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Two Stories by Cao Kou

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The author Cao Kou (born 1977) hails from a small river island in the central Chinese city of Nanjing, the former capital and still an important centre for literature and culture. Making his literary debut in 2001, he has since developed a broad readership and earned critical acclaim as a prolific author of fiction of all lengths, including a recent spate of flash fiction. Book-length renditions have appeared in French and Swedish, but translation into English has so far been limited to a few inclusions in translation sites such as Paper Republic and two anthologies.¹

With his deadpan narrative voice and often cryptic endings, Cao Kou's stories present fragments and raking glances from unglamorous precincts of urban China. His protagonists, as in "Happy Childhood," are often first-person narrators from a hardscrabble middle class who contrast with both the miseries of rural poverty and the flashiness of cosmopolitan high-flyers one more commonly encounters in contemporary Chinese fiction. Instead, we get the usually quiet mass of ordinary urbanites, leading lives that are materially adequate and not notably inspired, romantic, moral, or political. Taken together, this provides anti-dramatic, deflationary account of contemporary urban China from an author (and characters) too young to have experienced the Cultural Revolution and still pre-pubescent in 1989. On the other hand, they are too old to be digital natives or glowing with the "Go Global" optimism of the Hu Jintao-Wen Jiabao years, with the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2010 Shanghai Expo at the apex of international friendliness to an economically and politically rising China.

Cao Kou is part of a very conversational type of writing in Chinese fiction, one that arguably can be particularly associated with Nanjing writers (Twitchell and Huang, van Crevel 78). One effect of this chattiness is a pervasive use of paratactic phrases, where clauses are strung together without hierarchy as a series of comments. Chinese fiction generally allows looser syntax than more formal writing, but following this punctuation in translation creates features such as run-on sentences and comma splices. However, in order to maintain the tone, I have considered it preferable not to default entirely to conventional English grammar either, but to trust the reader—who, after all, may well also have dealt with Joyce or Woolf or Beckett—to follow the flow. Where outright ambiguity becomes a danger, however, I have attempted to insert a judicious full stop here and there.

Rachel May noted that leaders of literary fiction in English are used to the way that "[m]odernist fiction uses punctuation, along with such syntactic structures as conjunction and parataxis, in experimental ways, for visual effect or to highlight the interplay of textual voices" but that translators of author such as Woolf or Faulkner into French or Russian were liable to normalize the punctuation. The same is true of Chinese writers such as Cao Kou, whose pun too positions himself outside the literary mainstream, although he is resistant to labels such as avant-garde. But even if his writing is not self-consciously path-breaking, the gain in similarity of style and rhythm may outweigh the slightly more-than-equivalent increase in strangeness.

My attitude to this matter of punctuation has its foundation in an orientation toward the illusion of transparency, what Anthea Bell called "the illusion...that the reader is reading not a translation but the real thing" even as she acknowledged that it is "an impossible ideal to

¹ An essay about Cao Kou and three translations of short stories (including two by the present translator), will be published in the upcoming double issue on Nanjing Literature and Arts of *Perspectives in the Arts and Humanities Asia*.

achieve” (59). This position was articulated in more critical terms by Jiri Levy as “Illusionist translators hide behind the original, as though they were presenting it to the reader directly rather than as intermediaries, in order to create a translation illusion based on a contract with the reader or the viewer” (19). On this commonsensical account, the reader of a piece of literary fiction in translation knows that what they are reading is translation just as they know it is fiction, and it is on acceptance of this contract that they undertake the reading. While also acknowledging that “all translations can be situated along the continuum of illusionist-anti-illusionist or domesticating-foreignizing” (Kellman 7) many translators and readers accept the compromise of illusionist translating even when aware of its artificiality.

“The Story of Peng Fei and Wang Aishu” (first published in the literary journal *Hibiscus* in 2014) and “Happy Childhood” (published in *Youth*, 2019) are fairly representative of Cao Kou’s recent urban stories.² The narrators’ outsider personas, the deliberate shifts of the narrator perspective, the resolute colloquialism and occasional vulgarity all present particular difficulties for the translator, but the most challenging aspect is to manage the tone—never quite leaving a world-weary, sardonic voice even when dealing with an unexpected death (in “The Story of Peng Fei and Wang Aishu”) or the legacy, two generations on, of Nanjing Massacre atrocities (in “Happy Childhood”). My strategy for these two stories has been to try to imagine them as something of a bar story (although a Cao Kou narrator is more likely at a drunken banquet), as both stories seem to be narrated by men no longer quite young recounting anecdotes from their past. To work toward the illusionist translation, this means veering away from pathos, rephrasing for the chattiest option (“he got paid better” rather than “he earned more”), but while also watching for the instances where contrasts in register (a sudden distancing, an abrupt formality) or non sequiturs produce their disconcertingly humorous effects.

Perhaps the most difficult single translation item came in “The Story of Peng Fei and Wang Aishu” where an unconsidered use of first-person pronoun causes offense and is the fulcrum of the story. The Chinese term is “*laozi*,” and means “father” (though literally it might be “old one” and when it can sometimes be appropriately translated as “old man”). Used in the first person, dictionaries variously note that it is colloquially “said in anger or in fun” and “used arrogantly or jocularly” –and the story turns on this ambiguity. Peng Fei, who has some kind of disability that impacts his mobility, is annoyed that his friend Wang Aishu has asked about his medical expenses, and responds “*Laozi* never gets sick.” Wang is from the urban periphery and poorer than Peng Fei. When Peng defends his body in a jocular fashion, Wang reads it in class terms as arrogance (“Are you my *laozi*?”). For this section, I finally settled on “Daddy” which, though a substantially stranger first-person usage than the Chinese, is both intelligible as jokiness and provides plausible grounds for offense, since “Who’s your Daddy?” is a phrase expressing dominance, sometimes also of a sexual nature (Farhi). That awkwardness, too, reads into the undercurrent of homophobic anxiety that runs through their homosocial interactions.

Vulgarity was also part of the equation in the opening of “Happy Childhood,” where the familiar trope of teacher-crush takes a rather scatological turn with an eye (or a nose) for the neutral male-chatty tone. While “arse” and “ass” situate the speaker uncomfortably on either side of the pond, “butt” seems to be both less regional and less rude—while the Chinese (“*pigu*”) is used for a broad range of registers but is itself as inoffensive as ‘behind’. (‘Behind’ was itself out since it does not come with cheeks and like ‘bum’ seems to be too deliberately safe for a speaker who has no trouble saying ‘shit’ –which needs to be contrasted with ‘crap’ later in the story when it becomes a fertiliser).

² The stakes are different due to the inclusion of Xinjiang characters in one of Cao Kou’s other translated stories, “Headscarf Girl” (Cao Kou 2020) but the protagonist’s tone and social position are very similar.

As always with translation, cultural differences are a concern. Thus, although Chinese gravestones do not say “Rest in Peace” or anything like it, to make legible the joke surrounding the macabre proposed name for their Arbor Day tree, I found it necessary to undertake this substitution. Similarly, a reference to the iconic Lei Feng has been prefaced with “worker hero.” Other cultural references seemed comprehensible enough from context without further explanation. But other resonances are unrecoverable: while the PRC reader of Cao’s generation will recognize a certain theme song as marking the influx of Hong Kong culture of the 1980s, no amount of translation legerdemain can convey this information. Similarly, QQ chatting dates the beginning of “The Story of Peng Fei and Wang Aishu” to the early years of the millennium in a way that AOL Instant Messenger might for North American users, but such a substitution was avoided for fear of provoking a series of inapposite associations with the reader. And one element, the textbook child heroes from the Sino-Japanese war who feature in the textbooks of “Happy Childhood” combined the challenges of contextual complexity with that of offensive language. On the one hand, the vignette highlights the decline from the solemnity of the high Maoism to the mid-Deng era, by which time some of the propagandistic cultural excess was becoming risible. And on the other, it contains the most common term for the Japanese, certainly in Nanjing, with its grim wartime history. In the original draft I translated *guizi*, literally “demons,” simply as “the Japanese.” But *guizi* is of course hopelessly rude, and, called out by one of the peer reviewers, in the end there is little choice but to translate Sino-phonetic slur with Anglo-phonetic slur.

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Translated by Josh Stenberg

那个叫史珍香的女的自从当了我们的班主任后，就没有同学觉得她长得好看了。

在之前，也就是她教我们音乐课的时候，那可真漂亮。两条大辫子别人都任它在后面拖着。她不，总是要拿到前面来，一左一右搭在奶子上。而且她还喜欢玩弄自己的辫梢，这样一来，辫子就在乳房上走了个曲线。王勇说，她的乳房起码有我吃饭的大碗那么大，倒扣着。说着他在自己干瘪的胸前还比划了比划。我说，是，我知道你一顿吃两碗。有时候她的辫子也会跑到后面去。比如她垫着脚在黑板上方写字的时候，我们除了看到她的腰（腰眼还有两个酒窝那样的小肉坑），就是能看到那两根辫子一左一右指着她的两瓣屁股。但这两瓣屁股是臭的。上音乐课，脚踏琴和琴凳需要上课班级的相关同学搬来搬去。负责搬琴凳的王勇曾在下课后对着琴凳的皮革垫子上屁股的形状爱护不已，他知道，随着时间的流逝，皮革下面的海绵会恢复到原来的样子，这两瓣屁股形状的痕迹在他将凳子搬出门外就会消失。世界上比它短暂的生命大概没有。所以王勇曾经将凳子高高举起，由胸口抬至鼻尖，并以比这个短暂的生命更加短暂的方式嗅了嗅前者。很臭，王勇说，是那种新鲜的尿臭。就算如此，我们仍然觉得音乐老师史珍香是那么漂亮，或者更加漂亮。

After the woman called Shi Zhenxiang became our classroom teacher, no one thought she was good-looking anymore.

Which is to say, before that, when she was just our music teacher, she really had been beautiful. Her two braids—on other girls they would always dangle down the back. But not on her, she always had them down the front, one to the left, one to the right, over the breasts. And she liked to fiddle with the ends of the braids, which in good time would shape the braids to curve around the breasts. Wang Yong said, her breasts are at least as big as those big rice bowls I eat out of, if you turned them upside down. And as he said that he gestured to his bony chest. I said, sure, plus you eat two bowls every meal. Other times the braids would end up behind her. Like when she was writing on the blackboard, besides gazing at her back (she had two little hollows in her back, like dimples) we gazed at the ends of her two braids, one left and one right, outlining her two buttocks. But the two buttocks reeked. When we had music class, it was the students' job to bring in the pedal piano and the piano stool. Wang Yong, who was in charge of the piano stool, was enraptured by the form that the buttocks left on the stool's leather covering after class. He knew that after a time, the sponge beneath the leather would resume its original shape, and the marks of the two buttocks would disappear by the time he had carried the stool out of the room. I guess nothing on this earth ever lived so briefly. That's why Wang Yong on one occasion lifted the stool so that he held it from his chest to the tip of his nose, a sniff even briefer than the indent's brevity. It stinks, Wang Yong said, that fresh scent of shit. But we thought that the music teacher Shi Zhenxiang was so beautiful anyway, maybe we even thought she was more beautiful because of it.

As classroom teacher, Shi Zhenxiang was a big pain. She was relentless, ordering

班主任史珍香就很讨厌了。她无休止地命令我们干这个干那个，一旦没有按照她的要求做好，她就会实施惩罚。王勇写错了一个字，她问他为什么写错，他说是粗心大意，没看清。她就拽他的眼皮，差点让他的眼球夺眶而出。夺眶而出的是眼泪。她反问，难道你还委屈？王勇哭着指了指我，告诉她，我是抄他的！于是她又叫我和王勇将手摊放在讲台上，用那根教鞭打。这是一根柳条教鞭，还是王勇亲自制作的。春天刚刚到来的时候，他邀请我和他一起来到河边，然后三下两下蹿上树，经过一番筛选，他选择了这根笔直而粗细适当的。为了使柳条切口规整，他没有采取蛮力将它折下，而是从口袋里取出削铅笔的小刀慢慢切割。为了使我们的教鞭区别于其他班级的，他还用那把小刀在上面镌刻了花纹，即保留一厘米的树皮，之后的下一厘米，他又环形切掉树皮，如此白色（树干）和绿色（树皮）交错，迭加往复，让人眼花缭乱。现在，那些环形树皮不少已经被史珍香的指甲抠了下来，没抠下来的已经发黑了。

我们站在教室外面的屋檐下回忆往事，心里很不是滋味。身后是史珍香在训斥其他某个同学的声音，眼前则是空无一人的校园。教师办公室方向偶尔有人站在门口冲外面倒茶杯，他们换茶叶总是很勤快，我们每天都要踩到他们的茶叶。一年级方向的小弟弟小妹妹们正在参差不齐地读拼音字母。当然，我们也承认，从一年级一直带我们的班主任张龟雄跟史珍香

us to do this or that, and if you didn't follow her orders to the letter, you got punished. Wang Yong wrote one character wrong, and when she asked him why he had done that, he said that he had been careless, he hadn't gotten a good look. So she yanked him by the eyelid, almost making his eyeball pop out of its socket. Instead, what came out were tears. So she asked him, you think you're getting a hard deal? Wang Yong cried and, pointing at me, said, I was copying off him! And so she made me and Wang Yong place our hands on the lectern and then she struck us with the teacher's pointer. It was a willow pointer; Wang Yong had actually made it himself. Right at the beginning of spring, he had taken me down to the riverside with him, and, scrambling up the tree, he picked this willow shoot—straight and thick as it ought to be. To get a clean break, he didn't snap it off with brute force, he cut it off with a little blade that we used to sharpen pencils and that he kept in his pocket. So that our pointer would be different from other classes' pointers, he even carved a little pattern into it, and left a centimetre of bark on it, and after that he had cut a ring in the bark, so that the white (the flesh of the tree) and the green (the bark) crisscrossed and intersected...it was enough to make your vision blur. By now, many of those rings in the bark had been scraped off by Shi Zhenxiang's nails, and what she hadn't scraped off had already gone black.

We stood under the eaves outside the classroom reminiscing about the past, a bad taste in our mouths. Behind us was the sound of Shi Zhenxiang tearing a strip off some other classmate, and in front of us were the school premises, deserted. Outside the staff room, there would occasionally be someone tipping the used leaves out of their cups—when it came to refreshing their tea they were very efficient—and so we had to walk through their tealeaves every day. The little boys and girls of Grade One were spelling out the phonetic alphabet in an unholy jumble. Of course, we had to admit that our classroom teacher, Zhang Guixiong, who had been with us since Year One, was much the same as Shi Zhenxiang, with the only

也差不多，唯一的区别是他不会揪眼皮和打手心，而只惯于罚跪和大凿毛栗。但想到他现在躺在医院里，我们感到十分难过。我们曾在史珍香的带领下去过医院看望我们的前班主任，看到他直挺挺地躺在雪白的床单上被同样雪白的被子盖着，让我们觉得他还置身于白雪皑皑的严冬。我们分别在他面前汇报了我们的学习情况，并且还唱了一首史珍香事先教会我们的《路过老师的窗前》。张龟雄感激地闭上了眼睛。我们给亲爱的张老师带来的老母鸡和鸡蛋，希望他能尽快恢复。与此同时，我们又兴高采烈地欢迎史珍香担任我们新的班主任，王勇并就此特意制作了一根新教鞭。现在，我们还没来得及悔恨，而只是沉浸在对张龟雄的怀念之中。

你说，王勇问，张龟雄现在到底死没死？

我说，我们这么怀念他，他肯定会死的。

植树节那天，我们要栽树。沿着围墙，两人负责栽一棵。是水杉。我和王勇当然是一组。

在史珍香指定的地面上，我们开始挖洞。在就先往洞里浇水还是先把树栽好再浇水这个问题上，我和王勇发生了争执。王勇持前一观点，我持后论。唇枪舌剑，以至于在想象中动起了手。我们分别操持着各自的铁锹向对方头上拍去，我一锹下去，王勇脑浆四溅，流得他满身都是。尤其是白色的脑浆流在红领巾上相当扎眼。不过，他没有对此表示介意，而是强调他的衣服是他妈妈昨天刚洗的，到现在还有

difference that he didn't yank you by the eyelid or strike you on the palm, instead preferring to mete out kneeling and rapping you on the head with his knuckles. But when we thought of him as he was now, bedridden in hospital, we felt very sorry for him. Shi Zhenxiang had taken us once to the hospital to visit him, and when we saw him lying straight on the snow-white bedsheets, covered in blankets that were equally snow-white, it had felt to us like he had gotten trapped in some pure but bitter winter. We each reported to him how our studies were progressing, and even sang a song that Shi Zhenxiang had taught us, "Passing by Our Teacher's Window." Zhang Guixiong gratefully closed his eyes. We gave our dear Teacher Zhang an old soup chicken and some eggs, hoping for his quick recovery. At the same time, we jubilantly welcomed Shi Zhenxiang as our new head teacher, and that's when Wang Yong made the new pointer especially for her. And before we could even get around to to regret giving it to her we were steeped in longing for Zhang Guixiong.

Say, Wang Yong asked me, did Zhang Guixiong die after all that?

I said, if we miss him so much, then he's dead for sure.

On Arbor Day, we had to plant trees. Two students per sapling, along the outer wall. Dawn redwoods. Naturally, Wang Yong and I were paired together.

In the spot Shi Zhenxiang indicated, we started to dig a hole. Wang Yong and I had a dispute over whether to dig the hole first or water the ground first. Wang Yong insisted on the former procedure, I on the latter. The difference of opinion became so animated that in my imagination we started to grapple. We each took our shovels and brought them down on one another's heads, and as soon as I struck down, Wang Yong's brains splattered all over him. The white brain matter splattering over the red kerchief was particularly eye-catching. However, he didn't seem to mind this, emphasizing instead that his mother had only yesterday

肥皂的味道。他能够容忍脑浆流到任何地方，但绝不容忍脑浆弄脏了他妈妈新洗的衣服。所以他哭喊着一锹拍在我的脸上，将我的脸整个拍成锹背的模样。不知道为什么，我能够看到自己的脸，居然和史珍香留在琴凳上的屁股痕迹一模一样。因此，我还用已经陷入脸膛内部找不到的鼻子认真嗅了嗅，确实也有一股屎臭。

后来，我们只好采取了一个折中办法。不浇水，但王勇用他的铁锹到厕所里挖一锹大粪过来预先放入坑中，再按我的方法，将树苗放进坑中，填土浇水。好，很好，大粪会给我们的小树苗提供多于旁人的营养，这是科学，我没有任何理由反对。然后他就这么干了。那是一锹相当浓厚的粪便，五颜六色而又整体发黑。而且它没有我们想象的那么臭。当王勇将粪便倒入坑中之后，我不禁出于好奇弯下腰来仔细看看。除了干硬的屎橛子和各色稀屎，最吸引我目光的是一些擦屁股的纸张，作业纸上的红叉红勾清晰可见（学生用），报纸上的国家领导人也笑若桃花（教师用）。此外还有一只鞋子。看尺码，顶多是一年级学生穿的。王勇觉得这只鞋对树苗来说没有任何营养，就将它挑了出来，然后去寻找失主。当然，这是之后。我们还是得先把树栽好。

根据史珍香事先的宣布，每棵树都由栽他们的人命名，并书写一块纸牌挂在上面，用以标记。我们看了看别人的名字，有叫“苗苗”的，也有叫“壮壮”的，此类最多。还有个叫

washed his clothes, and that they still smelled of soap. He didn't mind where the brain matter went, but not if it was going to get on the clothes his mom had just washed. And so with a shriek he slammed the shovel down into my face, so that my face looked just like the back of a shovel. I don't know why I could see my own face, but it looked just like the imprint that Shi Zhenxiang had left on the piano stool. And so I held the stool assiduously under my nose, now situated somewhere deep inside by face, and lo and behold there was a whiff of shit.

Later, we had no choice but to compromise. We didn't water the soil, but Wang Yong brought a shovelful of crap over from the outhouse and dumped it in the hole, and then, as I had advocated, we put the sapling into the hole, filled it in with soil and watered it. Nice, very nice, the crap would offer our sapling more nutrition than other students' saplings, and that was science, I had no grounds for opposition. And so that's what he did. It was quite a thick shovelful of crap, with a contribution from every colour of the rainbow albeit blackish on the whole. Moreover, it wasn't as stinky as we had supposed. After Wang Yong dumped the crap into the hole, I couldn't stop myself from bending over out of curiosity to have a good look. Besides the little clumps of dry shit and the thin multicoloured shit, the part that most caught my eye was a piece of paper that had been used as toilet paper but on which the red exes and ticks of homework could be clearly seen (paper for student use) and the faces of the country's leaders, wreathed in smiles (paper for instructor use). Besides that there was a shoe. Judging by its size, it couldn't belong to any kid older than Year One. Wang Yong felt that the shoe would offer the sapling no nutrition at all, and plucked it out to go look for its owner. Of course, that happened afterwards. First we had to plant the tree properly.

According to Shi Zhenxiang's previous announcement, every tree was to be named by the pair that had planted it, and the instructions were to hang a cardboard sign on the sapling, bearing the name it had been

“我的中国心”的，算是较有创意。但这都不能让我们赞赏。

一定要起个牛逼的名字！我说。

大概是王勇家里死的人比较多经常上坟的缘故吧，王勇说，要不叫“王曹氏”吧，一看就我俩栽的。

我说，那为什么不叫“曹王氏”呢，还是一看就我俩栽的。

争执这个没意思，而且站着想名字让我们感到十分劳累。所以我们来到水泥乒乓球台上。为了免于受到对方的干扰，我们以砖砌的中网为界，各自坐一边思索。校园里到处都是追追打打的同学，据说他们正在欢度幸福的童年，而我和王勇却必须从幸福童年中抽出空来为一棵树想名字，这可真够我们受的。

何不就叫“幸福的童年”？我和王勇几乎异口同声说。

我们为那只小鞋子寻找失主找了整整一个春天。不过，我们没有主动去问别人有没有丢鞋子，而只是盯着别人的脚看。我们希望在晨会的操场上发现有一个家伙只穿了一只鞋子。功夫不负有心人，后来我们终于发现广播站的陶老师只穿了一只鞋。话说这个陶老师，中年，秃顶，胳膊窝里拄着根拐杖。听说他早年在采石场工作，负责点炸药。有一天，他把自己齐胯炸断了一条腿。成为残疾人后，他来到了我们学校，主要在校内负责看大门和广播站工作，播放运动员进行曲和喊口令，偶尔也使用当地话代读学生撰写班主任润色的国旗下的

given. We looked at the names the other kids had used, some were called “Sprouty” and others “Hardy,” lots of names like that. There was also one called “My Chinese Heart,” which I suppose was innovative. But none of them inspired my admiration.

We need to give it a killer name! I said.

I guess because he was related to more dead people and often went to their graves, Wang Yong said, let’s call it “RIP Wang and Cao,” then everyone will see right away that we planted it.

I said, why wouldn’t it be called “RIP Cao and Wang” then, people would still see right away that we planted it.

It would have been dull to argue about it, and it was exhausting to stand about trying to think of a name. So we went down to the cement ping-pong table.

To avoid interference, we separated ourselves by the row of bricks that formed the ping-pong net and each sat on his own side to think. The campus was full of our classmates chasing each other down and beating each other up, allegedly enjoying their happy childhood years, while Wang Yong and I had to take time out of our happy childhoods to make up names for a tree, it was really a big ask.

So why don’t we call it “Happy Childhood?” Wang Yong and I said, almost simultaneously.

We spent a whole spring looking for the kid who had lost that little shoe. However, we didn’t proactively ask people if they had lost a shoe; instead, we just stared at people’s feet. We hoped to find someone wearing only one shoe at morning call at the sportsgrounds. Hard work pays off, because we discovered that Teacher Tao, who ran the public address system, only had one shoe on. By the way, this Teacher Tao was bald and middle-aged, with a crutch under his arm. They said as a youngster he’d worked in the stone quarry, doing the explosives. One day he blew his own leg off. Crippled, he came to work at the school. Mostly he acted as gatekeeper and ran the public address system, broadcasting marches and

讲话稿。在周末，如果我们想进学校遭到他的拒绝后，我们还可以翻围墙。总之，因为他是个瘸子，而且从来没有在我们的课堂上出现过，而且亲友死绝，至今未婚，以校为家，所以大家十分爱戴他。我们甚至想，等我们长大了，一定会非常想念陶老师的。

于是课后我们来到了广播站。

广播站里除了桌椅、唱机、话筒、锦旗，还有一些靠墙摆放的旗帜。旗帜掩映之下还有一面鼓和两个黄灿灿的铙钹。哦，这些玩意儿是在节日使用的，这不由地使我们想起六一儿童节时的场面。

陶老师，我们只看到你穿一只鞋子，请问，这只鞋子是不是您另一条腿的？王勇开门见山地说。

陶老师接过那只鞋子，翻来覆去甚至还掀开鞋舌看了看内部，然后很确定地告诉我们，不是，我没有这样的鞋子。

我说，假如是您的，请您千万别客气。

真的不是我的，陶老师语气诚恳，说着还拿着那只鞋放在本来属于他那只丢在采石场的脚的位置，并晃动那只健在的大脚说，你们觉得这可能吗？

其实在我们看来，如果不把一大一小看作问题的话，确实算一双。

王勇觉得不能就此放弃，说，陶老师，也有可能是您小时候丢掉的鞋子，您说是吗？

陶老师露出慈爱的神情，带领我们一起追忆了自己的童年。他说他小时候确实经常丢东

commands, and occasionally reading out student texts in dialect, polished by the classroom teachers, about life under the national flag. On weekends, if we wanted to come into campus but he hadn't let us in, we could jump over the wall anyway. On the whole, since he was crippled, and because he had never appeared in the classrooms, and because he seemed to have no friends or family, and had never married, and lived in the school, everybody really loved him. We even thought about how, when we grew old, we would all really miss Teacher Tao.

That's why, after class, we went to the PA office.

In the PA office, besides chairs and tables, a record player, microphones, and embroidered pennants, there were also some flags hung against the wall. Half-hidden by the flags was a drum as well as shiny golden cymbals. Ah, these were things for use on holidays, which made us naturally think of the Children's Day shows on June 1st.

Teacher Tao, we saw that you were only wearing one shoe, can we ask does this shoe belong to the other foot? Wang Yong said without preamble.

Teacher Tao took the shoe, turning it every which way and even flipping up the tongue to look inside, and then said with great certainty, no, I don't have a shoe like that.

I said, if it *is* yours, there's no need to be polite.

It really isn't mine, Teacher Tao said earnestly, and even placed the shoe in the place where the foot he lost in the quarry would have been, and swung the remaining stump of his limb, did you really think it might be?

Actually we had thought, apart from the size, they really might make a pair.

Wang Yong thought that we shouldn't give up so easily, saying, Teacher Tao, maybe it was a shoe that you lost when you were a kid, right?

A compassionate smile on his features, Teacher Tao guided us into the days of his childhood. He said that he really was always losing things when he was a kid, and among

西，也确实丢过一只鞋。那年头日本人经常强奸我国妇女，国民党则在一旁推开半个门缝偷看。那时候的陶老师并非妇女，只是一个四五岁的小男孩，但不知为什么，也跟这一大群妇女一个劲地逃跑。在逃跑的途中，那条后来炸断的腿所属的鞋确实跑丢了。

这个故事让我们心中生起无限的同情。我说，也许您当年没有丢掉那只鞋，腿就不会后来被炸断，您觉得是这样吗？

是这样，我亲爱的孩子们。陶老师点头同意。

在我们把那只找不到失主的小鞋子重新扔进粪坑的时候，六一儿童节就到了。

史珍香要求我们班无论男女，所有同学都穿白衬衫黑裤子，并且还要求我们问父母要了两毛钱集体买一条新的红领巾。当天早晨，她还叫我们提前一个小时到校，由她给我们每个人化个妆。我看到王勇一改往日的形象，浓眉大眼，两颊红扑扑的，像课本插图里那个送鸡毛信的家伙，他则认为我更像那个把鬼子带进八路军包围圈的少年。

我们收到了礼物，和往年一样，是一支铅笔一块橡皮和两个硬水果糖。也和往年一样，先是在操场上红旗招展鼓乐喧天地绕着跑道游行，然后就是进入指定的方阵，在草地上坐下，听村长和校长的祝辞，之后才是最受期待的文艺表演。每年此时，校外田野里干活的农民，服装厂里的女工，都会跑来观看。因为这

them had indeed been a shoe. At the time, the Japanese had often raped Chinese women, while the Nationalists were holding the door open a crack, to peek in. Teacher Tao had not at that time been a woman, actually he was only a little boy of four or five, but—and he didn't know why—he too had fled with that pack of women. As they fled, the shoe of the foot that would later be blown off had indeed been lost.

The story filled us with boundless sympathy. I said, if you hadn't lost that shoe back in the day, maybe the leg wouldn't have been blown off? Do you think that's right?

That's right, dear children, Teacher Tao agreed, nodding.

We threw the shoe, whose owner could not be found, back into the outhouse pit just as June 1st arrived: Children's Day.

Shi Zhenxiang asked all the pupils in the class, both boys and girls, to wear white shirts and black pants, and also to ask our parents to bring twenty cents each for a new red kerchief. That morning, we were furthermore requested to arrive at school an hour early, so that she could put make-up on all of us. Now that Wang Yong had changed his usual appearance and had heavy eyebrows and great big eyes as well as scarlet cheeks, he looked to me just like the kid in the textbook illustration who heroically delivers the letter across enemy lines while he thought I looked like the youth who leads the Japs into the Eighth Army trap.

We got presents, the same as every year: a pencil, an eraser and two hard fruit bonbons. Also like every year, first the red flag was raised at the sports ground before we paraded around the track to deafening drums and music. Then we entered our assigned formations and sat down on the grass to hear the town mayor and the principal's congratulatory addresses, and only after that would there be the cultural shows that we were waiting for. Every year at that point the farmers working the land outside the school and the women workers in their factory uniforms would all run over to watch us. And given that these farmers and factory workers

些农民和女工都是我们的家长，所以我们表演起来更加卖力。

对于我和王勇来说，这是我们最后一个儿童节。所以我们决定表演一番武术对打。

在《霍元甲》主题曲的伴奏下，我和王勇跳入场地，不由分说，就打了起来。我一拳打在王勇的脸上，他的一颗牙立即就飞了出来。他则一脚踢到我的裆，我疼得意识到就算长大了也别想娶到老婆。所以我只好找了块砖头拍在他的大脑门上，血立即盖住了他的脸。他看不见，像一个太极拳高手那样在四下里东摸西摸，好不容易摸到一个坐在前排的一年级的弟弟，他将他拉起来，并将他举起来向我砸来。我躲开了，那个小孩一头栽在了地上……

操你妈，打死你。我说。

操你妈，打不死你。王勇说。

我们的表演获得了雷鸣般的掌声。

因为伤势过重，我俩分别被送到了医院。在医院，我们获知，我们的前班主任张龟雄确实已经死了。而因为今天是六一儿童节，各小学都有伤员，所以病床紧缺，我和王勇睡在一张床上。兴许就是张龟雄死的那张床，只是因为医院里万物皆白，我们像在雪地里一样迷失了方向，并晕眩不已，很快就睡着了。

等我们醒来，傍晚的骄阳自窗口而入，给病房里抹了一层尿色。这让我们感到舒服多了。

我做了一个梦。王勇说。

我也做了个。我说。

were our parents, we put every effort into our performances.

For me and Wang Yong this was our last Children's Day. So we decided to perform a martial arts battle.

To the strains of *The Legendary Fok* theme song, Wang Yong and I leapt into the performance space, and without any explanation began to fight. I landed a punch on his face and one of his teeth immediately flew off. But he kicked me in the groin and the impact made me feel that even when I was of age I could forget about getting married. So I had no choice but to find a brick to tap him on the head with, covering his face in blood. This blinded him, and he groped about in all directions like a tai chi master, finally grabbing a little first grade boy sitting in the first row. He pulled him to his feet, then lifted him to land me a crushing head blow. I evaded him and the little boy landed head-first on the ground.

Motherfucker, I'm going to kill you, I said.

Motherfucker, not if I kill you first, Wang Yong said.

Our performance was greeted with thunderous applause.

Due to the severity of our injuries, we were each separately sent to the hospital. At the hospital we learnt that our former classroom teacher Zhang Guixiong had already died. Also, because today was Children's Day, there were casualties from all the primary schools and there were few beds available so Wang Yong and I had to sleep in the same bed. Perhaps it was the same bed Zhang Guixiong had died on. Because everything in the hospital was white, we were like people who had lost their way in the snow and, struck down by dizziness, we rapidly fell asleep.

When we awoke, the blazing sun was coming in through the window and shedding a shit-coloured sheen over the whole sickroom. We felt much more comfortable.

I had a dream, Wang Yong said.

So did I, I said.

那我先说，王勇说，我梦见广播站了，陶老师正在和史珍香干坏事，史珍香的奶子和屁股我都看到了。

陶老师呢？我问。

他当然也脱光了，但我觉得他还是有两条腿，那条炸断的腿又长出了一个新芽，一个非常小的新腿，只长到那条好腿的膝盖部位。也有脚，很小，穿的就是我们在厕所搞到的那只鞋。

真有意思啊你这个梦。我由衷地赞叹了一番。

你呢，你那个梦？

我说，我这个梦没你的好，显得很无聊。

怎么说？

我梦见自己长大了，回到了母校。但我们的学校已经跟其他学校合并了，这里已经没有人了。黑板上彩色粉笔画的学习园地还在，你用白色粉笔在黑板上画的雷锋也在，包括卫生角的秃头扫帚和流动红旗都在，但没有风，所有东西都一动不动。

树呢？我们的幸福的童年呢？

没看到，没有，没了。我说。

彭飞和王爱书的故事

你应该还记得王爱书和彭飞初次见面的情况。

Me first, Wang Yong said. I dreamt of the PA office, Teacher Tao and Shi Zhenxiang were doing the dirty, and I saw her boobies and her butt.

What about Teacher Tao? I asked.

Of course he was naked too, but I think he still had both his legs, the one that got blown off had grown back, a very small new leg, it had grown back up but only reached the knee on his good leg. There was a foot on it too, very small, and on it was that shoe we got from the outhouse.

That's a great dream. I gave a sigh of genuine admiration.

And you, what about your dream?

I said, my dream's not as good as yours, it'll be boring.

How come?

I dreamt that I had grown up and was going back to school as an alum. But our school had merged with other schools, and there was nobody here anymore. The map of the study area in coloured chalk on the blackboard—that was still there—and the picture you drew of worker hero Lei Feng in white was there too, and even the hairless mops in the hygiene corner and the red pennants—they were all there, but there was no wind, so nothing was moving.

And the tree? Our Happy Childhood?

I didn't see it. No. No. I said.

The Story of Peng Fei and Wang Aishu

You probably remember how it was when Peng Fei and Wang Aishu met for the first time.

Wang Aishu said, you have a limp, you really are a cripple.

王爱书说,你走路一瘸一拐的,不愧是个瘸子。

鹏飞说,是,这我难道没在 QQ 里跟你说过吗?

说过,但还是出乎我的意料。

正常,不止你一个人这么说。

然后他们就去吃饭了。按理说初次见面的人,他们应该喝点酒,但他们都表示自己滴酒不沾,所以互相谦让着——

你吃吃这个仔公鸡烧毛豆,毛豆还可以,鸡好像不行。

是吧。我觉得回锅肉还好,这最后一块你不吃我可就吃了。

……

就这些。和在 QQ 上相比,他们聊兴略小点。就算聊过什么,相信你也不记得了。

之后就是二人长达多年的交往。因为有了这个开头,所以在这些年里,他们的交往主要就是吃饭。点几个菜,叫一大碗饭分在各自的小碗里,然后嗯嗯往嘴里扒。天气热,吃得少,天一冷,还会添饭。理论上二人轮流买单,坚决不搞 AA 制,但大多数是鹏飞买单,因为据王爱书说,他家比较偏,不像鹏飞家在市中心,好找。而鹏飞则是个瘸子,无需劳动他到自己家去,所以都是王

Peng Fei said, yeah, didn't I tell you that when we were chatting on QQ?

You did, but it's worse than I thought.

You're not the only one who's mentioned it.

And then they went out to eat. In theory people meeting for the first time should have something to drink, but both of them said that they didn't touch the stuff, they kept politely refusing—

Try this, fresh soybeans with chicken, the beans are OK, but the chicken seems to be no good.

Guess not. The twice-cooked pork's not bad, I'll finish it if you don't want this last piece.

……

That's all. They were a bit less animated than in their QQ chats. So what if they chatted, I bet you don't remember what about, either.

After that they saw each other for years. Just because it was the way they had first met up, in those years they mostly went out to eat. They ordered a few dishes, a big rice bowl which they split between their two little bowls and then, grunting, shovelled into their mouths. When the weather was hot, they didn't eat as much, and when it was cold, they ordered an extra bowl of rice. In theory they took turns getting the bill, never splitting it, but most of the time Peng Fei got it, because, by Wang Aishu's own account, he lived in the boonies, not like Peng Fei who lived downtown, and for whom it was no trouble to get to the restaurants. Plus Peng Fei was a cripple, it didn't make sense to make him go all the way out to where Wang lived, so it was always Wang Aishu who picked him up at home, and then at the restaurant Peng Fei was host. Another thing: Peng Fei had once let slip the fact that he got paid more than Wang Aishu.

Soon they had eaten at every place near Peng Fei's home. In the end they had to come

爱书登门拜访,鹏飞须尽地主之谊。而且鹏飞曾不慎泄露了自己收入比王爱书高的事实。

鹏飞家附近的馆子很快就被他们吃遍了。最后二人得出结论,那个名叫“湘琴酒家”的最好。

吃了二三十顿后,有一天在湘琴酒家,王爱书发现鹏飞面对回锅肉一副毫无食欲的模样,就问他怎么了。鹏飞表示吃不下去。

为什么,这不是你最爱吃的东西吗?王爱书说着趁机往自己嘴里塞了块回锅肉。

鹏飞摇头不语。

病了吗?你不是有公费医疗嘛。王爱书又干了一块回锅肉。

因为腿脚不方便,鹏飞不愿意生病,所以反感别人这么说。他有点气急败坏地说,老子从来不生病。

王爱书也不高兴了,放下筷子责问对方,老子,什么老子,你是我老子吗?

不是那个意思,鹏飞露出了烦恼和疲惫的样子说,我觉得我们这样是不对的。

你是说没有女人的缘故?

这当然是一个问题,不过.....算了,吃饭吧。

王爱书是一个聪明人,当然不会勉强鹏飞说他不想说或不急于说的话。

to a conclusion, which was that Xiangqin Inn—‘Zither of Hunan’— was the best of the lot.

Once, after they had eaten there twenty or thirty times, Wang Aishu discovered that Peng Fei’s gaze was fixed on the twice-cooked pork with an expression totally devoid of appetite, and asked him what was up. Peng Fei indicated that he couldn’t finish it.

Why, isn’t this your favourite? Wang Aishu said, taking the opportunity to stuff some of the pork into his mouth.

Peng Fei shook his head and said nothing.

Are you sick? The state covers your treatment, right? Wang Aishu polished off another chunk of twice-cooked pork.

Because he couldn’t get around easily, Peng Fei hated getting sick, so he also hated it when people talked about it. An edge in his voice, he said, Daddy doesn’t get sick.

This annoyed Wang Aishu too, and he put down his chopsticks to question him. Daddy, where did that come from, are you my Daddy?

That’s not what I mean, Peng Fei said, looking irritated and tired. I think what we’re doing isn’t right.

You mean because there aren’t any girls?

That’s one problem of course, but...never mind, let’s just eat.

Wang Aishu was a clever guy, so of course he wasn’t going to pester Peng Fei to say what he didn’t want to or wasn’t in any hurry to say.

Having watched in admiration as Peng Fei stuffed himself with several mouthfuls of rice, Wang Aishu picked a sliver of meat about the size of a fingernail cutting from his teeth, and felt much more at ease. He said, why do you eat like you’re taking a crap?

Hungh?

欣赏着彭飞“嗯嗯”吃了几口饭后,王爱书剔出了牙缝中一块指甲盖大小的肉,感觉轻松多了。说,为什么你吃饭的声音和拉屎一样?

嗯?

嗯。嗯嗯嗯,难道你拉屎的时候嘴里不也发出这种声音?

你知道的,之后发生了一场血腥的恶斗,王爱书被彭飞一个酒瓶拍碎了脑袋,血流如注。彭飞则被王爱书一个扫堂腿掀翻在地。为什么呢?因为彭飞那只好腿也被扫骨折了。好在并无大碍,在家躺了一个多月,又继续瘸着原先的腿出门了。

在拉黑对方 QQ 绝交的这些年里,二人分别走上了人生的正轨,都成了有家室的人。王爱书工作不稳定,还住在城郊结合部,所以刚开始姑娘们总是很嫌弃,直到他老婆出现的时候才发生了转机。彭飞虽然有享受公费医疗的事业单位,而且住在市中心,但是个瘸子,所以找老婆也费了不少周折。总之,从第三者的角度来看,二人差不多是同时结婚的,一年之后也几乎同时当了爸爸,只是因为绝交,二人彼此不知而已。

不仅如此,婚姻还给他们的事业带来了帮助。王爱书的老婆家里有一门好亲戚,是做瓷砖生意的,而且生意很大,王爱书也便成了那家店

Hungh. Hungh hungh hungh, it's how you grunt when you're having a crap, too, right?

As you know, this ended in a bloody brawl. Wang Aishu got his head split open by the liquor bottle Peng Fei smashed on him, and he bled like a fountain. Peng Fei was felled by Wang Aishu's sweeping kick and rolled on the ground. And why? Because Peng Fei's good leg had a fracture from the fall. The good thing was that nothing too serious resulted, he rested up at home for a little for over a month, and then he could go about, limping on his good leg as before.

In the years when they had blocked each other's QQ accounts and stopped seeing each other, the two of them each continued along the straight and narrow path of human life, both becoming husbands and fathers. Wang Aishu didn't have stable work, and he still lived on the edge of the city, so at the beginning girls would always look down on him, a fact which didn't change until his wife made her appearance. Although Peng Fei worked in a state enterprise and the state paid for his treatment, and although he also lived downtown, on account of his being a cripple it took a lot of trials and tribulations before he got a wife. In any event, an outsider would have said that the two of them had gotten married at about the same time and after a year had become fathers also at about the same time, but because they weren't in touch anymore, neither of them was aware of it, that was all.

Not only that, but the marriages they made had helped with their careers. Wang Aishu's wife had a good bunch of relatives, in the ceramic tiles business—a huge enterprise, and Wang Aishu became a manager in their company—and he learned everything about the business, wore gold necklaces, drove an S-Class Mercedes. Peng Fei, because of his leg, had gone into administration in his office, and before you knew it he was section chief. Of course the constant banquet drinking was tiring, and his

的一个精通业务的经理,戴着金链,开着大奔。

彭飞则因为瘸腿的缘故,在办公室干起了行政工作,转眼也混上了正科级。虽然疲于各种茅台酒局,成条成条的中华烟还霉在了柜子里,但怎么说呢,没有这些,彭飞觉得也不对。

就这样,转眼就过去了几年。然后他们在一场葬礼上重逢了。

这个死去的人叫“日本人”。当然,这是网名。直到二人赶到前者的灵堂,才知道“日本人”真名叫刘春华。也就是说,他们都曾经是一个QQ群的网友。刘春华正是这个QQ群的发起人。这个群以交流电影、文学和性行为为主旨。那年头大家聊兴很浓,几乎每天每时每刻,都有人在群里发言。彭飞和王爱书也是其中的活跃分子,当他们获知身在同城的时候,就互相私聊了起来,然后才有本文开头部分的相见。在湘琴酒家,他们除了吃仔公鸡烧毛豆和回锅肉,自然主要延续群里的话题,并且多以“日本人”的观点展开讨论。说白了,“日本人”不仅是群的发起人和创始人,也是精神领袖。支撑“日本人”的据说主要是学识。群里所有的人都知道,“日本人”拥有高学历高收入,在北京有个公司,早年留过洋也日过外国女人,此外还写过热播电视剧,出过几大本畅销书,无论是学问和见

drawers were stuffed with mouldering high-end cigarettes, but—what could you do—without all that, Peng Fei would have thought there was something missing.

And just like that, in the blink of an eye, several years had passed. Then they ran into each other at a funeral.

The dead guy was called “The Japanese.” Of course that was just his username. Only when they were actually at the mourning hall did they find out that his real name was Liu Chunhua—Spring Flourishing. Which is all just to say that they had all been members of the same QQ group. Liu Chunhua had been the founder of the QQ group, actually. The group had been devoted mostly to talking about movies, literature, and sexual practices. In those years people had really been into online chatting, at practically every moment of every hour of every day someone was messaging something to the group. Peng Fei and Wang Aishu had been among the livelier participants, and when they had found out that they were living in the same city, they started PMing each other and then there was the meeting that you will find described at the beginning of this story. At the Zither of Hunan Inn, besides eating fresh soybeans with chicken and twice-cooked pork, they had of course largely pursued the chatgroup themes, mostly taking The Japanese’s views as their point of departure. To put it plainly, The Japanese was not only the founder and creator of the group, they had also been the spiritual leader. The pillar on which these views rested was his academic knowledge. Everyone in the chatgroup knew that The Japanese had an advanced degree and a lofty income, that he owned a company, and had in younger years studied abroad and also fucked foreign girls, and furthermore that he had also written a popular TV series, published a number of bestsellers— so no matter whether it was academic or street smarts, The Japanese was a cut above opinionated dumbasses like Peng Fei and Wang Aishu who had never left their own little corner.

识,“日本人”都远高于彭飞王爱书这种始终都困于一隅却又总是自以为是的蠢货。

在二人吃回锅肉的日子里,他们还曾恬不知耻地邀请“日本人”:如果路过南京的话,二人一定会尽地主之谊——到湘琴酒家吃回锅肉。血腥打斗事件导致的绝交之后,群虽然还健在,但不知为何,彭飞和王爱书陡然变得沉默寡言起来。

这可能有时代的因素。博客微博什么的之后,大家不太爱聊QQ了,包括群。彭飞这么总结道。

但是,群的副主以及其他群友所传播的消息还是被彭飞和王爱书所知道了。那个多事的家伙不仅旨在告诉大家,咱们的领袖“日本人”不幸患癌逝世,还希望大家争取前往葬礼为死者送行。地址和联系人手机附录其后。一股青春和友情地老天荒的气息扑面而来。确实去了不少群友,但这未必是出于哀悼之情,有的是想趁机出门透透气,比如彭飞,有的则是听说“日本人”老家那个地方山清水秀,比如王爱书。后者在葬礼当天就亲耳听到一个千里迢迢赶来的女网友在一条溪流边赞叹:“啊呀,这里的水真清啊,可以直接装瓶当矿泉水吗?我要做大自然的搬运工。”

In the days when the two of them had eaten twice-cooked pork together, they had once shamelessly invited The Japanese to join them—if he should happen to pass through Nanjing, the two of them would do their best for him as hosts—treating him to twice-cooked pork at the The Zither of Hunan. After the break occasioned by the bloody brawl, and although the groupchat still went on, but—who knows why—Peng Fei and Wang Aishu had turned suddenly into silent lurkers on the chat.

It might have had something to do with the era. After blogs and Weibo and so on, people stopped chatting on QQ so much, including the groupchats. That was Peng Fei's take on it.

All the same, the message sent by the assistant manager of the groupchat had come to the attention of Peng Fei and Wang Aishu. The assistant, a busybody, had not only let everyone know that their leader The Japanese had sadly died of cancer, but had also expressed the hope that everyone would try to make it to the funeral to see him off. The address and the contact number were appended at the bottom. There was a whiff of youth and of friendship-is-forever about it, and it assaulted the senses. More than a few of the groupchat members really did show up, although that might not have been entirely because of mourning, some of them were just taking the opportunity to get some fresh air—e.g. Peng Fei—and some of them had heard that “The Japanese” was from a place renowned for its green hills and clear water—e.g. Wang Aishu. The latter had heard with his own ears, on the day of the funeral, a girl from the chat who had come from the other end of the country, saying in fulsome praise of a stream, “Wow, the water here really is clear, can I just dip my bottle in and drink it like mineral water? I'm going to export the stuff.”

日本人或刘春华自知死期不远,请求家人将自己从北京拖回老家。在中国,所有山清水秀的地方同样也是穷地方,誉为穷山恶水其实更为恰当。所以当鹏飞和王爱书分别赶到的时候,完全无法想象那个在 QQ 群里无比高端睿智的精神领袖“日本人”原来出自这么个穷山恶水。他的家很破败,大概还是清代的房子,所谓祖屋。猪圈就在卧室的窗外,一年四季应该都能闻到猪屎的恶臭。而且刘春华的父母也是彻头彻尾的山里人,矮小黝黑,穿着七十年代的衣裳。更要命的是,那个负责召集和接待各位网友的家伙还背着刘春华的家人告诉大家,刘春华生前欠了一屁股债,希望大家捐助一点以尽绵薄之力。鹏飞没有带多少现金,山村亦无 ATM,只好向王爱书借了点,并保证回去当天就还。后者哈哈一笑,摆摆手,说,权当以前在湘琴酒家欠下的埋单钱。前者岂能认可,表示,那是那,这是这。总之二人口头上很是谦让了一番。

也就是说,在葬礼上的相遇,看上去使鹏飞和王爱书前嫌尽弃言归于好了。他们共同瞻仰了“日本人”的遗容,老实说,这家伙长得真不怎么样。

我以为他很高大英俊呢。鹏飞说。

为什么还戴眼镜,你说给一个死人戴上眼镜到底是什么意思?王爱书说。

The Japanese aka Liu Chunhua, knowing that the grim reaper was at the door, had asked his family to drag him back home from Beijing. In China, any place with green mountains and clean water is bound to be poverty-stricken, in fact it would be more accurate to praise them as pauper's mountains and unlucky waters. So when Peng Fei and Wang Aishu made their separate ways there, they just couldn't believe that the incomparably wise spiritual leader The Japanese had come from one of these poor and unlucky places. His home was derelict, it was probably from the Qing Dynasty, what you might call the ancestral home. The pigpen was just outside the bedroom window, so you could probably smell the stench of pigshit all year round. And Liu Chunhua's parents were yokels through and through, short and dark, wearing clothes from the 1970s. Even more dispiriting was the fact that the guy in charge of assembling and taking care of all the groupchat friends had told them, without letting the parents know, that Liu Chunhua had died owing a shitload of cash, and that he hoped they would all make small donations, anything they could manage. Peng Fei hadn't brought much cash, and a boonie town like this didn't have an ATM, and so there was nothing for it but to borrow a bit from Wang Aishu, and make sure to pay him back the same day, when they got back to town. The latter had given a big belly-laugh, waved him off, and said they would treat it as money owing from the bill at the Zither of Hunan. The former wouldn't accept, saying, that was then and this is now. All in all, the two of them went through a good long round of polite refusals.

Which is to say that the meeting at funeral apparently had caused Peng Fei and Wang Aishu to forget their falling-out and make up. They both gazed reverently at The Japanese's body, though to tell the truth, the guy really wasn't much to look at.

I thought he would be so tall and handsome, Peng Fei said.

更让大家感到震惊的是,“日本人”刘春华还睡上了棺材,被几个壮硕的网友抬到了山脚埋了。山脚全是坟茔,山腰略少,山顶没有。这一点是不是说明,佯装尊敬死者的活人其实仍然懒得把他们埋得更高一点?震惊不在于土葬的违规,而在于其古老。一个叱咤于网络的网络名人,最后躺在一具棺材里被埋在古老的山村里,这到底是怎么回事呢?

虽然预签的机票时间不同,但彭飞和王爱书回到当地省城是同路的,只有那里有机场。

路上他们谈了谈各自这些年的情况是必然的。彼此都露出很欣慰的样子,然后用对死者的扼腕长叹来强化这一欣慰。他们甚至还萌生了超脱和达观的念头,眼前闪烁着马上就要面临的中年的景象。但因不够明晰,没有深入交流。不过,还是有个东西堵在二人之间,这倒是彼此心知肚明的。

咳咳,王爱书没忍住,但还是有点难为情,我想问你一个事,可以吗?

当然。

你当初到底想说什么?往事真是不堪回首,王爱书觉得自己脸都红了,就,就是,我俩打架那次?

Why is he wearing glasses, what's the idea of putting glasses on a dead guy? Wang Aishu said.

Even more astonishing was that while The Japanese Liu Chunhua slept in his coffin, a few hearty groupchat friends carried him to the foot of the mountain to bury him. There were graves all around the foot of the mountain, half-way up the mountain and none at the top. Did that show that the people feigning respect for the dead were actually too lazy to bury them up a little higher? What was astonishing about it was not the fact of burial, which was against the cremation regulation, but how ancient it all was. An internet celebrity, screaming all over the web, and in the end he lies in this ancient village— what was that all about?

Although they had booked different plane tickets, they took the same way back to the provincial capital, where there was an airport.

On the way they naturally discussed their situation over the last few years. Both seemed pretty gratified, and then sighed and wrung their hands about the deceased to reinforce their own gratification. Some unconventional, philosophical thoughts even occurred to them, as the prospect of imminent middle age glittered in front of them. But because the prospect couldn't be clearly enough discerned, they didn't discuss it deeply. Still, there was some kind of impasse between the two of them, they both knew that well enough in their hearts.

Huh, huh, Wang Aishu couldn't stop himself, though he said also with some embarrassment, there's something I want to ask you, OK?

Of course.

What did you want to say in the first place? It really doesn't do to look back at the past, and Wang Aishu felt that he was blushing. I mean, you know, the time we got into a fight?

我忘了,鹏飞其实已经猜到在葬礼上重逢之后迟早会面对这个问题,但王爱书一旦提出来,他还是紧张,真的,忘了。

哦。

嗯。

是,毕竟过去好几年了。

是啊。

过了好一会儿。

可能,鹏飞不确定地说,可能我当时是希望我俩不要那么吃饭?

那怎么吃?

呃,比如,比如我们当时应该喝点酒?

I forget, Peng Fei had in fact already guessed that the meeting at the funeral would sooner or later result in this question, but when Wang Aishu really did bring it up, he was still nervous: really, I forget.

Oh.

Uh-huh.

Yeah, since it was years ago.

Yeah.

It's been quite a while.

Maybe, Peng Fei said uncertainly, what you wanted was for us not to eat like that anymore?

Well then how?

Uh, for example, maybe we should have had something to drink?