's shoulder, where the young man had rested, stood a forgotten cup, later it was taken in and left a double imprint, two false rings of rust, engaged and overlapping. Rain pocked the surface of the lake and a cold wind smacked at the shutters of Ling's room. Although the rest of the household was in darkness, Ling and the midwife Ma talked without ceasing through the night.

Xi went to his room and lay as though knocked cold, his outside clothes still fastened and his hat tied beneath his chin.

Ma brought Ling heart soup. And when she had eaten that and was still too nervous to sleep, she brought in congee and small bowls of every condiment — the smell of rice and pickles and good hot broth creeping through the house, sliding under closed doors, filling the nostrils of sleeping grandmas and young

gentlemen. But for Ling sleep would not come. In turns she was a wire of focused attention and then, as though one self was slid away to reveal the next, fatigued. Ma could not leave her awake and unattended. They spent the night talking — talking about the baby, her size, her crest of dark hair and the hand. Sometimes Ling put the baby to her breast, sometimes they propped her on the bed between them, their heads bent over her, fussing with her cap or swaddlings. Ling, already a mother eight times over, played with the baby like a child with a new doll.

‘I am not afraid of her dying,’ she told Ma.

‘You should not be afraid at all,’ the woman tried. This was not what Ling meant, Ma knew it but she aimed to divert her.

‘I know it,’ said Ling, watching Ma’s nimble fingers as she tied a blue thread about the baby’s foot.

‘This is for the life gone out of you,’ she said under her breath.

‘A child places one in danger — danger from oneself. There is every childhood illness and accident to live through. There is worry at every junction. The mind has only so many resources.’

‘But she is strong, this one. We need a red cotton for the other leg. I want a colour for the life gone through her.’

‘She is strong,’ Ling agreed.

The night passed in rounds of sleepy chat. Sometimes the baby woke and cried and Ma hurried her finger to the angry mouth, hoping to put her off with this false nursing.

‘She pulls mightily,’ she nodded to Ling.

‘And I am glad for it,’ Ling said, untying her tunic, glad to relieve the hot tightness in her breast.

Sometimes her head filled with the cries of her four dead babies. Their faces swam across the room in the leaping-up of lamplight. As she put her bruised nipple in this baby's mouth she was not sure if it was Hsiao Yen who pulled on her or an unbidden brother.

'One was born never having taken air into his lungs,' she recited for herself rather than for Ma, who had witnessed every birth, had in fact nursed Ling from a child. One never suckled, sleeping the young, green sleep of a babe not yet finished with the womb — twitching, silent, his closed eyes busy. Wretchedly she held him to her while his small life seeped away.

'Over and over he fell through the worlds which sit in the sky above ours,' she told her puzzled older children.

One child stuck fast in her belly. One froze in her arms a week after he climbed out of her, his blood hardening like tree sap, his little hands thrown up above his head as if he died of surprise — as though living was a game he was unprepared for, as though he had jumped out of her for another reason entirely and had been taken in the midst of some strange, unfamiliar gesture.

Sometimes Ling looked down at the baby in a temporary confusion, tears for the spirits of her ghost children brimming, but the clack-clacking of Ma's wooden heels fixed in her ear and a slow smile unfurled.

'Did you hear the husband say the baby's name?' she asked, pulling herself up in the bed and reaching out to touch the other woman's arm. Her hand going from herself across to the other woman, a line thrown out.

'I would not rejoice to be called after a bird which is perhaps no more than vermin. The year my first child was born we were nearly starved when sparrows took our crop.'

‘No, no, not sparrow, we are talking of swallows, *Hsiao Yen, Little Swallow*, he said, how can you confuse the two. I think it a pretty name, an old name. Did you see the way he looked at her,’ Ling went on, ‘as pleased with her as if she had been a son. Did you see the way he held her?’

‘I saw.’ Ma sighed. ‘I heard.’ Nodding her head, rolling her eyes, there was no predicting men. ‘Sparrow, swallow, what use is a bird?’ Privately Ma thought he would be mad not to finish with the child. Perhaps he had made plans already, perhaps his pleasure in the babe was a charade, an elaborate screen. ‘I heard what he said. Little Swallow. Perhaps he wishes her to fly away?’

# THE COAT



Hsiao Yen reached the age of four without ever setting foot outside her father's garden. Yet she knew her city from books, from drawings, from conversations and stories. To this amalgam she added her own small experience of the foot traffic which passed under her lookout tree. She ran about, her feet as yet still unbound, her hair loose on her shoulders, fuelled on a desire to know the world. Every object was of interest to her. Every face peered into, creature or human. She captured crickets and played them against her brothers' best; fed on fruit they lived well but not long. This project began her zoo. She made no difference between the living or dead, animate or inanimate. She kept stones for their weight, held them to her ear for comfort. Some she kept in water to brighten them.

She had a stable of grubs and house flies. The flies knocked about their box until they reached some limit. Sleep, she noted,



overtook drunkenness, rallies became infrequent. Then they lay crisp and dry on their wings, their legs drawn neatly across the abdomen. Something tightened in death. Wings detached, legs broke easily away. She collected hair ornaments, tufts of dry grass, metal pins. She had mosses and bones. She had the scat of two types of lizard, fly dirt and the coughed pellet of an owl.

She painted at Xi's elbow, learning under his direction first to render trees, then rocks, orchids, bamboo, insects, and lastly birds. She drank tea with his friends, walked the gardens at his side or on his shoulders. She hid from him in the rockery. Here was an excitement! Her invisible self was strong, cunning, fleet, all seeing. He called for her, tramping the pathways alone, he looked to the lake as if she could have flown there. Intuitively she knew only her death could prick out the spark in him. Her heart beat faster. She heard his feet turn into the gravelled walk. He passed her, not turning his head this way or that. Disappointingly he was not in a panic at having lost her. He said simply as he passed, 'I must beware a beast which roams here,' and she smiled, she had tricked him, not by being plucked from his sphere, but by being transformed into a caution, a danger. She was at large for the afternoon, menacing passing innocents, dragging first the cook's son and then the dog back to her hide.

She commanded him, bossed him, sought him out to share treasures; thorn apples, cicada wings, decayed mice — their eyes picked over by ants or plucked out by birds. He was made to visit her zoo, purchasing from her a ticket which would give him leave to pet any of her stock. She dreamt of him: enormous, faithful, strong. She planned to marry him. He seemed both old and at

the same time a child to her, his hands clumsy, like paws, oversized and strangely under-fingered. He seemed necessary, his strength invaluable, his size both useful and laughable. He could reach into places she could not even see, yet he could not fold himself to fit beneath the armoire to play their hiding games. He could propel her through the air, the strength in his arms a wonder. It seemed to her that he was an irreplaceable extension of herself; an adjunct, beautiful, all-knowing, boundless.

On her fifth birthday he gave her a red embroidered coat trimmed with squirrel fur. The sleeves full and long fell over her fingers to disguise her hand. He dressed her in it, careful to show her a secret pocket sewn in the hem.

‘For your charms,’ he said laughing. The tunic was more beautiful than she could have imagined. She felt immense, enlarged, fiery. She arose that night and in the thin moonlight, dressed in the scarlet coat, she danced in her bare feet with her pug-nosed dog. She raised him on his hind legs and holding his front paws they danced beside her bed, their shadows giant puppets on the wall.

The red coat had, as well as its secret pocket, two pockets on the outside. Each fit her hand exactly, the left pocket was the size of her left hand and the right was the size of the larger hand. She could slip her hand into the pocket, her fingers straight, her hand held flat. She plunged first one hand into the pocket, laughing as it disappeared and then laughing harder as she pulled it out again, the hand restored.

‘Gone,’ she said to Xi, plunging the other hand deep into its pocket, ‘see, it is gone. Missing,’ her eyebrows raised, her face all

expectation studying his. He could see that the delight was in the concealment and retrieval, a thing gone one moment and restored the next. Dead and yet also living, the small death most commonly delighted in by lovers, killed by passion and yet restored. For a month or more it delighted her that she had this power, as she had had the power to hide herself from him in the garden.

Two years after this rehearsal Ling was dead.

‘Mother is gone.’ Hsiao Yen said and with that knowledge arranged both the concrete and the abstract on a single breath.

They spent summers in the garden painting Xi’s birds in their wicker cages, the teapot set on a rock, cicadas.

‘Your eyes work on the world,’ he told her as they painted, ‘undoing its parts, disassembling its pieces, knowing it, cataloguing its components. Look as a painter looks. Look at light on leaves, on water. It is the same light but carried on the surface of water it has become a mirror.’

‘Mirror,’ she parroted.

‘Examine the length of shadows, their fullness or obliqueness. What I am trying to impress is that it pays a painter to be curious.’ He tapped the side of his head with one finger.

She cut across him.

‘Do you ever wish that you could see as a bird sees?’ It stung her that she did not have the absolute clarity of bird sight. That she could not tip her head as a blackbird might, pinning a worm to the path a half li away. She had seen a raven take a rabbit,

a crow fly into a fuss of tiny larks and snatch one of their number whilst barely employing a full wingbeat. She had seen him launch from his lookout, his beak all spear, his eye an infallible instrument.

‘And what would you see?’ he asked, turning to watch her roll her brush across the paper on her knee. His eye fell to her hand. *The hand!* he thought, *always the hand.* It was as familiar to him as his own yet he found himself often observing it, wondering how she might have appeared to him without it. She laid down the brush, relaxed her fingers, then gripped the chair sides.

‘You do not like my hand.’ It was not a question, rather an observation.

‘Your fingers are as the feathers of a bird. I love your wing. Go on with your story. Tell me what you would see.’ He had always this instinct to deflect interest in the topic.

‘Sitting in my tree I would see out of the garden,’ she said.

Xi’s garden was a series of landscapes enclosed by a stout wall. The garden suggested all that was found naturally yet was in every sense an artifice. It was no wonder the child looked outside it. She referred to a tree along the river wall, Xi supposed. He found he did not like the image this conjured. He puffed out his cheeks, raised his eyebrows and brought them together in a line. He tried to recall the exact moment she had moved from baby talk to this precise articulation. She went on.

‘In my lookout I imagine myself on a boat and I sit forward, my eyes always straining on the distant speck ahead. You know that I can see anything I choose. I can see down wells. I can look

along stovepipes. I can see small things — detail,’ realising as she said it that this was the heart of it.

There were five pine trees in the garden; the child had chosen the most distant one.

‘It would not make your head ache?’ he asked her. This was not the sort of looking at the world he had been speaking of.

‘My head never aches,’ she said, surprised that he would not know this.

‘I would see every part of the world, see it all right from this garden. And then I would draw it on a great map. I would record it so a stranger to the city could easily find their way — not just along the main thoroughfares but to our door!’

‘I’m not sure I welcome strangers.’ He wondered had she overheard his conversation of a week ago with his friend, Li. They had considered the impact of the English as a sickness which their country must submit to or shake off.

‘I would mark the everyday-useful things — shady trees for lying under,’ she went on, ‘and other trees with limbs low on their trunk for easy climbing, wells, teahouses. I would have the markets yellow-ochre, the bathhouses sap green.’ She was reading he noticed from the plates pasted alongside each lozenge of colour in an imported French paintbox. Her command of this strange language already exceeded his own. For each point of reference she dipped her brush first in water and then into the corresponding pigment.

‘The rivers will be,’ and her brush hovered between ultramarine and cobalt and then wandered towards cerulean, ‘sorrel,’ she decided, letting the water from her brush pool on its surface.

‘All roads, all rivers will lead to our door. Our house is at the centre of the map.’

‘Seems you are compiling an atlas,’ Xi muttered, fiddling a wasp’s papery wing under his enlarging glass.

‘Significant objects also — I might mark on it the grasshopper shoe.’

Xi winced. Perhaps, she thought, she could have her father make her some bird’s eyes from his special glass. That would assist the making of her map profoundly.

As a rule Xi was a benevolent gardener, sharing crops with birds, inclined to let fruit set on long stems. He was pleased to see the season unfold according to its own clock. Yet he was acutely conscious of the order of things, one year recording the lifecycle of water striders and diving beetles, inking finely detailed drawings of half wings, folding poles of legs, bug eyes. To inform his drawings he set a large porcelain bath upon an outdoor table, filled it to the brim with lake water, furnished it lavishly with pond scum and water lettuces, sank mud and rocks at its bottom. The water surface was interrupted intermittently by the parasols of lotus and lily leaves under which hung brackets of spawn. The outside was built around with loose pebbles, earth lifted from the banks of the lake complete with water grasses, fine sedges. He carefully sloped moss up to its sides. It was a world about which for a season he hovered like a god smiling down on the toil of his creation. From the air, it seemed, flying creatures were pulled to this glittering strip of water. Burrowing grubs, legless soft-footed creepers inched over his work. He painted as he sat at the side of

the thrumming water city, his ink drawings as lively and true as any he had made on a larger scale. To these drawings, to amuse her, he fit a story: the water striders were warriors, fixing their shiny gaze on mayflies and water nymphs, poling their flat canoes alongside their chosen quarry, raking the water with their fine legs, causing a storm which confused the victim beyond recovery. They built their camp from mud and reeds, fought fierce duels with monster-legged millipedes and wooed their chosen loves with music played on the belly of the lake.

Hsiao Yen made her own pictures. Her boatmen wore long beards, spilt coats of red cotton fell over their dimpled breastplates and each was issued with three pairs of pointed shoes. They rode dark horses and fought turtles and crested eels bravely and to the death. Some got about in snail-shell chariots and leaned from their footplates to stick their foe. Much blood was spilt in Hsiao Yen's underwater world. Whole cities were brought to rubble. Her armies crossed subterranean Alps in caravans bringing rice, tea and the Buddha. She painted the king of the insect people addressing the conquered from his horse. He stood, Xi noted, in his stirrups, four arms raised over his head in victorious salute, his flat pan of a face turned not to the defeated but to a seam of light that lay below him at the drawing's edge — a lake. How is it, Xi wondered, that the creatures find these isolated bodies of water? What steers them as they burr through the air between one watery world and the next? In season, rain has only to fill a ditch overnight and the next day it will be peopled by the shiny black swimming slippers. What calls them

out of the air? Are their bug eyes so keen as to detect a needle of bright water from the air?

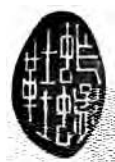
Examining her work — the beetles riding a fat bubble of air to their underwater palaces, their horny heads gleaming, their toothed legs beating the water like clockwork oars — he saw no reason to suppose that his Little Swallow did not already possess the honed sight of birds.

Some twelve years later, as he fixed a red seal on a newly finished painting, he was reminded of the red coat with its three pockets. Hsiao Yen had been gone from his house not yet a month and he missed her sorely. Dipping his brush in red ink rather than black he wrote down one side of the painting:

‘My precious child, your mother made you — grew you to a ripeness at which time you leapt from her body. I have made you over. This time no bigger than my smallest finger, so that I might carry you always in my pocket — that I might draw you out from time to time so we may speak about the eyesight of birds, the antics of beetles — all the things which most comfort and amuse us. My heart listens,’ he wrote, ‘alert for your return.’



# THE HAND



Xi had every doctor look at the child's hand. Mostly with strangers she held her hand inside her sleeve, the extra finger hidden in its folds. But for the physicians she raised her hand and held it in plain view, never flinching or pulling back from their investigation. For a month after her eighth birthday she wore her finger painted with chamber lye and bound to its neighbour. The lye would work as a mortar fusing the fingers; two fingers would become as one. Surely, her father asked, would not this gross finger remain an aberration? Her hand might lack charm, the doctor agreed, but it would be a five-fingered hand. Numbers were important, were to be respected — two eyes, ten fingers, the same of toes, one heart. A deviation was unsettling.

When the bandages were peeled away, a sick odour fouled the room and skin fell from her hand black and rotted. Where the two fingers had been mated the flesh was stripped almost to

the bone. Hsiao Yen looked unblinking at her father as he cleaned the wound, her trust in him neither dampened nor corroded by this failure. She loved him with unwavering certainty, a fundamentalism common only to children and dogs. Her childish inability to measure him against another augmented him. He was the source, his the original laughter, his flesh the embodiment of grace, his temperament indefinable and inseparable from her own. She existed only for his notice. He was her country and she had not yet stepped beyond its boundary. Her pain borne in silence was a gift laid at his door and she measured her offering in increments of hurt.

On one doctor's prescription she wore a plait of herbs in a string on her belt or wound into a plaster over her wrist. She swallowed bitter infusions and chanted medicines which would wither the finger to a nub. She plunged her hand into pork livers and wore the stomach of a lamb tied like a glove up over her arm, its stench turning her stomach. During this particular torment she worked to imagine herself a separate creation from her hand. She no longer wore it, instead she carried it as she might some putrid bundle. She removed that part of herself in her mind which saw herself as whole. Looking into an imaginary glass her image reflected true but for an absence from the elbow down. Here was plain air.

Secretly she named her hand. At night she lay with it as distant from her face as she could physically contrive and spoke to it roughly.

'Leave me. Curl up and die,' she told it, her voice coming from the spleen, thick and unpleasant. Sometimes she flung it

away from herself and draped it in a covering which served as her divorce.

Beyond this time of trials and cures they sought to disguise her hand, but the disguise worked only on themselves. On the premise that what exists is present only in range of the eye, they were well pleased with their effect. Every set of clothes had sleeves set low at the shoulder. Her dresses had cuffs patterned on a bell, and hooked to their insides were short false sleeves which enclosed the fingers in a half glove. No child was ever fooled by this conjury; most had shown an interest which although at first fierce was also shortlived. Visitors found their eyes drawn to the child's sleeve purely on the intersection of other's sight lines. Who can resist revealing the presence of a hidden object with their own eyes? Familiarity served as her best defence; curiosity cannot hold its own for long against the commonplace.

Carrying with her a dead bird that she had retrieved from the garden, she had once by accident nearly effected her own cure. She brought the bird into the room that she and her maid shared and laid it on the covers of her bed. Its dark plumage was broken all over by bright shims and the black feathers reflected green. She patted the puff of down which belled over its leg tops like pantaloons. Here was a friend, she thought, who could be made animate in games. Immediately she grasped the bird and righted it. She sang for it a long wobbling whistle and holding it firm she made it hop, running forward like a thrush. Tilted, it stiffly pecked the coverlet for worms, but silently, for they required expert hunting. Their reticence required them to be prodded out

with a determined beaking. What bird delight might lurk under a stitched silk flower, she wondered on its behalf. This was good work. It was absorbing, consummate. She concentrated with her whole being on pulling a thread she had hooked through the base of its beak. In one action the entire length of silk came free, leaving an absence like a furrow through the weave. The bird sat pertly in her grasp, the silk hanging slackly from its bill.

Sound of an approach put her on alert. Her heart enlarged its fit in her chest. Her glance swept the room, passing over the stove, a sewing box, a pair of small embroidered shoes stowed under a stool. They were her first attempt. Head first she stuffed the bird into a slipper but telltale feathers showed. She looked around again. The obvious concealment was the large black armoire. Without pause from the processing of this genius she rose, the bird still in her grasp and pulled the drawers from the chest in steps and climbed them. She was almost at her object when she felt the top drawer slide home beneath her. It cast her at an angle which was unsustainable yet still her mind worked to achieve its purpose. With the strength and flex possessed only by nine-year-olds, she threw herself forward and sought to right herself by grasping with her free hand the swinging cupboard door. But the physics of the equation were against her and instinct was no match for it. Her hand grasped the door and pulled it closed on itself with as much force as an axe falling onto wood.

She flew and the bird dropped from her hand. In death the wings were fixed — flight, she mentally noted, being both a conscious and unconscious thing. After a minute in which pain was fully shielded from the senses, she returned to herself and

knew that her body, which had fallen backwards to the floor, was incomplete. A mental audit left some part of herself unaccounted for, there was an absence which, after the progress of a minute was filled by cognition of the wound. Her screams, once they came, rose to the limits which the ear can bear and brought the household to her side. When she was done shouting, it was tears which choked her. She lay with heads bent to enclose her, not wanting to be lifted from the floor, her hand a bloody mash beside her.

When it healed, the scar showed where the last finger of her hand was all but taken off. But time knit it back leaving just a small disruption. It was as two pieces of wood laid flush and joined, the two parts working as one yet never losing their seam. Many times after the accident she dreamt that the finger had been neatly cleaved away. She wondered what her life might have gained had it been properly severed. She might have made an auspicious match but lost her father.

Later Xi told her there were hill stations where the tea-pickers' left hands were lopped for stealing small amounts of leaf. The work was slow and hard, their wages small. They made a leafy bundle and stowed it inside their shirts, in the armpit usually.

'And the right hand?' she asked him.

'The right hand is spared. How else would they pick the tea?'

He was suggesting that she had more than her share, an abundance, she figured. What had been taken away was restored and yet the sum was incorrect.

# TO GROW WISTERIA FROM SEED



By sixteen Little Swallow was already getting past a fit age for marriage. Xi put the thought from his mind. He immersed himself in work, in the pleasures of drawing, in reading and in his creature study. Her revelled in his daughter's company, he enrolled her in a dozen little projects suited to an enquiring mind. Together they sought to transcribe the music of cicadas and calling crickets, repeating each of the notes by voice and flute. The flute gave them an exact pitch which could be put down in ink. Hsiao Yen sang the note and Xi matched it. Xi was much impressed with her ear.

'You have a natural feeling for this work,' he told her.

'It amuses me,' she said, 'these small husbands calling love on a one-note song.'

By eighteen there were rumours circulated as to her fitness as a woman. Another year passed and it was said that her hand was the least of her deformities. One story had it that she was both man and woman and that she need not marry for she could satisfy herself by taking on any sort of posture. By twenty Xi knew that only a dowry as large as a ransom could distract from the blight of her hand.

It was not Xi who told her finally that she must marry. It was his mother. The news was a blow. It was an insult to her perception of herself as resident in her father's affections. That he would discard her caused a pain to inflate inside her chest. She had not ever considered their separation. In those first days of learning that she must leave, she hid herself from view. She dared not give way to tears fearing that if she began she might never stem them. She paced the length of her rooms afraid to be still. This was a new species of grief which must somehow be accommodated. She must learn to stomach it.

Xi put himself to work on her dowry. It would be his theatre, his final ecstasy. A public show, not just of his wealth but of his pride in her.

Servants travelled between his home and An Le. Gifts were exchanged. He wrote to Wei that he would trust her to no-one else. He wrote that her loss would be a blow from which he might never be righted but that he took heart in his friend's generosity. Wei, not needing wives or sons, thought long on the aspect of the dowry. The contract threw up an uncommon opportunity.

Hsiao Yen knew that her father and Wei shared a passion for porcelain and books. She knew that the two of them had shared

quarters in the Guilin days; had shared women, tobacco, horses, adventures of the kind he could not tell a daughter. She knew the story of his journey on the river to see her. How he had come through a storm of insects to be by her side, the boat plunged into a temporary darkness, the chalky, dust-covered bodies flying like dark clots at the sun. He had told her the story often. Telling her how he had been with Wei on the day she had been born, the two of them rapt in discussion of a pretty porcelain. A wedding bowl — the grasshopper shoe bowl. And then the door flung ajar, the announcement jumbled out by his own manservant, who had ridden all day to reach him over rough roads, stopping nowhere until he fell from his horse at Wei's door. She had seen the piece in question, studied its intricate hoops of pattern, admired its transparent bloom, traced her finger over the painted people under its rim. He had told her how the current drew him towards her, cutting through mountains, skirting villages. How it seemed that the river ran through him, over him, throwing him up on the bank below the city, delivering him to her door. He had not told her how he had dreaded seeing her or how he had planned to send her away. How he had spent one half of the journey puzzling over the Big Old's wife and the other half wondering if he had the courage to put out the life in his own child. This was not part of the story.

'I came to you, my face still dark with the black grime of their wings.' These were the words she had heard repeated since her first birthday. The picture of her father speeding to her through a pulsing swarm of winged creatures was precious to her as any memory of her own.



It did not surprise her then that Xi included in her dowry his most unusual pieces of porcelain: a footed cup, three nested bowls, a blossom vase. The vase she had seen often, its bowl incised with dragons, their three-clawed feet extended, their necks thrown back, their fiery nostrils wide — breath trapped under glaze. As a child she had watched Xi move it from a table to a lamp and back again, the decoration not apparent in the half light. The magic, he had told her, woke only as the light pricked it into a show. It was a trick both childish and amusing, absorbing partly for its simplicity. He would walk back and forth from the table to the light, smiling when she smiled, delighted with her easy pleasure. She reached for the dragons, wanting to touch them, wanting to arrest their disappearance with her plump baby hand. He let her hold the vase, his hands over hers. The glaze although rubbed in parts was still beautiful, rich, waxy; milk poured over stone.

She knew also that her dowry comprised some of her father's calligraphies. To no-one before had Xi shown his work. She knew of their existence but had not seen them herself. She had heard him speak of them, she knew he worked on them in private. There were four books, the fifth unfinished: *The Book of Creatures* (this included serpents, beasts, demons, fiends, dragons as well as the watery creatures that they had worked on together at the side of their artificial pond), *The Book of Little Troubles*, *The Book of Groans and Croaks* and *The Book of Cricket Song*, which included their transcribed music. She did not know how he could part with them; Xi did not know either. Now they would be part of Wei's treasure house, too precious to be openly displayed, light

being a natural enemy of ink. His friend would pour over them in secret, the door to his apartment slid shut, absorbed, amused, his fist crammed into his mouth to stop up his noise.

Xi's gardeners chose for the dowry a selection of ornamental and fruit-bearing cultivars. Potted flowers, dwarfed trees, water plants in jars, seeds and lifted bulbs dried and wrapped in cloth, an orchard of citruses, uncounted pots of prunuses, tender sprouts, vials of stamen, pollen, paper cones of dry root stock. Xi closed his eyes and saw his daughter planning a carp pond thick with flashing slices of silver. He imagined her ordering Wei's hillside garden to be planted out with plums. This imagined invasion buoyed him. He would have her transfer some of this place to her foreign home. It would be a part of himself that she would carry forward.

He took a day to rank birds, frogs, crickets and other singing creatures, tamping their wicker domes, their fragile shell-like houses, with his stick. Ordering fresh water for their toy dishes, calling back servants to sweep up spilt seed. It was all he could do not to strike something to the ground. He was petty in his inspection of the servants' work, testy with the auditors, withdrawn, surly, unreachable with his children. He dared not even look at Hsiao Yen. He spoke to her, his eyes averted, fixed on some vexing useless underling who would never commonly excite his attention. His discomfort was increased when Wei sent his servant Yuan-ching to inspect the wedding gifts. The man excited ill humour, his whole demeanour was detestable. He conducted every negotiation with chin thrust forward, as though he aimed to steer the talk on this posture alone. Xi sensed there

was some purpose which Yuan-ching aimed to conceal. He took no direct path, moving the talk along in stepped degrees. The man's patience was humbling.

With each visit gifts were exchanged and tea was brought to brighten their object. The two men had a stiffness about them which was more than convention demanded. Yuan-ching filled his chair, his long legs encroached on Xi's carpet, his cup sat in his great hand as on a club of ginger.

'You are appreciative of every fine thing,' he began, indicating his teacup. This was a species of compliment and the first clod of earth scraped from a shaft directed at Xi's prize. Yuan-ching was all purpose. Whatever had his attention became absolute, his focus was keenly directed. Xi pulled his eyes up from their contemplation of the man's shoes. There was a slight unevenness of face, on the cheekbones and on one part of the eyebrow, a darkening. Not enough to be counted as a feature, he owned, measuring each discolouration then looking away. A pancake slightly scorched, this was the image he held to.

'You are most generous with your time.' This from Yuan-ching again. Xi performed the slightest bow, made more with the eyes than the head. It was assent; a gesture as abbreviated as was possible within the limits of etiquette. Trying another route to his purpose Yuan-ching asked to see Xi's birds. This time he had his mark. He could see it in the set of the older man's eyes, in the whole arrangement of his features. Walking was Xi's preferred medicine; it was a relief to step outside. A man felt himself to be less confined in an open aspect. It put a measure of space between them and to Xi this was a gift.

‘What is your chief joy,’ Yuan-ching asked, ‘after your children?’ Xi felt the enquiry square in the back but continued ahead even though he knew Yuan-ching paused on the path. What was this penetration? Why this narrowing? He was only half awake to this interview; he could not unpick the knot. There were other pressing claims on his time. ‘My work ... my books, perhaps my porcelain,’ he spoke to the distance, his hands clasped at his back. Yuan-ching followed him and smiled.

Xi’s garden enclosed water, stone arranged to mimic geography, trees trimmed to suggest the passage of wind through boughs. A covered path was portioned by gates stepped along the lake; one arm took them from the house, the next returned them. Yuan-ching saw that they must make some ground before they reached a shaded companionway and held himself in check, adjusting his step so that there was some comfortable distance between them. He took pleasure in this, anticipation being the pretty side of desire. He allowed Xi the impression of independence, however any sideways step and he could reel him in.

He sensed the birds before he saw them. The air thickened a degree — whistles, preening dust, bird lime. The wicker houses tipped and swung, activity was fierce. Where water and stone worked to slow the heart, the bird garden served to lift it. What had depressed the shoulders and put the head into a frame for contemplation was here reversed. The stairs were enclosed by latticework; the cages hung overhead. No bird stood silent. No bird thought itself alone. All shouted and made their notes for every ear. Necks stood out, throats swelled. Yuan-ching put out his hand.

‘They work against their boundaries as though only recently enclosed.’

Xi smiled in spite of himself. ‘You are right.’ The man rose a notch in his estimation. ‘Their charm is that they do not resist flight even in this confinement. How dull a bird would be for its colour alone. Movement is pleasing, is what the eye wants.’

Xi had every pretty bird. The man moved along them, birds tucked and bowed. Whistles tripped, tails fanned.

‘I am charmed,’ he said and then, ‘would you let me hold one in my hand?’

Xi moved to unlatch a door. ‘You like birds?’

‘If I do this is the first that I know of it.’

‘Put out your hand,’ Xi showed him — wrist held level, one finger extended. He transferred the bird onto Yan-ching’s finger roost. A large bird, black as a coal, backwards-jointed legs holding fast, surveyed him. It preened, plucked at its foothold and from the cover of activity took in this living tree.

‘Some kind of crow?’ he queried. ‘But what are these yellow ears?’ His experience of birds was limited to a common four. There were eating birds, these he called poultry; what he thought of as tree birds, they were sparrows; dark birds he called crows; and lastly birds of the air, these he collectively thought of as swallows. It was a simple taxonomy.

Yuan-ching was altered by his smile. No less ugly, Xi thought, but a less forbidding aspect. He had the bird level with his eye and was *singing* to it.

‘He is yours,’ Xi offered, hooking down the cage. ‘He is some kind of starling. If you have the patience for it he might learn to speak.’

‘Be my eyes,’ he silently mouthed to the bird as he handed it on.

‘Wei’s gardeners should not grow my wisteria from seed or on grafted stock,’ he told his daughter later, ‘this would be useless. You may strike a new plant from the vines I send with you. The purple flower once struck will bring forth only purple blooms — grown from seed you may not even produce a flowering tree. Why it is that a parent may not produce its like from seed is beyond my knowing and yet I know that a switch cut carefully will be as the parent in every detail.’ He wondered if from his words she took the meaning on herself — having sprung from his seed she had grown wrongly, a parody of the parent as unlike the stock as a stranger might be.

In the summer as a child she had accompanied him as he inspected the gardens, fingering rose stems, plucking from the flower hearts the hostile interlopers (aphids, red velvet mites, sap suckers, mealy bugs), mincing the rose chafers between finger and thumb. He laid ants on her tongue, their acid making her lips smart. He examined peaches, their leaves mysteriously bonneted, sewn up by spiders or gummed by bugs spewing out shiny spittle from between horned lips. Eggs were laid neat as buttons, sealed inside the curled leaf.

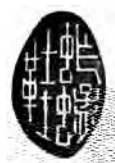
As a child he had been told that his mother’s royal ancestor had been sewn inside a suit of pieced jade, each jointed square cut from a gem mounted on silver hinges. The jade was thought to preserve the body, keeping the muscles smooth, the skin firm, shielding it from harmful humours in the other world. She had been buried with her favourite pony, a gelded brindled bay, and

the entire person of her household. He had been told that they removed her ears so that the armoured helmet could slide over her too big head. Had there been some terrible miscalculation, he wondered, or had they known that in the next world sound would be absorbed, carried by the listener's body as pollen clothes a bee. The ears were placed in a tooled box and slid between her stiffened hands. Just as the green stones shielded his princess forebear, he told Hsiao Yen, so must the leaf protect the clutch of tender eggs. He was fond of peaches, however, and the stunted leaves hatched in him unpleasant thoughts.

Xi had a good if unscientific understanding of propagation, producing tri-petalled japonica, clean grafts on a variety of trees and two-fruit medlar plums. He could make a cut with one pull of a knife and intrude the tongue to be grafted so that the two parts married and performed as one. Even the tree does not know it is composed of two parts, he told her, and put her small hand out to stroke the heal. She remembered that he had studied curled leaves, placing them inside a wide-necked vase, holding one above a flame, peering at another through a ground-glass ocular. The heat thus applied brought a city of small creepers springing from their beds.

He was wont to preserve interesting specimens, recording their details in a laboured hand, drying insect parts in clean sand, restoring broken wings with thin paper and gum. Good specimens he dried and then set over steam, to restore flexibility, arranging posture with tweezers and pins. He was curious, his great facility for observation informing a generous if pessimistic world view. He understood that from what he had given her she could construct her own kingdom, sealing herself as soundly as the jade princess, inside a living suit of green.

# GINGER FLY



For Xi assembling the dowry meant more than the transaction it was. Finding a husband for his daughter might have been a slippery job had it not been for the covetous nature of collectors. Long ago Xi had read the bride price in his friend's eyes. He need only to order the wrapping of a single piece of pottery, this piece alone would suffice and yet he busied himself boxing calligraphies, sampling tea from chests already filled and sealed, bawling out tremulous houseboys. Finally Yuan-ching asked for the bowl directly. So this had been the man's purpose. They would take from him not one treasure but two. Still he delayed putting his seal on the contract. Pacing the hallways lined with chests and unlidded boxes — calculating, counting, planning — it was as though he was struggling to put a price on the love he felt for his daughter. As though he could measure out in this peacock tail what it cost him to lose her, make manifest his



suffering. Yet he delayed. Her absence would swallow him. If he stripped away his outer self, exposing the kernel — the very substance that was himself — it would be her.

It was decided that Ma should travel with the bride, should ride beside her as her Good Luck maid. And it was Ma who hired the wedding musicians, trumpeters, drummers, clackers and singers. She inspected their gaudy uniform and heard them play, she organised carriers and runners, some of them not much more than children but they were used to walking and shouldering parcels and looked clean once dressed alike. In happier times it would have been a job the woman enjoyed. It gave her a sudden authority. She frowned, pursed her lips, liaised with the grooms and farriers knowledgeably, regarded the proposed music with great application. She ordered coats to be restitched, cloth buttons double-stitched, she pulled out an unasked-for embroidery over the hem of a skirt. The other women began to shun her, peeved by her elevation, thankful that she would soon be gone. She had an uprightness, an unbending quality, they agreed, that none of them had ever liked. Her promotion set her apart not just from her peers but from the family also. Xi was too wrapped up in his own misery to answer her questions with any seriousness, the girl was white-lipped and red-eyed. At times Ma felt herself unnaturally taxed, weakened by the dour cast of the household, felt herself the instrument of separation, a sword poised to shear like from like.

The wedding sedan was ordered. Xi rode to the city to oversee its fitting out. Three weeks later it was brought to their

front gate, red, tasselled and shimmering. Its lacquer walls insubstantial. Like a jewelled coffin, Hsiao Yen thought, sitting inside it, testing the cushioned bench. Xi laughed when he saw it, a small, dry, hysterical laugh like a sick cough. This is the price I must pay to be rid of the spirit in her hand, he thought, misery, separation, these things alone will be my companions. It crossed his mind to halt the proceedings, send a letter by messenger to his friend undoing their promise. There was not one aspect of the transaction which pleased him.

She must marry only to serve the idea of marriage, he complained to his mother. With him, she was protected, cherished, illuminated! And yet it was he and not his mother who had suggested the betrothal, written to his friend. He knew that if he did not have her marry his world would atrophy. Servants would leave, rolling their bundles in secret, slipping away without notice; it was hard enough to retain them now. Business would fall off, friends delay visits. He recalled riding through the city on the day she was born, seeing the wells hastily covered, spirit money burnt, offerings left at their doorstep. And there was one part of himself which shared this unease, the looks of loathing and suspicion from the gathered crowd had never left him, returning in dreams, the faces of grandmas, servants distorted with hate. He remembered the face of the young man seated on the stone lion outside his house. The unquiet, barely disguised hatred of irregularity, his posture rigid with suspense, waiting only for a signal, a movement in the crowd behind him to step forward, his arm raised against a suspected deviance. How easily such tinder took light. No, there was nothing to be done, no road

but the one before him. He felt already diminished by the thought of her going. He walked away from the gaudy box, the sight of her inside it carried before him.

Suddenly he knew why he loathed Yuan-ching. He was the one! It was a revelation. He felt the wind clapped out of him as by some injury. The hurt was not to himself, he was accounted for in all his external parts. It was his heart which suffered. He felt its mass contract. How could he not have known that face at once? He conjured a pancake on which sat two red beans for eyes, the surface all marked as from the application of the cook pan. The image, but for the adjustment of age, fit exactly the man who had sat at his gate. The blue-hat man! Xi felt exposed by the knowledge. Unclothed by it. He had sat across from the man, had invited him to drink his tea, and all the time Yuan-ching would have known. He would have been silently laughing. Yuan-ching was the archetypal *Hsiao Jen* he thought, *a small man, a trickster*. No doubt he had begged his master for the job. The whole business sunk Xi into deeper gloom and made him less inclined to give away his daughter or his bowl.

The women chose the bride's ornaments and wedding clothes. Stuff coats, figured gowns, every detail down to stomachers and leggings lay in open chests. A saddle, a bridle, a box of bride shoes embroidered with metal thread. Her jewellery was either worn beneath her gown or sewn into clothes. Her brothers had jokingly given her man and woman gifts, boxes with trick lids which sprang open to reveal a pair of unclothed lovers joined like

acrobats. Mirrors painted from behind to show a couple on their bed, jars which hid an interior of buttocks swollen to impossible ripeness. She examined them first with apprehension and then with puzzled interest, flicking the hidden catches open and snapping them shut.

One box she packed for herself. A wax doll, her face partly destroyed by rats. A child's necklace, hers, its centrepiece the twin wings of a butterfly fixed in a wavy, gold, glass tear. A painted box of playing tiles (the ones her father's servant, now long dead, had pulled from his baggage on the boat), a basket of unreeled silk cocoons, horn thimbles, needles, books of paper patterns for embroidered shoes, fine, coppery-smelling metallic thread — she laid this at the bottom of the trunk with hanks of coloured sewing silk. A red and turquoise tiny patchwork coat she placed on top of this, something she had begged for Ginger Fly, her dog, dead now two years ago. She folded its four buttoned sleeves across each other to make a frail envelope into which she placed his collar.

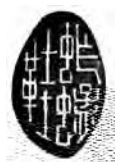
'Ginger Fly? Dead,' she said. 'Hu? Dead. Mother? Dead', as if it were an inventory. She wondered if her leaving would effect a death in this place. She would not come back to it, of that she was sure. Next to the collar she folded a baby's hat, next a string of Buddha beads, a set of painted fans — each weighted with a different species of memory, conjugated in an odd rank of grammar, each inscribed with precious but unimportant detail. Over the space of a week she packed and unpacked the case, assembling and reassembling her stores, sweeping together an already irrelevant past.

In her father's house she had fed on his wisdom, shaped herself in his image, aspired to know what he knew. She understood the role of a daughter, of a scholar, she felt physically the transfer between them. She had read and painted at his side, privy to his irreverent humour, his conspicuous wit. He had apprenticed her intellect, moulded her, tooled her, inscribed her mind with pictures, stories, some exquisite, some cruel, some sad, some suffocatingly funny. She belonged to him and now was let go. Set down without guard — lent out it seemed without conditions. There was nothing she knew about being a wife, nor was she surprised at this yawning gap. Innocence, knowledge, betrayal — three steps in a life sequence of eight. She expected in her husband's house to be blighted, confused, ignored. She expected to bring forth children, how she wasn't sure. She expected the physical world to be an irritating distraction from the life of her mind. His teaching had been exacting, explicit and, in the directions it took, not overly optimistic.

'There are twelve things to avoid when painting,' he had told her, 'the first thing is to avoid an ill-composed design. Assemble the picture in your mind, add one line to another — depend on rhythm.' He had advice for mountains, perspective, attributes of water.

'A rock has three faces, a tree has four main branches.' He wanted to tell her, 'Be on your mettle, trust no-one, beware of the enemy within.' Instead they discussed the constituents of pigments, his views on painting from nature, the rendering of leaves.

# THE CARP



That week she did not seek out her father. They moved about each other in a painful, distant orbit, swung about by the same levers and pulleys, yet their paths never colliding, the tasks which moved them through the day never intersecting, never reaching a common respite.

The evening before she left they met accidentally in the garden. She was on her knees beside the water coaxing a fish to the shore with a bracelet of bells. There was a look of intent on her face, studied determination overlaid on fear. He understood that she had fixed her mind on this small occupation, made it paramount to exclude thought. He knew this because his own mind was numb, he had finished with anger and regret and moved on to despair. He knelt on the wet ground beside her. Did she expect him to rescue her, he wondered, put an end to the charade which had them both in its grip?

‘If you want a fish you must bait it,’ he said. ‘You must lull it with your voice — tire its gaze with the silver on your hand. He must almost want to leap out of the water. You must suggest his desire, must embody that thought. He must wish to attend that idea.’

He rose clumsily, his trousers dark with twin stains, one over each knee.

‘Stay there,’ he said, already walking away towards the house. And she turned back to the lake, not because he commanded her to, or because she wanted to, but because this was her kingdom, her principality. She turned back to the fish, their lips grazing lily pads, their flat ochre armour inviting touch. The air rank with the smell of rotting winter plums; she could hear them plop into the thick treacly water, surprising sleeping fish, exciting eels, rolling weighty as small stones across the mud-thick floor. This was her place. It was as though here she was still six. Still able to ride on her father’s shoulders tree-high through the garden, her fat fingers pulling on his ears.

She was less stony with him when he returned. She saw that his purpose was to fetch the bowl which she will take from him tomorrow. She noted how he held it to him, hugging it to his chest, and yet he moved lightly as if its weight was nothing, as if it were a natural posture to walk with arms a perfect circle — held away from his body like a dancer — the bowl’s size preventing his fingers from meeting about it. He had held it often, this she knew not so much from recollection, but from the way his hands knew the shape, contour, its fragile porcelain balloon. In the distance he was but a dark shape attached to the bobbing, luminous vessel.

His eyes on her always, she could feel them; even when he could not fix her beside the water, his line of vision obscured by branches, he was drawn, it seemed, unerringly on.

He smiled, a smile that opened across his face like a fan. Hers was the twin of his.

‘So let’s catch a fish,’ he said to his daughter. ‘We will catch a big fat fish to take to your new husband.’ The project united them in a way their shared misery could not. Complicit, expectant, comrades. Allowed once more to be the child of her father, allowed to prepare for nothing but the moment, Hsiao Yen unpinned her hair, throwing the pins to the ground, shaking out the kinks and coils, their weight rolling over her shoulders and uncovered arms.

It took them less than an hour, lying in the shadows, peeping at the water through a twitching curtain of reeds. He caught small frogs for her amusement, setting them inside the high-sided porcelain. There was no recoil, he noted, no fear as she took them in her hands, stroking their pulsing throats, their trembling three-fingered feet. His eyes were always on the lapping water, his arm, sleeve rolled back above the elbow, one moment poised above a dark flash on the surface, the next plunged swiftly to pluck out a thrashing fish. She looked at each fussily, she took their flexing bodies in her hands, flattened coiling flesh against her dress. Too small, the first three flick away to freedom, too dark the next, too goggle-eyed, one with the flesh diseased in a way that at another time might have held their interest, the next an unnatural red. Xi knew his fish: there were the common Grass Fish which abounded, the Turned Out Gills, the Star Gazer



whose eyes were accommodated on a single side atop his head and looked forever skywards, and there were the rare Red Caps and beautiful Dragon Eyes. His arm fell like a guillotine, slicing the water into chunks. As his assistant she shook the bells and called across the lake. She laughed at him, his concentration comic, eyes narrowed, sight focused. At last he netted a bucking, writhing monster, long as his hand, bright winking scales, deep-chested and gold.

‘Aha!’ he cried, his volume waking birds and other daylight creatures round the lake. ‘This is the one! A king,’ he said, addressing the fish, his eyes sliding over to her for applause as he bucketed him. They scooped up weed, spooned over water and furnished him with water fleas and gnats, bugs dug from under reeds along the bank, a cicada and a cricket — stores for the following day, the sight as pretty as a soup. A dainty kingdom for a fish, they thought — he circled it dismayed, bereft of kin. Yet Xi could not help but see him parcelled in damp leaves, roasted with a whole hand of ginger over charcoal, or perhaps steamed on a bed of roe and wilted greens, a meal fit for hunters. Additions to the menu, substitutes, alternatives, this kept him warm and happy as they lugged the bowl between them. The dish, now full of fish and water, taxed them.

Bedraggled, wet and at a sort of temporary peace they reach the house, not hurrying, not speaking, shivering slightly but careful not to spill a drop of water from the dish. In the years to come Hsiao Yen would visit time and again this hour beside her father at the lake. His glistening hands, his arms dark-sleeved with silt, his neck red ropes of exertion. Each part of him she

catalogued, preserved as separate pictures. His trousers flapping wetly, mud-filled shoes, his eyes bright specks — these most cherished, she carried this emblem in her heart.

There was nothing to say at this point, she realised, and perhaps no need. They set the dish on a low table inside her apartment and Xi was gone. Her arms weak, trembling from the weight of it, and yet she could not move away. She stood at the table looking down at the spotted creature circling, turning, spinning a wheel of colour in the dish. The loathing, the fear had fallen from her. There was no emotion left in her but an unbidden fascination for this handsome thing. She had heard stories of the fish people who lived in the cold blue volcanic lakes of the mountains. They had eyes like men, speaking lips, the body of koi or carp. She reached into the water, stroking his oily back, pressing the flat tines of his tail between thumb and finger. The fish people, she had been told, lived long, worked magic, swallowed up trouble. They feared none, spoke only the truth. She knelt down at the table, tempted to press her ear to the side of the bowl.

Xi, shucking off shoes as he reached his rooms, stripping off coat, shirt, trousers, laughed silently, smiled widely in the dark. He imagined his friend's dismay at the mud-sullied dish, saw him trail his fingers through weed and grit, searching out loops of pattern, wiping the grime from the dainty painted shoe.

# RAIN



When the procession arrived at An Le they found the gates of the village were closed. The trumpeters, tired and dishevelled, their bright uniforms stained with dust and sweat, put their instruments to their lips. Hsiao Yen sat awkwardly, she had every discomfort from travelling, from tight clothes, hair pulled under a weighty hat. She was afraid. Through the cracks of the chariot she could see that the village gate was barred, gaps plugged between the rough cut planks with tar or clay. If she could have stepped from the wedding sedan and put her eye to the gap between latch and lock, she would have seen the red dust blowing through the streets, settling in spoons, riding in the neck creases of old men and fat babies, creeping under doors like a new year spirit. If she had looked to the west along the principal street and up through the shutters of the fan maker's shop, she would have seen a baby lying in his sister's arms, fat and festive, wrapped in

the tatters of a red silk banner — a banner torn down in haste some weeks ago, with the words 'long life and prosperity' sewn across the cloth in bright metallic thread. And yet perhaps if she had not completely worn out her sense through crying the scene might have struck her as odd. The baby was unmoving in his sister's arms and she leaned slackly, listing a little to one side, her eyes two blanks of unreflective of light. For a late afternoon there was little hurry or clatter in the streets, in fact the streets, the market place, the shops were empty. There was a crushing silence, a pounding, pulsing hush. Where workers might have been stopped by a street stall for broth or noodles, or old men returning from the cafe or tea house, there was emptiness.

But at that moment Hsiao Yen could no more climb down from the wedding car than the fish could leap from his bowl. So she saw only the gates closed against her and the moat clogged with discarded spirit money and broken prayer wheels. She heard the trumpets scratch a few sour notes into the frozen air and waited, her tears falling on the Good Luck woman's hands.

The procession bearing the dowry came to a bumpy stop behind them. There were men carrying chests of tea, shoeless boys carrying bolts of uncut silk, there were the porcelain carriers, their cargo nested in wicker and straw. Cumquats, plums, pears, quinces, haws and almond trees were carried on trays in their red and blue glazed pots, as though her father's garden had arisen and followed her. Cherry trees, apricots, pomegranates, millstone persimmons, white wisteria, japonicas, magnolias — some of them winter bare, some of them heavy with forced blossom or fruit, all of them came to an unthinking standstill, their bearers

grateful to set down for a minute in the dust. Summoned by the severe and unamused head musician, two of the cloth carriers ran forward along imaginary paths in the temporary garden, and were sent to look for the gatekeeper or failing that a second gate into the village. The rest of the caravan subsided, sitting on unopened chests or boxes or squatting, fingers feeling in pockets for a twist of tobacco to chew. The men bet on the likelihood of them being stranded for the night, games were taken from bags and pouches, the little boys pulled each other's hair, climbed trees, threw stones at birds and one another, or bent low over knuckle games. A low hum broken only by the occasional argument over winnings or rules hung over them as they waited.

Hsiao Yen stopped crying and lifted her veil. Her eyes were rimmed with red and the white paste makeup which her maid had so carefully applied in the morning was smudged and streaked. Ma laughed when she saw Hsiao Yen's face. 'Little Swallow,' she said. 'You have washed away your bride face.' Hsiao Yen put her hand up to her cheek, tracing the crisscrossing paths of the tears, following with her finger first one direction and then another, as though each was a separate brushstroke of a fine calligraphy.

'I feel like a chalk drawing dissolved by rain,' she said to Ma. She could see herself as though looking at another, on her knees in the water garden, sitting with her father in the bed of reeds. She looked down at the fish trapped in the bowl as though its colour, the light thrown off its back, could reconjure that experience, reunite them — erase the present.

Ma leaned forward and took the bowl from Hsiao Yen, setting it down on the seat before them. 'Let me see if I can fix

your face,' she said and parting the door curtains called to one of the carriers to bring her a dressing box. The man returned with a lacquered case and a white basin. From the box Ma took a tray of brushes, blue-black sticks of makeup and rice paste compacts.

'I see you yet,' said Ma, 'you are not completely washed away.' She drew the black grease stick across Little Swallow's brow creating a small bridge over one eye and measuring with her own eye the distance between nose and ear. She studied her face wondering whether to start again with a thin wash of paste or whether to patch what she could, painting over the smudges and streaks. She reassembled the jars before her, washing her brushes carefully in a jar, considering silently her own uprooted status, swallowing her private misgivings for them both. And then as if to mirror Hsiao Yen's misery, the air thickened, the sky — one minute unblemished — coloured, thunder rolled across the plains and it rained.

The horses were startled, shaking their heads, uneasily shifting from one foot to another, throwing back their ropy grey necks and calling out, protesting the unexplained change of light, spooked by the storm's din and the charged air. Mules brayed, ears flat, their eyes sealed against the driving curtain of rain. Hsiao Yen's potted garden was stripped of leaves and fruit as a great wind combed across the plain. Oranges glazed thinly with mud rolled about, the children shrieked at first with cold and shock but quickly recovered to dance about in the wild weather, their costumes ruined, their hair capped to their shining heads. Squatting in circles on the shores of great puddles they painted each other's faces with fingers dipped in mud — lunatic smiles,

comic eyebrows, whiskers, loopy moustaches, slit eyes accompanied by theatric poses and exaggerated laughter — their antics inflaming the tempers of the farriers as they fought to placate the horses.

‘Someone will go under the horses’ heels,’ a man screamed over the noise. The storm broke directly over them, the animals frantic, eyes rolled back in their heads, lips curled in terrified uncertainty, unconsolated by the attentions of familiar hands.

The rain lasted less than an hour, but when it drew off and the servants returned to the wedding caravan, they saw destruction wherever they turned. Whatever had not been carried to the shelter of trees or to the roadside shrine was water-stained, spoiled by mud. Dashed leaves and petals spun in puddles. Fruit was trodden underfoot. The children, excited and laughing a short time before, were now shivering. Hsiao Yen and the maid, who had clung together through the storm, climbed out of each other’s arms and pulled back the curtains of the wedding car to survey the wreck.

The two men sent to enquire at the village reappeared, sodden, sheepish, their faces similarly drained of colour. Even from inside the litter Hsiao Yen understood two words which fell from the first man’s wretched mouth. He looked distressed, frightened, his voice faltering. Ma, shifting on the seat beside Hsiao Yen, would have called him over but she could not speak in front of so many men. He had not addressed their carriage, instead he had approached the chief musician, stuttering out of confusion irrelevant information about the state of the crops, a drop off of traffic on the river, the village starved, sick — the

dead too many to count. 'The fever,' he said and the words stung Hsiao Yen like a blow. The North and West gates similarly sealed, a fever notice pasted over them. She put her hand up to her cheek as though it smarted. To the surprise of her maid she roused herself and unconscious of her eccentric appearance she stepped out of the car.

'Come,' she said to the man closest to her. The men froze in the act of running or bending to look at her. That a woman, a bride should not only step out of the wedding car but issue an order was so foreign to them, it seemed for a moment both perplexing and amusing. And she had addressed the man directly, rather than speaking through one of them. She had alighted unhelped and stood before them a spectacle, an anomaly. Every pair of eyes followed as she bent, distracted for a moment, to pick up a tiny, still warm corpse at her feet. A bird confused by the play of noise and light, dashed to the ground by the river of rain. A germ of pity uncoiled itself within her, pity not for herself but for the small soul suddenly extinguished. This uncommon feeling removed her from the immediate turmoil, narrowed her gaze, fixed it as though she looked through a keyhole. It was the first time in weeks she had allowed herself to turn towards another being.

The bird fit her closed fist exactly, its twiggy legs folded up underneath itself, its head resting slack on her thumb. She raised its small face to her own, observing with a measure of abstraction a fly, partly digested, a meal unfinished, blue wings pasted to its tongue, the papery head and shiny thorax surely already sitting in the belly of the bird. She wept for the bird and it was a relief to cry for



another, to feel her shoulders shaking. She walked with it away from the men. It brought to mind Xi's birds, the pre-dawn clatter that her father fondly spoke of as song, a bright spot in her childhood. Once as they had walked in the garden among the swinging wicker globes they had come across a dead bird. Its bright eyes were closed, shuttered by a thin leathery snip of skin, its neck angled unnaturally. It was stiff, although its feathers lifted and moved as though in a breeze — its personal army of lice departing.

'Father,' she had said, 'where will the bird go now he is dead?', her mind transparent, her logic unavoidable, the bright eyes fixing him along a line of purpose, of deliberate enquiry. He had taught her the four foundations. Did she not remember them? He had drawn the wheel on her belly with his finger, painting in turtles, a red-clawed cockerel, four-armed dragons, lions, serpents, lop-eared oxen. He had bent her small fingers into the shape of the sacred mountain, watched her practise the postures. He had turned her ever inwards, making the only virtue emptiness, transparency. And she had absorbed this knowledge into her canny six-year-old self eagerly, willingly, meditating on the invisible.

In the arbour he had turned from his contemplation of the bird back to her. His eyes full of interest, her wit, her curious comments on the world amusing him. Once, he remembered, she had thought herself invisible, walking the gardens smiling, her hair bright with stolen ornaments. Her question troubled him, perplexed him, its innocence arresting. Finally, saying it over to himself, it made him laugh. Throwing back his whole head,

reminding her of a cock extending its sinewy neck to crow, surrendering to the glorious physical sensations of joy. He laughed until the colour moved up his throat to his cheek and then he bent and pulled her to him. 'Where would a bird go, except to the sky? Perhaps its small soul will be as a shim to another winged creature — a bat, a fly.'

Hsiao Yen looked at the dead bird in her hand. She had nearly cut her hand in two once for a dead bird. She looked at the destruction that lay around her. A soup of spoiled fruit, bent branches, smashed pots lapped at her feet. Sometime in the as-yet-to-be-unfolded future, she thought, there would be an orchard of haws, quinces, oranges. No-one would remark on it until the branches greened and reached for the sun. No-one would notice until in autumn haws reddened, quinces yellowed. And then who would be able to remember how this strange garden came to be — the trees intermixed, the strong aromatic of citrus interplanted with the blossomy apple and all sprung up in coils and loops instead of rows. If in one hundred years from now the hillside was a forest of nuts and plums, they would have had their genesis in her dowry. Each generation's windfall springing up by the parent root.

The men were embarrassed by her unveiled face, her wretched tear-stained expression, but they were hooked by the unexpected authority of her voice. In the space of an hour she had lost her fortune and yet from her a beacon of quiet restoration fortified them. It seemed that she had made a decision, that logic propelled her out of her hibernation — and yet the animals were

wary, rolling their eyes, champing, pulling nervously at the bridle or tetherings. There was something electric in her command which jerked the men to their feet unthinking to obey and yet spooked the horses, their ears flattened to their skulls.

‘Come,’ she said again to the messenger. ‘Tie up the horses by the shrine,’ pointing with her chin, her hands busy with the bird. She laid it in her sleeve tenderly, absently, as though her mind and her hand were called upon to act with complete separateness.

‘And when you have done that pay off the musicians,’ she said, addressing the same person, not bothering to look up again, her attention taken up completely with the tiny corpse. He stood in the midst of the ruin, fascinated, gaping, a statue standing bridle in hand. She had no clear idea of how to proceed. It was as though each command presented itself in her mind, already formed. Moving, her lips spoke — utterance an independent action. She moved about through the confusion, cradling the bird, treading without care through the debris and mire, inspecting without emotion wind-scattered treasure, her red veil blown back from her jewelled hat, her silk trousers and cloth shoes already caking with mud.

‘You can go. Take what you need,’ she said to those about her. And then as if the littered road was suddenly of no more use or interest to her she waved them all away. Picking her way back to the wedding chair she leant in to retrieve her dish. Being careful not to dislodge the bird from her sleeve she took up the bowl and began to walk across the plain, travelling away from the locked gates, away from her intended home.

Beyond was the river, most commonly thick with boats, barges, floating bundled cargo steered or towed by tugs. Hsiao Yen did not note their absence. The river, wide at this point, wound and looped through mountains, cut through rich grain-growing valleys on its way to the sea. From the Wei mansion at An Le you could see lights bob on the river at night and hear the voices of fishermen calling to each other and their tethered birds. The smell of rotting weeds, silt, the day's catch floated through the village. A cart brought fresh eels, grass carp, snails, oily pop-eyed frogs to market once a week. Sometimes a lucky catch included water turtles, the creatures carted live to the village, their snaky heads hidden, stumpy hands paddling the air — soon to be swimming through soup, beak and shells ground into medicine, eyes sucked from the stewed head, the eighth treasure in a ten-treasure soup. Baskets of small tree snakes as stiff and waxy as candles, boxes of winter melons, jars of rich bean paste came down the river in mule-drawn skips.

After the Spring Festival one year, a theatre boat had docked for a week upstream of the village. Supplies were hauled aboard the boat, fresh water, tea, baskets of onions, spinach greens, live chickens in a wicker cage. The battered hull was patched and tarred by local fishermen. While repairs were made the acrobats rehearsed their turns; they spun and tumbled, their bodies taut as hoops, or jumped lightly from each other's shoulders. They walked backwards on their hands or balanced a tower of teetering dishes on their heads. They walked on ropes strung between boats, swallowed coins, coughed up firesticks. Work stopped as men came from the fields to watch, women left washing at the

river's edge, babies wailed in unattended baskets as their mothers wept or laughed at the pyramid of fearless tiny men.

The conference of the floating world was rich, colourful, unpredictable, the fortunes of the village following reel and flux of distant river towns — luck travelling the water like a boat. The unnatural quiet that day on the water, however, went unheeded by Hsiao Yen's company.

Hsiao Yen had taken the path towards the water, turning her back on the land to the west of the gates which was already planted out with beans, turnips, cabbages and yellow, knobby cucumbers just in leaf. Instinctively she had turned from these farms most likely worked for her bridegroom, making her way shakily across the flooded earth toward the swollen river bank.

For a moment there was silence on the road behind her and then whispers, laughter and then shouting, the threat of fever forgotten temporarily in the rush. Some of the men ran about stuffing their pockets with windfall, trinkets were fought over, quality mostly passed over in ignorance for baubles. The housing from a cedar crate was broken open and abandoned, Xi's books torn, mud-soaked — finally trodden underfoot. The children were put on horses, wrapped in fur. Wet rugs, bags, rain-slackened rush baskets were slung over the animals' uneasy behinds. What had come to the gates as a company left in confusion, a heady, sorcerous impudence infecting even the most sober of the men.

It seemed that their bright caravan had come into the district unnoticed, the tooled metal of the animals' bridles, the procession of potted trees, the clatter of drums, the rank sounding of trumpets had excited little attention. It seemed to

the men, as they saddled up on stolen horses, lucky also that they left unseen. They did not question the absence of field workers, the lack of traffic — animal or human — on the road or river. They had not paused to fully consider the meaning of the locked gates, the noiseless people inside the walls. They quickly forgot loyalty to Hsiao Yen. They galloped away, the children sitting astride before them or led on mules or ponies. There was no time to confer, to wonder at the unexpected bounty, to fear possible consequences, prepare likely explanations for sudden wealth. Some rode instinctively towards native villages, an internal compass guiding them towards the river or steering them between hills. Others dispersed not knowing where they would go, knowing only to put a distance between themselves and what had happened outside An Le.

But if it seemed to the men who sped away from the broken wedding train that their acts went unobserved, they were wrong. On that day near An Le village there were two separate witnesses, parties unknown to each other but both with an equal interest in what had transpired. One, a child, had watched from the heel of a hill which rose up from the river. He watched as the caravan, a string of coloured beads, was pulled along the rutted road which wound along canals between planted fields — a map of colour moving across his view. He watched from the cover of an unused otter house as the sky darkened and rain fell. He lay flat on his stomach, his head resting in his hands. He was eight years on earth, a foreigner, lately bereaved of his father and grown half-brother. Sent by his company to spy out the land, he had walked

from where the men had made their day camp on the river bank, along the tow path and then, tacking one way and then the other, he had made his way panting to the summit of the hill and over. The plains beneath him led in one direction to farms and the village, in the other to the stumpy fingers of grey mountains beyond which was the sea. His instructions had been to stay away from the village, to keep hidden and to speak with no-one, but to commandeer a vessel — sound clay or iron would do — a pot which would hold water, fit a hare or game bird and which could be set on a fire or hung over the flames.

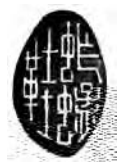
When the rain broke above him — noisy, sudden, the drops stinging his face — he retreated into his den, moving back deep into the cut side of the hill. It was warm there, snug, smelling rankly of turned earth and otter spraint like cut hay. The den fit his body closely, made by a nesting beast half his size. It gave him comfort to feel the earth tight around him, an embrace, as a seed is embraced darkly, as an unborn babe is held deep within muscle. He shielded his face with his arm, his eyes closed, waiting out the storm. The thunder riding across him, pulsing through his curled limbs like a great heart. When it was done and he had felt himself all over to make sure he was not broken in any moving part, he stirred out of the hole, wrung out his clothes made wet by the wash of rain that had spilled into his hideout. He looked about him. Great spires of water still lifted from the river and the wind flapped his wet shirt miserably. He turned about to face An Le and was surprised to see the caravan, that he had watched slide towards the foot of his hill not half an hour

before, broken up, the dowry spilled and spread and a dozen men fleeing on horseback. He watched awhile, the sight strange enough to make him forget his discomfort, and saw that the whole party had dispersed. He climbed back to the den, more for warmth this time and comfort rather than protection. It had been a taxing day for him, one where he had put his father and brother underground, witnessed a strange and terrible sight at the graveside, walked for miles and then weathered a storm that seemed to have struck some unknown fear into the company below. He was himself still not entirely recovered from the illness that had taken his family, and a wave of sorrow and fear broke over him so that he lay in his earth house sobbing until finally he slept.

The other who had watched the wedding party arrive was soon to leave the village himself, its streets empty, its houses filled with unburied dead. It was Wei's servant, adviser and confidante, Yuan-ching. He had seen the bride arrive, his plans for her awry, and looked on unmoved as the storm broke. He was still at the window on the river side of Wei's house when the wedding party rode away.



# THE FUNDAMENTALS OF PAINTING



‘The text is made by the body,’ Hsiao Yen said aloud, ‘made by the body,’ her head bowed, her arms outstretched about the heavy bowl, tacking slightly into the still fierce wind. She must speed away from the village, this she knew. Childhood memories of fever leapt over-coloured into her mind. Fierce hot winds in summer which left children slack and senseless on their beds, or thrashing in their mother’s arms, their bellies swollen, their tongues thick, eyes gummed shut, dead within days. Streets emptied except for funeral processions, tiny coffins carried by the still living, some already scabbed and spotted with disease. It seemed to her that she must outwit the fever, shake it from her tail. She knew without expressing the thought forming in her mind that she must not walk a direct line but turn inwards

towards her centre, treading a spiral, turning the wheel that her father had traced over her skin. It was well known that demons travelled only in straight lines, that they could be confounded by the sight of their own image in mirrors. She had no mirror except for the shallow water in the carp's dish and no hedge between herself and danger except her own cunning, her own route back towards herself. She shuffled on, stepping, turning, her eyes closed. The confusions of the afternoon fell away.

She flew back to her father, to herself smaller, rounder, fed on praise, sleep, companionship. She sat trapped between his belly and a wide tabletop, his heart thumping behind her shoulder, her legs swinging, her breath sucked into her cheeks as she watched him dip a new brush in ink. His elbow raised, his hand moving quickly, lightly — four leaves appearing on the uncoloured ground, this leaf longer than that one, a fifth crossing them, three more in the middle — the ink at first dark and now subtle, the line unbroken. Neither of them spoke, they barely breathed. If she inclined her head she could see the small pulse below his ear jump like a cricket. With one arm across her chest he held her to him, with the other he painted petals, buds, bent stems; the ink bold, wide, the brush held first this way, the next stroke delivered as though from a fine pen.

She had her jobs and performed them with nimbleness, not more than once or twice upsetting a dish of water or scattering ink dust on his paper or cloths. Before she could climb unaided onto his knee, she could hold a brush between forefinger and thumb, stroking a wash of pale ink across her paper, a blot of clouds, a ripple of water.

‘Look not at the object,’ her father said, misquoting his teachers, enlivening the method with stories, guiding her hand over shadows, arcing it over branches, shepherding her arm anxious for the finest result. ‘Look instead at its shape inside yourself. See that you are like the bamboo, each segment, each part of yourself a step on the path. It is this knowledge that you must describe in ink, not just the fall of light or the patterning of leaves.’ He felt her blots and smudges physically, her childish studies wounding him, filling him with frustration. If her wash of colour seemed uneven or her ink imperfect he sighed, offended by the unsubtle or hesitating line.

‘Father,’ she would say, sensing his displeasure, ‘enough,’ slipping from his knee, her hand laid for a moment over his mouth, stopping up the protest before it left his lips.

But before she could slide from him he would have caught her, tipping her back in his arms, her chest bare, her plump feet naked, as yet unbound, treading the air. Leaving his work unfinished he playfully considered her as he would an undecorated plate or jar, cocking his head, narrowing his eyes. Before she could protest at the cold lick of his brush he had painted the backs of her hands, her chin, even her eyelids with thick coils of ink. On her cheek he drew the character for laughter, on her nose — curiosity.

‘Keep still,’ he said kissing the unpainted palms of her hands. *Lid*, he wrote simply on her brow, knowing she would puzzle this one out alone, a borrowed mirror in hand, one thick line above six others, two arranged like stems inside the four. *Song*, he wrote by her lips, *fire* he painted on her chest, *drum* on

her belly, *secret* he wrote behind each ear. Was there any better way to learn than to be her own dictionary? She drew on him too, painting circles for his eyes to peer through, adding wings to his ears, a plum-red nose, a mouth — mineral blue that curled at the sides like Turkish shoes. She put handles on his brow and chin, coloured his ear lobes with paste jewels. She led him, eyes shut, from his workroom to the lakeside, made him kneel on the soft bank (the damp seeping horribly through his trousers), and contemplate with mock tears and gasps his buckling, watery self.

Ma stood immobile, unheeding the looting and fighting.

‘Little Swallow,’ she called out, her limbs moving once again, as the men dispersed, some turning back the way the procession had come, some heading north to the sea, some to the river, others rode madly, joyously, infected with freedom, no thought for the future, no plan.

‘Wait, child,’ she called, ‘I will come to you,’ and flew over the furrowed, treacherous ground as fast as she could. When she reached her object she saw that Hsiao Yen had fallen, her eyes were shut but her lips still moved, speaking over a mantra, chanting, sounding out each syllable. The bowl had fallen somewhere close to her still outstretched hands — the water shallow, the fish flapping uselessly, his body trapped in air. And the bird — the bird had slipped along her sleeve and lodged between her neck and breast. Its being returned, as if warmed by her fever. Its small heart expanded, its wings plumped and it called from its strange nest, the song mixing oddly with her own.

The girl lay on the cold ground, her head crowded with artistic instruction.

‘The text is made by the body, comes from within as a thread comes from the spider,’ she said aloud, perhaps to herself, perhaps to an invisible other, remembering the words but not the substance of her father’s lesson.

‘No, wait! Protect the tip of the brush with wax, dilute the ink with water only once the amalgam has thickened and is slick and smooth.’ It may even be acceptable to take some wax from your own ear if no substitute can be found, her father had once said, her face expressing disgust and fascination simultaneously. He had a store of knowledge from which he drew strange and sometimes horrifying material. He could recall the formula for pigments made almost entirely from the crushed bodies of insects and human saliva. He had appalled her on her fourth birthday by swallowing the unhatched, unfeathered body of a chick, weighing another pair of eggs, one in each hand, offering to loosen another baby from its shell. He had some questionable views on the preservative qualities of urine.

Now her arms, which had at first been held out stiffly before her clasping the bowl, swam in a lively choreography of transparent brush-strokes, the image of her father’s face serious and instructive before her.

Ma’s hands shook and the tremors moved up her arms and through her chest and head. She put her arms about herself, holding herself together. She looked from the fish to the girl, turning first one way and then another. And then, as if spoken to, she bent to the carp, snatching him up in two hands, feeling the

flex, the flat ribbons of muscle that propelled his coiling and uncoiling self through his watery world. She lifted him and raised him over her head as if offering him to the heavens and then before she could think what she was about she had cast him into the air. Ma stood, not breathing, following his flight with her eyes, from east to west, her mouth a circle of worry, her white hands pressed to her face. The fish seemed to ride without hurry — an odd, bright, unfeathered bird — then landed with a sound like a handclap, in a wide ditch, blue with silt and mud. He swam slowly about this foreign pleasure, snaking through the darkness, the thick, cold water a salve to his air-bitten skin.

# THE YEAR OF CHOLERA



Eighteen-sixty-six became known as the year of fever. Sickness was visited on the villages about An Le. It had come east with some tall-mast ships, riding in the bilge and ship's beakhead. Ships trading tea, dye stuffs and the accursed opium brought with them also disease — trailed it across oceans, unloaded it onto docks. It spilled from the ship's own water. Fever is well shaped to travel rivers, living between the cleated transoms, waiting out the season in village thatch and straw. In the damp warmth between clay bricks or the thick water of dead canals, it waits on the trigger of rain. This year it came with a survey ship and lit on each community — a map of contact, of transaction.

Outside An Le, the *Nicolaas* was at anchor and for eighteen days put up a hospital flag. The ship was a confusion; all work was suspended. Fever took some of the company's most able men. The captain was dead. The officers were mostly dead, a good part

of the crew succumbed. Lucien Battard the scientist remained to command the ship and see to the burials. Not wishing to put the dead into the water, he came ashore at dawn with a party and twelve bodies sewn into sails. The convalescents set to with spades and picks. Their metal rang on stones and dulled on roots but they put their backs to it and made a grave which could accommodate a dozen laid head to toe. They sang and Battard spoke a verse which they had by heart this month. And then it was done, the sod tamped, the final separation trod firm. The living stood atop the dead. Battard told the child his kin were transposed into sparks which rode the vapours seeking eternal light, but the child cried for his father laid underground and his half brother too. He had been nursed from sickness to survive this, to see grown men cut down.

Even the crew who had not sickened were fatigued and ill-set in their minds so that the Frenchman Battard gave them leave to go freely until dark. Being foreigners, they were not well thought of in the villages, he reminded them, they were to stay as a company and take their direction upstream.

'The child should go too,' he said, nodding to the boy to take this recreation.

Battard returned to the ship, whereas most usually he took any chance to scout. Any time on land was commonly a boon; he would haul down his nets and gun, take a small press and some killing jars. But his new commission weighed on him; he could take no ease in his usual habit. The men who remained with him he set to cleaning and hauling new sand over the decks. The linen could be boiled or burned. Burn, boil or bury it, he told the men.



Brasswork needed spit and a rag. Deprived of any kind of diverting conversation Battard sat at his desk, his head in his hands. The command would be his, there was no shirking it, yet he had the pilot and their bosun, both living and sensible, who had between them a lifetime on ships. He would draw on the wit of his native crew, who had imbibed every shallow and deepening with their first suck of milk. What they did not know, he was told often enough, would not sink them. Battard had every faith in the men and they in their turn would know him to be steady as he was keen. What a change the past weeks had wrought on him. He had become less involved with his study, he had not shied from the mess and horrors of illness. A guard had grown up inside his tender self. The men would find him an able leader, decided but not intractable. He would show them a good listener, he would know when to take instruction. He would divide his interest between his work and the men. Their cargo, he remembered, was generally intact.

‘We can still deliver it,’ he decided. ‘I will do the shooting as we go.’

He took a stride about the cabin, took down a book and slid it home again. He put himself back at the table, moved his presses and jars and made a study of the captain’s charts. The drawings were worked over with soundings, all the elevations made from sightings along the shore. Sandbanks were shaded and the varying depth about them inked in rims. The tide patterns and shales written where they were notable, or where some hazard posed. Their last recording marked their anchorage and the beginnings of the cholera. There was more detail here than in

a dissection! Yet he would find that it was not unfamiliar work, it was the kind of occupation which pleased him; careful, made on calculations and observation. There was no pressing urgency to weigh anchor today. He would let the men have their ease, he decided. In a day or two they would put away.

Battard's most able shooter, Henri Leroux, went slightly ahead of the onshore party, his stomach talking to his gun. Leroux — a parody of ugliness, a man such as no woman would ever lie with, face like a split chestnut, nose like a brass spigot — was yet a favourite with the men. He was short in the leg and bent from years of camp life but retained a strength bred into him by generations of men who used their hands to shift rocks and their backs as torque for the plough. He had thought all morning that what would set him right in his belly was a stew of rabbit heels with fennel if it could be gathered. He had a good instinct for game and the others followed him, happy to let him guide their steps.

When the sun was well overhead they stopped and made camp. They had walked perhaps a league from the ship and had shot two hares lying quiet in their new dug forms — smaller than the European hare but fine enough. They had brought down a wood thrush and three pigeons and tried unsuccessfully to dig a fox from her den, the latter being more a sport than a remedy for hunger. The hare would nourish wind and limb, the pigeon the heart. There was no other wild creature more a medicine for grief than the humble pigeon or dove. Whether it was the memory of its gentle calling or its role as an emissary of peace, no other meat worked on the spirit so profoundly. Which woman

had not stoked her timid lover on a pigeon pie? Childbed fever was fed on the same. It was said that a sinner could not stomach it, yet for the sorrowful, no other dinner served as well as a small bird roasted brown with a pouring of wine and meat juices, a hard bread to sop them.

They built a good fire lit from a lucifer. Although the wood was mostly green, it took, fed from underneath with dry reeds and the seed heads of rushes. As Leroux skinned the hares they fell to talking of how they might make their meal. They were ill-provisioned, having left the ship that morning with other matters to mind and had not thought to bring a kettle. Leroux had brought his fowling piece from habit, Battard often requiring of him his shooting skill. There were some in the company that argued to take the meat back with them to the ship, but that would have caused them to tramp on tired feet and divide their share into even smaller portions, the pot having to go round another nineteen men.

After debate which was resolved only by a bruised cheek for one and a bloodied nose for his colleague, it was merited that those two be served last and the child be sent to scout about the farms. It had been noticed by the sailors that the Chinese matron chose often enough to cook the family's meal over a fire outside the house, the provisioning being kept by the outside stove, or by a tree stump. Stone jars for rice, clay pots or cauldrons might be usefully appropriated from such a store.

The child Antoine, son of the now dead conder, was grubbed up, his hair bound behind him and a wide hat made of straw, that had belonged to one of the Chinese crew, was set over

his head so his face and pale hair were concealed. He was told to stay in cover and if he was caught to cry real tears but not to speak. He went delighted with his purpose, loose in the stomach with excitement. He strode off, manful for his eight years, and the men watched him out of sight as he topped the ridge and then disappeared, the aspect of his head and shoulders upset by a warm shiver of sun. All failing they would need to wrap the skinned hares in pelts and put them over the fire on sticks, advised Leroux, or use the hides stretched over the fire as a bed, with the beasts wrapped in leaves and reeds and steamed on the knuckle.

Leroux had made two goodly sized slits in the heels and undressed the hares as simply as if he were shucking a coat. One beast would have easily measured six pounds, the second coming close to four.

‘We’ve the makings of a tempting meal here, enlarged by the birds.’ The juices flowed in his mouth as he spoke, and his knife finished with the hares then worked a switch into a skewering pin. When he was done he set about hanging the meat, fixing a hat beneath them to catch the flow. A stew wanted wine but blood would do. He imagined also a fair-sized head of garlic pulled late but before the cloves put on green stems, good oil, salt, juniper berries, peppercorns, lard, a picking of herbs. Aromatics and salt he might manage but the oil and seasonings, so easily come by in his own province, he would have to do without. There were few high holidays at home where they had not prepared civet and spent a happy morning jointing it. They had pounded thyme, juniper berries, sticky pepper in a mortar and applied this as a clear green glaze. No other meal guaranteed

the family so happily collected at the board. The remembered infusion of pork fat, bay leaves and the hare's own liver sautéed in an iron pan made him want to weep. He wiped his eyes on his shirt's sleeve, looking all the while at the river, his face turned from the men.

It had been a hard four weeks as they climbed the river. Work had near been suspended as the crew went down with the flux. Only four of the Chinese crew and the French scientist did not succumb, Battard putting his strength down to the fact that he ordered his room scrubbed daily with chloride of lime and had worn a holy medal at his throat since they sailed. It was this and his profound interest in every animal thing that made the Chinese suspect him as a witch. He did not admit to his colleagues that he had worn the caul of his brother's child sewn into the cloth of his coat. Later he transferred it to the boy's bed, sliding it between Antoine's damp, hot hands.

The Chinese had nursed their own men, then unhooked the boat and rowed ashore with the dead. Their graveside ritual involved smoke, the burning of paper, the putting on of white sleeves. Battard could tell no more. Each evening as the sun came low on the horizon, they made their sutras. They set their offerings in reed boats on the water for the demon, who snatched them up on his hooked tongue and bore them under.

'They work the volume of three men,' Battard wrote in his journal. 'They carry seeming impossible weights strapped to bamboo — they keep to themselves. They have as many dead as we do but will take no medicine.'

The sickness struck first in the guts causing a violent evacuation, next at the head with a stiffness in the neck and jaw and bright spots danced before the eyes. Within a day the patient pitched and swayed as on a high swell, falling finally onto their knees to crawl or be carried to some place of respite, preferably cool and without light. The bowels worked until they had put out every quart of bodily fluid, dark stains discoloured the body, the face blued to cyanose. When the gums bled and visions of angels swung over the ranting, fouled patient the end was at hand. Sometimes the fever passed and the patient waxed cheerful, sitting up to take nourishment and an interest in his companions. This, Battard learned, was a false reprieve, the victim nearly always breathing his last the same day.

There was a time when there were too many sick down to be nursed. The ship trailed in a fug of ill breezes, men falling at their posts. The living sewed the dead into cauls torn from old sails. The French sang hymns but it was a chant, a dirge more than music. A fiddle strained out a minor figure. Silence. It played again. Battard, taking his lamp below, stopped dead as he caught the music. He retraced his steps and stood alert, his head inclined. The bowing was coarse, too much weight from the elbow and the wrist employed wrongly. He could hear the posture, feel the defeat.

The captain was among the first to be lost, then one of the coopers and the ship's surgeon gone also to their maker. Battard took on the sick list, entering new counts each day in his log. It was a grisly business they were in.

When the child sickened he took him into his own cabin. He washed over his fierce, strangely marked body with cool rags, dripped water into his mouth. Battard was a presence moving about the room, a shape in shirt sleeves bent over books or sat beside the cot, his hand over the small boy's own. On the fourth night the child had flung himself out of the rug of his coverings and to Battard's alarm named twelve apostles as they stood brightened before him. He would have climbed up to them, gone with them if Battard had not pushed him down on the bed — forced to pin the child's body with his own — until the boy ceased his protest and calling out and lay still. He vowed that he would not lose the child. He firmed in his resolve, made his prayers on a fist pressed to his brow. He fed him rice porridge from a spoon but it passed through him as water runs through sand. The child messed himself and wept. Day and night went by unnoticed. They were a small packet of hell afloat, their misery a wall which enclosed them.

On the eighth day of his trouble his father passed into the arms of God. If the child took in this fact when it was told to him, he had no speech with which to show that he understood. For twelve days he existed as though on a separate plane from his colleagues and from the man who laboured over him as if he tended a son. He existed as though slid between wax sheets, visible yet with his vital stuff obscured. Battard knew he should have been taken from him by the close of the first day. Many of the crew, fleshy and strong, were cut down quick and did not make a night. He thanked God for the boy, kept him there on prayer and vigilance.

When the child recovered and was again sound in his mind, he told Battard that it was the beating of the angel's wings, the flex and follow through which extinguished the candles in the Frenchman's cabin and struck such fear into the boy's heart that he was frightened back to life.

'I looked into their bright faces,' he told Battard, 'Lahash stood over me, his white face lit with the luminous gob eyes of an owl. I looked on that face, Monsieur Battard, and lived. They had the marks of the firebrand on their lifted arms, they spoke to me.'

To the child their voices were as music remembered rather than heard. Some time later he was to see another angel, one he could not put a name to, who appeared to rest at the side of the wide grave the men dug for the child's father and his mates. No other man saw what the child saw, he alone witnessed the brightness along the ridge of upturned earth.

The men had put the fire into a shallow, dry clay pan. The earth excavated from its centre was slicked with water carried from the river in one man's wooden shoe. They patted the mounded clay into a curving wall — a tiny fortress — leaving a small portion of one side open to allow gusts of wind to serve rather than extinguish the flames. The ground had not received rain in some time, they guessed, as they set about digging. The task was not made easier by the makeshift nature of their tools, but it was simple and deliberate work which promised the reward of eating well. The walls as they dried were worked at a slant, wider at the base and notched so there were three small fingers on which, once the clay had hardened, a pot would rest. It was a feat of careful



engineering for a company so fatigued but it was a pleasing design, one which they had observed the hillmen perform some distance back. And it filled the time, a distraction from the growling in their guts.

The sun was moving now, no longer overhead, and dark clouds were banking in the west. Leroux left off his labour with the meat, concerned that they had not yet sighted the boy. There would be a flogging all round if they came back to the ship without the child. He stood, his bladder urging him to find some cover for modesty.

'I'll take a stride,' he said to the men, with a blood-flecked hand shading his eyes against the strange fall of light. There was no movement on the hill that he could discern. It had been a madness inspired by their own greed and hunger to have sent the boy away.

Leroux walked by himself to the top of the small hill which sat like an upturned dish between themselves and the plain under An Le. It was over the lip of this hill which they had seen the boy disappear. Leroux had no timepiece but the sun had shifted and the air gone chill. At the mast of the hill he turned in a half arc and saw nothing but formed land and a village held under walls — this was An Le. The boy's instructions had been not to pass in sight of its gate. Leroux turned another quarter, the stubby mountains to one side of him, the river at his back. The black blot of an oxen could be seen in the distance and a well, a group of stone buildings, a pond perhaps of farmed fish. As he gained the summit he could see that the sky was fast becoming lower, bruised, the wind had risen off the water with a dull climbing

sound as a waxed bow pulled over a string. He would not have time to return to the men before the storm broke, they would assume he was with the boy. A crack of lightning split the sky and the rain fell hard and cold, pinking his unprotected ears and neck like seed shot. He turned his back on An Le, half walking, half falling down the hill. He had found a secure ledge on which to wait out the storm by the time it rattled overhead.

When the rain was done he relieved himself and did not go again to the lip of the hill. If he had done this, if he had gone again to the summit, he might have looked down and seen the child before he crawled back to his den. Leroux turned instead to the river, threading his way over wet rocks set in clay tongues, careful even though he was beyond tired to keep his footing true. God protect that boy, he thought as the night came on. It might be more than his place on the ship was worth if they had lost him. Battard had not nursed him from the brink to lose him in a rain cloud. In the dark it took him the best part of an hour to find their camp — the good clay oven they had built when the thought of food buoyed them had melted in the rain. The men had taken the game, he saw that, but there was no sign that they had put up a meal. No bones, no fat shone on the cold stones of what had been their stove. There was no purpose for now, except to return weary to the ship.

# THE DREAM HOUSE



Some time before he was to be married, Wei dreamt that a girl the size of a pear stood up on his bed. Wei lay straight as a chopstick, breath suspended, his eyes wide spoons of light. He wished to call her to him, for he saw well only from one eye. What a wonder, he thought, what a pleasure. She wore nothing but foot bindings and a pair of dainty shoes. They took his attention entirely. The grasshopper shoe, he told himself, she was wearing them. She had sprung from the side of the coveted bowl. He longed to have her near. What a fret to see so improperly. How could he achieve her, he asked himself, his dream mind canny as its waking counterpart.

‘Are you yet an illusion of the mind?’ he wished to ask. ‘Of what stuff are you made?’ His mind ran ahead, seemingly the one alert function of his disabled sleeping self. He wished he could find focus, could enjoy with his eyes this unexpected feast.

Turning his head to one side to accommodate his uneven sight, he saw that she was not a child and he swelled with the wish to have her in his bed. He tried to move his mouth to speak but no words came. He tried to soothe his dreamed discomfort but did not know what ailed him. The girl began to dance. She threw her naked arms over her head lifting the loose hair which fell over her shoulders. She tipped her head this way and that, calling him. Harking at him to raise himself up and come after her. She called out again and again. And then walking boldly across his chest, just as an insect might that had strayed in at an open door, she struck him. She struck him on the jaw with her six-fingered hand and a sound rang in his head as a two-tined fork hums if struck, as rubbed glass sings with a voice that gives no comfort.

When Wei woke he lay for an hour unmoving. The dream had a presence which waking had not upset. Each act hinged to the one before by seemingly unavoidable predestiny. When at last he could move his lips and blink back under his lids the over-coloured picture of his ruin, he called for his servant Yuan-ching.

Of practicalities at first they hardly spoke, moving instead in a tactful choreography of less pressing concerns, the configuration of stars, weather, the fragile geometry of dreams, which left the sleeper more spent than when he had first lain in his bed. This last was Wei's methodology, his route back to the subject of the dream. His servant stood quiet, as Wei retold it, not speaking or even appearing to be thinking of speaking, embarrassed, chastened perhaps. Wei could not fathom from the other's silence the significance of his dream. Perhaps Yuan-ching was calculating dates, figuring his luck on a mental calendar of auspicious days.

Perhaps such a dream interpreted by the right mind might be lucky after all, he thought, attempting unsuccessfully to read his servant's face. And then the two of them began to talk, one interrupting the other and it was a relief to have shared the burden. For a moment he stopped talking and relaxed, listening without any real attention, hearing language flow over and around him the way one hears the vocabulary of birds, familiar, domestic, benign. He almost didn't want to be burdened with Yuan-ching's ideas — he felt safer in the knowledge that he had some.

'It was a good dream in part,' Wei said, 'pleasurable. I almost wish I could have it again.'

They were joined by Wei's manservant who had brought tea and the barber to dress the old man's hair. Wei walked about as they talked, signalling the others to stay without turning his head to acknowledge them. His oddly tilted stride was accentuated by his unheeled slippers and loosely fastened and hastily put on clothes. He repeated the substance of his dream, not caring now who knew of it. Seen like this he seemed to the three men suddenly frail. His uneven shoulders unusually apparent, perhaps even exaggerated by the fall of his dress. The delicate yoke of bones across his shoulders had been broken twice in his army career, the fractures clumsily knit. As a result his gait had a strange listing, forward-leaning aspect, not helped by diminished sight in his left eye. His hand crept unconsciously to his unshaved chin, his thumb stroking his lower lip, his head suddenly dull as though with pain.

'You fools!' he said, already impatient with their collective lacklustre. 'Can you not between you find a road?'

His instinct was to cancel the wedding, but his heart was set on the dish. Yuan-ching had promised him the bowl. It was in their contract. It was his whole purpose in entering this unlucky arrangement. He could not bear to so very nearly possess the thing and then have it slip beyond his grasp. Chiang, his manservant, young, brash, his small turnip of a face devoid of compassion, suggested that they marry the girl to a proxy, let the stand-in lie with her and reap famine or plague. But where would they get such a pliable goon and how could Wei still manage to keep the dowry for himself? Chiang told him how in some villages unwanted girls were married to trees, their bad luck karma confined to an orchard or stream before they starved, a wedding feast laid out in the grass before the abandoned bride. Unbidden animal guests from the forests or rivers supped on plates of rice and sweet bean cakes under the cover of darkness. It didn't take long for the girls to become feeble and wasted, for the food to rot or be carried away by vermin. Whole cities had been saved this way, Chiang boasted, and for a moment Wei saw his unhappy bride, in her red jewelled hat, wed the peach tree in his garden, unsung, ungonged and led away from the village at night on slippered feet.

# PORCELAIN



Yuan-ching looked at Wei's trembling hands and understood them. He knew how he longed to finger the bowl. He saw him turning it in his hands, holding it up like so, in the window light. He saw him stroke the fragile humming rim, absorbing the shape with the tips of his fingers. He knew that for all Wei's petty fancies, for all his ill-disguised weaknesses, the old man had a gift for handling porcelain. He could grade more than forty colours of white: calamine, crocus, flax, paper, sow's milk, glassine, cloud, bone, chalk, egg, tooth, ivory, lily, linen, flour, ash, pipeclay, pearl, curd — there were others. He could feel the separate vibration of colours, tell one from the other without reference or comparisons. He understood the finest gradation of pigment as it slipped between one white and another. He understood this shift between milk and snow physically. Even within the constraints of white, the pigments rang in his fingers like notes struck around the rim

of a gong. Each one true to its chemistry. Each one set apart from another as a martin is from a swift. Unlike other dealers in plates and jars Wei's gift manifested more in his hands than his eye. He tested weight, saw with his fingers the admixtures of metal, glass and kaolin, felt the content of water over sand, the sensuous throwing up of shape out of earth, the lustre of fire, kiln-fixed.

He learned with his hand to judge percentages of glass or silver. Held in Wei's hands a jar shone like a lamp. He would balance it in his fingers, turn it, his attention focused perfectly, his body alert in every particle. A beautiful vase stopped the breath in his nose, froze his heart, impressed its shape on his memory. Wei had once told him that it was the mark of a true collector to die possessing only a single perfect piece. But how to identify the one? A thousand surely must pass into his hands and out again before he possessed the one. Wei had let him hold in his hands a blossom vase, a flat, petalled dish of crackled celadon, dishes with saucer lids, like inverted nipples, Yuan-ching thought. Wei owned tea cups, cricket jars; he moved his treasures from one hall to another mentally registering the impact of light on each. He catalogued the movement of shadows, each play of light forever mordant in his mind's eye. He wrote anecdotally to friends describing the nature of transactions, costs personal as well as fiscal, the intimacies of accidental acquisitions or hard-nosed trades. Women too he felt were analogous to porcelain — like vases waiting to be filled with sons, or to be enjoyed, admired, coveted, handled tenderly, exchanged, even traded. Porcelain was a currency not yet debased by popularity. It was an intimate language. Yuan-ching understood this.



Yuan-ching understood Wei's gift. He was himself stung by the desire to handle fine objects. When he was not at work at some task for Wei he made a study of each ceramic. He had worked some of his favourite motifs into a copy book. He painted boatmen poling the river, trees buttressed from rockfaces. Wei noted that he had the mimic's art. Like the minah bird who can imitate perfectly the lark, but cannot compose one note of his own song. For months they had discussed a copy of the grasshopper shoe.

But Yuan-ching knew that although his master was driven almost to the point of lunacy in his ambition to acquire this dish, he would not harm the child of his friend. Instead Yuan-ching, elegantly intuitive, mapped out a simple domestic plan. In a world of uncertainty not entirely fixed by the position of stars, it was necessary for him to safeguard his place in the household by acting equally as servant and friend. He balanced Wei's obsessive fixation against his sensibility to the reinterpretation of the sleep pictures and suggested that Wei postpone the wedding and wait for a further dream. Take himself back to bed with a plate of oranges and a supply of tea, fix his mind on pleasant, unambiguous matters and await clarification in the form of a less narrative dream. For a considered time Wei entertained this idea, straightforward and appealing as it appeared. He was not so averse to lying in his bed, particularly if he had the company of a woman or, failing that, one of the household dogs — he had a fancy at the time for a cross-bred, long-haired spitz, a companion to his youngest son. But time was slipping away and the bride and her caravan of trumpeters was moving towards him as surely and unswervingly as a barge on the thin, straight arm of a canal.

A contingency plan was hastily assembled. Postpone the wedding and hide, they decided, the three of them as one. Wei sent word to the village to lock the gates and tear down the banners. No-one was to pass in or out of the gates without his authority. Food and other supplies would be trundled in under the cover of night.

A story passed through the village that fever had been reported in the river settlements to the east. The cold weather and scarcity of green crops lent credibility to this tale and grandmas everywhere hurried children off the streets. Old men burnt festival money, set prayer wheels at the gate like a row of discarded hats. Every face wore creases of uncertainty. Worry infected Wei's people as only the threat of the unseen can.

Slippers, footbindings, grass pillows and rush mats were burnt, sheets boiled in soup pots. Quantities of wood were thrown on kitchens fires to frighten off spirits; soon there was a shortage not just of perishables, livestock and water but also of fuel. Families kept to themselves, lessons were abandoned. There was a hollow aspect to the paved substructure of the streets as though they had already been swept clean.

# ON THE BACK OF VERMIN



Wei took the advice of his servants and retired to bed. It was a refuge, a haven, a retreat from the sometimes nasty mechanics of life. In a dress somewhere between his night robe and street clothes he lounged, unbarbered, the sunlight dampened by screens in a hush which extended into nightfall. It was a strategy which he had employed at other difficult times in his life — when, for example, he had bet a considerable sum at the bear-baiting pits and been embarrassed both in his business and at home when the scoundrels pressed for their money. On that occasion he had had the house boarded up and retired to an apartment which had once served as his sons' schoolroom. This time he was entertained in turns by visits from his sons and Yuan-ching, games of chess, mah-jongg, his food brought to him on trays and set out on a low table. He had a supply of good reading, he worked from the warmth of his bed on a catalogue of his

porcelains and put his mind to how he would display his new bowl. He was faintly troubled that the closure of the village had spawned rumours of pestilence but agreed with the family that such a story would surely keep the wedding train away. There had been deaths, unconfirmed.

‘No-one will investigate for fear of contracting the fever,’ Yuan-ching told him. ‘She will be turned away from the gate and most likely make her way back to the city in shame.’

The business of the dowry troubled him, played on his mind, invaded his sleep. The week before the wedding Yuan-ching and Wei spent hours discussing the possibility of sending men from the house disguised as bandits to intercept the train. Wei drew maps with his finger on the back of a tray. They rearranged the furniture to represent the village walls, the path along the river, a blue carpet was unrolled to represent the fields planted along the back hill behind the house. They took it in turns galloping across the imaginary plain, their faces cast into shadow by wide-brimmed hats or pulled back into hoods. Should force be used or some clever deception? This was the meat they chewed over as the days ticked on. Wei, with a small prick of conscience for the welfare of his friend’s daughter, held that the men chosen should infiltrate Hsiao Yen’s number, melting into their company offering their protection perhaps on the journey home. They could offer to convey the substance of the dowry, providing fresh carriers, resting up the men who had made the outward journey at the first river port.

Yuan-ching favoured an attack as the wedding party approached the gates. They would be weary from walking, he

argued, eager to set down, less likely to defend themselves. It would be well orchestrated, clean and above all execute their purpose with rigour.

‘Disguise, surprise, attack, capture and evade,’ Yuan-ching repeated. He itched to be the one to carry out their plan, to feel the heat of horseflesh between his thighs, ride like a fury into the wind.

‘Take all your horses,’ he offered, ‘inflate our number with straw riders, come upon them in darkness. They will believe the rebels rode on them.’

It was now less than a month to when the wedding train was expected. They would set out from Wei’s house in just over three weeks, taking the driest path from the city, pausing each night along the river, taking their rest at inns. From being a problem tossed from one to the other, the caravan they had discussed over so many nights would soon be manifest outside their gates — peopled as is any drama with living breathing folk, whom they would ride down. People who would flee in front of them or be tramped under the horses. It was a meanly conceived plan, as must be all such plans hatched out of greed.

It seemed that the talk of pestilence was not without foundation. One was dead in this house, three more next door. It seemed afterwards to the few that would survive its fury, that the talk of such things had called it down upon them. Why else would such a visitation descend on them at this time? They did not suspect the river although they had heard of the foreign ships ploughing their way upstream. They could not know how disease rode on the back of an uncommon transport or how it cut

through the unfamiliar as a knife through reeds. Who could guess that fouled water conveyed in the belly of the foreign ships could reek such destruction on innocent shores?

When the bride's caravan set down outside the gates at An Le, the only sound from within its walls was the buzz of flies in a frenzy of copulation, a fury of generation. The death beds of so many fallen were attended by a black host, setting down their liquid purse of eggs on the lips and unclosed eyes of the dead. By the time the bride stepped out of her tasselled chair there was not even the sound of the dead cart rattling away. Grass had begun to grow over door stoops, gardens of vari-coloured mould flowered on uneaten food.

The first to sicken in Wei's house were the small children, the grandchildren and a servant's babe still at the breast. The din which most commonly accompanied the laundering, sweeping, cooking and butchering of fowl and small beasts ceased. The noises of a household wakening with the first warmth of morning sun were no more. All his life Wei had craved quiet, had longed for the simple life of a monk cloistered with his books. He had not reckoned on the silence of death. An Le had never seen such destruction. It seemed that fever moved in on them as a string pulled tight through the neck of a purse. All within its compass fell. The house was closed to visitors, no-one came or went. The rooms appeared shut up, light was screened, there was only the sound of those still strong enough to walk moving between rooms, their voices low. Soon there was not even the sound of the bodies being washed and wrapped. Fires smoked in the streets where the dead had been taken without rites.

Yuan-ching stayed in his rooms. He allowed no-one near him. He touched no food from the kitchen. He brewed tea for himself, visited no-one. To pass water he leaned from the window, urinating on the cold stone below. He heard nothing from outside the house. Traffic on the river seemed slow. He was careful with himself, he rested, walked in a counterclockwise arc about the room and prayed to the Buddha to let him be. He released the bird from his wicker dome and let him try his wings — watched him ascend in a spiral. There was a pleasure to be had in seeing him tread the air.

‘Come to me,’ he called, ‘come, little man,’ and the bird descended to rest first on his shoulder and then tried his hand.

If he felt hot he lay uncovered on his bed, if the cold troubled him he put on clothes. He walked briskly in his closed-up room, thinking how so many years ago he had sat on the stone lion’s back and waited for Xi. It had been by accident that he had set down there, had been drawn by the flow of people to that spot. As water carries a suspended object — a flotsam turning on every current — so he was delivered to Xi’s gate without once having acted on his own impulse. The hum of the crowd kept him there. Disaffected, his own petty ambitions soured — he had failed to get a purchase on study, failed the very idea of himself, he had wanted intellect, public standing — the prospect of another’s faltering engaged him. But it was his own lack of merit which put the edge on his menace that night. Xi’s trouble gave him a momentary purpose, a welcome vent.

‘So many years,’ he said to the bird.

‘So many,’ it spoke it back to him, part a whistle, part an inflection. Yuan-ching whistled back. Was he drilling the bird in

language, he wondered, or was it teaching him to sing? How things had come full circle, how things desired seldom came to be. The bride must have left her home by now. He had not kept count of the days. What a man might cover in a single day, would be for a wedding party a three-day walk, a slow march carrying their store of crated linen and boxed china. She would be well fed, he thought, perfumed, her face painted as though with milk. She would be pert, plump, ripened to sweetness under her red gowns, her strange hand drawn up in a sleeve. The thought of her arrival kept him alive, wired him with a strength he seemed not to have manifest before. Dark and light circled him as days passed. He was hungry and did not know it. He was thin, shrunk, possessed with the idea that he would take on the bride.

In the first days servants had ventured to the river for parcels of willow with which to cool the fever in the patients' rooms. Gourds were laid in babies' beds for the same purpose and spirit fires of bundled wormwood built in doorways. Such a fire burnt part of the women's chamber, those who had lit it being too weak to check the sudden blazing up. The flames climbed the pear tree's low branches, the sap singing and spitting from the green stems, wood lice fleeing with their babies glued to their backs. Bees rose sleepy on the smoke, their senses dulled, some fell like hot glass beads to the ground. For a time the fire swelled, a red flower of flame diminished only by the onset of rain.

By now Wei was dead. In his last hour fever took the place of his vital material, rode under his skin, worked his eyes left to right then rolled them back into his skull, pinked his cheek and chin. His hands moved up from his sides and returned, his lungs



were fire. His heart contracted black; a stone denser than nutmeat, pitted, inscribed, it made itself into the shape of a dark, winged grub. His chamber unattended, his beetled spirit flew at the screened windows, butted at the door, finally it rested at his ear whispering the names of Wei's already dead kin.

Some weeks later the ship's boy, paddling a muddy bank upstream from An Le, rolled a fat black beetle from his net. It was helmeted, tooth-legged, its black armour alternately ridged in craters and spires, a pair of soft waxen wings folded under horny shells. He surrendered it to Battard, and it brought him a little glory as it was not of a type the Frenchman already had in his store. Tipped from the snare into a tin, it reared — alarmed, defensive, armed — to fly at the shining enemy who mirrored his every move from the prison walls. The Frenchman tamped on the lid and placed the tin in his coat pocket. A fine catch, he told the child, I am in your debt. Thus Wei was carried aboard the ship.

Wei's wives were among the early dead, lying as they had died in postures of discomfort, knees pulled to their chests or foam drying on their lips, their hair like string nets tight on their skulls, their fine clothes torn from their bodies in fever's heat when not even a gauze could be borne on the skin. Wei's youngest wife, named for a night-opening flower, lay, her chest bared, her arms thrown up over her head as if caught in the passage of protest, a child not yet entirely consumed by the fever lying over her feet, the bed disarranged — messed with bodily waste.

'Why is there so much suffering?' she had asked of no-one. 'Why does no help come?' A servant lay over by the wall, a broken cup in her hands, a trail of ants rode in and out of her

ear. Who could name this demon which had eaten already more than one hundred souls? Who, like Yuan-ching, if still strong enough, would not creep away?

# THE GREEN SLEIGH



Once the fish had been disposed of, Ma turned her attention to her charge. Hsiao Yen was no longer able to stand. She had tried to right her, to prop her upright so that at least she was not lying in the mud. But all the uprightness had left her. If she were raised she fell down in the same place. She was as a healthy plant seems once deprived of water. Whatever had made her firm, strong, whatever had knit her bones long and straight was eaten away. She spoke to Ma and yet her eyes were blank and unfixed. She seemed to rant on some artistic premise, where light should fall, how the leaves of bamboo should appear. Her face was hot to the touch and her neck seemed bruised; dark patches spread under her chin and right ear. Ma could not lift her nor make her walk but she must raise her from the ground, this was certain. Fever thrived on the slack and cold.

In the near dark Ma stumbled back towards An Le. The light was bled from the sky now and every tree seemed to hoop

over towards her. She was not fond of darkness, nor of extreme weather — thunder — an unwelcome excitement. Had she been at home when the storm passed over, she might have waited it out in a cupboard or rice bin, her knees pulled to her chest, panting, her hands fevered and damp. But in this strange place, alone with her sickening charge, she sprang forward full of purpose, buoyed in action beyond her common means. The ground was still wet, water pooled in hollows in the places where the earth could take up no more. Her cloth shoes were muddied, the starch softened in the wet. The soles flapped with each step and a wooden heel fell loose. Roots reached up and hooked her down, she went to her knees a dozen times but she was not deflected. There must be something she could salvage from the wreckage outside An Le, something on which she could convey the girl. There would be some broken wood, some cloth, with which she might improvise a litter to move Hsiao Yen. Her mind turned to the wedding chair. She could not of course carry it alone but perhaps a part of it might serve as a low bed if she could unhook the cloth-covered walls.

She had found her way back to the gates by following the river-facing wall of the town but in darkness the place look altered. Where they had set down in the afternoon, where the children had played and the men had squatted sucking on their pipes, all was churned clay. Trampled fruit, burst crates, winking china shards lay as an odd testament to what now seemed a dream. She looked about her for the wedding car, surely it had not been taken. It would be an encumbrance to the fleeing men and a sure proof that they were looters. She walked between the

junked boxes. Books and calligraphies were pulp, but an unbroken tea bowl sat on a blue feather fan like a hat. She walked past the wedding chair a few times before she understood that the splintered wood and flapping cloth were the remains of what she had ridden in. She was not alarmed so much as curious to see its pieces disassembled. It had seemed such a steady thing when she had sat inside it — sturdy, its panels plumped with good cloth — but now the thin wood was bowed and broken, the struts held by the carriers splintered. She was not put off. It would save her the labour of pulling it apart.

She worked without tiring into the true darkness of night, tearing cloth, laying wood in common lengths, sorting torn branches from the broken trees. By the time the moon was well high she had worked up a sleigh, tying cross beams with strips of linen, weaving a mat of green leaves and branches over the frame, padding it up with a bed of cloth. For herself she plaited a soft harness from the ripped skirts of Hsiao Yen's dresses. This she could step into, driving the green sleigh over the ground.

After some false starts and some adjustment to the bridle length she pulled the sleigh behind her comfortably. The weight on her neck and shoulders kept her upright, and she stumbled less on the way back. When she located Hsiao Yen again it was some work to move her. She lifted her it seemed in pieces, inched her shoulder over the sleigh's side, levered her middle, carried across her legs which hinged awkwardly, causing her to roll onto her side. When it was accomplished she saw that her mistress was face down. The folded linen which was to pillow her from bruises and injured bones was tangled, her foot caught in it at a bad

angle. Again she lifted the girl in parts, putting her hand like a great spoon under her head. And Hsiao Yen pushed against her — insensible — resisting the maid's attempts to settle her on the bed. Over and again she set down the girl's head, the hair fixed now in a bonnet of caked mud, and over and again Hsiao Yen repulsed her efforts, waving her arms and calling as loudly as a hoot owl. It is no easy thing to right a fevered person who will not co-operate, and whose intent is engaged by unseen levers and cogs. Consumed by fever, alert only to her own phantoms, she chanted on, lucid to a conjured image. With heaves and grunts Ma turned the girl, falling across her more than once and wishing only to lie down herself. Where she assumed such strength that night, she did not later know.

Her next thought was to recover the carp; he was their emblem, was part of their entourage. Having once held the fish in her hands, she experienced a swell of feeling such that even in her fright at the low sky she could not abandon him. Leaving the girl she paced the ditches and furrows.

'Old man fish,' she called, 'jump back to your bowl.' She bent over reflections of herself peering into muddy pans. She broke a branch down to the size of an oar and trailed it through the wash, calling and combing as she walked. And sometimes in a surface pucker she thought she saw a flat eye or the red comb of a fin. The fish heard her call and at first pressed himself to the earth wall of his cave. Having heard the river, felt its pulse through rock, he wanted the pull, the drive against current in the pattern of the tide. Good straps of weed, egg stones, mouth feeding on flies — it made him wax on wanting it. All that it

meant to be a fish put him about finding this transfusion. Had he lain still and waited for dimmit light he could have been away. But the woman, he knew, had dipped him into this world; he was grateful and swam to the surface and let his red back show.

Onto Hsiao Yen's crib she set the carp in its bowl. She had also saved from the rain an undamaged box of shoes and three oranges. Discarding her own shoes she chose a pair from the box, a green satin-covered heel, embossed with yellow fish. She stepped into the harness, leaning well forward into the now substantial pull. She turned to the river, perhaps called that way by the carp. The land rose slightly and then gently sloped away. There was one hill — this she would surely have to walk around, there was no way she could take both herself and her awkward burden over its top. The sky above her a scoured pan of brightness, she bore the bride on her sleigh over the cold ground. The night was deep but clear of any cloud. A bright moon lit the path over the wet plain. Like an ant with a great load she moved her cargo slowly, the rough underside of the sled catching on loose stones and uneven ground. Behind them in the night quiet ran her shadow, an upright lantern-pony, such as gallops over the puppet-master's candle, ducking branches, dodging pits. Beyond this moved another shadow, staying out of sight, pausing when they stopped to rest, their bobbing shapes to him a moving finger on a map.

The ship's lost boy had woken and he followed the women at a distance, his fright at being left in darkness allayed by this steady jog. The child kept back, letting his eye accustom to the

length of light. He made himself of the darkness, wore it as he had seen Leroux assume the night when pacing quarry with his gun. He was comforted by the presence of the women before him, not taxed by their speed. In their wake he stooped for a strip of rag torn on a snag from under the sleigh; he broke open his breeches pocket made stiff by dry clay and thrust in his souvenir. He stopped to drink out of puddles and tricked his growling belly by chewing stems. He was hungry and his mouth was bitter for not having slept long. Leroux had once told him that to excite the juices for a dry throat, it was well to suck on a pebble or a bullet, or to conjure in the mind a favourite meat while chewing on a belt strap. Even when he slowed he kept track of the women. He was eased by their distant, moving company. He had no desire to choose his own way, only to be pulled from his misery, to escape the company of his own dark thoughts — a sore tooth pulled from the head on a string.

Later he told Battard, 'I could not trust to be alone with myself again. I could not stay awake alone with my mind for fear the angels return to me.'



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# PART TWO

He cutteth out rivers among the rocks;  
and his eye seeth every  
precious thing.

Job 28:10

# ALL THOSE WHO MAKE BLOOD



They had come into a fine spread of lake, a globe which hung from the Yangtze as a single weighty fruit. They had left An Le some months earlier, following the river or its tributaries as far as the draught of their ship would allow. Overhead, Hsiao Yen observed that the sky was without clouds, the sun was high and warm on her shoulders. From the village there was the sound of children laughing, dogs barking. To this she paid no heed, not even troubling to make sure she could not be seen from the nearby gardens. Her attention fixed on Battard sitting across from her on the deck, a great dragonfly fussing at his coat. She watched him watching the insect. It hovered above him for a moment, absorbing the hills and folds of his serge landscape before dropping onto his breast, weighty, substantial, its glass wings

carrying the eye as a torch swung in darkness trails light. It seemed fascinated with the second button on his jacket, stroking its bright metal surface with the side of its head, retreating and advancing on the puzzling aspect of the tiny frozen pond. The beast, an ordinary but delightful spectacle, made them smile, he at the creature mistaking his person for a puddling ground, she at his absorption. The man barely sucked in air. He made himself into a seeing, feeling reed, on which the bug stepped purposefully, travelling along his ribs as far as his breastbone and then, as though at crossroads, turning to navigate northwards across his heart.

That night he was to record in his journal that *Calopteryx splendens* 'rested its darning needle shape upon my breast like an ornamental pin — a brooch weighted with set stones, precious eyes winking out all over its terrible form'. He made a note beside an ink drawing of the beast on the segmented thorax, jointed like a lustrous dark bamboo: 'Its span did not exceed six inches, and yet it seemed a substantial cargo to take into the air.'

To Hsiao Yen it was Battard who was the study, a picture of absorbed delight. His intent was as light trained through glass, which intensifies and burns, needing no fuel but its own chemistry — a spot of pure intellect, transfigured by imagination and blind faith. Battard, she realised, watching him from the couch, retained the touchingly childlike belief that he could understand the world. He would order it, marshal the buzzing, crawling and flying into creaturely kinds, each with their kindred. It was his purpose to go forward, hunting up the strangest, the boldest, the most grotesque of beasts. All kinds of unfamiliar plants he

gathered, breaking open and tasting fruit, seed, digging carefully at tender roots. He returned after such an outing dishevelled, his dark hair pasted to his fevered head under his hat. His hands would be caked in salt-mud or clay, earth packed under broken fingernails.

Letters to the Jardin des Plantes, annotated drawings, and oddly shaped, carefully wrapped parcels sailed from him on trade boats. A dozen jars of seed, or shooting corms nested in cotton rags or sand, would be dispatched to friends, with urgent instructions for their care. His letters to colleagues and friends leapt from the page with colour, detail, neatly made observation. 'I have recorded a fish,' he wrote one day to his brother, 'or is it a salamander, I cannot truly say, a fish that appears to be able to live outside its proper element, propelling itself along the tidal creeks which abound here, not on legs but stoutly made pectoral fins. On watching it closely for just on an hour I was able to note that the coiling and uncoiling of its tail served also to jerk it forwards. It is a mite bigger than a youngling cod and not at all easy to secure. Leroux, the boy and I spent some time tracking its skip from one place to another, diving on it time and again without success.'

On ship or land, somehow the creatures were propelled to him. At sea he and the bosun had scraped unfamiliar shellfish from the hull or trawled with the fishing rig, sometimes eating their finds, Battard reserving the skeleton or shell for his collection. He had a strong stomach and was not easily put off his food. The Chinese crew applauded his mettle, sharing with him on occasion grass soup, fried cocoons — the silk unwound from

their golden cases. To their delight Battard had eaten cricket paste, meal worms and once, in port, what he had recognised as sea chestnut, the roe of the male sea urchin spooned from the shell and eaten on wet rice. At home he had belonged to a dinner society which met twice a month at a private hotel to enjoy exotic foods. He boasted to Jean Paul, 'I am way ahead of our friends now. Nightly at table I spoon up eggs, said to be of 1,000 years, preserved on the piss of horses and buried in clay jars. I query their counting but tell you truly that their colour is deeply stained by earth and limy ashes.

'I have downed the mucilaginous productions of birds — a substance naturally used by the creatures to cement their nests to rocky shelvings. Tell our colleagues no worm or fatty moth is safe from me!' The men, proud of their own catholic taste in wild food, could not however understand Battard's admiration for blood sausage or game liver. Of the many birds which were shot for his collection, there were only a few that he did not gut and dry, pricking out the brain or liver, sautéing it with knuckles of garlic, weed onion and water greens. The men would watch him tip the browned meat from the pan to his plate, the offal dressed with curls of crisp onion, the greens limp, glazed brightly with oil, a treacle of pan juices poured over. A dozen pairs of eyes followed him from the galley fire to the mess, the ship's out-of-water timbers ticking and calling under him, a plume of oil-rich steam unreeling behind. Battard made a show for the men's sake of swallowing the meat whole, tipping his head back, his eyes closed, downing the meat with hock or ale — wine he reserved for high table. Yet it had not always been so. When the ship had

first put out from Marseilles he had gone quickly from a figure made on the proportions of a hooped barrel, to a puking, wasting invalid. In the first week he lost flesh and gained a sailor's respect for the physic of chalk pillules. In the second week he was so ill as to be confined below decks and fed rice water from a spoon. Until he gained sea legs and a stomach which no longer tipped and bucketed at the most innocent morsel, he learnt to eat plain, to avoid liquor, to love fresh water where it could be had. Yet no sooner had he acclimatised than he craved rich food again.

After a year and a half at sea and some many months inland on the river, what Battard missed most was bread. Bread from honest ground flour, home-milled, the chaff puffed from the stone with one breath. Steam issued from the galley day and night, it seemed, while their cook prepared an endless supply of dumplings — meat or bean-filled — floating on soup, steamed or fried, small shining pockets of minced pork or salt-cured fish. Delicious as they were, Battard found his dreams invaded by the smell of oven-baked, egg-glazed loaves, thick cut or broken open and eaten steaming with slabs of good white butter. Sleeping fitful on warm nights, working his hair into damp knots, he sighed as cakes and brown tatin — sticky and sugar-burned — swam up before his inner eye. Almondine, seed-covered crusty batons, chestnut flans, flat-plaited just risen Easter bread — if he could have assembled a table of good things, these he would have had close to hand.

It seemed to Hsiao Yen that exotics fell into Battard's path, were called out of hiding by his curiosity, as a magnet calls minerals out of the earth. He collected everything and drew or

painted a good quarter of his finds. From a Swedish catalogue of Latin names he assigned nomenclature, hoping that his precious plants were so far unrecorded. He had the luck or perhaps the wit and the sharp eyesight to ensure success, to make his travels expedient and at a personal level exhilarating. He was not to foresee that a year and a half from this point in his career, he was to lose his most comprehensive collection of plants, a herbarium whose scope would not again be approximated for another thirty years.

‘I have never seen such an exchange of caresses between creatures,’ said Hsiao Yen one day, as they watched the pipefish and seahorses in the ship’s aquarium. She watched Lucien fold back his sleeve, push it up over his elbow and visit on the tank a monsterring. In the tank everything had the blue cast of milk draining down the wall of a glass. Battard’s intrusion caused sand clouds and water to tilt and slop almost over the sides. She watched him plunge his arm to the elbow, search about and take from the aquarium floor a coral which served as both ornament and camouflage.

‘True,’ he nodded as he worked a pumice over the coral to clean it, ‘what other creature moves as if to music — can you not hear the fiddle bow some cotillion to which they form slow-stepping sets? I think there is nothing in the air or over the earth to compare with the creatures of the sea.’

Along the deepest wall of the panelled cuddy, he had caused a great glass tank to be mounted. It had more than once sprung a gushing leak, spoiling a number of volumes in Battard’s own



library. The tank needed constant maintenance by way of siphoning and testing of the salt levels for their fluctuating chemistry. But the creatures were somewhat protected in their glass dormitory from light. In this way Battard, by remarkable good fortune and vigilance, had managed to keep a clutch of the creatures for a good part of the year, making a series of coloured impressions in his notes. Hsiao Yen saw that the pink coronet was a twin to the gentle beast that hid in the tank weeds or hung by a loop of the tail. Beneath the drawing Battard penned a note on their lifespan and appearance: 'it seems that the longer they live so imprisoned, the more colour they lose over their skins.'

His mind was as a museum, she decided, illuminated with the desire to know and not just to know but to understand also. It was his ambition to impose the unison of taxonomy on the deafening cacophony of unmusical species. He was on the Museum's business he told her, the Museum's business and God's.

'The Emperor once commissioned this kind of work in my country,' she said and he laughed with delight when she recited for him the Emperor's fourteen laws of creation.

'I should begin by telling you the first rank of creatures: those belonging to the Emperor; the second: that which has been embalmed; the third: tame creatures; the fourth: suckling pigs' (here he clapped his hands, his mouth a spout of laughter); 'fifth,' she recited ignoring him, 'fifth: sirens and so on.' Three small lines appeared between her brows. She shifted her weight uneasily. It occurred to Battard that she looked like nothing but a child called to the parlour to recite some dismal ballad or tract before company.

‘Why so solemn?’ he teased her. But she was not to be cajoled or petted. Later, following her to the sailroom on a pretext of scrounging rope fixings for his pipe, he told her that he was most pleased with number eleven: things drawn with a fine camel hair brush and fourteen: creatures which look from the distance like flies. He suggested, straight-faced, she add to the royal bestiary: the kingdom of all things dissolved in water and those creatures not burned by fire.

‘I wonder had your Emperor ever been abroad the sea,’ he said, taking her arm and walking her to his cabin where he sat down at his desk. He indicated for her to take the couch.

‘There is a mighty store of strange creatures along its deep — fish who carry their own lanterns, others that live entire in the belly of another. I have netted a giant sea animal and split its parts only to find a whole kingdom of creatures, as live and sensible as the two of us, thriving in its gut. I have seen beasts whose eyes turn as on rods, one independent of its mate, there are schools of small fish swum forever pleached, a body composed of a thousand separate souls.’ He agreed, however, that tame beasts ranked above those at large and applauded the Emperor’s good sense in his jealous ownership of unweaned pork. Where was his Aristotle, his Pliny? If he could have reached them down from his library now! His shelves bowed under a ton of books yet he felt deprived of reading. He stood and tipped a volume back, hooked it down tugging on the spine. It was not what he most wanted to show her but it would do. He walked about and then took his chair, holding the unopened volume on his knee.

‘You may know,’ he began, ‘of a Greek who made a study of all the animals. He classed beasts principally by their blood. All

those who made blood — such as the ox, the hare, the birds — were included in one company. The bloodless jellyfish, the worm, the unseen water-dissolved animalcule, comprised another set. It is an interesting and useful division, would you not agree, and as pertinent to his time as was your Emperor's taxonomy.'

'I am thinking on it,' Hsiao Yen said, seeing that she was looked to for a response.

'It was my mother who gave me Aristotle. My mother (she was the one who read to us) loved the poets, the great historians. She read out loud Herodotus, from whom I'm sure I get my will to travel, and Virgil from whom I learnt to love and respect bees, flowers, meadows. Virgil claimed knowledge of a tree whose fruit once burst to ripeness and dropped the embryo of a goose to the ground. The unegged bird grew feet and feathers, great wing paddles and a yellow bill in the span of a day. I know now from my own studies such things could never be. He claimed also to have studied the morbid effect of echoes on bees.'

'What else did your mother read? No adventures, no gory battles? My brothers loved stories of action and heroes best. Nothing pleased them more than to hear of an army cut down. They loved the details — a head chopped from the torso, a knife stuck in a side.'

She stood a little way from him and at that distance took in the sum of him. Seated at the cabin table, his legs stretched and braced against the cross bar, he contemplated the question.

'They might have enjoyed Homer,' he said and sighed. He had not meant to visit this portion of his childhood. Recollections of Jean Paul unfastened a spring in him which to this point had

been securely latched. He swung back on his chair, testing weight against geometry, and studied the neat joinery of the cabin timbers overhead. There was a loud report as the chair rocked back to the level and Battard twisted in the seat to face her.

‘My mother — I think you would have liked her. She read to me,’ he said softly, warming in pitch and volume as he found the thread, ‘also of a Venetian sailor who crisscrossed the world in a ship much less robust and not nearly as handsomely equipped as this one.’

Here he was silent for a moment, his mind running ahead of his mouth. There was much to tell her. She was the first person in months that he had spoken to of books. It had been all work at sea with a mass of observations to be set down each day in his notes. He had been, he realised, too long apart from good conversation, but she had released something in him. What he had of his true self was under close guard but she had rumbled him. His gaze went to his shelves, the books neatly stowed for size and subject. The bindings worn some for use. He looked across at her. Not only was he blessed with a French-speaking companion, intellectual and amiable, but a grand listener also.

‘This man,’ he began again, ‘had a great interest in the Middle Kingdom and regarded the Khan as much his master as the Pope, returning to Venice only after war, sickness and a progressive fatigue of the mind forced him home. I cannot tell you what stories of such imagination do to a child, how they infected my waking as well as sleeping hours.’

He was in full flow now. He leant towards her, his eyes narrowed on the past.

‘My brother and I constructed an island in our courtyard, heaped gravel, earth, broken pots and stones dragged from the coping of the raised flowerbeds.

‘We carved canals and fashioned locks. We drew water from our neighbour’s well to fill them. Over a summer it became our work, an all-consuming project which took us from light till dark. Jean Paul’s boats were barges, mine sloops moving between the river and the sea. We lived hard by the town’s church and climbed the wall to the graveyard to fossick among the grave bricks and funeral leavings. I am ashamed to say that we felled a tomb marker, Gabriel I think, with his wings spread and his right arm raised. He was an easy target, loose in the ground and listing. I remember that he was carved from stone rather than marble and was already well decayed — the fingers of his left hand had mostly fallen away. His face and trunk were coloured not for the rock from which he was cut but blazed with stone moulds. We roped him and transported him across the wall in a canvas cradle operated by levers. It was a feat of engineering for two small boys, although it took many attempts, a broken wing and the tip of his nose gone before our object was achieved.

‘Interesting is it not, my dear, that an angel, reportedly composed of light and air, should tax us so profoundly?’

But Battard’s hand went to his own nose, an unconscious action she thought, a reassurance. Battard was known in the mess as *Le Nez*, an allusion to its ability rather than its size. He had once rashly held his powers to be equal to a gun dog. After the hoots and jeers of the mocking chorus subsided, he was put

up against the captain's greyhounds: two noses against one. Battard embolded by his rather free consumption of tokay, believed himself the superior candidate. First to find a heel of hard cheese artfully hidden in the sailroom was the wager. Battard was blindfold so as not to take the dogs' lead. He made a show, taking the air through his instrument in great lungfuls. The men let him stumble about, catching his feet in loops of rope, describing small circles in the air with his outstretched fingers. The dogs had found the prize inside a minute and lay chewing on a bed of neatly folded canvas. Still, among his own kind Battard enjoyed an uncontested superiority.

'I roped the angel to the prow of the two plank doors and gate which so far approximated keel and hull. He was some figurehead,' Battard remembered laughing, 'his great weight nearly bringing our boat over. We took linen sheets from the grass and bushes over which they had been laid to dry. We dared not cut them, folding them instead into sail shapes which could be reefed or furled according to the transgressions of imagined weather. Typhoons, squalls, sea fire, waves freakish for size — we had all of it, we were becalmed and wrecked in turns.'

'This was your favourite pastime?'

'It totally absorbed us — we lived it. We continued the game past dark in the evenings, drawing a map of our voyage, painting fat-cheeked winds in its borders, laying in blue seas. This, I think, is where I learned to love the labour of the mind, where I was infected with the want to know more than I could possibly know as a child. My knowledge at that time seemed to me pitifully weak, needing to be constantly fed on reading.'

‘You seem not to have made any change there,’ Hsiao Yen noted, ‘except that you now command a real ship going over living waters.’

‘We had a bridge, I remember,’ Battard did not acknowledge her observation — did not hear it, so fully was he fixed on the past. ‘This bridge improbably spanned the Indian Ocean and could be pulled ashore much like a drawbridge across a moat. Jean Paul was forced to fetch the pannel when the bridge split and fell on me. See this scar above my right eye,’ he said his fingers pinching up a slip of skin, his face tilted towards Hsiao Yen, and she immediately wanted to put out her hand, run her fingers over the wound’s healed lip, ‘this was made by the bridge as it fell slap across my great knob. My mother locked Jean Paul in the cellar and made me lie with a cold cloth bound over my eye. She was shamed more for the bringing in of the priest’s loose woman than for our rough play. She tried to keep us apart from then, occupied us with small separate tasks such as boys must do for their mothers — lifting things down from high shelves, waxing thread for canvas mending, sorting buttons. That was the end of the *Mappe Mundi* — though I think I could still draw its seminal lands.

‘Most remembered from my childhood though and perhaps most loved was Pliny, who claimed that he had seen with his own eyes a centaur preserved in honey. I cannot remember how it was that the centaur was killed, but I have it in my mind’s eye, as clearly as though I had seen it myself, a hoofed man, maned and bearded, fit in a stoppered jar in a darkly bubbled sap. I have wished all my life to see that centaur,’ said Battard, ‘to peer

through the dim glass, study the horned head, the animal eye. And then there was Odysseus, I still recall how lovingly provisioned was his vessel, how completely described were the shipworks ...' He stood and the Homer he had pulled from the shelves earlier fell unopened from his lap.

But Hsiao Yen was still contemplating the juggled centaur. Their own suspensions had been recorded carefully, the analyses set down with full chemistry, the Greek letters drawn like ink buds. Preservation was a problem that periodically vexed Battard when supplies of spirits ran low, or when one of his more prized specimens darkened and spoiled, rendering it unsuitable for transport home. Plain spirits sometimes clouded, if the stoppered jar which housed the specimen was improperly sealed. They experimented with ship's cider, lamp oil, brine and a receipt which called for grated soap, quick lime, potash and camphor. In memory of Pliny they plunged some soft-bodied specimens into jars of honey, only to be disappointed a few weeks later, the specimens crystalline, haloed in a wig of frost.

Hsiao Yen remembered that her father had used an admixture of minerals dissolved in rice wine to preserve birds less suited to being wired and mounted. 'Small birds he would gut, cutting down the neck to the breast,' she said. 'He removed the brain with a small hook and discarded it. *You*, Lucien, would have eaten it.'

Her nose wrinkled at the thought.

'The skin and bones were dried over several days, longer sometimes, depending on the weather. A powder made of some



agent — I cannot recall its name except that it was regularly purchased along with a stock of medicines — used I think to seek out moisture. After a few days he would take a small brush and sweep the grit from the gut and from under the wings and from where the eyes had been. The sand had sometimes formed lumps or was caked over a small area. Then he would use a bamboo rake to work it free.

‘I helped him pose and stuff them. The eyes I remember were difficult. Sometimes a stitch was needed to position the glass correctly as the carcass shrank. That was just for the small birds,’ she said, smiling at Battard who had sat down again. ‘Just the small birds,’ she repeated, ready to expand if he raised his head from his notebook. But the patterning of her soft talk had turned his mind to other vexations.

Battard wrote to his brother that he, ‘had fixed some of the more brightly coloured coloptera in rendered beeswax, the effect being similar to that occurring naturally with flies or grasshoppers trapped in amber. The result is pleasing not just to my eye but to my sensibilities. However the colours are dampened. What I would not give to find an amber. I have heard that it is most commonly fished out of the Baltic sea. Yet I have also been told more than a few times that the locals use amber as medicine, eating it dissolved in rice wine or stirred through honey. They eat crushed pearls too, according to Hsiao Yen, this girl we have brought aboard, although only the rich can afford such costly physic. I have put the word out to the native crew to bring me some amber.

‘You know me well enough, Jean Paul, to imagine how I spend my evenings,’ he continued, writing on the back of the first page without properly blotting the ink. The lack of perfect register caused the script to appear moveable, transient, liable to jump from the page.

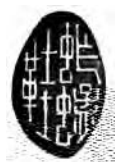
‘I must find viable alternative preservatives, especially for the insects who are often successfully dried only to be chewed into dust by mites or subject to a damp which puts a mouldy fur on every surface. Our supplies are sufficient at present,’ he continued, ‘but there is no knowing how long they will last me once we are upriver.

‘How is Céleste?’ He had left the question deliberately late in his communication, he aimed it to appear appended, an afterthought. He had witnessed the coming together of his brother and the woman with more than a measure of discomfort. She was a wedge knocked between them, although Lucien acknowledged she bore him no ill. Céleste was joy and enthusiasm made whole. Her entire purpose was to be in company, conversation delighted her. She was a lamp brought into Jean Paul’s world, every step back from her a retreat into gloom.

‘Tell her I will send her a charm for the babe. The native mothers sew them inside the brims of their babies’ hats, one charm for each immortal. Céleste would find the dress of the small children an amusement. Each article of clothing is closely embroidered with animals and good luck signs. Red and gold are predominant, fish, lions, gold-coloured fruit. I have seen a bonnet fashioned into the form of a bat, the wings worn close over the ears. Their small clothes are most ingeniously split at the

back, which must assist with the hygiene and dress of a small child.' He continued at his letter and Hsiao Yen, vexed that he did not respond with his usual interest in her description of her father's hobbies, took herself below decks to tend to the carp.

# AN ABLE ASSISTANT



At each port Battard sought out supplies of spirits, ink stones which when ground produced a good black, linen, quires of paper for mounting plants and — if it could be purchased — a good quantity of vodka. He kept his Italian paper for drawing, the Chinese product he found too fibrous, the ink bleeding into ferns and elbows. It was however, perfect for blotting, taking the moisture from a fresh-cut stem nicely. He found if he changed the paper daily the risk of losing specimens to mould was commonly avoided. Initially the vodka had been a happy accident, an afterthought, an indulgence, but it was the vodka that after some experimentation became their principal preservative, much to the disgust of the French crew who regarded any consumable spirit as their landfall due.

Hsiao Yen assisted Battard in netting and juggling a variety of dragonflies, water beetles, flatworms. Dressed in sailor's loose

trousers, her face shaded by a straw bonnet, she waded happily in the shallows, trawling the mud wash for small fish, nymphs, caches of roe. Dragging the net absently through the long grass at the river's edge, one hot afternoon, she scooped up a box turtle and her brood, the young the size of coins. They confined her and her babies in the bottom of a soup tureen while they both tried, inked brushes in hand, to transfer their gargoyle likenesses. Hsiao Yen painted the mother in soft smudges — one dark line for her back, her neck a hook. How was it that in so few strokes she had conveyed the ancient reptile demeanour, wondered Battard. He watched her roll the stock of her brush across the ink stone; holding the brush away from her body she let it cross the paper in an arc like a tongue. There was something animal in the way her arm moved across the page. It was the witless ability a bird has to build a nest, to weave grass between bent reeds and stop up the chinks. There was little information in her painting — the texture and patterned lap of the scales was lost, similarly she had not thought to record the leather of the neck skin, the four-fingered feet. The dark plastron, the hinged carapace — these too were details passed over. It was the language of its anatomy that she had captured, the living expression of the creature's soul — she would call it *ch'i*. He could not believe that he was now concerned with animal souls. Hsiao Yen understood the turtle, she could look inside the ropy skin as through window glass.

The look of temperance, of humility, had something to do, he felt, with the turtle's ability to contract its fleshy parts beneath a portable stone. If man had such an armour at his disposal, armour that was of himself and not some artifice to be strapped on, would

he be so arrestingly at peace? He did not give voice to his musings, happy to draw in silence — the last attempt made in ink directly to the page. The detail in his drawing was as marvellous in its exactness as it was absent in Hsiao Yen's. Side by side the two drawings complemented each other, he realised, one informing the other. One showing how the creature appeared, the other how it existed in the world. Turning to a new page, he held the brush as he had watched her do, thumb and first finger opposed, his wrist slightly inclined towards himself. He tried a hook and then an upward sweep, the physics of it escaping him. His lines were blots and hesitations. Hsiao Yen leant across to examine his daubs, adding, with her own brush, eight legs about a sinister blot.

'I cannot see how it is done,' he told her. He required the execution. The mechanics were hidden but he felt if shown he could learn them.

'The hand has its own memory. The ink speaks, I do not interrupt it. Watch,' she said, holding her brush above the page, 'if I try to direct my hand it will be too heavy, the line will be too thick or thin.'

'You are telling me now I must not think?'

'The thought travels from here to here,' she said indicating her heart and raising her brush to indicate a terminus.

Battard expelled a breath from cheeks filled roundly and said, 'I think you are confused as to your organs; each has its unique and separate purpose.'

She had been taught not to let her shadow fall across a brush-stroke. She struggled to translate this: 'You must not intrude your self onto the line.' This was her closest approximation.

It was difficult for Hsiao Yen to read Battard. He would sometimes talk of his family, of his brother, Jean Paul. But there was much he had not told her, could not tell her. They were limited in their understanding of each other's worlds not just by experience, by the shape in which sex, belief and circumstance had cast them. They were limited also by language. His language which had more than a dozen words for the colour of wine but, she discovered, turning the pages of the log, too few for the arrangement of clouds on a still day. The clot of spooned-up cloud, clouds raked into fins, the pleating harrowed arcs — for these he had only Latin names. And although he told her that for the French the preparation and eating of good food was an expression of a national trait, she discovered that for this too he suffered in vocabulary. The aromatic qualities of such foods as cured fish, or stropped and gutted eels preserved in brine, were absent from his experience. Not that he was unaware of such dishes, he assured her, salt meat and smoked fish were a winter staple, but there was no poetic appellation. The qualities of hot or sour were similarly dead to him. It was as though he had travelled only the familiar, his experience of taste truncated by the absence of words to describe it. It was a taxonomy, she decided, anything which stood beyond the established boundaries was overlooked. It seemed that the tongue gave contour to experience rather than the reverse. Language did not trade horizontally as beads. This word was not the equal, the same weight as another. There was no exact code. Did the fox taste the rabbit, she wondered, having no word for its brawn?

She washed the ink from her brush and looked over at Lucien. Much of what she understood of him came from her

study of his face, the way the lines sat under his eyes, the way they reassembled themselves when he was watching something which took his attention — the arrangement of colour on a snail shell, the leg springs of a grasshopper. She noticed the way he held himself when he talked with the crew, the way his head was enclosed in his collar — he wore them stiffened and upright, as petals hold about a forming fruit.

She examined with interest the formality of composition and execution in Battard's work, hoping there to find the hidden self, but the drawings he made were predictably ornamental, stylised, the detail often conveyed by careful cross-hatching. On this part of the river he made a portrait of himself. In his lifetime he would make another three. His face for the most part was shaded, light pulled into one plane along his jaw. His hair fell uncombed and overly long and he wore a dark blouse unbuttoned at the throat under a loose smock. Some months on he would have her pull the painting out. 'Tell me about it,' he asked her, his voice ranging through an octave, 'tell me what you see.'

'I see that you are almost wholly put in shadow.' She wondered at this. What did the mirror not show him?

'Yes, I see now that is a device poorly employed. In fact if I am honest with myself I would call it a mistake, a heavy-handedness. Go on, what else do you see?'

But Hsiao Yen was at a loss. She had never seen the school of Dutch painters for which it was composed. She saw only what was in oils on board, that the whole composition was dark, his face built up from rose tones under-painted blue. Held under her nose the painting lost any figurative coherence, it was in fact



wholly composed of tablets of colour, one imposed atop the other.

‘Daubs,’ he said into the silence. There is a crucial measure of time that elapses from the asking for an opinion and the giving of one. Too little time and it appears that the respondent is so appalled by what is before them, that they blurt out the first thing which trips off the tongue. Conversely, a heavy silence can mean that there is nothing that can be said.

‘You are contemplating some sadness,’ she tried. She guessed that she should examine the paint marks, that there was some clue here. The paint adhered in clots or lay in fine furrows where the brush had moved over it. There was a sheen winked off its every surface, a wetness which remained slick. She tried it with her finger but no colour came away. If his drawings employed the scientist in him, then surely in paint here was the man. He had said that he believed the act of painting to be mechanic, did not see that the way each drop of paint was applied transferred his mood. She guessed it was as a wax casting, an impression — still she could not read it.

‘I wonder if every painter recalls the germination of an important idea? Not that what you have before you is important, except to tell me who I was back then. God, I wish I could tell who I have become!’

He drew plants upright, in flower and fruit. The fruit, sometimes the last in a parade of small drawings chronicling the flowers’ sex and seed, set in below the main illustration and not entirely to scale with the rest of the work. Leaves were shown both from above and below, the tips sometimes turned back to

express differences. She was amazed that he drew accurately the neat incision that his knife had made in stem or branch, preferring to tell of his compulsive desire for order, than to invent a more natural seeming view. He made very few rough sketches, preferring to invest in a drawing which often took him several days. It was as well, she thought, that his eye was so well developed for colour, the specimens from which he painted being sometimes severely altered over time. Sometimes Battard drew in his journal looking through a dainty mounted dissecting glass, his drawings rich in detail, well matched to the original in colour. One such study he made was of a blue butterfly, a giant, astonishing as much for its size as its shade. Through the glass, the wing had a velvet pile, colour lapped colour as on fish scales. She tried her hand at painting looking through the microscope, but there was a trick to it. Mirrors required angling, a candle stub placed for a light. Every adjustment seemed the reverse of her intent. Once she found true register the surplus of detail bewildered her. It was one thing to lose herself in the rivers of coloured light, another to transfer them. It had been her training to distil the natural ferment of detail to a few lines. It had been Battard's to map all that was there.

The sun was already low on the horizon when they set aside their work, Battard pondering whether to put up the mother and her offspring in one jar or separate them into two. By the time he had returned from below with his kit, Hsiao Yen had set the puzzled turtle and her family free. Adrift in a bamboo hat, the mother stood facing downstream, as though she rode at a ship's prow. For nights running they laughed at the recollection of the

turtles skating in slow motion on the glazed surface of the tureen. Hsiao Yen reminded Battard of his look of disbelief when she confessed that she had set them free, their fragile vessel a bobbing speck fast moving from them. She pantomimed his expectant smile, one eyebrow cocked, his face a series of wordless emotions — a distinct and separate one sliding down like a blind to replace the last.

In Hsiao Yen, Battard acknowledged he had a more than able assistant. It was not just her local intelligence that he found invaluable, she had also the driving fuse of curiosity. But she was an admixture of contrary experiences and talents. Her knowledge of the world outside the walls of her father's house had been confined to reading and speculation, to hearsay and the limits of her own eyesight. Her father's friends discussed the uneasy climate borne out of foreign interests, the years of war. The European, she learned, was robbing them of their enterprise. He peddled an opiate which could have the whole country dozing. There was no lack of talk about the European presence. They threw up buildings, brought with them shiploads of strange comforts. Their pale under-dressed women moved on polished teak dance floors or jogged about in horse-drawn gigs. The Frenchman, the Englishman sported ill-cut clothes, he wore facial hair, and was as ugly as some kind of sickness. Their language — all gutturals — was a separate invasion. From the heat of fever she was somewhat surprised to open her eyes to Battard's pretty countenance. All the warning she had received against this interloper, and her own wedding march pressed her into his arms!

As a small child, she told him, she had sat in a pine tree on the compound's western wall and watched the river. Perhaps that was why life on the river gave her such ease. The lapping of water, the rods of light thrown up from the river bottom, the constant shift and creak of timbers now a benefit to her wounded self. She did not speak to Battard of her turmoil, of the confusion outside the locked gates of An Le. It was as though this part of her journey towards him had been suspended, a trailing branch nipped back to the true. But like a cut stem it existed somewhere. Separated from the thriving limb it had a presence, a yearning to be reunited with the whole. Sitting at his desk, a bill hook and a fresh specimen before him, Battard thought on it. Perhaps the fever had consumed that memory. He took the knife and pruned the flower of its branching ungainly side.

He knew from the child Antoine that she had come into the valley with a grand parade of horses, musicians and attendants, and that something had befallen her — an attack or sickness, perhaps the cholera, the child could not tell. He had followed the green sleigh that night under the great expanse of stars, the old lady leaning into the traces as a pony is hooked to the plough. Before daybreak the three of them, the child still unknown to the women, had found shelter by the river, the girl still chanting on her sleigh bed, the old woman lying beside her. Antoine lay shivering on the wet sand not far away. Sleep would not come — he was too cold, and he feared one of the dark angels would seek out his heartbeat. He lay still, riding out the plodding passage of night, alert to the lapping water below them. He would not break with the company of sleepers. Of the girl on the green mat, he

later told Battard, 'It seems as though her eyes are spent — all her seeing used up — but with her eyes wide she sees pictures inside her head and speaks of them out loud.'

In the morning it appeared the maid had gone for assistance, or perhaps to beg for or forage for food. She was nowhere at hand. Antoine, having succumbed to sleep as the sun rose, opened his eyes into bright day and saw they had slept in the shadow of the ship. He trod carefully, without noise to where the girl lay. She appeared both asleep and awake but was quite still. He signalled the first of the crew he saw to put out a boat, although the man seemed slow to respond, being still sleep fowed, thinking he had conjured the child in a dream. When Battard was fetched to shore, the child wept in his arms and the Frenchman took him up, holding him across his chest, pressing him so that the breath could not come freely either in or out.

'Here I am thinking I had lost you a second time,' Battard said, struggling to compose himself, to keep his voice at an even pitch, 'and about to crush all the bones in your body. You are a gue, Antoine, I would have had the men flogged, each one of them, if you had not flown back to me.'

Antoine had attended the carrying of the litter aboard the *Nicolaas*, his flight from the rain and the night terrors falling from him as he kept watch for the maid's return. They were moored in the neck of the white beach for four nights, Battard ordering lamps to be fixed on the port-side deck and a lookout stationed. Antoine, wrapped in Battard's good sable, kept vigil with the men. Battard hazarded later that she may have brought her charge

thus far, and left her to the ministrations of the foreigners. It was an action she would have made against every prejudice. Battard could not decide whether it was desperation or cowardice which served her. He did not like to suggest to either Hsiao Yen or Antoine that the old woman may have herself succumbed to fever.

Hsiao Yen told him that what she could see from her safe branch in her father's garden was what she knew, what she counted as being fixed in the world, but she knew much more than this, Battard discovered. She had learnt much from her own family, from her brothers' books (she could speak and read both Latin and French as a result). She spoke an intriguing antique French acquired from reading a curiously parochial translation of Matteo Ricci. It was a colourful French, with rural turns of phrase spoken only in isolated, less visited parts of the Kingdom.

'I too have read of Matteo Ricci and his fellowship,' Battard said. 'He was God's own Catholic — perhaps a saint.'

She had observed much from her father's painting, from what she called his creature study. He had also been a keen collector of plants, she told him, although he preferred to observe his specimens arranged for aesthetic appeal, potted or in the ground. He did not collect parts of his plants except perhaps the seed. For her father, a tree in flower or fruit invited contemplation, a bamboo — meditation. The difference being perhaps a study with the heart rather than the head.

'I have known men crisscross the world to round out a classical education and see nothing,' observed Battard. 'They

may see a hundred cities, have a thousand faces pass before their own, and they learn nothing. And yet you have seen the whole world from a childish lookout. You have achieved a few seasons and seen a dynasty.' She looked across at him as he spoke these words, receiving his praise like rain.

With most things Battard saw that she was fearless, not suffering the way he had been led to believe that women suffered from poor nerves or weak stomachs. Fish, voles, all manner of climbing and scurrying creatures she would help him put up in bottles. She was also surprisingly inventive, wiring dead insects to stems or flower buds to aid their drawing. Once she had assembled an intricate still life of moss, pebbles and sand on a lacquered tray into which she introduced a small venomless snake. Some time later Battard had found a snake coiled in his collar press, the cook found one in the meat safe, another inside the coal scoop. Green shapes found homes in hung-up shirt sleeves, wound themselves about gun stocks. How, Battard wondered, had they multiplied from one?

Hsiao Yen would not to his surprise use a gun to shoot at birds, lizards or even a pimpled toady. Battard obtained mustard shot, which reduced the kickback, but she would not load it. He tutored her in vain, even acquiring a daintily balanced and inlaid pistol, a suitable piece he supposed for a lady.

'I have seen men shoot at a butterfly with one of these,' he told her. She preferred to catch her quarry by stealth or examine those creatures found already with their spirits departed, their scaled or feathered bodies hopefully uncorrupted by dogs or infestation. Battard did not, he told her, believe that every life

taken by him was stored up in balance against his soul. In his version of creation the small creatures were set down across the map for such as he to find. He was, he explained, discovering the infinite mind of God.

‘Some monks say a prayer when taking water,’ she told him, ‘for the invisible beings suspended within it. It is not enough that the water is needed to keep the monk alive. We do not share your divine order — man at the top and all beneath serving his every requirement.’

When the pilot rammed a silver button into the barrel of Battard’s musket and shot a cormorant, the Frenchman had more trouble comforting Hsiao Yen than he did reprimanding the crew.



# CRICKETS



In the course of an afternoon Hsiao Yen introduced Lucien to cricket husbandry, transferring to him her enthusiasm for their strident voices, a sound he had at first despised. He was amazed at her finely educated ear, her ability to tell different species apart by pitch.

‘A stable of young men is what is wanted,’ she told him. ‘The woman cricket is mute, no good, they do not sing. We do not keep the females except to put out another generation or to feed birds. That is except for jin zhong, a black tree cricket. Golden Bell is the only species which requires sight of his betrothed to sing.’

She explained how Xi had organised a schema to record the music of each cricket species. And Battard listened attentively, intrigued by Hsiao Yen’s and her father’s preoccupation with bird and insect music as opposed to science. Their investigations

appeared to give equal weight to the figurative painting of the subjects and to their various behaviours. It was important, Hsiao Yen told him, that their subjects were shown with only a few strokes to fly, to hop, to be shaking along the length of the body in song. Too many lines or unasked for detail fatigued the eye. Success was no more than nine strokes of various weights, arranged to cause a small skip in the heart of the beholder. This physical reaction to a painting was its measure.

They grouped crickets, cicadas and some songbirds into drummers and throats, these were their two hierarchies. From this branched like a pedigree, cymbals, gongs, crackles, bells. The first of rank were the green and black crickets, below these a congregation of yellow, purple, moss.

‘We collected besprinkled crickets, mitrids, coffins, generations of rattles.’

They recorded certain songlines using an ink brush to score upward flicks, trembles, spaced intervals shown like a row of birds on a stair. Tempo was indicated by a heartbeat. A score of heartbeats in one breath was deemed lively, a slower pulse required the sign once after a series of chirps. The music was set within a page of decoration showing the cricket, his wings spread in a skirt, alighting, in mid hop or in a net of grass.

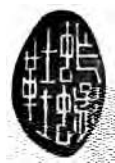
‘Did you know that most crickets favour their right wing?’ she asked him, ‘as a person might love his right hand more than his left.’

Although he knew from what Hsiao Yen had told him, that Xi had practised dissection upon numerous deceased specimens, their treatise seemed unconcerned with links between anatomy

and vocalisation. What seemed obvious and measurable to him was not only opaque to Hsiao Yen, it was also unimportant. The reason that the cherry-nose cicada sang at one pitch and grasslarks at another was not a question that Hsiao Yen and her father had asked themselves. They were concerned with the song itself.

‘We were collectors of exquisite fragments,’ was how Hsiao Yen explained their work to Battard. They were preserving, transcribing a library of song, so that the collection might be appreciated in its entirety, or in its constituent parts, one piece of music enjoyed in relation to another. Their purpose it seemed was entirely aesthetic. If there had been a question one of them had asked the other, it would have been which song to rank above or below another. The stencil through which they made and applied their observations was, he realised, entirely foreign to him and yet he did not reject it out of hand. The mechanics of Hsiao Yen’s labours had the reality and fascination for him of a world mirrored, transposed, as a reflection has the attraction of truth subtly altered.

# GUIDE TO THE COLLECTOR'S CABINET



They would have their own museum, they decided: bright stones, pressed plants, vials of coloured sands, bones, skulls, eggs, skins, both the whole and dissected parts of creeping creatures. There should be a cabinet, she suggested, of insect wings, teeth, feathers and fur, and a whole room devoted to birds — gutted, stuffed, painted, labelled. What they could not collect there, they could acquire in Canton. Although she shared Battard's passion for assembling a collection, imaginary or otherwise, she had not his scruples with regard to discovery or provenance.

'Bird-duffers are not well regarded in the West,' he told her. The wind had whipped her hair about her face and he leaned forward to hook a strand behind her ear. It was a subtle gesture, an attention such as might be visited on a child. She was in his

charge. She had been his patient. Under his care she had been recovered to be fit and able. It was an attitude which he unconsciously underscored with every action.

‘I have had my fill of animal forgeries,’ he continued, ‘beaks sewn to the features of soft furred creatures, fins or wings fabricated where there should be none. In Sweden my teachers had cases of birds which we thought alive must always have been in flight, for they had no feet with which to set down or walk about. There were examples of mermaids and seal people — the work of clever taxidermists. As I have told you, such tricks are not held in any esteem in my country, except perhaps at carnivals or in the fairground. We would return to your father, I think, to treat our birds. I have an idea which I would like to put before him. A great taxidermist can work a marvellous resuscitation on a bird. You might explain it to him, how I wish for the creature’s skins to be stretched over wooden frames, the artificial skeletons shaped to mimic muscle and flesh over bone. In fact in the small exhibits only would we stuff the specimens with straw on a wire ligature. I fancy that a carved form would greatly enhance the aspect of each specimen.’

Hsiao Yen nodded, her eyes shut. Her hand went to the back of Battard’s chair for steadiness. Herself, her father and Battard together, this she could not imagine. No doubt he thought her dead — stories of fever, which according to Battard had travelled the waterways, would have reached him by now. He may have travelled to An Le, desperate to find her, and found the village closed up, abandoned. They had passed village after village on their path downstream collapsed by fever. There were signs

also of the rebel progress some years before — clay walls stoved in where households had been burnt to the ground, temples abandoned. They saw a sorry pagoda listing on its river island, new trees that had seeded in its broken roof tiles struggled upwards, creepers bearded over doorways. Living with a foreigner in the confines of this strange laboratory afloat, she may as well be dead for all the shame it would attend on her family. They would think only of her hand's curse and see a passage into hell, perhaps even see a correlation between her advent in the valley and its subsequent demise. She wondered how her life aboard a foreign ship might be explained to her father. It was a scene which left her ill at ease.

'My father has a good command of French, but in recent times has made it a point of honour to close his ears to foreign words.'

'So then you will be our translator. You will interpret my ideas.'

He would not be deflected. She turned her thoughts instead to the mechanics of the idea, suggesting that the necks or heads be jointed, the wood moving across itself beneath the skin so that the exhibits could be changed, posed differently, moved between one diorama and the next. It was something she felt certain her father had the talent to create.

'Imagine,' she said, 'a deer with its head raised, eyes on the horizon, ears pricked. The next day it is grazing, a mother undisturbed in the thick of the forest flanked by her young.'

'How is your father at modelling?' he asked her. 'I have often thought that an open-vent display detailing the organs in

cast wax — perhaps pinned out as they might be in a dissection — might make a teacherly exhibit. I am not clear as yet in my mind whether the specimen itself should be of coloured wax or whether the moulded parts be nested into a bird leather say — the skin and feathers intact. I have some facility myself in modelling. It is an occupation which I find frees the mind, perhaps even because the hands are so worked. But it would be a significant undertaking. You see each exhibit needs to be repeated at least four times, allowing organs which are hidden to be shown. Each specimen detailing a later stage of the dissection.'

It pleased them both to furnish their imaginary bestiary with specimens precious not just for their rarity or their value as exotics; Hsiao Yen suggested that they might also have cabinets arranged solely to pleasure the eye. These would be organised by colour, by shape, by appearance from afar.

'The Emperor's taxonomy,' this was from Battard.

'Our own interpretation,' Hsiao Yen agreed. Bird-sucking spiders would sit beside the furred pods of cassias, Battard suggested. Coloured salts and nitres heaped in dishes would be soldierly in rows. A gob of red tree sap would rank with a brick-coloured gas held under a bell glass, all reds represented, from the bloody wine of a cut plum to faintest coral.

A bell was being struck some distance from their meeting. Battard ignored it. Enthusiasm became his animation, his cheeks coloured and for a moment his tongue showed between his lips. 'I want also a cabinet of lights,' he told her. 'There are many things which give off beams. I have myself collected shining wood.'

‘Shining?’ Hsiao Yen queried.

‘Bright enough that I might read by it at night and need no other candle.’

‘What kind of tree puts on shining wood?’

‘It is properly a fungus which feeds on rotted tree fall,’ Battard began, ‘found commonly in pine wood. When wrapped in a cloth many times around, still its light shines through. I have myself collected a specimen which gave out light for several days. It is a freakish but not unheard of phenomenon. There are stones too which have a greenish glow.’

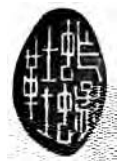
‘And summer bugs,’ Hsiao Yen added, ‘but we would need them living to show their fire.’

He suggested that they mount the great aquarium on an ornamental pedestal. This saltwater world would house children fathered by their broody seahorse, eels, colonies of sea stars — turquoise, ochre, cobalt. From ten paces the eye would be drawn as on a taut line, to the blue shields of the coronet crabs tapping vainly on the glass. The museum would be all embracing, as absorbing as theatre, its purpose to inform as well as delight.

‘We will rival La Specola.’



# FINS AND FEET YEARNING TO BE HANDS



In the evenings, when he had put up fleshy specimens in vodka or inked the labels on sealed envelopes of seeds or flowerheads, they lay without a candle, her lap a pillow for his head. As the weeks had passed Battard found that he sought her company most nights. At first he had thought himself interested in her only as her protector. But he was faintly aware of a surge of feeling for her and conscious that he must not allow this lapse in piety. He must not contest the boundaries, he told himself, he must not breach propriety. He would not alarm her.

He included her nightly in his prayers. Yet he shocked himself when, as his lips silently formed her name, he was not thinking of her conversion to the Church. He had imagined conversations with her, where she admired the fine script under

a drawing and they came to be leaning close. Her arm would be resting by his, the sleeve turned back so that he could see in his mind's eye the swell of forearm. Caught in such a reverie he would chastise himself, pull himself back from the brink. He stepped back into himself as a snail retracts its foot from touch. And yet he sought out this intimacy which they had found in their evening respite from labour. Knowing all the while it was a sin for which the next day he would do penance, he laid his head in her lap and looked up tenderly at the aspect of her neck and chin.

She had told him that the Chinese believe that once saved from death the victim is tied to the rescuer in this lifetime as by string, their fates conjoined. 'But,' she said, 'there are some who would rather go to their death than be forever belonging to another.' Battard knew that Hsiao Yen was not one of these. He believed that he had snatched her not just from death, but from a life which had not suited her, a life which she had assumed, as a costume may be worn, fully disguising the wearer's person. In her life there had only been her father and Battard who had seen that she was more than she appeared.

'That is more than most people can hope for in a lifetime.' he had told her. 'It is more than we can expect to have true knowledge of another and yet I think it is what we most crave, that and knowledge of ourselves and our purpose. It is our God alone who truly knows us and, to begin with, we Him.'

'If it is only your God who can know you, what is the purpose in being man? Why not stay in the spirit world?'

'That is a question for which I have no direct answer, I can only tell you that our minds and spirit enjoy both proximity and

separation. But it is our minds which require a vehicle and that vehicle being flesh reduces what was of light to carnality. Once sprung from the woman's belly our fall is complete and we have no knowledge of God — we speak with angels no more. We are conceived in light and then that candle is extinguished.'

'You are not put out with that light?'

'We spend our whole lives seeking it. We are pulled to it as bugs are pulled into firelight and yet we resist too. It is a sorry thing, is it not, Hsiao Yen, to be a man — and yet I glory in it. I feel that I have been set down here at the very root of creation — the underside of the bell — to discover, describe, to catalogue my God's greatness. I am his agent.'

'How is it,' she asked Battard, her hand crimping the stuff of his coat at the shoulder, pushing him from her lap, so that he sat upright again beside her and she could look on his face the right way up. 'How is it that a babe before he can walk or utter speech can have sinned in such a way, that the face of your God is turned from him and he must spend his life seeking to be restored? This seems to me impossibly sad.'

This was not an uncommon subject for them, one which gave neither of them great ease.

'You will remember we have spoken of the first story — the catalogue of creation, the first sin.'

She nodded, they had trod this road before.

'The sin that we speak of is not the babe's sin, but a universal sin passed through generations, much as the propensity for blue eyes or a large chin may reside in one family. This is how we know that we are descended from the original family.'

‘Strange that the coming together of man and wife in your country is seen as a sin to be passed along through every line,’ Hsiao Yen said. ‘We see it as a blessing, the wheel notched forward as it turns.’

‘Ah! but their union was corrupted. The first woman was tempted. She was promised a sight of God and that sight would have filled her with a knowledge so incandescent she would have died. We are not made for such strong stuff. It was her betrayal which became our inheritance.’

He was not sure he had made sense of this argument. He raked his hair from his face. She read it as impatience.

‘I should not take you from your work with questions,’ she said moving away. She would take a turn about the deck, seek the child, if he was about.

‘Please,’ he said putting up a hand to prevent her going, ‘do not leave me. I have made a poor attempt to explain myself.’

She returned to his side as he drew a globe in the air to describe a spreading tree.

‘The first people fell from grace after eating the fruit of the forbidden tree,’ he continued, ‘thought to be an apple and yet there is no mention of it being so in the Holy Book. It is as likely to have been a quince or an apricot. I had often wondered also at there being no mention of butterflies in this stocktake of creation. Did they manifest the souls of strange birds or the queer spirits of flowers?’

‘Of course you would wonder at the fruits and seeds,’ she laughed.

‘It is no matter what species of fruit the woman plucked from the forbidden tree.’ Battard was up now and walking. He slipped a finger between his collar and top stud. Hsiao Yen could see him working it. ‘More interesting is its appearance of goodness. The more she thought on the taste of the fruit, the greater its appeal. This is the anatomy of all temptation. It is as facile and complex as that. Her over-reaching — the first betrayal.’

‘This inventory you are making,’ asked Hsiao Yen, ‘it brings you into the light? Is it this work that will illuminate your lost self — restore you to your state of grace?’

‘It is indeed,’ said Battard, ‘you have my meaning entirely, as I knew you would.’ How could he explain how good works stacked up against belief? He would have left it there and returned his head to her lap but she continued.

‘Do you not fear that your thirst for knowledge is not unlike that of your ancestor?’

‘No, I do not fear for my soul on that account,’ he said and he took her hand in his, separating each of her fingers — interlacing them with his own. He wished for her to put her arms about him again, to draw him close so that he might hear her heart swing over him. Instead he had her hand and he thought this must be enough. To have her near must satisfy. She had come into his life uncalled and had settled as a bird may settle in a tree. He must not ask for more.

In the days which followed her coming aboard the *Nicolaas* Battard had watched over his patient. He had looked down into

this female face so different from his brother's bride. Céleste was all colour and movement. Her hair even when pinned up or held under a cap was working to be loose. This woman was all stillness, a pond before the pebble is thrown. A contrary thought, Battard mused, when she turned and thrashed on the bed as often as she lay still. Yet somehow she modelled the qualities of repose, which manifested even through her fever. Céleste was surface and brightness. Emotions travelled her. Colour caught and drained from her cheeks. Her eyes were lit or darkened. She was with every encounter a barometer. How marvellously different, he realised, women could be.

Battard had nursed her as he had nursed the boy, as he had nursed the men. But from the first he had a wick of promise on her recovery. He prayed at her side. He knelt on the hard ship timbers and laid his head on the bed. 'God,' he commanded silently into the stuff of the linen coverings, 'you will not let her die.' His fists tightened and relaxed with each uttered word as if to give definition and separateness. He held his hands together at his brow, the fingers interlaced. It was a compact he felt with his Saviour, a private agreement, an undertaking.

He raised his head and sat his chin on the bracket of his thumbs. It was sitting thus, arms bracing his top weight and his face as close as it had ever been to hers, that he had seen her hand. She was over-warm and her hand went up to her cheek as if to test its heat. He had her covered with every good blanket at his disposal. He firmly believed in sweating through disease. But fever puts strength into even the most feeble and Hsiao Yen tore down her coverings. She threw her head back, rolled it one side to

the other and then opened her eyes. She did not see him and Battard was not surprised to see her look around. Fever took this pattern. Eyes sunk back into their sockets. Those who slept, spoke and moved about. It was not a sensible consciousness. Her hand slid from her cheek to rest across her throat. His eye travelled with this motion and it was then he saw that it was over-large. The thought alarmed him. He rose and stood looking down, not knowing what to think. Six! He counted again. There were six fingers — add another two and it might be one of those bird-eating spiders. He turned on his heel as if to leave but spun about and looked again. Dear God, he told himself, *look for the other hand!*

As her nurse he had lifted her to bed, he had loosened her gown, blotted her cheeks and brow. He had bathed her face and neck but had not moved beyond them. He had not attempted her undress, modesty forbade him. Her sleeves were cut to fall to the fingertips — he noticed this now. Is that how he had missed the hand he wondered? He reached into the bed, leaning over her, using her shoulder as a route to the hand. It was more difficult than it seemed. Her arm was caught somehow under her, the stuff of her sleeve pinned by her weight. He fit his hand between her chest and elbow and pulled mightily. He made of himself a lever and, with every particle trained to the purpose, pulled. He felt the fabric of a seam rip through. There was resistance and then the sleeve tore easily. It took a moment to register the sound, then to connect it with his actions. He had taken apart the makings of her dress and in the same moment he knew this, her hand flew up and caught him full on the face. Later he could not tell if the slap, which brought tears to his eyes, or the sight of her

other hand amazed him most. He reeled back, the line and sway of the floor reaching up to meet him as he fell. After some moments he righted himself and still sitting on the floor, he laughed. One hand was perfect, the other quite enlarged, a scarlet imprint on his cheek might attest to the fact. Two thoughts came into his mind at once. He must put this in his journal. He must write and tell Jean Paul.

Thinking of that first sight of her hand, he now took it in his own. Between the heel of his right hand and the tip of his thumb he felt each finger, all the small bones like bamboos threaded to a cord. The right hand was larger than the left. He turned her hand palm down and held it from him studying the spread and pattern of the bones. She let him work her. He bent and tested each finger and she acquiesced. Even the fingers on the right hand, he saw, were slightly stouter, a fraction longer. The sixth finger was as strong as the others, and sprang not from the side of the palm but truly from the hamate, as though the hand had been designed to include six fingers and it was his own which suffered a lack. What a challenge she would pose to a glove maker, he thought, smiling to himself. She read the look and not knowing its meaning packed it away for later thought.

The sixth knuckle was functional, not double-jointed or in any other way unusual, except that it was there at all. He had dissected enough animal freaks to know how bone was wrapped in tissue and which fleshy cords moved which bony part. He put her hand alongside his own. She was altered at the fourth finger he saw.



‘Duma,’ he said, beginning at the thumb. ‘Scythe finger,’ he ticked them off on her hand, ‘midlestafinger, goldfinger, lytlafinger. You have two of the precious ones, so you are doubly blessed!’

What a miracle of creation is the hand, Battard thought to himself, perfect articulated utility. There need be no other proof of the existence of God than the realisation of the human hand. Yet the English cleric would not have it so. The man’s work on what was grandly claimed the worldly evolution was a heresy. His whole mission here was to prove it otherwise. The great geological ages may have been set down as days, this he allowed. But man stood proud as God’s most divine representative.

Did not the Bible so often refer to the ‘hand of God?’, Battard argued to himself. What could not be created, what could not be brought into being by the hand? No other creature so mirrored their creator. Function and aesthetics married to express the human yearning to touch, possess, to bring close and hold up to the eye that which we would taste, admire. Jean Paul had told him that what set angels apart from men was the human desire to act and surely touch was at the impetus for action. An angel’s presence is as a look or glance, he had said, it is no more substantial than that.

Mr Darwin had it, he told her later, that every other creature yearned to produce hands — their fins, their feet striving to become fingers. And the world was credulous it seemed. Men of standing broke their necks to agree. Yet only man was in God’s image. No other form achieved this near divinity.

‘You have an argument with this man?’

‘Yes, I admit I do. It is my purpose, you could say, it has underwritten all my work. I seek to show the infinite mind of God, the unequalled variety and fitness of his work. You have looked in my microscope, Hsiao Yen. Can such detail be an accident?’

She offered up her hand again and he took it. Feeling her hand he could see in his mind’s eye the bone, the muscle. It put him from the abstract. It took the heat from his cheek she noted. The Englishman and his ideas riled him.

# FEELING



He would make a drawing of her hands and send it to Jean Paul. His brother, he had told her, was a Paris doctor, as well known for his bonesetting skills as he was for his writing on visions and optical disturbances. He corresponded with colleagues sent to the Empire's far corners on the fits and trances of native peoples, the vagaries of weather, odd light shows and star showers. It was his fascination. Most recently he collected stories of apparitions. Lucien had shown Hsiao Yen the letter he had written to his brother, describing the child's fever angels. He was troubled at Antoine's certainty that they had spoken his name.

Jean Paul had had visions of his own, being visited at times in his life by an angelic hermaphrodite, who he claimed showed himself in naked innocence moving between his sexes without seam. The angel, bellicose and reportedly loose-tongued, claimed that he was composed of the fire breathed out by God at the time

of creation. His hunger for Jean Paul left the doctor as though in a fitful sleep for several days after their consummation. His fire left dark patches on his skin and a taste in his mouth not unlike sulphur which could not be scoured from the tongue. Despite his brother's bouts of instability, Battard had an unshaken trust in Jean Paul. In the periods when the angel let him be, he was as lucid and sweet-tempered as any man. More potently he was a good doctor. Battard had no reservations about his clinical ability. Once the drawings were in his brother's possession he would no doubt set to work to achieve a raised model in wax. Having made the hand as it appeared from the drawings, he might, as he had done with subjects previously which had piqued his curiosity, work backwards, deconstructing the vessels, the moving muscles, bones.

Battard wore a good gold ring on his second finger and the desire to slip it from his own hand and onto hers gripped him sharply. Could he not be married on the blessing of water? It was done often enough at sea. Who was to say, he asked himself, that a wife taken thus was not taken in the sight of God? What need had he of priests in this country of temples — a kingdom so foreign to him he hardly believed that he moved under the same planets as those which rose in the sky at home. The desire climbed him. Surely a test of faith, he thought as he wrestled with himself, a desire which must be stifled, snuffed out. He prayed that his heart be dulled, wintered, that it be closed on this subject, like a fist, righteous and muscled. Yet it was the moment which later he was to count as the very beginning of his feeling for her. It was a feeling which rolled over him as water spills down

a glassy pane — becoming of its journey more tightly formed, reflecting light from all its surfaces, an eye with which to look unblinkingly. Strangely, at the beginning this feeling did not erode him, did not consume his concentration, his appetite for work. Nor did it smoke in his heart as he might have expected. Rather it illuminated what was before him. Everything he looked on from that time forward had an appeal, a lustre that had previously been unapparent. It was as though looking over his life he was conscious that nothing before had ever entered him in this way, nothing had fully awakened him. All his scholarship, his intellectual fire, was merely a prelude to this state of being in love.

He believed that his feelings were adroitly subjugated to faith and industry. But where his mind argued against the possibility of such a state of being, his whole body expressed it. It was the spring in his step, it was the ear attuned to the rustling of linens as she walked over the deck. To the rest of their company it was as obvious as the difference between darkness and light. Previous to his feelings for her, he had preferred his own company, he had needed unbroken measures of time in retreat. The crew noted that closed into his cabin he required complete dominion. Solitude was the ballast which kept him sweet in the cramped conditions of ship life. At these times they went about their chores without the usual half-shouted banter. They avoided calling on Battard except in the most extreme of conditions for his opinion on shifts of winds or for soundings. The noonday calculations were now routinely recorded without his overseeing them. The time alone he spent writing or ruminating on the splicing together of his observations. Nothing, he felt, was

without corollary. No creature existed except in relation to another. He poured over his notes as he might over a puzzle, ever alert for the interlocking piece. Had not God set down the creatures to be of use to each other, he asked himself — primarily to be of use to man? Did not beasts weighted by four-footedness look to the earth, whereas man looked to heaven? Were not the creatures prisoners of base need, puzzled Battard, as we are not — being freed by the intellect? But that was before Hsiao Yen. He spent less time alone now, was less prone to mental fogs, unconcerned with ship's gossip. The men found that he was less commonly vexed by problems that arose from poor charting or miscalculations of land and water speed. Now when Battard was not on expeditions from the ship he was most commonly seen in her company. They would be sitting across from each other at a folding table on the deck, talking, painting or working on the storage of specimens. Their low talk and Hsiao Yen's counterpoint of laughter could be heard across the ship.

How he had come to allow himself to lie with his head in a woman's lap he could not begin to understand. She was not even a fair-skinned woman. She was not a Christian woman! They seemed to have no common ground except that her mind was somehow kindred to his own. They shared a fundamental curiosity. Theirs was a bond never approximated in his life before, outside his feelings for Jean Paul. He could only think that the three years since he had stepped from firm ground onto ship's timber had pressed his heart into a new and unfamiliar form.

With an effort he turned his attention once more to her hand. He noted a dark scar, an incision healed to a runnel. The

nail on the sixth finger would also bear examination. There were two deeply inscribed indentations on the nail, as though wounded by a knife set with twin blades. He would ask her for a paring from that nail and enclose it with a sketch.

Hsiao Yen in her turn studied Battard's hands, setting them in her lap, turning them over like two flat stones. She followed with her eye the bows, parasols, ellipses — the sunrays which spread from the surprising intersection of seemingly parallel lines. He had large square hands, handsomely wrought, although overlarge perhaps for his height. Turned palm up in Hsiao Yen's lap they looked to belong to an outside person, a labourer, perhaps a builder or mason, although they were not calloused or blistered and not disfigured by the discomfort that any tool might have worked on them. But a dark burr of grime was scoured into the seams, giving his hands the delicate detail of an etching plate. It was not shipwork nor plant collecting which discoloured them, although at times earth showed in black moons under his fingernails. He was careful, at least since they had had Hsiao Yen with them, to call for a heated kettle of water and a pan of sand with which to scrub them before they sat at table. It was the dark pigments he ground and worked for his painting which so stained the skin, the copper green, cobalt and indigo. Pigment was purchased in shards or in cone-formed blocks and a powder achieved using a grinding slab of roughened glass, a muller and a spatula or horn. Although he took care of his eyes and tried to contain much of the process, reducing pigment was a theatre of inevitable accident. Besides glycerine or fish glue in the dark tints, there were also the more sinister additives of

arsenic and binding white lead. Without doubt the chemistry would leech into his system, a clock set to run down. It would be this poison, which Hsiao Yen saw articulated like a map across his hands, which would eventually lay him in his grave.

‘This line here speaks of longevity,’ she told Battard, drawing her own finger across his palm in an upward lick, ‘and this line here is your native ability. You will live long and well. You will journey, study great things — but you know that,’ she said with a slight lift of her shoulders. She raised her eyes from his hands and looked him full in the face. It was a studied expression, such as he had received more than once from Pellisier. It was a look which kept something back. The look which his teacher wore as he thumbed through Battard’s portfolio. Seeing it now expressed on this woman’s face it gave him some discomfort. ‘She loves me not,’ he thought and drew back his hands, as though he would reserve something of himself, something she would not be able to read either in his palm or face.



# DRAWING



Some days later he made the drawings. She sat opposite him, the table between them, her hands a still life rendered in a clay-coloured ink. He made a series of six studies showing her hand at rest beside its mate, palm up, palm down. Muscles played against their opposing pulleys in the secret workings under the skin. He drew the articulation of finger and thumb, thumb and small finger, and her hand balled into a fist. His first expositions were to accurately speak of the positions of the long tendons of the fingers and thumb, to elucidate the pull of these tractors on the wrist. His subsequent drawings, over which he worked longer and attempted greater detail, recorded fine motor control and worked that part of the musculature responsible for the precise adjustments. He drew a green pear held in her hand as she might have held a ball, the joint receptive. Next he asked her to hold a brush raised as though it were inked and moved across a page.

‘You will see,’ he wrote to his brother of this study, ‘that the position of abduction at the first joint of the thumb and first finger is as expected. Give your attention instead to the position of the last two fingers. Where you or I might have the stock of the brush enclosed between the third finger, the thumb and first — the last two fingers acting as a counterweight — note where her fingers lie. The brush is grasped between three fingers and the thumb, held as it were in a club.’

To touch, he thought as he laid in a thatch of small lines along the base of the thumb, to touch — this is the hand’s purpose and without question to touch is to know, to believe. How often do we seek to touch that which is beautiful, smooth, soft, that which has sheen, weight, coolness? It was as though the hand had its own eye. Was the hand the eye’s instrument or surrogate, he wondered? He turned from his study of her hand, now extended across the table before him, a pencil held between the thumb and first two fingers, and looked into her face. How was it with him that he was not satisfied just to look? Why must he extend his hand to her?

She rose in between poses, walked about the deck. Her hair fell loose outside her bonnet. He liked to see it worn thus, sheer and undressed. When he had first seen her she had worn it parted ear to ear and pinned, the head divided into hemispheres. Still seated he followed her progress to the rail and back. There was everything in her posture which suggested lively curiosity. She was unassuming and yet purposeful in her enquiry. She had a good musical feeling for language. Her French although quaint was not hard on the ear. Her memory was enviable. She had the

names of both the French and Chinese crew within a few days of her recovery. He wished that his own mind would retain information as easily. The child had walked about with her those first days past waking, putting her hand to an object and saying its name.

‘Antoine,’ she said laughing when he put her hand over his heart.

‘Oeil,’ as he pointed at one eye — the other squint shut.

‘Ciel.’ He was pointing at the sky and then, as a bird caught his attention, ‘Oiseau!’ They shouted it in unison. Battard let them have their game. He enjoyed seeing them abroad, the colour in each cheek a badge of good health. In truth she needed little tutoring but she enjoyed the child and he, it seemed, saw her as a wonder. It was playing this game which earned her her shipboard name. Everyone has one, Antoine told her. They call me *The Candle* for my waxy colour. Monsiuer Leroux is called the *Gun*, Monsieur Battard is called *The Nose* for his powers with that organ. Hsiao Yen, she acted out the component parts, meant Little Swallow. ‘Ah! Petite Hirondelle,’ Antoine had it, mimicking the divided tail and abbreviated dart and dip.

Her close attention to atmosphere was registered — she noticed every variation in light and cloud. She was a veritable weather station, Battard wrote as much to Jean Paul. He was returned to his object as her shadow fell across him, darkened his tablet as she passed — he spontaneously raised a hand. She read the signal somewhat reluctantly. It was an instinctive protest at the interruption to his work, her form depriving him of light. But it was also a protection, for there would be nothing in him to

prevent him reaching out and drawing her to him if she remained close by. To touch meant also to contain, he mused. Touch could mean harm, covetousness, the emblematic gesture of trust betrayed. How, he asked himself, does the hand take up another's heart?

# BIRD LEATHER



Some months later Battard decided that they must make their way inland from the lake. Its fill being seasonal and thick with bird life, he felt it might well serve them to collect ashore. They were in deep waters and the land around was well treed. There was no sign either that fever had reached this far south and the ship was in need of being floated for repair. The oak keel was damaged from grounding; where the wood had flared and rotted around nails, they were making water. Lunder, the cooper, advised that a lime wash should be applied over the uncoppered portions of the ship to fumigate and guard against new infestations. They could not put to sea in a worm-eaten ship. Battard was told that, if work proceeded without interruption and if supplies were to hand or able to be accommodated from native materials, then the ship would be sound in not much over a week. The cook and his son were instructed to leave off their duties and walk to the next village for

supplies. They would need grain, pulses, root vegetables that could be kept awhile in sand storage, and fruit, either fresh or salted up. The two coopers and the sum of the crew were to construct a rude frame on which to raise the ship, or work to heel her and pin her over, running a line from the mast to pegs driven into the ground. Leroux, Antoine and Hsiao Yen were to accompany Lucien, with two Chinese to act as their guide and counsel, smoothing the way if they were held up with questions or delays.

‘There is a French school over the hill,’ they advised him, but Battard shook his head wearily; he would not hand over Hsiao Yen. His purpose was to penetrate inland as far as they might in a few days’ march. The habitat away from water would surely gain him fresh specimens. In recent times he had shot few land animals except for deer and hare. They had heard reports of alligators but seen none. They had clocked a black bear held on a chain at a village on the higher reaches but had never seen one wild. They had shot buntings, flycatchers, herons and pheasants but had little chance at larger game. Lucien might normally have preferred to work at collecting alone or accompanied by Leroux. To be slowed by the child and by a woman who was not made to walk any distance, let alone through wooded country, seemed a madness. And yet such affection did he feel for the woman and the child that it was hard for him to be without their company. He justified the decision in his mind by arguing that it might not be safe to leave a vulnerable party at the ship. He would not seek out the Jesuits and their mission school.

The men carried rolled canvas beds, their guns, a few days’ supply of rice, the ship’s physic, Battard’s bird wickers and —

hung from their belts — knives and collecting vials. Hsiao Yen would ride, Battard told her, if they could purchase a pony or a docile mule when the supplies were brought back to the ship. To her protest, he countered that she would secure the panniers and his satchels. She took this advice as a poor consolation, suspecting, as did the rest of the men, that Lucien had no faith in her ability to walk more than a league on her tight-bound feet.

A day into their excursion, with Battard putting out as though he would step right over the hills if they obscured his passage, they had marched beyond what had been sighted as the first pike from the ship's vantage. Hsiao Yen was glad then to be astride her pony, but happier still to dismount on the first night. The child was weary, his face dusted with kick-up, his skin a show-through of squint lines. Hsiao Yen had jumped down from her mount and offered for Antoine to ride, but he walked because the men walked and because he desired Battard to see no struggle within himself. Childhood was something outside Antoine's experience. It was not even a notion which had currency in his expectation. Work was his primary experience and was as much an expression of his vigour as imagination and curiosity had been for Hsiao Yen. He had the body of a child — he was small, neatly made, quick — but loss, grief and illness had worked him into tautness. He was not at peace even when released from his chores. He looked deprived of sleep, his eyes in dark sockets. To begin with, except when on watch, he had slept like his colleagues, taking his cue from darkness and rising with first light. Choosing never to bed down alone, he crept into the sailors' hammocks or slept with the Chinese cook and his son.

There was companionship in a shared bed which went beyond the doubling of body heat. Another heartbeat soothed him, he fell in willingly with every soft exhalation. Since the bereavement he had fought off darkness, the memory of death enlarged by night. In daylight he occupied his waking self with scrubbing, rigging, mending, going aloft for sightings and helping the midshipmen with their calculations. The ship was an ogre of mechanical industry, there were countless jobs to be done while the sun was high. It was after mess and in the slow first rhythm of night that he was alone with his mind, and his mind was monstered and fearful with imaginings. He had volunteered for more than his share of night watches, sleeping in daylight hours, feeling through sleep the company of industry about him.

Battard had prayed with the child, taken him into his cabin on Sundays when they lay at anchor, showing him new drawings and jugged-up dissections made large through glass. Antoine handled the objects which were allowed him, he asked questions, petitioned Battard to let him see a drop of bilge in the microscope — standing without breathing as he watched gargoyles and demons oar over their egg of light.

‘There! Is there not a world inside a world?’ Battard asked him. ‘And inside those pulsing diatoms and spheres, fluids press and run back, wheels turn on levers and a thousand arms flail.’ The first time Battard had invited the child to observe a bee through the glass he had pulled back, alarmed by its terrible amplified eye.

‘The creature has a thousand eyes,’ he told Battard. He set the child on his knee and Antoine suffered this indignity to be



near the man and hear his heart at his back. Yet he did not allow the embrace to relax his stiff posture. The heat of closeness worked upon him as on a stone.

‘At least you and I are not made at the bottom of creation,’ Battard told him, ‘never to know God. And yet this too is our suffering. To be aware of our fate, to know pain in our hearts as well as in the flesh.’

Battard cajoled him, piqued his curiosity with explanations of the transfer of light through water and the physics of the curved glass which caused enlargement. He cautioned him to put by what he had seen in his fever bed and by the graveside.

‘It is true that our minds are not made to drive flesh only,’ he told him, ‘but what you have seen is not fit for this world. You will not find reason and logic on which to pin out its purpose.’

‘I do not care for much,’ he told Battard, ‘I have seen over the lip of what holds us here, I have seen what we become and I am not frightened. But I am frightened of the hold that life has on me.’

‘You must not succumb to these thoughts,’ warned Battard, ‘you must not let your mind ride you. Do not question yourself. Do not constantly be measuring the depth of your feeling. Such thoughts lead to obsession and obsession unseats logic and ease. The truest passage to contentment is good company and work.’

‘You think I do not have enough of both?’

‘I do not doubt that you are less troubled when you are under orders to perform some purposeful task. The mind will heal itself, child, much as a clean wound will knit. Constant inquiry into its progress will only inflame what has received harm.

‘While we are afloat you must count me as your kin. If you will have me, I will step up to be your father, or you may know me as your guardian if that sounds fit. Hsiao Yen will be your older sister and tend to you as a mother might if needs be. Do you have a mother alive?’

‘I do,’ Antoine told him, ‘but she is not well known to me. I was not raised by her but by my father and my grandmother and she is gone under the ground.’

Hsiao Yen, walking for a while beside him, pulled from her pocket a salted plum.

‘Take it,’ she said, wanting him to take some comfort from her even if it were only this token. But he pulled her hand down where it had been raised to offer the fruit. He loved Hsiao Yen, felt that he had discovered her, that somehow he had called her out of the valley on his first adventure from the ship. But he could not ally himself with her when he would be a man, when he would have his master see that he was almost a man. Since Battard had restored him from fever he cleaved to him. ‘We are beholden,’ he had once said to Hsiao Yen. ‘It was he who raised us from where we should have slept.’

The first night away from the ship they made camp in a copse of dark pines, their fire fed on the volatile cypress oils, their beds stuffed with the tree’s good straw.

‘The pine-filled cushion is the feather bed of the open air,’ Leroux told them. ‘You will find the perfume a powerful aid to sleep.’

Battard made a light from his pocket steel, coaxing a glow from straws of fine wood and spent grass. These he built over

with splints of wood pared down with his knife. He felled a sapling with a rope and hatchet and made pickets for the flames to grow on. There was soon before them a blaze to which they put their hands. The heat drew them, closed their circle.

Leroux had shot two birds and sat with the fire built high before him, boiling water with which to scald the skins. Earlier in the day they had watched the two males strut about a female. It seemed with their constant walking about, they wore her spirit, capture made from confusion, they corralled her. And once they had penned her they beat her down with their wings and made a raucous calling. Perhaps these were their love songs. But they were, Hsiao Yen felt, overly rough with their mate, one pinning her neck with his bill while the other climbed her. They took turn and turn about with the docile hen, finishing with a trumpeting and a great fanning of wings. The hen took this respite as her cue and was well away when Leroux picked up his gun.

Hsiao Yen lay on her bed, a canvas spread beneath to keep off the cold, and watched the shooter turn out his bag. One trophy hung from his belt, the other he placed across the table of his knees, wiping from the breast any trace of blood or grit. His hands moved on the bird, Hsiao Yen noted, as though by stroking it he would turn the bird from its skin, a sleeve pulled the wrong way through the frock of a coat.

‘Placing the bloods,’ he told her, silking them through the vessels, so that a single incision would drain it straight off. When he had smoothed it to his satisfaction, he took a knife from his pocket and slit the duck, throat to vent. As she watched him slip the bright coat from meat and muscle, she was reminded of the

bird which she had put in her sleeve at An Le. That bird had begun lifeless and had the beating of its heart restored through warmth. These birds had had their hearts stopped cold by lead. They were harvested much as a field is gathered in. They were destined to be the subject of contemplation, of examination. A prepared bird, if it was an uncommon one, might be worth a book, Battard told her. She followed Leroux's method from afar and it seemed to her as though he worked a stiff, plumed doll.

# THE NUPTIALS OF FLOWERS



In a ring of firelight cut from the darkness — all embers, the flame no longer jumping or cracking on the spit of hot sap — they slept or did not sleep, each according to the ferment or stillness of their mind. The Chinese slept on mats and bedding they carried from the ship. Leroux on one side of the fire slept as though he had been knocked down with a club, the boy beside him flushed and calling from the depth of his nightly torment. On the other side of their camp Hsiao Yen lay by Battard alert to his breathing, the night falling in on her with a discomfiting coldness. It was the kind of cold to which sleep brings a merciful immunity but when suffered in wakefulness was the surest obstacle to rest. On instinct she sought the doubled heat of contact. She shifted her hip, which felt the earth chill even

through their canvas, and drew close to Lucien. He had told her that the earth itself is not cold, only its surface. A hole sunk the length of a man's arm would uncover the soil's own engine of heat. Yet they had not put their beds into the ground, but on it. Instead she put herself at Battard's back, and as though on a cue he read in sleep he turned to enclose her with his arm. She thought at first that he might have brought her close unknowingly; that he might have been acting out some dream business. But he acted with the self that was truest to his feeling, as though on this night they were cut temporarily from custom and the harness of expectation. Their camp was an island separate from the ship, adrift from his command, from his scientific purpose. And outside the compass of the normal constraints he reached for her and she did not beat him away.

They had walked an ample distance that day and she had not complained. She sat square on her mount rather than across as a lady might and stood down and travelled where she must. She had not called him for any assistance nor made any complaint. For this alone he drew her close. Then he was at her with kisses.

In the night chill their breath came in smoke as though their laying together had fed a spark. He undressed her where he could and docked his breeches, prising his boots free, toe against heel. There was a fit, a hooping, a posturing that took her under him. She felt his weight and his rough breathing on her cheek. She wanted to steer him, she wanted to hold both his ears in her hands, to have him resident always above her. Passion charged him and stiffened him with a false reserve of strength. After the

day's march and their work under the sun he was surprised not only that he felt wakeful and alert but that his body obeyed. It seemed to him that he might die if he did not discharge himself.

When he was done Hsiao Yen lay in wonder blinking at the stars. She was warmed through from her toes to the tips of her ears. She was stoked and felt the heat would last her through the night. It occurred to her that she should rise and wash herself. That she should break from his now damp limpness to find herself again, to find separation. But his weight pinned her and sleep came on him fast and deep. Later she learned to uncouple herself without waking him, to take a canteen of water into the nearby cover of low branches, her heart enlarged, her legs liable to fold beneath her.

As he lay in her arms, even as he felt her beneath him he felt an unbearable longing. Even in the moment of exquisite unburdening when he was charged with release and sexual purpose, his throat reddened with the blush of feeling. He felt an underscoring of fear. It was, he knew, the very nature of this sin which augmented pleasure. But what rode through his worked muscles, and broke like a fever on his neck and under his hair, was loss. The loss of himself, he figured later. Just as Antoine had explained that he was lost to himself, that he had recovered from illness to be someone who was vital and living but who little resembled the person he had once been. So it was for Battard. Finally he knew what the child had said was true. And he knew it in his bone, with his muscle rather than his mind. What was newness, what was incarnation to Hsiao Yen, was to him a termination. What she saw as a beginning, an unfolding, he read

as a line inked under his former self. The former self which had been moral, astute, wracked with feeling but feeling tempered with discipline, restraint. This self was finished.

He told himself that his God reached inside Adam to fashion him a mate. Was this not why he sought to cleave to Hsiao Yen, why he desired her to become one with himself? She was his missing hemisphere. This interpretation would buoy him; for a day he would step out with a light heart. He would feel the sun at his back and not think of hellfire. But again he would lapse in fear and self-loathing. Not knowing women, having held himself in check, first through piety and later through study and hard work, he had seen his mission as primary. The desires of his body had remained subjugated always to the passion of the mind. It was a loss of integrity and yet it was exquisite pleasure. It was the setting down of the faith that he had carried in himself to be above carnality, and yet there was relief too. Love, as he had previously understood it, was cruxiform — luminous, abundant and without taint. Days later as he pulled apart the business of his feelings he reasoned that it was the love of his God which he had abandoned. In this land of stone Buddhas he had lost sight of faith. He did not understand desire. He had no benchmark for love between a woman and a man, no expectation except that he had not expected it.

Jean Paul and Céleste had come together without intent and this provided him with little insight. He had left before they settled into a pattern on which he might have modelled love. He did not know how to proceed, he did not know this new part of himself. During the day he strode ahead, doubling back only to



collect Hsiao Yen and Antoine at rest stops. He spoke little, being busy as much with his gun as with his conscience. It was at camp that he felt he needed her beside him and she questioned neither his coming to her under the blanket of night quiet, nor his foreignness through the day. It was as much as Hsiao Yen could manage to stay on the pony without complaining or delaying their march. She accepted his attentions as she had accepted all that had been wrought on her. She endured her mount, she watched over the child, she ate what was prepared rough and fire-baked from Leroux. From Battard she took his closeness as a compact which needed neither words nor sign. It was not in her experience to question the wordless expression of his feeling. Yet in herself she knew he loved her and she knew that for him the acknowledgement of these feelings would not come easily.

She knew what was, without having to take apart the evidence. Without knowing the extent of his faith, how it contoured his vision, fashioning his observations to a pre-jigged pattern. She had his measure. Unlike Battard she did not have to assemble and record to understand. He was witness to the symptoms of his feelings only, absorbed by the change in his ability to work or pray. They were symptoms which appeared to him to have colonised his spirit in an instant. Being out of step with his heart he had failed to note its gradual ascent. Before he had known it himself Hsiao Yen had felt his interest. His symptoms only grew as he tutored her. Every collaboration had a charged purpose. In company others dulled and faded. His face lit at her proximity. As time passed he felt the urge to talk with her in a way contrary to his nature. He spoke of Jean Paul, Paris,

the country about his mother's house. He told her about Céleste, her grand rosiness, the babe. The child, he related wide-eyed, a squalling pudding in a shawl, ruled his brother's household. Their talk feinted at intimacy.

Before they had come away from the ship he had talked to her of flowers. It was surely a prelude, she thought, to his advance. Yet his every particle strained to express a proper caution.

'The marriage of flowers,' he said, 'consummated between enclosed petals, is as delicious as it is masterly, a triumph of design and beauty.' She had not known that trees had a sex that they held out to bees, to birds, moths.

'The passion flower is the perfect flower, named for the Saviour,' he told her, 'being both male and female, being both things and one, parent and child, beginning and end. Coming as Christ came of himself and of the Father, his conception both invisible and divine.'

They had sat at the table in the charting room, a candle between them. And in this illumination his face lit into high spots — his nose, his cheeks planed into summits and elevations. He held back petals. He stroked over the stamen and anthers, enclosing a flower in one hand, its throat exposed, its beard of pollen ripe — the smallest finger of his other hand a bee.

'See how the flower opens to her suitor, lifts her skirts guiding him to her stores. And when he is fully charged he climbs away, his coat and feet thickly dusted with pollen. The next flower he targets will comb the precious yellow from him. Is it not ingenious that the flower works her seduction on a bee or

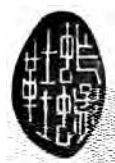
bird rather than another flower? For a flower has not the means to pursue that which she would couple with and must rely therefore on a proxy.'

'And the colour?' she asked him. 'Do the bees love the colour and the fragrance of flowers as we do?' Plant science was all primitive urges, she thought privately. It was all about lures and competition.

'Colour is most likely a trick by which a lily calls her bridegrooms out of the air. Small birds, moths, bees, bats too I believe unwittingly are charged with visiting new buds, although in their case it may be perfume rather than colour that is the allure. There are some flowers which depend on one particular butterfly or bird, having attraction for no other. It is as though the marriage between flowers is arranged, the outcome children, as you would expect, although there is distance and a lack of feeling between the betrothed. The seduction is all for the fly or moth. The passion, the nectar, the showy dressing — for a species love not entirely foreign to our own.'

The urgency with which he put out this talk of betrothal and pollening fully engaged her. He had crossed oceans to hold this flower in his hand, to dissect it. At that moment she knew that their own union would come of this preoccupation with flowers.

# THE MOTH HUNTER



After some days of tramping and shooting and carrying their kill, Battard saw that they were cutting through landscape that was familiar in its layout and scrubby cover, and they knew they had completed a loop which would return them finally to the ship. Battard suggested that they make a camp and rest while he treated and noted down his most valuable finds. They weighted sailcloth with small rocks and Battard spread the contents of his plant press over the entirety. In the space of an hour or so he had dried a quire of paper and a mass of botany which might otherwise have been lost to damp. While he and Leroux stripped out guts and powdered hides, Hsiao Yen and the boy wandered with the nets and snares, soft-footing up to nectaring butterflies and turning over loose stones in search of bugs. There was pleasure in being afoot in good weather without marching and the child relaxed, for once not over-conscious of impressing the master with his stamina.

They were in long grass, waist high in some parts, and the child made a ballet of stalking and leaping with his net. Hsiao Yen watched him as he narrowed his hunt for a small brown wing-hinged butterfly, like a single dull leaf fixed to a stem. Antoine had a kill in his sights and he pounced as the creature lit on a swaying grass, bringing his net across and down with a single swipe. It was away. It had felt the downward pull of the net as a breeze no doubt on its powdery wings. It lit again some feet away and the child held it with his eye while he stepped that way. This time he drew a loop in the air which began and finished with a lift. He had it, the creature being dull to tricks. In fright it flew to the small end of the net's sock and was trapped as he spun the bamboo handle. He watched it with the powerful abstraction of a cat too well fed to make a fast kill. And a rake of small lines fell into pleats between his brows, as the rod turned making a friction of his hand heat.

'Will you return with the master when he is done here?' Antoine asked without prelude, although Hsiao Yen figured that he may have been brooding on the question some time before he gave it voice. It was something that perhaps he had considered from his own point of view also, being now in effect orphaned and having no home that he knew of save the ship and its community.

'I have no place that I would rather be,' she said, 'and no person who I would rather follow. I am cut adrift from what I know, Antoine. I know no context outside what each day brings. You could say that I am at your master's mercy.' She knew that he did not ask out of curiosity at her circumstance. He had

figured on the altered state of relations between Battard and herself. It would be implicit in gestures, in their studied politeness, in the averted cast of eyes. The last two nights they had supped in near silence, Hsiao Yen eating little and Battard walking about them in a ring of agitated steps. He came to her only after the others demonstrated their thickness of sleep.

One night Leroux had shot a song bird and Antoine took it from the game bag, stroking out its plumes, feeling with his fingers for where the shot had pierced. He carried it with him to his bed and lay it on the canvas beside him. When he had finally struggled to sleep, his eyes darting under his lids, his feet jumping and twitching under his blanket, he had the bird still grasped in his hand.

They walked on a little and then stopped looking out over trees to the faint sparkle of water. The child brought the net up to his line of sight, holding the rod with one hand and using the other to pull the gauze away from the small hooked feet of the butterfly.

‘Would that I had killed that plum bird,’ he said. He resumed their conversation as though this had been where their talk had aimed. ‘I do the looking but Leroux always gets to bring them down. Had I a shooter I’d give the master a prize. One to be named after me, to be written down in his book and to be drawn in ink. One the like not seen before. Sure I could have most likely knocked it from the bushes with a stone.’

‘You will have your day,’ Hsiao Yen replied, taking the net from him and shaking out the butterfly. ‘You are a fine hunter

and Battard counts on your eye. Only last night I heard him say that you pull up at a burrow or grass-hiding cricket where the rest of us would have walked right over it. "Still low to the ground is the boy," he said, "whereas we have our heads always in the clouds." He says also that there is nothing so mean, that it does not speak of design or reveal in its parts some miracle. So you see he is just as grateful for your gifts of flies and bugs as he is for any piece of game which Leroux may bring down.

'Do not underestimate the value of contemplation. This is something I learned from my father. It pays to observe the beast in its native ways. Do not be too quick to bring an end to something living. A corpse can only reveal its working parts when cut about. Think what more service you will do discovery by seeing it move as your God intended it. Battard has said that every small thing praises God just by its being alive. Practise your stealth and hunting quickness of course, Antoine, but be sure before you kill that it is purposeful.'

Hsiao Yen had her hand on his arm as she spoke, watching him spin and turn the net, and he leaned into her the while. But as she spoke those final words he sprang away disenchanted with her telling him what he must do. Jealous in himself without knowing it of the creeping together of his master and this thief. He did not know yet whether it was his love for Battard which he felt in jeopardy or his claim on Hsiao Yen. By rights it was he who had discovered her, she had come to them on his finding and now she was slipping by. She had guided him through the foreignness of night and returned him like magic to the ship. She was his pilot. They belonged, they fit. And it had seemed to him

that he and the Chinese woman were chocked in at the same notch in the hierarchy of the ship. This had, without him thinking it over, been a comfort, and now she would betray him by setting herself up as equal to Battard.

‘What would you know of hunting?’ he said with some heat. He had not heard Battard speak of contemplation or of measuring quickness over death. He had seen the master cock his gun. Men killed — this was his measure. Hsiao Yen released him. She turned and walked on from their lookout, seeking as she went a sight of the two men at their work.



# THE STRANGER



In an attempt to woo his small friend one hot afternoon when they had set aside their work, Battard made for Antoine a set of small wax fish: a red carp, a catfish, a sleek blue eel, a red snapper, perch, sole, a trio of baby koi. It was a consolation — a peace offering — and for the first time in a month the child's former trust seemed returned. Battard pinched out wax from the block before him on the table, taking pleasure in its hand warmth, its sweet beeswax smell. For each of the fish he drew in the details with a pin. The pin head was pressed into the soft wax in an overlapping pattern to approximate scales, the point he used to make fine ridges in the fins. Holding his tool as a rod, its impression sufficed to indent an open mouth, lip curling downwards as though the fish gulped air at the water's rim. To each of the fish he gave their true colours, grinding the pigments and pressing the bright powder into the wax, laying one colour in

at a time. Once the colour had adhered he made a hook and a string for each fish, pushing the bent pin deep into the soft throat — the string he tied to a neatly cut twig. When each fish was finished he dipped them quickly into a dish of clear wax, the pigment cleverly trapped under the glaze.

Antoine was allowed a pot from the galley and set his fish in their pond, fishing them out with his willow rod, their wax scales brightened with beads of water, and releasing them again from his hand. He returned the fish he had landed to the pool, swelling the stock of uncaught game, the day being hot enough that if he had set the toys onto the deck they may have been spoiled by the sun. It was a pleasant occupation and one which allowed the child to be just that, a child. Over the span of his time with Battard he had been required to work like a man twice his age in years and had seen things that even the crustiest wept for; he had lost his kin and come close to the brink of his own mortality. For these things Battard felt in some measure liable and so he was cheered to see the boy still able to play as though without a care.

Antoine was at this game an hour, fishing, ranking his catch variously by colour, size, by eating quality, when the calls of birds in the rigging caught his attention. The ship was attended by birds — a commonplace which excited no interest from the crew or from Battard, unless an unusual bird was sighted among the common pipers. This being so Battard would be called to note its dress, its bird gestures; as often as not Leroux would be required to bring it down with his gun. Their usual company set up a hue if a stranger bird alighted within their marked-out keep. Sometimes there would be a flurry of wings, a wheeling and calling,

a strutting in the spritsail or mizzen, feathers plumped, the wings exhibited strangely in a manner of defence. The interloper more often than not would take to the air, persuaded to seek out a less well defended supper away from the ship.

These calls that broke into Antoine's fishing game were not the cries of the men birds defending their turf. There was more excitement, more the speech of alarm than aggression, a tocsin which signalled flight rather than a rally to arms. Antoine's line slackened in his hand as he tipped his head back, eyes slots in the strong light to examine the birds. There was indeed a stranger bird, its shape a crisp dart of shadow against the sun. The bird circled, looping lower, seeming to move in the air as though swung in arcs on a string. For a measure it continued these elliptical sweeps and then it was falling like a stone, its body folded into a slip as compact as an arrow head. And Antoine could see that it had no quarrel with the ship's own birds — it was at his own person that this missile was launched. His arms a shield for his face he sprang up and away from his game, calling all the time for Battard, his cries choked on tears.

'Au secours! Lucien, au secours!' he called in fright and Battard appeared from below with Leroux, fowling piece in hand, in time to see the bird fall not on Antoine but on the waxen fishes' saucepan pond. It was a harrier or kite — they could see from the small head, hooked bill and intense eyebeam. It fell and climbed repeatedly, eyeing the tin pool of water and its bright company as it swung across. Leroux raised his musket but Battard stayed his arm. There was more purpose in watching how the strange bird behaved than there would be in bringing it down.

And then the little hawk alighted beneath the fore topsail, continuing to put its head first on this side and then the other, pinning the coloured fish on a bright look. They were able to climb on the main deck and make a study of the bird, Battard's arms enclosing the boy as he pointed out its strong clawed feet and patterned leg breeches.

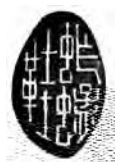
After a moment where it sat up in the rigging, composed, its speckled wings folded, its ruffed neck inclined as though to attend to what was being said below, there was a sound like a handclap. The bird spun upwards against the light then fell on Antoine's dish, snatching up a fish — the blue eel — not in its beak but fastened in its great fingered feet. Then it was aloft. Leroux followed its path with the gun and this time Battard let him be. His chest bowed by sucked-in air, Leroux aimed above and a tick beside the bird, to shoot where it would be on the next uplift of wing. His aim was made purely on intuition, his sight having long been diffused. To take a beast's soul was in the order of things for Henri Leroux — it was no more questioned than light and dark at day's beginning and close. To bring down a bird in flight was to have won something from the world. A true shot raised him in the ship's company. There were other men aboard who were well drilled in shooting, whose eyes were less dim and who held their gun without a tremble. But none had Leroux's natural compass which fixed on a heartbeat, on the updraught of a wing.

There was a crack and the incense of gunpowder; Leroux staggered back under the gun's report but there was no answering thud of a bird brought down. Antoine's speckled kite was away,

probably to his stick bower, Battard said, to make what he could of the wax fish. If he returned, Battard said to the boy, they might attempt to trap him, lure him with a cut of real fish. Caged he would make a fine study to paint.

‘I was once made to paint a bird, nowhere as pretty as this — some hunter’s trophy, it stood wired into a pose, wings unfolded. But this would be painted from the living creature, moving, alert — perhaps a bamboo house could be fitted up for him.’

# THE EEL PIE



Battard had spent the twelve months before he sailed, in Paris, at the School of Art studying under Pellisier, he told Antoine.

The great uncarpeted rooms in which they painted were so inadequately heated that Battard doubted he could soften the paint on his palette, let alone stroke a wash across the dull expanse of the page pinned up before him. The fire at one end of the gallery where they worked, a red eye of light rather than of heat, held his attention not so much for its comfort, rather it seemed the single bud of colour in the room. Battard leaned stiffly towards his work, having neither eye nor stomach for the composition before him. His work lacked light, subtlety, movement and yet he was a master at mixing colour, with an instinct for judging the measure of change in pigment between wet and dry. The distances between one colour and the next were as notes laid out on the pianoforte to Battard.

In the room's centre, a split-leg table was furnished with a figured cloth of heavy dark stuff, draped unevenly about a pewter candlestick. The arrangement included an upturned, unglazed dish, a pair of kid riding gloves, and a speckle-brown kestrel mounted and filled with chair straw, his bright glass eye inclined to Battard. Alongside the bird was arranged an ill-matched zoo of winter fruits, king marrows, striped aubergines, a bowl of sour Spanish oranges. A jointed silver nutcracker in the shape of a crow was set beside a dish of walnuts. It was not a composition to inspire delight. The whole arrangement was bled of colour; even the oranges appeared waxen, the sunless afternoon wrapping the great hall in an oily grey. The marrows less green than an earthy purple, the nut tongs — without light to throw back at the room — a poor stone colour. Battard had trouble rendering the fall of light, the placement of shadow. The bird mocked him. He was never able to record its true person. He longed to be in his own studio, a cut stem in a jar lit by strong morning light. He craved a good fire and to be working in ink, each careful line set beside another, the colour laid in separately. Battard was by nature a journeyman and had the craftsman's feel for the merit of detail. He was able to work for a week or more on a single subject, a day spent entirely and joyfully on the composition of tines on a feather. His way was to sketch in foreground subject and work up a portion of detail at a time. The laying in of show-through colour, the building on pigment did not suit him at all. It was a drill for which he had no inclination. The turpentine smell of the oils on his palette brought on a sick headache. He set down his brushes in a minor fit of aggravation.

Thirty years before Pellisier had engaged Battard's father as his principal assistant. It was only as a favour to his family that he tutored his son now. Lucien was a good draughtsman, this Pellisier could see, and he had a talent for colour, but he told the Battard family that Lucien would never attract work as a painter.

'Hard enough to put bread on the table with a great talent at your disposal,' he said sadly, the hand that he had scrolled through the air to mimic fruitless productivity, resultant poverty, settling now on his friend's arm.

Battard's father explained that his son had been to University at both Cambridge and Uppsala studying the virtues of plants, Natural Theology and the Latin languages. To complete his studies, to round off his education before he took cloth or found a wife, he was to sail for the East. That was if, he added, 'We can find him a place on a survey ship employed on charting, or raise the funds to buy him passage with a trade ship.' He need only benefit from a twelve-month tutelage to fit him to record the findings of his trip. His old friend was persuasive. Pellisier relented and Lucien was taken on.

His father had only sweet memories of his time in Paris. The mornings he was called from bed in darkness to lay the fire or nights spent keeping the rats from pots of size or glue were overlaid with memories of painting at Pellisier's side, accompanying him when he was commissioned for portraits, riding in the carriage beside him when he went to call on fine lady friends. A commissioned portrait appeals to every vanity, Pellisier told him. It was a contract which encouraged licence.



‘The nose is an area of common aggrievement, no matter how God slapped it on, you must render it noble, fleshy but not overly so. It must sit proud between the eyes, coloured for every indication of health. Too much ochre and you have jaundiced the sitter, a ruddy undertone hints at drunkenness.’

His first lay with a woman was thanks to Pellisier’s engaging way with ladies young or old, fair or stout. She was a whore well over forty, thighs like brushed kid skin, arms as thick as his waist and dark gold hair which fell like light off a spoon to her dimpled knees. She would be well dead now, he had told Lucien, but could not help going hard at the thought of her mouth, her dainty dancer’s feet. He had spent himself on her in a minute, but being fifteen had climbed back across her, taking a fistful of breast in each hand like a baker kneading risen dough, and had ridden her again and again until he rolled from her sobbing and beating the straw-filled ticking with his fists. He had a dose of the clap and a head full of vermin to remember her by, and was made to wear a medicine of mercury and tea at his throat for a cure. But as with the vigils by the glue pots or the sour mornings toasting his chilblains at the fire, an itch recalled loses its bite, whether it be in the crotch or on the head.

‘Paris is for young men,’ he said with a sigh.

Lucien had packed into a leather trunk, books, coats made of good suiting, a writing case of quills, a mechanical pen. He would later buy his colours from Herbin’s, glorying in the deeply coloured stains. He brought with him also his collecting kit,

thinking he might find enough free hours to walk out from the town gates and observe birds or sugar up trees for moths.

It was arranged that he would lodge with his brother, a doctor already in Paris. Jean Paul had the lease on an apartment above his own shop, in which he saw mostly injured gentlemen come loose from their horses or fools cut about in duels. From his brother's residence Battard could walk each morning over to the school by six. He could work up Pellissier's accounts, brew the day's Java and teach the talentless parade of young ladies to mix their paint. It was his job to elucidate the properties of siccatives, oil of camphor and Venice turpentine. And when they were done, their pretty portraits invariably achieved with high colour and a complete butchering of light and drapes, he would work up copal or dammar in order to seal their artistic crimes. In return Pellisier would do his best to reform Battard's strange fascination with etching and pen work and train him in the rudiments of perspective, landscape work and the grinding of pigments. To the old man's mind it was only the latter skill he had any hope of acquiring. Years later it would be said that the paintings Battard made on the *Nicolaas* were strangely flat, although an unsurpassed exposition on detail and mechanics, well coloured and rendered in full light.

The day had dulled at noon and by three o'clock the light was so poor that Battard sat squinting at the still life before him, unable even to make a start. Instead he assembled his inks and soldiered them into neat rows. He washed out his brushes in a bowl and when they were dry enough set them into a cloth roll,

the stiff bird following him the while with its glass eye. One pen he kept by him, and opening a bound book he scrolled around great culicued letters. This would be his log, his journal in which in a few months' time he would note a whole atlas of weather, air, soil, water, herbs yet unseen, oddly perfumed flowers, fat coloured birds. In his own hand the first page read: *Notes from a voyage, for the purpose of sounding, charting and compiling a natural history of the great rivers of the Far East.* Underneath and made in a smaller and less elaborate script, he wrote: *with figures of fowl, fish, beasts, serpents, insects and plants.* He inked a double row of spired water beneath the word fish, while across his inner eye was played out the compass of the past three weeks.

His mind had been overcrowded with things he must do, items to be assembled or made to order. He would sail well equipped — take with him a library, a laboratory, an artist's studio. He had already caused a battery of crates and cases to crowd the space at the back of Jean Paul's shop. He would request the ship's forward cabins be modified to house plant presses, a gun case, a working collection of books. He was told that they would have new pinewood masts banded in hoops of steel. The hull and stem must be repaired with oak cut green and carted to Marseilles. He would need accommodation for long boots, gentlemen's false sleeves, all manner of snares, nets, wax for sealing down bottles, tallow, preserving alcohol. Daily to Jean Paul's shop there were deliveries of potash, quick lime, planks of lard soap. His recording would require supplies of resins, Japan wax, glycerine as well as jars of raw pigment. He had commandeered sets of his brother's grinding dishes, tweezers, steel pipettes and bungs.

So occupied, he had burst onto the street one morning, mentally penning amendments to the shipwrights, to suppliers, manufacturers, when a woman not quite delivered of her child (although she told him later her time was easy a sennight past) dropped before him. She fell in such a way that he must either fall too or step over her, neither of which he wanted. He looked down at her with surprise, as he would look at a fruit fallen all at once from a tree, alarmed when he realised that she was stout with child. Her eyes were wide and on him. 'Lucien, you must help me,' she said and Battard leaned down to assist her with a blush which ran up from his throat in a flame. He was as much surprised to be called by name as he was to be assisting this woman, who he was sure was not among his acquaintances. He turned her about, his hands under her arms; conscious suddenly of her warmth and her weight, he walked her stiffly into the shop.

Jean Paul was trained in bone setting, had compiled a great atlas of human bones drawn as to represent both position and function. He had studied the human mind in all its vagaries, but he did not as a rule attend childbed. No matter, thought Battard, he had nowhere else to take her, she had not commanded him except to come to her aid.

'Should I know your name?' he asked, wanting instead to cry out at her condition. 'I am sorry to ask so stupidly, but do I know you?' She looked as though she should not have moved beyond her bed or strayed out of familiar company. Her cheeks were ruddy, her breasts swollen, her belly the size of a melon sat low, as though the babe might already have turned head about. She had the fine, faintly removed air of one already absorbed

deep down into her working self, communion with the child her current state of being. She must have lifted herself as though out of a dream to speak to Battard. He durst look at her — feared that at any moment she might crumple in his arms, or worse heave the child out on the street. They had another few steps to achieve his brother's shop. Already he was mentally putting her in Jean Paul's care. His brother, he knew, did not love women, although he embraced the notion of womankind. He preferred the abstract idea of the feminine but enjoyed the company of men. No matter, Battard thought, he would, given her condition, have to take her in.

Later Céleste would say that she could have told without being prompted that they were brothers, and yet superficially they were not alike. Jean Paul was a shadow of Lucien; taller, darker, more sparsely proportioned, he lacked his younger brother's vigour and high colour. Lucien was square built, an oak of a man but deprived of height, his colour nutty — enlivened at the cheek and chin as from leaning over-close to a fire. His hair fell to his shoulders in curls, sprang back from his neck in coils, encircled each ear, intimate, attentive, refused to lay close to his skull even under the compress of a hat. Where Lucien was stout for a young man, Jean Paul was spare. Where for Jean Paul inspiration attacked him, lighting him from within, a lantern spontaneously aglow, Lucien's thinking was an aggregate. He was compelled to write as he laboured over problems, his ideas worked over, beat like a flax, wetted, trod, rotted down to the constituents, until detail firmed into the elegance of an idea.

He had just sat the woman down on a bench usually occupied by his brother's customers and could not think of what next to do, when she spoke to him.

'Céleste,' she said, putting out her hand to him and letting go of a great breath, as though she had for some time either forgotten how or had been unable to breathe. He had already had her in his arms, as he assisted her from the street. It seemed incongruous somehow, to be just now taking her hand. 'Would you bring me a glass of sweet wine,' she continued, punctuating her words with small hiccoughs of breath. 'You may not remember me, but I know you, Lucien.'

'Jean Paul,' he called, 'Jean Paul,' a note of near panic rising in his voice, 'we have a customer.' That did not seem an adequate description but it would do. He fumbled behind the high shop counter, sliding open drawers, searching their contents. He put his hand up to her as though stopping traffic or hailing a carriage.

'Bide,' he said, 'I will be back with you quite soon.' And without guide of experience to instruct him, thinking only of what would have settled himself if he was so disposed, he went direct to the empty kitchen at the shop's back, thinking to return with a pot of warm beer and a slab of good pie.

He reached the eel pie down from the larder and set it on a plate with a good spoon, then tapped off the beer. The kitchen was dark, cool, sweet-smelling, a salve to his confusion. The stone shelves cut into an unlighted recess which served as their pantry were well stocked. They had pâté de jambon, eggs set in jelly, an uncut loaf, plums put up in clamped jars, ginger wine, a basin of beef broth self-sealed under a lid of rendered fat, the eel pie. He

had no idea what a young lady might eat. He wondered at her condition. Would she be heartily hungry for her exertions or so tightly encompassing the child that to fit in the merest crumb would make her ill? His hands hovered over the set eggs, but as though infused with a separate will they took down the fish pie, set it out on the table behind him. He took a good hunk — the pearly flesh curled in its jelly bed, softened leek, limp greens layered under it.

He had got in these eels for their cook, Toc, who moved silent for all her size in felt slippers, in rolled worsted, her hair held up under a red cap, singing the hymnal under her breath. Battard had asked her why she did not give full voice to her piety and she told him, 'Monsieur Lucien, full throat I would shear the glass not just from this window, but from every window in the house.' And Battard's need to hear her sing was increased tenfold by her answer. Toc shopped from the backdoor, left the house only on her day off. (Today was such a day, a day when they could have used a woman's wit about the place, childbringing being the proper business of women.) Lucien and Jean Paul had tried in vain to assist her to market. But to Battard, the fish auction was an eye feast. He tramped the corridors crowded with fat aproned hawkers, perusing baskets of pipers, red mullet, turbot lain on beds of torn cabbage, bug-eyed crabs. The eels lay fatly black, slick like rubber rain slippers. Probably Holland eels, he thought, although why they should be carted all over the Dutch flat lands when they could be drawn from any mill pond hereabouts, he did not know.

The pie in its high crust would not cut clean. He had a mess of pastry under which the filling spilled on all sides. Still, to his eye it looked good. He contemplated setting out a second slice for himself, pouring a splash of hock. Busy, he was steady, could contain the heat that had pricked over him. His hands were so occupied when Jean Paul's face appeared from the dark stairwell. Battard could only point with his chin, he could think of no words, his mind was dull, fogged. But they were brothers and understood blinks, pouts, shrugs, the slight turning-in of wrists. There were sounds which might have been made through locked teeth and crying interrupted by panting and again a noise that caused two tears to spring from his eyes. His brother stepped along the unlit passage emerging shy into the shop light. Lucien moved a full three paces behind Jean Paul, comforted by his shadow. Set down his pot and dish and turned to see Céleste spread on the floor.

She had torn from herself her lower clothes and petticoats and was banked, her fists balled under her back, hips thrust, her eyes screwed tight. He saw the babe's head appear wrongly, the face crowning, coming forward, pushed from behind with effort, as with a button used for the first time on a new shirt. And at once he was made entirely of water, the room swimming up to take him with a sickly thud. He fell it seemed in parts, his knees folding while his upper self remained for a moment standing, like a tree felled, or the hinged seat of a chair which can be set flat. And that was all he knew of Céleste's confinement, Jean Paul working around him, stepping over him as he would over a rolled rug, kneeling to receive the babe, wiping it over on the hem of Céleste's torn skirt.



‘A boy,’ he murmured, not to Lucien — he was still stiff, lying unblinking. ‘A boy and he is fighting hungry and right I think in all his parts.’ It was Jean Paul’s turn to weep tears over the stranger and her babe. Delivery was a subtle marker. From the enclosed to the overt world. Terrible and wonderful. It was an excitement which made his heart a hammer. Thank God, he thought, the child had lived. So many did not. The churchyard fairly bristled with tiny crosses. His sleeves were turned back and pushed up over the elbows, his hands were bloody. He lowered himself slowly onto one knee, setting the child into his mother’s arms, and then took himself away to wash up and put on clean clothes.

He had brought a babe forth from a woman’s body. This was the mystery uncorked. He had reached inside her. This thought propelled him into weeping broken by sharp intakes of breath. The feeling of tears on his cheeks brought to him a sensation which he later knew as the understory of love. Fear, jealousy, anxiety at imagined losses, a trinity which from this moment would be his companions. Love, he learned, comes at a price.

Reaching his room, he loosened the cravat which had been knotted at his throat, drew the pin from its folds like a splinter, unbuttoned his breeches and waistcoat, unfastened his shirt. He stepped from his trousers, dropped his shirt by his feet and stood in his small clothes before the glass. The mirror, which was foxed and bled through with water damage at its edges, gave him a reflection which might have been that of an acquaintance only faintly recalled. This was a termination. Part of himself was spent

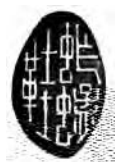
in this ordeal. He stepped from the casing. Propelling new life into the light had made him over. He turned his head slightly so that his vision encompassed the reflection of his left ear and the entire geography of his cheek and jaw. He accomplished this operation only to be assured that this was not the same person who had dressed himself not four hours earlier. He drew off his undershirt and linen. He stood, his skin pricking over in gooseflesh, and observed the poor thinness of his chest, the nipples pale, the bones a rack beneath the skin. This poor body could no more father a child on such a radiant being as he had just attended than ... he could think of no appropriate parallel. But he had brought life from her, it was an indisputable fact. That thought sustained him. He took the jug from its stand and poured the water unheated into a dish. And the thought of Céleste still lying on the shop floor, and with any probability his brother laid out motionless beside her, hastened him into clean clothes and down the stairs to her side.

It was from this point that things for Jean Paul were altered, as though turned on a pivot. This coming down the stairs and seeing her — he thought of it later as a calling. Something at the level of his unconscious self responded and he was drawn into a new portion of his life. Before Céleste — before the shop was filled with the smell of laundry hung up before the fire, milk, child-piss, ointments which they pasted into the fat creases of the babe's thighs — there had been order, quiet. The days had run on a straight canal of business, had been neatly jointed into work, meals carried up to his rooms over the shop on the chiming

hours, men visitors and such after dark. For four years he had lived attended only by servants, seeing patients, seeing doctors for his own mind, coming and going from the shop in predictable loops and circuits. Lucien had been with him not quite the run of the seasons and had filled the house with the provision of his vessel, a cargo of books, equipment, people.

Now there would be Céleste and a babe who would order the house around his waking and sleeping, his calling for food or to be carried. And he would wink up at Jean Paul or spill his stomach curd on Jean Paul's shoulder or lay limp as a rag asleep along his arm. And the man learned to exist for a while outside himself, carried by the imperative of child-sleep, laundry, food — putting by the life of the mind that had so contoured his existence. He embraced it without fear.

# MARSEILLES



Three weeks later, sitting before his still-life in the oily light of a dull afternoon, Lucien figured that he must go. His heart told him it must be sooner than he had planned. Now that his brother had Céleste and the babe Otto under his protection, Lucien felt outside the trinity. It was as though the three stood enclosed in the bright spot of a lamp and he stood in darkness. The three had eyes for none beyond their circle. The man whose very footstep had lifted Battard's heart, now barely acknowledged his presence under the same roof. Strange, Lucien thought to himself, that a being so insubstantial as a baby could so alter their fundamental chemistry.

Had his exclusion been deliberate, it might have been bearable. There had been times in the past when Lucien and his brother had fallen out, had pursued too zealously a point of argument or queried the other's judgement or soundness of opinion. Most frequently they argued over books — a scene

remembered differently, a line wrongly attributed. The climax of debate would be a rush to the shelves to substantiate their claim, one pushing the other from their object, the question sometimes settled by a tussle, a contest of strength. And in the way that brothers have they would glory in the pitting of wits and muscles, Lucien often claiming the victory of body weight, Jean Paul pinned beneath him, breathless, laughing, defiant. But it had always been mended between them. Yet now there was no palpable stem of discord, only a sliding apart of two hemispheres unconsciously joined. There was no remedy for commutation. Finally he understood there was nothing to hold him. The voyage out, the work — this would sustain him. He might never again be so comforted by another's presence, but for Battard the mind's labour was a trusted balm. He would press on.

He was equipped as far as Pellisier could tutor him to record his findings, so he had no qualms about leaving his mentor, in fact he itched to return to his preferred medium, to work only in ink and water-softened paints. What he had still to learn, he thought, setting his brushes into a stiff canvas roll, must be learned in the field. That he had not confronted the Pellisier with news of his issue troubled him and prompted him to put some distance between them. How many bastards had the man made on his young female students? And yet there was nothing attractive about the man save his talent. When he learned that Céleste had studied drawing and composition under Pellisier, Jean Paul had turned on his brother. Lucien had been made to account for himself in what he felt to be a humiliating and unnatural argument.

‘What was her purpose in accosting you?’ asked Jean Paul. ‘And why was she abroad in such a condition?’

‘If you are accusing me, if you are suggesting that I am implicit in the nature of her condition, then you are wrong,’ he had countered, stung to the quick that Jean Paul should suspect him of bringing the girl to this embarrassment. ‘You cannot think that I have been her suitor.’

‘And how is it that, with her attending the very institution where you spend your days, you did not recognise her when she approached you in the street?’

They accommodated Céleste upstairs. Jean Paul had attended her with clean linen and a basin. He had taken possession of some of Toc’s intimate clothes which he offered to the young woman with some degree of awkwardness. As the brothers argued in the shop below, Céleste and the baby slept, the infant swaddled and laid on a cushion in a handsome basket beside the bed. Jean Paul had made up a fire for them in his room and drawn the curtains so that they might rest undisturbed by street noises or the passage of the late morning sun.

‘I attend a bevy of young ladies, all of them high born, none of them more remarkable than another. And I don’t think I could clearly recall a single face. You know me well enough to observe that I am shy of young women. My work is simply to prepare their materials. I size their paper, grind and prepare pigments. I cart about easels and assemble a meaningless array of still life subjects for them. To them I am a functionary, a part of the furniture, an abstraction. They have Pellisier’s tutelage not because they are painters but because they can afford to pay him.

It is an accoutrement, part of the charade of womanly accomplishment. I assure you, Jean Paul, I do not figure in their romantic designs — nor they in mine. You must know my only interest is in travel, in painting and science. I have no romantic aspirations. And I certainly had no intimate knowledge of the young ladies' situations.'

'She chose you not by chance,' countered Jean Paul. 'Did you not yourself say that she called you by name just now in the street?'

'She did indeed. She knew my name but that can hardly make me the guilty party in this crime. I gave aid where it was asked for. The young women would know me, would they not, because there is but one of me to remember. There are twenty some of them. I am not equipped to remember them all.'

It was Céleste herself who finally came to Lucien's defence. When in the afternoon she was woken with soup and bread and the babe put up to her, she confessed to Jean Paul that Pellisier was the father of her child.

'What should I have done?' she asked, tears coming at once into both eyes and her palms turned up in a gesture of helplessness. Her hands were uncommonly red for those of a lady, thought Lucien. Perhaps it was the physical ordeal of childbirth which put such colour on. Her hair was loose from its fixings. It needed a maid's brush. His look registered a soft chin, eyes torches of bright and a mouth which put loops and bow curves onto words. He remembered with a start that she had his good name to justify and he refocused on her speech.

She had approached the old man as her confinement drew on and he had thrown her off. Stormily she retreated to her

apartment in her father's house, taking to her bed. Red-eyed and sombre she refused all visitors, living in the gloom of drawn drapes, turning away trays of food arranged to tempt a fussy appetite. Milk puddings she sent back cold, jellies set in scooped orange peel were untouched, bread soup congealed. Female hysterics, came back the diagnosis, but she put on flesh and strained at her clothes. Finally her condition could not be disguised in altered waists and let-out bodices.

'I had nowhere to go and could remain not in my father's care. They have it that this child is a bastard! I am to them a slut. I am ruined, shunned by my own family.

'I had heard you speak of your brother, Lucien. I knew from your conversation with Pellisier's manservant Jules that your brother was a doctor. It was not hard to find out where you lived. I knew you would not send me away.'

Jean Paul was on his knees at once at her bedside, taking her hands in his, wiping her tears with his thumbs. Her tears were an agent which acted on him efficiently, which drew him into her melodrama, dissolved commonsense. He felt at once the need to act as her protector, to step between her and this invisible perpetrator. Lucien stood with the image before him of Céleste, all bosom and dimples, in his teacher's arms. No, he told himself, he would erase it from his mind.

Lucien had still to be called to the *Nicolaas* which lay in dock at Marseilles. He was still to make known his specifics so that a cabin might be fitted out to his precise needs but what could not be done in his absence he considered must be done at sea. He was assured that they would take carpenters aboard,



coopers, a shipwright. He would make do with a hammock until a berth could be sawn for him. He had heard talk of the cannons and brass fittings being sold for their metal weight to raise coin enough to fit her out snugly.

He was impatient to be gone and so not a month after Céleste had fallen by him in the street, he was on his way to Marseilles to inspect the makings of his adventure. Céleste and Jean Paul were married on that day.

The captain, a Hollander, and a quartet of midshipmen were already aboard when Battard arrived, overseeing the stowing of supplies as they were as yet without the full complement of impressed or volunteered hands. They would have no shortage of likely sorts to fill her, thought Battard as he made his way to the hoisting place, Marseilles being a haven for every kind of petty thief. Crates of salt, sacks of oatmeal and peas, jars of salted-down rations and casked ale stood about on the dock.

There were parcels wrapped in oilcloth, bales of blankets and kegs of sand such as might be used to scour the ship's boards. A dray stood to one side of the boxed goods; in amongst its cargo was the ship's voice, a bell as yet uncased. Battard walked over through the mess of rope and hooks and read through the packing cage, the *Nicolaas*. Battard was told that the bell had been brought overland from a foundry in the north and three gold pieces thrown in the casting crucible where she was forged, to sweeten her sound. She was an English ship made over with orders for both survey and trade. She had a Dutchman on the poop deck. At least the bell is French, he thought.

‘I see that our new bell takes your interest,’ said a man stepping out from behind the dray, feeling with his first finger through the boxing, tracing out the letters as though this was a valid medium. ‘Sometimes an old bell is hung in a new fitted-out ship so as to ring on her good fortune. You will know an old bell not just from her metal but from her name. Mostly they will not hammer out her first ship’s name but paint over it or wear it with a file. This one is new though, you can see there is no touch of weather on her. A bell is as good maybe as a figurehead for luck and longer lasting. Wood splits and is subject to any number of nuisances, wormholes, barnacles. Paint strips and wears soon enough but metal rings on. This one we won’t hear until she’s hoisted on and hung. You will see that it is a fine thing to have a sweet sounding bell.’

Battard looked at the speaker with a degree of apprehension. He was of a small make and quick with it, his head big on his shoulders, with a face like a character jug and a mouth that lay across his countenance as a crack lies in dry mud. To add to his carnival appearance, he wore the remnants of what might once have been a uniform or perhaps a piecing of different uniforms, together with a sailor’s bonnet. He was fastened in the front by tin buttons which although dented and infilled with grime were impressed with shield and crest. Battard could not place the regiment. The coat may have originally been the blue stuff of an enlisted man and he was buckled by leathers rather than a sash. This was Battard’s first impression of Leroux, whom he was to learn to depend on ever increasingly. As with those

who earn the respect of both their peers and masters by the demonstration of good sense and fairness, his features would grow on Battard, so that eventually he would regard them as the fit expressions of loyalty.

Leaning on the dray as comfortably as he may have leaned on the timbers of his own doorframe, he looked back at Battard without false humility or insolence.

‘She is not so large or grandly turned out as some, being a lady of some years. But she is snugly caulked and has new timber where needed, we shall not want for accommodation. I hear she is coppered smooth in parts, an English habit — their ships cut through the waves smart as a blade.’ And then applying the flat of his hand to his brow as though the idea had struck him with some force and he must feel its impact palpably, he said, ‘You must be the man of science set to accompany us on this foreign adventure.’

Battard was more taken with the unique delivery than the sum of the words. He had spoken without appearing to, the words materialised, thought Battard, as though spoken from directly behind. It was a conjurer’s trick surely. He had heard that sailors sported tricks and sleights of hand with which they amused each other in idle times. There was scarcely any involvement of the muscles of the face or jaw. And it was not just the absence of discernible delivery, it was the flatness and complete absence of inflection which intrigued Battard, he could not guess at his provenance. There was not the promise of a smile, his eyes had not a sparkle. There was no obvious clue that he might be performing some jest. So Battard to be safe answered him straight up.

‘You have it first off,’ he said, turning his gaze from the man to the hoisting place. ‘I am indeed the naturalist — Lucien Battard. And may I ask your name, sir, and your trade?’

‘Leroux, I am — I will be on the forecandle. You may not see me, sir, but when you need me.’

Battard’s equipment which had come ahead of him was to be variously fitted to the hold and stored in front of the sailroom. He inspected his quarters, grateful to have one of the poop cabins with storage beneath the fixed and lidded settle for his nets and jars. The shipwrights were still at work fixing gun cases, sawing timbers for shelves on which to accommodate his books. The vessel it seemed was snug as Leroux had said, competently chinked against water, had the thick smell of tar caulking and linseed oil. It would be a pleasure to tread her boards. If he could no longer fit the drill in Jean Paul’s estimation, he must be away from him — exist outside his influence. It was painful to Lucien to lose his orbit on Jean Paul; the only remedy he knew was work and distance. He could not know it at this moment but they would eventually recover their relationship through correspondence, Battard unable to repress his urge to show off his finds and insights to anyone but Jean Paul. On this day he knew only to put a distance between himself and his brother’s house. He returned to his lodgings spending the sum of the days waiting to be called aboard, tramping the hemp fields in search of birds and bugs and inspecting the country about Marseilles.

# SEALEGS



They put out from Marseilles in good weather, with a brisk wind behind them and the sea licked into crests. They made way without sounding or bumping, Battard on deck and standing fresh at the wind. He had no thought for seasickness or malady, although he would spend the first three weeks at sea bent over the ship's railing or sat on the captain's field commode, a wretched victim of his stomach and bowels. He had a young boy as his primary servant. The child waited on him, scrubbing out the cabin's wooden fittings with vinegar and clean sand when Battard spewed the thin soup of his stomach across the floor. He brought him tapped water from the captain's cask when he was able to sit up and take liquid and the ship's news.

'Antoine,' Battard asked when some semblance of sense returned to him, 'what is the day like above?' He had the invalid's quality of distance, feeling entirely removed from his situation.

He asked as though for another fainter version of himself. His corporeal being existing only in the material, having substance only in how he felt. He was either overheated or shivering, nauseated or subject to hunger. These were his perimeters. Even the child knew the question was a fingerpost to recovery.

‘The water is bright and we have for some time now been accompanied by porpoises. You should come up on deck, Monsieur, when you are well and take the air. The men have today caught a blue and yellow wide-winged flying fish in the trawl, you may want one for your collection.’

‘I have heard that old hands throw out chum on the water to bring on dolphins, their company being providential. Throw some down for me, Antoine, I need brightening.’

He gained his sea legs with the first calm when they sailed under full sail and the water lay in shimmering harrows. There was much excitement when the trawl nets were hauled and when the great chandeliers of the man o’war lit by. There were buckets of interest to be pulled in and wondered over. The sea, Battard remarked to one of the men, seemed to be an entirely separate creation. There were finless bowls of translucent jelly propelled by the taking in and rapid elimination of water. There were parasols and ink-squirting cuttlefish — spotted and barred, shy or alarmed into clouds of black. Even the seaweeds amused Battard. Cats’ tails and squirrels’ tails, fat-fingered bunches, globes gaudy and free floating, blood-red sponges — he made the proper drawings in his journal of each and more. The seaweeds lost their colour over-fast but held in a tray of water they danced and moved for him, their colours made deep and smooth in their true

suspension. Drying and mounting them was more delicate work. With tweezers he arranged their flowers and fleshy beads, being ever careful not to spill the water from their float or cause ripples which would disarrange the show. Then with a steady hand he drew a sturdy cut of paper under them, lifting the whole from the water bath without losing his intended form. Once the seaweeds lay on their mount it was near impossible to rearrange a stem or flower, the only remedy being to immerse them and begin again.

What had at first served only to torment him — seeming to be ever closing in on him or shifting underfoot or offending his stomach with putrid odour — fell finally into the background. Once his mind was engaged by the ever-changing chance of securing new animals to haul in and take apart or put in his microscope, he was almost immune to discomfort. The sea tilted or flattened and was never the same colour. In the still times he made drawings up on deck. In a landscape of few elements there was, he found, an hourly shift of light. In rough weather when they raised the lightning chain and egg birds wheeled over, he went below and secured his precious items. As the weeks passed he taught himself to accommodate the routine of a dry breakfast, quelling the rising bile brought on by constant scoops and plunges underfoot. Like a woman in the first tender weeks of her confinement he learnt to avoid Java, table wine and fatty cuts of meat. Instead he grew to love tea a little and to eat small parcels of bland food which he imagined walled his inside workings with a protective emulsion. Later in the voyage he claimed he was cured and, to prove it, ate every wild food which fell to his hand. By the time they recorded the marker of currents and sighted first

land he was recovered enough in himself not to demand to jump ship and return at once to Marseilles.

In his recovery he was driven in on himself in a way which furthered in him the desire for solitude, for there was never complete privacy aboard and a want for stillness. He had ever been one to work in the quiet of his rooms, finding peripheral movement a distraction to the mind. But he had a sociable side also and had watched the boys work at cleaning the deck and the topmen reef or furl a sail with admiration rather than discomfort. He was alive to their acrobatics aloft, to their fearless climbing. It made him retch to tip his head back so to watch them. He asked questions, did his round of walking and was both a figure of alarm and speculation as he hung in the skirts observing the nets or lay along the bowsprit in calm, watching the ship cut through foam. There was excitement too when he would take fish from beneath the stem, landing something as long as his arm with a barbed fishing gig.



# LOVE AND SAINTS



The time ashore had made Hsiao Yen and Lucien indivisible. From then on they were not able to look at one another without being conscious of love looking back — seen double as in reflecting ponds. There was a halo about their working or idle postures. Love infused even their most ordinary abilities. They were let into the discovery of the senses in fractions, in stepped progress. They were breathless and exalted even at the recollection of touch. To Battard it was as though he wore a womanish corset, daily increased in tightness. He sat with an inked pen dropping blots onto his unwritten journal, his eyes fixed on some imaginary horizon. Hsiao Yen lay on her back and idled at clouds or hung over the ship's railing tracking light on the water. In each other's company they were ever over-warm, even in the coming on of night. They were fuelled on blushes which began at the heart and moved along each limb, burning through the skin in

red lamps — their cheeks badges, their fingertips glowing coals. Battard's every need was answered in her compass. It seemed that in the first swell of love they rode out every sadness which had beset them. For both, days were to be tolerated. They craved night.

In their ship's sealed world they threw off convention, not even hiding from the sailors that they had become as man and wife. They fed each other, taking choice meats between their fingers as offerings. They slept late, they walked arms linked. Leroux accepted their compact with an inward smile, going about his ship work without orders. It seemed for some time there would be none. The Chinese crew muttered and cranked over stories of failed liaisons. The European man has an odour, they claimed. No Chinese woman should be able to endure his embrace. But it was not so uncommon, the foreigner taking one of their own for his wife. He would not take her home. None of them did. They made pretty babies and sailed on alone.

The Frenchmen smirked, embellished their talk with smuts and boasts of their own. Only the child was dark, shirking his deck work and attendance in Battard's cabin. He lay in the strapped longboat inventing plagues and cusses. He was dull and shuttered. He refused to eat or come up onto the deck for celestial sightings. He left off his whole business with Hsiao Yen. He refused her on every occasion that she attempted conversation. She left him parcels of food, a cut-glass stopper from Battard's dabbing pomade. She made a drawing of him inky and dark, his head thrown back in a scroll of curls, astride a porpoise. But he was unamused. Her attentions babied him. He dreamt of cutting

Battard down in a hail of fists. There is no greater discomfort, he discovered in those weeks, than that of displaced love.

‘I am in love,’ Battard wrote to Jean Paul, ‘I am useless for any work although I am in rude health. Let me begin from where my course was altered, although I confess it has taken me more than would normally be condescended as sensible to own it.’

He scratched the words down and his pen nib — an inferior make — divided and flexed, kicking a blot of ink and a fine spray over his work. He wrote around it. Jean Paul, he knew, would excuse his poor penmanship.

‘I have rescued a girl,’ he wrote, thinking that he may not have clearly communicated this fact to his brother before. ‘A Chinese, although she speaks a workable French, if a little antique. It is this very girl who has inflamed my heart! There is a belief among these people, that one who comes to the rescue must by dint of his action lay some claim to the one he has rescued. A quaint but fitting custom, do you not think?’

‘She appeared as we recovered from the flux and were stood at anchor. She seemed herself to be afflicted with fever and not aware of her conveyance to us. She had been pulled over rough ground on a makeshift sled. She was deprived of all her possessions except for what she tells me is a dowry piece — a great china dish coloured with dainty paintings. She seems to believe that it is worth a not inconsiderable sum, but I am not convinced. I know nothing of porcelains except what pleases the eye, and this piece it is true is most arresting for both its coloration and design. Its use, however, seems contrary to its supposed value. When she was found it housed a great red fish in grimy slops.

‘She was my patient for some time and more recently my assistant. She is an able artist and has a naive if affecting command of the native flora. If you will recall the drawings I sent you of her hand, you will know of whom I speak.

‘Please do not be angry that I have not communicated my feelings for her before now. They are somewhat new even to myself. You may accuse me of being in love with the very idea of exotica, or think that I obsess over her hand because I am enamoured of some medical discovery to add to my log. I assure you that this is not my purpose. I am entirely a hostage to my feelings. We are both come at love, you and I, Jean Paul, seemingly by accident. Love seeks us — pursues us. Is this what it means to *fall* in love — to loose foothold on the rational, to free fall without expectation of recovery? Jean Paul, is it not a fact that the alchemy outstrips any expectation?’

For some weeks after he wrote this letter he watched himself as though at a remove and at liberty to observe each intimate action. He saw himself made small, an insect, busy at his books, at table supping on a tiny silver spoon or on his bed victim of his love urge, his white nakedness a candle in the windowless gloom. For Battard his trajectory was that of a stone thrown high out over water. As time smoothed out his incandescence he was plagued by an underscoring of anxiety and doubt. Within the month he was writing to Jean Paul again.

‘Rain, rain and then more rain! You could not account for its heaviness. Just when you believe that it might ease it comes on again with increased weight. It seems uncannily to work to the clock, the clouds banking at the same time each day.

‘We are at anchor this past week waiting for a subsidence in the river which is over full, but I am in no haste. The warm weather brings on such conditions and serves to remind me that the river is a being, as is the forest, working in all its various parts as one great life machine. But let me approach the purpose of my communication without further niceties. Tell me, has it been your experience to come to know uncertainty early in your love career? Am I alone in this ferment? Tell me, dear brother, that I am not. I have nine score birds and ten times over that of plants stowed and would come home if I could this instant, bringing my bride to receive your blessing. I have every Biblical bird from the bittern and hoopoe, the turtledove and osprey. I have the heavenly crane, the falcon, kite, lapwing, the stilted heron, the fat partridge, the humble sparrow. I have a cabinet of blown eggs in all incarnations of blue. I have detailed drawings of every notable find. Sometimes for my own amusement I have noted chapter and verse where the creature has its notice in biblical text — it is my ambition at some later date to pursue this seriously. My labour has been all for the glory of God and yet I feel a subsidence of intent. Perhaps I have eroded my own frail notions of purity. Perhaps my own actions, driven as they are by material desire, have made a confetti of my devotions.

‘I am wearied by the onset of summer. I feel the climate bedevils me with humours that I would never entertain at home. I am told that the weather is an unproclaimed weapon in the East. But do not misread me, I will not abandon my mission. This is merely my mind’s late-at-night brew speaking. I will return in triumph armed with exotica. I am a Noah abroad the

sea in my wooden ship. I take my pattern from him, bringing my cargo of animals not to a new emergence of land but to a new science. Granted the animals that make my cargo are dead rather than alive and I have more than two of a kind. But I think you will agree it is a pretty metaphor. And yet although it is a fair fit and I wear it, I would rather St Francis than old man Noah. Is it not somewhere written that St Francis spoke sermons to the stones, so awake was he to God's spirit resident in each form? Did he not call all animals brother and preach to the birds sermons on their feathered clothes and their airy homes? Did he not suffer to carry the naked worm from the path of traffic to spare him? The incandescence of his vision I crave for myself. To see as he did, the six-winged seraph ablaze with the divine. Am I to be the only one from the clutch of those I hold dear, not to see an angel? You and the child have both spoken of your own witness. The child's epiphany borne on the back of fever, your own you felt over your body rather than saw with your eyes. I have seen what such an encounter can do, taking away the appetite for life. Seeing over the brink and desiring to live in the light always. Yet I cannot help but think somewhere I have fallen short. Am I jealous of your sensibilities?

'St Francis was made over in the heat of an illness, was he not, which served to forge his spirit. If it was fire which worked his spirit, was it the cool air of La Verna which served to amplify his sight, giving him notice of the whirling particles that I see in my microscope? Did the earth's plates open to him, allowing examination of its layered geology? How is it that the mystics make this leap from one world into the next, whereas I must

labour and work through eternity for a fraction of their sight? Yet I am on my knees always.

‘You see these saints have a commune with the natural world. It is to this program I aspire. You will have read of St Kevin’s otter which brought him salmon in the time of famine. Of how he, busy with his devotions, reached out his hands to God and a blackbird, seeing this gentle branch, set down and made her nest in his cupped hands. I know you will have this story from our Sunday devotions and recall that St Kevin, being of a heart so curious and kind, remained in this stiff attitude until the clutch was fledged. This story is surely not simply a parable. Tell me that it is not! In it is contained every virtue, transfiguration, mortification — the heart at once both dulled and made brilliant. I have gone over it so many times in my mind that the imagination has furnished all the details. I see St Kevin, his face wide and ingenuous, his arm a bough of supplication. I would have the bird set three eggs the size and feel of pebbles muscled under her, I have their blue that of sugared almonds. Tell me, Jean Paul, does it take a lifetime of prayer to approximate such purity, such ecstasy?

‘I have sworn to myself to overturn this modern notion of stepped creation, of the rise and fall of creatures taking their turn over the earth. This is my whole object, I put my shoulder to the task. Tell me, Jean Paul, does not God smile on such species of devotion?

‘I have wearied you with this, no doubt. But I have no other kin so close. Who else would listen to such ramblings? I envy you

your compact with Céleste. How easily she fit your life. You were at once in step and amiable. I felt outside your trinity. You are blessed, brother, do not doubt it. How wonderful to have a son!’

By the time Jean Paul held this letter in his hand, his child was in stockings, had had his curls shorn and was learning at table to manage a bent spoon and his own mash. He was now no babe and Jean Paul and Céleste were beyond the first fair flush of love.



# THE GREAT SPILL



When the rain lifted and while Battard penned his letter, Hsiao Yen and the child took the row boat. She had won him with the promise of a swim. The heat was oppressive, a kettle run on in a closed room. Battard's plants and papers suffered. A grey mould furred and flowered on his precious notes. Clothes folded and stowed dry, grew black spots. Shoe leather took water on as a sponge.

'If this keeps up,' Battard told them, 'fish may well swim through the air for all the water in it.'

On deck they were each attended by a personal host of flies. They favoured the face wanting to come at the eye.

'We are all in black bonnets,' Hsiao Yen laughed at Battard and the child. It was useless to bat at them.

'Mourning bonnets,' Battard crabbed out. His unease permeated, as did the fug. She aimed to escape them both.

The river had filled and everywhere water spilled over its enclosures and ran into swales and hollows, making summer lakes and ponds. The sedges were drowned but for their pollen blowing tips, trees stood at their waists. Frogs and hawking dragonflies thrived for a month. Water sought water it seemed, stepped its way to join runnels and channels to a true deep. Over this temporary landscape Antoine and Hsiao Yen sped in their little boat. Hsiao Yen at the oars, Antoine faced her, the carp in the dish on his knee. Everywhere fingerlings fanned from bright sheets of wet, these they drove down as far as they could manage without going aground. They were warned to stay out of sight of strangers and in compass of the ship. But they sought a sheltered playground, they were after escape. The world was rained into one great waterway and they would explore it.

Ducks flew up from their nosing passage. Antoine turned to see them settle in their wake. Where their oars had stirred and mixed the watery population, the ducks lit, knowing, either on the impress of instinct or experience, a worthy dining room.

Hsiao Yen pushed the hat back on her head with her forearm and for a minute closed her eyes. She worked the oars two handed and thought of Battard and his brother and their landlocked ships. She was not a stranger to the pleasures of paddling and had oared over her father's lake every summer since she could stand in a boat. She leant and pulled, her fists meeting before her chest and drawn apart with every stroke, the pull and follow through an exhalation. The air came out of her in an audible grunt. Forward, pull, sweep. The oars lifted and returned. It was the perfect meditation. Antoine saw her eyes closed and felt her absence. It pricked him.

He had her apart from the others, apart from Battard this one day and would not brook a separation. He had the urge to clap his hands, to intrude on her quiet, to have her returned to him, but he was occupied with the carp dish. Its weight would not allow it to balance on his knees alone. She had told him that the bowl was all that remained of her dowry. It was pretty, he looked down at it, too pretty for a fish.

‘Here,’ he gestured with his chin but she missed it, still in her rhythm of sweep and pull. Her eyes, when she opened them settled on a stand of trees which fenced them from view. The neck of water they had travelled fed to a pond. Yes, she nodded, this would do. She pulled in one dripping oar and leaning over the side with the other sought to find the depth. At its centre it would be perhaps chest deep to the boy. It was a perfect pool, the willows would be their beach. She poled them to the shallowest point and they shunted the anchor up and overboard.

‘Now to play,’ she held the child in a smile which showed her teeth — all white, he saw, but one. She would have the perfect smile but for it. They stripped their outer clothes. Ship life has not much account for modesty but they showed a tact and turned away. Hsiao Yen had buttons and hooks and knots to unpick. Much as her eagerness increased her haste it slowed her too. Before she had an arm from a sleeve, she heard a splash and the child was moving through the green. He hung down, ruddered along the bed sludge and sprang back to the surface on a single breath. He had bundled his clothes she saw and swam in his own skin. She peeled her blouse, stepped from her flounced skirt and stood in her leg bindings and pantaloons. She was

comic in her half Chinese and half French dress. Battard had given her a chinzt specked with tiny roses. The men tailored petticoats and close wear from storage, some cutting down their own shirts for bodices. But her bound feet were too small for slippers. On the progress of a few weeks she owned a sunbonnet and a printed tabby shawl — something Battard had purchased for Céleste. She had stockings knit from reclaimed skeins; one of the midshipmen mooning for his sweetheart knit them on four small needles, looping and hooking the stitches with a fifth. It was an abiding habit with the sailors in idle times, knitting for love. They kept their needles in their kit, the points made dandy time and again by any ready jack-knife and polished with sand and spit in a rag. Any time below decks you might see the serpentine column of a stocking grow or see a sailor, his tongue mortared through taut lips, work up the heel.

Palm to palm she put her hands and raised her arms above her head. She stood as if to launch herself across the bows. But it was a gesture of anticipated pleasure rather than readiness, a posture made to amuse the child. It was the sailors taking their toilet in the scuppers. Antoine saw this straight off. There was an endless amount of scrubbing and preening if the men ever went ashore.

‘Go on,’ he called out. ‘Go on!’

Already she felt the water meet above her head. She felt the idle pleasure of floating on her back. But she quit larking, stepped down and scrambled in the bottom of the boat.

Their game, they had decided, was to free the fish. They would release him in this enclosure and swim with him. Race

him. They would let him try himself in this living broth. There were a thousand dissolved particles of goodness on which a fish could thrive. Antoine had looked through Battard's microscope. He had put his eye on water enlarged some ten or twenty times. He knew now they swam in a teeming skilly. Hsiao Yen unhoused the fish. On the ship he lived in a keg and the child tended him. He caught swimmers in a net and dropped snails into the gloomy water store. The fish never made a great show of appetite. Twice he had heaved himself from his containment and they had found him flapping and useless, his red skin dull. Did he remember his lake life, his purpose before being made a pet? Hsiao Yen and Antoine had wondered over him. Did he remember how to be a wild thing, how to hunt?

'He might know the river is all about him, yet he cannot reach it,' Antoine had supposed. 'It may pull at him,' Hsiao Yen agreed, 'an uncomfortable dislocation.' Now they would see. Now they would grant him a small pleasure if only for a spell. Hsiao Yen took the lid from his dish and carefully set it by. She put her hands into his bowl and slid them under him. He fought but she raised him; calling Antoine to the boat side, she let the big fish flick away. It was an excitement! Her heart beat high in her chest.

'Keep him in your eye,' she called and the boy struck out again. She put their clothes about the porcelain, a safeguard against its being harmed. And with the boat tipping and swaying underfoot she leapt from the side.

A sheet of water went up where she came into it and her clothes tented around her. The press of cold water made her beat

her hands and send up spikes. She sliced and chopped and sent waves to the shore.

‘Antoine! Antoine!’ she called and he surfaced, cheeks ballooned and red.

‘I have him,’ he called back, knowing she meant him to track the fish. ‘I have him caged in this shallowest part.’

It was all soft mud and drowned grassy plants where he stood, such as fish love. The child watched him fin about. He sank his arms almost to the elbows and threw dark gobs of mud. He held his knees up to his chest and barrel-bobbed about. Idleness for him was an unsuspected pleasure. This past week they had anchored under a cloud the size of the sky and it weighed on them. The men scratched rash roses under their damp hair, flies bit at their scratchings. They peeled shirts from their backs like the first damp layer of onion which adhered with sweat. Tempers were tested. Orders were feinting provocations. Every chore required twice the action expended on cool days and the men flagged.

Water dissolved every irritation.

But come noon it felt as though they’d swum a mile. Their arms aching, their fingers puckering, they sought firm ground and dry. They wanted their clothes. But first they would have their fish. It had come to them separately and without collaboration, that they might set him free. But for Hsiao Yen he was the one link with her father — a gift which could not be willingly turned back. And Antoine, for all his callowness, knew what store she set by the carp, which save for his colour was but a common one.

The child unhooked the bailer from the boat and set to chase the fish. But the fish put on speed and all the thrashing and churning after him clouded their point of view. Antoine learned to be as a rock or a tree trunk, a fixture about which he hoped the fish would nose. He stood, his feet planted in the mud, his eye chasing bright spots and swung and missed and swung and missed. Twice he felt a soft bite on his toe.

‘He is the devil for slipping past just as I think I have him.’

The bailer cut the water and the fish fell from its sluice. Hsiao Yen waded to his side.

‘You might think that he would know me, the months I have been his food supply.’

‘He must want to come. We must lure him. We need some bright object or some pretty morsel.’ She looked about. There were flies which dipped and fanned above the surface where they stood. They would fit their purpose, but they were fast and clever — as much trouble to net one of them as to catch the fish. She turned a half circle and scoured the trees for inspiration. She turned again and faced the boy. He had not a stitch on him but a gold ring winked at his ear.

‘Your earring,’ she pointed, laughing. ‘Do you mind? We’ll fix it to a string.’

The boy’s hand went to his ear, the wrong one at first. He looked down and caught his reflection in the pond. He was mirrored from the waist, his hair slicked into peaks and points, his nose and his cheeks burnt brown. He unhooked his one jewel solemnly and handed it on.

‘The reeds,’ he pointed, ‘or we could tear down a strip of willow.’ He had fished often enough at home with string and a pole. Bending his gold into some sort of hook they improvised a fishing rod and cast about. Hsiao Yen took a turn and then the boy and turnabout. The hook hung under the water turning brightly and throwing off the light. Two sets of eyes fixed at the point where their line met its reflection. Concentration made a blur of their object but neither dared to look away. The water lapped her knees, his thigh. They were about to concede that their luck was thin, when the fish bit not just the ring but a good portion of the willow as well.

Hsiao Yen felt the whole apparatus bow and come taut in her hands. The feeling rose from the turbid waters and climbed the line, took its current through her fingers, leapt the tendon to her wrist. It ran her bone’s length, foxed only momentarily by the joinings. In a second it had upset the rhythm of her heart.

‘I have him,’ she said over her shoulder to Antoine.

‘Bring him by,’ he said, moving in behind her. ‘Pull across yourself.’ He spoke now urgently, ‘pull across yourself and then let go.’

She drew the line from right to left and hauled it smartly to her shoulder — felt again the electric governance in the angler’s geometry. Each incremental rise already tracking a descent — the pull of death on life, capture on freedom — it manifest as a pendulum. It was so, she thought as she felt it, that everything in life had its mathematical equivalent. A roof raised over the humblest dwelling, the grade of a slope held by snow, the force exerted on her line, each had an equation best expressed as poetry.



'Now relax your hold,' he counselled. Following to the letter she released the rod which shot back plumb and true and in resuming the linear, flew from her. Antoine sucked in a breath and bobbed beneath the surface, still determined to secure the fish. His naked gaze was filmed by mud but he caught the movement, the rod propelled like a harpoon along the muddy bottom. He threw himself across it, his two hands closed upon their rig but as they did he judged the weight as lacking. His gold ring at line's end blinking bright was less their fish.

They rowed back through the wet it seemed more slowly than they had come. They took false turns up dead sleeves and sighed.

'I feel more fatigued for the swim than when we left,' she puffed at Antoine. Every exertion taxed her doubly. The return was wearisome but she would not let him at the oars. It was an hour before the ship rose like some sort of wooden hill behind them. Hsiao Yen's hands all blisters from her work. As they bumped alongside the child turned the spoiled ring over in his pocket. It might not, he knew, ever be hammered back to the true.

Battard was on deck as they drew level. Hsiao Yen sighted him over her shoulder as he paced and fanned with his hat. There was some agitation in his step, she noted. They were all of them in this heat plagued with itch and fungal rashes. Sometimes pacing and knitting of the brow meant the mind on an itch unrelieved. It took a deal of strength and some delicacy to wait till one was alone to reach the spot.

They were of some comic appearance, she supposed, their clothes crumpled and damp. They were both dragged with weed. Her white things worn in the water were green or at best grey.

No doubt they broadcast no pretty odour. They tied on and climbed up, Battard putting out his hand to assist with the last leg. She was ready for his argument. They had been gone longer and further than he had warned. Yet he seemed at a remove from them, uncommonly quiet. The boy went to his station without hinder. She went to Battard's cabin and he followed her. She felt his bulk behind her, the breadth of him, his step, which might have easily overtaken her, measured to her own. Still he did not make comment on their tardiness. He shut them in, turned her about and worked at a tie on her skirt knotted tight.

'I need the scissors for this.'

He saw her hands.

'Your hands?' It was both a question and an accusation. He would make issue of her hurt, she saw, rather than their lateness in coming home.

'You have been at your press?' she asked to put him off. He had taken her hands in his own. He examined the damage done by rough wood to their surface. He laid them between his own. He would undress her and help her to bathe. He would tend her little injuries. She knew it before he moved to do these things.

'I wrap the most precious things in oilskins, yet the damp finds a route in.' He looked up from her hands and moved to pull on the bell rope. 'It is through a quarter of my paper. Three drawers of pretty butterflies are a mess of sooty mould. I might better make a study of mildew,' he said sarcastically.

'But you have drawn them?' She could not believe he had not.

'I have — but I do not want to be accused of executing some sort of artistic licence with my drawing. I would have the specimens to back them up. Pinned en masse they are my

argument for infinite variety. Somehow the upper drawers are spared. Beyond that I dare not enquire.'

He called for a pan of heated water and a dipper and washed her hair. She sat undressed on a stool while he combed at snags. He was surprised once again by its weight. One hand he pressed flat between her shoulders, stopping the hair from being pulled against the crown. He worked the knots in steps, loosening snarls, working always towards the ends.

'You are a fine maid. You have such a store of patience,' she told him.

'You think so?' He pondered this. 'I have seen native women dress their husband's hair. This was in the Indias,' he said leaning around her. 'There are men who wear their hair uncut and wound into one great knot at the front of their heads. In the season it is worked through with mud and cow dung and the vermin plucked out. They sit in the fiercest sun, these men, baked like clay pots. The heat kills everything but them. That is a labour for which I think I should have no talent, so you see, I am not quite that commendable.'

He picked out seed heads, a mash of grass stems and leaves gone to slime. When he was done they fell into bed. They lay cooped under the net which enclosed their cot; stillness, he suggested to her, the only possible device against this crushing heat. He had noticed that their Chinese crew slept through the high point of the day when not called to duty. He was often to come upon a man bedded on a coil of rope or a wad of folded sail. Some — hat tipped over the eyes for shade — leaned up against a companion way. The hammocks were not unroped till dark. A bed, Battard told himself, is merely convention. With his

feet unstockinged and his shirt open he moved his hat across them in a lazy arc and allowed his mind free rein. When he spoke again it was against the cricket noise of dusk.

'This heat kills a want for activity. Today I had every intention to work, yet my muscles fail me and my mind has the substance of gauze where I want steel.'

'Summer,' Hsiao Yen said sleepily. 'Does heat always affect you so?'

'No, not always. I am taxed most by this heavy air. This layering of heat as in a steam bath. Sometimes it seems that in my travels I have suffered every inconvenience, from rashes to summer bloat to bowels which spasm at the merest sip of broth or tea. I did not love the tropics,' he shook his head, 'not least because of a sickness there which does not kill you outright but in inches. I have seen men reduced to skeletons by it — drained of every bodily fluid. I have seen a spider drink the mortal juices of a fly. This illness is its twin.'

'There are islands in the Spice bracelet where mountains blow like chimneys and any elevations that are not smoke and ash are scarfed in cloud. Some I swear are made on brimstone. You have seen my drawings? The vegetation is a jungle of tree rope, any penetration requires a machete to cut a path. No European can be properly sustained in health. I found myself daily amused by the antics of monkeys. I netted butterflies the size of bread and butter plates but each day there is a torment. It is Dante's steaming, viper-infested hell.'

Hsiao Yen disengaged herself and sat up in the bed looking down at him, surprised by his vehemence, by the immense feeling

of his delivery. But Battard continued his monologue, his hat now set down on his chest and his arms a support for his head.

‘It is a surprise that so many of the islands are peopled. Some of course of not. One island we put in at was taken over entirely by a lizard population. We took that path deliberately to take it in. They are a terrible size, as long as a man, and a foul sulphur cloud attends them — sticks in the nose and burns the throat. I am not sure whether it is the beasts’ own odour or a product of the volcanic geography.

‘I determined to have one for my collection, I put my sight on an adult male. An ill-conceived idea, I own now. But the men humoured me. We were to snare it with a poacher’s noose, the bait stick amply loaded. Once it was caught we would rope it in three places and cart it aboard. Failing this we would empty the contents of our muskets into it and be satisfied with the skin. A bold move since our firepower was hopelessly antique — more suited to fowling than stopping game.

‘We climbed trees for a lookout, no mean feat, encumbered as we were with nets and guns. I felt my size with that exertion, all lumber and pull against the climb. A man is not made to go up a tree. Not this man.’ He looked at her seriously, his fanning suspended and tapped a finger against his chest.

‘We lay along our branches and waited, our muskets at the ready. It was a most uncomfortable accommodation. We took up our posts at dusk and did not dare to come down from them until the sun showed. We returned to the ship empty-handed and stiff in every limb. I was told after, that one grown beast consumes

forty pounds of meat a day. So it is likely no ill thing we failed to hunt one down.

‘But,’ and here he turned to her tenderly, ‘you have had enough of my ramblings.’

She was weary from her own exertions with the boat and mourned the loss of the fish but shook her head. His voice eased her into a stillness near sleep.

‘No, I love to hear them. If I am quiet it is because I am imagining you at your adventures.’

‘I will leave off with the lizards. I have no wish frighten you.’ He took in her hands again. Assessed them without speaking. She seemed not to want his notice here. They would be a week healing.

‘I have no fear of lizards, there is something quite pleasant about hearing these things from the safety of a bed.’

‘I got myself a giant insect at St Helena. There, that is not so disturbing, unless you are come upon unawares. I would not want one down my neck or in my sleeping roll — better in the killing jar. St Helena was a welcome stopping place, some have it as a dour, unpleasing rock. I did not care for it myself, except to tramp it over.’

# OLD BONEY'S ISLAND



‘From Madeira our tracks at sea had left us well into the season,’ he went on. ‘St Helena meant fresh supplies and a week of well cooked meals, although my heart sank to see the rocky fortified appearance of the island from the water. All cliffs and basalt knobs stepped by shelves of untreed terraces. Only from the settlement could we see some green.’

Ashore, on the promise of sighting Napoléon’s headstone and working at some terrestrial collecting, Battard and Leroux had covered a great part of the lower territory. They shot six birds between them that first day, two of them egg birds or storm petrels such as they had seen often enough at sea. On land they effected none of the usual interest, petrels being a sign of stormy weather when sighted from the lookout and ill-favoured by sailors. Yet Lucien drew his game with interest and accuracy, extending the wing on one side, weighting it with small stones,

recording the gloss black which reflected blue. He took callipers from his breast pocket to measure the skull and bill and made notes by his drawing on the indicative nature of its overhang. 'He is supplied of a goodly diver's breathing apparatus,' he wrote, 'such as the pearl divers of Japan may be fully jealous.'

He surprised and amused his assistant by dissecting out the crops of birds which they shot that day, making a careful examination of their contents, teasing out threads of vegetable matter from the minced parts of soft bugs or flies. 'Part digested mollusca minor, perhaps some kind of small swimming crab or krill, fish fins and spines,' Battard wrote under Observed Diet for the Petrel, and 'unusual to see this small fellow outside deep water given that we are not in the breeding rush.'

Leroux bagged a noddie, a dove, some unusual form of plover which much interested Battard and a fairy tern, snowy and unmarked by shot. There seemed to be nothing on four feet to shoot save the goats brought to shore to feed the Portuguese recluse some many years ago. For a deserter he seems to have been amply provided for, commented Battard, living on supplies brought into the anchorage by passing ships. It was said that for ten years he would not show his face, sighting the incoming trade from a rocky steeple and hiding himself in what was once a well-wooded territory. For some years his story became well known across the courts whose trade ships sought rest and fresh water at his port. He was the living fable — a nobleman, his hair uncut since the day he had swum ashore, a man whose only companions were his God, the goats and a cockerel left at his cave by a curious shore party. At first he had not been able to produce tinder and



had eaten the hearts and soft parts of his game unfired. He wore a hat of plaited leaves and a skirt of dry kelp. He prayed and kept hidden at the first sight of a landing crew.

In time he received a King's Pardon and a letter was carried to the island embossed with the royal seal of John III. And it is supposed that he returned to Portugal and found the choke and dust of the inhabited world ailed him. He pined for his rocks and goats and for the slant of the sun thrown back from the sea. He spoke of storms weathered in his snug cave and the shore pickings after — bladderwrack, stunned fish, birds pulled down by rain.

From their numbers and fearless occupation of their adopted homeland, it seemed more than a few of the deserter's goats may have escaped their hobbles.

'I am told that ebony once flourished across the island,' Battard said. 'That would have been a prize for my press. They are now all gone, I think, chopped down for their strength or to provision lime kilns. The English have a firm belief it seems in levelling wooded parts. One wonders what part of a forest was used to wall Old Boney up.'

Despite their first disappointment in the rocky piles which lay about untreed, they walked that first afternoon and found it a pleasure to put a distance between themselves and the shore. Weeks of circular deck exercise had provided an inadequate stretch on the mind and, for Battard, the thigh. It was fresh to find bird tracks impressed on washed sand or to stop to turn a stone from one's shoe. Their eyes were excited by a horizon which had contour and colour and did not shift and sway like

a balance beam. Yet for Leroux they walked overly slow and it seemed to tax him as the sun climbed. Lucien, despite the heat, tacked this way and that, his head down most times and bending here and there to examine soft rotted tree parts or to split a nugget of hard rock with his pocket mallet. He seemed to be newly awakened, like a spring-born beast in good grass. For Leroux the excitement lay in pulling up his gun, not fidgeting with finger moulds or termite nests.

‘Look along my arm,’ Battard called to him. And he came to Lucien who stood as though turned to salt, the young man pointing with his chin to his shirt sleeve held up elbow out. Battard had called him from unbuttoning himself and putting his water on a tree. Leroux was chronically plagued by his bladder, which caused him some stinging and gritting of teeth. The urge was there but the action was not. What should have shot from him came in dribbles, in drops. He had held himself ready, urged himself to make water and be done, and then to be called from his purpose! It was an old man’s problem, not one he could share with Battard. He suffered and put himself away.

‘Some sort of earwig,’ Leroux volunteered, vexed to have doubled back to see an insect, even though it might be as long as a man’s hand.

‘What should I do, sir, shoot at it?’

‘Earwig?’ Battard said somewhat testily, ‘it is only a giant and a beauty of prime rank! Unhook my net, Leroux, quick, while he still thinks me a tree.’

Their path was well-shaded by green growth and vines which extended small fragrant flowerheads. More than a few large

butterflies sported at these honey jars and Battard stalked them as seriously as he might have a deer. It was strange for Leroux to see a grown man so excited by insects, even ones that had overgrown themselves. But for game he was Battard's most diligent helpmate. Despite some stiffness in his walking and gun handling and in spite of their somewhat antique firearms, it was poetry to watch him bring down a bird.

They lunched by a fire which Leroux rang from damp wood and leaf litter; although they were heated from their work it gave them the comfort of a brew. And although there was no leaping up of flame, there was the faint whisper of smoke to watch as it drew straight upwards or made fiddleheads. This was not the first fire about which they had assembled but it was the one which Battard later recalled as an emblem of contentment. It marked their beginning as colleagues, it drew them towards each other, levelling off the differences which age and circumstance had wrought on them. It set as their pattern companionable silence, which was a comfort rather than a provocation to speak, simply for the sake of putting something between them in the air. And when they did converse, Battard enjoyed Leroux's plain way of speaking. He admired as well the man's ability to accommodate himself even in the most unpromising of outdoor settings. He was entirely domestic — as Battard was to observe many sailors are — being proficient at what in normal circumstances would be counted as womanly arts. He could make and repair clothes, sewing straight seams with God's needle, a thorn which he had shown worked as well as Battard's expensive silver ones. He managed laundry to a tolerable whiteness, he could pull a tooth,

pluck a bird without distressing the skin, plait hair and bind it in ribbands. He could knit stockings and jerkin sleeves on four needles. He could be counted on to find dry rocks to sit on or to build a hearth and had the countryman's knack of locating seemingly by instinct the fixings of a meal. Poaching, thought Battard, may have been his most natural profession if he had not been abroad the sea in ships.

# THE GRASSHOPPER SHOE



She was almost asleep when he left off talking. But he worked his arm from under her neck and she roused.

‘I was not asleep,’ she said, ‘I close my eyes to better imagine the sense of what you describe.’

Battard smiled. It was her most common excuse. These hot nights sleep was an abstraction, a notion fondly remembered. They dozed and woke in perpetual rhythm. Sleeping close was no aid to comfort but she would not leave him.

‘I have been thinking that you may want for some personal items,’ he said, his eyes everywhere but on her. They had fit her with a wardrobe improvised from their stores: stockings, a close jacket in demure shantung which fastened under the bosom, a poke bonnet. Her own clothes were ruined and she came aboard with nothing spare.

He would love her dressed in all the frills and underskirts. It fuelled his desire to imagine it. But he saw that she was most in need of shoes and intimates. The Chinese shoes, tiny cloth confections, shaped not like any reasonable foot, these he thought they might manage locally.

'I can send the men on a provisioning tour,' he offered, wondering at the etiquette of sending a man on such an errand, conjuring three oafs at large in a haberdashery. Still, she could not go herself. It was unthinkable. They had been unable to give her any sort of fit shoe, only fresh bindings from the laundry supply. Battard worried that her feet might receive more harm than already worked on them, so completely were they sealed away.

'Shoes?' he prompted.

Since the cholera he had kept house with an eye fierce for what was wanting. Every sailor, no matter his provenance, was under orders to present his whites before Sabbath, to bathe weekly, to sling out slops before they went to vinegar. Each part of the ship was swept and sluiced, the stove brush worked to loose bristles. He was alert to smoking also, his nose unparalleled in the company for its accuracy. The men were on a permanent warning not to tap out their pipes below. The Chinese, he found, were forever lighting little fires, incense spiked like smouldering sun rays from offerings, spirit money burned in paper boats. There was a row of leather fire buckets hung by the galley, which were in almost daily employ.

Ventilation, he believed, was also a great aid to health and in good weather what could be slung open or propped was set to catch a breeze. It was his thesis that where healthy air circulated

freely, there could be no malaise. Cholera, it seemed, had loved enclosed spaces, had wanted the close atmosphere in order to double itself. Could she not loosen her bindings, he wondered, let some good air penetrate? It plagued him that he could not tend her feet.

‘I had a whole box of shoes,’ she said, more to the back of the door than to him. He was aware that a Chinese bride might possess a substantial dowry but had not before considered her loss in terms of quantity.

‘Anything you want,’ he added quickly, ‘not just the shoes. But I thought you may want new ones especially after your wading and bathing — it cannot have been kind on the heels or the seams.’

Little horns, he had once called them tenderly, for their shape. Yet they gave him horrid fascination. He had measured her feet in his palm. They were barely longer.

‘They are nothing if not oversize,’ she had said blushing, uncertain of his interest. Chinese men admired small feet but she could not be sure of him. Women in Europe, he had told her, got about in boat-sized shoes. He put on a mannish stride for her amusement. Women also rode in the hunt, danced with unmarried men, played cards and wore bodices cut to reveal a great part of the breast.

‘Can it be undone?’ He had no experience here. It defied any medical thesis. Once again he thought of Jean Paul and his atlas of bones.

‘You sometimes hear of older women, widows mostly, who have let their feet out if they are forced to field work or to travel.

But the bones are all in pieces and have been for years tied tightly into shape. The letting out is not an absolute remedy.' He flinched.

'I was a child when it was done,' she assured him. 'I do not recall the pain any more than you might a bad toothache.'

This information served to cheer him less. Bad teeth had made him a victim of the ship's surgeon more than once on the voyage out. Where her hand to him was a marvel, this practice on the feet seemed an aberration.

To distract him she had talked of other things, of food, of preserving gelatin — she had never seen it. In his turn he amazed her with stories of great wobbling jellies; dice games; remedies for lice amongst the men. But he returned to it. It held him. She saw that he could not leave it alone.

'It is considered a just vanity,' she told him. 'There are many with feet much smaller than mine and less able to walk than I am. You have seen that I am in no way greatly hindered.'

He had seen no such thing, he owned to himself.

'The shoes are a jewel to show off the size. I had these red ones,' here she extended her foot beneath her dress, 'made for my wedding.' They were barely any colour now. Only the fancy stitching and the cloth ties held them.

'We could purchase a pattern,' he offered, then on reflection. 'Is there such a pattern book?' He second-guessed himself, out of his depth. He knew needlepoint, tapestry, he had watched his mother make straight seams. He had a vague notion of tissue covered with a tattoo of embellishments. There was some way his mother had transferred the proprietary design to her linen.



‘There are printed books and designs for ornament but I have the pattern in my head.’ Here she turned to him and smiled. ‘I have made many shoes myself or with the help of my maids. We purchased wooden heels and soles and sewed the rest. I worked peony, lotus — all types of blossom in silk. The immortal fungus, that was a favourite. The clever ones made phoenix tails but I am no great embroiderer.

‘I have shown you the carp dish,’ she continued forgetting the tremendous lack of interest he had shown in its design. ‘You may have seen the tiny shoe painted close on the rim. The grasshopper shoe, my father called it. It comes from a children’s story of two shadows who competed for the attentions of a lamp.’

It was her turn, he conceded to himself, to talk. He had spewed out half his life for her, trying to put her into his own context. He thought of it as an education, that he must fit her out to be a wife. If she had made something of the dish before, he had forgotten it. His brow furrowed for a moment, his mind worked to loosen the memory. He remembered that it had been a dowry piece and that she had spoken of its unusual and beautiful form. There was something about the way it sprang from the foot — this is what she had told him, it came back to him now. She had compared it to the way a flower sits on a stem. Two independent parts joined, she had said, with perfect union. At the time he had wondered at her meaning, was it simply an exposition on pottery? His mind returned to the present. Should he give her story some encouragement, he wondered, smile a little, nod? But she had proceeded without this generosity.

‘These two shades competed nightly for notice,’ she was saying. ‘They oiled their hair, threw up their hands in dancing postures meant to lure him. What one did the other did better. If one shadow sliced a piece from herself, the other cut more. Soon they were as wafers dancing on impossibly tiny feet. To settle it the lamp ordered three sets of special shoes. Each pair smaller than the one before. The first pair would fit a fox, the second pair a cat. The third,’ and here Battard joined her, guessing the direction they were taking, ‘the third were made for a grasshopper.’

‘Whichever shadow’s foot was a perfect fit,’ she continued, undeterred by his singsong, ‘he’d have for a wife.’

‘I have grown up with a similar story,’ he said. ‘In my story it was a glass slipper and the lamp a prince.’ And then, as he considered it, he asked, ‘So how did the lamp decide, if each of his suitors shrank in size?’

‘He didn’t need to. They both shrank to nothing. A lamp’s whole purpose is to drive shadows out. I’m sure he involved them in this trick.’

Battard was left with this. She went no further and they resumed their positions in the bed, Battard with his arms hooked behind his head, Hsiao Yen fit to his side. It came to him as he lay there studying a water mark on the back of a book, that her life to this point might been a struggle to fit a tiny shoe. She might have seemed a poor marriage candidate, her disfigurement certainly altering her prospects. But it was not just the physical which set her apart, it was her curious reasoning ability — the inquiring mind most usually the province of a man. There were men, he conceded — grateful that he was not one of them — who shied

at the thought of a clever wife. No matter how she had been cut about, the tiny shoe would not have been hers. The wedding bowl with its painting was a joke surely, some sort of code — a gentleman's amusement. He pondered for a moment its possible cipher. The overlarge hand — the tiny shoe — this bowl in particular being given as the primary gift. But he had not the patience to turn it over, he was never one for the acrostic or cryptic. He had ever been too serious to jape at parlour games or hands of whist. He thought of such idling as typically English, the product of inclement weather and the resulting unnatural fireside climate — all those conservatory plants and a winter of mixed vapours and exhalations. At any rate his coming on her, he congratulated himself, had surely saved her from some tedious provincial transaction! For a heartbeat he had, almost within grasp, a notion of a matchmade marriage, the track of steps danced around such a negotiation. Here was a clue to the wedding bowl's code but he passed it by. Had he not lifted her from the banal and constrained her to scholarship? It pleased him immensely to think so. And as though she had sleepily followed the progress of his thoughts, '*You* fit me perfectly,' she murmured.

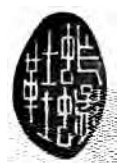
Eventually in the part of night which is really properly the first hour of day, she slept or looked to imitate it, so Battard crept away. Sunrise found him hanging over the rails watching the water take on colour, her shopping unresolved.

# PART THREE

Cicada!  
Not your doing  
But day darkens ...

Den Sute-jo

# THE FRENCHMAN'S EYE



He should, perhaps, compile a natural history of the senses, thought Battard, as he lay on deck shaded by a parasol. His chair set to capture the afternoon breeze, he had a rug across his knees. He should note his observations before the memory of sight was lost to him entirely. He might dictate them as they came to him, have them penned before they dissolved into the imperfect substrate of recollection. Battard was much concerned with recollection lately, days seem to merge, information quickly taken up was as smartly lost.

He pulled on his collar stud, adjusted the forward riding of his hat. 'What is the eye,' he began with this mental dictation, 'but a muscle made bright over its surface by fluid — fluids which serve to irrigate and protect the lens from foreign particles, fluids which may also be manufactured less intuitively.' That was

a sound beginning, he felt, and went on to list some questions, the question being the tool of enquiry. What other animal weeps tears, he asked himself. Yet each of them save the most lowly had eyes. What other animal had eyes that varied in colour and pattern so as to be compared to stones? What is this organ of itself? That was the nub, the primary question — an eye which once dissected appears dull and rubber, yet in working order has dominion of the senses.

‘I have seen eyes all over the country,’ he mused, running his fingers along the rattan chair sides, ‘painted onto the prows of boats so that they might seek out safe passage,’ he began to tick them off on one hand, ‘on the buildings of the North raining down a kind of blessing on those who walk beneath.’ There were the downcast eyes of the Buddhas, he remembered — eyes of contemplation turned inwards. The confluence of artificial eyes spoke surely of their elevation in the minds of men.

‘But it is inwards that from now I must look.’ He spoke this way to himself in an attempt to right himself, to buoy himself against this temporary blindness. ‘No longer is the material world my stimulus.’ His own eyes were bound over with gauze and a cushion of cotton to protect them from light. He lay up on deck like an invalid traveller sent to take the sun, to absorb it like a heated poultice. And yet they bound over his eyes, thinking that the strength of the afternoon sun might compound his injuries. He was in fact protected from light, wearing a straw hat and being shaded by an inclined parasol and yet he craved brightness from his perpetual darkness — wanted to test his eyes’ repair. He wore the bandages until he lay undressed and in darkness on his

cot. His eyelids were as yet inflamed and tender. Before he slept, Hsiao Yen wrapped his head in a shawl to protect his skin. But he must sleep on his back, any pressure under or above his eyes was to be avoided.

Like the blind man in a parlour game he was ever guided by a circle of extended arms, which bat him into familiar unfamiliarity. The ship was now a puzzle to him and he learnt it over in counted footsteps, in the hand feel of turned wood, in rope braids. And he told the apartments by their inherent smell, the odour most commonly married to function. As he moved about his feet seemed to raise an enveloping dust and he imagined that he could detect the smell of fallen hair or scurfy skin. The hold was all bilge, gut-wrenching, the sailroom mildew, it registered with him at once. He could find the galley from a hundred paces.

His nose, ever a talent, became his chief aid to navigation; he was surprised by what it knew, by where it took him. The world was no less densely coloured, he discovered, for being invisible. The vibrations registered by his eyes were now transmuted into spectrums of sound and scent, each gradation notched on a scale ranging from sweet to that of serious discomfort.

There were subtle markers also: a memory of hops in the men's mess; aromatics used to buff the charting bench; the metal taste of tapped off kegs. There was the bitter-ink smell of penwork and the sea-salt sharpness of sand swept over the decks. Underwriting all other fragrances there was the presence of wood offered up by the ship, heighten by daily scrubbing to a white

burr. There were scents which were inseparable from taste, savoured principally on the tongue rather than in the nose. And then there was Hsiao Yen.

He told her, putting himself into her lap for comfort, 'I am that small lizard who drops his tail. Deprived of a convenient handle, no bird can catch him.'

'Does one loss equate with another?' she could not help asking, although she could see that he was adjusting the facts, making a virtue of an obstacle.

'Not equal perhaps, but it is a fair comparison in that we are both without what would at first seem essential. Sightless I am forced to look inside myself, to work with what I already have at hand. No temptation shall seize me. Perhaps I am in some way saved from devilry by relinquishing my tail.'

But there was nowhere he could go without help. He could not sit at table without the invisible aid of proffered arms. Hsiao Yen and the child ministered to his most intimate wants. He was bathed in water hauled to his private rooms.

'I do not like to stand,' he told her, 'unless I am somehow braced. Balance, it seems, requires the eye to rest upon some level thing. Here, put me up against a chair.' She unbuttoned his shirt and supported him to peel it from his back, moved over him with a wrung cloth as though polishing a tabletop. She led him around the chair, put his hand to the side of the bed; he tapped along it as with a cane.

'Lie here,' she told him. Next she worked between his toes, cupped his heels in her hands, circumscribed ankle knobs and reached down the length of his calf to the hinge behind his knee.



It was a map of tenderness and all that was rigid in him collapsed. The effort with which he bore his affliction, which taxed him more than he would allow himself to know, dissolved. And yet there was nothing her work so resembled to him than the ablutions served on a corpse. As a child he had seen his mother and her maids lay out a dead man, a farrier thrown from a bolting horse. The outdoor men shouldered him home, carried him to their kitchen and set him by the fire. There was no use doctoring him, his neck was broken and his jaw hung loose as gate. When he was stripped and his clothes burned he was put up onto a table where the women combed and cleaned him, cutting the thickets from his ears, working behind his neck with a soaped cloth, lifting his weighted hands like meats. His hands, Battard remembered, and his face were dark from outdoor work but his upper arms and belly were a tender ashen blue. Battard blushed as he remembered, with the vividness of childhood, the gassy hissing of corpse winds over the next few days.

Hsiao Yen knelt on his cot, her face so close to his that she could not clearly bring her eyes into focus, except on the small square over which she moved her blade. She practised a devotional stillness, her incline supported on an arm buttressed by his chest. She did not like to take breath while she drew the blade across his cheek yet even before the razor made contact with his skin, he felt her living warmth above him. She generated heat — an incandescence like a candle — and he felt it in his mind. It was as though she burned a picture of herself into his imagination, her shape an illumination which he understood in frozen images. He carefully organised these lantern slides into

a sequence and had movement, had colour, had vibrations which closely approximated light. It was an after image, he supposed, a recollection held vividly in the mind so that it could be conjured at will.

She drew the razor alongside his ear across the rise of bone which supported the cheek and down the jaw. She enjoyed the sound that it made as it cut the new beard, leaving the skin beneath polished, supple. It was the absorption which she enjoyed also. It was the giving over of herself to an act which was entirely physical, which required judgement and instinct rather than mental figuring. She was near him, her activity encompassed him, they were for the space of that moment as one. She held the shaving dish on her lap, and dipping the fat brush into its lather she made him a soap beard, painted directly across his lips so that he dared not speak. Now he was not just blind but made mute too. She could not bear to hear his cheerful acceptance.

# TEARS



In private she wept for Battard the tears which would not well up in his own eyes.

‘Tears are an indulgence,’ he told her. ‘They are a form of intoxication, a badge of suffering, like mourning bands. I do not deserve to wear them.’

‘You are deserving I think on this count,’ she tried. But he would not be swayed.

‘Tears are for mourners, for those who have had their most cherished taken from them. I wept tears when I nursed the child in his fever bed. I wept when I buried my companions. I will not now bleat like a lost ewe, nor will I broadcast my loss, it is enough to stumble about like a drunk, to be the subject of pity.’

‘You are on no count the subject of pity,’ she assured him.

‘Would you have me a blubbering idiot?’ he thundered.

Hsiao Yen shrank from his reprimand.

‘I will not weep for myself, you know,’ he began again more reasonably. ‘I have what I love at hand. I have you and the child. I still have my work although I must learn to come at it from some new angle.’

‘You are allowed surely to weep for what has been lost,’ Hsiao Yen countered. Then going carefully, ‘Are tears to be rationed? Are you allotted only a prescribed amount that you do not wish to waste them on yourself? When I left my father I wept for what I would never see again. I wept outside An Le for fear of what I was about to see. I weep for you too, Lucien, and yet I have tears over.’

‘For women tears may be some kind of remedy. Tears in a man are not simply a purgative, a release after which one feels unburdened. Weeping is a serious symptom, a loss of footing. Tears are so hard wrung from a man I suspect they scar him, inscribe some damage to the heart.’

‘And yet you have told me of mystics who wept in order to purify themselves.’

‘I did indeed but such weeping is costly. It is akin to blood-letting or cauterisation. The patient may as likely die of the cure as be saved by it.’

Bandaged about the head he felt his way about her, his fingers lingering behind her ears.

‘I no longer possess the chemistry to make salt tears,’ he told her; this was his new thesis. It was a confession, an explanation. ‘Perhaps I have been deprived of sight because I have offended my God. Perhaps he did not care for my attempts to press a natural chaos into artificial order. Why should I feel sadness? Should I not instead feel justly served?’

'Perhaps you over-estimate the presence of God in little things.' She said this not to hurt him but to allow him the possibility that it was so.

'On the contrary, I rely on the notion that the Holy Spirit informs the smallest particle of life.'

'You misunderstand me or perhaps I have not put it well. What I mean to say is that surely your God is above punishing small sins. To take sight is a serious measure. Explain to me what you have done so wrong?'

'My intention from the outset has been to halt this English blasphemy. This idea that creatures *make* themselves, *fit* themselves to their situation, that they compete one against the other. I have collected every various creature in order to prove that design is above accident. The English have embraced this country cleric in his madness and I am about to set them straight. Can you not see the intoxication of such a task? Yet now I doubt that I possessed the required humility.'

What he had attempted had seemed at the outset an honest enough vocation. But Hsiao Yen saw that he trod a ground as treacherous as that under a turned heel. Every loose cobble, every sinkhole palpable. He was both definite and vulnerable in turns.

She lay by him quite still in the spill of bedclothes, listening to his voice travel between the stations of his ideas. It was like a weighty fly, she decided, buzzing amiably, it lit where there was momentary interest and then moving on. Seen from above they might have appeared dressed in classical drapery, her hair loose from its bindings and his nakedness arresting and without Biblical shame. They were turned slightly towards each other as you would

expect them to be, each attending to the other's conversation, and yet they were quite still, their gestures frozen into mannerist poses. They made the perfect painterly study of lyrical allegory, Battard with his bound head and she a wild Diana at his side. They needed only the set props, Diana with her bow and he, her consort, manly even though he attended her his sight covered. Perhaps this could be played into the metaphor — his bandaging alluding to blind faith in beauty. The background should have been a formal, terraced Italian garden, furnished with a lake of blue water set about with swans and coloured geese, long-tailed lambs. An arc of sky, plump clouds and the two of them figuring over-large in the landscape, their limbs well muscled, their skin given its vigour through an underpaint of gold.

It was their unselfconsciousness that so contributed to the painterly aspect, and the fact that there was no-one there to make the allusion. He talked on, rehearsing nothing, speaking what came directly into his mind.

'I no longer have you in the compass of my eye and yet how exquisite it is to know you only by touch. The sensation in my fingers seems amplified. The taste of you a cordial, a distillation. Sightlessness can be a powerful drug.

'What wonder is it that the mole does not miss this muscle we wear like an ornament. In his sleeve of earth he is surely embraced in pure sensation. Perhaps the excavations of bugs and earthworms are as amplified as thunder to the mole, or as finely voiced as violins; the work of invertebrates — an orchestra. You and the boy shall be my eyes. You shall give me the colour of things. The two of you are innocents. I need entertain no fear of what your eyes light on.'

# THREE SHOTS OF LEAD



He put about that he was unchanged by the accident, that work should proceed around him. Yet he felt as a bird must feel knocked from the air by lead shot, his body encompassed by a terrible brightness — then unholy pitch. But irony does not lessen the tenure of tragedy, it serves only to keep it worn close. He made a show of competence but did not refuse attention. The accident was played out before his internal gaze with obsessive regularity. It was as though, being deprived of sight, his internal register was perfecting the final sequence, isolating moments, plumping the minutes with an infinity of detail. I have become my microscope, he thought, where everything is working at its most fundamental. Every detail once angled and lit has perfect register. There is all at once apparent movement which is invisible to the unaided eye. There is saturated colour where there should be simply shades of white.

He could hear the first two shots ring out and could see himself come up on deck running, his arms extended at once a shield and a device to disengage the shooter. He could see the child, intent on emptying the powder horn, spilling it rather than tipping a measure. Next he was ramming the shot home with wadded tow and raising the musket, taking aim. It was at this moment that their intentions collided, Battard to stay the child's hand, Antoine in haste to bring down a specimen.

Battard could have called that the shot was improperly loaded — the tow a likely tinder — but he had no words. He had only instinct, and instinct powered his legs rather than his tongue. Like a dancer he reached the child in an arabesque of arms, knees bent, his feet grazing the ground. In one version of this play he seemed to fall on the child rather than knock the piece from his hands. In another he had the child lifted in his arms, he had run at him and scooped him from his makeshift hide. Then he was felled as with a stone and colour spat and spun around him like fireworks. Next darkness and rank pain and the distress of hearing the child's keening and not being able to pick himself up and go to him.

'You have not killed me, little one,' was all he could whisper through bloody lips. 'Come to me. Let me see that you are without harm.' He wanted to say, 'Be ever beside me.'

But he thought that he had perhaps dreamt the words rather than spoken them, being unable to hear even his own utterances, his ears ringing on the gun's report.

The boy managed to disengage himself from the man, separate their twined arms and hooked over legs. The fright



visited on him a strength which he would not know again for some years and he was able to roll from under the limbs which pinned him. He was aware of his own voice pitched high and coming in wails and peals but could not think how to prevent it. All his energy was bent into moving, into putting some space between the man and the discarded gun.

Antoine climbed up and sat along the rig, his heart gone to pulp. He might let himself fall he mused, bring a close to this sorry event. Yet his knees gripped. There was no thing he had done so wrong in his life. If God saw, let him cast him onto the deck below. If he climbed down, it would be no ordinary flogging, he knew. He would be called to muster and sliced into strips of bloody meat. Watched by his colleagues, a company of eyes on him. To bring a gentleman down was perhaps a treason. The child ached inside, chastised himself, put himself to mouth a hundred penance and then more.

‘Hail, Holy Queen, Mother of Mercy, our life, our sweetness ...’ How fast his old easiness had gone, innocence sheared from him with one act. He turned his mind to wishing that he had never come across the gun. He would not come down, he decided, he would never come down. He would stay in the rig until he fell from it stiff and reformed. There were at times birds who froze in the rigging, or who were killed by freaks of wind. He would be as one of their kind, clamped to the crosspiece, a month from now a desiccated rag.

From below they called up to him, made halloos. There was some pantomime involving the arm held upright and then chopped down — he could not read it. Hsiao Yen knelt under

him, put out her arms as though to break his fall with an embrace, as though she stood beneath a burning building with a net. He would go straight to hell for this, it was a sure thing. There would be no angels choired to sing him upstairs, he would not rest in his dead Pa's arms. He would be prodded into the furnace, burnt up and yet eternally aflame. He watched Battard put on a canvas and carried to his bed. The gun recovered, the deck bucketed, eventually the crowd fell away.

Whether the child had flinched as the priming fired, thus corrupting his aim, or whether he had been surprised enough by Battard's unexpected appearance to improperly load the gun, they were not to know. Even the child could not have told them. All he knew was that he had felled the one he loved.

Battard lay where he had fallen, the power to right himself quite drained from his limbs. At once there was commotion which separated into running and barked orders. A rolled cloth was put under his head, his shirt loosened at the neck. Battard saw nothing but heat as though he looked up through a red stain. And then the swelling sealed his eyes and he lay in the isolation of pain, adrift from all that went on about him.

Antoine had meant to surprise him. He had aimed to lay a bird at his door. Battard was meant to wonder at it, turn it over in his hands. They would be from that moment elevated from the rest of the company. Battard would have from then on known that they were of one accord. The man had told him once that there were two sorts of observers, two sorts of hunters. One had the eye. It was a gift, a talent endowed as perfect pitch might serve a musician. This one from an infant would see the dropped

needle winking, would find lost buttons, coins. The other was an eye tutored, an eye trained to notice the bark rubbed from tree trunks or the conformed sedges. An educated eye was no bad thing, Battard had told him, but the gifted observer could read a prairie or a forest like a parish map.

Antoine longed to have Battard's notice, to have his master discover in him a rich seam. What he admired in the man he would have others admire in him. He craved to show that he had the natural eye. He was weary of his tutoring, of apprenticeship. He willed on himself the blaze of God-given talent, in the belief that love branched solely from admiration. He would be cherished by the man. This was his most primitive desire.

Some months later Antoine sat with Battard for company, holding a book open on his lap and telling the man a little of its drawings and annotations. Battard allowed his hand to rest on what he judged was the child's shoulder and Antoine, feeling its weight — its interruption — looked up in mid speech, his voice trailing.

'I would have you know,' said Battard, 'that there is little or nothing in me that I can claim as a natural ability. All that I do has been worked for, has been schooled. I am the tree which bears because it has been pruned and trained to seek advantage. I do not possess the natural eye of which I once told you. My chief talent is my will, a passion to learn, to understand. My good fortune has been that I lived amongst those who valued the pursuits of the mind over fashion. I had my grounding in theology, in philosophy and the natural sciences from men who had made these disciplines their life's work. Work is a tool not

to be underestimated, Antoine. A well-skilled eye is an asset much valued in the field.'

Then the child was all tears and shaking.

'I never meant to harm you,' he heaved out.

'Life throws up these obstacles,' Battard began and then began again. 'I have you by me. That counts for more.' Antoine caught a tear on the back of his hand. Another fell direct to the pages of his book. He checked himself, his tears suddenly absorbed. He had dissolved a word.

# READING



Battard slept for fully three days before he woke and remembered his circumstance. He had been dreaming, he thought, but no. His hand went up to his face and he felt the wrapping. Pain returned in that cognition. Pain which had been so mercifully absent in sleep. He made an attempt to speak and his voice was fogged, muffled. But he was immediately attended by soft arms — Hsiao Yen's — and heard light steps go from the room — surely the boy's. 'Good,' thought Battard, 'at least he does not avoid me. He has not shunned my bed in a delusion of guilt.'

'Are you in pain?' Hsiao Yen asked him later and he turned his head as if to look at her and saw nothing through his bandages. 'I will come through it,' he said 'as I have come through many other things. Do not be worrying after my every feeling.' Privately he thanked God for a store of opiates which his brother had

pressed on him. 'Tell the boy he is to have lessons from Leroux on using the gun.'

'Is that wise?' He felt a stiffening, a reproach, a posture. She thought he might have been lost to her and now he would put the boy in the way of danger. She was all concern, he could hear it in her voice. He wanted to kiss that voice, he had too long been separated from it.

'Luncheon,' she told him. 'It is some clear soup.' She set her tray on the table and unfolded a linen napkin. She spooned up a portion and blew to cool it. But before she could offer it he continued talking.

'Let him show me what he can do after some instruction. Leroux will put him right as to sighting and cleaning. I have every faith in the man. A fowling piece can sometimes be a temperamental thing. The one the boy was handling is properly an antique. You know I had forgotten that I too loved my father's gun at that age, although he kept it from me until I was a little older. But it was the length and weight of the thing and its pull back which he feared for me rather than its explosives. I followed him across fields, flushing rabbits from hedges. The taste of that rabbit was different from the ones we have enjoyed here.'

He was gone now into that high-coloured place that is the imagination. Hsiao Yen put the spoon down and waited out his story.

'I think at home they feed only on the tips of grasses, on seedheads and the coming buds of flowers. There is a fragrant herbal taste to the European rabbit. It is the quintessential flavour of spring, a wholly green taste. Rabbit is the one dish I can still

assemble in my mind, so exactly has it been laid down. I do not know whether I recall it for its merit or whether it is illuminated with that first clarity which is childhood. I recall too the sugar smell of cut grass raked to stooks and see my father tramping before me gun in hand.

‘Those walks with my father were a taste of wildness as was not resident in the village itself. In fact it was this wildness that the village was walled against, the very reason the mason cut the cornerstone of each house. Yet I know that I craved this wilderness because it was within myself, as I think it is in the stuffing of every man. Perhaps it is because we cannot give life that we must take it.’

Hsiao Yen saw her opportunity — the soup was cooling. ‘Drink,’ she said and raised the spoon.

Later he returned to this theme and Hsiao Yen saw that he had been chewing on it for some little time.

‘My first regret is that I cannot teach the boy to shoot myself. It is a job I delegate with no great pleasure. It is such a task that a father should undertake with his son — a title that I assume with the boy.’

Hsiao Yen put her hand in his, thinking privately that she might forget to forward this message, the boy having suffered sufficiently already for his pride. She hoped he would not readily handle the gun again. Was this not an adequate outcome? She remembered that she had once seen a child who had suffered burns to the face as he bent to inspect the workings of a lamp. His face was scalded red and pocked with small cuts and blisters — his appearance not dissimilar to Battard’s under his bandaging. It

would have been the imprisoned leaf of flickering colour which so enchanted the child and drew him to touch it. Hsiao Yen recalled the fuss he had made at finding himself burned, his howls ranked in ascending pitch as though the level of pain was only being discovered in steps. But his protest seemed as much a wordless vocalisation of disappointment as of hurt. It was an expression of fundamental disbelief that something so pretty, so inviting of touch could not be held in the hand. So it was with Battard who must take apart a flower to see its function — understanding being possession. So it would be with the child who used him as a pattern. Hsiao Yen knew that he would now be cautious of a gun. The lesson had been learned but Battard would not let it be.

Where they diverged was the product of their teaching, it was as much a cultural badge as it was a personal perspective. Hsiao Yen had learnt from the first to watch, to make her observation without the intrusion of herself. Battard on the other hand, she knew, must have the thing he studied stilled. He must be able to hold it to his eye. He must dissect its parts to learn of its abilities. It did not cause him to feel a dislocation with the world he lived in when he took from it. He must stop life to see it and did not feel the discord.

Once Battard was awake and cognisant he asked that his eyes be uncovered so he might test them. But he discovered soon enough that the damage was largely to his skin and that the swelling was so severe as to prevent him from opening his eyes at all. He waited a week and then a week more and then in the passage of another week he found that he was reluctant to remove the



bandaging and know the worst. He had adapted to the invalid state where his limitation was contained. He managed the affliction, saw it as a temporary nuisance from which, at some unspecified time, he would make a full recovery. For the present he did not want to approach the unknown, to confront what was in store. While his eyes were covered he could construct a future where all was right, where he had the woman and the child at his side. His name would be lettered into the archives of the museum, his own cabinets full of curiosities. He saw his exotics grace the Jardins des Plantes: nodding alpinas, double yellow banksias, viburnums. He would receive eager young men, students of natural history, who would ask details of his expedition. They would examine his herbarium, handle fossils and tap with their canes on the glass of the aquaria. He would never leave this idyll; his one adventure would suffice. His stomach would be full, his bed warm and in it he would manufacture children. Antoine had taught him that there is no compare for love than that of a small child. Antoine! Thought of the boy brought him home to his present circumstance.

Regardless of his words of comfort for Hsiao Yen and the child, he felt diminished by the accident. He counted on being fully recovered. He did not know how to proceed with his work if he could not hunt or work at drafts for his painting. He had not been so idle since childhood. Idleness made him think. Since reasoning was a discipline for Battard that was founded on observation and since in his current state he was not at liberty to make any fresh finds, he required of the child and Hsiao Yen that they read aloud to him from his notes. This would be his food,

his consolation. He would work on his ideas using the material close at hand.

Antoine read in a stilted stumbling falsetto, his finger inscribing a vanishing line beneath Battard's penstrokes. He had never read words before which did not come from the Book or the Concordance. Battard's words were elaborate, descriptive, sometimes lengthy, looping Latinate. It mystified Antoine that he could devote a whole page of close writing to the drilled eggs of a dove.

'I could have you a bag of these at home,' he told Battard.

'Not that particular one.'

The child went on undeterred. 'My Papa told me that blowing on the hands before lifting an egg from a nest saved the others. That the mother would not abandon the eggs left to her this way.'

Battard nodded. He was surprised at such a demonstration of care. Most commonly he himself cleared a clutch. He climbed down with the eggs in his breast pocket, in his shirt sleeve, in his mouth.

The child enjoyed the sketches more, telling Lucien, 'You have here the three elevations of St Helena, I can see that without reading the inscription. You have exactly the meanness of the rock from the sea approach. These are the black cliffs of the Horn, I remember it just so.' Or he would test Battard saying, 'You have made eight drawings of the petrel's beak.'

'No, no,' Lucien would counter, 'not a petrel — it might have been a booby or an albatross. And not eight surely, I warrant it was four or five.'

They had between them in that month an easiness which had not come about simply because Battard was now Antoine's pet. Their roles had been revolved so that one was where the other had been. Antoine enjoyed the authority he had over Battard's steps, his arm now the guiding one, the steadying influence. Battard was beginning to know some more of the child. He experienced the compassion of which he learned Antoine had a good store. The child saw that he could aid him in his recovery by busying his mind. By reading to him, reporting to him on cloud cover, observing how the grasses lay down under a wind. For once he was the doctor, the dispenser of balm.

But their enjoyment came also from knowing that it could have been otherwise. That the accident might have ended with them putting Battard in the ground. The child had already seen his father and brother lain side by side, a crude cross serving as a headstone and their only marker. There were graves made on the river bank which they might never again visit. There would be no posies wilting at their head and no new prayers said over them. There could be no guarantee that they would lie undisturbed in heathen ground. He was not a stranger to the swiftness with which death could intrude but he examined his heart and was uncertain how to read it. Had he not somehow willed the accident, called it up out of the ferment of his mind? Had Battard been killed it may have been entirely his doing. To others it might have had the substance of an accident, as a stupidity, fatal and unavoidable. But Antoine would have known, of this he felt sure. And the man may have known too as he took the spray of shot full in the face, falling and looking into the child's eyes. Falling

and knowing why. But Battard had been spared and although the explosives had badly hurt his face, the shot was of the smallest gauge and could not have brought him down. For now the child believed that he would be well. The axe had fallen and missed its mark.

‘I have done a mean thing,’ Antoine confessed one day and his ears reddened invisibly under his hat. He was emboldened suddenly by their closeness and the assurance that Battard in his condition could not directly witness his misery. In fact their closeness, Battard’s ready forgiveness — he had never blamed Antoine for his accident — merely served to deepen his shame.

‘There is no need for this,’ Battard told him, ‘do not go over this ground again.’

‘No, wait, this is something I have not told you. I have fed your horny black beetle to the fish.’ He got it out in one breath, looked at a spot between his feet, held it in unblinking focus. It seemed moveable, liable to swim up at him.

‘Just now?’ Battard was surprised, they had been reading for what he guessed to be about an hour.

‘No, some months ago.’ It was three. Antoine knew precisely when Battard and Hsiao Yen had unwittingly excluded him.

‘I have some thousands of beetles,’ Battard assured him, ‘I can afford to lose one or two. In fact I have sometimes a dozen or so of each type.’

‘Not this one,’ Antoine sadly shook his head. ‘It was a large black one, great notched legs. I gave it to you and you said it was to be a new species, you were to write a paper on it. You said that

seeing I had found it, it might be named for me. I took it back when I was angry and gave it to the fish.'

The child he guessed had struggled with himself over the concealment. Guilt likely would have plagued him. A wrong action was not easy to own, this surely would have gnawed at him. Then his thoughts shifted. He imagined a hole in his collection where the creature should be, his notes on it of little interest without the specimen. Without hard evidence any discovery was as hearsay. He did not recall that he had even made a drawing. He had months, perhaps years of work still to do on his collection. Plants he would leave to the taxonomists but for beetles he had an abiding fondness, their great variety, their jewel-like colours; their aesthetics alone were the perfect prop for his argument. Battard lifted himself slightly in his seat, as though the interview was concluded but then fell back; he was no stranger to disappointment.

'You are still angry?' he asked Antoine. Before the accident he might have thought it proper to chastise him. Virtue he knew did not fruit without tending, but in convalescence he craved the child's attention and strove to do nothing that might injure their friendship. There was untold comfort just in having the boy sat at his feet.

'No, I was angry but one day,' Antoine intoned. He had learnt the pleasure of the deed was swift to pass, where the regret would linger.

The man for a minute or more was silent, thinking it was all mended between them. Then it occurred to him that he should know why.

'You had a reason,' he tried, his voice aimed at encouragement. Antoine sighed and shrank a little. What should he say?

'She was my discovery.' At first he thought the child meant the beetle and then it dawned.

'You mean Hsiao Yen?' He put it cautiously.

'You took something of mine,' Antoine began slowly and then it came unplugged and he told him, 'and I took something of yours. Do you see it? I brought her aboard and you made her yours, where fairly we might have both had claim to her affection.'

Battard concealed a smile. The boy was but a child!

'I gave you the beetle and you were mightily pleased. But when you made me sore I stole him.' It did not seem fair to the child to give everything over. He had seen the way the man looked at his black bug, his breathing a little shallow, an excitement putting a brightness on his eyes.

'I wonder if the fish knew he swallowed a prize.' That was all Battard would say on the subject. He knew the child now a chink more. Antoine was a deep well. From the smallest action, from a careless word, an incautious look, Battard learned the repercussions can be outstanding — the mechanism defied logic or perhaps was entirely logic, he could not decide. He made a mental list, constructed a hierarchy. First of all the child was lost; he followed the woman; she was nursed; they were coupled; the child was soured; he made a theft; Battard's career was injured and so it went on. Each action nudged another into falling.

And thus Hsiao Yen's husband was consumed.

‘Go back to the drawings of the eggs,’ Battard said to Antoine one day, arresting his chatter about some antics in the rigging above. ‘Find me the pages where I have made some coloured drawings of the eggs.’

And Antoine, obedient to Battard’s instruction, went below for one of the great bound books. When he returned he propped it by Battard’s inclined knee and turned the pages one by one, searching out the desired sketch. He saw in this book there were careful details of birds’ feet, scaly, webbed, clawed. Battard mostly worked from specimens, Antoine knew this, but he noted as he leafed through that the details were made to seem as though drawn from life. The heron lifted its folding pencil legs from duckweed and the owl’s tufted foot clamped to a sturdy branch. There were pages of nests, three full pages of plumes, of habitat. But then the child came at a double page which lay open to display paintings of perhaps a hundred eggs. Antoine sat back on his heels, putting his finger first to one speckled jewel and then another. There was such variety, such marriage of colour.

‘Tell me what you see,’ Battard said.

‘I see the very likeness of an egg drawn,’ the child said. Battard it seemed would start with the obvious. ‘Why have you drawn the eggs so, when you have them already in your store? They will not fade like the pressed plants, will they? Or are you afraid they might not survive the ship’s rocking?’

‘Neither. You will see that they are arranged for some similarity. See if you can work it out.’

‘Well, they are not grouped for size, they are every size from pebbles to globes. And they are not formed into families as you

have them in your boxes. I can see that from the labels you have inked beneath each one. It is, I would say, colour. You have them set out in grades of tint.'

'You are there and you are not,' Battard said. He wore his rosary knotted about one hand and his thumb played over the beads as he spoke. He leant forward in his chair, there was alertness in his posture, interest. Yet the blank of his bandaged face unnerved the child. Antoine would not meet that empty gaze. He looked at Battard in a sideways squint, letting his attention stay fixed on the study at hand.

'Look close and you will see a conformity. The stilt sits by the plover and the piper — why? Because they are shore birds, water birds and what else? I will tell you. You had it. For their pigment. I have arranged them purely on a rule of similarity.'

'They are not the same,' Antoine nodded, passed his hand over the pages, 'but near enough.'

'Be my witness, ordered in this way a pattern has emerged. In the beginning all animals were divided into two schools. Those that had blood and therefore a heart with which to drive the blood about, and those that are bloodless.'

'You and I have blood,' Antoine agreed, putting his hand to his heart 'but ...' and he searched about, 'a ladybug might not.'

'Quite so. This system served until it was put about that there may be many more specific orders made. In our time we organise on the principles of similarity. That is, creatures which share a number of attributes are of a single class. Sometimes within one small group there seems an infinite variety. Mr Darwin would have it that they have formed themselves to this order, that



the world nudges change, that change is made in increments over the centuries. I would put it to you that variety is testament to some greater design.'

Antoine saw that to Battard it supplied a 'personal proof'.

That said, Battard seemed eased, he was knocking the story home. 'Returning to the eggs,' he began, 'think on their colouring, their unique patterning. How is this colour made? Through what stencil is the design transferred? I know well enough,' he continued, clearly not wanting his questions answered, 'I know well enough that an unlaidd egg is white. Always white. I know this from dissection. What organ in the body of the bird paints spots and lines, flutes and arabesques, no two the same? And note that the ground is sometimes olive, sometimes blue, sometimes a polished marble. Where does she store these pigments? These are the things which I would know. Although sometimes I think we ask to know God's mind.'

Hsiao Yen read to him from what he called his hothouse notebooks. These were the drawings made en route, some of them from the tropic islands across the line, others made at sea and stuffed with descriptions of seaweeds and luminous jellies. The plants and beasts which he had set down seemed as fabulous to her as they had at first appeared to him and they lived for her from his sketches and paintings. Reading to him, she learned a new vocabulary. She learned to bear interruption and repetition. She began to see where his mind was moving and it troubled her.

She read and described drawings of specimen blooms. There were arums, lilies and globe-headed rhododendrons, baroque and conspicuous in their attributes. He had recorded

flowers whose throats measured that of a church vase, sundews which closed over meat, orchids which exactly imitated the patterning of moths. And as with the child he listened to what was read and sometimes interrupted with a comment or a question. But his questions had less to do with natural history and more to do with his own anxiety.

‘I began by hunting exotics,’ he told her. He addressed the space before him with the generic dislocation that attends sightlessness. He had directed himself to her approximate place beside him, locating her with the compass of her voice. But it was not an exact instrument, or not one with which he was fully conversant. He was marginally off course and put his head at the slightly wrong aspect.

‘I sought contradictions, impossibilities, the outrages of nature. Onto these monsters I imposed the reason of taxonomy. I bent them to conform to the expectations of classification. I would have nothing outside comprehension, all would be subjugated to the laws of Binomial Latinate. I was true to my mentor but perhaps not to my faith. I must examine now if I have offended my God. Have I misused these eyes that they are taken from me?’ and here he put his hand up to the bandages, felt their linen creases, ‘This is what I must constantly ask myself. Have I set myself above my station that I seek to pin a name to every skunkhorn and pitcher plant? Have I committed a gross sin of pride?’

‘I do not believe that you have suffered this mischief in order that your God impose humility,’ Hsiao Yen countered.

‘Perhaps it is not that exactly, but rather that I have misread my commission. I have not knit together the orphan pieces, too

busy have I been with ambition. I have worked too much on my own. I think I must learn to abridge this sense of myself and embrace the commerce of this community.'

'Community? You are its very backbone.'

Hsiao Yen put her head back into the book she held on her lap, passing her hand over its illuminations. She felt sure that his preoccupation with fate was no aid to his recovery. 'My father was once on a river boat,' she said still addressing her book, 'that was overtaken by a mass of butterflies.' She told him how they had been enclosed in a choking throng of wings and how Xi had taken their manifestation as a sign. She had piqued his attention, she could see. His hands left off their perpetual fidget with his rosary and the muscles in his neck were all rope. He leaned into her story. She could feel him listening, he was waiting for her to advise him of some sign which would fit his own circumstance or to use the story as some allegory. She would no doubt point up parallels, tell him he also would come through his own dark cloud.

'What colour were the butterflies?'

'Black, I think — white spots on the lower wings.'

'*Papilio pammon*,' Battard said with a smile, 'they are not uncommon about Shanghai.'

'What took my father's attention,' she continued, pulling the neck of her dress into pleats as she spoke, 'was that there was a woman on the boat who was blind and yet before the insects plagued them he had been completely unaware of her condition. She had brought them lunch, she had attended them at table, bending over him, my father said, as they conversed. She was so

completely adapted to her circumstance that she moved about the boat without fear of injury.'

'You tell me this why?' Battard countered. 'To suggest that I might remain always with the ship, learning its every plank and rig? This vessel is merely a tool. It is useful to me as is my dissecting kit. It is a conveyance, nothing more. Do you suppose that there is no life for me when we are finished here?'

She was stung by his tone.

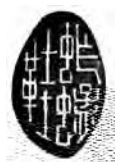
'Not at all. I was merely wondering at the flexibility of the human creature. We conform, we take on boundaries as a cup shapes water. We embrace almost any possibility.' She might have said that she spoke direct from her own experience. Instead she aimed at comfort.

'My father was most impressed with this woman, who worked at her living, who was entirely useful and competent. So perfectly did she fit her world, so attuned was she to its component parts, that she could predict the weather some leagues ahead.'

And so they passed the first few weeks of Battard's blindness. Going nowhere, the ship pulling at anchor. The child and the woman bringing his findings before him with words, reading to him from his notes, retrieving specimens so he might amplify their descriptions. He dictated and put up questions which he would mull over. It was his attempt at work, a show of normality, but there was a slackening which his sightlessness supported. It separated the men into those who could go about their work unsupervised without the threat of punishment or the reward of

praise, from those who were corrupted by idleness. The company which had once performed in unity fell into discontent, rumour and resentment riding them sorely. The musters flagged. Some of the Chinese slipped away to and returned from inns. The French shot game and bartered goods from the ship for unfamiliar grubs or well-coloured stones. For these Battard was known to pay. They made their descriptions, sold him spotted eggs, put his hand to the shed branches of dehorned stags, 'like the devil's own', they told him. But they were restless. There was a brewing discord through the ship, petty thefts were reported, fist fights and cursing soured below decks. The crew talked only of dissatisfaction. They sought the cool relief that movement would bring. Some of the men had already set their heads on home.

# OVER THE MOUNTAIN



‘Our road will soon be ended.’ This from Leroux to Battard at the captain’s table. He spoke for the men — a fair and fearless mouthpiece. He meant the watery road, the river, which had no passage through the mountain that stood ahead of them, a great bulwark of rock. They needed to know, Leroux felt, whether they would be asked to climb it or swing the barque about. Besides, they wanted some task at which to put their heads, a crew was liable to turn if left to gob spittle over the ship’s bow or live for wagers and derring-do. A ship’s whole cut served movement and without it the days drew on dismally. There had been scraps enough and bets on counts of fish and the like and the men were worn thin by it. A day ago Leroux had cut down a man dandled from the bowsprit. On questioning the men he learned that the victim was paying for a loan defaulted. Under slack command a rebel standard flew. Leroux knew it from his army days,

recognised it as sure as though it wore a label. A man who a month ago might have made a shield of his own self to save another, this day was capable of near enough hanging a man for a card game.

Leroux took a seat and studied the naturalist. He wondered had his question been received, it was hard to read him with his face so swaddled in bandage.

‘You’ll want to tell them whether to proceed afoot or turn about,’ Leroux prompted, seeking to end this rocking limbo. Battard inclined his head as the man spoke, as though to strain after a music clear for a moment only on a breath of wind, but did not make an answer.

‘Decide what you will, the men deserve to be employed.’ Leroux jerked his chin towards the idling hands. Their choices he saw as a neatly dividing fork — if they chose to go over the pass, they would need two parties, one to carry Battard over, the other to turn the ship about. He did not suggest the option of remaining afloat and anchored, only trouble lay that way. Should Battard choose to cross the pass, Leroux thought, he would ask to remain behind aboard the ship and captain her. The ship was to him these years past a home — every board and rope of it — and who could ask for a tighter chummery? If Battard gave him leave to sail, they would meet a month or two later in Canton.

‘I wish to reach Canton and at the earliest,’ Battard turned to where he felt a bulk, perceived to be the man’s locale. ‘I will lodge at the mission there — take the woman and the child with me.’

Leroux silently formed a word, which had there been another present and gifted in the reading of lips, might have been

translated for Battard as *foolhardy*. Leroux had doubts about the liaison closeted aboard the ship, but to take the woman abroad in the city! He shifted his weight uneasily.

Battard had made his decision privately a day or so before — had needed prodding to voice it. He craved quiet, the salve of repetition and order now as much as he had once needed adventure. There was a pit made in his heart which required caulking. Without help he feared that what kept him ticking, what plumped him and fed his curiosity, would leak away. Retreat and the embrace of a religious community would restore him — he had stewed on it. The survey was for him effectively over. He would send word to the Museum to receive his cargo, and would follow it when he was mended. But he would not leave the child and the woman behind.

‘Then you must go over the mountain.’ Leroux said and Battard saw himself carried atop his barque, oared by a hundred human hands.

Battard’s party would consist of himself, the child and Hsiao Yen, as well as a Chinese from the crew. They would need a translator, someone trusted and able, but sweet enough of temper to keep the party easy. Battard chose their cook’s help, then no matter how they travelled they would mess happily. He had learned this past year or two to rely on the ingenuity of the Chinese at his stove. Days when they went without game or cabin rations, they still had a service of three or more courses in the gentlemen’s mess. Much as Battard might wish for dabs of butter on a river trout, he owned that daily he dined like some minor mandarin.



It took them a week to make the arrangements, find a guide and porters. They would carry the naturalist, not in his ship as he had fancied but in a palanquin. Hsiao Yen would follow, also carried in a chair; the child could sit with her or walk alongside as he pleased. There was much speeching — this chiefly from Battard. Hands were wrung, he clapped Leroux to him and with that they were put ashore and parted.

Day one, Hsiao Yen told Battard, they followed a waterway through mirrored rice fields. Their road was never wide and dipped and climbed in turns from a valley and through two villages. As they passed through the gates Battard turned his head inside his padded portage, heard on the one hand the drums and bells, on the other what he took to be beasts at market. At last they had the mountain in their ken and the climb began quite steeply.

The mountain stood between two rivers, and would, they were told, take a day to cross, no longer. What Antoine remembered later of their ascent was the steps cut into the rock — he made to count them, but lost the number in his head. He went at them slow and fit his foot to the groove worn into the stone by countless earlier climbers. He went at them fast and took the work behind his knees — still he did not gain on Battard or Hsiao Yen in their portered chairs. He liked this little liberty, fancied himself cut loose from this enterprise — followed the flight of a hawk slow as you like with his eye.

When at last they had the summit and had passed through a stone gate, they had the whole of the Orient spread under them.

‘One foot in Kiang-see,’ Antoine said to no-one as he stood direct beneath the stone arch, ‘the other in Kwangtung. This is the marker?’ he asked Hsiao Yen.

‘What do you see?’ Battard cut in, needing some gauge of their surroundings.

‘People, rocks, trees.’

‘Then I have taught you poorly,’ Battard sighed.

‘Firs,’ the child offered, casting about for some detail he could convey. ‘They are some type of pine.’ Then squinting at a bank of coloured stones he thought that, had Battard been himself, he would have had his hammer out, and he himself might have lobbed a pebble from their lookout had the way not been so populous. He took a quarter turn to get a second view.

‘Some orchard trees gone wild. They might be cherry,’ he added hopefully, anxious to be moving again, to be let off this test. But they were being offered tea and their carriers were taxed and needed a spell. He looked below. The path was serpentine and as steeply plunging as their ascent had been. The way forward would be slow, the carriers feeling for footholds and wary of slides of stones.

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# PART FOUR

O quick quick quick, quick hear the song-sparrow,  
Swamp-sparrow, fox-sparrow, vesper-sparrow  
At dawn and dusk. Follow the dance  
Of the goldfinch at noon. Leave to chance  
The Blackburnian warbler, the shy one, Hail  
With shrill whistle the note of the quail, the bob-white  
Dodging by bay-bush. Follow the feet  
Of the walker, the water thrush. Follow the flight  
Of the dancing arrow, the purple martin. Greet  
In silence the bullbat. All are delectable. Sweet sweet sweet  
But resign this land at the end, resign it  
To its true owner, the tough one, the sea-gull.  
The palaver is finished.

T.S. Eliot, *Cape Ann*

# EYEWATER AND EXERCISE



They were embraced by the mission as though they had been expected. The relief was evident in Battard's whole posture. He had kept himself contained for the weeks past, every feeling trussed lest he break down. Over the months they were to see him return to himself. He crept back into himself by inches, in breaths. It was as a wet cloth takes up a stain.

Battard brought with him his journals and paintings. The child brought his father's pipe pouch, a twist of tobacco still at its base. Hsiao Yen brought the porcelain. They were conveyed from Whampoa to the city of Canton, where they left their party. From there they made their way about the trading quarter, Battard taking his cue from Hsiao Yen, his hand resting on her shoulder. The boy walked before them, halting at every junction, uncertain of which direction they would choose. They made slow progress, Hsiao Yen with the encumbrance of the bowl to carry

and Battard's papers wadded into a bundle on her back. They made their way through the business of noon-day trading, dodging carded noodles set out on poles like bunting, hawkers drumming up notice of their handcart restaurants. Pots perched in stepped pagodas, one feeding the next with steam on braziers chuffed up with slow burning fuels. Smoke stung their eyes, they were assaulted with every incarnation of smell from sewerage to the salt sweets of crab soup. In front of bucket aquariums old men minced about or hooped to eyeball juvenile carp or bug-eyed koi. Everything including a tepid shower of rain seemed to give them delay.

As Hsiao Yen fatigued, Battard's hand seemed a yoke on her neck. Not able to take her stride, she must tow him and wear the pull like a contrivance, a harness which favoured one side. Thus she was made to walk unevenly and tired before they were halfway done. The child skirted in circles of altering circumferences. She was the centre. He necked up alleys and slid home.

In the porch of the mission house they made a motley assemblage and yet they were welcome. A spectacle of privation and uncertainty, the child almost beyond thinness, Hsiao Yen in her French bonnet and ruffled skirts, Battard bandaged and clearly unwell. Yet they were received in trust.

'Jesus embraces every child,' they were told by a brother, his glance including the three of them in this fact. Battard's knees weakened as though a bolt which had held him upright and rigid so far had been withdrawn. The prospect of comfort and attention loosened him, he felt it in his bowels.

‘Thank God for it,’ he said, putting out his hand to be enclosed by this man’s. Where he had been worked into ropy tautness he now felt relief. His trouble had been clasped closely to him; he owned it jealously, forcing his guts into cricks and crimps. For weeks he had strained uselessly on his improvised commode, shame setting his stomach to stone. Battard saw his torso as a gun stock, the lead pellets tightly enclosed. The warmth of this stranger’s hand undid him. He expected a chorus of angels to step up and lift him from this fix. ‘Home,’ he thought privately, ‘we are come home.’ Hsiao Yen saw him tremble, his step falter, and she moved in close to be his prop.

Their burdens were soon taken from them and they were conveyed along dark halls. Their guide, a tall man with hair torched to brightness, which seemed to Hsiao Yen the only lamp in the gloom. She covered her eyes and uncovered them, testing for sun blindness, and still saw before her only that bright knob. Her eyes had no other engagement. She felt conveyed on its beam. Yet, unlike Battard, she felt there was no warmth in him. It was brightness as from a polished surface. He did not turn about or speak their names. They must keep their light for sunset, she supposed. Battard had warned her to expect thrift.

‘They will be all about simplicity,’ he had told her. As this beacon came to their allocated rooms, closets really, he stopped and slid the door across and made his invitation by the raising of a hand. There was no talk, that would come later. Their apartments, it seemed, were not to be adjacent. Hsiao Yen’s heart dropped. It would be their purpose to have them apart; it would fit their mandate. Silently she would protest it.

The child was the first to be let into his place. Three doors they then passed without pause. At a fourth, their guide stopped and Hsiao Yen looked around her room. She heard Battard's shuffle adjust to the big step of their silent friend and then she heard it no more.

It was a joy to have water at hand, to walk boards which did not constantly pitch and slide, to spread arms and legs the length and breadth of their cots. Hsiao Yen lay down on her couch to test its comfort and immediately missed Battard. They had fit themselves about each other for a good span and it would be a wrench to lose it. She enjoyed his mammoth warmth and the composition of arms in their sum. There had always been too much of them for a ship bed, which Battard had said was no more properly than a shelf. But it had taught them a nuptial embrace — Hsiao Yen nested in the scoop of him, she slept by the rhythm of his heart. Containment was proof that they were joined, that nothing would divide them. Yet here they were apart.

Their rooms allowed only the width of a cot and yet to the travellers they seemed abundant. They were swept, the walls distempered, there was a high window, a crucifix pinned to incline its eyebeam, there was linen, a net drape which could be let down to encompass the bed. In this simplicity there was already comfort.

They were called to house prayers and sat before their supper plates that first night in a waking sleep. Battard kneeled and assumed every devout posture. It was a medicine and he craved it. He was eager to begin his cure, to feel a progress to wellness, to recover some of his former certainty. And yet he



reminded himself he was here to unlearn all that, to assume a fresh attitude. He would, he felt sure, mount a whole new branch of taxonomy cemented in biblical reference. He would be at it immediately. He champed over his first devotions. But they ate alone after worship. The brothers were about some business that did not lead them to the hall. Battard's design would have to wait another day.

Battard's program was to make confession and to arrange his marriage. This he felt would be the first and easiest step to absolution. He managed to deposit the sense of his ambition in gobbets, in parcels of seemingly disconnected information about their relationship — the three of them to each other, to the ship they had come off. They sat at table their first morning, coffee steaming in beakers before them, bread broken open on a deep dish; there were preserves shining from stoneware, coddled eggs. Such a spread! Thrift did not extend to food. The brothers had not been denied their culinary respite.

'Bread, Lucien,' Hsiao Yen murmured to Battard, 'and you have so missed it.' There was a peeper, glazed and roasted in an open pan, a bowl of apple johns, a covered basket of rice. Hsiao Yen sat at Battard's side putting his hand to jammed bread, filling his beaker and his plate.

'We have been part of a survey,' Battard began, pausing to chew on a crust and wash it down with good Java. The surface of his coffee registered a tremor conducted through his hand. He set it down. At once his wrists felt weak. He had an overwhelming desire to return to his cot, to turn his back on all this good French food. How he had missed a plain cooked egg, jam sweeteners,

a brew that was not green or flower tea. It required effort to condense what they had lived through to a short summation.

'I have been abroad for coming on four years. We have lost a substantial number to fever. We have buried them,' and here his voice lost volume, 'in a mound. *Bravely and in the service of their country* scratched onto a rude marker, we had no statuary. I have ordered my party to put out to sea again once they are properly provisioned and have signed up fresh hands.'

Sweat pricked over his brow. He felt it moisten his neck under his hair and dampen his collar.

'I have a cargo, you know. The sum of my career sails with it.' The child made crumbs of his bread, made as though he enjoyed the muddy aromatic poured for him. His eyes were on the man sat across from them. He took in his plain dress, the high colour like a rash on his cheeks.

'The boy is to be my son, the girl my wife,' Battard went on. He made a gesture with his arm like the first part of an elaborate bow. It was an inclusion made from a pretty flourish. The brothers read it as parenthesis.

'I will have them with me.' He was firm in this but making less sense now, he felt a tightening under the breastbone, he sucked in breath but could not send it out. Père Menou rose from his chair and came to Battard's side. 'Do not breathe in or out. Stay as you are.' And he thumped Battard with the heel of his hand between the shoulder blades, served him squarely and it did the trick. Something was dislodged in his chest. But it was not a bone splinter he had choked down, nor a crust. It was something like relief. Something which pressed also from behind his eyes.

The blow to the back disposed him to think that it might have been unshed tears, which he had for so long manfully enclosed. The jolt brought water from his closed eyes, moistened their covering. The bandaging was a mercy. He imagined that his interior steamed and bubbled like a cistern fit to rupture. He must contain himself. He must not frighten the child.

The room they sat in gave onto a courtyard. Through the open shutters there was the sound of sweeping, of poultry — wingflaps and alarm as they fought away from the broom. Hsiao Yen could see the brothers and their Chinese attendants. They were converts, Battard had said. They had received grace and paid for enlightenment by working the mission carts which patrolled the markets or by performing domestic labour. They assisted in the hospital gallery, they were housekeepers, cooks, nurses, they beat linens into glassine folds. Faith, she had been told, should be expressed in the humility of detail, in attending to the most unambitious of tasks. Knees which bent on cold stone, a head which followed the loops and pothooks of a polishing cloth realised the catechism. Battard had come to step down from his high enterprise, to learn a less elevated approach. From his exultation at the helm of discoveries, from his panoramic sweep of understanding, she wondered would he be scouring cobbles or fanning leaves from the stoop?

Menou was the mission doctor. He won converts with his practice. When they had arrived almost two years ago he had sat daily in his dispensary uninterrupted, suspicion surrounding them. Since they had put down some cases of trembling fever, administering ampoules of neat quinine, they had become as

celebrated as shamans. But their appeal was seasonal, it waxed and waned, favour as fickle as weather. Today the infirm of the city would approach the mission, claim their tickets, park themselves along the courtyard walls, on chairs ranked in two straight rows, hawking, crying or dumb with rigour, waiting for their linctus or aperient. Tomorrow a shift in the winds of politics would have the antechamber empty. But Menou was a philosophic kind. He had come East less with a burning brand than a sense of usefulness. He had been a modest child, a solid lump of reasonableness as sure of his purpose as a stone. Menou was moulded from strong stuff and knew it. He was enduring. Life leapt up and fell away around him and he remained. He was not easily ignited, was not one of those fools who engorged on evangelism at a Missionary Society evening and leapt aboard the first packet directed at the Orient. He saw The Word as a practice; medicine was simply his theatre.

‘We will have you to our infirmary directly after breakfast,’ Menou said, his hand still on Battard’s shoulder. Lucien could feel its clamp leave the impression of handmarks through the stuff of his sleeve. Yet there was warmth conducted in a radial which reached his heart. There was an uplift, a skip in his pulse which acknowledged this directive. It was begun, this remaking of him. His foot was set on the path.

Menou’s dispensary was a long narrow enclosure netted on one side with fine cloth. It worked both to allow a tolerable circulation of good air and to exclude winged and buzzing visitors which otherwise nightly went to the fire of his lamps. There was a couch and a high table set to accommodate the business of his apothecary. Mortars and crucibles were ranked on shallow shelves

by a copper still. A tablet press hunched by a spirit burner, glass balloons and spouted columns branched like candelabras. These the Chinese knew as his magic instruments. Douches and funnels hid in drawers so as not to agitate. Here was collected all the paraphernalia of modern medicine which, had he been well and able to see, would have excited both comment and discussion from Battard. As it was, his nose was filled with a mixture of powdery silicates, dust, wormwood fumigants and the tensile sweat of spirits leaked from corked jars. It threw up before him a vivid incarnation of Jean Paul's shop. The memory struck at his very fundament, the patina, the protection of distance and time rubbed from him in one inhalation. He was for a snatch as alive to it as though he stood in his brother's doorway. It was as well at that moment that Menou steered Battard to a high-backed chair and put his hand to its upholstery.

He watched as Lucien sat and fronted himself to where he felt Menou might be. His divination relied solely on the projection of a voice or the more subtle rustling of skirts or a footfall. Menou saw that he could easily trick Battard by gliding without sound behind him and speaking to one hemisphere of the man's head, before revolving himself to the opposing side. He has accustomed himself to the disability, Menou noted, he is not relying on the perception of shadow or a current of air passing before him. He did not twist in his chair or startle, rather he moved from the shoulders, turning slowly, rolling along behind the voice.

'I would examine your chest first,' he said, 'if you could open your shirt I might make my soundings and take down the

reading of your heart.' The near fainting at breakfast bore investigation. He would satisfy himself first that Battard's condition was not complicated by the onset some pyrexia. Battard unmade his collar and took apart his shirt front. He had been no more vulnerable on his first time with the woman. The doctor patterned him with percussive taps, pressed thumb prints across his ribs. He required Battard to cough, to stick out his tongue, to tip back his head so that he might feel the intersection of tissue and bone. He took each of Battard's hands in turn, straightening the fingers, forcing blood from under the nails with a testing grip. He has not seen the girl's hand, Battard thought to himself. He would have the lamps devouring their wicks once he discovered it. Menou relaxed his grip and walked back to the table where he unwrapped a cloth of tools.

'Let me treat a small injury while I have you here, put a pin to a spoiling blister.' Battard had driven a splinter through his fingers a dozen times feeling his way about the ship. His first instinct was to withdraw his hand. But the operation was strangely soothing in the absence of seeing what was done. Menou was firm in his touch, quick. Something cold sliced him and at the same time burned and then a plaster bound him tightly and was pulled into a knot.

Next Menou put his ear against his chest and this was an intimacy which was almost beyond consent. Battard's hands tightened on the chair leather. He felt the man's breath come and go through a part-open mouth, felt his two hands stationed for balance near his trouser tops. It was an embrace which he wished over from the moment Menou clapped his great ear against him.

After what seemed to be an insufferable measure Menou stood away and had Battard clothe himself.

‘Your heart is a little irregular,’ he said, ‘but I feel that you are sound, that all your signs will settle themselves. I am not registering fever or detecting any obvious malaise. Your lungs are admirably clear of rattles, you have a reasonable colour over the skin and I would say that you are nourished exceptionally for one who has been so long in a foreign climate. When you are ready I will uncover your eyes.’

While Battard fastened himself, pushed the dress of his shirt into his unbuttoned trousers and fought the colour which nettled his cheeks, Menou wrote down the readings which until now he had cleverly kept in his head. Battard waited. What would be the next assault on his modesty, he wondered. He brushed back a lock of hair, made a bow of his collar and pressed his back to the leather of the chair.

‘You enjoy the chair?’ Menou asked.

‘It is well stuffed and generously deep. To tell the truth after ship living anything which is firm under me is welcome.’

‘I had it made and shipped. Everything made here is in light bamboo.’

When Battard was clothed Menou unwound the gauze from his face and let it fall to the floor like an orange peel, intact, still conformed to the impress of his cheek bones. His skin was mostly healed, there were nicks and divots, pits where the explosives had fused to him and bit down. The new skin was tight and a tone lighter than his true colouring, the scars grubs of white raised into ropes. The lashes and brows were burnt away. Their absence gave

Battard's face a kind of innocence. He seemed as a clay blank awaiting inscription. *No face hair*, Menou wrote into his notes.

'Can you look from side to side under your lids?'

'I can,' Battard told him.

'Do you register the light?' Menou had a lamp up to Battard's face and passed it from one hand to the other lighting up the planes and angles of his features — the sun falling over the shelvings of a cliff.

'I feel warmth on my closed eyes but see darkness. It has the quality of wine jelly or a close-knitted stocking so dense that I cannot see through.'

'And pain? Do you receive discomfort when you move your eyes about?'

'I feel nothing except a certain tightness of the skin, there is a resistance, a pull at the corners of my eyes.' Battard's hand was raised as though to adjust the pressure, as though he could unhook a taut wire.

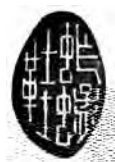
'I want you to walk about with your eyes uncovered,' Menou told him. 'Walk about unshaded, hatless for a period each day — take the air. You will do rounds of the courtyard. Step out before the sun has a sting and then before retiring. I will make an examination of your progress every second day and compose an eye bath, a dilution which will both soothe and lend some elasticity to the skin.' Menou rang a bell which summoned a steward. He made a note to check his supplies of orrice root and white copperas as Battard was led away.

The examination left him testy. Sightlessness rendered him culpable to surprises. He had not enjoyed the way the man's



hands spooned under his eyes, the flat they made of his nose. Hsiao Yen had been the only one to cup his chin, to breathe warmth across the tender drops of his ears. He would suffer the prescription of eyewater and do his walking, he decided, but he would put his faith in prayer.

# A STONE IN THE SHOE



Battard continued his medicine of walking and his visits to Menou's dispensary. He became used to the man, his questions, his oblique touch. He tested his ideas on the doctor, he argued for all points of view and Menou listened.

'It is in the drawings,' he told the doctor and the man looked them over, searched out the clues. 'I have massed as much of one class as I could commandeer. I have every variation. I show, I think fairly conclusively, the infinite expression of design.'

'By that you mean the Almighty's design.'

'The Englishman would have us think otherwise. He would have grown men suppose that animals made themselves — chose their own stripes or spots.'

'Tread carefully,' Menou warned. 'Take care with your thinking that it does not over-inflate itself.'

‘You would disagree with me?’ And for each attempt that Battard made to hook the doctor on his theories, Menou had the same refrain. Do not stray into dangerous waters, do not go beyond your capacities.

Regularly he entreated the doctor for his blessing. I cannot get well without it he told him. But Menou was a master of deflection.

‘You can get well only from the inside,’ he countered. ‘Where you and the woman have gone is outside the law. You are beyond what is enclosed by God’s word. There are hedges and there are gates. I would have you enter through a gate. I speak to you now not as your friend, nor would I doctor you. I speak as your priest. Go slowly.’

‘I acknowledge my weakness but crave absolution. Lead me to a gate only that I go where is salvation. Believe me I do not argue against it.’

But Menou was resolute. Battard would be cured first. The flesh would be instructed not by itself or of itself. Women posed an entrapment — the heart gone temporarily astray. Caution was best exercised. The climate in this part of the world, he had been told, was morality’s chief enemy. He made a mental note to find Hsiao Yen some employment. He would do his best to have them apart.

Meanwhile he would impose a regime. Daily Battard was made to exercise the small muscles of the face. It was suggested that he sit resting his elbows comfortably on a tabletop, his hands spread lightly over his face and in this posture he perform the prescription. He would smile, at first only a little and then in

incremental enlargements until he was, he imagined, leering like an idiot. This was to be repeated twelve times, beginning with what felt like twitches and tics and working up to grimaces. Each morning as he performed this task he was witnessed by an unseen chorus and he confirmed their worst prognosis. Those who sleep with their mouths open leave vents through which any number of things might climb. Once inside they worked the limbs, they wagged the head. There were some in that community who slept with their jaws strapped tight against this eventuality.

Next he was to lengthen his chin without causing his mouth to come open. And so on through all the major and minor pulleys that fed the face and made it the mirror that it was of feeling. In the space of a half hour he was to run through every muscle and be finally moving his missing eyebrows up and down and fluttering his eyelids like a girl at her beaux. But for progress made over the passage of two weeks, where he was at last able to open and close his eyes at will, Battard might have felt that Menou was taking him for a fool. But he was greatly afraid when at last Menou ordered the bandages thrown away and he opened his eyes for the first time on darkness.

‘Are we without candles?’ he asked the doctor.

‘We are not,’ Menou replied, putting his hand over Lucien’s. ‘It is not long past two o’clock and we are in good light.’ It was quite fascinatingly as he had supposed for some time.

‘Hysterical blindness,’ he told Battard. ‘Do not be alarmed. Now that we have your face made well we must comfort your heart.’

But Battard was as chastened as though he had been publicly named a coward.

'You are saying that I have imagined this infirmity, that I would see if only I have the will, the stomach for it?'

'What I am telling you is that you have suffered greatly. You are confused and your mind cannot bear this weight without being taxed to the extreme. I want you to think of the injury itself, the accident that you had with the gun, as a stone which has worked its way into your shoe. It gives immediate discomfort, does it not?'

'It does but it is not so terrible. It can be tolerated, even accommodated.'

'But if the stone were left in place during a long foot march. If you could not stop and turn it from your shoe?'

'It might fester,' Battard agreed. He could see now where Menou was going with this argument.

'It might. We must disgorge the stone remembering that it has been a long time giving pain.'

'And you think this will speed my recovery?'

Menou swung on his chair and tilted himself a view of the ceiling. He had not had so interesting a patient his whole time in China.

'I once read of a patient who could not warm herself no matter how high the fire was built or what kind of heating footbath was applied. It transpired after some investigation that she had been scalded by water from a boiling kettle as a child. This was the seat of her anxiety. The work was to make her less afraid. Once this was done, she regained her natural vigour and warmth.'

'I am to be likened now to a hysterical woman.'

‘You are to be compared to nothing except yourself. But I must caution you to be less severe, less exacting of yourself. Do not be an enemy to your own recovery. You are to see your time here as a respite.’

‘As a rest cure,’ Battard agreed, not without some bitterness. ‘I think I might have been more relieved to be diagnosed with some exotic ailment, something not so readily associated with children and unmarried maids.’

‘Men such as ourselves,’ and here he leaned towards Battard as though he felt that his friend could at some level receive the encouragement of his look, ‘we sometimes forget that the mind is as much subject to weariness as are the legs after a stiff hike. What we must do now is identify the stone.’

Over the following weeks Battard sat unseeing before Menou and discussed his heart. At first falteringly, details chiselled from him by careful questions. When he was asked what something meant to him, how he felt about his circumstance, at first he was unable to say. ‘It is as though I truly do not know,’ he told Menou. ‘I am as closed to myself as a stranger.’ During their talks it was reeled from him. He had an image of himself — a tiny bobbing sac dangled from the doctor’s hand. The thread spewed directly from his mouth as his head turned this way and that, talking and talking and talking on. I am fixing my silk first to this point to anchor it before I turn inwards and enclose myself. Will I be able to bite through this webbing as does the moth when I am done?

Menou was secretly gladdened by the progress of his cure. He mounded and shovelled as he would put earth up to a delicate

plant. At first all he heard from Battard was that he must marry the girl. He thought that perhaps this was the stone that rubbed so. Perhaps there was some confusion here in the man's heart. It was always a possibility. Our own dealings and workings are so often obscured to us. But from Battard's talk he began to see that they were interconnected, the girl and the man, that one was dependent on the other.

'I have never in my life come up against this doubling of souls. It is as though we are formed of the same stuff and yet we are started half a world from each other.'

He heard too Battard's struggle with himself, how he had both wanted and resisted her. How he feared that his sight might have been taken from him for looking on a woman's flesh. 'Perhaps I corrupted my enterprise in rescuing her. Yet I did not actively pursue her. We came together as though it was the only possibility.'

'Ah how subtle is temptation,' Menou sighed. All this uncovered and yet no recovery in sight.

'In the end we will stand before God in union,' Battard told him, he was all prickles on this. 'I know it. It is the one sure thing in me.'

'It is what you have wrought that stands for what you are.' This from Menou. 'By the time you stand at judgement all else has been dissolved by death. You will not be one or many. You will be nothing. Against this will your deeds stand on the scale.' The girl was surely a distraction. Apart, Battard would recover his sensibilities. It was not so uncommon for a man to lose a sense of himself here. The heat, the strangeness worked against the mind.

Meanwhile he took his walking cure, led about the garden by the boy. Confession was a great evacuation. He stepped lighter. It lessened his interior inclination. He slept chaste and deeply.

‘Strange that I sleep on the trigger of darkness as I always have and yet how do I know night being unable to see?’ he once asked Menou.

‘You are all composed of questions. I believe that if I sliced you through, at your very centre there would be a question mark embedded like a printer’s error. All I can suppose, Lucien, is that we are a complex clock, wound over by the seasons as are plants and animals who bed themselves for winter. Did you not tell me in one of our first conversations that you supposed that plants could in some way see the sun?’

‘You doubt me?’ Battard laughed and Menou saw the man’s face most improved by the levity.

Next Menou prescribed bathing. Each day he ordered Lucien be sat in a tin tub and scoured pink with sand. He learned to endure the touch of men, to allow his nakedness before them. He was at this point so foreign to himself, so absolutely outside himself, he did not care. He was shaved by hands which thumbed him over, his chin raised, his nose folded from the blade. He co-operated at a remove, tightening his mouth when told to, put his tongue into his cheek as bid. He did not flinch at cuts. He was still at the point of self-chastisement, believing that he had brought the sickness on in arrogance.

Later he raised with Menou the punishment of pride.



‘Do you suppose that every dandy has been sullied or every great painter who did not glory God has been prevented from their work?’ the doctor argued.

‘But there, I think you have touched on it,’ Battard said. ‘It is all to do with the glory of God. You said once that my work may not have exalted him as was intended. Perhaps I expanded my own kingdom at the expense of his. You see my whole purpose was to bring down another man, to discredit his work.’

‘You misunderstand me. You are imagining that we are speaking of a vengeful God. You are too much concerned with the Old Testament. I would have you meditate on the compassion of the Christ figure. Spend less time with the beads. What we must do is work you to an openness both in your heart and your expression.’

One afternoon he sat with the boy in the garden. Antoine put himself against the shelf the man made of his folded arms and looked up at him. He made an examination of Battard’s neck, the underside of his chin, the part of it he could see that was not in shade. There were nicks and cuts such as were made by being poorly shaved. It must be a painful exercise, he realised, an exercise in trust not fully exerted. Before they had come to the mission Hsiao Yen had performed the intimate services. She had shaved him neatly and close, drawing the lather into a bouquet of descending stems. She made him a false beard of foam and cut it from him in three intersecting slices.

‘You have a fly at your collar,’ he said.

‘Tell me its colour.’ With Battard this was as a reflex.

‘It is large,’ began the child, ‘large but fine. The leg poles jointed more than halfway.’ He had only a little enthusiasm for the task.

‘The wings,’ Battard prompted, ‘tell me the shape of the wings, has it two wings or four? To be a fly most properly it should have just one set. Look carefully, sometimes a half wing is cunningly folded away.’

‘How long must we stay here?’ Antoine asked.

‘Only until we are well and fit to travel. It is not our purpose to be delayed more than the exercise would warrant.’

He could not explain his fear of being abroad, of being in the world. But he sensed on the child the foreignness of this place, not in being a Christian island in a sea of Buddhas, but for its exertions on their trinity. For what would seem a great chunk of the child’s life the ship had been their country, the moving ribbon of landscape their whole world. Battard had been his king, Hsiao Yen moved between mother, angel and object of remorse. This enclosed community of brothers with their bible trading, their hospital and charity worked on the poor, tweezered them apart.

His announcement that he would marry the girl was deflected always into silence. Everything tangible was put past his recovery. But it was a gate at which he constantly faltered not knowing how to angle his approach.

‘Would you like to attend school while we are about Canton?’ he asked. And he asked it fairly as he might have put a question to Jean Paul or to this other important brother, Menou. He did not pose it as a possible convenience, a way of

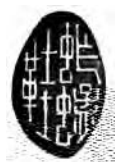
absorbing the child's mooning and resistance. The mission furnished a school for the children of French and American traders and for converted local children whose parents were not alarmed at foreign lettering.

'You would have friends, advancement,' he struck off the benefits on the fingers of his left hand, 'you would be away from this muddle I have made of myself ...' He could not begin to think of a fourth reason.

'I would rather wait on you as I have always done. I am not a baby to be put by now we are beyond the ship.'

And Battard left it so. He would not intrude on the boy's wishes any more than he could manage.

# INSOMNIA



Hsiao Yen kept apart from the Chinese probationers. She felt their dislocation and did not wish to revisit her own. But she felt their eyes on her; a thread followed her through the galleries and across the courtyard. She spread her laundry as she had seen them do on a bamboo pole posted between forked tree branches. But her presence in the garden was a trespass; she felt sure it was an interference. She did not doubt that they wondered less piously than they pretended at her origin. She came across tableaux of silent initiates, their work laid aside, their postures inclined as though frozen in the act of transferring an invisible substance by mouth. Her coming on them seemed to arrest animation, the air charged in her wake as by lightning.

One night when the household was knelt in prayer, she raised her head and met across from her a naked gaze. It was a look which

communicated more than observation, served more than curiosity. Perhaps it was a look which hid a smile. To Hsiao Yen it was an unsolicited intimacy, an invasion. It spoke to something at her element which warned her to take care, to be alert, be on her mettle. She lowered her own eyes, the first to look away, the first to break from the compact. She moved in closer to Battard, put her hand inside his hand. When he stood she rolled back on her heels and stood beside him.

For Yuan-ching the look signified his immense satisfaction at having two halves of a damaged vessel brought about and knit, the jagged pieces resolved in union. He had not been present when the three travellers presented themselves at the mission door. Nor had he been one of the brothers who shared their first meal, having been abroad in the city overseeing the receiving of bibles. Of the Chinese he was deemed the most able. He was the mission's protege, their finest advertisement. His language was good, he slipped the distance between cultures like an oiled cog. Menou sent him with his signature to supervise their commerce, he was their agent, their conduit for sea-tracked and local supplies.

Approaching one morning from the garden, Yuan-ching had slipped past Hsiao Yen in the corridor, his hands in his sleeves, his eyes downturned. He appeared completely resident in his own preoccupations. Only as he stepped back to let her pass did he raise his face to hers. Turning his eyes on her and holding her gaze for a brief moment before moving on. It was some time later, when he saw her guiding hand at Battard's back, that his memory yielded up her identity: the six fingers a starburst.

A year before when the Wei household had folded around him, the servant lay in his room and waited for death. He had not avoided this appointment, had not shied from its eventuality but no fever was visited on him. Cholera has that ability, to knock down eight pins and leave the ninth standing. There is no just cause. Yuan-ching imagined a great rattan paddle brought to bear on a worry of flies. He was missed in that swipe. In time he righted himself and accepted that for some reason not obvious or deserved he was to live. He had risen from his bed and moved through the house along corridors filled with final exhalations, picked his way around blackened corpses. With a cloth pressed across his mouth and nose, he peered into faces, with care he navigated the treacherous outcropping of elbows. Each victim seemed to have jiggled towards death, arms and legs uplifted in spasm. He saw uncovered hands already skeletonised like pond leaves. The rats working where the good of a grave was denied. He saw the messed remains of intimates and did not stop to cover them or press weights over their eyes. Having made the decision to live, he must put his mind to survival. There was any number of useful appliances he could commandeer from the house. It was a matter of choosing wisely, of constructing his reinvention with appropriate cunning.

He had made his way to the chief apartment, and had broken open the window covering. As his plan congealed he stood and watched the storm break over the river and over the bridal caravan. The dish was within his reaching for it, was being conveyed to him as though he had summoned it by will. One perfect porcelain was the summation of ambition, had not

Wei told him this? All else lost its lustre. His mind went to contaminants. He had no intention to survive An Le to be struck down as he hastened away. He took only the black bird in his rattan house.

When Hsiao Yen retired she lay with that face before her eyes. It had a meaning for her, but one she could not guess at. Perhaps it was not the face, she decided, it was more likely the tenor of the communication. Everything was in looks here, in the subcutaneous impulses of blinked out messages. She made herself into one signifier on the mattress and then another. She felt more keenly the excavations of Battard's absence. She recalled the first night of their love, when he had funnelled the entire spectrum into their unity and it had consumed them. Before that moment she could not have confirmed with any satisfaction how it was possible for two bodies to fit together with such precision. Even from her study of the man and woman jars, it seemed unlikely that their parts could collide with such a certainty. She played over every species of their lovemaking but it did not bring on sleep. What other game could she invent to absorb her loneliness? She tried to conjure the faces of their departed shipmates, each luminous countenance overlaid. She returned always to Battard. She spoke under her breath the names of flowers she had learnt, put alongside them his drawings. Erupted stamens, the rayed wheel of a flowerhead which pulled colour to its centre, the dissected labial arum. All was elemental attraction. Flower study was essentially the up close minutiae of sex.

They had bent their heads over peas sprouted in damp linen and Battard had told her that the footings were coaxed by water, the green fuse sprung by the angle of the sun.

‘Do you believe that a plant has sensation?’ he had asked her. ‘Do you believe that this shooting pea is as sensible to my touch as you are?’ He explained the eyeless quest after ground liquors, dissolved mineral foods, how roots could lift a flagstone, how tubers divided around stones. He drew the sun-thickened stems on her open hands, curled his fingers around hers demonstrating the latching tendency of vines. He ran the tips of his fingers first along the fiddleheads and then across her cheek. Before she could answer he had planted a kiss under each eye and put his arms about her. Pollen was the closest earthly approximation of manna, he had told her, the perfect food of love. Why else would the bee copulate with a thousand nodding flower skirts, except to be embraced by sweetness?

All her sleep inducements brought only Battard to mind. Before him the consciousness of her sex lay dormant, fisted like buds. Now not only was he not in her bed, not only was she deprived of his nightly petting and attentions, but throughout the day he was as hard to accompany as vapour. This amputation, this reversal of their pattern left her fretting and alert. So it was that she was fully conscious an hour later when there was a tap at her door.

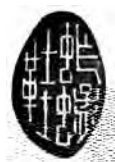
She half sat up and then lay down again. ‘Lucien,’ she whispered. I have called him, she thought, before she owned that he could not have tracked her in the dark.

‘Not Lucien,’ returned her visitor, ‘simply a friend.’



She pulled the linens more tightly about herself. Her heart enlarged uncomfortably. Ship life had made her ever aware of the eyes of men — times they stayed overlong at her breasts, watched as she put food in her mouth. In Battard's company she was protected, their searching eyebeams turned away. This experience put her on alert, her arms across her breast. Without her giving the command, without encouragement the door opened, and in a pod of light shone from a tallow stood Yuan-ching.

# THE PORCELAIN



‘You don’t mind if I keep you company?’ He walked his balloon of light towards her and without invitation set himself down on her bed. She drew up her feet under the linens and quilts. Her posture repulsed his physical closeness.

‘You are of no interest to me,’ he spoke a Chinese similar to her own rather than the mission French, ‘but you have something in your possession that by rights is mine.’ He raised the light, made his examination of her and then of the room. Hsiao Yen followed the path of illumination and then returned her gaze to his face. What could she have that belonged to a stranger?

‘I brought nothing here but the clothes on my back.’

It was too much to hope that she still had the pottery in her possession. But he hoped and, as unreasonable as hope can sometimes be, the thought inhabited him. It doubled and trebled its importance as bread proves until it pushed out all possibilities.

‘Where is the porcelain, the dish that you were bringing to An Le?’ His face had every angle of coldness. It was as though a stone raised itself up, thought Hsiao Yen, and gave voice to granite, to infinite particles adhered by misery. Battard had told her that rocks were made of compressed lightning, of river slurry, sometimes even of marine shells fired to a coral hardness. He battled with geology — told her it was not his subject. There were creases and folds in the world’s fabric, which those who followed Mr Darwin believed were the ages laid down, one atop another as with a filled cake. How would he know of An Le, Hsiao Yen wondered.

‘There is nothing left there,’ he continued, ‘the Wei fortune was mine for the taking but I would have my deserved wages. Wei would have the custody of the porcelain come to one who can appreciate its worth, that was our compact.’ He did not say that his plan was to copy it, not once but a dozen times or more, and sell them as antiquities. He was a master at ageing porcelain.

The story evolved in her mind as he spoke, put on flesh, was coloured to reason. He stood now and bent over her, the lamp thrust under her face so that she was afraid of the hot wax burning her. The trade was that Wei take her as a wife in exchange for the bowl. She could not see that the agreement stood but she did not contest it. How had he found her? It was impossible. Later she would come to think that she had sought him out. It would seem the final giving over of her past.

‘I brought the bowl with me,’ she said abruptly, ‘it seems to belong here.’

‘Where is here?’ He pounced on the information. He was definite. Unwavering. It was the purposefulness, the incorruptible

focus which had ensured his survival thus far. He could hardly contain his feelings of triumph. That he had been in the city the week of her birth, that he had served her contracted husband, survived the cholera which he guessed had spared no other life in An Le but his own — for these things now he could extract a price. The porcelain was his birthright, it would be his emblem. It had been conveyed to him by one who could no more appreciate its aesthetic than could a bird. But this was the way of things, he could see that now. The caterpillar spun silk, the oyster made a pearl out of an injury. It was an unconscious delivery. Possession was a product of knowledge. He had as surely cultivated this right as if papers had been drawn up to ensure it.

‘We shall make a bargain,’ Yuan-ching offered, and without waiting for a nod or show of consent plunged on. ‘I will advise Père Menou to let you marry. You will have your foreigner.’

One piece of porcelain and so many hands stretched towards it. To Hsiao Yen it was the one link with her past life, the fish which had been enclosed in it her father’s joke, a code for Wei’s eyes alone. The joke was surely past its currency. Her coming to Battard was a demarcation. There was no returning to her old life, the porcelain the only vestige carried over this boundary. She had told Battard of her father’s collection, how this piece was worth its sum. Porcelain has the combined robustness and fragility of life, Xi had explained. It has unparalleled substance, form, ornament yet is easily broken apart, as is a man. A man might be laid low by disease and rise again, he might suffer anguish which strikes at the heart and still live. But one arrow well aimed, a draught of poison, a fall from a rearing horse

— all might easily unmake him. Battard was unmoved by the dish. His eyes did not register any increase in illumination in seeing it. Wei had required ownership. This man before her came under the cover of darkness to claim it. Hsiao Yen stood guardian for the figured bowl. In her there was a cautionary alertness yet she would let it go from her without obstacle.

Yuan-ching gnawed at his fingernails. He sat down and stood up. He felt a tightness in the thigh which could not be relieved between close walls. He wanted exercise, action. His bladder filled. Hsiao Yen felt his eyes rest on her hand.

As curd rises out of soured soy, making of itself a delicate crumb, so the pattern of his years became at once discernible. No longer desiccations, unrelated instances, all became united. A logic formed links and hasps. His fate for all its discomforts appeared a foundation for his ambition. Why else would his path intersect with this woman once more? Why else would he have been stationed at these three junctions of her life?

Before he had found a livelihood with Wei, he had worked as an artist in ceramic studios decorating ballast ware. At first he had made paintings of Chinese ladies in European dress, robed ancients, their boats harnessed to tortoises. Pagodas sat in English gardens, robust flowers dwarfed hunted deer. Monkeys hung down from an apple tree. This hybrid manufactory of images paid handsomely. The Europeans and the Americans had a taste for this marriage, this exotica.

Later in Canton he found his true calling and made forgeries. He had before his internal eye an inexhaustible catalogue.

Wei's collection had supplied him with a well of inspiration. Each plate he decorated, each dish he flooded with blue was a mimic of its original. He was, it was soon acknowledged, the master of fakes. Tea sets, dinner services left his hands to grace American tables. Planters all over the south ate Thanksgiving from his forgeries. Each of Wei's treasures lived again. On each he practised his most fundamental gift — his memory. It was an entertainment which paid, a joke which brought him close to those in favour. Finally it was his contact with the traders which led him to extend his reach and thus he found Menou. He repented, he learnt the value of absolution. He was their greatest prize. It made a nice anomaly.

'You will persuade Menou to let us marry?' Her eyes met his in the dark.

'You have my word.'

'The bowl is in the chapel,' Hsiao Yen told him. He was almost felled by her reasonableness. By the direct way she held his eye.

'The chapel,' he repeated. He could not believe that it had been so close at hand. 'Yet I have not seen it.'

'There is no room to accommodate it here and Menou felt it looked well as a font.'

It occurred to her to make a conversation with him. Make a friend of those who would oppose you, her father had told her, they will soften like a lump of fat closed in a warm hand. How can tallow get up and hurt you? She might begin by telling him how they had let the fish free in the river and lost it, plunging

after it, striking into the water, kicking up ropes of spray. Yet her first experience of the river combed from her the burrowings, the infestations of grief. Bathing had become one of her chief joys. They had lain on their backs and absorbed the blue compress of the sky. They had caused strings of brightness to fan in their wake, filled their mouths and spat the water in spouts. The river had taught Hsiao Yen to play, as the wax fish had taught Antoine. And the value of play, she had learned in those months on the river, was its ability to separate one from the world. The burdens of living, which even the child had learned could so press on the mind, were dissolved. But he would not understand, thought Hsiao Yen, as Yuan-ching spun on his heel and the door slid to behind him. He was so far removed from being able to comprehend, there was no point from which she could reach him.

‘Do not ...’ her voice trailed away, absorbed by the darkness left in the wake of his light. Do not what, she wondered, harm her? Take the bowl? Break into the precious repository of memory?

She lay down, curled her fingers over the coverlet. If sleep had eluded her before, she had no purchase on it now.

# FOSSILS IN A BED OF STONE



No progress. For a time Battard began to shun the surgery. He spent his time with Hsiao Yen who unbeknownst to him had confided to Menou: 'There may be no cure for him here. I have accepted that. But I know that he can accustom himself to this hindrance. He is uncommonly strong. Almost perversely so,' she added after a moment's pause.

She had Menou's measure within the first few weeks or so of their residence. He was sure, a straight thinker, he had the satisfaction on him of keen faith. He would sleep well at night on his cot, Hsiao Yen knew. He would say his prayers and bed down not to stir before early devotions. But she did not dislike him for it. He had the manners of an educated country man, he looked at one levelly, he took off his hat and held it across his



chest when they met in the hall or as he strode across the yard. He doctored all who stepped up to the house. His yardstick was a job competently done. She wondered if he possessed the imagination to figure Battard out. She might have helped there, but Menou was a blank. He allowed her to run on, he held his head as though hooked on her every word, he did as much with everyone.

Hsiao Yen had her own program with Battard. She would stir him up, dredge his brain of its morass. She believed he wanted for distraction, some jolt which would charge him with new spirit.

‘Tell me about this Mr Darwin,’ she would bait him, doubling her step, striding ahead to make him work for an audience. So Battard would take his mind from his accident and swing around to that other great topic — the Englishman. Without her arm through his, without this prop, guide, he pushed on bravely, each step one that put him at the brink. She would call him and he would right himself on that sound, put himself to that direction. His mind on these two things: argument and mechanics, it must, thought Hsiao Yen, push out his lethargy.

He was a little more careful, she noticed, than he had been before his accident. He was less sweeping. He has learnt to pull himself in, she thought, he is less acrimonious. Yet he could not resist the chance to argue his personal point of view. His talk was prosy, elevated. It was a brand of lecturing, narrative rather than conversation. Once wound he was set to run on, but she smiled at the effect, his heightened colour, his loosened step.

‘Consider the great rains,’ he began. His hand gestures suggested birds knocked from the air, his finger met his thumb to puppet monster snails sealed up in their shells.

He returned as always to the deluge, the termination of corrupted life. It was a theme she saw with him.

‘*Fossil clues*,’ he insisted, pausing in mid-stride and making a level of one hand, sliding the other across it. ‘They talk endlessly of the land rising up,’ here his fingers made a peak, ‘beds of scallop shell resting atop a mountain. I am impatient with this talk of the earth bucketing about, enclosing forests, swallowing forsaken animal tribes. Are we not told that many did not take passage with the Ark, finding themselves covered by an endless ocean?’

‘This you have told me,’ Hsiao Yen agreed. She was three steps ahead of him and not in the quarter he had moved towards. There was a minute as he shuffled, located her imagined place.

‘Are these not the fossils knocked out of cliffs? Why, my dear, do they not see that it is not the land which has climbed up, but the sea which has drained off. All this time my mind has been as clear as a bell on it, yet now I do not rightly know,’ and here he hesitated. ‘This accident has worn a hole in me and doubt seeps in.’ He pressed his hand to his top coat-button and felt about as though to stop the gap. She could have counted the seconds on her fingers before he righted himself and burst out with, ‘Dammit! I will not have it that beneath solid ground there is a shifting fiery sea.’

She fed him the occasional line, like stoking a fire and watching it brighten. He was mostly, for the passage of their talk,

the old Battard, definite, poised to put down what he termed a temporary insanity.

'Science has these false roads,' he assured her and it seemed was assuring himself at the same time, 'sometimes we must ride down them to discover what in our hearts we already know.'

'You cannot build a house inside a house.'

'This is Chinese wisdom?' he queried her.

'A proverb.'

'Meaning?'

'It has any number of interpretations. I think of it as a warning against self-absorption. A man must go into the world to build a house, useless to raise one within existing walls.'

But this perking him up had its counterpoint.

'Do you think I am getting well?' he would ask her when they were alone, and ask her twice again in one encounter.

'You have a good colour,' she would say for encouragement. He was like a beautiful woman who needed to be told so, who asked daily and was reassured. She comforted herself that this was part of his medicine, that he measured his progress in this way. Privately he trusted no opinion but the boy's.

One day she cut across him with a question of her own.

'We have been here some while,' she began.

'You are anxious to leave,' he interrupted. He imagined she pined for some part of her old life and he was a hindrance. A great millstone was what he had called himself often enough.

'No, it is not that. Since we have settled and begun to know the brothers, I wonder have you spoken with the convert — the one who comes and goes with his wad of tracts? Yuan-ching. But he is given also a foreign name, Paul.'

‘His baptismal name.’ Battard nodded. ‘You forget that I exist in a clamour of voices. From this tangle there are only a few which my ear has as distinct and easily told from the crowd.’

‘Of course, what am I saying? Here I am thinking that you see his skirts disappearing around every corner as I do. He came to my room,’ she added after a delay where she silently debated whether to lay this open.

‘Who came to your room?’ Pricked, he responded as she thought he might, all bristle, every defence on him awake.

‘Paul,’ she struggled with that name, ‘Yuan-ching — the convert.’ It sounded all wrong now. It was not what she intended. ‘He found the bowl.’ She looked round the chapel where they stood suspended in this ridiculous interchange. They stood not a yard from where the bowl had sat. ‘It’s gone. He has taken it.’

‘He did not hurt you?’ he asked at once. The words rushed out of him.

‘No, he did not. He shone his light at me, paced about the room. He was all questions. He had a nervous, watchful air. He promised that he had Menou’s confidence, that he would encourage our union.’

Battard had nowhere to go with this information except perhaps to Menou, and Yuan-ching was well regarded in the community. He worked on the tracts for style and sense, transferring the Word into a score of Chinese fairytales. He was their Trojan Horse, he went where they could not — their purpose inside him.

‘He frightened me.’

‘My God! My dear, my darling, my dearest, I am useless to you, worse than useless, I am an impediment.’ He was all anguish

and she was sorry to have told him. Then as he thought on it, 'We must get it back, it was your dowry. We must confront him with this accusation.'

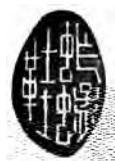
'I do not need a dowry now and there is some freedom in letting it go. I could not be under the same roof with the man and have him always working against me. He believes he has a right to the bowl. I would let him be.'

How could she explain to him the value she put on the piece, that its merit was purely a private thing. It was her portable memory of home; she had carried it. Had he been able to listen, less inflated at the thought of another coming near her she might have told him.

They took another turn about the yard, stepping out of the way of a broody hen scratching in the dust.

'Promise me you will not talk of it to the others,' she cautioned him. 'I could not bear the enquiry.' Already she felt a heat in the tops of her ears.

# THE RECOLLECTION OF FACES



In the next month they learned that the *Nicolaas* was gone under. All souls on her drowned. Battard dreamt that he saw their faces in blue glass, their hair fanned and bright with dissolved gases, their bodies wound about with weed. Their limbs were clothed in these filaments and straps, floats bobbed at their cheeks like ear gems. The holdfast of giant kelp sat on their skulls like a Medusa's helmet. They were an unusual *Phaeophyta*, promising enough to warrant further investigation, he noted in his dream. When he woke he could only chastise himself. How could he be concerned with exotics when his drowned comrades reached out to him, he asked Menou. But always in sleep his sight was restored and he noticed all kinds of items of interest and recorded them. He saw things in a heightened register. He was impossibly alert.

The men would visit nightly, bearing the terrible transfiguration that dreaming makes plausible. In his imagining their eyes were swelled to grotesque plums and were forever on him. Yet he knew the reality was beyond the scope of nightmares. Air squeezed from their lungs by water, the terrible weight of harrowed surf which could powder a man's bones. Some men would have been run through with splinters of the wreckage, harpooned like reef fish. His hoard of skins, his bird leather, his herbarium furnishing the warm currents with a new kingdom of creature — he grieved first for his men and almost equally for the sum of his labours. How could he have sent these men to their deaths, he asked himself. Some of whom had accompanied him on a promise, others no doubt had been impressed, stolen from warm beds or from their cups.

'How can I account for so many souls?' he asked Menou, his hands turned up on his lap like the empty seats of a scale.

'Account for three,' his friend told him, 'the three that you have saved by not going aboard yourself.'

But there was no going around the terrible loss. The loss of comrades, the sum of three years' labour lost on the sea floor. Battard rocked himself in Menou's leather chair, his hands covering his eyes as though to blot out the terrible picture. But all that plagued him was on the inside of his eyes.

'*Leroux! My friend Leroux,*' he said to the doctor, as though this was explanation enough and it was.

This new grief erupted, blazed up and consumed the next few weeks.

‘What do you make of the dreams?’ he asked when he had recovered himself enough to want to press on. By this time his faith in recovering his sight was at a plateau but he trusted in the man, in his ability to tease out of him thistles and nettles and apply the salve.

‘Dreams are a wondrous insight to our private ticking.’ He poured tea from a red and gold pot and set a cup on a low table at Battard’s side. He watched as the man put his hand out to it and grasped air, watched again as he recalculated, batting the space around his object until the cup rattled on its saucer and his hand enclosed it. He did not say that in Battard’s case they were more than valuable, the man seeming to be able to go on from every hurt in his life without being conscious of how it struck at the quick. Menou was surprised that he had come so far without being made into a blubbering fool. It seemed he had never before made his misery public and it was a labour, one that he worked at stoutly but came at unnaturally. It was not easy to set out his troubles in this naked way, nor did he wish to overstate the damage, being afraid that if he did so, the diagnosis would be beyond bearing. Always he had Jean Paul before him as his example. Would it be so unlikely, he asked himself, to be made on the same pattern? He had not mentioned his brother or his episodes. So far Menou had been unable to generate any suggestion of his provenance.

There was much to talk out. Battard could have furnished a life’s investigation. Menou’s case notes filled a ledger and they had not yet moved beyond his most immediate travail. Often



when the day was over and Menou sat alone at his high table grinding out of some dried stuff the vital ingredient for stomach sickness or nervous gas, he would think over Battard's case. Tears. Blindness. Mentally he scrolled an ink line under each word. They would be the key elements in the story, but to figure their link he must make a road into the past.

He began the next morning by asking Battard what he most missed seeing.

'I miss everything. I miss detail, colour,' he answered stoutly, working the topic first in his mind. 'I miss faces. After a time they become dulled in memory. I remember reading that a recollection of beauty preserves it at its perfection. Well, I can tell you with authority that this is not true of faces. Love refreshes itself daily in exchanged glances, in the tenderness transferred in looks.'

Menou saw at once where he was headed.

'Your loved ones are not lost to you,' he counselled.

'A part of them is lost.'

'Not lost to themselves,' argued Menou.

'No, lost to me,' Battard tapped his chest with a finger, 'as my work is lost. My eyes take the world to my mind. What I see becomes food. I chew it over, make comparisons, observations. I am now as useless to my work as a farmer kept out of his field.'

'Your kind of work at this stage of your enterprise surely can be performed as much in the mind.'

'I had hoped so,' Battard began. He was ever conscious of Menou's work, his industry, and yet the man seemed to have a surfeit of time for him. 'At first I had Hsiao Yen and the

child read to me from my journals, describe for me individual specimens. I had them take down observations, conclusions. But without my collection I am not sure that I can go on. The collection serves to put all parts together. Each pinned out beetle amplifies another. A collection exists to be seen. I cannot see!

Did Menou grasp it, he wondered. He began again.

‘It is a tool, a reference. It is not enough that I made drawings. My function in massing skins, bones is that they exist as a whole to be consulted over and again, looked on with fresh eyes, details noticed by others not included in my likenesses. They were to provide a lifetime work. And now I am told that the collection is lost! Gone down with my comrades.’ The thought struck at him again. ‘Oh God, how imperfectly will I remember their faces?’

The question hung between them. Menou wrote and Battard heard the scratching down of details.

‘You have had enough for today?’ he asked, turning in his seat to see Lucien already making to lever himself from the chair. He was leaning forward, his arms braced equally. It was a termination, this posture. The doctor recognised it as a coda, a punctuation.

# HSIAO YEN



Later as he was attending the poisonous cut on an old woman's arm, Menou looked out and saw Battard. Through the net screen he tracked him, watched him clockwork himself across the yard. His gaze shifted and he saw Hsiao Yen calling, putting her hands up to her mouth to make a trumpet. She let Battard reach her on the direction of her voice. She was flexed and alert in her attitude, her cheeks were two blots of colour, she was inclined as though she stood on a bridge and called across water, making of the sound lines which would wind him in. He felt as an intruder on this moment, overhearing their private talk, watching Battard strike out and miss his purpose, go forward again with every anticipation of success. In the presence of the girl he seemed attentive, full of interest. The usual Battard — slow to speak, cautious, sober — where had he gone? This man laughed like a high-strung pony, danced along, putting his hand up to false

walls, imagining obstacles. He had sat in the surgery only this morning, shoulders two weighted slopes, no real appetite for talk, the words wanting to be prodded out. 'But look at him now,' Menou murmured, 'look at the devil now.'

The girl too was a study, protesting Battard's false steps, her voice notched a tone or two to reach across the space. She was in perfect contrast to the way he had seen her move about the compound without Battard. Alone she was all seam turned out, her smooth side no doubt worn against the skin. Yet of the two she was the stronger. Battard had let him have her story in steps, in instalments. She had unwillingly left her home. She was without her dowry and it had been substantial. She had survived cholera. She had made the adjustments and according to Lucien she had made little protest.

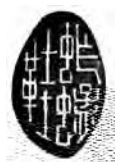
'To your left,' she instructed Battard. Menou watched him correct his path. And it came to him in one thunderous moment, it had the property of a dissonance resolved. He steadied himself, turned away from their game to give the work his attention. He drew off an opiate for his complainant and she sat, her naked arm a punishing blue, smiling her no teeth at him and nodding.

'You have before you, madam,' he said in French, 'a perfect muttonhead.' And his patient agreed, vigorously wagging her head and replying in musical Cantonese, 'I have made four sons, all of them grown men.'

He made the summation privately, inwardly, although had he the required solitude he would have thrown his hands in the air and stepped out in dance. *The girl and the man were equally matched, equally weighted.* This was what the man had tried to

convey. It was as the Chinese described the yin and yang of things. The two of them could not be made into portions. They had come together and closed with the perfect fit of a well-joined box. The Chinese had it that if the two parts were not in true registration, sickness moved in, the body made itself vulnerable to attack. All this time and talk and the remedy was under his nose. Menou laughed to think of his prescribed baths, the face loosening regime. He blushed to think of his wadded notes, the weight of transcript in his own careful hand. His mind went back over the time they had been beneath his roof. He called up every image he had of them together. Together they were conscious, alert. Apart they lost lustre, brightness, the fuse which drives the life force. He had put the man through every sort of mental exercise and achieved what? The girl had worked on him with the simpleness of love. Her company was what was required. What sort of healer was he that he had pulled them apart? They would marry, he decided with relief. He would give his blessing. It was certain. He would have it now no other way.

# SEPARATION



‘I have nothing to offer you,’ he told Hsiao Yen. ‘Properly I should not ask you, I am a poor prospect. It will mean life in a strange country, a child that is not yours, a husband who needs leading around like some youngling creature.’

They sat in a rare avenue of quiet. Where usually there was the crash of dishes in the scullery, the ceaseless sweeping of the courtyard and stone steps, there was a restful pocket. Battard had the feeling that the tranquillity was contrived, that the household held their breath behind the shutters. His sightless acuteness made him overly conscious of watching eyes. For now in their self-consciousness they were as two lumps of stone warming in the sun. There was no liveliness to their conversation. The world did not ignite at the suggestion of their union as Battard had once imagined that it might. But Hsiao Yen smiled and leant across to embrace him. It had come to her at last, this moment as she knew that it should.

‘I have wanted to tell you some news of my own, but did not want to intrude on your recovery. We are to have our own child and so it relieves me to have your protection.’

In the silence which followed she saw the tiny muscles at the corners of his mouth work.

‘How things are turned about by that news,’ he said and then, ‘how is it possible that out of so much torment there is still hope, we are pulled to shreds and yet have enough of ourselves to make a new person?’ And then as the thought came directly into his mind. ‘Is there a difference showing already?’ He clearly remembered Céleste’s stoutness, her overripe appearance. He became at once all concern. All the care, all the tenderness she had shown him he would turn back to her.

‘I have only the first level of discomforts, nausea, hands and cheeks that feel like coals. By my reckoning I am just three months advanced.’

‘Thank God. Thank God,’ was all that Battard could say and tears sprang onto both cheeks and were not brushed away.

Once Battard had begun with a few tears he could not stop weeping. All his terrors, all his grief joined to one torrent and washed down his face. The next few days he was not seen except in this state of constant mourning. He spoke to Menou for the first time of his coming away from Paris, how he had been implicated in the ruination of a young student.

He told how his brother had embraced this creature, how he found himself exterior, put out of sight. Menou’s notebooks bulged on this incident. He recorded that Battard was at breaking point as he spoke of his brother, that it smarted him still.

‘We are not so alike as to be confused,’ he told Menou, ‘and yet we have a common marrow. When I speak with him my words are channelled immediately to understanding. I do not have to search about to illustrate my point of view, it is his also. There is no-one I would sooner declare myself to. Our abilities diverge but I warrant that they are merely expressions of what is at the quick. One concerto yet voiced for different instruments.’

*Separation narrows him.* Menou wrote this on a slip and carried it with him the length of a day. Separation. Put out of sight. He said the words over as he attended to chores. A word puzzle was a pleasure to him, he worked it as the jaw works meat. Loss of sight. Sight put out. How literal was the mind, this fact never ceased to amaze him. The explosion of the gun was only a metaphor for termination, for the putting out of sight that which had injured him. The child had not brought down a bird as a gift for the man, he had brought down Battard’s very idea of himself. The loss of his ship, of his men, the cargo could have been made up to him in love. It was all in removal. If only he had realised it sooner, they could have accommodated the man, the woman and the child in one dormitory, let them have their own apartment.

Battard’s sight returned to him in flashes. For a minute or more light would seep into his consciousness, shapes make of themselves objects and then all would be a blank. Darkness. He was both overjoyed and vexed. He stumbled about testing his memory of things and then was beaten about the head with detail. How busy the world was, he had not remembered it so. He would learn to refocus his eyes, Menou told him. He would learn



again to direct his gaze to one thing. Think of it as your ability to sit reading in a room where others are in conversation. You are not deaf but are able to filter background from what is your interest. So it is with the eye.

At first he saw in two enlargements of space. It was as though he made hollow fists and put them to his eyes. His horizon was not continuous, the two spots not joined. It was as though he looked from a dark room into a well-lit one. Every object he fixed on had a palpable glow, an aura. Privately he found this ability charming. Busy one morning in the courtyard with his face exercise, his eyes lit on Hsiao Yen. She stood beneath the tallow tree and was working to post some linen along a pole.

‘Oh!’ Battard said aloud. ‘Oh, oh,’ his hand pressed hard against his heart. To him Hsiao Yen appeared to jump and flare as seen through a flame. He turned and felt behind him for a place to sit, then looked again. It was true, her image flared and danced lights before his eyes.

‘My God!’ he said to no-one. ‘Finally, I have seen an angel.’

‘You appear as the luminous wood I once told you of,’ he said to her later. ‘A shining thing, an object which gives off light ...’

‘I am your candle fungus,’ she laughed at him.

To begin with he had no peripheral sense and walked into objects which assaulted his knees or dug their way into his ribs. He was blue with bruises. But there was no dulling of his enthusiasm. He had returned not just from sightlessness but from a dark corner of himself. He coached himself to remember the precise positioning of chairs, of low tables. He awoke and put his eyes to the test each day.

He would be seeing his own child! This buoyed him. It contained him and helped him wait out the periods when all was a blank.

‘Consider this,’ he told Menou, ‘of all the people I have not known and will probably never know, you are my favourite. You have looked at all my unseemliness and not recoiled. You have put right all that is broken in me. You have listened and soaked up all that was spewed out. You have been as good as a new rag.’

In Battard’s mind he was already away from this place. His injured self renewed, it left him ready for activity, engagement. In his heart his foot already struck the road.

‘And yet you do not know me?’ Menou asked.

‘The traffic has been one-way. The talk has been mine. Selfishly I have talked only of myself.’

‘You were ill. You had suffered some sort of nervous exhaustion. It is my place as a doctor to listen but I thought we might have formed some sort of attachment through our proximity.’

‘It is to do with us not beginning with a look,’ Battard countered. ‘Our first exchange was not made with the eyes. This has hampered me. Do not be offended if I tell you that I formed a picture of you in my mind with which you do not correspond. And so I begin with you again. The person I constructed for you I must let go.’

Menou was amused by this. ‘Tell me,’ he said, ‘how I should look?’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ Battard mused. He wanted to say that the man should be older, that his voice had a pleasant greenness,

that it was a high sounding voice for a man so deep in the chest. And the hair! He had not guessed at the hair.

How is the optic so influenced by feeling! Menou wrote in his book. Battard watched him pen it. The doctor's whole appearance was a revelation. He had not expected him to be so tall or as young as himself. They stood level, both of them made in a large frame. Menou was fair with a burnished top of hair. He burnt in the sun as red-headed people often do and was most often seen in a hat. The hat was not much in the crown but had a cartwheel of a brim. It was now beside him on the table as he worked.

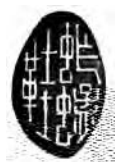
'My good friend,' Battard began, 'how can I ever repay you?'

'Your recovery satisfies my fee. To see you walk about unaided, to see a smile across that great knob of yours — it is satisfaction enough.'

He came over to where Battard sat and wrung his hand. 'It plagues me that it took me so long to supply the key.'

'The stone. This was the stone you spoke of — who could have told it was in my shoe from the start?'

# ONE SOUL



There was delay as the brothers readied Hsiao Yen for her conversion. A Christian must marry a Christian, they told her, a Catholic would wed a Catholic or put the souls of their issue at risk.

‘You will be baptised,’ they told her and seemed to put great store by this. She was to understand the distance between Purgatory and Limbo; also the flaming dormitories of hell; mortification; the sacrament; the nine choirs; the stepped radials of heavenly personnel. There was much to attend to, so great was her lack.

‘Lucien has already given me the first stories, the origin of knowledge, the expulsion from paradise. Your demons are not so different from mine,’ she observed, ‘yet the creator I find more mysterious. It is hard for me to think on a God who is so little described in his features, except to be like a man.’

‘It is not for God to be like a man,’ she was corrected, ‘man is a faint copy of him.’ The brother they called Royale, for his big head and his ponderous way of talking, put her right where she lost the thread. They spent the best part of each morning, before the heat sapped their enterprise, reading, talking, learning verses. The next day was a pattern of the first but she would be drilled. She would recall yesterday’s lesson in its entirety.

‘Do you feel you need a God?’ she had once asked Royale. She looked at him, attentive, eager, and he matched his hands, palm to palm, locked his thumbs as if to say a prayer. It was a most earnest gesture. She was to learn he made it before any heartfelt declaration.

‘In this country I have never needed Him more.’

Later she started with it again.

‘Why did the Almighty not know that the viper would win over the woman?’ she asked. ‘Although I think it more likely that a man be seduced by the promise of revelation. Men are so much more driven on their want to inflate what they know. Women invent to serve their own work, not themselves. Is not a man also more likely to accept a gift of food? His stomach rules, would you not agree?’

She spoke, she suddenly realised, into a thundering silence. She had been used to this exchange of ideas with Battard, the companionship of free talk. ‘I will give my attention fully to the lessons,’ she conceded, and then as if to work her way back she suggested, ‘I am much interested in Eve.’

She was tutored with the child at her side, he was her prop, she told him, her stay. Where in the past he felt his place

by her trespassed upon, here he received her notice daily in smiles. The two of them rose early, they aimed to outstrip the heat. Antoine appeared to quit sleep without any hardship. He was ready, his hair slick from the comb, his hands washed, beaming. She was less pleased to greet the light, holding to sleep as to a refuge. They met by the scullery, that was their program. They set out silverware, hauled crockery. By six the table boasted butter cooled in a water crock, eggs, six loaves like miniature hills. The kettle shook and blew steam. Antoine brought in a dripping jug. Then they had half an hour before the men came in. Prayers said in one company assembled on their knees, breakfast and the din of spoon on basin or pot, water heated again and dishes mopped — it was eight o'clock before the first lesson began.

‘We are not equal in this,’ she told Antoine, ‘you are my superior, it is from you that I would learn.’ Her hand passed over her eyes. An image of the sun clouded came to mind. ‘You must help me,’ she whispered.

‘Keep your finger in the page and repeat every word they say,’ he prompted her. She adhered to what was put out and tried not to vex the brothers with questions. But she would know, she would understand it. They were more used to a learning done by rote, chapters and verses had by heart. Her language was good enough that she unpicked the sense.

Royale gave her a list of saints.

‘Choose a name that you could wear as your given one,’ he said. And she was surprised that it would be so easy to lose herself, or what she had once called herself.

'I am Hsiao Yen — Little Swallow.' Could he not know it?

'There is no such name in French, nor in the Holy Calendar. There is no approximation,' he walked a half circle behind her, 'it cannot be translated.'

'Petite Hirondelle! It is what Lucien has named me.'

'You will not be called for a bird. You will be Madame Battard,' he told her, 'but you will have a name that your husband can use also. He will not always call you Madame except in company.'

He put the paper on the table before her. Her eyes moved down the list. Who were all these women consumed in flames? Some were virgins, celibate mothers of the Church, all were martyrs. Some burned for their steadfastness, some were taken while they protected their flocks. There was one whose neck repulsed the sword. She was startled by the violence of it. He is a fractious God that he would allow such tests, she owned silently, having the sense all at once not to speak what she thought aloud. The brothers, it seemed, were not as Battard was to her. She could not debate and turn up words for their meaning. What was read to her was not a probability, to these men she saw it was so, without the basis of query. From all of the names she chose Mary.

'Mary,' she said aloud and imagined being Mary to Lucien.

To the catechism she put her mind as she would put her mind to any puzzle. Question and answer. Yet they were not her questions.

'Is it not enough to know, do I need to believe as well?' she wanted to ask. To the parables she was every part of her an ear, loving the logic of stories, the lesson as neatly incorporated as

nutmeat pricked from a shell. She wondered at the string of families from which it all came down. They heaped words at her and it seemed that she was able, would learn fast. But her instinct was to try it on her horns, to butt it against this and wear it up against that. She understood evil but not sin. Love she knew but not grace. Faith she began to see was possible. A good part of life, Battard had once told her, exists beyond the range of the eye.

‘Think of it as the child’s box of worms,’ Royale had said. Antoine had picked a fine mess of caterpillars. They looped their tiny selves along leaf stalks showing no fear except for obstacles. They leant out into space stepping on air. They ate tidily in rounds, preferring a blunt edge. They made neat evacuations, resinous and hard — daily the specks increased in size. Antoine relayed every gesture, every behaviour to Battard. Their pale skin showed ink fluids shot about their stems. They fattened hourly. Flesh strained against its seams. They made their moults against the box sides, wanting for some abrasion, some purchase as they stepped from their skin. Finally they worked a thread into a closed purse and slept within. The child waited, lifted and shook each case. She waited, the men waited, drawn to look into the tray as they passed. Dead leaves littered the bottom; they gathered them up. Antoine put the box on a sunny shelf and began with other games. A week passed and some days more, then one by one they struggled from the chrysalis, jawed their way through it into day.

‘So pretty, so pretty,’ Antoine said delighted, a green wing settled on his fingertip.



‘Think of the sinner as the worm,’ Royale made his argument. ‘Faith alone makes us into butterflies.’

She worked to submerge the question, to ignore the inconsistency. They were patient, these Frenchmen, they would not turn her away.

There was a delay when they found Yuan-ching hanged in the brothers’ dormitory. Before they went looking he was missed not from one set of prayers but two. There was all the noise of business when he was found, the paddling of fowl in their dust bath, the clink of china, the hum of conversation which perked and drew down. There was the sound of bare feet running across stone, a handturned mill working grain. All these sounds were swallowed in that moment of discovery — in hearing the news, in having it spoken.

From the annexe laughter rose and fell and then ceased with the abruptness of a bow lifted from a string. There is a dullness which accompanies death, which sets heavy on the lungs. There is a density which thickens the air. Breaths taken through the mouth are shallow and lift the shoulders. It is perhaps a preparation for weeping, a rehearsal. But no tears were shed for Yuan-ching. Instead they walked with a stiffness. They stood as a company without speaking, fixing their minds on what had been the man. Brows knit as they strained after evidence of his unhappiness, of unusual hand gestures, of looks gone unmet. And then there was the abruptness, the squareness with which life was levelled. All was reduced to a spade’s depth, to a cutting in of earth. It was simple. All was made equal in the end.

The brothers went to him, touching both their hearts and heads and raising a hand in a half salute. Pushing death back, Hsiao Yen thought, beating the boundaries like dogs working a wall. The whole household was funnelled to that one point outside his room as though called to witness. Death is like that, without witness it defies belief.

Yuan-ching had climbed the rattan shelvings of his night bureau, put his head through the rope as through the neck of a dress and swung. Death had come on him with the violence of deep sleep. He was thrust under.

'How many steps have I made in a lifetime?' he wondered as his eyes pressed from his skull. It was his final question. He was cut down from the knot which had choked him and laid out with tenderness.

A black bird stepped along his roost and sideways eyed the men. He put up his head and called.

'He spoke!' Royale said with astonishment. It was as though the corpse had said one last thing in a fluting voice, as might be expected from a soul ascending.

'Yuang-ching's bird.' Menou went to the cage, lifted it down and offered it to Antoine. 'He has been teaching it the rosary.'

'A grackle,' said Battard in half-voice, 'a wattled mynah.'

The brothers prayed that a soul which they had fished from the wasteland would not be cast out. It was a blow to the community. It was a deed they puzzled over, not having in themselves a measuring stick for this incarnation of greed. Even the recovery

of a paper in his sleeve, which put the dish as a forgery, enlightened only the most worldly.

'My father kept his dish,' Hsiao Yen told Battard in private. 'He could have put me at risk with such a deception.' She coloured up.

'He might have needed an insurance,' Battard offered. 'Needed to be sure that you were accommodated and treated well before he gave the true bowl up.'

Hsiao Yen nodded, piecing it together as he spoke. 'Imagine how vexed Wei would have been to receive a forgery. How my father made him want that bowl. I am not even pleased to have it returned to us, it having cost a man his life.'

'He was a poor convert if he has done this to himself.' This from Royale to Menou. 'It is not for us to choose the moment of our coming or going.'

'We may have been less to him than we should,' Menou scratched his head, working his tuft of hair to a crest and then smoothing it. 'We are wanting that we did not see it sooner, that we did not counsel him.'

So they were careful with each other for a while, voices were kept low, passions were cooled. They felt an unseasonable dampness. From then on they did not pass that point in the house without the mental flexing of a knee, without a feeling of diminution.

Yuan-ching was buried after some argument within their compound. He could not lie inside the gates of the Christian cemetery and was not wanted for a Chinese tomb. He was given

to the part of the garden which grew to a tangle, the ground overly marshy and well shaded. Hsiao Yen asked that a lotus nut be set inside his mouth. So that, she explained later, if his plot were ever to flood he would send up a bloom.

‘But in his mouth?’ Menou queried her. That way, he would appear to be praising God in a manner he had not been able to in life. Menou was struck, not for the first time as she made this explanation, by her method. Her mind worked on the appearance of a thing. If Yuan-ching sprouted a lotus from between his lips, he appeared to utter a perfume of praises, no matter that it was all stagecraft. Menou closed his eyes and pictured it both literal and allegorical. It was as Hsiao Yen explained the Chinese characters to him — every idea a pictogram.

They sang over him, versed him. They stood over the dug grave, each of them alone with their thoughts. Battard’s turned to his men, put toe to shoulder under the ground. In this humid climate they would now be less than a pile of bones. There were days when it weighed on him — all this death. How many spirits could he claim to have freed in pursuit of higher things? He had drawings and stuffed notebooks bursting their bindings on facts, and at what cost? He drew Antoine to him, with one arm he made a living hedge. It said, you belong with the living. It was as a man stands on the shore to watch a boat put out and walks the boundary between home ground and sea.

‘Yuan-ching,’ Royale said, ‘was a clever man.’ He was dressed dark for this moment and felt the colour in a good part of himself. There was nothing cheer about a funeral where the soul could not be commended to heaven with certainty. And they had

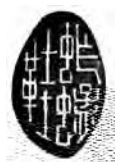
come close enough with Yuan-ching, feeling that every heathen sensibility garnered was a thornless rose. He blinked back emotion. His thumbs printed sweat onto the leafed tissue of his hymnal. His voice produced from a tenor register; he was most usually a bass. He moved spit around his mouth, cleared his throat and started over.

‘Yuan-ching was a clever man. He worked with every intuition at his disposal. He came to us like new cut wood and we fashioned from it a Christian. We pray now that he climb the steps of heaven and summit the peak. We pray that the door be open and that chariots not pass without taking him aboard. If there is one chance left to a soul ascending, let it be to express remorse for this violence done to itself and to the Word. God forgive him for what he has done.’

Each in the circle sent a clod down, unclosed their fists and sent a final knock on Yuan-ching’s door.

‘One soul flies out,’ Battard said with his arm about his bride, ‘as another settles in.’

# LILY



In the months after, Hsiao Yen ate prodigiously. She craved and dug earth secretly from flowerpots, shovelled it in, threw it up a minute later. She hid her dark and broken nails, slept early, woke late, sewed small items.

‘I am the sinner about to put out wings,’ she told Battard. He saw that she was at ease now in the mission life. She embraced the possibility of faith, although Royale had reported that she went at it with her mind rather than her heart.

‘You are an angel.’

‘I am happy,’ she said smiling.

It dawned on him that he was happy too. ‘Petite Hironde.’ It had been months since he used this diminutive.

They made their promises in the chapel before the community.

They gathered, late morning, under the spread of a garden tree — their whole party, Menou presiding at the tabletop — and sat down to a splendid lunch. They had brought chairs and a cloth and a few bottles of wine. A carpet was spread on the ground. Cut glass threw off shims. There were dainty cakes the size of teacups, almondine, glazed duck served on canapés. They made a cheerful group, reaching for sherried chicken, for paté pressed into stone pots. A pastry baked on a fitted mould was turned out to cheers and passed the length of the table. A dressed pineapple got from who knows where stood proud on a silver plate. Antoine jogged about the table begging sips of wine. Battard favoured the poultry pie. There were at least a dozen chickens used in all and more of eggs — one dish alone called for nineteen yolks. Later they would notice the gap. The courtyard could be swept once a day and kept clear of scratchings. Struggling herbs were let be, yet privately each in his own way missed the strut about of hens.

Presents had been laid out after breakfast — a peony dinner service, red details with gilding; a cradle on a rocking base, this from Menou; gold finger rings. For Battard, good paper bound in kid. He took it in both hands, opened it on marbled endpapers and an inscription which read, *For the Glory of God* and beneath it in a tighter hand *and in the Service of Science*, another offering from the doctor. Battard's finger underlined the words.

'I am humbled,' he got out, unable to lift his gaze. His hands trembled a little, for the weight he told himself. For a moment he saw the pages stiff with painted birds, their annotations neatly made. He had an image of himself publishing a second China account, then halted. There I am falling victim

to pride again. He forestalled the image before it grew ahead of him.

'You are as family to me,' he enclosed them in one misty glance. 'Had I the ability to choose my flesh and blood it should be found here. And I am today spoused,' he grinned at Hsiao Yen. 'I have a son,' he made it a gift the way he put out the words and looked to Antoine. The child was putting on size as fast as a rabbit. He is all knobs and angles, Battard thought to himself. He might soon outstrip me.

'I have received such love here yet I am wholly unworthy,' he went on, and so began a long speech which touched on empires, Gods and the République Française, the merits of hard work, the reward of sacrifice. It occurred to him as he spoke the words that these men knew more of sacrifice than him. 'We are all at work for such an enterprise ...' he faltered.

'A-men to that,' Menou cut in raising his glass.

For Hsiao Yen, a tasselled hat. She wore it with a blue cape trimmed with fox. Battard was delighted. The child looked up at her, shy of her fine trimmings. She smelled of roses. Later he stuck a finger through a curl. She wore her hair dressed for the French fashion — divided in equal hanks and put up, curls hanging in bunches by her cheek. Lucien had a tailor fit him for a fresh suit, the child had a fist of flowers and let Battard tick off the Latin names. On hearing the vows Antoine had an image in his mind of two great hands brought together and himself neatly held within. He felt the relief of a thing concluded, a thing mended. He had been caught up and dashed down and caught up again. This time, he knew he would not let go. Menou joined



them, 'Mary and Lucien'. He blessed them, made a pretty wedding speech. He looked on them as he might some creation of his own, their union an achievement. He wrote a final note, as much to himself as on Battard. *Sometimes the route rejects haste for its own purpose.* I am putting out my own proverbs, he thought as he scratched it down.

While Battard worked at his bird list, Hsiao Yen learned to pull on the teats of a goat. The milk surprised her for its smell and colour. She marvelled at its flow as from a water butt, for the way it ran along the backs of her hands and inside her sleeve. Menou prescribed a cup for each day of her confinement. He watched her put the beaker to her mouth and tip it in. He laughed as she pushed it to every corner of her mouth. She directed her eyes at the ceiling, wrinkled her nose a little, her cheeks stood out in turn. She might have had a plum in there. It did not, she told him later, sit well on the tongue.

'You are building another and you want him beefy strong.'

'I am building him in quarts of milk?' She did not believe him. It brought to mind a baby formed in the shape of a milk jug.

'Nourishment is of the first order. You will get the taste for it. You should drink a little milk, so that later you can make it.' Hsiao Yen thought on this. Where then did the nanny goat get her supply?

Through winter she learned to pray for the sick, the fallen and the unbaptised. She prayed for the multitudes, those nameless, faceless ranks, and it gave her a glow. She prayed for an easy birth and had one. She prayed for a son and delivered a girl.

‘Lily,’ Lucien said when he first held her. ‘Lily, Lily, my lovely Lily. It has a dance step to it. Your sister,’ he solemnly told Antoine by way of introducing them. For that moment he was reconciled even to the loss of his work. He put ambition by and was easier for it.

‘Let Mr Darwin trot about with his bag of beaks and bones.’

What he called the *English Trickery* still irked him but he gave it less space in his deliberations. He had the sense of a journey jogged to a comfortable close. He had the thankfulness for an affliction ended, for the new registration with which he saw the world. He found himself altered and did not dislike the result. He had come away with only a portion of his earlier self, but he thought the best part. He was loved. That was at the nub of it, loved and in the bosom of good company.

# A LETTER



Some six months later Hsiao Yen's life began to conform to some predictable pattern. She rose to the baby; was first down to set tinder in the stove. There were prayers, breakfast, light household duties. She dipped candles, made flour paste for bookbinding — the Chinese bibles came to them unbound. In the few moments she had to call her own and with the ardour of the recently converted she drilled the bird on his rosary.

'He is not unlike a bird my father had,' she told Battard. The bird sidestepped along its bamboo rail and looked down at her. 'Yet he was not as clever as ours.' This bird had hymns and psalms and spoke them prettily.

'You see whole flocks of these glossy starlings in the Indias,' Battard stared at the bird and back into his months at sea. 'It is said that no bird so truly captures the human note. Should we not also teach him some Balzac to round out his education? You

have taught the bird to talk but he has nothing of interest to say. We should get some entertainment from the novelty.'

Hsiao Yen could not tell by his tone if he mocked her.

As the days went on they gave the bird a sort of liberty, opened the sliding panels of his wicker accommodation and he appeared at them as at a window. Later he became hand-tame, would come to a whistle; but for nights they left the door to his wicker open. Menou gave the bird into the boy's charge but from the company he chose Hsiao Yen, sat on her shoulder when he could or flew to her hand to be fascinated by her ring, fussed loudly when she would not let him. It was a hindrance, she told Battard, to be folding linen, to be pulling a comb through her hair with a bird clamped to her wrist. When she scolded him he gave her every courtesy, dipped and bobbed, flew to his house and looked contrite. But the size of a bird's brain is equal to a cherry pit and whatever trouble he had recently been in was soon forgotten.

'We are recalled home,' Menou said to Hsiao Yen one day. She had come to the surgery to tell him some small news of her own, the baby on her shoulder. He held up a letter. The gesture was, she thought, a demonstration of witness. He wanted acknowledgement, the recognition of a slight. Word had come from Paris for Menou in the form of a wingless bird. The news had existed all this time, he thought to himself, had crossed oceans, weathered blast and billows. And all those days since the pen had scratched it to paper, he had not known. It was only the act of having torn the letter open and moved his eyes across the page, he owned to himself, that had brought disappointment. That was

how news travelled. A man might die at his post in the Orient and be held to be still alive by his relatives for five months or more, depending on how a letter travelled. Sometimes letters came in wads, written weeks apart, so that the telltale of home must be absorbed in lumpish portions. Months telescoped to a feverish open-mouthed hour, as the eyes followed spiderish hands, skipped lines, passed over blots and reread the sum from open to close. He held the letter at some distance to himself, waved her to pull up a chair, slumped back in one himself.

‘Do you know ...’ she began and then halted. ‘You say we, that *we* are recalled home?’ She had grown accustomed to the mission life, dividing her time between Lily and Battard. Menou had told her once that he may at any time be called away from his post. *I will go where my medical bag is needed. God calls and in my humble capacity I attend.* Hsiao Yen understood from him that the Roman Church had embassies at almost every reach of the earth.

‘My work is entirely an expression of faith,’ he had said. Hsiao Yen thought she had once heard the same from Battard.

‘I say we and mean the whole company,’ Menou lifted the letter again and with it detailed the compound, its every inhabitant. ‘Every stick of furniture must go.’

‘Your work is concluded?’ She had come to believe that sermoning the heathen was more than a lifetime’s occupation.

‘Never. We work as at a field of thistles. For every one cut down another hundred spring up under us.’

‘So why?’

‘I no longer ask such things.’ For a moment they sat in silence, Menou rubbing the cane weaving in the chair sides.

‘When?’ she asked dully.

‘Soon. Sooner than I would want. We are given a month to resolve all business and take passage on a packet this spring.’

‘Can you not write and tell them of your great progress?’

‘The school? My practice?’ Menou gave a laugh which ended as a groan.

‘They do you proud.’

‘This country is new timber, these are merely chocks hammered into the first cut. At home they count only a handful of initiates and one of them dead while in my protection! I have no case to argue.’

‘You are not thought of fondly?’ She did not wait for his confirmation. ‘Then they hardly know you. I have it in mind to write a letter of my own.’

‘Rome does not readily give ear — unless I claim the whole country turned Catholic and I will not jaundice preferment by putting up a case for it. Here, hand me the child,’ he said, reaching across to take her as the babe began to fuss. Hsiao Yen passed the child and watched him dance the baby on his knee. He crooned in a high-sounding voice, hid his face behind his hand then peeked over leering, and soon had the baby laughing. She bobbed and batted at him with her plump hands, her cheeks spots of high colour, her eyes round as a trout’s. As she watched them play, the baby all attention, the man lost from his troubles as he cooed and crowed, a sickening thought formed in her mind. It occurred to her that they might not be included in the mission’s census.

‘I should find Lucien,’ she said, rising at once, her hands at her apron pretending to pluck at a spot.

'He knows. I have this minute come from him. He agrees that the four of you should sail with us.' Catching her eye he reined himself. He had perhaps presumed with this spouting forth of news. He had gone at it headlong yet it was no use retreating, nor could the words be gulped back.

'But I have upset you,' he saw that her eyes had filled. 'You came to me for some advice and I have spent the time talking.'

'It was nothing,' Hsiao Yen began. She held back feeling foolish but was encouraged by his eyes, 'Except that the bird can quote the Pilgrim's Hymn line for line. I thought you would find it a wonder.'

'In French?'

'Yes he speaks it remarkably. Antoine calls him Petit Napoléon. He looks so smartly turned out in his black and yellow uniform.'

'So at least we have made one convert. Perhaps we should put that in our letter to Rome.' Then seeing that her hand was still on the door knob, he motioned her to go. 'We are all right here. Go to your husband, child, you will have things to talk over. The baby is safe with me.'

That month Menou no longer hung out his shingle and treated only cases where the patient refused to be turned away. Slowly the house was disassembled. Pictures were unhooked from the paste walls, books stood in piles on every surface. Menou packed his probes and funnels, his glass balloons and spouts in straw. He turned from reaching into a cabinet one day and looked down at Hsiao Yen. She had not protested her removal, at least not to him.

‘You will miss your own country?’ He meant it kindly, conversationally, yet she felt it an inquiry after symptoms. I am not your patient, she wanted to say as she looked up at him where he perched on the third elevation of a stepstool.

‘Tea?’

She had brought him some, was the only one to think he might be choking on dust and cupboard grime. Some gnawing grubs had penetrated the far reaches of the cabinetry, made tiny pyramids of sawdust as they jawed their tunnels through. His eyes were bleary from it. He was as grubby as a boy, she thought, almost comic. His sleeve showed spiders’ web, his hair wore a feathering of dust. She had heard it said amongst the brothers that Menou’s fiery crop was his vanity, that in Paris he had weekly paid for an expensive treatment. It was true that before the day’s most urgent ablutions, he stood before a looking glass, fogging its surface with his close breathing. Baldness was in his family, not just an inherited possibility but a promise. Daily he gazed at this double register, tilting his head about, a hand patting at his crown. In the Orient he discovered a wealth of restorative remedies. He learned, however, that one did not inquire after the ingredients. It did not do to dissect the constituent parts of a mass which, when broken open, looked to contain fur still adhering to hide, testicular bulbs, which one could only hope were of plant origin, and a doubtful powdery silicate hardened to a biscuit. Each concoction came to him dried and bundled in a slip of crude paper or tied into a cloth. Some medicines were to be drunk as a bitter tea, some packed into muslin and worn as a poultice. All smelt like a cesspit. The Frenchmen went to the four corners of the house when Menou cooked up his brews.



'You will be homesick?' he tried again. Following her gaze his hand raked through his hair.

'I might miss my people and the sound of Chinese spoken but I left my country when I left my home.'

He handed down a fistful of candles and she set them in a basket thoughtfully. He watched her hand work with a doctor's interest. She was neat to a fault, laid things square, packed into the corners. There was a fatality about the statement, yet he felt her isolation as a sort of anticipation. He saw her move into French society, invited everywhere for her exquisite bearing, for the startling aspect of her hand. The image of it would go before her. It would become heraldic, more emblematic than her face. Men and women alike would strain to peek at her shoes, tiny embroidered confections. Dances would be engineered for the possible coincident of seeing her move on those enigmatic contortions. There would be new choreographies, moves which called for a kick from the knee, a turn which flared the skirts, all for the chance to see her bound over ankles. He stopped himself; she had of course stepped onto French soil the day she boarded Battard's ship.

'We are not unlike, you and I,' he made this complete revolution of thought, was practised at it, this truncating of ideas. Erotica existed for him in some uncharted part of himself. If by chance he strayed into dangerous waters, he executed this drill, this involution. His sexual nature lay dormant, atrophied, yet there were days when some faint recollection of his former self flickered into temporary ignition. His heart was surely a stove where vigilance tempered the keenest fire.

‘Unlike?’ She echoed him.

‘Yes, we go where needs must. It is a migratory existence, is it not, this being a wife or a priest?’

They were in Menou’s surgery, the scene of his many conversations with Battard. The room looked entirely different now, stripped of its authority, a humble production of varnish and wood slats. The two good chairs were gone. What talk had been received into the horse-hair fill. He jumped deftly down and stood surveying this little Purgatory. Such was his existence. He considered it, the sum of his enterprise abroad. If he had a failing it was this wish for satisfaction, for effort to be realised into palpable productions. I should have been a sculptor, he told himself.

‘Are we finished here?’ Increasingly he suffered from fatigue. They were packing one room at a time, in a clockwise order from the hall. They both of them looked around. The teacup stood untouched on a bamboo table.

‘For today.’ Hsiao Yen stepped away and Menou was left to hunt for a couch on which to lay his weary frame.

Two weeks later they were existing in a shell. The house amplified each footfall, they were down to one bowl and a spoon apiece, only the beds remained. With the onerous work done, Menou sank into a sort of weariness. It came on him abruptly and he could not easily shake it. The brothers were subdued, mindful of his anxiety. They weathered it, this painful taking apart of their mission. It was as a garment knit up stitch by stitch the year long, ripped out in a day. Commonly they looked to Menou for

brightening. He had the knack of turning a thing around, he saw a speck of good in the least devout, encouraged the curliest smile from the downcast, but he was exhausted. His ordeal close to over, he felt a slight decline. But it was not just this, it was the aspect of failure. He would be judged at home by those whose most potent excursion was to the parish fair.

Mission life was set at a remove from the contemporary world. On a square of heathen earth they had attempted Paradise but it was a paradise of their own interpretation. Menou's preaching, when he set about it, took its pattern from local fairytales and politics. The Nile became the Yangtze Kiang, for Bethlehem he had Pekin, for the Pharisees he picked his cast from a tinpot local bureaucracy. But oration was not his primary talent, in fact in his case he saw it as a species of dissuasion. Better to lift the voice in song, he thought, joy being a potent advocate. His was an unremarkable tenor, yet his feeling after notes, the stepwise terminal chords which he pumped from a pedal organ entranced the Chinese supplicants. Daily he knit bones, put down fevers; medicine, the community agreed, was his most effective parable. But some, he knew, saw this seriatim as a personal flaw. To return to France would be both to be embraced by the fold and to be called to account. As a company they felt it settle on them, this shouldering.

Their household had lately contracted, the Chinese servants having taken their leave. Their poultry was given to pay a debt, the milking goat passed to their neighbour. More mettle was needed in taking a place apart than in raising the cross as cleanskins. Lily remained the only merry one. She pulled herself

up on packing crates, balanced on her two plump pins, held Antoine's finger and took a step. She was rosy and blithe, everyone's darling. In a few weeks she would be in a ship afloat the sea.

Every day the sun shifted a little higher, the days were a little warmer, a little longer. 'Spring is on us,' Menou said and there was no joy in saying it. Nightly he sweated on his cot, woke knocking his head at the wall. Hugging his pillow to him he held stubbornly to the anaesthetic possibility of sleep, but once lit there was no dimming him. The hours before dawn he found a dreary passage and lay mentally ticking off the years he had been at this venture, the blood booming through his skull. He made twin fists and lying on his back put up a prayer for humility. He prayed that the two poles in him be closed without a gap, this call to be a leader, this need to subjugate the will.

'I feel like the snail who rolls a stone to close her shell,' he said to Battard as they walked in the garden.

'You are wanting to study creatures now, instead of sawing at human parts.'

'Hardly.' He put his hand on Battard's shoulder, held him as though to look him over. *I have done some good here*, his eyes appeared to say. *The man is living proof. Could he only be paraded before my superiors.*

'More likely I envy the creature's ability to seal off the world,' he heard his voice pitch and then steady, it took a dive and righted — a sound boat taking the swell.

'Yet if she stayed so she would starve within it.' Battard blushed, felt himself squinted at, the doctor did not look away.

The day came when they assembled in the kitchen for the last time and Menou gave the final devotions.

‘A-men,’ they breathed it together.

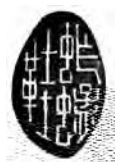
‘There is ever an ending,’ Antoine said after, his whole face set to glum. He looked around at the place that he had not wanted to come to, except to be by Battard, yet the mission had been his true childhood. It was the first time his head had been put before handiwork. He had learnt a new word every day, rocked them in his head until he had their shape. Numbers he totted in rows, his brow furrowed and clerkish. He was good for something else, he found, besides lifting and carrying and trailing after the men.

‘There is ever a start.’ Battard aimed to cheer him. There had been too many for the child, he owned it.

They were gathered now by the buggy, handing up parcels, fixing ropes around trunks and carry-alls — Hsiao Yen with her bowl, Battard stretching the length of his arms by carrying books too precious to be consigned to a box.

‘Who will shoot the bolt?’ Menou spoke into the morning, his eye fixed on a cloud. It was the closest he could come to saying it was over.

# THE BIRD



‘The Bird!’ Antoine said in a panic when they were halfway to the quay. He held its wicker house but the door was swinging. He shook it a little as though he might loosen the creature from hiding.

‘I swear I put him away.’ This from Battard who stared at the empty bird cage and mentally retraced his steps of the night before.

‘He was there this morning,’ Antoine assured him. ‘I gave him seed and a crust.’

‘We have shut him in the house then,’ Battard said in a pique. The child made a loop in his hair with a finger, with every word from the man twisted it tighter. ‘Give me the wicker, boy, I think I must recover him.’ It was not so much for the child as for Hsiao Yen. The bird was only nominally Antoine’s charge.

He rapped on the roof of their gig and had the driver set him down. The rest of the party watched him walk away.

'Be sure that you find him,' Hsiao Yen called after him.

'Go on ahead,' he spoke over his shoulder.

He returned to the house and stepped into its gloominess. It already had the odour of a house closed up. When he had come to the mission he was conscious of its roominess, he had felt that the place was all grand proportions, an allusion which owed as much to his having to hand-feel his way about the place, as to its being built around a courtyard. Sightless, one could do several circuits without knowing that the steps were retraced. Battard strode about the house, looking into corners, sliding open cabinets. He had three rooms under his belt without blinking. Perhaps the house had shrunk or diminished as a sort of allegory. It had been a beacon, a resuscitation; now he fairly itched to get away.

Nothing.

Had the bird flown as they had climbed into the carriage, he wondered, picturing this speaking evangelist abroad in Canton. He might escape the European confine and go about the city bleating his concordance.

'Hsiao Yen's small black angel,' he murmured. The idea of the bird trained to the Book by a Chinese, in *French*, gave him a little amusement, caused him for a moment to forget his irritation.

He went to the window, unlatched the shutters and stuck his head out. Every room gave onto this familiar aspect. He had come to know the courtyard first by step — two hundred to the water butt, eighty-eight from there to a pavilion. Where a Frenchman liked to take his garden's pleasures at a jog, the

Chinese, he observed, preferred to sit in theirs. There was ever a platform or a covered viewing station, there was no shortage of seats carved out of lime. The whole arrangement spoke of a world contracted. This stone pile mossed over became a mountain, there were small bridges thrown over streams and a path appeared to pass into the neck of a wood. All was contrived to appear a production of nature. He looked it over critically, compared it to his native walks and borders. The eye went from level to level, took its ornament rarely from flowers but from fantastic plays of light, from shellwork, trees bent for an expression of storm passed through them. But he had mostly known the garden as surfaces. The limey shards of shell crunched underfoot; caused savage injury if taken a spill upon — Battard knew it; the rough of woven wicker hurdles; the cushiony surprise of sunning hens scared up.

This spring morning Battard noticed that the cherry was in bud. Although the days had seemed still winter, there had been just enough fire in the sun to cause a pucker and frill along its branching. Had the tree been in a French garden, Battard could not help thinking, it might have been pollarded to put on a showy springtime clot of flowers. Here the effect was spare, a demonstration of natural intent that is the ideal image of a cherry in flower. The result: a composition which surpassed the easiness of symmetry. His eye followed the fretwork to the crown and there in its glory sat the black and yellow bird.

‘Come to me,’ he called from the window uselessly, then appeared a moment later beneath the lowest branches. Testing their sturdiness, he put off his coat and began to climb. ‘So you



would have me a monkey,' he said under his breath, putting hand over hand, gripping the trunk with his knees. The bird looked on with interest.

'Come, Monsieur Napoléon,' he said sweetly and falsely, the bird and he both knowing that he was not his master. He made apples of his cheeks and whistled, a friendly upwards arpeggio. The bird obligingly descended by hops until he was in hand reach.

'Come to me, lovely,' Battard cooed, making a grab at his leg spindles. His fingers closed on air. A foot above him now the bird looked down.

'One God ...' He began the concordance. It was Menou speaking. The bird had each of them in perfect register. He copied blithely the little hesitations, the provincial inflections. Battard had heard him mimic the baby's cry.

'Sweet Jesus! You will have me miss the packet,' the man cursed under his breath and looked behind him guiltily. 'Would that I had my birding ladder now.' But it was most properly at the bottom of the ocean with his friend Leroux. He winced to think of it.

'Lord, remember David, *and* all his travail,' the bird replied conversationally. He had switched to Royale, made the 'and' with every deliberateness. He seemed to rejoice in company. When he was not occupied with lessons, or with a looking glass, he strove to follow the flightless human flock. He lit on the backs of chairs, perched on the rim of the washing tub and intruded with snips of Gospel. He relished the sound of his own speaking. When closed in the house alone, he had learnt to engage a footstool with tracts.

‘Come down, little soldier,’ Battard tried. ‘Come!’ he said again as though calling a gun dog to heel. The bird dipped his head, made a scissoring with his bill level with Battard’s nose. It was curious to the bird to see the man thus in the tree, flapping his arms and shouting. This time Battard made his move with every subtlety, extended his arm by degrees, still his hand closed on nothingness. And so it went. He sugared it, the bird danced down, he made his grab. He stood in the tree for what he thought might be near enough to half an hour, his arms extended, the sun playing on the surface of his gold finger ring. Finally, his patience exhausted, he climbed through the branches and jumped to the ground. He picked his way along the path, turned to take one last look at what had been both his torment and medicine. He had walked this circuit, he wondered how many times, had each corner under his heel and by heart. A smooth red stone caught his eye and he bent to claim it. This moment, perhaps sensing victory, the bird alighted on his shoulder.

‘No,’ Battard threw out his arms as though crow scaring, his voice a little hoarse for its exertion. He felt finally aggrieved at this nuisance, could see himself daily risking his life in the rigging climbing after the bird, yet it irked him somewhat to lose him. The grackle was a footnote to his biblical atlas of birds.

‘All this petting and we have made a monster.’ He picked up the bird house, returned to the garden and hooked it to the tree, the bird following at a remove. Counting on the creature’s natural curiosity, he put the red stone at the centre and propped the door ajar.

‘Here, show this to your own people,’ he said meaning the manufactured nest with its pink, polished egg. ‘Take a mate if you can. I give you your freedom officially.’ The bird immediately took possession of the wicker dome and Battard put on haste to leave. He had a fancy that Napoléon looked after him.

What he would tell Hsiao Yen, he had as yet no notion. He stopped for his cane which he had left leaning by the gate, put his eye to the shoreline, picked out the bibbing of white sails. He had an ocean to put behind him. Ten o’clock already, he judged the sun, spun the cane in his hand, stepped out. There was a slight lift of a breeze at his back and it helped him along. ‘France.’ He said it aloud and moved towards it. While he descended to the quay he held to an image of the bird speaking the Book to a city of swifts.

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## Notes

Lucien Battard and his followers are pure fiction. His activities in China, his journey and unique mission are also a creation. That having been said, there were many collectors who worked in China both before and beyond this period and who operated in much the same way. The wholesale collection of exotics was a feature of the nineteenth century. It was not unknown for a whole species to teeter on the brink of extinction as a result of overzealous collecting practice. The Victorian fascination with natural history spawned a generation of amateur collectors. Battard's herbarium and entomological specimens would have had a ready and paying audience.

Battard's professed anti-evolutionary feelings are, however, based in fact. A movement opposing Darwin's thesis flared up and died away in the wake of *The Origin of the Species*. Although the Creationists had long feared the implication of geological surveys such as Lyles', *The Origin* was quickly taken up by the scientific community. By the latter part of the nineteenth century, Battard's views would have put him in a steadily eroded minority. However, there was some extraordinary work undertaken with the express intent of undermining evolutionary theory.

I have taken some licence with the progress of psychiatry as portrayed in Menou's counselling of Battard. I hope such tampering with history will be excused. Breuer and Freud did not publish their work on hysteria until the 1890s. Some years

advanced on Freud in his career, it was Breuer who famously treated Bertha Pappenheim's fear of table water. Under hypnosis he encouraged her to speak of an incident where a dog lapped water from a glass. He finally made the association between the negative experience and her subsequent aversion and effected a cure. Recollection of trigger memories and the manifestation of hysterical symptoms was the nub of this early work. It was Pappenheim herself who dubbed the process a *talking cure*. I've used this well-known case as the model for Menou's treatment of Battard. Tom Lutz cites this and many other examples of Freud and Breuer's work on hysteria in his book, *Crying: The Natural History of Tears* (W.W. Norton, New York, 1999).

Leroux and his men's clay oven is adapted from *The Art of Travel: or Shifts and Contrivances Available in Wild Countries* by Francis Galton Phoenix Press, London, 1872, 2000. Galton supplies all kind of useful information for the traveller ranging from the proper manner of assembling a rudimentary yurt, to securing prisoners and the fabrication of underwater spectacles. Leroux's advice to Antoine on staving off hunger is also drawn from Galton's repository.

W. Hamilton Gibson in *Camp Life in the Woods and the Tricks of Trapping illustrated by the author*, describes a portable litter contrived from poles and sacking. He states that 'a portable bed can be prepared on which the weary hunter can rest as serenely as if slumbering on the congenial softness of a hair mattress [sic]'. Ma's sleigh of branches is modelled on such a bed. *Camp Life* was originally published by Harper and Brothers, New York, 1881 and reprinted by The Lyons Press Guilford CT, 2002.

The Grasshopper Shoe is not an existing porcelain; rather it is an idealised version of a particular form and period. It exists within the context of the story as a handy pointer to the characters' varying motives and ambitions. Xi's description of the exterior painting, however, is based on an unattributed painting from an album of erotica, reproduced in Beverley Jackson's *Splendid Slippers: A Thousand Years of an Erotic Tradition*, Ten Speed Press, Berkeley California, 1997.

Other useful sources included:

Longman, Norman, *King Cholera: The Biography of a disease*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1966.

Cressey, George Babcock, *China's Geographic Foundations: a Survey of the Land and its People*, McGraw Hill, New York, 1934.

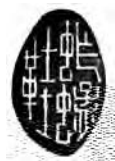
Vorzimmer, Peter J., *Charles Darwin and the Years of Controversy: The Origin of the Species and its Critics 1859–1882*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1970.

Fox, Helen (trans), *Abbé David's Diary*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1949.

Frazer, James, *The Golden Bough: a Study in Magic and Religion*, Penguin Books, London, 1922, 1996.

Chieh Tzu Yuan Hua Chuan, *The Mustard Seed Garden*, A facsimile of the 1887–1888 Shanghai edition with text translated from the Chinese and edited by Mai-Mai Sze, Bollingen Series, Princeton University Press, New York, 1956, 1992.

This is by no means an exhaustive list.



In China the seal or chock has long been a unique form of identification. Emperors and officials had their seals carved from precious jade, the humble had his signature chock carved in wood. No calligraphy was ever complete without the impress of the painter's seal, which was applied with infinite care and was considered integral to the composition. The chock used in this book was carved by a master engraver using characters from an antique script, and reads the 'Grasshopper Shoe'.