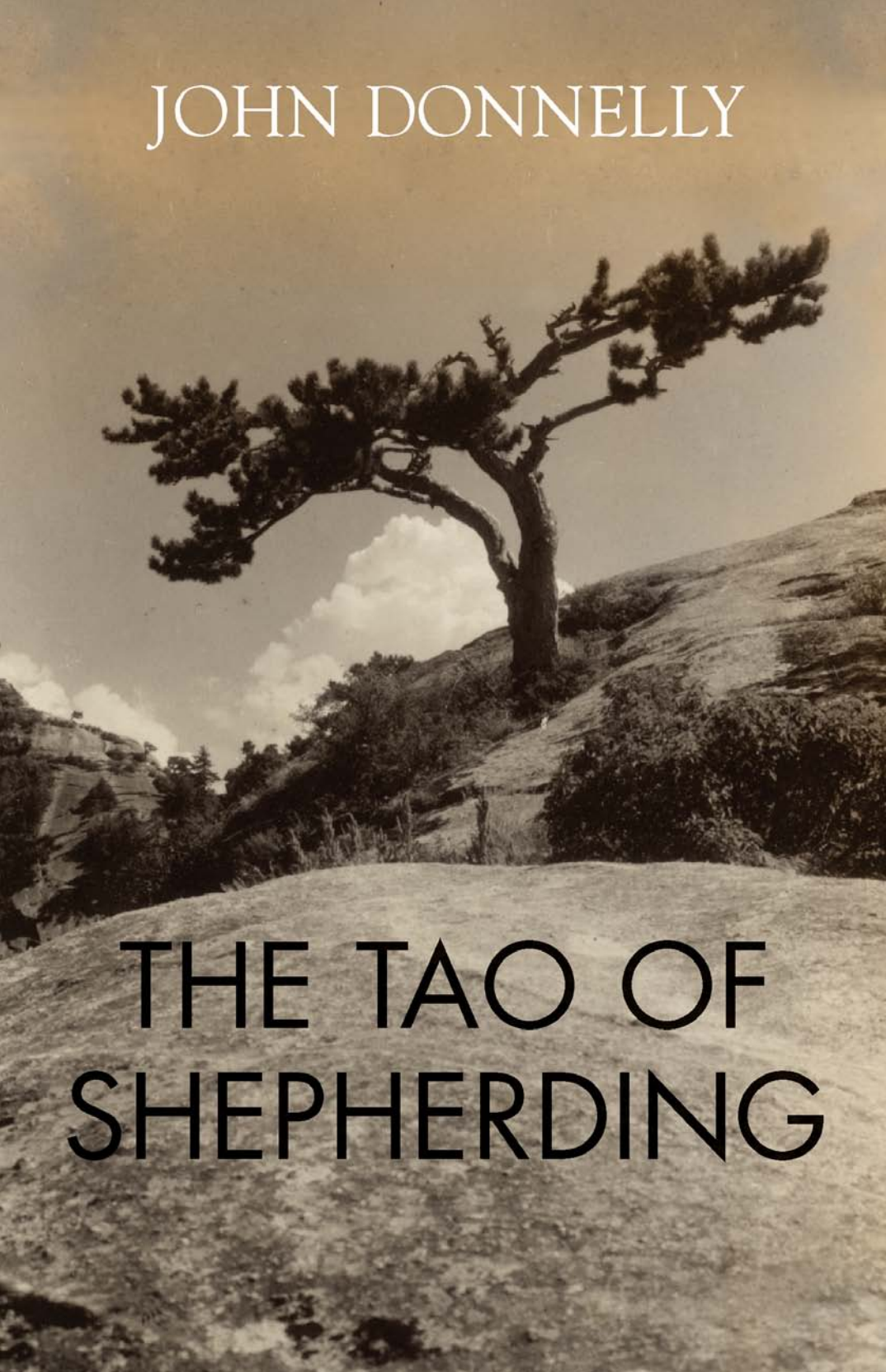
JOHN DONNELLY



THE TAO OF SHEPHERDING

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The Tao of Shepherding

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JOHN DONNELLY

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for Rebecca, as always,
and in memory of my father

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John Donnelly

PART ONE

THE SCHOLAR AND THE GAMBLER

Truly the man who is oppressed by debts, which he sees no prospect of ever being able to get ahead of, realises what an awful curse human existence is — good indeed would it have been for such a man had he never been born.

Thomas Henry Wilkinson,
November 1905, on his return to Wagga

1.
AT FLYING CLOUD PAVILION

IT IS THE 15th day of the 10th month, little spring, and the warm air cradles me as I walk through rhododendrons in bloom, their red, pink and yellow blossoms lighting the way like lanterns. My path winds gently up across the approaches to West Mountain, passing through thickets of bamboo that bring the gloom of dusk about us, and noble stands of fir like brave young men guiding the faithful on their journey. Every now and then, I stop and, through a break in the trees, I cast my eyes back to the village growing ever smaller and insignificant as the wilds of nature envelop me.

At this distance, I can just make out the parallel lines of Warehouse Lane and Locksmith Lane; I laugh out loud at the sight of men rushing back and forth, busy like ants on a tree trunk, their frenzied activity meaningless. At the end of the lane stands our family compound, the Villa of Tranquillity: the courtyard with its ginkgo and frangipani, Father's rooms in the Pavilion of Stone, the east and west terraces, the servants' quarters. I catch my breath as I think of the recent turmoil behind its vermilion gateposts; but, at this great distance, the afternoon sunlight twinkling merrily on its glazed roof tiles, it appears to wear its name well.

Rising above the village like a lotus flower unfolding perfectly from its muddy roots, I am calmed by the regular

shapes of an octagonal pagoda or circular pond laid out just so, markers of our peoples' custodianship of and harmony with the land, as I am thrilled by turning a corner and catching sight of an ancient twisted cypress, its roots gnarled and splayed, its trunk bleached and dead, its few live branches with tufts of leaves representing its continuity from the Yuan until the present! I hear the sound of cascading water and follow it to its source in a spring near Flying Cloud Pavilion, so called for its glorious aspects of heavenly motions, providing rest and stimulation for wandering scholars like myself.

'Here you are, Young Master,' Ah Chiang has made some tea from the spring water and waits for me to drink. He might be only our manservant, but he still clings to the honorific 'Ah' despite his fallen circumstances. Ah Chiang is Second Wife's cousin, whose family fell into indebtedness, a disaster that was averted only by the magnanimity of Father, who paid the bills and took in Ah Chiang as servant in security against his loan.

Will the examiners query me on debt and its consequences, I wonder? Does the suffering it causes have any bearing on the poetic sensibility?

Father counselled me against venturing alone into these mountains at these times, but he did not disapprove when I expressed my desire to visit our ancestors' graves and sweep them before my departure to give our ancestors, who were so much the making of ourselves, the benefit of this warm respite before the chills of winter: allow the dead the pleasures of the living. I have been into these mountains many times with Father and my teacher and I know my way alone, but, as a dutiful son, I respected Father's wishes that Ah Chiang accompany me on this occasion. For Father, I carry a sprig of lime and a frangipani blossom, a 'little spring' bloom from our courtyard, to fragrance his memory of Mother who, like the Lady Pan, has gone to her spring garden.

I sip my tea. The rose fragrance fills my nostrils, reminding me of happier, simpler times. Ah Chiang squats

a short distance away from me, his scoundrel eyes ever vigilant. Once I pitied the crude fellow and his misfortunes in life, which brought him to our compound. But that was before everything else. And now I am burdened with his companionship on this most personal of journeys.

'We will rest here awhile,' I inform Ah Chiang. 'Tonight we will camp by the graves, and drink wine with the full moon who watches over our ancestors while we are busied with life's cares in the town!' What an elegant formulation, and how noble to include my unwanted companion in my plans! My chest swells with poetry and pride, and I gaze out into the afternoon's clouds, their ten thousand shapes forming and disappearing as quickly as thought: the images of my imagination's strivings!

As Ah Chiang unpacks and repacks his bundles, permit me to introduce myself. My family and friends call me Shiu Pi. I am a humble student who, in a few short months, will be a candidate at the county level for our Middle Kingdom's highest honour. It was Mother's greatest wish before she — well, more on her later; let me wipe a tear from my eye with my silken sleeve. I am the first son of the Honourable Shiu Gong, who is private secretary to the magistrate of Tong An County in Fukien Province.

We have been living these past three years, the period of my father's current engagement, at the Villa of Tranquillity, our compound in a village a few *li* outside Tong An township. The Pavilion of Stone, Father's rooms — consisting of our ancestral altar, library and sleeping chamber, serving the needs of mind, spirit and body — faces south; mine is the first room in the terrace to the right, my doorway facing east for my morning duties — lighting the lamps on the altar before entering the library where I help Father with his secretarial duties, preparing letters for the magistrate on occasion, practising correct forms, while continuing my studies in the Classics.

In addition to a tea table and stools, the library houses several cabinets with their rows of concertinaed volumes and

scrolls of all sizes containing Classical learning in all fields: diplomacy and war, poetry and painting, administration and geography and, at the bottom, romances and allegories. These last were my favourites as a child, when I could not reach any higher than fictional nonsense; however, as I grew and my horizons increased, I found before me the richer and altogether more satisfying harvest of the more profound areas of human endeavour. I learned about the Middle Kingdom's reach and influence extending beyond desert and sea from these works and aspired to become a scholar-administrator like Father.

Father's sinecure with the magistrate gives him the time to train me, to overcome his own scholarly disappointments and carry the Shiu family name into the county and provincial realms of the mandarinate. And — should the gods smile on me — to realise Mother's dream, fed into me from my suckling milk onwards: to see, after my successful candidature for the national examinations, my name carved in stone for all time in the Temple of Confucius in the Northern Capital! But I overreach — forgive me, I cannot restrain a flush of excitement when I think of having my very own stela erected alongside those of the most illustrious and capable this civilisation has bred.

Father sat the county exams twice, but was unable to prevail; his own father's death, necessitating a 12-month mourning, as for Mother, came just weeks before his third and possibly successful candidature, after which he abandoned his own ambitions for higher office. Mother's death was more timely — if I may be permitted to make such an observation — its anniversary falling some weeks before my candidature. Thanks be to the memory of Mother that she did not linger in her winter sickness into the new year.

Was ever a son so loved by his Mother as I was? When I was a babe in open-vented trousers, she followed me herself, rice-porridge bowl in hand; she cleaned my sicknesses, nursed my sorrows; and, as I grew into manhood, she still came to my room and wiped sweat from my fevered brow, whispered

reassurances into my thrashing dreams. But the sickness that failed to steal me, stole her: Mother grew pale and thin, stopped eating, refusing even the gruel I prepared myself and held to her trembling lips. She took to her bed with only tea and water and left this world these 10 moons past.

Wiping a tear from my eye, I gaze down once more at the Villa of Tranquillity. Tranquil it has not been since Mother's passing. Like Wang Wei, I see autumn's weeds gathering in the palace yard, fireflies passing across her jewelled windows. Her position in our household has been taken by Second Wife, whose sons are still playing with kites. Barely two moons after Mother's passing, Second Wife moved her quarters one room up to the head of the east terrace, opposite my room. At first, I objected — but Father silenced me: he pointed out that this usurpation did not threaten my primacy in the household, and, if I were a dutiful son, I would find him a concubine to comfort him in his sadness. My ears burned and I was silenced. Where would I find one — among the flower girls along the river? All I knew of life then was what I had read in books!

Aiee, Second Wife! You are not, and will never be, my mother! In the mornings, emerging from our rooms, we face each other across the courtyard. In her sleeping gown, her hair still disarrayed and smelling of jasmine, she smiles at me as I make my way to fire the oil-lamps to our ancestors. As First Wife these 10 moons and thus to be obeyed as Father requires, she would have me serve her as I did my own Mother: bring her tea in the morning; taste and spice her rice-porridge; open her shutters. Even here in the mountains, I cannot escape her: I suspect it is she who has arranged with Father for Ah Chiang to accompany me.

Even now I cannot fathom how it all began, when matters became too complicated and involved.

I stand and, taking up my staff, look around me. Ah Chiang sleeps by his pots and matting. The air is thinner here; but her jasmine fragrance lingers. I feel dizzy; I see phantoms in

the clouds, heavenly bodies writhing and coiling in a mist of jasmine.

Breathe steady, now, calmly; again. So.

The Tao teaches that there would be no delight of altitude without the perils of vertigo. The Yang is necessarily shadowed by its Yin.

Like a moon orbiting the Earth, the smaller of a pairing, I find her influence subtle and irresistible, flooding my thoughts; her earthly distractions weigh down my spiritual purpose. As Father says, it is a matter of balance: but for me, put all the jewels of duty and responsibility, all the wisdom of the kingdom in one side of the scale, and Second Wife in the other, and she will make it tip her way.

So she will impose upon my reverie, my sad family history. Let it come out then.

Capitulating to her demands, I kick Ah Chiang awake in a clatter of pots and howls. Let me banish these distractions directly by telling you of their sad occasion, and then permit me to continue my journey.

2.
MORNING PRAYERS

THE PATH WINDS onwards and upwards, snaking between stands of bamboo. Ah Chiang follows me, grumbling at my back, complaining that he does not deserve to be kicked like a dog when he has been such a good friend to me all these months. How he has covered up for me. Wheedling and dissimulating cur! I resist the temptation to turn and strike him with my staff for dragging my thoughts back into the mud. But, like the lotus flower, my thoughts will unfold pure and beautiful out of the very mud in which Ah Chiang seeks to confine me.

I breathe in deeply, the cool air is fragranced with pine needles. Our feet spring as we walk over their carpet. I scoop up a handful, wet with the earth's richness, sniff the heady sweetness and, behind it, faint but unmistakably present, something altogether more primitive and arresting.

See that rock there, half-buried in soil? Brother rock, impenetrable and upright, you thrust clear from the moist soil that would soften and overgrow your hardness. You stand firm now but time will corrupt you: water will leach from the soil, seep into your fissures, freeze and expand in winter and cause you, mighty rock, to crumble into earth itself.

Would that it had never happened! Shame to relate it at all! Aiee, Second Wife, you are as persistent as a flower girl, invading my thoughts, pestering me as I walk towards my ancestors' graves, and my own.

I might have mentioned that Father was away with the magistrate, visiting landholdings in western Tong An County, collecting annual rent from rice farmers. These trips were usually long and arduous, lasting several weeks, not least because farmers who could not pay in copper cash or gold would be forced to pay their lease in kind. And so Father would find himself loading their barrow with ducks, fish, pigs and the occasional daughter. What they could not eat or find an immediate use for they had to take to markets to sell.

In his absence, I was, of course, master of the compound. My duties as First Son continued nonetheless and so, every dawn, as the sun entered my chambers from the east, I rose and lit the lamps on our ancestral altar. Amid the clatter and rustle of the household waking up — water being drawn from the well for washing and tea, rice being picked over for the morning's porridge and the inevitable argument between the nightguard and dayguard about when one's work ended and the other's began — I found a calmness in this routine. Not fully awake, I carried a lit taper from my bedroom, across the courtyard in the shadow of the ginkgo and up the two stone steps, ancient and worn smooth with use over many generations and which gave the Pavilion of Stone its name. It was a daily reverence to those who went before us and who interceded with the gods on our behalf.

Sliding back the rice-paper shutters, my eyes took time to adjust, made all the slower by the preponderance of dark wood, greasy and thick with years of accumulated incense burnings, denying reflection, absorbing light. Parking my slippers at the threshold, bowing and stepping over the rail, I would pass into this darkness each morning and was briefly transported from the cares of running a household and into the spirit life of our family.

I would light the oil-lamps from my taper and let their warm glow reveal the mystery within. Framing the main altar, two red curtains, embroidered in gold with the characters for

happiness and long life, hung from a carved wooden frame on which dragons and phoenixes intertwined, rising heavenward.

On the altars stood statues of Buddhas and saints, the Taoist deities and, to the side, the memorial tablets of our Confucian ancestors. In this little room, I could engage with the beliefs underpinning and guiding our culture through thousands of years: the Celestial Trinity of Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism. And within each its own trinity.

I could gaze on the past, present and future Buddhas in the ascetic Ameda, the serene Amithaba and the laughing Maitreya; my eyes wandered to the red-faced Quan Cong, flanked by his two trusty Taoist deities, the warrior mandarin and the civil mandarin, the latter of whom was my personal favourite; and, in considering the Confucian trinity of Father, Mother and Son, in our family's case so recently broken and not re-established, it would be time to pay my respects to our ancestors.

I turned to the family altar stacked with wooden tablets on which the names of each departed ancestor was remarked in characters, telling of our family's connection with Tong An, stretching back far beyond the three years of Father's employment with the magistrate from the north. Each row of tablets denoted another generation of the Shiu lineage. There were six rows in all: from Mother at the front through to Shiu Wang — the illustrious founder and exemplar of our lineage and the first of our family to settle in Tong An — stacked high above all others at the rear. The gold lettering had long faded, and I could barely make out the characters on his tablet, but I did not need to, having memorised through daily observance his significance to our family.

Before the tablets were vases and a small bowl in which fresh flowers and fruit were placed every other day, between two oil-lamps that burned throughout the day. I would inspect the condition of the offerings, nipping a few flower heads off between thumb and forefinger and turning the fruit in its bowl so that its overripe flesh would not offend the sensibilities of my

ancestors. Everything was then ready: I would light three, five, seven sticks of fragrant incense — always an odd number — from an oil-lamp and kneel on the cushion, arms raised clasping the incense, now bending over till my nose almost touched the ground; murmuring prayers requesting their kindly guidance in the affairs of this family. My filial duties complete, I would pass through to the library where I spent the morning studying the Classics, sipping a fragrant thimble of oolong tea between scrolls.

One morning, as I was bent over in supplication, I heard some giggling from behind me. I tried to ignore it, muttered my prayers louder; but the giggling continued. Annoyance and a kind of frustration gripped me; whoever it was could see me but I could not see them. From my kneeling position, I leaned forward, bending my arms and raising my buttocks in mute insult until I could see, framed upside down in the silk arch of my sleeve, Second Wife's elder child with one of the servant's children. They saw me watching them instead of praying, my bottom skyward and my nose in the dust, and their giggles burst into open laughter.

My prayers were incomplete, but my concentration was broken. Apologising to my ancestors, I struggled to my feet, and turned to face the distracting wretches. But they had scampered off across the courtyard to the kitchen. Pushing my toes into my slippers, I was met with another unpleasant surprise: the children had placed a piece of soft fruit in each of my slippers, which squished and oozed between my toes in a most disagreeable manner. I yelled for water and a cloth and, when the servant brought this, I sat on the stone steps and cleaned my feet. I noticed that the servant could not help smirking at my misfortune, so I smacked her on the head with my soiled slipper and bade her clean them and be gone.

The housekeeper came to me with another pair of slippers, which he put on my feet. Standing, I crossed the courtyard to Second Wife's quarters. I banged on her doorpost, demanding an interview.

She looked up from her embroidery in alarm. 'Whatever is the matter? Li Ling, bring some tea now for First Son,' she directed her lady-in-waiting.

Once the woman was gone, Second Wife invited me into her quarters and, in my anger, I forgot to consider the very unsuitability of her private rooms as a meeting place. Ah, had I never crossed that threshold, matters would be so very different between us now! But I did and, in doing so at the time, I was not — as I thought — asserting my primacy as master of the household in Father's absence; I was taking the first rash step down the path of thraldom to that woman: transferring my worship from the dead reposing on the ancestral alter to the very much alive Second Wife in her private rooms. For a man to trespass on a woman's quarters when that woman is not his blood relative can mean only one thing — a meaning that escaped no one but myself. In my case, the truth was revealed only when Ah Chiang sidled up to me after lunch when the rest of the household was resting.

'First Son is very sure of himself in the absence of Old Master.'

'In his absence, I am the master of this household, and will conduct myself accordingly.'

'But is it wise for Young Master to extend his husbandry to Old Master's wife? What would Old Master think of such an arrangement when he returns?'

Before I had time to reply to this slander, Ah Chiang had disappeared into the servants' quarters.

Rather than taking matters into my own hands, I should have asked for the ancestors' help and taken their counsel of forbearance — but I did not. I left them and went to express my anger directly. So it became a matter of gossip and opportunity among the servants how, on that day, I crossed the threshold and drank tea with Second Wife in her chambers. Of course, I did not in fact drink tea: our exchange lasted barely a few minutes and I had retired to the library before her servant

returned with the tea things, if that was ever her intention. It was the stuff of a women's romance! Would that I could unravel these skeins of distortion and set them right!

After her lady-in-waiting was gone, her attention turned to me.

'What is the cause of your anger, First Son?'

'That impious child you have raised has disturbed me at my prayers. If you do not discipline that child I will arrange to have him thrashed myself.'

'Your anger becomes you, and I see the spirit of your father in you. However, I request that you stay your anger. Do not waste your feelings on young children who know no better. Sit and calm down.'

But I remained standing. 'If you hope to allay punishment by flattery, you are mistaken. If your child is of this household, it will be properly respectful.'

'I see you are determined. But you lack discrimination. If you feel you need to punish someone for disturbing you at your ritual then let it be me.'

I own that I was surprised at the turn of this conversation; I had never even dreamed of laying a finger on Second Wife.

But I was to be even more surprised when she added: 'You try to walk in your father's footprints, in your cap and gown and with your learned manners, yet your whiskers are barely grown. If you will not be still, will not sit and drink tea with me here, go back to your books, Stripling, and let me speak with your father's child. Now leave me to my embroidery. It would be hazardous to your position to stay here longer.'

Like a scolded child, I obeyed her command.

Leaving her without so much as a farewell, I returned across the courtyard to the library, where my morning's study competed unsuccessfully with reviewing this extraordinary exchange over and over again, wondering what she meant with her dismissal of me.

But, in seeking to provide a texture for this discussion, to shed light on why our interview ended so much to my dishonour (Stripling, she called me!), I realised I had taken nothing in. So consumed by my image in the mirror of my own self-righteousness had I been, I had missed everything of her: her image, her chambers remained inscrutable to me. All I had were her words, framed in the context of my recollection.

And yet, there was the lingering fragrance of jasmine. And yet, her embroidery on her knee.

And perhaps the exchange was not as I saw it after all? Could I have misread it, Stripling that I was — and still am! Was ever an insult turned into a name so dear, and then back to insult again?

In short, I could not get her out of my mind.

3.
IN THE LIBRARY

THE NEXT DAY, she joined me in the library.

After a sleepless night, I had been able to conduct my morning prayers without interruption, and continued to the library for study. I went to the shelves and from the second-top row, selected *The Analects*. Naturally, I had studied the writings of Confucius before. As the esteemed author of one of the Five Classics, his philosophy of service established the examination system I would be submitting myself to in the new year; and, that morning I felt that the Master's recounting in balanced phrases the distilled observations of humankind through his long and chequered career might help calm the storm that had raged inside me all night. I returned to the seat by the doorway, where the morning light provided sufficient illumination for reading, and called for tea.

The tea arrived, pot and cups on a porcelain tray, and, without looking up, I gestured to the servant to place it on the table beside me. But instead of leaving me to my solitude, the figure seated itself on a stool by the table and proceeded to pour two cups of my delicate oolong. Such presumption in what was effectively my domain was not to be tolerated and I snapped the volume shut with the intention of crowning the upstart, until I heard that familiar voice address me.

'Good morning, First Son.'

I checked myself in time, and brought my arm and book down to table height.

Second Wife had brought the tray of tea herself, which was most irregular. If — as she had claimed in her exchange of the previous day — my behaviour had alerted the servants to something unspoken, then her actions in bringing me tea would only reinforce their suspicion.

'Good morning, Second Wife.' I kept our exchange at the formal level, not knowing what she intended by her actions, and conscious of unseen eyes watching us. I did not invite her to sip tea, but returned to my book.

I picked up *The Analects*, opening it at random, but what was the Master saying now? Book 17, verse 25: '*Women and underlings are especially difficult to handle: be friendly, and they become familiar; be distant, and they resent it*.'

I could scarcely believe my eyes. What was the unseen force at work managing my affairs? Ancestors, help me!

'May I sit with you awhile here?'

I recalled my companion and realised by the look on her face that it had caused her some considerable effort to carry the tray to the library. I regretted that I had been so lost in my volume to have not observed her undoubtedly fetching progress as she tottered across the courtyard on her golden lilies. I cast a glance at her slippers on the doorstep: no larger than a child's. Her feet, bound in their socks, would be a revelation. But these were not the thoughts of a son towards his Father's wife. I corrected my thoughts.

'Have you spoken to your child?' I inquired, perhaps more sternly than necessary. This picked up an obvious theme from the previous day's exchange. Accordingly, it was a topic within reason — one that could be closed neatly — but three parts of me did not want to dismiss her charming presence so soon.

'I am sorry that I called you Stripling yesterday, First Son. It was the wrong thing to do.'

But I, who had harboured such unworthy thoughts towards her just then, did not press home the advantage: 'I am sorry too that I approached you in such haste and anger

yesterday. It was unworthy of me, as First Son in this house, and disrespectful to you, as Second Wife to Father.' Truly this was an answer worthy of Taibo, whose moral power, the Master tells us, was supreme.

'Come, we have too much in common to argue. Let us drink tea together. May I call you by your familiar name?'

I did not know how to respond. My familiar name was for blood-family and intimates, and Father's concubines and other wives, for obvious reasons, were generally excluded from this sphere of informality. I chose to answer with a riddle: 'But you have a name for me already.'

She bent her head, and I was touched by her modesty. I returned to the wisdom of Confucius, not realising at the time that I had relinquished more than Taibo and his kingdoms: as a man, I had surrendered the initiative in my dealings with a woman — a woman nearly my relative, and yet not, thereby requiring all the more careful management.

It was only later that I realised she never did tell me whether she had disciplined her child.

But, from the knowing looks I got from everyone in the household, they felt I had been well and truly put in my place.

After this, she brought me tea every day. Often she would just sit there as I read. At first, it was difficult to ignore her, but as the days passed I accepted her presence, almost welcomed her silent homage. She made a most agreeable tea companion. In her long silk robes reaching down to her feet, her long fine hair as dark as her eyes, her smooth white skin, she was like a doll, contrasting in every way with the tanned and tattered servant girls of my knowledge.

My studies continued apace in Father's absence. I concentrated on the Five Classics, as these combined works distilled the essence of China's genius, and were the eternal subjects for examinations. I needed to know these works almost entirely by heart, as the examiner would take a phrase or one line of a couplet from the original and ask candidates to complete it; or,

demanding the impossible of candidates, task us with improving upon the original. In addition to *The Analects*, I pored over Mencius's *Disputations*, Lao Tzu's *Tao Teh Ching* and Chuang Tzu's *Essays*. But my favourite remained the *Shih Ching*, the Book of Odes, which I believe I dipped into during my studies more than the other four combined. I loved those verses almost as much as the works of the later Tang poets, who had reinstated the classical style.

One day, when she brought me my tea, Second Wife seemed more distracted than usual. By this I do not mean to imply that I was aware of her state of mind; as I have related, you will appreciate my own was well-trained and of a high order, and I was able to concentrate my attentions on my studies.

I was mouthing the verses of Du Fu, whom many consider the greatest of the Tang poets and as such an obvious inclusion in the examination, ensuring that I had his measure and rhythm within me. I caught her trying to read my lips and she looked away, flushed. Now I could study her up close: the almonds of her eyes ignoring mine, the paleness of her cheeks tinted with the faintest pink of embarrassment, her lips, redder yet and now mouthing something. Such was my reverie that she had to repeat her words.

'I wish I could be more like you, Stripling.'

'Whatever do you mean?' At that time, I was too callow to not be charmed by a favourable comparison.

'I envy you being a man, your freedom. Being able to take control of your life in the examinations and lead an independent life.'

'But I have not passed the examinations yet. And I will always have obligations to my family and ancestors.'

'To be a man would be a great thing, I think.'

'But what sort of man? There are many types and many are admired for their differences in these books. Consider the Tang poets,' I handed her the volume I was reading. 'Du Fu and Li Bai could not be more different yet they are both admired. Du Fu, a Confucian scholar praising the beauties of the natural

world. Li Bai, on the other hand, rejecting the scholarly life and wandering the country singing its beauties. Two men could not be more different, yet both are great.'

'I think you are like Du Fu with your books.'

'Would that I could be!' I laughed.

She looked at the pages, at the elegant calligraphy trailing down the page, for a long time. 'I wish I could be like Li Bai,' she said quietly. 'To travel outside this house. But I am a woman — I cannot.'

The prospect of my being bracketed in history with Second Wife, like Li Bai and Du Fu, left me strangely excited. I wanted to reach out and touch her, take her fair hand in mine, build something other in the guise of developing the analogy, but feared this would be too familiar and a breach of filial piety. I had to settle for reassuring words.

'But you can be free, in your imagination.'

She sighed. 'Stripling, you do not understand me. I am a woman.'

'To be a woman is also important,' I said softly.

'To do what? Childbearing? Embroidery? Pleasing her absent master with her homely devotion as she withers from lack of attention? I am all alone here. I do not have the company of First Wife, your mother, any more. The servants, my maid Li Ling, these are no companions. I do not know these men in your books. I have never been taught how to read. These books without pictures are as empty bowls to me.'

'But you have me. Let me be your eyes then. Let me read to you.'

She burst into tears, and I wondered whether I had offended her. But then she spoke through her tears. 'And you would give me that freedom? Truly you are quite the best man I know.' She reached down and kissed my hand resting on my lap, that very same hand that I wanted to hold hers in.

Overcome by her gratitude, I failed to check the disparaging reference to Father that her words contained. And,

from that innocent and filial exchange, rose all of our later difficulties.

From that day, I read to her in the mornings the whole range of materials I could lay my hands on. She was a good listener, and her rapt attention flattered me; I reassured myself that it helped my studies to read to her as I had to Father under the ginkgo when he was at home. And, because it happened so gradually, again I failed to recognise the dangerous transition I was making, my loyalty and affection drifting from Father to Second Wife.

'Stripling, truly you are China's genius,' she smiled at me one morning and squeezed my hand between hers.

Was ever a less deserving man praised so well? Could you have withstood better such a mountain of charm and attention?

I cannot remember when it was that obeying Father became less important than pleasing Second Wife. Or when Father became the obstacle to be avoided rather than the one to be obeyed. It was a madness; and, in the magic of the library mornings, she was Li Bai to my Du Fu for a brief, bittersweet moment while Father was away.

4.
A TREATISE ON CRICKETS

I PUT MY book down and stood to greet Second Wife as she entered the library. It was spring and the lime tree was in fruit. She wore her yellow robe, with jasmine spun in threads through her hair. After exchanging familiar greetings, she inquired what we would be reading and discussing that day.

'Chia Tsu Dao's *A Treatise on Crickets*.' The Song Dynasty scholar's work set out scientifically the various types of crickets; how and where and in what season to catch them; how to keep and train crickets to encourage their singing; the various types of food and accommodation for crickets; and, not least, a listing of their songs with the author's interpretations of their arcane meanings. I had chosen this volume, which might seem to you slight and not relevant to my studies, because even scholars need a hobby, and cricketing had been a favourite pastime of mine since I was a child.

We sat down together. Her jasmine scent filled the library. Now was the time for cricketing, as they leapt through the grass stalks by rivers and streams.

I made ready to read to her, but she started in on the topic ahead of me.

'You know, Stripling, a woman in a house is like a cricket in a gilded cage.'

'Pray, how can that be so?' I asked, intrigued by her simile.

'Why, there are many ways. First, she is the cherished possession of her Master. Second, when fed well and housed

comfortably, she sings her gratitude. Third, when left in a cage with others who compete for their Master's attention, she will fight to the death. Need I go on?'

This conversation was taking me deeper than I wanted to go. I thought of Mother and her illness the previous year. But I was charmed by Second Wife's witty chirping.

'Please, continue your comparison, if you can.'

'Fourth, the Master is willing to shed his blood for his woman, as a cricket-owner does for his crickets. A Master will defend his house and family against bandits. A cricket-owner will allow himself to be stung by mosquitoes; after the creatures have gorged themselves on his warm blood, he feeds them to his crickets.'

'And does this supreme example of self-sacrifice earn their loyalty?' I inquired.

'The woman's, or the cricket's? Come, a cricket is a fickle thing, a bauble. One season and it dies. That is its charm. A woman is different. She can do so much more than sing.' She paused before adding, 'But one man's blood is as good as another's — is that not the teaching of your master Confucius?'

I met her smile. It was true: one man's blood was as good as another — that was the basis of the imperial examination system, which had served so many dynasties so well for almost 2,000 years. I was as good as any other candidate, I had as much right to face the examiners. But, in facing my current inquisitor, I had other things on my mind.

'And what of the poor mosquito?' I could not help smiling.

'Why, it has feasted in a stranger's house. It has known happiness before it dies. It dies serving another purpose, bringing pleasure to others. I do not think you need worry yourself about the mosquito,' she smiled back.

But I was not thinking about mosquitoes. I was thinking how the study for my examinations seemed less and less interesting when compared with the education on offer at home.

5.
AT THE TOMBS

IT FEELS GOOD to be striding free and clear, outside the four walls of our compound, within the confines of which so much deception has occurred. If I am a Du Fu, my days spent cloistered among the volumes and scrolls in Father's library, today I feel like a Li Bai, wandering free where she cannot go on the mountainside, leaving below the life of ants with its petty intrigues. Up here, there is only the clear air and the sound of my breathing — and, inevitably, my memories.

I fumble in my belt pouch and pull out my little carved cricket-box, admire the cloud-ringed mountains carved into the ivory, feel the weight of its memories in my hand. She gave it to me in happier times, and it is as dear to me as her face once was. Perhaps I can catch a cricket among the tombs, make it sing, and, with its beautiful melancholic voice, drown out the sorrow in my soul.

But this is not a time for the idle pleasures of crickets — I should be focusing my attentions on matters less transitory. And speaking of transitory, I note Father's sprig of lime is wilting and I wish to make sure its respect is done to the memory of Mother before it is completely faded.

Not too far to go now; I can tell by the trees around us that we are close to the top. We continue up the path, through familiar spruce and cypress, the path a dense springy mat of their needles. The air grows colder and thinner around us as we leave the living behind and enter, as it were, the realm of the

deceased. It will be cold here tonight, and I am glad Ah Chiang is carrying extra bedding for us.

A few woodcutters are ahead of us; they stop to let us pass. Ah Chiang exchanges a few words with them, but I am too focused on my thoughts to give them more than a glance. Would that I could be alone with my ancestors, and not burdened with the unwanted companionship of that reprobate! And I recall Wang Wei's lines from his Wang River sequence:

Tall bamboos reflected in the meandering water
So the rippling river drifts blue and green
We are on the Shang Mountain track unobserved —
Something no woodman would understand.

Had I come by myself, I would have set up a hermitage among these mortal remains, seeking their forgiveness and return to the cares of Earth only when purified!

This morning, over lit incense, I prayed to the ancestors' tablets in the Pavilion of Stone, and advised them — but they who know everything already, already knew — that I would be visiting their tombs shortly. I apologised to the ancestors for my being absent last spring, explaining that my mourning for my Mother, as well as my studies, had kept me away. I prayed to the God of Prosperity for luck in the forthcoming county-level exams, which would be held in Tong An township, and sought their assistance for my journey there. I also requested their forgiveness in advance for my likely absence in future years, explaining that family duty and the glory of imperial service in distant provinces would likely keep me distant.

So you can imagine my surprise when, deep in communication, kneeling before the altar, he entered the altar-chamber.

I asked Ah Chiang what was the meaning of his intrusion, and he advised me that as he would be visiting these eminent personages as well, he wanted to seek their assistance in making our journey a profitable one.

Profitable? Has he no dignity, that he would see our spiritual journey in terms of material gain? Presuming to petition my ancestors? And now, sanctioned by Father, accompanying me to their tombs! Mother would turn in her grave to have her remains tended by this stranger. The scoundrel is becoming too confident, too sure of his place in Father's household. Such extraordinary behaviour, fed no doubt by that woman who has made my life these past few moons such a misery.

Li Bai and Du Fu indeed! I kick the pine needles underfoot, sending a spray into Ah Chiang's back. My preparations in disarray, I try not to think of Du Fu's own failures in the examinations, but throw myself on the mercy of my ancestors. I admit it, I was her slave. It was a madness, to be sure; but one that is passing. Has passed. Now the tombs beckon.

Between the trees, I see the sky, white wisps of clouds enshrouding the blue-grey sky of little spring. As we crest the hill, the vista opens out into a hollow where tombs have been laid out over many generations. The nearest one faces us and looks fairly recent, its horseshoe shape still intact, its earthen mound still piled high: I wipe my eyes as I think of Mother. Beside the resting place of her mortal remains lie the more settled mounds of my longer-departed ancestors, who provide a foreground to the more substantial memorials built higher up on the hill by more illustrious lineages than our own. A row of stairs leads to a pavilion shaded by an ancient and twisted cypress tree, built no doubt by the descendents of one of these great Tong An families; perhaps the one to its side, a stone box with a portal doorway. Further back again, near the top of the hill, stone walls have crumbled, exposing even older monuments, broken and untended, markers of lost lineages. Sadly, I wonder where their children's children's children might be, and whether we might have time to explore these ancient vestiges of once-powerful lineages, and dwell at these heights on lost greatness. But to my own first.

Taking Father's offering, I proceed to the graves for a closer inspection while Ah Chiang arranges our camp for the

evening. Odd, the grass looks trimmed as if parkland; someone has been here recently. I stop and listen; over the whistle of wind there are other sounds, as of music among the tombs. Which of my ancestors is speaking to me? I feel fearful: they must be displeased with me to be audible. My ears strain to catch the unearthly notes. A bleat and chink, and a goat emerges from behind a wall. Startled, we stare at each other, its horrid oblong pupils a pair of tombstones in its eyes. It reaches for the sprig of lime in my hand and I draw back sharply. It raises its tail and ejects a stream of pellets, before bucking up and running away. I follow it over the wall and see, among the ruins beyond, a solitary goatherd, his charges feeding on the grass as he rests his back against a tree, playing his pipe. My relief is palpable: I imagined a ghost in these remote reaches.

I step back over the wall, and return to my family's tombs. Apart from goat pellets, the area is remarkably clean of debris, the goats having weeded and fertilised as they wander among the dead. The earthen mounds are somewhat trampled, marked with cloven feet; we will need to raise some of these a bit. I make a mental note to bring a millet-broom from the camp site to clear the earthen mounds.

As I approach, I can see that most of the horseshoe memorials are barely legible, but, from long familiarity, I know which is the final resting place of the mortal remains of which ancestor. I am glad I remembered to pack paint to brighten the horseshoes and reinscribe their names, reconsecrate their memory. Away to the side is Mother's memorial, still bright and legible; but then it has been less than 10 moons after all. Her tomb was laid out, with the help of a feng shui master, in the lee of a rocky overhang, sheltered to avoid the winds that blow through the cemetery and which disturb the bones in their urns. It is a still, quiet place, suitable for a woman who led her adult life secluded in her compound.

I approach Mother's tomb, eyes moist, and place Father's sprig of lime atop its earth. I kneel and prostrate myself before

her remains. And have second thoughts: the goats will only come and eat this, scrape around for more feed buried in Mother's mound. I sit up, perplexed, not knowing what to do, until it occurs to me to seek the intercession of the ancestors: what would they have me do? Perhaps their answer will make itself plain in the work of tidying these tombs. Excusing myself to Mother, I get up and head back.

At our camp site, I find that Ah Chiang has negotiated to buy a goat from the goatherd for our dinner.

'And you will spill blood here among the tombs?' I ask him, incredulous.

'Sprinkle a little on their memories,' he replies with a sneer.

That is too barbaric to consider. 'Leave the wretched creature and come with me,' I demand. I grab the whitewash and broom and walk away, refusing to be engaged.

Chastened, Ah Chiang follows me and at the tombs I point out the older ones, which need their earth mounds raised higher. As he shovels earth, I sweep goat droppings aside. We work silently beside each other, not speaking for 10 minutes at a time, and there is a strange harmony in this working together that I have not felt with him before. Perhaps Father was right and he deserves the opportunity to make amends as well?

When we have finished our sweeping and piling, I explain to him the location and names of our ancestors and direct him to whitewash as I paint in their names. I go back to get the paint and rummage through our bags without success.

'Where's the black paint? And the brush?' I call out to Ah Chiang. Without black paint we cannot inscribe their names on their memorial tablets.

Ah Chiang looks up inquiringly from his whitewashing.

'How in the heavens did you forget to pack them?' I accuse Ah Chiang. 'What are we going to do now?' I wail.

'We could use goat's blood,' he suggests brightly.

'Blood!'

'Goat's droppings then. We can crush the pellets into the carved inscriptions, but it won't last long. The first rainfall and the stones will wash clean and illegible again.'

'But this is all too awful,' I object.

'Well, Young Master,' and I detect a hint of the sneer coming back into his voice, 'is it better to leave them unpainted or make do with what we have here?'

'These are my ancestors. You get on with the white-washing while I think about this.' I walk away, pondering the intolerable situation we now find ourselves in. But I am shaken from my thoughts by the breathtaking view over the crest. There, way down below, is the township of Xiamen, its buildings sprawled in all directions from the old fort. I think of our own village and its artisanry magnified a thousandfold in the township. So many lives without meaning down there, without appreciation for our great and timeless culture, eking out a miserable daily existence.

I regard wide-eyed the rest of the world. In the foreground, I can make out the outlines of Gulangyu Island, where the foreign devils have made their base, and, in the channel between small upright shapes, vessels lustrous in the afternoon light.

The serrated lines of the township look absurd from up here, all the more so when contrasted with the dramatic curve and jag of nature's structures. The town's western extremity is draped by grey raincloud. I hope this will not wet us this night, and I make a mental note that in case of rain we should make our shelter in the pavilion tonight.

'Young Master?' Ah Chiang calls to me. He has finished the whitewashing.

I direct him to move our camp site under cover, and I head off among the tombs: the promise of rain, and the threat of groundwater, will draw out crickets from their subterranean burrows. With a morsel of soft chewed rice on my long thumbnail, I seek to coax them from their hiding places. As I burrow in among the grass and rocks, I see Ah Chiang

hauling pots and bags across the grave site to the pavilion. He makes several trips while I am thus occupied, moving from place to place in search of these singing and fighting prizes.

'Young Master?'

I turn startled from my prostrate position among the grass and rocks.

'Praying for a cricket?' he smiles. He has finished moving our belongings.

I put my cricket-box away, fumbling in my belt pouch, and slowly get to my feet.

'What about the tombs?'

Grudgingly, I admit he is right — the smell of kindred blood will keep the goats off the mounds — and, with apologies to our ancestors, I have him slice the beast's neck, draining the blood into a bowl. Now we are without a brush of any kind.

'The tail?'

But it is caked in droppings and urine.

'That bit of twig there?' Ah Chiang suggests, pointing to the sprig of lime on Mother's mound.

I cannot bear his smirking helpfulness any more. I take the bowl of goat's blood and, sobbing for the shame of it all, daub the names of my ancestors onto their memorial tablets using my index finger. It is nearly dark by the time I have completed the last name, and my finger is scraped raw.

Time for dinner. Ah Chiang has prepared goat meat with green leaves and rice. But I am too tired to eat, and too put off goat to be hungry for its flesh. The goatherd joins him for dinner and the smell of cooked meat draws a couple of other wanderers to our pavilion. Men in capes, with dark clothes, they speak little but eat greedily.

I wonder what these newcomers are doing in these parts at night. They carry no tools and they seem to know Ah Chiang. But I am too tired after the day's exertions to engage them in conversation and bid them goodnight, rolling over in my blankets.

As I sleep, I dream of Second Wife in her cricket-cage, our gilded compound below, singing to me, as I lie trapped under a growing pile of stone tablets from the tombs of the ancestors, crushing me until I plead forgiveness. The pain in my chest is intense, yet I still strain to listen to her voice. 'Another note!' I croak. She chirps and another tablet is added to the pile on my chest by a frowning ancestor. I can hardly breathe now.

Coughing, I wake up to find my head covered by a sack and unfamiliar voices laughing, the voices of the strangers who joined us around our fire. I struggle to sit up and realise my hands are tied together. I try to move them but they are trussed to a rope around my waist.

'Ah Chiang!' I call out, but there is no answer.

'Our crab in the bag's waking up,' one of the strangers says. A hand grips my shoulder, shakes me, but I can see nothing.

'Enjoy your sleep?' another voice asks.

'Where's Ah Chiang?' I demand to know.

'I don't know, do you know where Ah Chiang is?' one voice says, singsong.

'No, I don't,' another responds in the same singsong. 'Guess his friend's run away.'

'What about the goatherd?' I persist. Now I am awake and am starting to get frightened.

'We're your goatherds, Young Master,' a voice sneers. 'And now we're taking you to join the rest of our flock on Gulangyu.'

'Who told you to do this?' I demand of my captors. I have heard stories of men disappearing, taken from their families and sold into slavery, but cannot believe this is happening to me. Who would want me banished thus?

But this time there is no answer. I am dragged roughly to my feet with, 'Get up now, we've got a long way to go before daylight.'

6.
A GAME OF FAN-TAN

THE CROUPIER THREW coins across the tin-lined table, which scattered and clattered in the dense expectant silence like the stones he and Brother Lim Poh had drunkenly tossed on the roof of Big Hoa's house. There had been screams from inside, the crack of broken tiles, and the bustle of men being shaken into action. Angee sweated and waited, drunk with anticipation, as fearful and giggly as he had felt after Big Hoa's men had chased him into the rice fields surrounding Hai Chong Village until, the darkness enveloping them, they gave up. Brother Lim Poh had not been so lucky: he had tripped over in his drunkenness and came home a few days later, his eye swollen and his front teeth missing. A blind man was a liability, let alone one who had damaged clan property and could harm the group's chances of selection, so Angee had filled his friend's place in Big Hoa's clan tong preparing for travel to the Gold Mountain. But then he had tripped up in his own way: Big Hoa's Gold Mountain had passed him by, left him stranded in Xiamen, and all that mattered now were the coins on the table.

Angee watched as the croupier stretched out his tin cup and clanged it down on the coins in a thunderclap. Beside him, the banker, his sallow skin testimony to a life lived indoors and by night, watched the tin sheet for any movements: any wavering hands surreptitiously changing bets, any coins added or withdrawn from the betting positions at each corner or straddling a side.

Angee sweated, his sour workman's smell blending with the smoke and heat of the close room. Number Four, where his 16 coins rested, lay between the croupier to his right and the banker opposite. The fan-tan table was pushed close into the corner of the room so that these men could not be jumped from behind. To the croupier's left was the Number One corner; between this and the number two corner, Angee and a few others pressed their bets. Across from Angee a large man sat, his cap and silk wrap marking him as being of a better fortune than his companions, a space around him at the crowded table. Well-fed, too well fed, the kind you only saw in the village around tax-collection time. No prizes for guessing what he was doing here.

Behind them the room stretched into darkness and speculation, the only lighting being an oil-lamp hanging directly over the table. The mandarin's large frame cast a long shadow across the room as he took snuff: it smelt of something dark and mysterious and expensive.

Angee's eyes narrowed to Number Four and the tin cup. Loose coins were swept back towards the croupier until the table was clear again; only then, and with a clear sense of ceremony, the croupier lifted the tin cup from the table's surface, and with his ebony wand started drawing off coins from the pile in fours.

Angee watched impassively as the pile grew steadily smaller until less than a dozen were left.

'It's two!' a pop-eyed man alongside Angee shouted with delight. The croupier frowned and, with a flick of his wand, drew off another four coins, leaving three brass holey coins behind.

'You cheated, you son of a bitch! That's my last coin.'

'Then leave the table and let others play,' the mandarin spoke in a dismissive falsetto. It was an extraordinarily high voice from one so large, and it marked him as a eunuch. A few surreptitious glances confirmed this. His facial skin was smooth and completely free of hair, his hands soft and pudgy, his fingernails long: the markers of a person who did not use their hands to make a living.

'You saw that — didn't you — how he drew three coins away instead of four?' the pop-eyed man appealed to Angee. His tattered clothing and thickened callused hands suggested a workman like himself. Too far gone already, his eyes were yellowed with jaundice and fear, a pair of yellow disks in his face recalling the brass coins they were staking their lives on. Angee thought of his own four losing bets in a row, redoubled each time to recoup his losses, and shook the man off.

The rattle of coins in the tin cup took him back to the table.

'Bets!' the banker roared, as two men slipped out of the darkness to drag the pop-eyed man from the table.

'See you all in the Second Court of Hell!' he cried, eyes bulging as if ready for extraction by demon henchmen. But the men around him ignored him, as if already frozen into the blocks of ice that awaited them under King Chu Jiang's fiat.

'See you there then, Brother,' Angee muttered under his breath. He did not care, not now: all that existed for the moment was the table and the coins. If he could only stay in the play long enough for his luck to change.

Insensible of any bad omens in occupying the space vacated by one whose luck was dry, another workman squeezed in alongside Angee and, shouting at the banker, cast a couple of coins between the Number Two and Number Three corners, halving the odds but doubling his chances of winning. Angee checked his remaining pile, counted out 32 and placed these on Number Four again. The mandarin raised an eyebrow and the banker nodded in agreement.

The croupier cast his cup: coins skittered and spattered across the tabletop, one or two bouncing clear, ricocheting off the raised rim of the table. Another thunderclap as the croupier brought his tin cup down on the coins in play.

This time it fell to two. The banker added Angee's losses to his stash, calculated the workman's winnings less commission and swept it across the table.

'Master Feng,' the banker pushed a pile of coins past Angee towards the mandarin, although Angee had not seen him place a bet in his time at the table.

Gathering up his commission, Master Feng left the table with a rustle and a scent of faded flowers, and was swallowed by the darkness. Angee remembered the kicks of his kind's slippered foot and his bile rose as he imagined the scene outside, the two loin-clothed coolies stirred into wakefulness with a few well-placed toe-taps in the kidneys, gagging, stumbling to their feet and bearing the mandarin away in his silk-curtained sedan chair to some other gaming house.

'Bets!' the banker roared. Angee wondered whether to follow the mandarin's pattern or continue with Number Four. He counted his coins and realised that he did not have enough to redouble his bet.

'You betting or just taking up space?' A merchant to Angee's side elbowed him in the ribs. 'A bit of advice? Stick to ploughing fields, farm-boy.'

The comment, calculated to sting, hit its mark. And now a figure from the darkness behind tapped Angee on the shoulder, a loan shark familiar with the cold sweat of fear and desperation soaking Angee's jacket, sliding over another 50 coins to add to his small residue.

Voices clamoured in Angee's head, seeking their fair share of him and counselling against taking the money — Spring Flower's anger at him raiding the family stores, his father's shame at his unfilial son selling off ornaments from the family altar, Big Hoa's disappointment when his stealing from their pooled funds in Xiamen was uncovered. And always the complaint: you cannot be trusted.

Well, let him be untrustworthy, he did not care about their good opinion anyway. He had not seen any of his family for more than a season now and he could resist their demands a little longer. And the tong that had been his family in town had expelled him and another from their group heading for their

fortune on Gold Mountain. Angee might have been a gambler, even a thief, but Lok See had befallen a worse fate still, succumbing to the opium supplied by the foreign devils.

No, the only prospect of a gold mountain for Angee was in the pile of holey coins before him and their power to multiply if placed on the right number. He took the money, gambling — as he had always done — that things were already as bad as they could be, and that there was no turning back. All that mattered now was the next bet. He stuck with Number Four, pushing 64 coins across to the far corner.

The croupier cast the next round; Angee watched as the counters were whisked away till only three remained. But the odds, the table, the whole room were against him tonight.

Sixty-four coins gone! A season's wages in one round! And not enough of a pool to recoup this loan, let alone his earlier losses. How was he going to repay this, short of jumping someone or raiding a store? And what risks did that involve? But he knew he was damned already, like all gamblers.

He tried the mandarin's Number Two — singly and paired with one and three to spread his bet — over the next few rounds, but his luck was dry. Soon all the loan shark's money was gone as well.

'You and I need to have a chat,' a soft voice said from behind him. Angee knew it was the loan shark or one of his minions. Turning, he pushed the figure behind him to the ground and sprang for the doorway, forcing his way through the crowd. He stumbled down the wooden stairway into the narrow alleyway, where the crisp night air brought back to him the enormity of his situation.

Downstairs, someone coughed, and Angee stepped back into the shadows, assuming a defensive position, fearing he was to be beaten. Slowly, his eyes adjusted to the darkness, and he could begin to make out recessed doorways and overhanging windows where an attack could be launched from. But there was nobody there. Breathing deeply, Angee forced himself to calm as

he walked down the alleyway. The shophouses lining the street were boarded up for the night. At ground level their bluff fronts were impenetrable to outsiders, but from the occasional upstairs windows the light of an oil-lamp burning told of men toiling over their accounts. If he could only make the corner, he could run for it down one of the several passageways opening out, improving his odds of escape.

'So,' a voice began softly, this time from the gateway ahead of Angee, 'how do you propose to repay my Master Feng?' The voice was soft, very soft, and Angee strained to listen. 'To help you, I borrowed money from Master Feng, a worthy whose station is so great he would not care about the lives of we ants. He would not hesitate to have me punished if I could not give him back his money with interest.'

'You mean the fat eunuch who won tonight without placing bets?'

'Master Feng would not appreciate your insolence. Nor, for that matter, do I, village-man.'

A kick from behind sent Angee sprawling into an involuntary kowtow. He sprang to his feet, his palms grazed but otherwise unhurt.

'No fighting now,' the soft voice warned. 'You should be grateful we are able to help you pay off your debts.'

'What do you have in mind?' Angee could not make out the person speaking. In the black clothes worn by nearly everyone in the old quarter, the speaker blended into the shadows of the alleyway.

'Read this,' a scroll was tossed on the ground before him.

Angee refused to admit his illiteracy, so he unfurled the scroll and looked at it. It seemed to be a kind of hastily prepared official document. Some horizontal brushstrokes were familiar to him as numbers, but the rest of it was a mass of indecipherable characters.

'Sign this and your debt to Master Feng will be honoured. At Foreign Devil Tait's on Gulangyu.'

'Gulangyu? Where the foreign devils live?' An island off an island, across the inner harbour from the main settlement on Xiamen. Angee had sailed there on delivery runs and fished in the sheltered bays off the southern tip, but he largely avoided it; a man could go missing there without too much difficulty. 'And if I refuse to sign? Can't I pay some other way?' Playing for time, Angee threw the scroll back on the ground.

'With what? That paper says I own you,' the softness continued, revealing its menace. 'You've got yourself in too deep this time, gambling man. Pick up your IOU.'

And, with a shove from behind, Angee was on the ground with the scroll.

This was his chance. Rolling and springing to his feet, he tried to grab his opponent about the knees, bring him down, but his move had been anticipated. A rabbit-chop to his neck caused his legs to crumble and, before he knew it, Angee's hands were roped together and he was half-lifted, half-dragged to his feet. His queue was pulled hard till his scalp hurt; his eyes looked into his captor's.

'I'm sure you see the sense in cooperating,' his captor smiled. 'As your hands are full, let me help you with your cap.'

Angee's cap was retrieved from the ground and pressed roughly back on to his head in a show of humiliation.

'Who are you?' Angee asked, his voice wavering.

But his captor ignored Angee.

'Just two weeks to go, Scar, and three more after this one to meet Master Feng's quota. Then we can have a break.'

'With a woman and a pipe,' Scar added enthusiastically.

'Until the next orders come in.' He turned to Angee: 'Just another small businessman. You can call me Brother Beng. Now follow me.'

7.
NIGHTWATCHMEN

ANGEE FOLLOWED BROTHER Beng down the kinks and bends of the narrow, dark lane, the clop-clop of the wooden shoes ahead his guide. There was a spring in his captor's step as he led them through the artisans' neighbourhood. If, as Angee suspected, Feng's lackey was a crimp — a labour contractor using fair means and other — he had set up Angee good and proper tonight. What had begun as a little squeeze of loan sharking had proceeded, as Angee gambled more and more recklessly, into a full-blown crimping.

Now that Beng had the IOU on him, Angee was as good as on the boat already. Why had he not heeded the fortune teller today? Was this how Big Hoa's adventure of a season ago would end — an unknown journey, alone and friendless, across the seas? The thought that he could disappear without trace, without his passing marked, terrified Angee.

At the end of the passageway, leaving behind the gambling den that had become Angee's nightmare, they stepped over a raised gate into the nightmares of others: a few men, their bodies wasted and drawn, curled foetus-like, shivering in their opium cravings. Angee's bare feet stumbled as he stepped over these living dead, like Lok See, victims of the barbarians' poison. Angee had not seen Lok See for some weeks now and he wondered if he was still alive. But a useless addict would be of no help to Angee now.

Down another laneway lined with the bluff faces of wooden-shuttered shophouses, they passed more slumbering forms: men from the countryside curled up on the steps, heads pillowed on their livelihoods — their baskets of cloths or herbal medicines. Then another step up and over into a new laneway, and along until its end in another guarded gateway. The nightwatchman opened one eye and, at a nod from the crimp, waved the entourage through.

Angee wondered whether they were deliberately taking a back route, or whether the crimp and his henchman were so used to avoiding the open space and inquisitive eyes of the high street that skulking rat-like in the gloom of these unremarked lanes was second nature.

Another alleyway, then another into the heart of the old quarter. Angee knew well the twists, turns and zigzags of its centuries-old artisans' streets — Wooden-Chest Street, where carpenters worked; Drum-Skin Street for leatherworkers; Fabric-Merchant Street; Ironworker Street; Paper Lantern Street — where tradesmen in the same field gathered near the temples to their patron spirit. A few men from Hai Chong Village had worked these alleyways as delivery men, preparing the way for Angee; and so, when things had not worked out, he had shifted goods, made deliveries throughout the old quarter, even tried his hand at some of the old crafts with the blessing of the local guilds.

If only he could get these ropes off, he wagered he would have a fighting chance to dissolve into the old quarter. But his wrists were bound tight, looped to his neck, and his struggles choked him. And who would help him here anyway? Not the nightwatchmen whose alleys they passed through. These men, on the lookout for fires and thieves and generally maintaining the peace in their area, ignored any claims Angee's rope bracelets and necklace might have made on their attention, leaving him wondering whether the entire old quarter was in collusion with the crimps.

As the trio pressed on unimpeded through the guarded alleys, what did the silent nightwatchmen see? Three men, all dressed in black jackets and pantaloons. Two were frequent visitors and vaguely familiar, their companion in the middle less so. If their gaze rested longer on the roped one in the middle, it was merely to confirm that the unfortunate was not one of their own, nothing more.

But this dawn it was just another transient, with no financial claim to their protection, who was being marched through their alleys. They grunted and waved the trio on. Alone and friendless, life could be cheap in the old quarter.

8.
THE PORT

AT LAST THEY emerged from the narrow lanes of the old quarter into a wide street, its three-storey terraces curving down towards the waterline: Kai Yuan Lu, the port road, where you could get anything you wanted. Every dozen or so paces, they passed a lamp haloed by smoke in an open doorway, and a pyjama-clad woman seated at the foot of the stairs, her toes splayed: big-footed port girls smooth like fish — reeking of quick opportunity behind a rolled-down bamboo blind — not the three-inch golden lilies of the women in the fragrant houses near the old castle back up the hill. A man sidled past them in the passageway, reeking sweetly of opium.

Keeping to the shadows of the colonnaded walkway, they picked their way around puddles of urine. They passed a man stooped down over another, rummaging in his fellow's pockets as he slept, ignoring them. Angee had slept like that; had helped himself to others' drunken pockets as well, when he needed money and work was thin on the ground.

He saw an opportunity: 'Hey, Beng.'

In front, the crimp's shoulders tightened.

'You've only got a few more to crimp and you've made your quota for the season?' he asked Beng's back.

'That's right.'

'This neighbourhood must provide a steady stream of recruits.'

Silence. The sound of their footsteps, then: 'It's not bad, if you know where to look.'

'Maybe I could help you grab a few, give you both an early break.'

Shouts and a rumble like thunder made them pause. A porter hauling a barrow piled high with rice sacks came tearing around a corner as they shrank back under the colonnade. Sweating and sinewy-armed, the veins in his neck bulging like a buffalo — which in effect he was — the man glanced at Angee and his tied hands, and, with another shout to keep Angee's bad luck off his back, he ran through the Si Lang Arch, the gateway to the port.

Straddling the street, its central arch broad enough to admit the passage of two barrows at once, the gateway was a memorial to the brave deeds of the naval commander, Si Lang, whose vessels ferried soldiers to the garrison in Taiwan. Above the main archway, serpents faced off each other, fangs bared. To either side, pedestrians passed through smaller archways; above each were characters that Angee had been told were quotes from an ancient scholar called Confucius exhorting duty. Above the lot, a boat-shaped finial supported two fish emblems, and rampant dragons crested the extremities of the tiled roof-ridge.

'Why would you do that, gambling man?'

'Well, perhaps you could see your way clear to writing off my debt. Toss you — my ropes for a few crimps. I've got nothing to lose, have I?'

Angee felt a push from behind.

'Aiee, you mad bastard,' Scar smiled, revealing brown and missing teeth. 'You've lost everything already and you still want to have a bet.'

'Not quite everything,' he retorted. Angee might have been the crimp's property, but he knew Master Feng had no chance of getting his money back if they disposed of him.

But Beng was not laughing.

'I think you've tossed enough coins tonight. And I have this to lose,' Beng slapped Angee's tied hands with his IOU. 'See if Foreign Devil Tait is interested in your proposal.'

Now the buildings were on one side only; on the far side lay the water, oily and black. And everywhere the smell of fish, its slimy, almost sexual redolence hinting at so much of what the port offered. Angee heard the muttering of voices from a nearby tavern, a hole in the wall offering shot-glasses of rice-wine, where he and other working men met and swapped stories with other labourers and sailors, drinking to remember or forget. Hanging either side of shophouse doorways, red wooden banners invoked happiness and prosperity; rice-paper lamps in windows shooed away night demons more fearful and malevolent than the passing crimps.

A man stabbing joss-sticks into a plant pot at the doorway to his shophouse looked up and, recognising Angee, looked away quickly, ignoring Angee's eyes wide in appeal. Fat Chuan enjoyed a certain reputation as a go-between; he could arrange anything for anyone, for a price. Angee had delivered parcels to his shophouse, and from there to some of the dens in the old quarter, no questions asked. Everyone in the bars whom Angee had drunk and fought with had their views on what Fat Chuan's main business was, and it was not selling joss-sticks, not in this part of town. He was a good person not to cross, had helped Angee out of difficult situations in the past until a supplier told him of Angee's extra deliveries. But Fat Chuan would not be helping him this morning; muttering prayers, he burned paper words to erase Angee's recent passage.

At the water's edge, a few sampans rose and fell gently on the shore-lap.

Beng called out softly, and a head popped up from under the curved roof of one.

'Catch no good?'

'I've had better,' the sampan pilot offered warily.

'Take us across to Gulangyu!'

The sailor looked slowly at the three men, before naming three times the usual price.

'Robbery!' the crimp protested.

'I've had a worse night's fishing than you,' the sailor replied, nodding at Angee's tied hands.

The crimp settled for twice the going rate. They rolled their trousers up and stepped through the water and into the sampan. Angee was half-lifted, half-rolled over the side by Scar, landing face-first in the bilge water. Winded, he came up spluttering fish-scales.

'Go easy on him, we don't want to attract any more attention now, do we?' Beng said to Scar, with a threat in his voice. 'Pick him up and put him under cover now.'

Angee was set upright, or at least as near to upright as he could get, his neck and back bent under the low ceiling of the sampan's wooden cabin. In the corner was a small boy, presumably the pilot's son. Angee remembered his son at that age, happy to come along for the ride, to help dad out, playing in the rice field mud.

'What's your name, boy?' Angee asked. But the boy did not reply, shrinking back from contact as if Angee were a ghost. Unresponding already, sullen like his own dull boy had become! Angee bared his teeth at the pilot's son, and the boy, wailing, scampered above decks, leaving Angee alone in the cabin.

He had heard stories of Spring Flower taking another husband in his absence, of a third child, when he had sent money back to Hai Chong through the clan bankers the last time. How old would Young Hoa be now — 10, 11? Old enough to work himself, support the family. And Spring Blossom? Well, she could help Spring Flower on the land or be sold off as a servant to the schoolteacher or the village head. Unless Spring Flower's new companion had other uses for her. He wondered whether he would ever see his family again.

His passengers aboard, the sampan pilot sprang to the stern from where he poled the sampan into deeper water. The

pilot working his oars in a crisscross fashion, the sampan made its way steadily through the still waters of the inner harbour, passing junks and coastal vessels offloading and reprovisioning their cargo into sampans powered by pigtailed youths: ferrying from ship to shore and back again, vegetables and chickens and rice, proffered through portholes and down rope ladders. They passed beyond these vessels and steered into the main channel, the pilot working his sampan at an angle across the steady south-flowing current. Angee rocked with the swell, wet with bilge water he shivered from the cold and anticipation.

What hope was there anyway for poor men such as himself, born as good as dead, condemned to a life of brute toil? Men like him arrived wide-eyed from the countryside to swell the port's workforce; men like him were discarded when they had outlived their usefulness.

The salt water tightened the ropes on his wrists, cutting him.

Perhaps he should have stayed home after all. Angee thought of the quiet and unchanging life in the Hai Chong rice fields, where days were measured by the number of seedlings poked elbow-deep into mud, and evenings were spent in darkness. Yet a quiet life was for the lucky ones, and there was no guarantee of that in the village in these troubled times. Who could say whether the Manchus and their manifold opponents would not have disposed of him, press-ganged into their militias, had he remained in the village?

He listened to the lap of water on the hull of the sampan, smelt the fish. He could barely remember Spring Flower's face, her callused hands, her reproaches.

No, better to have gone out and seen the world. If he had buried himself even deeper this time, the odds were still in his favour that he would get through as before.

Secure in the knowledge that he held the winning cards, Angee laughed out loud, his laughter echoing across the water.

9.
ON GULANGYU

THE SAMPAN GROUND to a halt, sand scraping on its flat bottom, and Angee banged his head on a cabin beam. He clambered from the sampan, the sand squeaking under his feet, watched silently by the wide-eyed boy and his father, the pilot.

They had landed on a beach that had formed in the lee of a stone retaining wall, hidden from view by mangroves. But they were not alone. Angee could make out men like himself, hands tied together, being half-pushed, half-carried along the beach. Their clothes were messed and wet, like his own, and he could detect the smell of rice-wine in the air — some poor souls would be having the hangover of their lives this morning — and the reek of soiled trousers.

A little way along they came to a creek. Angee was thirsty but, after seeing other prisoners squatting in the water, he did not want to risk a drink. Still, the water felt good: smooth, almost oily on his legs after so much salt.

Some distance offshore, a devils' ship lay at anchor. Even from this distance, it was huge. In what felt like another life, Angee had done his share of deckhanding, taking goods up and down the coast. He had seen these giants cruising the coast under sail: three-, four- and even five-masters, capable of carrying many *mou* of sail to traverse the great oceans. But this one was in need of some attention: two masts were snapped off, and it was listing badly in the water. Whether this was due to its resting on a sandbank or a leak below the waterline, it was

impossible to tell. Men paced about above deck, armed with pikes and cleavers. A few sampans buzzed around the vessel, like gnats around a buffalo.

'How do you like the look of that tea-house?' Scar sniggered. He waved to the men on deck, one of whom raised his arm in response.

So it was a prison ship, a hulk, and these toughs were its warders.

'You've stayed there then?' Angee snapped back, feeling he had nothing to lose.

'Why, you little—' Scar lunged at Angee, falling in the soft sand at his feet. Angee made to kick him in the face, but his legs were knocked from beneath him.

'Stop it you two,' Beng hissed at the men sprawled in the sand. 'You,' he waved the IOU within striking distance of Angee's head, 'are in enough trouble as it is. And you,' he added, turning to Scar, 'should know better. Leave him in one piece, will you? We're nearly there and I don't want you to undo all my hard work with your stupid temper.'

Angee got to his feet, smiling at his little victory. As he got up he could hear something like cheering. Then a banging noise on wood directed his attention back to the hulk, where the men were pounding their pikestaffs on the deck. Angee looked puzzled, until he recognised that faces and hands were waving to him from the portholes below.

'See what you've done now, idiot?' Beng hissed at Scar. 'Stirred up their cargo. Settle down or you'll end up below decks as well.'

They made their way slowly up the rise along one of the rabbit tracks. It was not easy with his hands tied; and Angee tried not to look down from where they had climbed. Then they came out over the top and found themselves on the headland facing a pair of massive stone gateposts, their square sections rising higher than a man and topped with spheres, marking the entrance to a compound.

Angee wondered why the compound was not closer to the main port area on the island. Its sheer inaccessibility meant you needed to walk cargo in and out. Unless of course it could walk itself. Angee shuddered as he realised what they were looking at.

The three men entered Foreign Devil Tait's compound: two crimps and their human cargo. Inside the compound, a few buildings clustered around a courtyard. The nearest building, a tiled single-storey sandstone and brick structure, with a few windows along its sides, appeared to be a bond store of some type. A hastily built bamboo structure, more corral than shed, took up the opposite wall of the compound. Its doorway opening into the courtyard was guarded by two men with pikestaffs.

'You two wait here,' Beng said to Angee and Scar, and he headed over to a table set up in the courtyard in front of the bond store where a seated bookkeeper, armed with a large ledger and an abacus, surrounded on all sides by clamouring men, calculated their takings.

Angee looked around the courtyard. A number of men, their wrists also tied, squatted or leaned against walls. He scanned faces for any response, any flicker of engagement with another in the same position as themselves; but all were indrawn, fearful.

Fruit-sellers squatted in silence behind their baskets of goods. A tofu man, his trolley of quivering jelly squares parked in a shady corner, was watchful. Good jobs for seeing and hearing things, Angee thought — but who were they on the lookout for here? A knife-sharpener, his tools jangling on his shoulder, emerged from a nearby doorway and sliced off a piece of tofu. He ate one square and placed another inside on a dish on a makeshift altar where a few sticks of incense smouldered.

They waited, and the courtyard steamed. Every so often there was a shout from the table, and one of the prisoners would be dragged to his feet and marched first to the table then tossed into the maw of the bamboo corral. Each time the doors opened,

a blast of air stinking of human waste issued forth. If this was Tait's tea-house, Angee thought grimly, it was even less accommodating than the rotting hulk in the channel.

'Ssst,' Scar hissed at a tea-seller squatting in the shade.

The tea-seller wandered over with a glass and handed it to Scar, who sipped it noisily a few times and held out the glass for a refill. Downing the second, he tossed the dregs into the dust and handed the glass back.

Angee watched Scar carefully. He was thirsty and even Scar's dregs would have helped.

'Say, how's that tea taste?' Angee asked Scar.

'What?' Scar turned and looked at him in surprise.

'You been here before?'

Scar nodded. 'A couple of times.'

'Where do the boats go this time of year?' Angee asked softly.

'South.'

'To the Straits Settlements?'

Scar shook his head: 'Much further south.'

'I didn't know there was anywhere further south.'

'You'll find out soon enough.'

'Why does Beng call you Scar?'

'For these,' said Scar, fingering the livid lines on his left forearm and above his left eye. 'A spot of trouble with a few sugar planters for the West Indies last season.'

'Did they get away?'

'Depends.'

'On what?'

'On whether you think bubbling blood in a ditch beats sugar planting. So if you want to meddle with me,' Scar left his sentence unfinished.

Could — or would — Angee take him on? The man was shorter than him, his back slightly stooped from malnourishment, with a sunburned face suggestive of outdoor labour or junior military service: a foot soldier in a private militia, perhaps,

to whom crimping for a foreign devil's factory must have seemed an improvement. Under his patched jacket, his shoulders were narrow, also suggestive of poor nourishment. Like Angee, he was barefoot, and the bottoms of his trousers were ragged. Angee felt his ropes, which could so readily have been around Scar's wrists instead of his own.

Then there was a shout and Angee's name was called. Scar stiffened again into his role of captor. 'Your turn,' he said to Angee.

Angee stood up, his legs stiff, and was marched over to the table. Beng unrolled the IOU and placed it on the table before Angee: 'Remember this, gambling man? Now you sign it. Unless, that is, you wish to discuss your proposal with Foreign Devil Tait.'

'No more subcontractors,' the bookkeeper said firmly.

Beng pointed to the space at the bottom of the IOU.

Angee showed his tied hands: 'How?'

An ink-stick was placed between his tied hands. With difficulty, Angee drew a circle on the paper and this was chopped in red to make it official. The details of the IOU were entered into the ledger.

'That's it for last night's haul. How much am I owed now?' Beng asked the bookkeeper. Nodding to Scar, he dismissed Angee with, 'Sort out his accommodation, will you? I've got to go see the boss.'

Now Angee started to sweat, his knees buckling under him, as Scar half-led, half-dragged him across the yard. At the doorway to the corral, he stopped. 'We go our separate ways here, gambling man. This'll be your home until the boat's ready, I'd say.'

'And then?'

'How should I know? Ask Foreign Devil Tait yourself.'

'If you see him first, give him this message from me,' Angee spat in Scar's face, bracing himself for the blow that would follow.

But Scar carefully wiped the saliva from his face. 'Keep that up and you won't last a day inside. Get rid of him,' Scar said roughly to the guard.

The guard shoved Angee through the doorway, slamming it shut behind him.

10.
IN THE TEA-HOUSE

ANGEE SPRAWLED ON the ground, the door rattling shut behind him. He rolled to his feet, his tied hands clasped and raised in self-defence. He heard them before he could see them: voices in his own dialect, as well as others familiar from the port.

As his eyes adjusted to the stripes of light coming through gaps between the bamboo poles, the shapes of men appeared. It was a vast space, full of men, many more than had been in the courtyard: dozens if not hundreds, a shipload's worth and more. Angee blinked and peered at the faces staring at him. He felt tired and hungry. His head hurt where he had fallen against the sampan and his hands were numb from the ropes on his wrists.

'You from Flower Drum Village?' a voice asked.

Angee shook his head: 'No, Hai Chong.'

'We thought you were the rice-pots,' another voice whined.

'Can one of you help me get rid of these?' Angee held out his tied hands before him.

Voices muttered. Angee waited. Finally, he was answered with the shuffle of feet coming in his direction. A man, his back cowed as if from repeated beatings, approached him guardedly. He had a cast in one eye and held his head sideways, bird-like, regarding Angee with his good eye.

'Young Angee! Can it really be you?'

'Uncle!' he started. 'What are you doing in here?'

'It's good to see you too, nephew,' Lok See laughed, a raspy noise in his throat, which turned into a hacking cough. Angee and Lok See had come to Xiamen with the clan tong from their ancestral village. While they were indeed uncle and nephew — Angee's father was Lok See's eldest brother — Lok See was the same age as Angee and was more a cousin than an uncle to Angee, and they had played together through much of their early years. After their joint expulsion from the clan tong, they had stuck together working haulage in the old port for a while, but they had drifted apart as the opium took more of Uncle's attention.

'What happened to you?' Angee asked, unable to believe his luck. Alone and friendless in a place like this, he had been more expendable than many. 'I thought you'd left Xiamen.'

'Later,' Lok See hissed. 'Let me get you out of these first.' He struggled with the knots, which, having been wet, had dried all the more tightly. Angee winced as the knots refused to give way.

'Cut him loose, Lok See,' a voice called from the crowd. Angee looked up to see a fat man, his sallow face glistening in the half-light, pull out a knife and slide it across the dirt floor, coming to a stop near them.

'Will do, Big Yap.' Lok See sawed through Angee's ropes, taking a little bit of skin off as well. The knife skittered back across the floor to Big Yap.

The sense of relief was immediate. Angee held his hands out, his fingers moving stiffly as the blood and warmth flowed back.

'Come with me,' Lok See melted into the crowd.

'Off for a pipe with your friend, new man?' a figure squatting nearby called out to Angee.

'I thought I could see something crazy in his eyes,' another agreed, laughing.

'What?' Angee paced menacingly towards the men.

'Fancy a fight, madman?' the man who had passed the knife to Lok See stepped in. Stout, he was older, with long wisps of hair growing from a mole on his cheek.

'No,' Angee backed down.

'Go easy in here,' Lok See warned. 'Big Yap is the Flower Drum headman and he's got over 30 of his villagers in here with him.'

But then there was a banging noise and the argument was forgotten as the doors were flung wide open. Light flooded the room and men entered, walking crab-like in pairs, staggering under the weight of huge steaming pots. The pots were set down and, shouting with excitement, the men fell on them like ravening dogs, scratching and biting. Angee made to rush forward but a hand held him back.

'Wait,' Lok See urged. 'We are two and they are many.'

'But I haven't eaten since yesterday,' Angee felt his stomach rumble.

'Here you are, Big Yap,' a man filled a bowl with rice and sauce and gave it to the tong headman. Another passed him a tea-glass.

Big Yap ate slowly, carefully, the click of his chopsticks the only sound in the room. Finishing his bowl, he passed it back for a refill and, having received a second bowl of steaming rice, he moved back from the pots.

'Eat and drink now, boys, we'll be paying for this remember!' he sang out.

At this cue the other men rushed forward again, Angee among them. Greedily, Angee grabbed a bowl and chopsticks, shoved his bowl into the mound of rice and, elbows flailing, retired with Lok See to a corner to consume his meal at leisure.

'You're not eating?' he asked Lok See between mouthfuls.

Lok See pulled a small package from his pocket. 'Not hungry — I have this instead to look forward to.'

'Opium?'

Lok See nodded.

Angee took his bowl over for a refill, looking around at the others hunched over their bowls. Big Yap's minions were mostly younger men, glimmering with the dewy-eyed hopefulness of youth, their hunger for adventure dimmed until after the next bowl of rice. Who knew what stories they had been told to lead them here; but perhaps it was simply the promise of a regular meal that drew them in. But what sort of freedom, what sort of choice was that, to travel or to starve? He knew only too well what it felt like to be hungry too often.

He sat down beside Lok See once more.

'Last I heard you were the contact taking clan money back to Hai Chong and other villages in Tong An, weren't you?' He fell silent then, reminded once more of his own failure as a provider.

'I did a couple of runs, but our brothers knew me too well by that time, they didn't trust me with their money. Not that I blame them — I would have smoked it all or paid off my supplier.' Lok See paused, breathing deeply. 'I worked doing haulage for others, now I work for the opium. Got myself a little too deeply into debt with my supplier and then — bang — here I am.'

Angee shovelled more rice into his mouth, waiting for Lok See to continue.

'Still, it could be worse. I can get a pipe in here from one of the guards, and he tells me they have more on board, and that is reason enough for me to travel.'

'Did the guard say where we would be going?'

'No. What about you? How did you come to be a guest of this tea-house?'

'Fan-tan and an IOU.'

'No surprises there. Whatever would Big Hoa make of us now?' Lok See tried to laugh, but his body broke up into shuddering coughs. He spat into the bowl by his side and leaned back, his chest heaving. 'Time for my pipe, I think. Can you help me?'

Angee put his bowl aside but held on to the chopsticks, just in case. From what he had seen already, obviously not all the men inside were prisoners, or their knives would have been impounded. And even free men under pressure could be dangerous.

He helped Lok See to his feet and they picked their way through the darkened chamber. Beyond the activity at the food pots, other men, a little older and bearing signs of family responsibility, continued plying their trade. A barber, his hairline shaved back to a high forehead with a long pigtail hanging down past his waist, worked his blade over the scalp of another.

'Keep cutting back till the grey is gone from my temples,' the man in the seat said.

'But that will make you nearly bald,' the barber said to his client.

'If that gets me selected I can grow my hair back later.'

The barber plucked and razored the grey away, the only sound the scrape of the blade on skin. 'There you go,' he said laughing. 'You don't look a day over 30 now, with your face covered, you old fool.'

The man sprung from the chair and swung at the barber, but missed.

'So that's all the thanks I get?' the barber continued teasing him out of arm's reach. 'No more haircuts for you on the boat.' He saw Angee. 'I haven't seen you in here before. Haircut and shave before the inspection?'

But Angee, fearing the drawing of the stranger's blade across his throat, shook his head and moved on.

Little lights like fireflies dotted the back of the room, and there was the familiar sweet smell and bubbling crackling of pipes. In the gloom, Angee nearly tripped over an addict lying as if dead on a pallet. Shuddering, Angee made to move away, but the figure grabbed his leg and fixed him with bulbous wild eyes.

'Have you got any? My stomach hurts so much, I can't eat.'

Cursing, Angee made to strike the addict, to release his grip on him, but he stopped when he realised it could have so easily been Uncle on the pallet. Angee bent and felt the addict's brow: he was feverish.

'Let me get you some water.'

'No, a pipe,' the addict pleaded, his eyes wide.

'Leave him, Angee,' Lok See said firmly, dragging him to a free pallet some paces away where he prepared the makings. 'You want some?'

Angee shook his head.

The pipe bubbled and, as Lok See's breathing grew deeper and slower, so did his own. He felt calmed by Lok See's familiar presence, to have a friend in here. Angee lay back on the pallet beside Lok See, listening and looking upwards, imagining the first star in the sky, but instead getting peppered with specks of falling dirt and insects coming loose from the thatch. He made to crush one insect, then relented, flicking it away to make trouble elsewhere. They were like these insects: others would seek to crush them.

But tonight he would rest. His hands were free, he had a full belly and he had met up with Lok See. Last night a gambling den, tonight a tea-house; who knew what tomorrow promised? Too many questions without answers. But one thing was certain: with a companion, they had increased their chances of survival in the tea-house and whatever lay beyond.

Curling up beside Uncle, Angee drifted into sleep.

PART TWO

COOLIES

Nobody ever bothered to explain how far away a country was, how long it would take to get there. When they arrived, they did not know where they were. It was equivalent to taking a rocket to another planet where they suddenly found themselves up for sale. All the contracts were negotiable.

Eric Rolls, *Sojourners*

11.
EXTRATERRITORIALITY

THE SOUND OF gongs outside could have marked the new year or a fire alarm, but Tait thought otherwise. Tossing aside the month-old newspaper from Canton, he got to his feet, the cushions of his wicker armchair squelching and farting as he rose from it. He moved to the window, pulling back a corner of the bamboo chick blind, which kept the morning light and prying eyes out while allowing air to circulate, to establish the source of the commotion.

It took his eyes a few moments to adjust to the light outside. At first, he could make out the broad outlines of the settlement, which in a few short years had come to resemble something of an English village, with its green and trim two-storey shops arranged around three sides. South of the green was the British Consulate, completed just two years after the treaty was signed, standing stern in stone atop a rocky outcrop, watching over the comings and goings of all vessels through the inner harbour to Amoy, protecting the Englishman's exclusive right to dock and conduct trade here.

The jangling and shouting continued. Tait's eyes lit on a few off-duty garrison officers, smart in their dark jackets and white trousers as they strolled across the grass, or sat talking in high chairs, their walking sticks tapping a tattoo, as pigtailed boys in black cleaned their shoes. The more Tait looked, the more Celestials he saw marring the English idyll below: fruit-

sellers squatting beside their baskets in twos and threes, old men sitting on stools drinking tea in the lee of a building, and — inevitably — a man in the cangue. Propped at an angle against a wall in full sun, his weary arms unable to hold the weight off his body, his head protruded through the heavy wooden beams like a watermelon. Paper notices in the Celestial's language stuck to the stocks proclaimed for all to see the nature of his transgression. Soon he would be soaked through by the rains of the southern monsoon, which had Tait's men busily recruiting, filling ships heading for New South Wales.

Tait wondered what the cangue victim's offence had been, hoping it was not one of his delivery boys caught out and made an example of. But that would be Feng's style, he thought grimly to himself, putting a warning right under his window like that.

Officially, the Celestials took a dim view of his trade, but unofficially, Feng and many others benefitted from his services. There was Feng's sedan chair bouncing along the esplanade, its four bearers expressionless, their passage marked by Chinese scuttling for cover under the awnings of the shops and trading-houses that lined the esplanade. Still some distance off, four servants danced in an advance party, beating gongs and singing the praises of their master within his silken carriage. For a while, Tait amused himself deciphering the status code woven into the fabric of the sedan chair: its silken tassels and silver threads like spun webs, the ball and pommel on its roof denoting a senior administrator. He imagined the opulent interior of the sedan chair, the curtains drawn, Master Feng surrounded with the scent of jasmine and lilac. No wonder he enjoyed prancing around in the silly carriage for all to see.

Tait turned away from the window: such unseemly ostentation would get the Celestial into trouble some day, but for now, at this great distance from the capital, he seemed immune. Tait rang the bell to get the boy's attention, but with the racket outside it was no wonder that there was no response; the silly child was probably out there gawping at the circus.

Receiving no answer, he strode to the doorway and yelled: 'Boy, tea!'

He turned to the aquatint portrait of the young Queen, draped in an ermine-lined robe, on his wall: 'Your Majesty, yonder comes my business associate.'

He went over to his desk and pulled out a strongbox. He unlocked the tin and withdrew a brown envelope, slipping it into his inside jacket pocket. He shut and locked the tin again and returned it to his desk drawer.

'I hope you appreciate what I'm doing for your interests,' he said to the picture. But young Queen Victoria stared off to the side.

The chair stopped at his doorway, the pompoms and tassels of Celestial rank still jiggling as its four carriers squatted to rest it on its feet. The gongs stopped and a servant presented a tablet to Tait's door-guards.

Tait remained upstairs: the Union Jack ensign fluttering over his building demanded a certain gravity and reserve in his bearing. The tablet was presented and, with a nod, he admitted Mandarin Feng, Imperial Representative and Bearer of the Blue Button, to the factory of James Tait and Company, Traders and Merchants. The message was duly relayed to the waiting sedan chair.

Then the silken curtain would be pulled back to reveal inside the extravagant Master Feng, fat like a bug cocooned in layers of heavy silk. Slowly, one leg would emerge, then the other, and his bearers would take him by the arms to raise him from his chair. Ponderously, he would shuffle in his wooden sandals, supported under each arm, a six-legged grub, taking measure of Tait with his carved doorposts and his paired guardian statues: the lion, his paw resting on a globe; the lioness, a cub curled at her feet, her claw in its mouth — Celestial symbols of authority appropriated for the overriding might of British commerce. Not insensible to these symbols, Feng and his bearers would cross the threshold and enter the reception room where he would be lowered into a guest seat.

Tait picked up his moustache-brush and proceeded to scrape his face for any crumbs or tangles. He steered the edges of his moustache away from the corner of his mouth and, with no small satisfaction, smoothed down his lustrous mutton-chop whiskers. Damn me, if I'm not a fine figure of a man, he thought to himself as he imagined the scene below. He slapped his stomach for emphasis, before buttoning up his jacket and heading downstairs to join the Mandarin for tea, the office reverberating to the sound of his feet on the wooden stairs.

Downstairs, Tait flung open the door of the reception room and strode inside, a burst of energy, his coat-tails swishing about his knees.

'Ah, Mister Tait,' the startled Mandarin greeted him from his seat. Tait noted that he still wore his silken skullcap indoors; could it be true that his pigtail, his symbol of submission to the Manchu, was false? The British Consul had hinted as much over a bottle or two of his Spanish shiraz, payment in kind by the Spanish Government for services rendered. For Tait, nothing was too outrageous for this old dissembler. And yet, he recognised a kindred spirit.

'No, please, stay seated,' he protested as his guest struggled to right himself.

'You are too kind,' the Mandarin rolled back in relief.

'Let me order some tea for us.'

'That would be delightful.'

Tait rang the bell again, until a barefoot boy came skidding past the open doorway.

'Wulong-cha!' Tait snapped, and turned to face his guest. 'Now, Mandarin, to what do I owe the pleasure of your visit today?' It had to be something more than his commission: an intermediary could have dealt with that.

'Mister Tait, you flatter me. I am not a mandarin from the illustrious line of scholars our country has produced over the centuries. But the Emperor has seen fit to recognise his servant's abilities, and has appointed me to speak on his behalf.'

Pray continue, you old rogue, Tait thought to himself. Your only asset is your knowledge of us foreign devils and our devil-talk. All those years in the Straits Settlements have brought you this nice wet sinecure.

'Mister Tait, among my busy rounds I have made time to come and pay my respects to you and remind you that while the Emperor has concluded a treaty with your government, he continues to view your foreign presence on imperial soil as an insult and provocation.' He paused, breathing with difficulty.

'My compliments to you and let me assure your Emperor we view him in the same warm light that he views us,' Tait concluded the formal greetings, noting the slightest twitch in the Mandarin's eye as the meaning of his words sank in.

Just then the boy arrived carrying a tray of tea and sweetmeats, breaking the moment. Tait directed the boy to pour the brew into blue and white patterned cups, a gift from the Dutch Government. He knew the style as delftware, but did not know that the good burghers of Delft had taken the pattern from the Chinese via the East Indies. Removing his glasses, he helped himself to a slice of lemon, wishing there was some milk to cut the brew's tarry flavour, and dismissed the boy. Bowing, the boy avoided Tait's sightless glare — he was terrified of this devil who took off his eyes and put them in his pocket — and, eyes fixed on Master Feng, backed out of the room, closing the door behind him.

The Mandarin looked around the room, noting its elaborate decoration, and turned to Tait with something less than contempt.

'I see your business is good,' Master Feng sipped his tea. 'Recently, Mister Tait, some reports have come to my attention. Most terrifying reports, of deaths at sea, the savage treatment of my countrymen at the hands of foreign sailors.'

Tait was surprised and impressed to hear the Mandarin speak of the *Duke of Roxburgh*, only recently arrived in Sydney, with more than a dozen deaths in passage and stories of a riot en route. Clearly, his sources were up to date.

'Mandarin, these allegations are quite serious. If you can give me more details, I would be delighted to oblige you in checking the veracity of these claims. And, should these allegations have any substance, in seeing to it that any villains are prosecuted with the full force of the laws of their country, be they Spanish, Portuguese or Netherlanders. My friend the British Consul will deal with any Englishmen at fault.'

'Ah yes, you represent several governments as well as running your own business. And you all are immune under Chinese law.'

'Extraterritoriality.'

'A most extraordinary arrangement your government concluded with the Emperor.'

'And one under which your citizens receive the same consideration in our territories.'

But the Mandarin was not reassured by this, nor had Tait in any case meant to appease him.

'Understand me well, the Emperor has asked me to convey to you his most serious concern at the nature of your business. If you knew our country's illustrious history, then you would know that Emperor Kang Xi of the illustrious Qing imperial house banned this trade in people over a century ago.'

'But, Mandarin, did you not travel yourself to the Straits Settlements for employment? Is the Emperor not aware of your travels?'

'Yes, but at that time I was obeying my father, as now I obey my emperor.'

'And would you deny other young men, sons and fathers, the opportunity to do honour to their families as well? Men have been seeking to travel overseas for centuries before I arrived in Amoy. Before my grandfather's grandfather was born. Mandarin, now you flatter me by implying that this trade is of my making,' Tait smiled at his guest. But he did not add that this very business, together with the perquisites of his various consular offices, allowed him to live very agreeably. Nor that, in his

opinion, the time of the Qings was coming to an end — what the opium war had started free trade would finish off.

'Your foreign presence here encourages their departure.'

'Mandarin, do you not recall Xiamen's great and noble history? How in the time of the Yuan Emperor, Kublai Khan, the port of Zaiton, in the great southern province of Manzi, was the greatest city in the world? How centuries ago the port of Zaiton was also open to foreign traders, so that the recent treaty between our two nations has only restored matters to the way they were in the days of the great Khan?'

But the Mandarin was unmoved by a foreign devil's history lesson.

'Yes, but Zaiton silted up,' he said shortly. 'Clearly, the gods did not care for this contact.'

Tait reached into his jacket pocket and withdrew the envelope, which he put on the table before the Mandarin.

'If you have any specific difficulties with my plans perhaps I can help you in resolving them. Being so well able to interpret the views of your Emperor, at such a distance to the north,' Tait continued, emphasising the distance, 'you have been most understanding of the needs of my business, and here is a small consideration for you and the men who work for you.'

The envelope lay on the table between them. Tait hoped it was fat enough to smooth agreement or silence, given the strength of Master Feng's views about that blasted ship of death. He turned away for a moment and, when he turned back, was relieved to see that the envelope was gone, secreted somewhere about Feng's copious personage. So silently had it disappeared, Tait felt he might have been imagining that he ever placed it on the table, were it not for his guest's new warmth towards him.

'My friend, I too have many *guanxi*, many contacts whose interests I need to attend to as well. This small consideration for your friend must be divided among many people.'

Tait returned his guest's smile, wondering idly whether Feng's agents would get their cut.

'Thanks in part to your men's efforts, I expect a full shipload to be leaving shortly. Over a hundred men, to employment in the southern colony of New South Wales.'

The Mandarin drew breath, and Tait imagined the clack-clacking of the abacus in his head totting up his commission.

Tait continued. 'We will be moving men from their present accommodation here on Gulangyu to our seagoing vessel in the next day or so, after they have done their medical examinations.'

But the Mandarin was not finished with him yet: 'Before I leave you this morning, I have one final request to make of you. It has come to my attention that a particular person will be needing to say farewell to the Middle Kingdom. I wonder if I could prevail upon you to ensure his immediate passage?'

'Ordinarily, all men have to pass medicals before we offer them contracts and passage.'

'Let me assure you this one is a well-bred young man, strong and fit. His family have expressed a desire that he see the world.'

Tait speculated on the unfortunate individual, and who he had crossed to suffer a banishment facilitated by so senior an agent, but merely inquired: 'Is he in Amoy already?'

'He should be here in a couple of days.'

'My friend, this is somewhat unusual, but I will oblige you on this occasion. Have him delivered direct to the deep anchorage in the lee of Da Dan Island, where a barque is currently being provisioned for its journey.'

'And the name of the vessel?'

'The *Arabia*.'

12.
FOR QUEEN AND COUNTRY

BACK UPSTAIRS, TAIT poured himself a madeira, his second for the morning, and reflected on his recent visitor.

'For Queen and country indeed!' he snorted at the aquatint. 'Consorting with rogues, more like it!' But Her all-seeing Majesty remained unmoved, as impassive as Kuanyin.

The treaty restricted the British in Amoy to Gulangyu, so that their presence here would not corrupt the population at large. Tait snorted and poured himself another glass — whose corrupting influence indeed! Tait looked out the window and across the harbour, where a number of sampans lay lazy and flat, their bow-eyes looking low across the water. The British barques could hardly be more different from the local vessels — upright in bearing, many-masted and full-sailed, like an out-thrust chest — and it was as if these differences in bearing captured the differences between the British and Chinese races: one upright and manly, the other sneaky and inscrutable.

He dropped the chick blind to shut out the heat and crush of Amoy and returned to his newspaper. The politicians had only themselves to blame for this fine mess. If the British Parliament had not abolished transportation to the eastern colonies in the previous decade, there would not be a labour shortage on the big sheep runs of the southern colonies. And, if the Irish workmen had not decamped to the goldfields of California and now Victoria, there would not be a need for Chinese labour in New South Wales.

'Ahoy there, Jim!'

Startled from his reverie, Tait pulled back a corner of the blind and looked to the esplanade below, where William Chilcott, captain of the *Arabia*, today in an open-necked shirt, was waving to him. He had another fellow with him, whose head rolled from side to side as if he was on deck in a great swell.

'How's the view from the poop deck?' the Captain's booming voice, practised at barking orders in gales, carried up to him.

'A storm brewing this afternoon, Bill.'

'Permission to board, Sir?'

'Permission granted,' Tait smiled. 'Come on upstairs, you rogue.'

Tait emptied his glass and stepped back into the shadows of his office.

From the pounding on the stairwell, it sounded as though the Captain must be taking them three at a time. He burst through the open doorway, holding out his hand in greeting. Tait shook the Captain's hand, but the Captain squeezed so firmly that Tait could feel his bones almost cracking. The Captain's companion shuffled in and made for the window, muttering to himself, his head twitching all the while.

Tait looked quizzically to the Captain, but he seemed quite at ease with the shaking and nodding stranger. Concluding that he must be either a passenger or an idiot relative of Chilcott's, Tait left the stranger by the window and turned to the task at hand.

'So how's the *Arabia* coming together?'

'Fine and dandy. She'll be provisioned and ready in a day or two,' replied the Captain.

'Water?'

'Yes, I had the men fill our casks from a spring on the island. We've enough to get as far as Bali, with favourable winds, allowing two quarts a day. The nor'-east monsoon should have us there in a matter of weeks.'

'Have you emptied the old casks?'

'Yes, we filled up at Lombok, but some of the water was tainted.'

'Fill up again in Manila. You know there are problems with the water the nearer you get to the equator. During the monsoon season, run-off from the hills contaminates it. We don't want the men getting dysentery. Or worse.'

'There's no money in a dead cargo,' Chilcott agreed.

'Is two quarts per man sufficient?'

'It will be fine in cooler weather, and with minimal activities below decks.'

Tait nodded and sipped his madeira. 'Food?'

'The Sydney agent asked for beef, salt fish, rice, pickles, yams, sugar and biscuit.'

'No fresh fruit or vegetables?'

'I've put aside some fresh provisions for the crew, but for the cargo, pickles and yams will do for the scurvy. They also get tea.'

'But only twice a week.'

'And subject to good behaviour,' Chilcott added.

'All you need now is the men.'

'And how is that coming along, Jim?'

'You'll be pleased to know I've just met with Feng. Coordinates some of our local agents for us. Finalising arrangements, as it were.'

'Yes, we heard the carriage jangling down the esplanade a good half-mile off,' the Captain laughed. 'It was like the circus had come to town, all acrobats and jugglers.'

'And weightlifters,' added Tait, laughing.

'From his retinue, he looked like an estimable fellow. Not that we saw him, hidden away behind his curtains.'

'Cheeky devil, here he was, large as life and fat as butter, sniffing around the *Duke of Roxburgh*.'

'Th-that was a b-bad job, that one,' the stranger thundered from the window, his head twitching with each

staccato consonant. 'Over a d-dozen d-deaths from d-d-dysentery. And the j-j-j-judges blaming the d-doctor.'

Tait stared open-mouthed at the stranger. From his rolling head, he had assumed him incapable of speech, and such an outburst left Tait wondering whether he had been inspired.

'I see you've not met Doctor Johnson, Jim,' said Chilcott, laughing. 'Ship's doctor for the *Arabia* run to Sydney. Always one for a lasting first impression.'

'I've not had the pleasure,' Tait frowned at Chilcott.

'P-p-pleased to m-meet you,' the doctor, his head twitching all the while, proffered his hand. 'I'll be c-conducting my inspections l-later this morning, Mister T-t-tait. Any s-special c-c-concerns with this b-batch that you know of? Any l-local outbreaks I should b-be aware of?'

'Let me get you both a drink.' His hand free, Tait retreated to the safety of the bar.

The Captain downed his madeira in one gulp. 'That's fine medicine!'

'I'd not be surprised to see c-cholera in this p-port,' the doctor continued, his glass spilling as spasms shook him.

'You sure he's up to the job?' Tait whispered to Chilcott as he poured another madeira. 'I wouldn't want him to come near me with a knife.'

'What does your Celestial know, Jim, about the *Duke of Roxburgh*?' the Captain asked suspiciously.

'He's heard about the ship reports. Nothing that I told him. As we're British citizens, he can't touch us and he knows it. But that doesn't stop him trying to lean on me.'

'You haven't agreed to any special favours, have you now, Jim?'

'So how's the *Arabia* coming together?' Tait changed the subject. 'How about some medicinal spirits for your crew? I have a few cases of this fine Portuguese wine.'

The Captain frowned. 'Jim, what *have* you promised your Celestial?'

'Whatever do you mean?' Tait protested weakly.

But Captain Chilcott did not answer. He was examining Tait's face, trying to read what the Amoy agent was trying to conceal.

'I know you too well — what is it, man? Go on, out with it!'

'You'll be having a late arrival,' Tait mumbled.

'Whatever do you mean?'

'I mean,' Tait continued testily, 'there'll be a late delivery to the *Arabia* at anchor. The Celestial's got a special delivery he wants exported. Don't ask me who,' he added, answering in advance of the inevitable questions from his colleagues, 'just another poor unfortunate devil Feng or his friends want out of the way.'

'What about the m-medical checks?' the doctor protested. 'You know I'm p-paid a b-bounty for every healthy man that arrives. I don't know who this w-w-wretch is, so how can I be held responsible for his welfare?'

'I understand, doctor,' Tait tried to be sympathetic. 'But in my position—'

'Your position be d-damned,' the doctor cut across him. 'What if he's sick, if he's carrying some c-c-contagious disease?

'I only said yes to get the Celestials off all our backs,' Tait protested. 'I wouldn't have agreed if he hadn't come in so hard on the *Duke of Roxburgh*. What in the blazes was your surgeon colleague doing on board that vessel to let so many men perish?' he turned on Johnson. 'If he'd been doing his job we wouldn't all be in this fine mess now, would we?'

'And if you hadn't good as confirmed your Celestial bigwig's suspicions by agreeing to his ridiculous request,' Chilcott complained.

The doctor stood by the window, glowering at Tait, his head shaking.

'Jim,' Chilcott continued, 'I understand you're in a rum fix, living among the Celestials, but you have to understand our

situation as well. Another *Duke of Roxburgh* and my commission's gone. The doctor here, his nerves are already fragile—'

'I can see that,' Tait said unnecessarily.

'—he's got his future to provide for, and another bad run will affect us all.'

But Chilcott was interrupted by a gargling noise from the window.

'It's a w-w-worry, having such a large g-group of men together on b-board for such a long time. We will need to be ever v-v-vigilant and watchful.'

'And what do you propose that I do, Doctor?' Chilcott protested. 'Ship a few dozen women on every voyage? And women of what fashion would want to sail with my men? And, pray tell, what do we do with them when we arrive in Sydney town? Enlist them for the stews in The Rocks? Besides, surely you know the town is full of young Irish maids?'

'Yes,' the doctor said. 'I was s-surgeon-superintendent in '49 for a s-s-shipload from Plymouth.'

'That wouldn't have been the "Belfast" girls, would it, Doctor?' Tait frowned. 'Pardon me for saying so, but you do sign on for some unlikely cargoes.'

Doctor Johnson's head rolled to one side, and Tait wondered whether he was fitting, but he was laughing.

'No, these ones were f-f-from the workhouses, not the streets.'

'Jim,' Chilcott continued, 'I'll honour your agreement with the Celestial on two conditions. One: that he arrives before we are due to leave so there's no demurrage. I'm not going to subject myself to fines for late departure just to oblige your bigwig Celestial.'

'Agreed.'

'Two: that the doctor here examines the man and finds him fit to travel.'

'And what if he's not?' Tait asked.

'Doctor?'

'If we are t-talking about the l-life of one m-man over many, then that one n-n-needs must go.'

'But Bill,' Tait began, 'my Celestial doesn't want to see this fellow dead.'

'Jim, your Celestial has no jurisdiction to lade a man on my ship without my permission. Nor, for that matter, do you. I am in charge of the ship, and responsible for safety of all on board. And if my ship's doctor forms an opinion that carrying the man would be hazardous to others, he won't be carried. Doctor?'

'I c-can l-live with th-th-that,' grumbled the doctor.

'That's settled then,' Chilcott poured another noggin all round. 'To the health of Queen Victoria,' the Captain raised his glass in Her Majesty's direction.

'And the h-h-health of your Celestial,' the doctor added darkly, his glass shaking.

'For Queen and country,' outnumbered and outmanoeuvred, Tait drained his glass.

13.
TWITCHING DEVIL

'OKAY, YOU RASCALS, get to your feet and out here — now!'

The tea-house doors were flung open with a bang and light streamed inside, blinding the men momentarily.

All around the bamboo enclosure, lumps took shape as men, grumbling, got to their feet. Tripping over Angee, one cursed and fell on top of him, elbowing Angee in his ribs.

'It's selection time, boys — one in, all in!' Big Yap told his gang of followers, as they pressed and stumbled past him to be among the first outside.

Stripes of daylight pierced the bamboo walls of the tea-house. Uncle held out his arm and helped the winded Angee to his feet.

With Angee rubbing his side, they emerged blinking and frowning from the semi-darkness into the light. Judging by the sun's position in the sky, they were a few hours into the day, but inside Angee had lost track of day and night. Disoriented, he felt puzzled and not a little fearful. What did selection time mean? He held back with Uncle, anonymous and safe.

A number of men were already in the courtyard, their clothes marking them as village farmers.

'Is this where we come for the New South Wales boat?' one of them asked Angee.

But, before he could answer, even if he knew the answer, the guards shouted: 'Do what the doctor says! Get running now!'

Angee and the others did as they were told, shuffling slowly around the courtyard perimeter. As he circled, he noticed two foreign devils among them. There were accompanied by a man, who, from his elaborate dress, appeared to be a village herbal quack. Angee tried not to stare, not wishing to draw attention to himself, but on each lap he stole a glance at the devil who, head twitching, monitored their progress. The other devil swayed a little and, when he came close, Angee could detect the reek of wine about him.

Running, he watched as the two foreign devils spoke to each other.

'I see your m-men have d-delivered quite a f-few f-for us t-t-to select from, Mister Tait.'

It was the first time Angee had heard devil-talk: an extraordinary language, far more guttural than their own talk. Which one of these two — Wine Breath or Twitching Devil — was Mister Tait?

Angee watched carefully as Wine Breath replied to Twitching Devil: 'Thank you, Doctor. I have many orders to fill in New South Wales. I trust these men will measure up to your exacting standards.'

Wine Breath marched off into one of the doorways opening onto the courtyard. They had passed the doorway nine or ten times when: 'All right, you lot, shirts off! Form two rows, you mongrels!' The tea-house guards shouted and pushed the men into line.

Stripped to their shorts, the men were lined up. They were nothing to look at and yet their bodies told their stories. Some were still boys, their faces round and unlined, while a few who were bent over panting and heaving could have been grandfathers from the look of their bony backs, ribs rising and falling, skin flapping on their thin arms where their biceps and triceps had been. A few bore the telltale pockmarks of smallpox on their faces, while others had disfigured limbs: a twisted foot run over by a cartwheel in childhood, a withered arm from

a childhood bout of polio. The barrow-men — golden-tanned in their loincloths, strong and entire in their bodies, but passive and apart, more animals than men. And the work gang — clustered around Big Yap, whose hairless chest and belly glistened with sweat.

'Just do — what the doctor here asks — and we'll all be on the boat — out of here — together,' he whispered to his men between gasps.

Angee looked to Lok See, who nodded. Big Yap seemed to know what was going on and, in the absence of other authority, his interpretation of events would have to do for now.

Twitching Devil walked slowly down the line, his bobbing head making his manner all the more terrifying. He stopped before a short man with squinty eyes. Grabbing him by the chin, Twitching Devil tilted the man's head till they were looking at each other. Whimpering in fear and pain, the man's eyes bulged. He pinched the man's cheeks till his jaw popped open; felt his neck with his other hand. The man gagged and gargled until, nodding, Twitching Devil let him go and directed him through an archway on the far side of the courtyard. The man ran off, glad to be rid of his tormenter, and Twitching Devil continued down the line, looking at the men, stopping to cursorily examine a twisted limb or a skin eruption, tweaking at flesh and joints. At his nod, men peeled off the line and were ushered through the archway.

The run had not affected Uncle — his strength restored by a few predawn pipes — but the jog had taken its toll on another, less fortunate addict. By turns sweating and shivering, the addict was coughing so badly he could hardly stand upright. Angee recognised him as the man who had had his hair cut the day before. The cooking-pot tar he had rubbed through his hair to blacken out the grey streamed across his temples and ran down his cheeks. Shave or no shave, the addict could not fail to attract Twitching Devil's attention.

'Step forward,' the village quack translated.

The addict shuffled forward.

Now Twitching Devil pulled something from his coat pocket, a three-way cable of sorts with lugs at two ends and a metal disc at the third. He put it around his neck and stuck the two lugs into his ears. With the cable in his hand, he approached the man, placing the metal disc against the man's chest. Trembling, the man breathed shallowly, fearful of the machine, not knowing what its devil-magic was.

Twitching Devil said something to the village quack.

'Breathe normally,' the village quack barked at the man, which only made him hyperventilate all the more.

Twitching Devil's head shook and the cables jerked. He raised an eyebrow to the village quack, then spoke. 'C-C-Consumption. He'll h-have h-half the men on board inf-f-fected if we c-carry him.'

If his words were unclear, Twitching Devil's dismissive tone was not. He pulled the lugs from his ears and rested the contraption around his neck.

Now the guards, all with menacing smiles, advanced on the old addict. He put up a struggle, but it was no use; it only made the guards handle him more roughly. Half-dragged, half-carried to the gates of the courtyard, he was pushed out so that he stumbled and fell — and would keep falling until he could not get up again.

Angee shuddered: whatever was in that tool gave Twitching Devil the power to condemn the withered addict to wandering the streets of Gulangyu. His eyes met Lok See's: both knew it could so easily have been Uncle. He imagined Uncle, cast out, far from his village home, begging for food and work and opium, sleeping huddled in corners until one morning the sun would come up and he would not wake again.

The treatment of the outcast addict had stunned the rest of the men into silent compliance. Twitching Devil moved slowly along the line, stopping before a man with scabs on his

back. He said something to the village quack, gesturing with his hands.

'Show your palms,' the village quack ordered.

The man held out his hands.

Twitching Devil's head shook; he conferred again with the village quack.

'Pull down your shorts.'

Disbelieving, the man did as he was told.

Twitching Devil squatted down and examined the man's genitals closely.

Angee could not imagine the purpose of this ritual humiliation. He felt grateful that it was somebody else receiving such intimate attention from Twitching Devil.

'Syphilis.'

Twitching Devil stood up, shaking his head. The man was pulled from the line by the tea-house guards.

What was the word Twitching Devil had said, which had led to such a categorical dismissal of the man? It was yet another example of his dark magic: with one word, your fate was sealed. Whoever could command such magic was a terrible man indeed.

'What happens to me now?' the man wailed; exposed in his infection, he had precious little room for any lingering self-respect.

'You will leave immediately,' the village quack said firmly. 'Or I will have the guards remove you,' he continued, gesturing to the tea-house guards, who, without needing further invitation, began to advance upon him.

Having seen the addict's treatment previously, the man decided quickly: without waiting to grab his clothes, he ran naked through the gate outside to the jeers and laughter of the guards.

'That'll mean a safer passage for you all,' the village quack hinted darkly. 'Burn those rags.'

Another man down, Twitching Devil continued along the line, ever closer, until he reached Lok See and Angee. Lok

See was directed towards the arch, and then it was Angee's turn to face Twitching Devil and his devil-magic.

Head jerking, his eyes bored into Angee: Angee's breathing became light and rapid. Twitching Devil returned the two lugs of the cable tool to his ears, stuck the metal disc against Angee's chest. Angee flinched as if stabbed, willing himself to fight the devil-magic.

'Relax, breathe deeply and slowly,' the village quack said, not for the first time that morning.

Hypnotised with fear, Angee could not take his eyes off Twitching Devil's face. He had never been this close to a foreign devil before. As Angee breathed, Twitching Devil moved the metal disc around his chest: a coin skittering across the fan-tan table. It was like putting all your coins on Number Four, only he did not know what was at stake here, whether a nod or a shake of Twitching Devil's head was the better outcome for him. The arch or the gate, the arch or the gate; inhale, exhale; what was it to be? Finally, Twitching Devil withdrew the metal disc from his chest, nodding to the village quack.

'Go over there,' the village quack directed Angee towards the arch.

Angee scampered across the courtyard, away from Twitching Devil and his terrible powers.

'We made it!' Relieved, Angee embraced Lok See.

'I knew it would all work out for us in the end,' a beaming Lok See said triumphantly. 'No thanks to Big Hoa.'

Angee wondered where the other men from Hai Chong Village had ended up last season. He would have liked to talk to them about their experiences with Twitching Devil and beyond, whether passing his inspection had been a good thing after all. He had no idea where this was all leading.

Passing under the archway, they turned around a false wall blocking the view from outside and entered another, smaller courtyard. A pile of clothes lay in one corner, discarded

like snake skins. Water pooled around the feet of naked men, including Big Yap and some of his work gang.

Angee and Lok See were ordered to strip and add their shorts to the pile. They were given a cake of yellowish soap and a basin of water, and were instructed to scrub themselves clean in the open.

Angee rubbed the soap on, his skin beginning to bubble with white froth and the smell of lye. He scooped water over himself and the bubbles disappeared. Passing the soap and basin to the next man, he joined the others who had completed their ablutions to wait for the remainder, stragglers from the inspection.

Standing naked in the blazing sun, the men's bodies dried quickly. The human horses, whose skin was used to sun, withstood the heat and the shame of their nakedness better than most; but for the other men, the sun began to burn. By the time Twitching Devil passed through into the inner courtyard, Angee's shoulders were stinging. Twitching Devil looked closely at the men: clothed, he forced eye contact with his naked subjects, who had only their eyelids and hands to cover their shame. He gestured to one of the guards, who took a lamp and poured oil over the clothes, lighting the pile. Their clothes flared up and the flames died away.

'Step through that doorway, and you'll get some more,' the village quack answered the question everyone was afraid to ask in the presence of Twitching Devil.

A wild cheer broke out among the men.

Big Yap looked to his followers. 'We're on our way, boys. What did I tell you, free clothes all round!'

'For a fee,' the village quack added. 'An advance on your employment contracts. Sign them and the clothes are yours. Go and get your loot now, and good luck in New South Wales!'

'No turning back now,' Lok See whispered to Angee.

The addict and the man with syphilis were forgotten in the rush for the doorway.

14.
ILLITERACY

WITH THE KIND of simple contentment that only a full stomach could bring — he had eaten five bowls of rice — Angee now looked forward to a walk in his shiny new boots. These were not the canvas slippers he was familiar with, but leather lace-up workboots, like the foreign devils wore.

He wiped his chopsticks on his new trousers and rolled them into the paper the bookkeeper had given him. Laying out his spare jacket, he rolled his spare trousers around the paper, stuffed his trousers into his folded jacket and tied a knot in the sleeves to make a little knapsack. Now he could carry his spare clothes in just one hand, leaving his other hand free for his tambourine.

The men gathered in the courtyard and the guards organised them into two lines. There were more than a hundred of them in all; all dressed the same, in their nankeen jackets and trousers. And musical instruments — their drums, gongs, cymbals, trumpets, two-stringed zithers and trichords, tambourines and flutes.

One man puffed hard on his trumpet, his cheeks distended, but all that came out was a little strangulated 'phlut'.

'So you can fart with your mouth, too!' someone shouted amid laughter.

He pulled the instrument from his lips and tossed it to the joker. 'Come on, then, I'd like to see you do better!'

'You'll have plenty of time to practise below decks!' another shouted back, bringing his cymbals together with a dramatic crash.

'It's going to be a noisy voyage with this lot,' Angee yelled to Lok See beside him, banging his tambourine for good measure.

'It's like Lunar New Year when we were little,' Lok See yelled above the racket, eyes shining with memory. 'Remember how Father and Mother, Grandfather too, would give us presents of clothes and cakes to see us through the year ahead? It's a good omen, a new start.'

With a shout, the men moved in a jog-trot out the gates of Mister Tait's compound, the two lines in sync like a giant centipede, the clamour of gongs and cymbals like a funeral procession driving evil spirits away. Angee shook his head. Who would want a book in the dark of the voyage? He banged his tambourine from time to time, the discs rattled and skittered, its percussion reminding him of the fan-tan table and of why he was with the group. At least he could pull the discs from their bamboo ring and make a game out of its coin rattles.

Few others were out at this time of late afternoon, when the great rock-mountain at the heart of the island shadowed their progress. An old man carrying a portable kitchen balanced on a shoulder-pole stopped his bobbing progress towards the village, resting his stove and cookpots on the ground, to observe their clamorous passage. He watched the long lines of men pass, expressionless; he stayed there for a minute or so as the caterpillar wound in shadow away from the village towards the south-eastern headland, where a rocky outcrop flared in the light, its granite massif striated with purple and ox blood shadows.

'To the beach!' a guard yelled over the noise.

Music was forgotten as the men scrambled down over stones as best they could, clinging to figs growing in the crevices, a few curses and clanging gongs marking scraped knees and elbows. The foot of the headland remained mostly underwater, the wavelets crashing and spilling, scouring sand from the shore, forcing the men to breast the rocks islanded by the risen tide. Between the rocks, water surged and sucked,

rising and receding, the wind whipping up spray, which stung skin more used to river or paddy water. Men grumbled as the salt water splashed over their legs, and they slipped and fell on slimy rocks. Lok See sprang like a goat from rock to rock, sure-footed and an inspiration to Angee.

'I still can't believe opium is that good for you,' Angee said wonderingly.

'A few pipes and I feel as strong as a buffalo. Catch me if you can, Nephew!' Lok See scampered across rocks to where the sand bellied out in the lee of the headland, and where half a dozen sampans rested, awaiting their cargo.

Angee caught up to Lok See and threw his tambourine down on the sand between them.

'But it's not just the opium,' Lok See tossed a book to Angee.

'Where'd this come from?'

'I've had it with me all the time, kept it safe under my pillow in the tea-house. It kept me going when I was alone.'

Angee examined it, flipping open its sheets. But he could not read and did not know what its significance was. He shrugged his shoulders and handed it back.

'What is it, Uncle?'

'It's the *I Ching*.'

Even Angee had heard of this. 'The Book of Changes?'

Lok See nodded.

'But I can't read,' Angee handed the book back.

'Don't worry about not being able to read the characters, they're just scratches on a page, not reality themselves. Outside of what meaning we give them they're meaningless, we have to make sense of the scratches for them to have any meaning at all. The wise man who gave me this book taught me about a separate reality outside what we see. Just imagine how the characters come to life, dancing around the page, when you've had a few pipes!'

Angee grunted, resenting his illiteracy despite Uncle's soothing words. The two men squatted in silence, waiting, watching the sun set across the outer harbour. Across the channel, the port was lit up by the setting sun. Its buildings ablaze with colour, light leached in late luminescence, Angee wondered when and if he would see Xiamen again.

'And now the day is gone,' Lok See finally spoke, 'I can't read it either!'

Angee laughed. 'You win, Uncle.'

15.
HYDROPHOBIA

'CLOSE YOUR EYES and tell me what you hear,' Lok See said quietly.

Angee could hear the voices of men talking quietly a small distance away, too quietly to make out the words.

'What else?'

Angee heard the creak of wooden planks on vessels rocking on the swell; the chop of waves spilling on sand.

'More?'

His heart beating, his breath rising and falling.

'You're meditating already — well done! I'll share my book with you, teach you the Tao, if you like. Open your eyes now.'

The moon was low in the sky above the town. The guards stood up and ordered the men to prepare for boarding. The men shuffled forward, stepping gingerly into the sampans. Angee, who had worked on boats for a while, leapt on, rattling his tambourine.

'Move on down now, 20 men to each!'

Grumbling, the men edged forward, crab-like, on all fours, avoiding the gunwale.

It took some time for all the men to board, and, by then, the half-dozen three-planked vessels that made up their convoy were pitching uncomfortably in the shallow water. The boatmen poled the sampans into deeper water, paddling smoothly past

shore rocks glinting in the moonlight. The sampans strung out over the water, heading south-east along the Xiamen Island foreshore, passing junks anchored in the lee of the headland. As they passed close by, Angee could hear men talking and laughing over a game of dominoes or shot glasses of rice wine. Lok See said they had opium on board; would there be rice wine during the voyage as well?

There was more of a swell as they got into deeper water, the channel current dragging the little sampans powerfully along the coastline southwards. It was difficult to make out the shoreline in this angle of moonlight; but Angee guessed they had passed beyond Xiamen's southern fringes when the swell grew and the wind picked up, fed by the monsoon winds from the north. Spray blew into their faces; the swell sloshed and at times breached the gunwale. The passengers had gone quiet, but Big Yap banged his drum steadily, answered with gongs and the clash of cymbals.

'The water is so deep,' wailed one.

'And I can't swim,' another cried.

'How much longer till we reach Da Dan?' Angee overheard one of the guards ask the pilot.

'Not far now,' he replied. 'See that darkness ahead? That's it.'

His hand to his face to keep the spray off his eyes, Angee looked in the direction the boatman indicated. The moon twinkling on the water all around them gave way to a dark area, which could only be something solid that was not reflecting moonlight. The current drew them there, and the shape of Da Dan Island loomed up quickly.

Angee had been to some of the further reaches of the outer harbour once or twice before, delivering goods to ocean-going junks berthed in deepwater anchorages near enough to gather provisions from Gulangyu, but far enough out to conduct business without attracting attention. But he had never been to Da Dan; and he wondered whether the stories he had heard

about the vessels laying over there were just sailors' stories, tales of men disappearing told and retold around lamplight.

As they approached, he could make out a number of spikes in the sky, masts of an enormous vessel floating in front of the island, dwarfing the little sampans in their convoy.

'It's a sea monster!' someone howled.

'Waiting to swallow us up,' a voice from another sampan echoed fear. The bang-gong-clash took on a new intensity and clamour.

As their sampan drew close, the monster vessel groaned and wheezed as it bobbed in the gentle swell; and it was hard not to get swept away in the current of fear washing over the men cowering in its shadow. They glided along in the vessel's shadow, making for the stern ropes that had been flung down to them. The swell bumped the little vessel against its giant neighbour, and the sound resounded ominously, a hollow boom like distant cannon fire.

'Mazu, save us!' It began with one voice and grew to a chant, a cacophony of wailing and crying panic more fearful than the creaking ropes and sails and planks. Angee craned his neck up and up to see over the rail, to make out the source of the noises, but it was too high, and the wailing of his companions threatened to swamp him as well.

One of the crew leant over the rail and shouted down, 'The quiet maiden won't help you — nor will we — if you keep up that caterwauling.'

The drum stopped and the other instruments did too.

'That's better. Now, you lot, who's to be first on deck? Can't wait all night!'

'It's a bad omen to be the first up!' someone whispered; and the rumour spread through the convoy of sampans.

'There's opium up there and, for a few pipes, I'll go anywhere,' Lok See whispered to Angee. 'Coming up!' he called out to the crew above. Lok See struggled to his feet in the rocking sampan, and the huddled, wet men cleared a path,

drawing back from one determined to hasten his own demise. Lok See grabbed a rope ladder and slipped his foot into a rung, then climbed hand-over-foot up the side of the giant vessel to the edges of the lamplight, where his legs disengaged from the rope ladder and he was sucked up, vanishing from sight.

The men wailed at Lok See's disappearance. Angee got quickly to his feet, shaking his tambourine. He did not believe in these demons, but he wanted to best his own trepidation before he succumbed to the frenzy whipped up by the music on the sampans. At the top of the ladder, a pair of arms grabbed him from above and he was deposited beside Lok See on the deck.

Up top, the vessel seemed hardly less a figure of terror as they looked around open-mouthed at the inscrutable machinery and fittings aboard the foreign devils' barque. It was unlike any ship Angee had ever visited, so different in design from the junks he knew that he was at a loss to comprehend the purpose of many of its fittings. Even the masts and sails were of a layout and configuration that were entirely new to him.

Other men followed, scrambling up the rope ladders, spilling over the gunwales onto the deck, looking around in fear and wonderment. The deck swelled with its human cargo, a cacophony of voices returning to the beat of gongs and drums. Angee and Lok See shuffled back until they found themselves near the foredeck, where a couple of foreign devils conferred with a Chinese crew member.

'Look, there's Twitching Devil!' Lok See whispered.

Angee shuddered. 'Better keep out of his sight.'

'But who's the other one?'

'Probably the one in charge,' Angee speculated. 'Look at his special hat and jacket.'

'Looks like a devil mandarin,' Lok See mused.

Angee shook his head at the thought of such a combination. But now the Devil Mandarin stepped forward and addressed the men on deck. He said a few words in a calm, modulated voice before turning to the Chinese crew member,

who interpreted for him, roaring: 'All right, you lot, we've got a full house below decks, you'll have to wait up top for the first watch.'

Frowning, the Devil Mandarin tapped the crew member on the shoulder, and he added: 'The Captain says welcome aboard. We'll be sailing for Sydney on the morning tide. Breakfast's at four bells, so make yourselves at home above decks until then, and after that you can inspect your quarters below decks.'

'Well,' Angee turned to his friend, 'where do you think we should start?'

'As far away as possible from the foreign devils,' Lok See retorted. 'Wouldn't do to come to their attention too early.'

16.
A LATE ARRIVAL

LIKE SO MANY cats, the men paced out the new environment to get its measure; marching between the three masts, looking over the rails into the inky water, curious and yet timid to mount the stairs to the raised deck above the devils' rooms beyond the rearmost mast.

Shortly after the delivery of the men, Twitching Devil and the captain had retired to their rooms, which made Lok See feel much more relaxed about being abroad. But the strangeness of so many things still unsettled Angee. Every so often, a boy would turn over an hourglass that had run its course and ring a bell, causing Angee to scuttle as if in response to a fire alarm the first time he heard it. He wanted to throttle the little monster when he realised it was not; but the boy explained that he sounded the bell every half-hour, when the hourglass had emptied. Angee struggled to comprehend the meaning of this new mystery; and, after releasing the boy with a cuff and a warning, whispered to Lok See, 'What's an hour?'

'It seems to be two measures of sand,' Lok See observed.

They still had many measures of sand before they could go below decks, and a number of men already lay curled up on the deck, heads pillowed on their bundled possessions. Uncle was tired after his exertions, but Angee was too excited and disoriented to sleep readily. Arms folded, his head bobbing forwards with Uncle's head on his lap, his thoughts flitted like sprites; but then the bell would be rung, punctuating his reverie,

stirring him into wakefulness all over again, and he finally gave up trying to rest.

He eased Lok See's head off his lap and stood up gingerly, his legs stinging with pins and needles from lack of circulation. Wriggling his legs to stir them into comfort and wakefulness again, he hobbled over to the rail, and looked into the water, mesmerised by the dancing reflection of the moon twinkling on the wavelets. He thought he heard a voice calling across the water and he watched and waited as a sampan came into view. Unlike theirs, this one appeared to have only the one passenger.

'Special delivery,' a voice called softly from below. A crewman on nightwatch tossed a rope ladder down to the sampan. Its sole passenger, slipping and sniffling, was directed to climb it.

The sailor who helped him over the rail stood back and whistled to his mates: 'Look who's arrived lads! A fine figure of a man indeed! We are honoured.'

The sailor bowed before the new arrival, to roars of laughter from his mates.

Angee did not need to understand the seaman's words to register their contempt. He shrunk back along the rail, but their attention was directed elsewhere.

Keeping out of sight, Angee looked at the new arrival, standing shaking on the deck, a pool of water collecting about his feet. He was young, barely able to grow a beard. With his fine silk jacket, brocaded at the collar and cuffs, he was clearly from a good family. All that added up to an educated person. One who had squandered the opportunities given him by this society. So what was he doing here, Angee wondered? More to the point, who had he crossed?

A second look at the new arrival revealed more. His silk slippers were shredded and torn and the hem of his long coat was ragged and muddy. Clearly, he had been on a long walk to get here, over territory his kind was not used to traversing.

The sailor continued talking, making a speech of sorts, cheered on by his friends, but their laughter died down sharply when the Devil Captain appeared and snapped at the seamen. The cowed sailor ran off to the rear and knocked on Twitching Devil's door.

Twitching Devil opened his door, glasses perched on his nose. He was wearing a long dress and a funny cap on his head. He said a few words to the sailor and closed the door in his face. The sailor returned and said something to the Devil Captain, who directed the men to take the new arrival to the poop deck above his sleeping quarters.

Twitching Devil emerged a few moments later carrying an oil-lamp in one hand and a bag in the other and, stifling a yawn, ascended the stairs to the poop deck. On seeing him, the new arrival began to whimper. Angee chuckled, wondering what book-reading had led him to imagine was to happen — but then he recalled his own fear at facing Twitching Devil. Twitching Devil glanced at the Devil Captain, who nodded. Twitching Devil took off his coat and gestured for the new arrival to do the same. The man refused and Twitching Devil had the crew undress him, peeling back his blouse to reveal a white hairless chest and arms, almost luminous in the lamplight.

To Angee, these marked a body that had never seen a day's manual labour, of a piece with his soft scholar's hands, but all that would be changing. Real life was making its grim presence known already. Other devil crew, watching from the main deck, whistled as Young Scholar was stripped naked, his clothes tossed aside. His skin was soft and white like a flower girl's, provoking their interest. He tried to cover himself with his hands but the two men restraining him pulled back his arms, parading him before their mates below. His whimpering had by now increased into full-blown sobs, wrenched deep from inside. Twitching Devil snapped at the men, who remained defiant, howling like the pack of dogs they were.

Angee longed to run out from the shadows, draw a knife, cut out all the devils' tongues and throw them overboard for the fish and crabs to consume so they could not insult his countryman further. The strength of his feeling surprised him; had any of the scholarly class ever condescended to help him in times of need? He held back, storing up and stoking his anger.

The Devil Captain spoke sharply and the devil crew calmed. Now Twitching Devil produced from his bag the cable tool machine that he had used on Angee and the others that morning. He put the lugs in his ears and made to place the metal disc against Young Scholar's chest. He screamed and recoiled, but his two captors held him firm. Twitching Devil brought the contraption close to his chest, heaving and swelling, listened for a while, and directed the men to turn him around. Next he placed the disc against Young Scholar's back, who arched and struggled in their grip. Pulling the device from his ears, Twitching Devil rolled it up and returned it to his bag. Slowly, Young Scholar was turned to face Twitching Devil again.

Twitching Devil picked up the lamp and squatted down, head jerking and lamp jolting in his hands, spilling oil and swinging close to Young Scholar's bare skin. The Devil Captain directed one of his men to hold the lamp. It was an extraordinary tableau: Young Scholar naked and another on bended knee before him, framed by devil crew. But finally Twitching Devil stood up and toed at the man's clothes, indicating that he was to dress himself again.

Young Scholar clutched at his clothes and drew back from the two men who had been securing his arms. Twitching Devil said a few sharp words to them, provoking a sharp response from the Devil Captain, who directed Young Scholar to follow him downstairs and into his cabin.

The door closed behind them and Angee shook his head, glad he had not intervened: once again, class had prevailed over culture. Or did the cabin visit, the special treatment of Young Scholar, mean something quite different? If Angee wondered at

the night-time activities of foreign devils, he was as much in the dark about the proclivities of the mandarin class. He vowed to keep himself free of their attentions. He crept back to where Uncle slept and lay down with his head on his bundle. And, with these scattered thoughts, he dozed.

A little while later the cabin door opened and Young Scholar emerged, scuttling away into the darkest corner he could find. He did not move and it was impossible to make out his shape any further; but gradually Angee could hear more sobs, great wrenching sobs, coming from the poop deck. He felt confused by the scholar's treatment, his countryman's suffering at the hands of these foreign devils, and a small part of him wanted to reach out and help. But still he held back. The sobbing gradually subsided; and Angee fell at last into a deep sleep.

The bell sounded, waking him sharply. It was light. Angee did not know how long he had been asleep this time. The devil crew bustled around, kicking prone bodies, stirring other sleepers into wakefulness. It was their turn to go below, as men from the second shift clamoured to come up on decks. Groaning, Uncle rolled over, covered in seasick.

'Water,' he gasped. Angee got him a cup from a barrel under the mainmast. He passed close by Young Scholar, thought of offering him a cup, but held off.

Lok See drank greedily, gasping, the colour returning to his face. He caught something different in Angee's eye.

'What's wrong with you?'

'Didn't sleep much,' Angee mumbled.

'Who's that young fellow sitting alone over there against the mast? Dressed like a mandarin?'

'Just another passenger, arrived while you were asleep,' Angee replied shortly. 'He was in the Devil Captain's cabin most of last night.'

Lok See arched his eyebrows.

'Come and get something to eat, Uncle,' Angee helped him to his feet.

'No food. But I'd love a pipe.'

'Later.'

One of the crew raised a hatch in the foredeck and, grabbing Young Scholar, pulled him over to the ladder.

'Step on his toes as you go down, that'll show him how his world has changed,' Lok See sniggered to Angee.

But Angee resisted, knowing that Young Scholar was only too well aware of the change in his circumstances. Down, down he went, feeling the rungs with his toes, till his feet touched bottom.

His eyes useless in the dark, Angee's other senses registered the presence of others with him below decks: the clammy, fetid stink of dried sweat and the fear of penned animals; the chesty wheeze of an addict; the spatter of loose bowels. He realised quickly that those surrounding them, their eyes adjusted to the below-decks gloom, could readily see him; and this relative disadvantage filled him with apprehension. But it must have been worse for Young Scholar in front of him.

'Look at his lordship, lads!' one of Big Yap's mob called out to laughter.

The initial surprise below decks at finding one of the ruling and educated classes among their number would soon change to something darker. His countrymen as well as the foreign devils would be after Young Scholar, and Angee wondered how long he would survive friendless, harassed below and above decks. Like an injured duck in a rice field, he would be pecked to death by his peers.

Angee wondered how Young Scholar felt, what he thought about being below decks. In a strange way, Angee felt grateful to Young Scholar: he and Uncle were safe while there was a larger target such as Young Scholar. But what kind of security was that, when the mob, having tasted blood, could turn on others? From what he had seen above decks, Angee now realised that he did not wish this suffering on a countryman, not even one of the educated.

17.
IN THE ANIMAL REALM

THE DRUM SOUNDS and the hatch is flung open. Soon the men will come below decks bearing the large plates of rice. For the first time in days, I feel hungry enough to eat. My robes feel wet and I realise I have soiled myself once more. I recall swine swirling in their own stale during a visit with Father to the villages of Tong An County. And, like those swine, I am not alone in my debasement: locked below decks till nightfall, out of sight of the sun, we are all swine, trapped, fouling ourselves and each other: our air, our clothes, our bedding-mats.

I have heard men say that seasickness rarely lasts more than three days, but how long it felt! The disorientation of not being allowed out in the sunshine, of having to wait until night-time to smell fresh air! My head pounds from the never-ending cacophony of gongs and flutes, accompanied by men hacking and wheezing, the effects of a few comforting pipes having worn off and the crew forbidding the lighting of fires below decks for obvious reasons. Although, if we were all to go up in flames, that would at least put us out of our misery.

I still feel weak, even though I stopped throwing up a while ago. I cannot remember feeling this dreadful, not even when I had my brain-fever and Father fed me claypot chick. Oh for some of that home-cooked comfort food now! Second Wife, I thank the gods you cannot see me now! My skin is caked and scaly, cracked sore with salt; and the itching on my scalp is none

other than the same lice that afflicted the cook's splay-footed daughter. Not that anyone here would notice, as my condition is scarcely worse than that of any of the unfortunate souls who are my companions below decks.

If you are thinking of me, understand me well: I would take my bedding above decks, to air it by night, but the uncertain rain might wet it and the feel and smell of lying on wet, rotting cotton would be worse than what I am already familiar with. The fresh rainwater on my skin would be a welcome relief, however, and I would wander about the deck with my mop, feeling the wind-sting lashing me for my transgressions, masking my tears.

It feels good to have my head bare once more. My head covered and arms tied, a crab in a bag, I smelt pine needles, felt them underfoot as I was led away. I asked and asked my captors what they wanted. Contact my father, he'll pay you good money to return me — but they remained silent.

Over the ensuing days and nights, I could not understand why, if money was their ultimate objective, they would not contact Father. Unless — and the possibility was too dreadful to consider — Father himself had sought to have me removed from Second Wife, to install Ah Chiang in my place. That scoundrel had been most familiar in his treatment of our ancestors. No, it was not possible that Father had directed him thus! But was it not possible that the scoundrel himself had sought to have me removed, had arranged our chance meeting with the woodcutters at the tombs for my disposal? The imperial histories are full of such examples of deceit visited on masters by their servants.

Or was it simply fate, plain bad luck that I was in the area when they were looking to take someone? I gathered from snatches of their conversation that they kidnapped men for a living. And, from the wary eyes of some of my travelling companions, I surmised that they had befallen a fate similar to mine. In the thick of men, as I am now, I have learned that I am not the only miserable one.

But my clothes set me apart right from the start. Would I have been better to adopt the nankeen drab of my travelling companions? I ask myself this question as I push my mop across the decks of an evening. But then I would be one of them. I remain aloof in my tattered robes, a reminder that my former life is not some dream from which I have been rudely awoken. And that the indignities served upon me, by Sons of Heaven and devils alike, are by no means warranted.

The pots arrive with shouting, a few fortunate men having taken upon themselves the job of preparing and delivering food below decks. They look sleek, well-fed in comparison with the rest of us, as if they have served themselves first — I know I would in their position. A little fish and watery vegetables are served in pots alongside the rice. I hang back, waiting for the others to serve themselves first, too weak to assert myself and assuage my hunger directly.

The clangour stops and the silence is palpable a moment before men charge in, fill their bowls and retreat, snarling. I am reminded of a neighbourhood dog, a miserable cur who hung around outside our courtyard, waiting and watching. Painting under the ginkgo, I saw it stealing in to raid the rubbish pile, gulping scraps and running away, vomiting up his snatch to chew over in solitude. But dogs at least would not soil where they eat and drink.

No doubt about it, I am in the animal realm now, surrounded by men-animals, descended from the human realm of passion to one where stupidity prevails. Like dogs, we have our pecking order, and I, unaffiliated, am towards the bottom. Am I to roll over on my back, expose my soft underbelly? But those devils on deck have already done that to me. And what they left unresolved in my humiliation, my travelling companions — I laugh to use the term — have made abundantly clear.

The dogs have served themselves and retreated. I move in and serve myself from what little remains. I pass a group of men in loincloths sitting together, quiet and watchful. I have seen

their like toiling in the villages near home, hauling barrows and digging ditches for a bowl of rice. In their social organisation, they resemble ants rather than men. Passive in their animal element, they remain aloof.

I wonder how much further I will descend before my punishment is complete — into the hungry ghosts' realm of poverty and inadequacy? Like our cook and his daughter at the Villa of Tranquillity, the faces of many on board, tight and watchful, are of men born into that realm; many will not escape it in this life. Or lower still, into the hell realm, of aggression and hatred? I fear this one the most. It would destroy me not merely in this life, but affect my future lives. If fate has decreed that this life is done, let its unravelling not affect my future salvation!

The first few nights on deck, I walk around as if in a daze. My stomach churning, my legs rubbery, I hang over the rails much of the time, too ill to marvel at the moon over water, a sight that would have affected my poetic yearnings in another place. My eyes meet the glares of others: my tattered clothing a provocation in itself, I match their gaze until either they look away or they take my attention as some kind of insolence and swear at me, threatening. My sense of superior social status not yet eroded, it takes a while to learn to avoid eye contact with the other Sons of Heaven on board.

The devils are another matter entirely. Fortunately, I learnt my lesson from them on the night of my arrival, and I get to see those Sons of Heaven who victimise me victimised in turn by devils: the justice of the Hell Courts. I see men punched and tripped, and the glint of the crew's weapons is as menacing as their smiles. Keeping my eyes downcast, I reel and stagger along the deck looking for somewhere to sit down. A space between men beckons and I would rest there but for the hostile looks of the men already seated nearby. Sighing, I move on again, friendless.

It is an upside down world when a young scholar is consigned to the lowest of the low. And that is how I come to

spend my time on the night watch mopping the decks. It was that or cleaning the buckets, taking up the stink-pots from below decks. And the sounds of sick men groaning and exploding, sloshing their bowels into these, is more than enough for me.

The Master said: '*A scholar who cares for his material comforts does not deserve to be called a scholar.*' But I know he never voyaged beyond the Middle Kingdom by sea, in a devil vessel such as this one.

I cannot speak yet of the ignominy of bodily functions performed in concert with others, in those foul buckets, or hanging off ropes at the front of the vessel. Allow me to eat my rice in peace! Looking down, vertiginous, I recall breeding-ponds and the fish below the hole in the flooring, the water surface boiling with anticipation, waiting for their sustenance. Here, on the open sea, the water foams as the ship rides the wind, cresting swells, and we dangle on the end of a rope. More than once, thinking of you, missing you, I am tempted to simply let go. But one *xia hai* was enough: being on this vessel is a *change in career* for me; I do not need to *jump into the water* as well.

I finish my bowl and put it aside. I have the stomach for just one bowl of rice this morning, but even this simple sustenance revives me, and my old dissatisfactions return. What I would not do for a cup of tea! Its fragrance, its warmth and stimulation to my senses would elevate me from this prison below decks, at least while the cup lasted. The pleasure of sluicing even a cup of water around my mouth, rinsing out rice particles between my teeth, is denied me until it is our turn above decks this evening and I settle for a makeshift toothpick, a bamboo strip peeled from my pillow, as I have observed others doing. Already my little pillow is fraying in parts and I wonder how much longer it will have to supply me with toothpicks: in short, how much longer this voyage will last. It cannot be too much farther: even you, an uneducated woman, know there is

only so far we can travel before getting to the edge of the world, the southernmost reaches of the Heavenly Dynasty, where the Old Man Star lives.

As men around me settle back after their meal, a circle forms and shouts mark the start of another game of chance. I have had my chances, and perhaps that is how I ended up here. For want of other amusement, I pull out and look once again at the piece of paper the Devil Captain bade me sign in his quarters. I puzzle over it, unhurried, my only occupation until we are allowed above decks. I have looked at it so many times that I know every word on it, but the sum of its parts remains a mystery to me.

18.
THE DEVILS' CONTRACT

I, *SHIU PI*, am willing to sign this contract for Five Years with an Australian, living in the colony of England. This person asked the Tait and Company in Amoy to recruit workers to work in the pastoral industry as a Shepherd or as a General Hand in New South Wales. The employer will give *Shiu Pi* Three Dollars salary per month or give the same amount in English currency. In addition to this salary, the employer also will provide

10 pounds of Rice
8 pounds of Flour
1 pound of Sugar
8 pounds of Meat
2 ozs of Tea

Because of *Shiu Pi's* request to serve his Urgent Needs he has borrowed Six Dollars in advance in Amoy. After arrival and commencement of work, his salary will be deducted One Dollar every month until he has paid back all the money owing. Afterwards, he will get his full salary again. *Shiu Pi* is required to do whatever work the employer asks without protest. This contract is proof of all things mentioned above.

19th Day of 10th Month in the First Year of Xian Feng.

19.
THE OTHER SIDE

THE MORE I read the devil's contract, signed just four days after I set out on my ill-starred journey, the more confused and angry I become. How willing can a man be when he is dragged, head covered, from his Mother's grave to a devils' vessel? If the meaning of five long years is clear, the other details are not. Who is an Australian? And what is a shepherd? To think I have been stolen away from my exam preparations, from my destiny in Xian Feng's Court, to undertake menial tasks in an unknown land! I look at my poor hands holding this paper: what once held a brush are now blistered from my mopping. I do not think that Xian Feng's Court will wait for me.

Turning to the more mundane concerns that remain, what of these foodstuffs? While the numbers and quantities are a mystery to me, at least there will be some tea provided when we arrive in New South Wales, which, I understand from snippets overheard on deck, is near the New Gold Mountain, wherever that might be. I wonder whether the promised money will be sufficient for my needs — I do not know, for Father always provided for our household. As for my urgent needs — I snort with derision at this lazy phrase masking the manner in which I was forced to purchase garments, a rough-hewn jacket and trousers, which have already been stolen from under my pillow while I lay ill. Sons of Heaven, why would you treat me thus?

So many riddles bound up in this little piece of paper, which now sets out my destiny! Turning it over, I look at the other side, written in the devil language. It is even more impenetrable, a series of incomprehensible sticks and curls, but presumably it sets out the same peculiar notions in their language as I have struggled over in mine so many times already.

At the bottom of the page on the left-hand side, in the same place as on the side I can read, the Devil Captain has made his mark, scratching the paper with a metal-tipped quill. To the right of this, on both sides, I added my signature as instructed.

Following his example, I dipped the quill into the ink-pot, scratched it on the paper, flicking spots of ink as the metal tip caught in the fibres. If the Devil Captain was surprised at my literacy, I felt somewhat embarrassed by the mess the unfamiliar quill made on the paper. My name came out as scratchy and angular, quite unlike the graceful swelling of characters tapering into points produced with the graduated pressure of a brush and ink. Still, the devils know nothing about writing, so it is hardly surprising that I should be given something more appropriate for cleaning wax out of my ear than for signing my name.

We stop at a port, take on more water, but are not allowed off. To see land, to imagine its solidity beneath my feet and be denied the sensation, is cruel torture. Furthermore, no tea is served, given that a couple of men have been in a fight with the devil crew: while they have been placed in the cangue near the main mast, the rest of us are punished as well, as a warning. That has upset more than just me. A group of men led by a greasy, well-fleshed fellow they call Big Yap was most displeased and had their hot heads prevailed we would have seen more rationing from the Devil Captain.

I see little of his travelling companion, the one called Twitching Devil, who subjected me to indignities by lamplight. He keeps to his cabin much of the time. Would that I had my own cabin!

I get used to mopping, my blisters harden and I learn more about my travelling companions. Pushing a wet rag around the deck, I sidle in and out of conversations without being a part of them.

'You know, our recent harvests had been so poor, and the imperial dues so punishingly great, that my father sold me to the labour contractor.'

'Ours was not so good either, a 20 crop. Twenty from our clan on this trip.'

'Shut up and let him tell his story! Go on.'

'But not before he made me marry the daughter of our neighbour.'

'That's not so bad then, is it?'

'My father hates this neighbour with a passion, and his daughter is a funny little thing with a club foot.'

'Ah, but she would be warm at night,' someone says to laughter.

'Aiee, it doesn't sound like she could do much work with a bad leg. So why would your father insist on your marrying her?'

'So she would have to come and work in our field instead of that of her own father,' he concludes to roars of laughter.

Even I chuckle at this anecdote, drawing attention to myself, so that one of the men listening to the story calls out to me.

'And it wouldn't be your father who collects rent on the fields, would it, mop-man?'

'So what's the young mandarin doing here with our tong then?'

Their speculations becoming ever more lurid, my mop steers me to another part of the deck.

I wonder if my family ever think of me any more. Do people really cease to exist once they depart the Middle Kingdom, cut loose from relations? If they leave nothing behind, no wife or son?

If my tears drip a trail on the grey deck, my mop ensures no trace of my feelings remains for others to pick and laugh over.

20.
MEDITATIONS ON A CRICKET-BOX

AND YET. AND yet, say it: I still have the cricket-box she gave me. Thank those monsters for not emptying my pockets as well as my hopes! Putting aside the paper, I burrow in my pockets and remove the little cricket-box.

It nestles in the palm of my hands, its front panel a scene carved in ivory of a cloud-ringed mountain with a village in the low-lying foreground. I think of my recent ill-starred journey to Flying Cloud Pavilion. The cricket-box looks old, the wood burnished from the touch of loving hands over time. I roll it over in my hands, turning it from the pictorial panel to its blank rear panel. The little box is so finely finished that you cannot tell how it is to be unlocked at first, and, turning it end over end, only gradually reveals the secret of access to its inner depths. At one end, a honey-combed panel of ivory provides ventilation for the crickets housed inside; if escape is on their minds, they are tricked into seeking egress from the wrong end. It is the other end that is removable: sliding it off reveals a second concealed panel behind which rests a small food container. Scrape a thumbnail of rice-porridge in there and the little bugs will be kept happy for several days as go went about your wanderings. Bring them home, place them in a bamboo cage and hook it under the awning, listen to them sing. Choose the most beautiful singer,

place it in a silver cage you have had specially made, and present it to her, a token of your—

I kiss the little wooden box, breathing in its fragrance, its hints of her, layering the pungencies of my memory while it still carries some vestige of her — the salt tears, the throb above my eye where a crewman struck me, wishing she would bathe it for me as she has done before.

The little crickets have more chance of escape than we do on this devils' vessel, surrounded by water below and the sky above, with no land in sight.

I remove the front and rear panels, sliding these off to examine its empty barren interior. I have not yet had the pleasure of filling it to my satisfaction, and I grieve for the loss of this opportunity.

But there are no crickets singing in here for me. Instead, a sudden movement in the gloom, and a scuffle. I freeze, fearing an argument over gambling spilling towards me, and listen.

'It's mine, I saw it first!'

'Finders keepers!'

I roll my head over until I can make out a man holding up something between his fingers. From its movements, it appears to be alive: a cockroach, its legs wriggling furiously. He pops it in his mouth and crunches it up, chewing happily, before leaping to his feet and running away, chased by his companion. Are they truly mad or just acting? And what of me? How long can I endure this madness, this loneliness?

As our journey progresses and I move ever farther in time and space from my former life, the Villa of Tranquillity seems like a bad dream, one that not only gives me no comfort but which fills me with dissatisfaction for my present circumstances. Details of my former life blur, distorted by imperfect memory. So I try to cast myself in the heroic role of traveller-scholar: a new Confucius boarding his raft, crossing seas to bring the message of a rational social order to men still slaves of superstition. But try as I might to cast myself in the great teacher's mould, or the

efforts of other great men of our culture bringing light to the darkness, this is no rational venture I am on. This is a ship of superstition, fuelled by the never-ending music and the ravings of madmen, and me with my mop, sailing around the decks, night after night.

The darkness, which threatens to consume us all, begins with opium.

Some of the addicts have procured smoke from the crew in exchange for portions of their advance. They puff away at their pipes when above decks, falling back on the wooden rails into a heavy fitful doze, their mouths open, snoring and snorting. Every so often one will wake, his eyes gazing directly above at the sky; and, overwhelmed by its enormousness, he will begin to wail as the stars spin and dive.

'It's going to land on top of us!' one screams.

Another, started into wakefulness beside him, squawks: 'You're right! See the bright burning one up there? It's coming towards us, it's going to hit us!'

Each fans the flames of the other's paranoia, until, sweating and shivering, their mania breaks and they doze again.

The sky is not the only thing that transforms under their opium-induced vision. The ship wheels and rolls far in excess of the ocean swells; indeed, the decks ripple, and the masts slither like snakes through the sails. When the watch ends and we go below decks once again, the inky black of night replaced by the eerie gloom of daytime in the hold, and the opium begins to wear off, their dreams take on a different complexion — livid and echoing. Everything is turned into something sucked into their own personal universe: the vortex of their pipe. But for all their abject terror, they are powerless to move, incapable of defending themselves against the impending doom they see for themselves and for everyone sharing this ship of death.

We have learned that the vessel is called the *Arabia* and this intelligence feeds the addicts' wild imaginings as they tell each other stories of the Mongol sailor, Zhong He, and his fleet

travelling to Arabia and beyond. The fantastical giraffes he brought back from his voyage for Emperor Yung Lo were nothing compared with what the addicts imagine lurking below decks. For the great creator, Pan Ku, the lice on his body became the human race; and, in this crazy parallel universe at sea, the hold fills with the fantastical inhuman creatures that the addicts' imaginations have bred from the bugs and lice that share our bedding.

I cannot fail to take notice of these ravings, and be impressed by the febrile power of their imaginations, their fantasies taking on an air of reality; and I wonder whether I too am losing my mind as I drift around the decks by night, keeping to myself, fearful and uncertain — unable to ignore the drums and gongs below decks, unable to dispel the fear that such monstrous inventions live beyond the addicts' imaginations, walking the Earth somewhere, wondering whether there will be such beasts wherever we are going. But, like a storm-tossed bottle, cursed with being alive in interesting times, I will have to wait to see what shores we come to rest on.

A new moon comes and goes, bringing with it memories I would rather have forgotten. At the time of the last moon, how different my life was! And now? With just my mop for company, I have taken to talking to it as I go about my business above decks. To play the fool to survive, perhaps.

With my mop, left alone by everybody, I have ample opportunity to observe the personalities on board. I do not intend to waste my energies describing the devil crew who persecuted me upon my arrival on this vessel; or their headmen, who, occupying private rooms, failed to dissuade them from their excesses. There are men in large clan groups from the same villages, who travel together as smoothly operating machines. The members of the Big Yap group from Flower Drum Village share tasks such as the food preparation aboard the vessel, dividing these up among themselves to best advantage. That is

our one-third. When we return below decks, we share the hold in turn with the other two-thirds of the men on board.

Night after night, after night, at sea. The boy rings the bell to mark the watches, but time ceases to have meaning. Its usual markers of light and dark denied those of us on the night watch, our bell is sounded by the addicts' chorus.

If the space on deck and the very vastness of the sky above us is made to swell and shrink by the sheer force of their terrified imaginings, how much more frightening is it when time stretches or shrinks? Sometimes, as I go about my mopping, I hear them talking to each other in their lucid moments, about how they have lived an entire lifetime in the course of a day below decks, that not only their lifetime has passed, but the entire history of the Chinese people and all in the space between one night on deck and the next as they lie entombed between decks. Our little ship is all the world we know now, and I, isolated from all others on board, find in their ravings a force they would not have on land.

Another port — scanned for any sign of Arabia or fantastical creatures — and again no chance of putting feet on land. This time, however, two men try to jump ship, but are caught and beaten for their troubles. They are placed in stocks, at the foot of the mainmast, as a warning for all to see. Our tea is again withdrawn as a warning to all to not attempt a repeat.

I have mopped the area around the cangues, scrubbing at the caked blood and waste there, but the sight of men in it is all the more frightening.

'Hey, Young Scholar, give us some water.'

I look up, startled. I have not been addressed in this way for so long that I thought I was imagining voices in my head! But then I realise it is one of the men in the cangue. So even someone with their hands manacled feels that they can be insolent to me! I am tempted to wring out my mop in his face, crown him with its wet weight, but I know he will be released from the contraption

at some time and will come looking for me. On this vessel, I have nowhere to hide: I would be hunted down and paid back with interest. I fear physical pain far more than the emotional anguish I have been experiencing; and my memories are sufficient torture. I get a scoop and hold it to his mouth. He drinks, spilling water down his chin and neck, which runs on to the wooden beams of the cangue.

'How does that thing feel?' I ask.

'Well, it doesn't tickle, if that's what you mean.'

He winces, and I ask: 'Do you want some more water?'

'Give some to Uncle, too,' he nods to the old man in the cangue beside him, whom I recognise as one of the addicts.

'He is your uncle?' I cannot help but ask.

'My father's youngest brother. Lok See's my age, but you wouldn't know it any more. That opium poison the devil crew feed him is slowly killing him.'

I do as I am asked; Lok See drinks sparingly, his hollowed eyes unseeing as one who has already been through the Third Court of Hell. What things those unseeing eyes could tell us about suffering!

'Thanks, I owe you,' the nephew says. 'You know, I saw what they did to you when you arrived that night. Can I fix someone up for you?'

Flushed with shame, I do not know what to say. Should I accept his offer and end up in the cangue or worse myself for fomenting mutiny? Or should I refuse and be cast as a weakling, if my reputation can sustain any further damage in this area?

'Let me think about it and get back to you,' I say.

'You do just that,' he says, looking me in the eye. 'The name's Angee.'

My mop steers me to other parts of the foredeck, and it is only later that I realise that I did not introduce myself. But I am easy enough to find. What world am I in that a man in stocks controls my freedom? And I seek the counsel of addicts?

After the second port, we sail south. The weather grows hotter daily and our journey takes on a new air of desperation. Shivering despite the heat, the addicts lie like dead men along the rail, huddled together to stave off their madness. I think of what Angee said about the devil sailors feeding these lost men: ageing years in a few short moons as the drug wastes their bodies.

'There's the Old Man Star,' one whispers on a clear night, pointing to a bright star in the southern sky.

I am relieved to know that we are still within the Heavenly Kingdom's realm. Perhaps I say this out loud to myself, for another addict answers me: 'If you believe that,' he mutters, hawking and spitting where I have recently mopped, 'you'll believe anything. We're all going to die, to sail off the end of the world!'

'And the Old Man Star's coming to drag us away, to the abyss off the end of the world!'

And the line along the rail sets to wailing and echoing, until the devil sailors come out with sticks and silence them. It is like being in some chamber of hell — tortured men crying for mercy and being beaten — where the misery is compounded and seemingly never-ending.

Angee and Lok See are released from the cangue and tea is restored. We nod to each other as I go about my mopping. Angee tries to keep his uncle away from the other addicts as much as he can. They often sit to one side, reading a book together and I burn with envy for such a luxury! I have only the Devils' contract for reading material, and I know every last word on the page.

My curiosity gets the better of me and I mop in circles ever closer, straining to listen to the words Uncle reads out to his companion. If I get too close, he stops reading until my mop takes me away once more. This drives me nearly to distraction: a book, a touchstone for my former life, within range and yet denied me. I surprise myself: despite everything I have experienced, desire still

rages within me. I wonder whether a direct approach is warranted. While in the cangue, Angee said he owed me a favour, so why not ask outright if I can have a look at their book? But my sense of entitlement has been so worn down by the countless insults I have endured during my mopping that I no longer know how to frame such a request.

Another moon comes and goes, another sad reminder. Mother has been dead 12 moons now, and I am, if anything, more dead than her. I have missed the county examinations; and so much more. At least her mortal remains lie with our ancestors.

The food is getting worse. After the fresh vegetables run out, it is salt fish and rice, salt pork and rice until next landfall. And weevils. The cooks give up picking out weevils from the rice and, when someone complains, argue that they are protein. Men start falling ill, their skin bruising and not healing, so the telltale encounters with devil sailors are there for all to see. They hang over the ship's heads, their bodies unable to keep down any food. A few are quarantined by Twitching Devil, but his gestures are so wild, so fearful, that only the bedridden submit to his attentions. Often it involves bleeding and, under his jerky knife-wielding hands, the treatment is worse than the ailment. He tells us that the barrel water is bad and we should not drink it; but with salt food and hot weather, how can we not? Rain is a blessing, when it comes, easing the ferocious dry winds, but it is impossible to collect sufficient water for all the men on board. Thirst is added to our sufferings.

The smell below decks is overpowering, and a dark music of gongs and horns now echoes through the ship. We are all going to die, the addicts croak. We have sailed beyond the limits of the known world, into waters where the Celestial Empire is unknown. Surely that is why our food, our water has turned! Such a wailing of tortured souls, the very heralds of hell! The night air fills with their clamouring voices warning us that we have sailed beyond the reaches of the Heavenly Dynasty into uncharted territories; that we are beyond redemption.

A few, weakened by sickness, simply let go of the head ropes and tumble into the water. Most are picked up, but I know of one who was not. It was Uncle, the owner of the book and one of the fellows I gave water to in the cangue. The terror of his transformation into an uncertain state below the waters, eaten by fish or some indescribable monster of our latent fears, swells and fills the minds of his fellow addicts. With no means of commemorating his spirit, he stalks our ship, his sea-monster form hungry for more souls to drag through hell with him.

In our time above decks, Angee sits alone by the cangue, cut off from the addicts and the non-addicts in his grief. Like the others, I avoid him. I cannot help — such is the lure of the hungry ghosts' realm at this stage of our journey — but I wonder whether the book has also fallen to a watery grave. Finally, my demons bested at least temporarily, I approach him one evening as I mop.

'I'm sorry about Lok See,' I say, resting on my mop.

He looks up, his hair matted. 'We're all going to die,' he says simply. 'Uncle was merely the first to recognise this, to *xia hai* and to give in to our shared fate.'

'Did the *I Ching* tell you this?' I curse myself inwardly as I speak.

'I don't know—' he stops, his head bowed, and I wait for him to continue. But he has nothing more to say. Finally, I drift away with my mop, leaving him, another outcast.

Sometimes, by moonlight or lightning, we think we can make out land on the horizon. But it remains a cipher to those of us on the night watch, and we wonder whether we have dreamed it or are victims of another cruel hoax, a lure from the sea-monsters, who, having tasted the withered flesh of Lok See and eager for more, stalk our passage. The day watchers eagerly describe the landforms they see, but these vanish whenever night falls and our turn above decks arrives. I do not trust anyone else's eyes, and so remain sceptical. Deep down, I still share the addicts' fears that we are going to fall off the end of the world.

Men gamble and play music ever more frenziedly, Angee now among their number. He tore apart his tambourine and made a gambling ring from the body, counters from the rattles. The shouts and noise of the gamblers below decks competes with the groans of the growing numbers of sick and crazy, the gongs and zithers of this watery funeral procession. The wails of withered addicts that fill the hold, calling for death or mercy, feed my own demons. By now, most have run out of money and the crew, having fuelled their addiction, refuse to advance any more opium. Having exhausted their advances, and pawned or hocked everything of value, they take to stealing, as do a number of the less fortunate gamblers. This makes all our few possessions all the more precious, to others as well as ourselves, as anything of any transferable value is sought after and traded. Fights erupt over small matters, and the possessions of the sick and dying are pounced upon: a watch or bowl here, a blanket or pillow there. Uncle's blanket is taken by Big Yap, but the whereabouts of his book, the only item on board that I crave, remains a mystery. Sometimes repossession is a hollow victory, as the new owner follows the former owner into sickness, only to have their possessions fought over again.

In this new, even more desperate phase, I jealously guard my cricket-box. It is the only solid object linking me to my former life, to sanity. But even this link begins to give way under the stresses of our voyage. It is around the third moon that my own nightmares begin. My demons take flesh in familiar forms, and the image remains the same: a scroll.

Bending over, I pick up the scroll from the dust at Father's feet. I feel the silk ribbon, slippery and soft against the graininess of the parchment, the wax seal holding the bundle secure. My fingertips weigh the wax globule, try to make out the details of the mandarin's chop. There was a time when I would have desired a scroll with the mandarin's seal, waiting in the library at the Villa of Tranquillity for notification as to whether I had passed the imperial examinations and was eligible to step onto

the first rung of the mandarinate ladder. But not this one. This scroll holds my fate, absolute and irredeemable, in a way the imperial examinations could not: in those there is always at least the prospect of another chance, of redemption.

'Open it,' Father commands from his sedan chair.

I pull the ends of the ribbon apart until the wax crumbles, slip the ribbon clear off one end and unfurl the document. It is blank. Puzzled, I look to Father.

'This tells the story of your life,' he says.

'But there's nothing on it,' I protest.

'Then make something of it.' And, with a peremptory clap of his hands, the silken curtain is drawn between us and his attendants, Ah Chiang at the front and Second Wife at the rear, pick up the chair and trot off down the alleyway in to the darkness.

Other times, in my panic to open the scroll, I tear at it and it crumbles into dust before me.

'What did it say?' I ask Father.

'It's not important any more,' he answers dismissively. 'Go about your way.' And, putting his hand on Ah Chiang's shoulder, he waves me out through the gates of the Villa of Tranquillity. As I depart, I hear a woman's laughter from within.

In a third, I see Second Wife sitting in her rooms, her hair down, laughing with Ah Chiang as he reads from a scroll listing my crimes against filial piety.

At first, I do not know what to make of these disturbing messages from my slumber. But as they continue, in concert with the ravings of other madmen below decks, I start to wonder what bearing they have on my present circumstances. How much did Father know? How much could Ah Chiang or Second Wife tell him without exposing themselves?

Nearby, men huddle in a circle, shouting bets. Others lie shivering on pallets, calling out into the gloomy hold for anyone who will listen. I pull out my cricket-box, try to recall her face, but cannot. Eyes streaming, I look around and see, refracted

through my tears, the image of my own ruin. And then it strikes me, a dull blow that leaves my head spinning: that here, among the gamblers and addicts, is where I belong. In the animal realm of stupidity. Like the gamblers and addicts, I have been feeding my private demon, until it destroyed me.

I gambled everything on her, and lost.

How much have I lost already? Lineage, assets, honour and name. The contract lists a stranger, a worker from the Middle Kingdom. My clothes are now tattered rags, barely fit for mopping decks with. My family, Father and Mother, our ancestors, my examinations, my future and my descendant's future: all crumbled into dust, the scroll of my nightmares. The lineage scroll listing my descendants blank.

I look at the cricket-box cradled in my callused palm. Such a little wooden thing against which to weigh the rest of my life. Unused as well. Shouting to shake off my own bad luck, I cast the cricket-box into the middle of the circle of gamblers.

21.
THE TAMBOURINE

I CAN SCARCELY believe what I have just done — tossed my heart into the middle of a gambling ring! Their shouts die down, replaced by the excited chatter of speculation as to who has joined the fray.

'It's the mop-man!' one calls out, no doubt having observed my peculiar complexion. Cheering, they run over and grab me by the arms, pulling me into their inner circle.

'Good on you, mop-man!' Suddenly, I am one of them; and I have been isolated for so long that I do not know how to feel.

'Are you in?' a man holding three discs speaks to me.

And then another: 'Young Scholar, are you playing?'

It is Angee! Only he has addressed me thus this long voyage! We have not spoken for some days; now he seems diffident, reserved, as if with Uncle's passing something in him has been lost as well. Carefully, he picks up the cricket-box, looks at it closely, then at me.

'You sure you want to play this?' he asks, examining my face for any hint of its true value.

'Not really,' I admit at last, feeling awfully silly for having provoked their interest in the first place.

'But he must, Angee, he's thrown it in,' another protests.

Angee looks at him slowly. 'But this is valuable, should not be trifled with. We need to stake something of equal value. Any takers?'

Someone produces their contract, slaps it down on the reed mat between us.

'Play that!' he challenges.

I pick it up and glance at its contents. It reads more or less the same as mine. I pull mine out and show them.

'No, I have one like this already,' I say, handing it back to its bearer.

Those in the circle grumble but cannot raise the stake to play my cricket-box. Relieved, I lean over to claim it back, but Angee put his hand on top of it.

'Not so fast, I have something.'

He digs under his bedding and pulls out a calico parcel. Unwrapping it, he produces a worn and tattered book, its silk covers stained, its papers swollen with rainwater. So he has it after all!

'Angee, you cannot play that, you know it's bad luck!' one of the circle objects.

'Not if we don't mention it by name.'

'If that's been hidden under your bed all this time, no wonder we can't beat you,' another complains. 'It's as good as cheating!'

'Go get Big Yap, he'll know what to do,' another suggests.

Ignoring these protests, Angee turns back to me: 'Will you play this? It belonged to a friend of mine.'

By now the other men in the circle, spooked by the presence of a book, hold back, fascinated and appalled, unable to take themselves away, to see how this will resolve itself. I recall that *shu* or *book* is a homophone for *losing at gambling*, but given my inexperience, I did not until now realise what moment it was to invoke the risk of loss directly. We are all in unknown territory now. Transfixed, they watch as Angee places the book next to my cricket-box on the reed mat between us.

I pick up the book, a sacred object denied me for so long. With feelings of pleasure and excitement, I withdraw the bone needle from the silk noose holding the covers together and open

the concertina pages carefully. I recognise the teachings immediately: the *I Ching*, the Book of Changes! How appropriate for this journey! Its papers give off the sour-sweet aroma of opium and sweat and something else deeper: the evocative fragrance of rice paper and ink. For a delightful moment, I am back in the Pavilion of Stone.

How much I have lost already! If life is a gamble, I have been losing steadily for the past three moons and more, so why hold back now?

I bend over and pick up the three discs from the reed mat beside our stakes. I turn them over in my hand, observing the plain side on each and, on the other, a painted cross. In their own way, they are not unlike my little cricket-box, with its decorated panel and its blank rear. They are only three little discs from a tambourine; but, from the crowd gathering to watch us, it could be the contents of the whole world: the Moon stacked against the Earth, the Earth stacked against the Sun. Perhaps it is for the two of us: Uncle's *I Ching* pitted against Second Wife's cricket-box.

I feel a strange affinity for this fellow Angee. Having lost so much already, we share a recklessness that the other gamblers shrink from. If they have seen the drop, and have drawn back from the abyss, we find ourselves balanced on the edge, our toes curling, dislodging stones underfoot, challenging each other to jump first. It is a heady sensation, and I feel truly alive for the first time in months.

Word has gone out below decks and, for the first time in ages, there is no music: instruments are abandoned and we find ourselves surrounded by ever-increasing numbers of men clamouring to know what is happening.

'Boss, Angee's been cheating,' one of the original circle protests to Big Yap, who has joined the crowd. 'Look what he's had hidden under his bed while playing!'

Big Yap casts his eye over the betting ring. His eyes widen at the sight of the book.

'What's that doing there on the mat? Are you mad? You didn't steal it, did you?'

'It belonged to Lok See.'

'Is that so?' Big Yap observes with interest. 'You cost us our tea before, Angee, trying to jump ship. You think there's a special set of rules for you or something?'

'You know we tried to get off because the Devils wouldn't give Lok See the opium he needed,' Angee says quietly. 'And now he's gone, washed overboard, too weak to hold on.'

'He was an old addict, Angee, something or someone else would have done him in. Save your energy for the living.' Big Yap next turns his attention to me.

'Well, mop-man,' he growls, 'you want to gamble over dead men's things? You appear to be in the wrong school this evening.' His oblique reference through schooling to books sends a new wave of murmuring through the crowd.

Challenged, I find the courage to speak out: 'I've been in the wrong school this entire voyage.'

'And what might that be — the school of mopping?'

The crowd laughs at Big Yap's poor attempt at a joke.

'The school of hard knocks.' I want to say more, about how I was kidnapped, but something holds me back from opening up and possibly invoking his resentment: that little wooden cricket-box contains a dead man's heart.

'And where's your classroom?' Big Yap hisses at me.

'It's here, right now.'

'And what about your books?'

'It's too dark to read but I know the text anyway,' I reply, also invoking *shu*.

Angee looks at me sharply.

'Then you are truly *shu*,' Big Yap replies dismissively. 'I just changed the rules and this is how you lose today.' He leans over into the circle and picks up my cricket-box.

I panic. What is he going to do with it? He turns over the little wooden box in his hands. I feel violated, as if I were sharing

my secrets with a complete stranger. Watching him, I imagine his paws on Second Wife's white skin, and my bravado evaporates.

'Give it back, please,' I beg him. 'It's all I've got left.'

'Very nice. Where did you get this from, mop-man?' He seems pleased with the effect he is having on me.

'Please,' I kowtow, a scholar before a labourer, humiliating myself, but having so little left to lose I am prepared to pay this price for the return of the cricket-box.

'A bit of advice? Stick to mopping.' And with that Big Yap makes to leave the circle with my cricket-box. I howl.

'It's a fair bet, and it stands,' Angee says softly.

'You talking to me?' Big Yap says menacingly.

'Put it back, Big Yap,' Angee smiles, 'or I'll cut out your liver.'

'Is that a threat? With all my clan-brothers here to help me?'

'I've got nothing to lose. What about you?'

Angee speaks so softly that it seems like a joke at first. But there is a hard edge in his voice; and Big Yap hears it. Backing down, he returns the cricket-box to the circle.

'I'll play the bet then. Your book against my box.'

'Plain or crosses?' Angee asks as he picks up the discs.

I cannot believe what I am hearing: my cricket-box is back in the ring, but it is no longer my bet! And this man Angee is now casually playing for it against a bully and a thief.

'Crosses.'

Angee shakes the discs in his hands, casts them open. We all watch as the discs spin and twirl. One plain. One cross. The third spins and spins before resting plain side up.

'I have won,' Angee says, claiming the cricket-box.

'But you cheated!' Big Yap protests. 'The book!'

'And so did you, playing a piece which was not yours,' Angee says softly. 'Now clear out before I get serious.'

Big Yap knows he has lost face, and is keen to avoid losing more. He parts with a warning: 'You'll keep, cheat. Boys, come away now. Let's have some music again.'

His lackeys disperse the crowd until only I remain seated there, trembling and fitful.

'Now, this is for you,' Angee says, pushing the cricket-box across the mat to me.

I look at him in disbelief; but he nods.

'Go on, take it, it's yours. Besides, I owe you, from the cangue. You gave Lok See and I a drink, remember?'

'You risked your precious book to redeem my cricket-box?' I look at Angee in wonder.

'It belonged to my friend. I've lost him, why not his book as well?'

I pick the cricket-box up and kiss the dear little object, the receptacle of all my memories and desires, the connection to my former life, which I so nearly lost. Perhaps my luck is starting to turn.

'Thank you,' I say. 'I don't know what I would have done without it.'

'We all have our precious things,' Angee replies, picking up his book.

A strange and new feeling, of an indebtedness to someone who is so clearly my social inferior, wells up inside me:

'But how can I ever repay you?'

'With the first fighting cricket you find. Deal?'

'Deal,' we shake hands.

'Take my advice, Little Brother, give gambling a miss. And go back to the school where you belong.'

Little Brother — I feel not a little awkward, after all this time alone, to be drawn back into a family relationship with a name. And by this Angee at that. But this is my new reality, how my life has moved on. I shake my head sadly.

'Not very likely. I've missed my exams by now. Doubt I'll have a chance to sit those again.'

'Do you mean the imperial exams?' Angee asks with interest. 'I've never met anyone who was going to sit those.'

I nod, flattered by his interest in what once seemed so important to me. Honour, wealth, dignity, influence, all were within my grasp before this voyage began a few moons ago.

'I've heard you can bet on those as well,' he continues.

And yet, I still feel grateful for what has been restored to me.

But any further conversation is put on hold by shouts of: 'Land — we've arrived!'

We have heard this so many times before, it barely interrupts our conversation. Until another voice: 'Get up, we're really going to land!'

'The hatch is open!'

'Our voyage is over!'

Angee and I look at each other and burst out laughing. We have survived the voyage!

'After you, Little Brother,' he offers.

'You first, Angee,' I say, and he takes no second bidding. I follow Angee in the rush for the hatch, flung open for us in daytime for the first time since our departure.

The deck is already crowded with men blinking in the unfamiliar daylight, crying and hugging each other. After what we all have been through, this is a moment to savour.

No matter what lies ahead, the rescue of my cricket-box coinciding with our arrival is a good omen. I hug Angee, tears running down my face.

PART THREE

THE DESCENT INTO HELL

In the First Court of Hell, King Ching Wan conducts preliminary trials and each prisoner is judged according to his deeds in his past life. Those with virtuous conduct in their past life will be led over the Golden Bridge to reach Paradise. Those whose past good deeds outweigh crimes committed will be sent to the Silver Bridge to reach Paradise. Those who were evildoers in their past life will be sent to repent before the Mirror of Retribution and then taken to the subsequent Court of Hell to be punished.

Sourced from Tiger Balm Gardens, Singapore,
and Jade Emperor Pagoda, Saigon

22.
AN ODD COUPLE

SYDNEY PORT WAS quite a town. O'Neill liked it well enough for a visit. He had been to the new township of Wagga, a day's drive from his property, on a couple of occasions, but Sydney was just that much bigger, its attractions that much more distracting. But to stay here too long, among the stews, the bars and all the other temptations, well — O'Neill plunged his head into the basin of water on the washstand. The cold water stung his skin, made his temples bulge, but it cleared his head. Dripping, he came up for air, combing his fingers though his straggly red hair to wake himself up. His fingers smelt sickly sweet of last night's hair oil, and he shuddered.

Still, Lydia had not objected to it last night, curling her fingers under his chin, chucking him as she sat on his knee. He smiled at the recollection of it, before thinking of his own dear departed Sarah, taken off in the flu epidemic a few seasons back. Was it '47 or '48? His memory was slipping and he felt oddly disloyal. But Lydia was warm and alive; and a man could not pine over dust all the time, not in the city.

Drying his face on a handtowel, he looked at himself in the small shaving mirror over the washbasin. A few telltale nicks were the marks of his recent visit to the barber, his first trim in some months, in celebration of his visit to the city. There was a strange shadow-line, a photographic negative, where his beard had protected his cheeks until recently: above, his face was sun-browned, and below, his cheeks were pink.

Perhaps he should take Lydia and have their image captured together at Mr Terry's daguerreotype studio, a memento from his trip to the city? Who knew when he would be back in the city next? Would she like a copy for herself? No, she would have to sit still for a long time, and he doubted that Lydia, his dancing and singing and flirting Lydia, would be able to sit still for long enough to have her image captured in the light-box. Not even on his lap, which made him question his own capacity to keep his hands off her for the duration. It had not been easy during the moonlit walk around the point last night. She stopped him along the Cumberland Walk and he had kissed her, not for the last time. And then he had asked her under the moonlight if she would come away from the city with him to 'Borambola'. She had laughed and stepped back away from his embrace, which was all the answer he got.

He was glad that he was not in town for too long, there were too many distractions and not enough work for him to do. Around Dawes Point, past the Observer and along the gentle rise leading to the Hero of Waterloo and the Garrison Church, there were any number of sly-grog shops and gambling dens filled with sailors and women. And houses like Mrs Walker's Piano Rooms, the one where he had met Lydia, where more than stolen goods were traded. They had spent a few merry nights around a pianola and, during the day, walked across the green where the air was cool and afforded a view across the township east and west.

The past few days of waiting for news of the arrival and clearance of the *Arabia* had been pleasant, certainly. He had allowed himself to take a break, have some fun himself, after supervising the new merino crossbred doing his duty with the wethers; and there were supplies to be got for himself and his neighbour Wright. Still, he counted himself lucky that the ship had not been blown off course or delayed unduly by a typhoon — or else he would have been more than skint, and his letters of credit would need to be redrawn once more.

With a white woman running the house again, perhaps he could get the station back on track. The earth had died with Sarah: the drought had run two seasons — or was it three? Ruby would be banished from his bed, a move that would no doubt please Catherine Wright, a woman brought out from the old country and soured by disappointment.

But Lydia was a butterfly and would wilt in the heart of the inland. Even as he was asking her, he knew it was hopeless, and he a moon-calf excited by moon-dreams.

No, Ruby would not be leaving. It had been Wiradjuri land before the Crown Commissioner granted O'Neill his 14-year lease; and she and her mob would not be moving on. He had her, and she had him, and they both knew it, in a form of reciprocal access rights: her thighs for his land.

With these thoughts, he grabbed his jacket and hat from behind the door and headed downstairs. His breakfast chops could wait: today he had the chance to do what he had come to town for. Singing to himself, he came out through the back entrance of the Fortune of War into the narrow alleyway where the Shipwright Arms and the Torres Strait Hotel let rooms for seafarers and the occasional bushy such as himself. He swung through the coach way of the Scottish and Australian Chartered Bank and turned left on George Street, heading north towards Campbell's Wharf. To his right, down on the shoreline, was the quarantine station; he hoped he did not need that for his Celestials. The agent would tell him whether quarantine was necessary, notwithstanding the doctor's opinion.

He had met the ship's doctor, a Dr Johnson, the other day, but the twitches and skin eruptions manifesting themselves in the good doctor's own person did not inspire confidence in his judgment as to the wellbeing of the Celestials in his care. After he informed O'Neill that a few had come down with an ague, O'Neill left the doctor to dispute his landing bonus with the receiving agents.

Along George Street, he passed ship chandleries, sailmakers and spermaceti works peculiar to a maritime neighbourhood, as well as the barbers, drapers and tea rooms of the city. There was Broughtons' Tea Rooms, where he had taken Lydia yesterday afternoon, and next door was William Terry's Daguerreotype Studio — a William just like himself, she had observed! He crossed the road and passed the new Orient Hotel, where just last night sailors had been brawling on the streets again.

The dockyards now lay to his right and, before them, the premises of the shipping agents. Shadowed by these buildings in the morning light, he had some trouble finding again the Tait and Co. shingle, on a two-storey building towards the end of the row — surprisingly, as he had been there before. He had made his way to their premises three days before, presented his credentials as it were, at which time the shipping agent had told him after formalities were completed that he could return to sign for his men.

He took his hat off before entering the doorway, played with its brim, twirling it in his hands like a ship's wheel. Inside, another man, like him, unused to the city, if his blue serge shirt, moleskins and riding boots were any indication, was signing a few forms, completing formalities before collecting his charges from the ship, at anchor beyond the building.

A bookkeeper, hunched over a ledger on a sloping table, looked over his glasses as O'Neill entered the office.

'You've come to collect some men?'

O'Neill nodded.

'And you are?'

'O'Neill, William O'Neill.'

'Let me see,' the bookkeeper returned to his register, leaving O'Neill standing there, shuffling from one foot to another. I'd like to see you mend a fence, or clear scrub, bookworm, he thought to himself.

'Right, William O'Neill of Borambola,' the bookkeeper looked up. 'Is that you?'

O'Neill nodded.

'You're marked down for two men. Names of Shiu Pi and Angee, according to the captain's manifest.'

'Shiu Pi?' O'Neill had trouble pronouncing the unfamiliar name.

'Call him Sheepy, that way he'll have at least the makings of a shepherd,' the bookkeeper took off his glasses, his squinty eyes looking at O'Neill with something approaching amusement. 'I'll just have them brought up here for you.'

The bookkeeper called out the back and a boy ran down along the pier to where the *Arabia* was berthed to collect the men.

While O'Neill sat and waited, the bookkeeper continued to regard him with wry amusement.

'Have you ever had a parrot?'

O'Neill looked sharply at the bookkeeper. At first, he thought this was Sydney-town slang for Lydia and her kind, and he feared he had not wiped off all traces of her face paint, but the unblinking look on the bookkeeper's face assured him that he in fact meant the seed-eating bird.

'I've plenty on my station. Why?'

'Well, put one in a cage by itself and it'll talk to you, forget it's a bird. But two, they'll stick to each other. Celestials are like parrots.'

O'Neill frowned. 'You mean they keep each other company, right?'

'Right.'

'That's what I want. Reckon it would be pretty lonely all by yourself, looking after sheep, with nobody to talk to.'

'You could talk to the sheep. I hear that's what most shepherds do. Turned imbecile by their company.'

'I've got one like that already. One's enough, thanks.'

'Ah, here they are then.'

Two men had entered the room from the rear doorway and were ushered forward for O'Neill's inspection. They were quite a deal smaller than himself, their heads barely coming up to his shoulder. They were Celestials, no doubt about that, from their almond eyes to their pigtails. One, wearing a stained cotton jacket and trousers, had a nasty glint in his eye; but the other commanded his attention, dressed like a woman in a tattered silk robe. O'Neill imagined Lydia on her days off; but not even Lydia at her most dishevelled would get around in something as tatty as that.

They hardly seemed the solution to his shortage of manpower.

'Are you sure these are the two marked down to me? Can't I go down to the ship and select two shepherds for myself?'

'Sure as they stand here before you. That's Angee,' the dangerous one looked up at the sound of his name, 'and the other one, believe it or not, is your man, Sheepy.'

'But he'll never do as a shepherd in those ridiculous clothes,' O'Neill protested.

'We can fix you up with slops here as well. You know, a set of clothes for outdoor wear, shirt and trousers, issues and even a shepherd's smock, all brought in on the same boat from China.'

'Convenient, isn't it?' The shipping agent, who had joined in the conversation at the hint of a contract going sour, smiled patronisingly at O'Neill.

'Angee?' O'Neill tried out the name and the dangerous one looked at him shiftily. O'Neill frowned. 'I don't know about this one.'

'They come as a pair,' the shipping agent was firm. 'They've taken to each other, so it's best not to split them up. You'll get more work out of the pair than each one separately. Have you ever had a parrot?'

'Your bookman asked me that already,' O'Neill retorted. 'I have thousands of galahs and cockatoos on my station.'

But the shipping agent remained unruffled. 'Mister O'Neill, take them both or not at all. I have other property owners on my books who'll have these two if you back out.'

O'Neill looked at the two men before him. They were an odd couple, no doubt about that. He wondered whether he was being hoodwinked by the shipping agent into taking a couple of undesirables. It was his first time experimenting with foreign labour. He nodded to the Celestial, making a mental note to watch this shifty-eyed fellow.

'Sheepy?' No response. O'Neill tried again, and this time, after a dig in the ribs from his companion, the one they called Sheepy looked up, baffled by the attention.

The Celestial said something, several times over, slowly, until O'Neill realised he was repeating his name.

'That's right, Sheepy,' O'Neill encouraged him.

The Celestial looked to his companion despairingly. There was nothing in his eyes to suggest a troublemaker, perhaps he would even be a calming influence on his mate; and this decided matters for O'Neill.

'He'll do, get him some slops,' he directed the bookkeeper. The bookkeeper made a note in his ledger and produced a packet of clothing, which he handed to Sheepy. He and the other one animatedly exchanged a few words in their Celestial language.

O'Neill pulled out from his jacket pocket the promissory note for £30, which he had prepared through the Australasian Bank in Wagga. Unfolding the large sheet of paper, he smoothed it flat on the desk and handed it over to the bookkeeper, who scrutinised it carefully.

'This all seems to be in order,' the bookkeeper said finally. 'Now, the contracts. Just one last bit of paperwork and the men are yours.'

He held a piece of paper before the Celestials, and Sheepy, the one in the silk robe, dug into his pocket producing a similar piece of paper. Sheepy said something to Angee, the shifty-eyed

one, in a singsong voice, the sense of which eluded O'Neill, and Angee removed a slip of paper from his jacket pocket as well. The bookkeeper made to take these from the men, but the men shrank back. Shaking his head, he turned to O'Neill.

'Look, witness these two and then the Celestials will see what I'm on about, will you? These are their new employment contracts, setting out their pay and the duration of the contract. If something goes wrong these are legally enforceable in the colony of New South Wales. The old ones are only good for signing in China.'

O'Neill signed the two contracts. Turning, he offered the quill to his new charges.

'Sheepy?'

But the Celestial was pulling a most extraordinary face, his cheeks puffed out, his lips distorted as he seemed to be hissing something. O'Neill looked at him with alarm and wondered whether he had contracted a fever, but they had said nothing about quarantine. After his initial alarm, O'Neill realised he was trying to tell him something.

'Sh-'

O'Neill parroted his sounds.

'-iu-', the Celestial continued, O'Neill copying his sounds.

'-Pi! Shiu Pi!'

The look of childish delight on the Celestial's face as he pronounced his name relieved and charmed O'Neill.

'Not Shoopy, Sheepy. Nice try though, you'll get it right quick enough.'

Sighing, the Celestial took the pen from O'Neill and signed the contract with a series of horizontal, vertical and diagonal scratches. Having finished, Sheepy offered the pen to Angee, who marked his contract with a simple cross.

The bookkeeper took the signed and witnessed contracts, dusted them with a little bit of powder and rubbed them over with his blotting-block. He entered the details in his ledger.

'A pleasure to do business with you,' the shipping agent held out his hand to O'Neill. 'Do have a safe and pleasant journey back to the frontier.'

'Come along then,' O'Neill said to his two new charges, holding open the door for them.

23.
LYDIA'S ASS

THERE WERE A few good hours' work to do before O'Neill left Sydney town with his two Celestials. There were supplies to get for Borambola — and for the neighbour who was keeping an eye on things during O'Neill's absence. George Wright of Cuningdroo was a self-important, trumped-up Anglican. But he was the only landowner within a day's ride, such was the size of their stations.

Many of the bond stores were clustered in and around George Street in The Rocks and they made good work of it, O'Neill driving the dray and the Celestials doing the loading and packing under his direction. Checking off the provisions list one by one as they made their rounds, he watched his two new charges in action, forming an opinion about their suitability as workers. They worked steadily, if unremarkably, and O'Neill wondered again whether Tait had diddled him.

He had read an announcement in the *Empire* by a Mr James Tait, Esq., took the trouble of tearing it out of the paper and putting it in his pocket, then promptly forgot about it. Later, looking for something else he had misplaced, he found the slip of paper and got all excited about the prospect of a new labour supply. Later still, over a boundary meeting — Wright frequently complained that O'Neill's shepherds strayed onto his land — he had raised it with Wright.

Wright snorted: 'Bring Celestials here, when we've just cleared the land of blacks?'

'At 13 pounds a year, George, we can get three men for the price of one.'

'But Will, three won't work as shepherds. Two shepherds to every hut, remember?'

'A pair then, and then they can talk to each other.'

He chuckled, recalling the bookkeeper's comments about parrots, and imagined Wright's blank face.

In spite of — or perhaps because of — Wright's reservations, O'Neill had written off in response to the advertisement. Forgetting about it once more, he was surprised when he received confirmation of his subscription for two adult male Celestial station hands for delivery by *The Arabia*. He took the opportunity of his contracting the two Celestials for a town visit and for some recreation.

It was getting towards midday and a cool breeze had sprung up across the harbour. O'Neill sniffed the sea breeze, redolent of other salt tangs, and thought of staying in town another night, but he knew it was pointless: the holiday was over and he had work to do. Now that he had his Celestials in tow, there would be no more of Lydia on this visit.

O'Neill had never had the chance to observe Celestials up close before, and he felt strange watching them do a man's work. Angee, the shifty-eyed one, was lean and strong, was clearly familiar with hard work. He could lift a flour sack no problems, knew how to make the weight of the sack work for you; that skill would come in handy tossing a sheep. He might even make an acceptable storeman or general hand on the property. But that Sheepy was none too promising. He looked a sight in his shepherd's smock and trousers, but at least they were better than the shabby silk robe. And that was before you added the pigtail to the picture! Still, he seemed most attached to his old rag, would not let O'Neill throw it out when they finished packing up, and so the old tattered robe was rolled up and stowed under the seat of the dray with Angee's roll and O'Neill's own satchel.

The loading finished, O'Neill called a rest, and none too soon, for Sheepy was worn out. He splashed water over himself from the horse trough and slumped to the ground. Angee stood alongside him, glowering at his new master, looking ready to slit O'Neill's throat if given half a chance. That one would take a bit of softening, he could see. But O'Neill had known other men, convicts and blackfellas, who had come to reason under a horsewhip.

He passed around some bread and cheese, which the Celestials ate in silence. After finishing, O'Neill pulled out his pipe, at which Angee became quite animated. He would not offer him a smoke, not here in the crowded town where others could see. But back at the station, there was no reason why tobacco rations from the station stores could not be advanced. O'Neill smiled. They could charge a pretty price, keep Angee indebted and under the thumb. Wasn't that what Mr Tait's agents hinted at with these new labourers, to keep them from running off to the goldfields?

With a journey of a week or more, just the three of them, O'Neill had to decide whether he could trust them or whether they would be better off tied to the wagon until they left the population centres behind. Beyond, where there was nowhere to run to, they could sit unfettered. But for now, he chose to keep them tied, their ropes concealed under a horse blanket spread across their knees in the back of the dray.

Their accounts with the hotel and providores settled, the three men got on their way, heading up George Street and along the Parramatta Road before the sun was too much lower in the western sky. He wanted to put some distance between himself and Sydney — between himself and Lydia, more to the point — before stopping for the night.

O'Neill held the reins and Sheepy and Angee sat in the back, their heads bent over, talking softly to each other. They made an odd couple all right, O'Neill thought, but they seemed to have a calming influence upon each other.

The horses made a fair pace while the road remained broad and gravelled, passing vehicles in both directions: mostly carters out with their horses and wagons, but occasionally a sulky or brougham with a horse or pair in magnificent condition stepping out, it seemed to O'Neill, almost arrogantly. The traffic slowed, at times to a standstill, as carts cut across the highway.

At the crest of a hill, the Great Western and Southern Roads diverged and, gratefully, O'Neill turned his horses off the main road and south towards Campbelltown and the Cumberland Plains. The traffic had thinned with the setting sun and O'Neill could make a better pace, sticking to the centre of the road.

The light was fading rapidly and a chilly breeze had sprung up, but O'Neill pressed on, flicking the whip to keep the horses moving. To keep himself warm, he sang a tune he had recently learnt at Mrs Walker's Piano Rooms:

You've asked for a story — I'll sing, I will tell,
About a young lady I knew very well;
Her name it was Lydia, a beautiful lass,
And the song I will sing is about Lydia's ass.

The original song had been about a Mary, but the only Mary he knew was Wright's proper young Irish maid; and it did not fit. She was a sweet lass, not too long off the ship herself. The melody escaped him, and he sang out of key, but none of that mattered, out here all alone in the cold and dark, missing a woman's warmth.

'Gee-up!' he flicked the whip across the horses' haunches, breaking them into a canter.

And continued singing:

A present to Lydia her uncle did make
That whenever she went to some exercise take
This donkey, or mule, he said, 'Sure, take your choice,
One that's gay and so frisky with beautiful voice.'

The dray rattled and shook as they bumped over potholes in the track. Thinking of Lydia, O'Neill chuckled to himself as he launched into the second stanza:

Now early next morning young Lydia was out,
And all round the town was seen riding about.
'Twas the talk of the town, north, east, west and south,
In fact, Lydia's ass was in everyone's mouth.
When tired of this, she would gallop back home,
That ass would be covered with sweat and with foam;
She cried out to the groom, 'Grab a handful of grass,
Come down to the stable and wipe down my ass.'

What price a roll in the hay, what? But it was not to be on this moonlit night.

O'Neill leaned forward with his whip and flicked the horses' noses, and they stepped up into a gallop. He urged his horses on, faster and faster. The dray springs screeched and whined, its wheels rattled like thunder; trees cast wild shadows in the moonlight and the dray flashed between darkness and light as they raced along the highway.

'Hold on, Little Brother,' Angee hissed to his countryman, moaning softly in fear.

Cracking the whip again and again on his screaming horses, O'Neill roared over the noise the third stanza:

Now old Joe, who sells greens, has a moke very old,
It is bony and lean from starvation and cold.
And when he meets Lydia, which often occurs,
How he wishes his ass was as handsome as hers.
Now early one morning as Lydia did pass,
A lad with a straw slyly tickled her ass;
The mule gave a bolt, down a hole it did go,
And over its shoulder poor Lydia did throw.

O'Neill stood in his seat, terrible and unstoppable, challenging the stars and the moon to strike him down. The

galloping horses tore through the night along the invisible highway, the whip cracking a metronome of fear on their flanks.

Eclipsing the moon, casting his own enormous shadow over the dray and the terrified Celestials, O'Neill bellowed into the night sky the final stanza:

They carried her home — she recovered next day;
But that ass it was left in the hole where it lay.
Its poor neck was broken — Och! Bless me soul!
And the people all round called it Lydia's Ass Hole.
And Lydia regretted the loss of her ass,
And oft of an evening by there she would pass,
And lately I've noticed as by there I stroll
There's some very bad smells come from Lydia's Ass Hole.

Crr-ack! The rear flap of the dray had burst open, spilling O'Neill's sacks onto the highway.

'Dash and damnation!' O'Neill cursed his bad luck. He pulled on the reins, slowing the horses first to a canter, then a walk. As the dray slowed he could make out other noises from behind. He had forgotten about his Celestials!

Crouched down, squashed between the remaining sacks, they shrank back from his gaze in abject terror. Like the sacks, they had slid across the tray towards the burst flap. Another stanza at full gallop and they would have been spilled out on the highway as well!

Chuckling at the thought, O'Neill sobered up when he realised the state he had ridden his poor horses into. Their necks were white with foam from their exertions. Still panting and snorting, they would be needing water and a rub down soon. O'Neill turned the dray around and slowly retraced their path till they reached the fallen sacks.

The Celestials shrank from his touch when he moved to untie them. Given the look on their faces they, like the horses, needed time to settle down before he could get any more work

out of them. Grumbling, O'Neill hefted the fallen sacks back into the dray by himself and secured the broken flap with a leather thong. It would not do for another gallop, but would hold till they reached a stable where he could get it repaired.

He was buggered, his horses were stuffed and his workmen were paralysed with fear. What a start to their journey home! Stepping back up into the seat, he walked the horses to the next public house. It boasted a warm fire, clean rooms and a stable, where the boy could clean up his horses, fix the flap and maybe even find some straw for the Celestials to bunk down in. He gave the reins to the stable boy with his instructions and entered the public house.

His room was small, the sheets dirty, with a hint of cheap perfume. O'Neill sighed: it was not The Rocks, and there was no Lydia to join him tonight. But remembering the look on the Celestials' faces, he chuckled to himself. Perhaps it was for the best to have struck fear into them so early, show them who was boss. See how they fetch up tomorrow.

That hint of perfume again. He blew out the lamp and pulled the sheets over his head, succumbing to the smells of other bodies intertwined.

24.
BAD DOG VILLAGE

'YOU OKAY, LITTLE Brother?'

Little Brother groaned: 'No I'm not. I'm sore in places I didn't know existed. These ropes are cutting my skin. And all you can do is go on and on about this Red Devil we are travelling with on our journey to hell.'

'I told you already, he's a demon and we need to be watchful,' Angee said grimly. 'Red Devil is the driver on the journey to hell, Lok See told me so.'

Little Brother snorted: 'And I suppose that the Devil Boy staring at us from the corner is a Hufashizhe in disguise?'

They were in a stable, their hands tied, with the horses. A Devil Boy had tended to the horses and threw them a few pieces of the white crusty stuff Red Devil had fed them earlier, before sitting back, watching them warily.

'I hadn't thought of that,' Angee said thoughtfully. 'He was guarding the entrance to the stables as we arrived, now you mention it.'

Little Brother rolled over in the straw.

'I don't want to talk about all that again right now. Between you and Red Devil, I don't know what to think any more. I just want to sleep and wake up from this bad dream. And not get into that cart tomorrow. Good night.'

Angee looked at Little Brother with a mixture of sympathy and scorn. If that was how book-learning prepared you

for life, to make you critical of the evidence before you, he was glad he could not read. What did Little Brother think he knew that Angee did not? Was he another trial, another demon sent to torment him? He had appeared out of nowhere, after all, arriving at the ship back in Xiamen all those moons ago just before it was due to leave. And then teaming up with Angee when he gambled his cricket-box against Uncle's book just before their arrival. It was uncanny. But Angee dismissed the idea: Little Brother had undergone torments worse than those experienced by Angee during their long voyage. And, like Angee, he had proved himself a survivor.

Poor Uncle. Who knew where his spirit was now, his body having fallen into that vastness of water? Was he in hell already awaiting his reincarnation? Perhaps they would be seeing each other again soon: because right now, in this devils' stable in this devil country beyond the realm of the Old Man Star, all the signs told Angee that they too were on a journey to hell.

Angee had assumed from Little Brother's knowledge of book-reading that he would be better prepared for the journey ahead. And yet Little Brother seemed more frightened than he by the strange rumblings of the devil-cart as they rode along, the other devil-carts with their unfamiliar occupants they passed on the roads, the signs of devil industry in buildings lining the road. As they travelled deeper into devil country, Angee had done his best to calm Little Brother, set him straight about the markers as Lok See had done for him during their voyage.

'First Marker: at the Gate to the Infernal Regions, people demand your money and if this is not forthcoming you are beaten. My journey began with my gambling in Xiamen, and after I lost I was attacked and tied up.'

Little Brother had grunted, and Angee continued.

'Second Marker: the Weighing of Souls. Think of how we were paired off on that ship. We measured each other in gambling my *I Ching* for your cricket-box — without realising at the time what it meant.'

'And I still don't know what it means, if we're saddled with each other in this empty land,' Little Brother had turned away, staring out at the flat featureless country.

'Little Brother,' Angee persevered, 'in the Middle Kingdom, there are no empty places like this. Everywhere you see signs of people. This is a land of the dead we are passing through.'

'Enough!' Little Brother raised his voice, and even Red Devil had turned around to see what the noise was about. 'Don't speak to me any more about these things.'

Little Brother snored beside him. What a day! They had been called from the ship into the devils' office where they were introduced to Red Devil. As if his fearsome appearance, with his red face and massive frame, was not enough, his unpredictable manner struck fear into Angee. Lulling them into a sense of false security, Red Devil drove the cart mildly, calmly at first, but when the road was theirs alone and the sun was setting with the realm of darkness enveloping them, his true character was revealed. Then he drove the cart like the demon he certainly was, whipping his horses until they foamed, singing demon songs, shouting, standing in his seat and laughing demon laughs as Angee and Little Brother bounced around in the cart, their hands tied, bruised and sore, yet all the more fearful with nowhere to hide when he stopped the cart and cast his fearful demon eyes upon them once again. And then he brought them to this stable.

Apart from the Devil Boy watching them from the doorway, the stable was swarming with dogs — snarly red dogs, mean yellow dogs, a stumpy dog with one eye missing and a funny brown-and-white dog that ran around holding one of his rear legs off the ground — all barking and howling, running in and out of the stable door. Real dogs or devil dogs, men in the form of dogs trying to warn them of the dangers ahead — it was impossible to say, so many signals were demanding his attention. The dogs avoided them until a big, mean, scratched-up yellow

dog, who seemed to be the one in command, approached them warily. Sizing up the scraps of bread before them, the dog growled at the two men before snatching a crust and running back to a corner to eat it, watched by all the other dogs.

Perhaps it was their unfamiliar smell that kept the other dogs away, but more likely these dogs knew that before them, hands tied, were two men well advanced on their journey to hell, passing through Bad Dog Village, the Third Marker of their journey.

Angee watched the dogs in silence as Little Brother slept beside him, just as Lok See had for so many nights during their voyage. If Little Brother was not as agreeable a companion as Uncle, Angee at least recognised that he could be a useful and complementary partner for the unfamiliar journey ahead. With Little Brother able to read and interpret the scribblings, and Angee able to read the faces and the markers of their journey, they were as well placed as they could hope to be in devils' country. Anything more would have to be left to fate.

Perhaps Little Brother was right, it did not do to worry unduly about what was going to happen. Not tonight anyway, when there was more to face tomorrow. With that, Angee closed his eyes and slept the sweet sleep of a condemned man.

25.
THE MIRROR OF RETRIBUTION

THEY WOKE A little after sunrise, feeling stiff and cramped. Red Devil was in the stables already, ministering to his horses. Seeing them stir, he came up to them, his face twisted in a smile that seemed to Angee to be mocking their misfortune, and said something incomprehensible. Next he tried, through a series of gestures and hand movements, to ask them if they wanted something to eat or drink.

Angee eyed Red Devil warily; but Little Brother nodded assent. They ate.

Smiling his demon smile, Red Devil untied their bonds and allowed the two men to stand up and stretch a little. He kept his eye on Angee, however, and it was as if he could read Angee's mind. That his demoniac powers extended to mind reading was only to be expected. Testing his theory, Angee thought of the most disgusting thing he could and every now and then glanced at Red Devil to gauge his reaction.

For a few moments, Red Devil looked at Angee in some puzzlement, as if the image in Angee's mind was cloudy, until he screwed up his face and Angee knew he had transferred the image of the bloated body floating face-down in the greasy Xiamen canal into Red Devil's head. Satisfied with his experiment, Angee knew he could use this to his own advantage

in the journey ahead of them, and on that note he made to board the horse-cart.

'I'm not getting up there after last night,' Little Brother said firmly.

Red Devil looked pleadingly at Little Brother, but he was resolute. So they walked beside the cart, hands tied. They passed through Bad Dog Village, which consisted of a few rude houses. It was silent, eerily so, the only sounds the horses' hooves and the creak of the wooden wheels. In daylight, it was a mean and shabby place: no common area, no communal pond or rice field, no ducks. Angee wondered how the devils survived; and remembered that, in hell, devils did not need to eat food. Angee shuddered, wanted to voice his misgivings, but after last night's exchange with Little Brother he kept silent.

The chill lifted as the sun rose higher, the earth steamed and mist rose like a fog. The sun streamed from their left, which told Angee that they were heading vaguely south. Three markers down, four to go.

Beyond Bad Dog Village there was little evidence of foreign devils. If the road they had careered along last night seemed less menacing in daytime, the vastness of the land stretching out in all directions made Angee's heart sink. Low and undulating, an occasional tree breaking the ocean of grassland, the land bore little evidence of human cultivation: a wasteland.

'Look over there!' Little Brother muttered to Angee.

Scattered across the grass were a number of horned black-and-white creatures, about the same size as a buffalo. And there were other creatures, the like of which he had never seen before: standing on two large feet, with a massive tail for balance, they resembled more than anything a furry dragon. But surely such creatures did not exist? Not in the known world. Angee shuddered. The creatures stood, forepaws poised, watching their passage. Little Brother smiled briefly at Angee before returning his

gaze to the land unfolding before them. He seemed to be enjoying his morning walk, seemingly unconcerned that they were almost halfway to damnation.

Without warning, a screech from overhead caused them to trip. Angee and Little Brother ducked for cover as they looked up to see a flock of white birds streaming overhead, screeching and screaming to each other, landing heavily in trees with bleached trunks like ghosts. In the trees, the birds raised their yellow crests and screamed some more. Then Angee and Little Brother saw Red Devil laughing at them.

Angee got carefully to his feet, cursing his luck in being partnered with Little Brother.

'What'd you say?' Little Brother looked at him.

Angee started, embarrassed to have been overheard.

'Aren't you afraid?' Angee suddenly said.

'I beg your pardon?'

'Do you want to go to hell?'

Little Brother giggled, a silly high-pitched girlish giggle: 'Don't start that nonsense again.'

'I'm serious, mop-man.'

At this reference to his shipboard occupation, Little Brother frowned. He looked at Angee carefully: 'You really mean this, don't you?'

Angee nodded.

The men walked on in silence. Angee waited while Little Brother, head bowed, considered his question.

Finally, Little Brother looked up: 'I don't know. I've read about it, but I've never been there. I've felt like I've been there sometimes, but I really don't think I have.'

'Well I have, and I don't want to go there again — not just yet.'

'What do you want to do then?'

Angee looked at Red Devil's broad back and tried to keep uppermost in his mind the image of a mountain stream, to block his plan from Red Devil.

'I say we roll him and take this cart. Knock him on the head, choke him with the reins, shove him under the cartwheel, whatever. He tried to kill us last night, riding till we fell out of the cart! Let's take the horses and retrace our footsteps, head back to town and work out something from there.'

'And what then, Angee? What's the point of going back to where we came from? We don't know anybody there either.'

Angee frowned. Much as he hated to admit it, Little Brother was right. They had been only a day out from the ship. Big Yap and his clan had been moved from the ship before them. They knew no one, and if they just turned up in the city the foreign devils would be suspicious. He stared at Red Devil's back, defying him to turn around. But he did not budge, the only movement was the flies landing and swarming on the broad expanse of his blue shirt.

A little while later, Red Devil drew the cart to a stop in a shady spot near a riverbank. The trees were quite unlike anything they knew from the Middle Kingdom: their bark peeling in strips, their leaves blue-green and long with peppercorn bubbles in their surface. Red Devil unshackled the horses and led them to the water where they drank deeply. Leaving the horses, Red Devil collected sticks and leaves and, with a flint and stone he produced from his pocket, started a small fire between a trio of stones. He took a water-can from the cart, filled it with river water and placed it over the fire, balancing it on the stones. Soon the water was steaming and Red Devil was beaming at them.

'What do you think he's doing?' Angee asked Little Brother.

'Making tea, I hope. But where's his pot, the cups?'

Red Devil took a small handful of tea from a chest and tossed it directly into the water. Then he took a few leaves and twigs and added these to the pot and put the lid on until a little water bubbled out. Smiling at them, he held the pot by its handle with the aid of a rag and started swinging it around in

the air, great arcing loops, as if he was winding up to hurl it across the river — or launch a boiling-water bomb at them, to burn their skin off. Angee ducked for cover and Red Devil roared with laughter. He put down the pot and took a tin cup, poured some of the brew from the pot into it and handed it to Little Brother.

'Don't drink it, it's a demon drink, it's poison,' Angee hissed, watching Red Devil warily.

Little Brother took the cup and sniffed it: 'Smells like tea to me.'

'It's a magic potion, you'll never be able to get away then.'

Ignoring Angee, Little Brother took a sip and pulled a face: 'Pah, tastes of leaves. But it is tea. Perhaps this is the way the devils like it?' Little Brother offered the cup to Angee.

Angee sniffed the cup; it smelt something like tea, and something else — peppery, oily. Looking into the cup, he saw through the dark brew to the bottom, saw something like his own worried face reflected back, a face scratched and marked and horned: a leafy twig demon. And he realised he had seen into the Mirror of Retribution.

'The Fourth Marker! I'm doomed!' he nearly shrieked, dropping the cup and spilling hot water on his lap. He sprang to his feet howling as the boiling water burned his skin. Seeing what had happened, Red Devil raced over and grabbed him. Lifting him bodily, he threw him in the river. Angee's scream followed him underwater, his lungs filled with water and he came up coughing. But the cool relief on his skin was immediate.

Red Devil stood back and let Angee drag himself out of the stream, letting the other Celestial attend to his countryman while he saw to the horses.

'You all right now?' asked Little Brother. He looked genuinely concerned.

'My legs are burnt,' Angee complained. 'Plus my boots are waterlogged.'

'And mine are blistered from these hard boots,' Little Brother slipped off his shoes to reveal his bloodied feet, red and glistening wet where the skin had rubbed.

'Guess you'll have to ride in the cart then?'

Little Brother nodded.

'What were you talking about back there?' he asked, looking mildly puzzled. 'Something about the Fourth Marker?'

By the time Angee had calmed down sufficiently to explain about how a mirror reveals the doom of reincarnation for a sinner, and how he had seen his own in the cup Little Brother had given him, Red Devil had the horses in rein on the cart.

'It's a worry,' agreed Little Brother, not sounding entirely convinced. 'We'd better get back on our journey to hell. Red Devil's waiting for us.'

26.
TEA AND TWO-UP

O'NEILL HAD TROUBLE understanding his two Celestials. Lack of a common language was only the beginning of it. They were silent around him, watching his every move, but whenever he turned his back on them in the cart, or went away a distance to water the horses or do his business, he could hear them jibber-jabbering to each other. Time and again he would catch Angee looking at him threateningly — or was it merely that his repeated staring without words became threatening after a while? But his ducking in the river had taken some of the sting out of Angee.

The rutted highway took them through the fine grazing land of the central district, the original 19 counties, where within the space of two generations settlers such as his neighbour Wright had grown fat and prosperous off the land, masters of all they surveyed from the verandahs of their two-storey country estates perched atop hillsides. Several days' fair travel saw them pass through Camden and Mittagong — fine country towns, their high streets lined with Georgian terraces worthy of the old country. O'Neill marvelled at the avenues of oak and elm, the neat habitations as they drove through — but not before he had stopped and tied the Celestials' hands.

Most nights they camped out by a river or waterhole, under the star hotel. The cool evenings were refreshing after the shimmering heat of the day, and a swim was a welcome relief

from the hard wooden seat of the dray. It amused O'Neill to have two such new chums under his wing. The screeches of the cockatoos at dusk made them cower, terrified, until he pointed out their silhouettes in the trees. The Celestials were silent, watchful over meals that O'Neill prepared on an open fire, largely unresponsive even though he tried to engage them, in gestures if not in words. He had tried to point out the constellations, the moon and Venus rising early in the morning sky — surely they had these where they came from? — but drew another blank. He even offered them some chewing tobacco, showed them how to stuff a quid into your jaw and chew it, suck and spit the juices for something to do, but the rustle of a monitor lizard slipping down the bank for a drink caused Angee to gag on his quid. Not surprisingly, the Celestials avoided tobacco after that night. It could wait — out in the fields they would be glad of an occupation.

'You ain't the easiest of travelling companions,' O'Neill complained to them one morning as they drove along the road towards Goulburn.

He had taken to thinking out loud, sharing his thoughts with them: partly to get them more comfortable with the sound of English so they could work better, but increasingly to keep at bay the strange feeling of turning silent and Celestial himself. As things stood, he was the odd one out in their trio, and this knowledge did little to put him at ease. He had felt this prickling before, an edge not unlike spending time alone among the blackfellas. Never seemed to worry old Boswell the shepherd. But then he was cracking mad.

Outside the towns, the land seemed tamed by the white man's industry. Here and there a tree remained, spreading its branches and providing shade for the flocks of sheep, a focal point for the eyes to rest on, but most of the landscape was low grasses covering the gentle slopes, waving silver in the breeze.

'That tree over there,' he said to the Celestials, 'that's a eucalypt.'

His charges remained blank.

'You put the leaves in the tea, helps the flavour,' he explained, making a sipping gesture, which Sheepy registered with a. '*Cha*!'

O'Neill smiled at his breakthrough, thought about it some more as they drove along. The sun was warm on his back, his thoughts of home pleasant; they were in no hurry.

They stopped for the night in Goulburn, where O'Neill treated himself to a room at the public house. The two Celestials were tied up in the stables with the horses, guarded by a stablehand. The next morning, O'Neill was in a good mood, refreshed by sleep in a proper bed, but his two charges were sullen and silent. Back to their old inscrutable ways.

Heading out of Goulburn, they found themselves beyond the smallholdings of the original 19 counties and entering the Lachlan District, where the stations were larger and more recently settled, where the scrub still prevailed. They passed the hillside where a decade earlier a gallows stood, festooned with skeletons, the bodies of men gibbeted for murder or stealing livestock as a warning to others.

They passed farm workers who nodded greetings to them, observing his passengers with interest; and the occasional idiot shepherd who looked up wild-eyed before ducking for cover, crawling through bushes after their charges.

'Reckon you could do that?' O'Neill quizzed his Celestials. Ignoring their blank faces, he continued, 'My man Boswell will teach you.' He chuckled at the thought of teaming up the taciturn Scotsman with these two Celestials.

For a while they followed the course of the Mulwaree River down towards Gundaroo, where O'Neill had started out. Blacks were very thick in the district when he first came through, and their warrigals chased and killed his sheep. Later he had given the leader of the local Kamilaroi clan a kingplate in recognition of their role on the land, and they lived peaceably enough alongside each other. There remained the occasional

rustled sheep, its forelegs broken to immobilise it, but most of the time numbers of the Kamilaroi gathered round his station, where he employed men in return for food, clothing and tobacco, which they shared with their womenfolk and piccaninnies.

O'Neill pointed out to his Celestials several black figures watching their passage from a ridge. The Celestials jibber-jabbered to each other, wide-eyed and fearful.

'Wait till you meet a few at Borambola!'

Not that they could understand him. They stopped at the sound of his voice briefly, then returned to their jibber-jabbering.

Then, a few minutes later, a rattle in the back of the cart caused O'Neill to turn sharply. He caught the look of alarm on their faces, saw the coins bouncing on the tray between them.

'What are you playing?'

No answer.

After such long silence from behind, the coins clattering on the wood and the excitement of their voices intrigued O'Neill. But to pick up a coin now would be to lose the chance to learn their game. He turned himself slowly around, gave them time to settle until he heard the sound of coins bouncing on the tray once again.

When he stopped to rest the horses a little while later, the two Celestials fairly sprang out of the cart. Angee looked at him closely but O'Neill pretended to be occupied with the horses. From his vantage point between the horses, O'Neill observed their antics as Angee took the three coins, shook them in his cupped palms and tossed them, studying their fall as if their very lives depended on it; then tossed the coins another five times; then Sheepy consulted a book. All very mysterious — and what the blazes did they want with a book out here? Then straight into a new round, this time Sheepy tossing.

O'Neill gathered sticks and twigs and prepared a fire, watching all the while. The way they ignored him was different to before; this time it was not a wary avoidance, but a real

interest in something else that animated the pair. The fire started, he stood up and wandered over to the cart, got the tea things out, and came back over to where they were. The Celestials stopped their game, looking at him blankly.

O'Neill gestured to the coins and Sheepy cautiously handed them over. One side was blank, like their holey dollars and dumps, the other covered in Celestial characters — but they had a head and tail good enough for his purposes. Tossing two coins up in the air could result in a stalemate: one head and one tail. But with three of them, you would get a pair at least of something each time. With the coins balanced between a couple of flat sticks, O'Neill showed the Celestials how to toss for two-up, raising his wrist and flicking; but only Angee seemed interested. He handed the sticks to Angee for a toss and he obliged.

This was something new: O'Neill watched his eyes narrow, his attention complete and focused. Usually it was the other way around, with Sheepy trying and testing things and Angee sulkily holding back. O'Neill said nothing, let the silence between them grow as he weighed the coins in his hand. At last Sheepy volunteered: '*Cha*!'

Smiling, O'Neill gave him the billy-can and the tea to let him try his bushcraft, while he settled in to tossing coins with Angee.

From time to time, O'Neill turned to check Sheepy's progress — he had the tea and the leaves cooking merrily on the fire — so he returned to his game with Angee. A yell and O'Neill turned in time to see Sheepy release the whirling billy-can into the air; it arced high and clear against the sky before gravity intervened and brought it down into the river, landing some 10 yards out with a plop and a zing as the hot metal entered the cool water.

O'Neill stood up, the coins still in his hands, looking at Sheepy in disbelief. And tossed the coins into the river after the billy-can.

A little later, when they had all calmed down, it proved possible to retrieve the billy-can, which, with a bit of hammering from a stone, regained more or less its original shape; but the coins were not recovered.

27.
THE IMPERIAL EXAMINATIONS

FATHER WARNED ME about foreign devils and their inscrutable ways, but if Red Devil is typical of his race they are truly to be feared. More contact seems to engender greater confusion, not more understanding. Angee and I are transfixed by his strangeness. From his riding like a madman down the dark road, to smiling strangely at inopportune moments, to dancing and performing as if he were making a magic brew when it is only tea. And not even proper tea at that: an awful, sticky brew full of twigs and dirt, a distant relation to the translucent oolong I enjoyed at the Pavilion of Stone — but even its taste is receding in my memory.

I can barely remember her face; just the memory of the memory, of sitting there with Second Wife and Father over tea while the dissembling Ah Chiang schemed to unseat me from my rightful position in the household. He, not I, should be on this cart travelling beyond the end of the Earth. With Angee. But it is me now, suffering here in his place; and he enjoying the fruits of my absence.

Was Father so naïve as to believe the word of a servant over that of his own First Son, to think I would dishonour him in his own home? Or did Second Wife assist her relative in his poisoned plans? She must have — oh woe is me! Not only did she take away my drive for study, but she dashed all my remaining hopes!

I finger the cricket-box, my surviving link to the past. She was as cruel as Red Devil when he cast our coins into the river. No, more cruel: at least he did not dissemble, his reaction was immediate and drastic. Unable to recover our coins, we cannot complete, let alone take, another reading; and, without divining our prospects, we are truly rudderless, unable to prepare ourselves for whatever lies ahead of us in this land of watchful black devils and great white birds, screeching like the dead at dusk.

Day after day after day, cast adrift in our horse-cart in this hot vast unpeopled space, our passage marked by another waterhole, another river, sleeping where the cart stops, heading we know not where. And yet we know we are not alone. They are there at night when, crowded shivering and fearful around a fire, we listen to the sounds of frogs and crickets and sometimes on the breeze the cries from a black devils' camp. We are being watched; for all I know, followed as well. What do they want of us? I despair, burying my head in my hands.

'Little Brother?'

Through webbed fingers, I look at Angee: he is little better than Red Devil as a travelling companion. We share a language and voice, but I feel that I have about as much in common with him as with Ah Chiang.

'What is it now?' I ask, barely able to conceal the note of irritation in my voice. 'Spotted another hell marker, have you?'

'Am I disturbing you?'

'It doesn't matter,' I reply, looking around at the empty land, shimmering like a mirage. 'I'm not doing anything else now the coins are gone, am I?'

'You could read my book to me.'

'I could — if I wanted to.'

'What was that you said to Big Yap, about knowing the text in the dark?'

Sighing, I recall the discussion in the betting ring just before we landed.

'Just a play on words — *shu* and *shu*.'

'Is that all? I thought it meant much more than that.' He pauses, frowning. 'Don't you want to know why?'

Clearly, we are going to have a conversation, whether I like it or not. 'Okay, why?'

'Well, Lok See said something similar to me on the beach before we set out—' he breaks off, and I wonder where this is leading. 'You told me on the boat, when you bet your cricket-box, you were planning to sit the imperial exams.'

I look up in surprise: 'Yes, that's right.'

'How many take the exams?'

'Well, there are three levels — district, provincial and national — held every three years. If you pass the first then you can have a go at the second and so on.'

'So how many would make it through to the final round?'

'Well, at the Confucius Temple in the Northern Capital there are memorial stones recording the names and achievements of the successful candidates. Over the last two centuries only about 150 men have passed all three levels and become mandarins of court.'

'What if you don't pass?'

'You can try again. Some men spend their whole lives sitting and failing their exams.'

Angee looks around at the brown empty land surrounding us. 'Bit of a waste of time, isn't it? I mean, what work can you do if you don't pass?'

'Well,' I pause, looking out over the unreadable grass-lands, so lacking in any indication of human occupation, wondering how to reply. Nothing could have prepared me for this. The idea of failing was not part of my preparation and I have to struggle to recall Father's experiences in his youth. 'You could take a local job as a teacher, or attach yourself to a magistrate as their secretary. That's what my Father did.'

'So what are you doing out here with me? Did you take a dive for the money and get caught out?'

'You mean the lottery?' So this is where his line of questioning is leading! I am less surprised that Angee knows about the infamous lottery, which grew up in response to the corruption of the court, than that we are discussing it out here — he is a gambler after all.

'Yes, where people like me bet on the names of the successful scholars, like you? Or, more to the point, people not like you? Casting for the names of the top 10 candidates, studying their form, and rogue gamblers make it worth a fancied candidate's time and efforts to deliberately fail to boost the pool? Unless they have them already in their debt. I know it very well indeed. In fact, it's about the only good thing I know about the mandarins.'

'You know nothing of the things you speak about. Who do you think you are to criticise the mandarin system, the glue which has held our Middle Kingdom together for thousands of years? You'd be whipped for such disloyal views.'

'I don't think so, not out here,' he says. 'Not unless you try, and if you did I wouldn't be the one getting whipped, Little Brother.'

He smiles. He has me, and he knows it. I have no way of dealing with Angee's threats by myself and I am not going to risk injury defending the virtues of a system that has abandoned me to my fate.

I try another tack. 'But you don't understand the system,' I say, less confidently than before.

'You mean to say, a low-life like me cannot understand your fine system?' Angee says, still sneering. 'But I think I do. Say, for example, you were to fail deliberately and miss out for another three years, you'd have to be given some pretty large incentive for taking a dive, wouldn't you? Did you bet on crickets fighting and get out of your depth, like me? That little cricket-box of yours must be worth a bit, I'd think.'

I look away at the waving grass, moist-eyed. Angee is right; I was out of my depth, but for reasons completely different

to those he assumes. His inquisition has reduced, made tawdry, my innermost thoughts and feelings. Drowning in my memories, it is a relief to make out to our left a line of trees along what appears to be a river course. I stare at the trees: these are not the old spruce trees of my familiar landscape; these are swollen water-loving giants, branches spreading broadly in all directions, their bark peeling in strips, scattering leaves rather than needles.

'The person who gave it to me, she was very special,' I say softly. 'But she's gone now.'

But Angee continues: 'She's gone. Lok See's gone too. A person like you thinks you are too good for the likes of me. But you're stuck in this cart just like I am. Prick us and we both bleed. We're in this together, Little Brother. We can work together, or we can fight each other. What's it going to be?'

But still my pride resists. It seems obscene that the fine nuances of relationships should come down to such stark choices — heads or tails, cooperate or isolate. I stare at the unfamiliar trees, fighting for calm. But this is not the Middle Kingdom and we need each other. No Second Wife, no Father — it is just Angee and I. I look up and meet his eyes.

'Give me your precious book then,' I say. And, before he can gloat in his victory, add, 'I need answers too.'

28.
THE ORACLE

WHEN SO MUCH else is unfamiliar, the feel of a book in my hands is a comfort. Carefully, I unfold the well-worn concertina pages of Angee's *I Ching*, savouring each hexagram like a long-lost friend.

'Pick a number between one and 64,' I say to Angee.

He looks at me, startled.

'That's what happened at the fan-tan table,' he says, shaking his head. 'And look where that's got me.'

I grunt and open the book at random. As I read aloud to Angee, the ancient wisdom embodied in the hexagrams fills the air and takes us momentarily away from our current concerns. I know that to read these in isolation is a waste of the oracle, but how are we to marshall its powers now that we have lost our coins?

I am still wondering how we can make a better and proper use of the oracle when Red Devil turns in and stops the cart by the river. Looking up, I see him release the horses and lead them down to the water. My eyes follow as the horses push their way between marsh-reeds and bulrushes to get to the water. And then it hits me like a bolt of thunder.

'Angee,' I tap him excitedly on the shoulder, 'look at the river.'

'Yeah, all those ducks!' he says. 'More than at Bad Dog Village.'

'Forget about food,' I snap. 'Look at the reeds. Those reeds are our future. Come and help me pick them.'

'In the mud?'

'Just like the lotus, something beautiful that rises above the mud it is rooted in. With these stalks and your book we can do another reading.'

Angee grunts, clearly not impressed by my analogy.

I try to recall the oracle as I practised it at the Pavilion of Stone. Fifty stalks tossed 18 times is more random than three coins tossed six times, so the stalk oracle is more accurate in telling what lies ahead.

'Better odds than coins,' I explain to Angee.

'Why didn't you say so earlier?' he says, jumping down from the cart. 'Let's to it then.'

We head down to the waterline, ignoring Red Devil watering the horses.

'How about these?' Angee asks me, holding up a handful of stalks, several feet long. He has pulled up the entire plant from the sandy bank, their roots dripping.

'We won't need all that — just take the tips. Snap it off like this,' I show him how, peeling back the outer leaves, unsheathing the stiff tuberous stem inside, which I lie on the bank to dry in the sun.

We work quickly together, drawing and lying reed stalks on the riverbank and, at first, we do not notice that Red Devil has fallen asleep in the hot sun. The reed stalks dry quickly and we gather them up into piles of approximately equal length, counting off 50. The remaining ones we put aside in case one or two snap.

I look to Angee expectantly. 'It'll take a while, about an hour. Reckon we've got time while he's asleep?'

Angee nods.

'You go first, Little Brother, show me how to do it,' he says.

'Very well. My question is, what will happen to us when we finish this travel with Red Devil?'

I lie the 50 stalks on the ground before me. Then I take one stalk and put it aside.

'This is the observer stalk,' I explain.

'Observer?' Angee shrugs and I continue.

'Now I divide the remaining bunch into two,' I explain, moving the reed stalks deftly. I take one from the pile on the left and put it between the fourth and fifth fingers of my left hand. Next, I pick up the pile on the right.

'I count this pile off in fours, laying them out in separate bundles, until I have a remainder of one, two, three or four,' I say, counting these off until I have my remainder, which I place between my third and fourth fingers. I take the untouched pile from the left and count it out in groups of four, lying these alongside the other bundles, until I have another remainder, which I put between my second and third fingers. Now I take all the stalks from between my fingers and put them aside.

'That's the end of the first round. I repeat this twice, casting aside the stalks between my fingers at the end of each round, to get our first line.'

I count through another two rounds until I have seven bundles of four stalks laid out on the ground before me. In three rounds, I have cast aside 21 from between my fingers, and the observer stalk lies to the side.

'Have you ever played mah-jongg?' Angee asks me. 'The way you move those stalks, you'd be a natural with bamboo tiles.'

Smiling, I draw the result in the sandy bank, a solid unbroken line. 'Seven is a young yang line. Now we repeat the cycle another two times to get our first trigram.'

The next cycle results in six bundles of four remaining. Above our first line, I draw a broken line, marking it with a dot. I cast a third cycle and end up with eight, for which I draw a broken line, young yin, in the sand above the other two.

'Shall I get the book from the cart?' Angee offers.

'No, it's fine, I know the eight trigrams,' I say to Angee. 'This one is "thunder", but it changes. See the second line? The dot marks it as an old yin line, which turns into its opposite, a young yang, and changes the trigram into another.' I draw beside our original trigram another consisting of a solid first line with broken second and third lines.

'This is "thunder" changing into "lake". Let's do the next three cycles to get the second trigram and then we can have a look in the book to decipher which of the 64 hexagrams we have.'

'I'll get my book,' Angee says, sounding unconvinced.

Annoyed, I watch as he walks away. 'Try doing this without me if you don't like my interpretation,' I sneer at his back. He returns and I continue the process. A solid line, young yang, is followed by a young yin broken line, then another young yang line.

'Our second trigram is "fire".'

'So how do you put thunder and lake and fire together?'

'Give me the book,' I say testily.

Angee hands me his *I Ching*. I leaf through the pages until I find that a lower trigram of thunder and an upper trigram of fire correspond in the hexagram key to number 21, 'biting through'. I read the commentary on the transforming second line only:

'*You meet a lord in a narrow street, a place between things. This is someone important who can help and teach you. This meeting is not a mistake. You have not let go of the Tao in this encounter. Bite through the obstacles. Gather energy for a decisive new move.*'

I look up: 'Any ideas?'

'That I met Feng in the alleyway outside the fan-tan house?' Angee chews his lip, noncommittal.

We will have to mull this over. Is the lord in the narrow street Angee, whom I met below decks? He did, after all, save my cricket-box for me when it was lost — and, more recently, taught me cooperation. Perhaps my attitude towards him is the

obstacle. I do not like that idea. Perhaps the oracle refers to someone else, someone I will meet shortly; remember, I cast my mind forward to what will happen to us when we finish our travel.

Now we need to consider the new hexagram in full. I look up lake and fire, which correspond to number 38, 'opposition'. I frown as I read out its commentary:

'*When expression and awareness are in conflict with each other, fire rises, the mists descend. The solution to this conflict is inherent in the situation. When the way of dwelling together is exhausted, you must necessarily turn away. Examine what separates and what connects people. Polarising is a time when you can connect with what is truly great.*'

I hope it does not refer to my time with Angee; although the prospect of future separation could be a relief.

'Little Brother?' Angee is frowning as well. 'What does that all mean?'

'I suspect it will reveal its meaning to us as we go further. Do you want to have a go?'

'It's like stacking chopsticks in a noodle-house,' he jokes, gathering up the reed stalks. He is practising casting these and dividing them when a noise from behind startles us.

It is Red Devil harnessing the horses. We look over at him briefly, at first concerned that he will again come over and ruin our oracle, but even if he smashes our reed stalks, we can always find more along the river.

Secure in our new knowledge, I turn to Angee: 'Here's part of the answer to our oracle already. *Examine what separates and what connects people*. He talks in the devil-tongue and we cannot follow. But you and I, we can understand each other through words.'

'Ah,' Angee smiles like a child. Then, glancing back at Red Devil, he frowns: 'Let me try. When the way of dwelling together is exhausted, you must turn away. Like maybe we won't always be stuck with him?'

'Could be,' I welcome his interpretation.

'Little Brother, I like this game,' Angee turns back to the reed stalks, bundles them up. 'Now we know what to look out for, let's get this journey to hell over with and say goodbye to Red Devil.'

29.
QUAN CONG AND HIS ASSOCIATES

'AIEE, LOOK AT Red Devil now!' Angee whispers to me.

Red Devil's rest in the full sun has burnt his face a red to compete with the fire in his devil hair, as red-faced as Quan Cong from the altar at the Pavilion of Stone. We watch as he approaches the waterhole and splashes water on his face, gingerly touching his brow and cheeks where the devil whiskers do not cover his skin. He fills his hat with water, puts it on his head so that the water streams down his face and shirt.

'Fire rises, the mists descend,' I repeat from the oracle.

Ignoring our laughter, Red Devil mounts the cart without so much as a word to us, and we hop up on the back, our bundle of reeds safe between us. He roars at the horses, cracking his whip on their startled flanks. I look sharply to Angee, and we wonder whether we are in for another ride like the first night.

The cart bumps and skitters over the rough track. From our vantage point, behind him, we can see that, from time to time, he touches his face, wincing, if the tensing of his shoulders is any indication. His shirt is already dry, but whether from the heat of the day or the furnace of his inner temper it is impossible to tell.

The land is truly blasted here: an ocean of yellow grass, rising up and falling down gentle slopes with monotony. Few rocks or trees lend distinction to the landscape; and there is

little evidence, apart from this pitiful track, of human interaction with the land.

I am sure we would be more anxious crossing this vast expanse of grass and nothingness if we did not have the security of our oracle to check the flights of our imaginations. There is a lightness, a new familiarity in our relations, which I attribute to the healthful effects of the oracle. Through the oracle, Angee has shown an interest in the yin of process as well as the yang of outcome, a most welcome development given his earlier outbursts against the mandarinate.

We stop once more to water the horses among the trees, leaving our reed stalks in the back of the cart so as not to draw Red Devil's attention and bad mood to them. But he seems to be lightening up, even offering a smile as we three stand by the river.

Presumably, this is the same body of water we crossed by barge some distance back, beyond the last township. But here it is considerably larger than at that narrow point of crossing. It must be some hundred feet across, a steady flowing belt of brown water. A floating log moves fairly swiftly past us in its current. I hope we do not have to cross this substantial natural barrier again; and I wonder at the notion of something as supple as water providing such a solid and impenetrable barrier. It is at once yin and yang, a revelation, and perfectly right in its setting; and I feel pleased with my interpretation.

Red Devil points with his hand along the riverline.

'Mur-rum-bid-gee,' he says slowly.

'Mur-rum-bid-gee,' I repeat after him. Angee scowls at my yin willingness to engage Red Devil.

Then Red Devil hugs himself and stamps the ground. 'Bo-ram-bo-la.'

I have no idea what he is saying, what the sounds signify, but it seems important to him; so I humour him, repeating the mantra. Red Devil seems happy enough with that, and looks over the wide brown stretch of river in satisfaction.

We return to the cart, a veritable spring in Red Devil's step. I feel a lift just seeing Red Devil happy. His magic mantra has shaken his black mood.

'Bo-ram-bo-la,' I offer from the back of the cart a little way along the track.

Red Devil turns around at the sound of the mantra. He waves his arms in the air.

'Borambola!' he shouts, laughing, pointing left and right.

'Stop encouraging him!' Angee hisses at me.

'Examine what separates and what connects people,' I remind Angee from the oracle. I repeat Red Devil's mantra, this time more quickly as its characters became more familiar: 'Borambola!'

Red Devil stopps the cart, leaps down from his seat and kneels on the ground, kissing the earth. His face covered in dirt, he jumps up, turning cartwheels in the long grass as I shout the mantra over and over again.

'Stop it!' Angee hisses.

But his exhortations only drive me on. I get down from the cart and turn somersaults in the grass alongside Red Devil with his cartwheels. Red Devil is redder than ever from his exertions, but he helps me to my feet and together we return to the cart, where a glowering Angee sits silent.

Red Devil whistles a tune as he heads the horse-cart along the narrow track.

Angee's eyes threaten me against whistling as well. Such yang violence bubbling just below the surface frightens me, and I leave the tune alone. Yet a new environment requires new strategies — can he not see that? Angee might not like it, but I will not surrender my yin — I have to maintain it. If he is the warrior, then I am surely the diplomat.

Still, I wonder if I had been more firm back home whether I would not be here now. Then, I should have acted in a great and solid way, been strong and imposed my will on the household instead of being Second Wife's lackey and Ah Chiang's dupe, the traitor in Father's nest.

The unchanging grasslands help my meditative state; and I do not notice that we are heading away from the river until we come over a rise and before us lies a settlement of sorts consisting of a house, a couple of sheds, a few trees and, beneath them, a cluster of about 20 black devils watching our arrival with some interest. Dogs bark, and the devils stand up to get a better look at our arrival.

Angee and I exchange looks, united in our apprehension. We have never been this close to black devils. Are these the same ones who have haunted our campfires with their cries at night? Perhaps Angee is not being so silly when he speaks about our being on the road to hell. Although why would people in hell have black skin? Have they been scorched by the flames licking the judge's cauldron?

If we were shocked by the appearance of the people at the settlement, it does not take me long to register, from the startled looks we receive, that we three present an awesome sight ourselves. Up front, Red Devil, red-faced from sunburn and his recent exertions, and Angee and I in the back. Perhaps these inhabitants have never received guests from the Middle Kingdom; and in that sense Angee and I are envoys of our great civilisation.

Under the weight of their stares, I imagine us as the magisterial trinity of the Tao: Red Devil is the red-faced deity, Quan Cong, with his horses; and we are his associates, Angee, the warrior mandarin, and myself, the civil mandarin. I wonder whether I should have sought the horses' blessing for this journey — brushed my head with their manes, rubbed their noses and sounded their bells — before we set off. But it is too late for thoughts like that now. Red Devil's manner tells me we have at last arrived.

High in the horse-cart, safely clear of the dogs growling at our unfamiliar presence, we look around the settlement. The outdoor cooking and washing areas are not unlike those of the Pavilion of Stone. But instead of a central courtyard and a perimeter wall, keeping the world out and affording the household

some privacy from its neighbours, there are no walls here, only an unrelieved sea of grass, another anti-barrier like the river. There is no other household in sight, no neighbours, and the very lack of a boundary performs its function as well as the water-barrier of the river. This is a challenging land to read.

But try as I might, my gaze keeps returning to the black devils before us. There are women of all ages, from young adults in pieces of the foreign devils' clothing through to a few elderly women draped in animal skins; teenage boys and girls; and below that, younger children of a lighter complexion than their elder siblings. But no adult men.

Red Devil calls out something and a white-bearded devil who was sitting among the black devils limps over to the horse-cart. His head tilts as he has a closer look at us through one watery eye; his other eye is cloudy, as if half his spirit is elsewhere. I tilt my head in the opposite direction and his head regains its upright position.

We look at each other, White Beard and I, and for want of anything to say I try out Red Devil's mantra:

'Borambola?' I say, but my statement comes out as a question.

White Beard twitches, staggers back as if startled. His eyes clarify and his clear gaze bores into me as he responds with a resounding: 'Borambola!'

At which point, I faint.

30.
THE BUNYIP

IT TOOK O'NEILL and Angee but a few moments to haul Sheepy out of the cart and lie him out flat on the ground. The people of the settlement crowded round, Boswell the shepherd to the front of them.

'Get back, let him breathe, for the Lord's sake! Get him some water!' O'Neill shouted. He splashed Sheepy's face with water from a pannikin, and the Celestial came to, disoriented and alarmed at the crowd around him.

'Where's Fisher?' O'Neill asked about his overseer.

The Scotsman slowly turned his gaze from Sheepy to O'Neill, scratched his white beard, looked at his boss for what seemed like an eternity before answering: 'Ran off to the goldfields a few days after you left.'

O'Neill cursed under his breath. Another one gone, with who knew what gone missing from the station store. What other bad news did he have? But he did not want to discuss it with the mad old shepherd right now. From the way he spoke, drawing out his words, it was as if he was forgetting his English, hanging around with the blackfellas all the time. Well, my fine Boswell, O'Neill thought to himself, perhaps you are ready to learn a spot of Chinese as well now.

'Mr Boswell, meet Borambola's two newest shepherds. I've decided to team Sheepy and Angee up with you. With your experience, I'm confident they will pick up the shepherding game in no time at all.'

The Celestials recognised the sound of their names and looked first to each other, then to O'Neill and then, following his eyes, to the old shepherd.

'Before you protest, Boswell, I'll have you know that Angee carries a book with him everywhere like you do, and that young Sheepy here makes a mean billy of tea.' At this, O'Neill swung his arm around in the air over and over again, until Sheepy realised what he was referring to and, with a high-pitched chirruping, began to do the same himself. Jem and Tommy joined in the game as well. O'Neill smiled: it would be all right now Boswell's Wiradjuri boys had accepted them.

'See to the horses, there's a good lad, Tommy.'

Tommy took the reins of the horses, scratched them behind their ears and they whinnied with pleasure. I'm not the only one glad to be home, O'Neill thought to himself. He followed Tommy into the stables: the unloading could wait till later. But where the blazes was the milker? If she was not inside, odds were she had strayed into the kitchen garden again. Or into the house, where he had found her once munching happily on Sarah's lace curtains.

The verandahs could do with a bit of sweeping, and the windows perhaps with a wipe over, but otherwise the homestead looked in good order from the outside. Inside, in the sitting room and bedrooms, sheets were draped over Sarah's soft furnishings to keep the dust off. The only room where the furniture continued to be used was the dining room adjacent to the cookout, where a long table was surrounded by a number of chairs; and where he had been accustomed to taking his meals since Sarah died.

Out the back, all that was left in the kitchen garden were a few withered leaves among the weeds that had sprung up in the scratchy soil. What had Ruby been doing since he had been away? The lettuces had shot up and gone to seed, their yard-high stalks having dried and toppled, lying where they fell, and pecked into pieces by the straggling chooks; the tomato vines had curled up the stakes but in all directions so that they grew

an abundance of thick leaves rather than fruit. The only vegetables that had benefited from her neglect were the pumpkins, which had sent out runners in all directions. O'Neill found pumpkins, grey-green and bulbous at the end of their vines, in all sorts of unlikely places around the kitchen garden, including a couple that had made their way to the rich pickings around the outhouse, a little shack atop a trench, with a couple of planks to sit on. But still no milker.

O'Neill lifted the well cover and peered into the darkness out of habit. He had heard of people being dumped down wells, to hide the body or poison the drinking water or both; but that was the stuff of fiction, and there was no real reason to suspect any further disasters since his departure. He dropped a stone into the well and was answered a moment later with a reassuring plop as the stone hit deep water below.

He came back through the house and on to the front verandah. The two Celestials were being carefully scrutinised by their minder and the blackfellas, one of whom had approached Sheepy with great caution and lifted his shepherd smock up, revealing his hairless chest. When Sheepy protested, slapping his smock back down, the woman leapt back with a start.

'Boswell, where's my woman?' O'Neill called out from the verandah.

The old shepherd looked up and, excusing himself from the group, shuffled over to O'Neill.

'She's gone, Sir.'

'Yes, but where the blazes has she got to?'

Boswell frowned and scratched his chin. 'Well Sir, there's those that believe in a life after death.'

'Death? You think she's dead?'

'Sir, Mrs O'Neill died in the flu epidemic of '47.'

'I wasn't talking about Sarah, I meant Ruby,' O'Neill said, somewhat testily. He needed a leg-over, and if she was not around he would have to grab one of the other camp women. 'If she's gone walkabout, who's been looking after you here then?'

'I've been having meals with the Wiradjuri camp. They're a friendly enough bunch, accepting of an old whitefella like me.'

An awful thought occurred to O'Neill. He tried to put it out of his head, but it kept coming back and, given the crazy kind of logic that seemed to have prevailed at the station in his absence, he had to ask the question.

'Boswell, what have you been eating while I've been away?'

'We've all been eating very well, thank you. A fair bit of steak.'

'Do you mean to say that you've slaughtered the cow? Wouldn't one of your sheep have fed the mob just as well?'

'But, Boss, you know my job has always been to protect my sheep.'

O'Neill shook his head in exasperation. At least that explained where the old milker had got to.

'They cooked it a bit rare for my liking,' Boswell continued in his reverie. 'I prefer my steak pink, not blue. And how about you, Boss? What have you been eating?'

Then the penny dropped. O'Neill looked up and saw Boswell laughing at him.

'Had you going there, Boss! The milker wandered off and broke its leg. I had to put the poor beast out of its misery. So after I shot it we skinned it and ate it. We even cured a bit for rations later. There's still some hanging in the meat safe. Made a very nice change from mutton, let me assure you.'

O'Neill flushed. 'Yes, Boswell, very funny. But what about your flocks? Who's been looking after them then?' O'Neill protested. There were 500 sheep to be looked after.

'I've got Paulie and Sam from the camp helping out on the run down by the river-bend.'

'All right, all right, let a man go and wash the dust off and we can talk more later,' O'Neill dismissed Boswell.

O'Neill grabbed a cake of soap and headed down to the Tarcutta Creek, which flowed through his land and on to Wright's station, its course marked by a stand of river red gums.

As the crow flew — and there were plenty of them in this district — the two head stations were fairly close together, only a couple of miles apart. Wagga Wagga, place of many crows — wasn't that what the name of the new township a few miles downriver meant in the Wiradjuri tongue? But as the river wound through the grassy flatlands, the two home stations were almost 20 miles distant by road, a respectable spread of river frontage and good grazing land for each squatter on their 14-year leases.

He wondered where Ruby had gone walkabout to this time. Upriver or across country? Perhaps spending a bit of time out on the land with Paulie and Sam? He thought of riding out to see them, but had they stopped at an outstation, like Boswell said, or were they on the move with the flock? Scattered out in both directions along the watercourse, the small huts where the shepherds rested after grazing their flocks by day dotted the river frontage every few miles, marking O'Neill's occupancy. On the backblocks away from the river, an old boundary hut now used as a sleepout by shepherds marked the southern extent of his run. They could be almost anywhere on his run, spending time in one of their special places. Their land was full of stories about places, about creatures.

And now buildings. Down by the creek stood the old overseer's hut with its slab walls and timber roof: the original squatter's hut, which O'Neill had superseded in building a more imposing station house for his wife. Like O'Neill himself, the simple slab hut was starting to show its age; it had served him well enough as a bachelor, and perhaps he should have retired to it as a widower, but the big house and trimmings were Sarah's memorial and he feared losing her if he vacated it. After all these years on the land he was as prey to the spirits as the blackfellas.

The gully walls were fairly steep, and he held onto branches to ease his way down to where the creek bellied out into a fair-sized waterhole, where he stripped off his boots and

clothes. His forearms were burnt red and stood out against his otherwise fair skin. He stepped down into the water — it felt cool, but not too cold to enjoy — and, when he had waded in thigh-deep, he plunged in head and all. He broke the surface with a bellow of delight, his wild hair strung down over his eyes.

He washed himself first, ducked under to rinse off the soap and dirt. Next, grabbing his shirt, he scrubbed it into a lather, paying particular attention to the stained collar and armpits. He slapped it and wrestled it against a boulder by the water's edge, then rinsed it through the water until the soap-scum stopped bubbling to the surface. He followed with his undershorts and socks, but left his trousers dry on the riverbank. Having finished his washing, he left his wet clothes on the rock and swam out, did a few duck dives, poking his bare arse in the air, coming up quacking and snorting.

Alerted by O'Neill's cry, a small crowd had gathered at the top of the gully. He was midstream, a water-monster with his long hair streaming down, wrestling the waterhole's resident bunyip who wanted to borrow his soap, when he looked up and saw more than a dozen faces, white and yellow and black, peering down at him anxiously.

'You okay there, Boss?' Boswell called out.

'Go away,' O'Neill said to the assembled crowd. 'Please.'

The figures disappeared over the embankment, leaving O'Neill to complete his toilet in private. He could hear their laughter long after they had disappeared from sight.

31.
WORDSWORTH'S OBITUARY

THE NEXT MORNING, O'Neill was unloading the station stores with Sheepy and Angee when Borambola received a visit from its neighbours. Instead of arriving on horseback, as was usual, Wright had hitched the sulky to his stallion and had brought with him a female passenger. O'Neill could tell from the woman's figure that it was not Mrs Wright. His spirits leapt as he realised it was Mary, the Wrights' fresh young Irish maid.

The sulky slowed and O'Neill approached to settle the stallion.

'Surprised to see you've got Black Jack in harness, George,' O'Neill greeted his neighbour, a thickset man some years his senior.

Wright took off his hat and wiped his brow. His straw-coloured hair was flecked with grey, and his face and forearms were marked with liver spots.

'I could hardly throw the lass up behind me, Will, at least not with Mrs Wright's approval,' Wright said, winking at his neighbour. He looked at the Celestials in surprise. 'Your latest experiment, Will?'

But O'Neill ignored his neighbour. 'And how did you enjoy the ride today, Miss?'

The ride had brought out the colour in Mary's face. A few hairs had come loose from her bonnet and their black tendrils framed her rosy, chubby cheeks.

'Very much, thank you, Sir,' she smiled shyly, but her eyes shone boldly.

'Catherine thought our Mary could help out with a bit of cleaning, and so on—' he paused significantly before continuing '—while I was here visiting you. Said it would be a kindness for our neighbour.'

And to check up on us, no doubt, O'Neill thought to himself. But he put his suspicions aside almost as soon as Mary sidled up to him.

'I've brought you some grand scones, Sir,' she whispered as they walked towards the house. O'Neill sniffed her closeness, breathed in the fresh warm smells of baking on her.

Inside, Boswell was poring over copies of the *Argus* and the *Liberty* and the *Sydney Herald*, still in his cap and nightshirt.

'What news from civilisation, Boswell?' Wright asked brightly.

The shepherd looked up slowly at the voice addressing him.

'Wordsworth's dead,' he replied flatly.

'Who?'

'The Poet Laureate,' O'Neill cut in.

'Oh, I'm sorry to hear it.'

'Hadn't written a decent line in 35 years. Perhaps now all the rubbish he penned for the Queen will be forgotten so's we can enjoy his *Lyrical Ballads*. Now, that *Michael* was a fine poem. An old shepherd, his son and the lures of the evil city.'

O'Neill looked up sharply.

'Let me help you with your basket, Miss,' he made to clear a space on the table, but Boswell slammed his hand down on the paper to prevent it from sliding away.

Mary yelped as if struck, and the old shepherd looked at her quizzically for a moment before continuing to O'Neill.

'Can you believe it, Boss, he had a State Funeral and was buried at Westminster Abbey. Pah! Should have been buried in the Lakes District, where he wrote all his best work.'

'Very interesting,' O'Neill shrugged his shoulders at Wright.

'Is there anything in the paper about stock prices?' Wright asked.

'*If from the public way you turn your steps*—'

There was an awkward silence, and O'Neill feared the shepherd would recite from memory the Poet Laureate's long verse narrative.

'—*Up the tumultuous brook of Green-head Ghyll*—'

Fortunately, Mary jumped in before the shepherd could get any further.

'Look at your place, Sir! You need a woman's hand around here! Let's move these papers along, Mister Boswell, so a lass can prepare some tea and scones for a man just come home.'

Boswell obliged by sweeping a pile of accounts on to the floor and disturbing several weeks worth of dust as well.

'It's a bit untidy, I'm afraid. My wife passed away a couple of seasons ago,' O'Neill said, flashing a look at Wright. But Wright was immersed in a copy of the *Liberty*.

Mary looked up, her cheeks flushed a most fetching rose. 'Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that, Sir, I didn't meant to pry.'

'No, no, it doesn't matter. And,' he said looking around at the dust settling anew on the freshly cleared flat surfaces, 'I suppose you are right. Keeping clean just doesn't seem to have been a priority recently. I'll arrange for one of the gins to come in and give the place a good dusting over.' He was not going to let on about Ruby in front of young Mary. No, better the girl thought the seeming squalor was a result of his unhappy widower's existence than his sometime lover having gone walkabout.

But he did not need to worry, as the shepherd resumed his narration. '—*His days had not been passed in singleness. His helpmate was a comely matron, old — though younger than himself full twenty years*—'

Mary was making herself at home. She had rolled up the sleeves of her white blouse and was busying herself with the

dusting, but not before she had put a kettle on the fire and brewed a pot of steaming tea. She set out the makings of a Devonshire tea, all her own work: good things like homemade butter and clotted cream, scones dusted with flour wrapped in a teatowel and a pot of jam she had made from the fruit trees down by the river. O'Neill's mouth watered for the food treats prepared lovingly by a white woman's hand.

'You've set a fine plate for us, young lady,' he complimented her on the spread. 'We bachelors don't stand on ceremony here, Lass, come and join us.'

Mary sat down next to O'Neill and he poured her a cup of tea.

'I'm afraid it'll have to be black today, our milker broke her leg,' O'Neill explained. 'Got some good beef hanging there if you're interested.'

'Mary, Lass,' Wright called out to his maid from behind the pages of the *Liberty*, 'you think you could make something with beef instead of mutton?'

'Yes, Sir.'

'And how about some pumpkins for scones?' O'Neill offered.

Mary blushed, and O'Neill felt a ripple run through him.

'Bad show, this lack of rain,' Wright volunteered over a scone, his lips greasy with butter.

'Hard to know when it's going to break,' O'Neill agreed. 'What's your opinion, Boswell?'

Boswell looked at them blankly, his lips muttering the poem.

'About the weather?' O'Neill repeated.

Boswell wiped his mouth, looked first at his boss, then at the neighbour and finally at Mary before opining, 'I'd say we're in for a pretty bad drought this season.'

'Stuff and nonsense!' Wright roared, spitting scones over the table. 'On what basis are we going to have a drought this year? We can't afford a drought, it would send more of us under!'

There was silence, as nobody was prepared to risk another thunderclap of Wright's opinion.

'Being at the head station must make a nice change from shepherding for you, Mister Boswell,' Mary opined brightly.

The shepherd put down his scone, looking at her blankly.

'I mean, isn't shepherding boring? Out there in the fields with just sheep for company? Surely it must be more jolly in here at the head station?'

Boswell appeared to be struggling with the words.

O'Neill tried to draw him out: 'The lass asked you a question, man, what do you say to it? Isn't chasing after sheep the livelong day frustrating?'

Boswell's milky eyes appeared to register the meaning of the inquiry this time, and he turned slowly to Mary with a look of mild puzzlement and disdain.

'Oh no—' he finally answered, leaning forward as if he were about to share a secret '—you don't chase the weens, then they will follow you,' before sitting back in triumph.

'What's your poet Wordsworth say about it?' Mary continued. 'Shepherding, I mean?'

Boswell glanced at her shyly, almost apologetically, then spoke in a voice barely audible: '*It is in truth an utter solitude*.'

'Excuse me?'

But Boswell had already left the table, newspaper under his arm, shuffling outside across the yard to where the Wiradjuri sat clustered under the trees.

Somewhat crestfallen at their exchange, Mary looked at O'Neill.

'Don't worry, Lass, he was struck by lightning a few seasons back, hasn't been the same since then. But it's made him a good weather-vane.'

'Oh, poor man!' Mary looked after the white-haired shepherd with a new consideration.

'But before that he wasn't really much good for anything other than shepherding anyway,' O'Neill continued. 'He's been

working for me for over a decade now — before this run he was on another sheep station I had over Gundaroo way. Got no living relatives, here or in the old country, far as I'm aware, poor devil. I suppose I'm the closest thing he's got to family, apart from the mob under the tree over there.'

'Get along then, Lass,' Wright put his paper down. 'Mr O'Neill and I have got some talking to do. Go and see if Mr Boswell and his *family* would like their tea and scones in the garden.'

Mary flashed a look at O'Neill, her eyes twinkling with laughter.

'Mister Wright, Sir, you do tease a young girl so!' Curtsying to O'Neill, she gathered up the tea things and took them to the wash area outside.

'Good girl that one. You know, Will, you should get yourself married again. Bring out a nice girl from home, like I did a few years back. Never looked back. Gives the place a real air of a home.'

'Well, I feel as if I am still married,' O'Neill observed from the doorway.

'A man can't live like a monk forever.'

'No,' O'Neill agreed, without elaborating.

Wright looked at him a moment, then grunted: 'Say, what about those Celestials of yours? I'd like to have a closer look at them.'

O'Neill looked at his neighbour in surprise.

'I didn't think you were interested in anything other than convict labour, George,' he said, the old edge returning to his voice.

'You know as well as I do there's a labour shortage here. And your newfangled ideas about not using convicts from the *Hashemy* last year didn't help the district's labour situation any.'

'You couldn't expect me to endorse that position, given my own background.'

'But you were the only magistrate of the Wagga bench not to sign the petition. You'll be getting the bench tangled up with the Anti-Transportation League before we know it.'

'And what about using the Wiradjuri here? Why can't we have them do some of our shepherding and shearing and other labour? Couldn't be any more trouble than some of those recent shearers — the way they stirred up the local women,' O'Neill left his sentence unfinished.

'You know why,' Wright said darkly.

But O'Neill refused to be silenced. 'Because of problems with sheep stealing early on?'

'They broke the dumb animals' legs then speared my men, burnt my huts,' Wright said, the anger returning to his voice.

'A dozen years ago. Times change, man, and so should you. They're not going to just go away, so you may as well give them some useful work to do. You weren't against using them for shearing or wool washing early on? What about this season? If Boswell's right about the weather we'll be needing all the help we can get.'

'I've modernised my views, Will,' Wright said somewhat testily. 'I've moved beyond accommodating the savages on my run. Remember, I was here in the early days, I did what I had to do to claim my property. I didn't waltz in later and slap a pile of promissory notes into someone else's bloodied hands,' he paused significantly. 'This is my land now and don't let anyone tell me otherwise. I took the law into my own hands then and now the Government has me on the bench, managing their law.'

'So given my man Boswell has shot my milker, should I have him run through as well?'

'I'd run him through for spouting all that nonsense about Wordsworth,' Wright could not help smiling. 'Demme if I haven't thought of poetry since I was in short pants.'

'Yes, he made quite an impression on your young Mary,' O'Neill agreed, chuckling.

'But seriously, Will, the way he fraternises with the blacks on your run—' Wright left his sentence unfinished.

'Let's not have this argument again, George. It's Boswell's job, he's working with them and they know the land. And before I hear any more protests from you, he'll be teaching my Celestials shepherding as well.'

'And poetry too I'd wager,' Wright muttered darkly. 'Darn funny ideas you've got, Will.'

'Where you look to the past, George, I see a golden opportunity for the district, to bring in a few John Chinamen at a fraction of the price of your average ticket-of-leave man.'

'I'll grant you that,' Wright agreed. 'But what are you seriously expecting to do with them here?'

'Well, I've got just the two for now. I want to see how they settle in, how they fare as workers before I sign up for any more. The bench should applaud my willingness to take this risk on behalf of the community.'

'You mean you'd consider bringing in more Celestials alongside the blacks?' Wright said incredulously. 'You're as much of a dreamer as your mad shepherd Boswell.'

'And why not? You're ignoring the poetry in our land, man. We're only recent arrivals ourselves here, and together we can all make something new and strong.' O'Neill slapped Wright on the back, a little harder than neighbourliness warranted, before continuing: 'Now come on, and let's have a look at my two Celestials. Come see the future of *Australia Felix*.'

'If that's the poetry in your land,' Wright jerked his head across the yard to where Boswell sat circled by the Wiradjuri, listening without understanding, 'I think I'll make do without it. But I wouldn't say no to that beef you've got hanging.'

32.
THE FIFTH MARKER

AFTER THEIR INITIAL interest, the black devils left Angee and Little Brother alone, sitting talking among themselves in their devil-talk in the shade of the trees. Their group was mostly made up of women, with a few babies and striplings, and White Beard, in the absence of any black men, appeared to have set himself up as the clan head. An older woman sat by his side, while younger women looked after the babies and prepared food. It was the closest contact Angee had had with women for some moons; and, if their sour-sweat smell and devil-talk were unfamiliar, the shapes moving under their loose shirts were not.

The day after their arrival at the place the devils called Bo-ram-bo-la, Angee and Little Brother were in the storeroom with Red Devil when the sound of an approaching horse-cart interrupted their work. Red Devil went outside and they followed, blinking, into the sunlight.

The cart was driven by an older devil who was accompanied by what appeared to be a woman devil. She looked at Angee, frowning, and he returned her gaze, trying to take her measure. One of the striplings took the horse and cart and Red Devil instructed them to load the cart with a pile of sacks put to one side in the storeroom.

Shortly afterwards, White Beard emerged from the house carrying a paper. He rejoined the group under the trees, where he unfolded the paper and looked at it, put it aside, looked at it

again, put it in his pocket, pulled it out again, all the while, shaking his head. Angee wondered if it was his contract. Suddenly, he stood up and in an instant the group under the tree was watchful, alert. Speaking in a low voice, he stamped and shuffled his feet in the red dust. Soon White Beard was joined by low voices chanting softly as he continued speaking.

Little Brother had stopped working and stood by the doorway of the storeroom, listening intently.

'Sounds like poetry of some kind.'

But Angee's attentions, now that he had stopped working too, had wandered elsewhere. Was the Woman Devil in the house made of the same stuff as their own women? It was impossible to tell with what lay underneath the many layers of clothing. He could tell at least that she had a narrow waist, because the cut of her clothes accentuated that feature; but he could tell nothing of her legs or what treasures lay between them from the fanning of her skirts. Similarly, her upper reaches were concealed beneath a white shirt, which was pulled out, loosely, so as to conceal the flesh.

Apart from the fact that she wore different clothes to Red Devil, and that she was shorter by more than a whole head, the distinguishing aspects of her appearance were her hairless cheeks and her long hair tied back in a plait. And even these were not categorical determinants of sex: Angee looked at Little Brother beside him with his smooth cheeks and Manchu servant's plait. His eyes shone as he listened, rapt, to White Beard's talk.

'What's he saying?' Angee asked Little Brother.

'How should I know?' he replied.

White Beard sat down in the dust and, still speaking softly, took a handful of earth and poured the fine dust over his head until his beard and clothes were streaked red.

Angee shook his head. The more he saw of devils, the less he understood them.

A little while later Red Devil and his companion emerged from the house and, making a wide berth around the group under the trees, entered the storeroom, pointing out additional items to load in the cart. Angee was hardly surprised when, of all the things in the storeroom, the older devil seemed most interested in a carrion box containing white-streaked chunks of meat still on the bone. They watched the horse-cart casting a long shadow in the late afternoon light.

'Think this is the end of the line for us?' Little Brother asked.

'How should I know?' Angee parroted Little Brother's earlier response.

In the days after the Woman Devil's visit, Angee and Little Brother were detailed on light duties around the house and buildings: moving stock in the storeroom, chopping firewood, a spot of digging in the garden to get rid of weeds and roots. Even these most basic activities proved challenging to Little Brother, whose books had not taught him how to hold an axe or hoe or even how to lift a sack. For much of the day, however, they sat in the shade of the trees with White Beard and the black devils, watching and listening. Little Brother was enraptured with White Beard's rambling reedy voice, and even Angee took note of the cadences of his devil-talk as he declaimed some verse or other to his circle. If they were to be cast among the devils for any length of time, they needed to make some sense of their devil code of behaviour. Their very survival depended on it.

One morning Red Devil had them back in the storeroom loading the cart with bundles, which — from Red Devil's exaggerated gestures of hand to mouth and belly rubbing — presumably contained devils' food. They looked at the packages, unwrapped some to satisfy themselves that the contents were edible. There was the powder for bread, sugar and devil tea. But where was the rice as promised in their contracts? There were other bundles containing some more clothes and blankets, as

well as a wide-brimmed hat and a pair of boots apiece for Angee and Little Brother. They looked at each other.

'Looks like we're on the move again,' Angee said.

'Where to now?' Little Brother asked.

Angee shrugged his shoulders. A few days spent around the house had lent it a degree of familiarity; and who knew what lay ahead.

They scrambled up in the back of the cart. White Beard stood up and slowly shuffled over to the cart, clambering up in the back, giving off little puffs of dust as he sat down on the bench beside Angee. Little Brother, as was his wont, waved to the receding black devils, but they did not wave back. White Beard looked back sadly at his black friends sitting under the tree. A couple of the younger boys got up and ran after the cart as it headed down the track, but even they could not keep up with the horse responding to Red Devil's whip.

They turned off the track and headed over a rise where the wheels of the cart were not unduly upset by bumps. They passed through stands of trees, the light dappling their cart and making it difficult to see ahead clearly. Coming to a rise, Red Devil turned the cart slightly and stopped it so that they all had the opportunity of looking back at the house.

'Borambola,' Little Brother volunteered.

'Borambola,' Red Devil repeated, smiling.

Frowning, Angee turned to White Beard to see if he would utter the mantra as well. But he was silent. Fat tears welled up in his eyes, trickled slowly down his weathered cheeks, striping his dust-red face and grizzled beard, arousing Angee's interest as well as a small wick of sympathy.

'He's crying,' he whispered to Little Brother.

'Must be missing his home,' Little Brother added. 'It's quite a view from up here, you can see all the buildings, and the black devils under the trees look like ants.' He broke off, and Angee felt a strange feeling coming over him as well.

'What is it, Little Brother?' he said testily.

Little Brother looked up and his eyes were watering: 'Reminds me of a walk I made last season to my mother's grave. You know, I was going to pay her my respects at Little Spring but had a bag put over my head instead. That's why I'm here now,' Little Brother sniffed and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. 'Let him enjoy the view of home before it disappears for him as well.'

Angee snorted. The view of home, indeed! What was home? What right did any of them have to speak of a home? And then it struck him with a dull shock, overcoming his own hostility, that they were facing the Fifth Marker on their journey to hell.

Here on this hilltop, stopped awhile in the horse-cart, they had their very own Viewing Home Tower. His eyes misted: was that not Hai Chong he saw in the mist? The duck pond, the muddy path to his hut? And there inside, crouched around the fire, Spring Flower with Young Hoa and Spring Blossom?

Shivering despite the warm day, Angee thought how much misery he had brought them. If only he had been a better husband and father, a better provider, more able to withstand the poisonous temptations of gambling, of always trying one more time to recoup his losses. Well he had done it now, done it good and proper: he was definitely on the road to hell, and there was no turning back.

Hot tears stung his own cheeks and he felt a hand on his arm.

'Angee, what is it?'

He saw Little Brother looking at him with genuine concern. What had he done to be this far on the road to hell as well? Angee pulled himself together.

'It's nothing,' he shrugged off his countryman's hand and hawked loudly to clear his throat, to spit on his unhappy memories of a life he would not see again this side of his grave.

The cart lurched on again and over the rise, down a gentle slope to where the river lay before them, creating

a watery barrier on three sides. The grass seemed greener close to the river and was dotted with hundreds upon hundreds of grey-white quadrupeds foraging in the grass. They were a bit like goats, only their legs were shorter and they lacked horns.

Red Devil pointed in their direction and said, 'Sheep.'

At which Little Brother looked up sharply.

'Listen, he's trying to say your name again,' Angee offered.

The fluffy quadrupeds scattered as their cart made its way between them. Red Devil said a few words sharply to White Beard, who pointed to a couple of black devils who had been sitting under a tree and who, at the approach of the cart, stood up and ran towards them, scattering more of the creatures. But the cart rumbled on, outpacing the men on foot, their run slowing to a walk, falling ever farther behind in their wake.

They travelled on, stopping only at a lump of grey on the ground, one of these creatures apparently dead. Through gestures, Red Devil made it clear that he wanted Angee and Little Brother to get down and load the dead beast onto the cart.

Up close, it was a strange-looking creature. Its feet were cloven like those of a goat, and the bones and ligatures of its four limbs were also consistent with those of a goat. But, with its extraordinary fluffy coat, up-close a dirty unwashed grey, peppered with thistles and scraps of twigs it had picked up in his wanderings, it was quite unlike any goat Angee had ever seen before. Grabbing two legs apiece, they struggled as they lifted the creature, stiff in death, weighing perhaps as much as a large sack but more awkwardly proportioned, into the cart.

White Beard grabbed the creature under the jaw and had a close look at its face. Then, nodding to his two companion shepherds beside him, he put his fingers deep into the creature's coat and folded it back to reveal a finely crimped, creamy-white, softly textured material underneath. Then, with his free hand, he picked up the blanket and held it aloft.

'Wool!' he said in a booming voice.

'Why is he barking at us like a dog? And shaking the blanket?' Little Brother asked Angee.

'I think he's trying to tell us the stuff on this animal's back is the same as in the blanket. Either that or he's barking to say it's a kind of dead dog, this creature here.'

Grabbing one of the dead creature's ears so that its head lifted, Angee checked its teeth. 'It's not a dog.'

He pulled back an eyelid to have a look at the pupil: he had butchered enough of the creatures to know that a goat's horizontal oblong pupil was quite distinctive among animals. Tasty too. But this dead creature's pupil was not oblong.

'Not a goat either,' Angee let go its ear and it flopped down in the space between them, its tongue lolling out of its head in an obscene grin of death.

'Oh dear,' Little Brother buried his head in his hands

'What is it now?'

'I've just realised what that wretched creature is,' Little Brother toed at the dead animal with distaste, which set White Beard protesting before dissolving into sobs.

'You didn't have to upset him like that,' Angee said to Little Brother.

'If you knew what I knew you'd be upset too,' Little Brother defended his actions.

'So what is it then, Young Scholar?' Angee said, sarcasm heavy in his voice.

'It's a sheep. The Mongols herd these on our north-west frontier. So if that's to be our fate, to herd the Mongols' animals, the gods have truly abandoned us.'

'Don't you think you're overreacting?' Angee reached out and patted the dead creature's head, nodding to White Beard. White Beard stroked the head of the dead sheep, his watery eyes twinkling back.

Little Brother ignored him, gazing at the fields.

The cart trundled on, through the grassland down to the flats where the river lay nearby. Ahead of them they could begin

to make out a small hut, which, it was now apparent, was their destination. It was a much simpler structure than those they had left behind. Its walls were made of rough wooden slabs, with strips of tree bark for a roof.

The cart pulled up near the hut and the four men jumped down. White Beard grabbed a water can and wandered off towards the river to fill it. Red Devil tasked Angee and Little Brother with emptying the cart of their provisions. Leaving the dead creature where it lay, legs skyward, on the tray, they shuttled back and forth between the cart and the little hut, stacking their stuff on makeshift shelves. Soon they had quite a pile stacked neatly against the wall inside.

A dozen or so paces outside the hut, a circle of stones marked a makeshift fireplace, and into this Red Devil tossed a number of leaves and twigs and sticks, which he had gathered while they were unloading the cart. White Beard had returned from the river with a can of water and, with Red Devil lighting the fire, the water was soon heating up merrily.

'Wish we had some Wulong-cha,' Little Brother said to no one in particular.

'Dream on, Little Brother,' Angee retorted. 'Still, if we add a few leaves and sticks it won't taste any worse. And it seems to please the devils.'

By this stage the water was boiling and Red Devil chucked in a handful of devil tea.

We have to live with these people for the time being, Angee told himself grimly, I should take Little Brother's lead. He picked up a few leaves and tossed them in as well, to the great delight of Red Devil. Then, holding a rag, Angee picked up the can by its handle and spun it around in the air, faster and faster. Red Devil was not laughing now, but White Beard's eyes were twinkling.

'Let it go!' a voice in Angee's head told him, willing the can out of his grasp and into the river beyond. But another voice, bent more on survival, prevailed: the revolutions slowed,

and Angee brought the can back to earth without spilling more than a third of its contents. The remaining two-thirds he poured into four tin mugs White Beard had set out on a fallen log near the fire — a makeshift table and bench rolled into one — into which he had already added several rough spoonfuls of sugar.

The four of them stood and sipped the sweet black tea, their backs to the fire, looking out over the fields. Dozens of the grey specks appeared to be heading their way: they watched as two brown devils approached the camp, driving the sheep before them.

Red Devil spoke sharply to White Beard. Tossing his leaves on the fire so that it hissed and spat, Red Devil went around the back of the hut to where a series of circular fences enclosed a patch of mud. The hut now safely between them, the black devils approached the fire and White Beard gave them a few quids of tobacco. They stared at Angee and Little Brother, until White Beard said something to them that made them relax. His tea finished, White Beard shambled after Red Devil and assisted him with moving sections of fence a dozen or so paces distant.

'What do you think they're doing?' Angee asked Little Brother.

'Why don't you ask them?' Little Brother said tersely.

They watched in silence for a few minutes as the corral was reassembled a stone's throw from the original arrangement.

Angee tossed the dregs of his tea on the fire and stood up: 'Come on, let's go help with this fencing. I'm getting cold.'

But Little Brother remained seated, lost in his memories.

Angee shook his head and walked away — Little Brother would keep. There would be plenty of time for talking later on.

33.
THE HORROR OF EATING A CHOP

HOME. THE WORD has a crushing ring to it, when applied to this mean little hut surrounded by grass and trees, bounded by the river on three sides. It is made of wooden slabs mounted upright, with bark stripped from trees for a roof, a stone chimney and a fireplace blackened and greasy. The doorway, the only opening, is draped in several thicknesses of hessian bags. It is furnished rudely to match its hastily built and unloved construction: our beds are two rough wooden pallets covered in sheepskins, our table a broken-down sea chest, our lamp a small tin dish filled with river clay topped by mutton-fat, which hisses and stinks as we strain our eyes and crouch in fear of the distant howling of wild dogs and worse. The servants' quarters at the Villa of Tranquillity were very palaces by contrast.

From the doorway, I watch as Red Devil and the black devils return to Borambola, leaving us behind with White Beard and our provisions. Now we are just three, among the sheep and the flies, watching the cart disappear over the ridge.

This is the end of the line for Angee and I. With our little hut our only shelter, and White Beard our companion and teacher, we are marooned in an island of grass among sheep. And flies: big buzzing flies, which get in your mouth and nose and bite your bare skin, kept at bay only by the oily smoke of

a mutton-fat lamp. I swat and curse these wretched creatures, these poor benighted souls who have gone before us, only to be reincarnated as our tormentors! It is a clear warning that if we do not repent, a similar fate awaits us.

I sit on a pallet in the hut, my head in my hands. The self-discipline that was my friend and guide through my studies back home has deserted me. I feel more alone than ever; and the thought of this exile extending indefinitely is almost more than I can bear. At least when I was mopping the decks on board that terrible vessel, I had the consolation of knowing we were heading somewhere. Even travelling through the strange barren countryside to Red Devil's land had the same consolation. But now we have arrived at our destination, and there is no relief in sight.

'Well, we got those fences moved,' Angee appears at the doorway, startling me. 'Settling in, eh?' he smiles, looking around the rude hut we will be sharing.

'You could say that,' I grumble.

'Come and have a wash in the river. You'll feel better for it.'

'I'm not going down there,' I mutter from the safety of my pallet.

'Come on, you can't not wash. You'll stink.'

'And I don't already? What's the point of washing any more if we're going to have to live in this wretched hut?'

'Suit yourself then,' he says, and walks alone down to the river. I watch him from the doorway and look around to where White Beard stands building a fire, waving branches in the air, shouting at the sky. At least I know Angee. I run after him, causing the flies to scatter.

There are fewer flies down at the river, but this is more than made up for by mosquitoes.

'Get in the water quick so they don't bite you,' Angee calls out.

I make a mental note to bring a lamp with me next time. The water is crisp and makes my skin tingle. I cry out and Angee laughs, splashing water in my face.

'Just keeping the bugs off.'

Angee was right: it feels good to scrub the grease and lanolin and dust from our skin. I cannot fail to be cheered by this prankster nearby, forgetting about my worries as I splash about in the cool. A screech from the treetops, and I laugh to myself as I see the shapes of local birds perched awkwardly on the tips of branches. How these terrified us at first!

'Mmm, smell that fire!' Angee pops up in the water near me.

I realise how hungry I feel after a day in the open and find myself looking forward to dinner.

'What's for dinner, do you think?'

'Let's go and find out,' Angee yells.

We get out of the water quickly, pulling our clothes on over still-wet skin, and race up to the campfire where White Beard sits alone.

What should have been a reward, however, proves the cruellest punishment of all. There is more tea, and bread baking in the fire, and, sizzling in a pool of grease, a panful of mutton chops. We sit without conversation, the sucking sound of meat being sundered from bone the only noise, and between us a blackened pan rapidly emptying of its contents, burnt splinters of mutton adhering to their ghastly bone. The pan is passed around, from White Beard to Angee, from Angee to me.

'Good, eh?' Angee smiles, grease running down his chin.

Mutely, I consider the pan before me. To think that these unpleasant portions were once an animal, and if this is how it is to be served and eaten, then it has died in vain.

You will think me silly, after all I have been through, to quibble about food on a hungry stomach. But I cannot begin to tell you of the horror of eating a chop. You may argue, as does

Angee, that it is better to eat than to starve; but you, who have listened so patiently to my misfortunes, need to understand what mutton means to my people.

Mutton represents the end of civilisation. You think I exaggerate? Let me speak.

We Han of the south-east are pork-eaters. In the vast spread of the Middle Kingdom, only the Mongol savages — with their religious aversion to pork — eat mutton. When they raided from the north-west, sacking the Southern Sungs and snuffing out the last remnants of the Tang civilisation, and propping up in its place the Yuan Dynasty under the barbarian, Kublai Khan — the vastest dynasty the world has known and which after its dismal beginnings became an ornament to our China — not even then would the Han switch their allegiance from pork to mutton.

We had our other diplomacies, placid beasts of our own in our young women sold off in marriage to nomadic Mongol chieftains. Until now, these were mere words in a history book. Only now can I truly imagine the agonies of an aristocratic Han girl, married to a Mongol chieftain, living in a felt tent stinking of boiled mutton and fermented milk. And the words come back to me from somewhere deep inside —

My household married me off — Oh!
Under another sky,
Gave me in custody, in a strange land — Oh!
To the king of the Wu-sun.

— I cry out her loneliness, passed down through the centuries, into the night air.

'What's that you're saying, Little Brother — Oh!' Angee chuckles, chewing on a crust of bread.

A vaulted hut for a house — Oh!
With felt for a wall,

I use flesh for food — Oh!
Koumiss for liqueur.

White Beard listens carefully, his head tilted on its side like a bird. And my voice wavers as the anonymous *Lament of a Mongol Bride* takes on flesh once more, for my audience of two:

Thoughts of my own soil are always with me — Oh!
Wounded deep in my heart
I could wish to be a yellow swan — Oh!
To return to my old home.

If only Second Wife knew how lucky she was, and what she has banished me to — Oh!

White Beard grunts and points to the pan, gesturing that I should pass it on.

The thought of eating these awful servings of meat is quite appalling and, as I sit stunned in the glow of the fire considering my options, one thing is clear: mutton equals Mongol and I am now among the barbarians, my only companions are one who could not understand my words, the other my feelings. I am forced to confront my fate: eat or starve.

I have learned to put up with a great, great deal since Second Wife so coolly abandoned me to my fate. I have forgiven her for so much. But this charred and greasy reminder of my descent into barbarism is more than a punishment; it is a very hell in itself.

I prise a chop free, its imprint left in the already congealing grease. If Angee has failed to convince me that I have been on the journey to hell, the splinter of bone and flesh I now hold in my hand tells me once and for ever that my descent into hell is complete.

PART FOUR

A NEW SCROLL

A cup of wine, under the flowering trees;
I drink alone, for no friend is near.
Raising my cup I beckon the bright moon,
For he, with my shadow, will make three men.

Li Bai, *Drinking alone by moonlight*
(translated by Arthur Waley)

34.
THE COFFIN-BARROW

AT SUNRISE ANGEE rolled off his pallet, ignoring Little Brother's snoring and mumbling on the pallet beside him. His boots were cold and smelt of the mutton grease White Beard had taught him to use to keep them supple. Angee's breath steamed as he stepped outside their hut. The dawn sun was low and streamed blindingly through the trees as he wandered down to the river with a water can for the tea, gathering sticks and leaves for the fire as he went. Mist swarmed around him from the river, an eerie ghost-fog, which it took a good hour of sunlight to dissipate. He filled his water can, listening to the sounds of frogs and fish, watching the ghostly figures of creatures with huge feet and thick tails drinking on the opposite bank. His arms full, Angee trudged back to the camp, his figure casting huge demon shadows across the grass.

The water boiled, he filled the mugs, sugared sweet to balance the tarry tannin, and took tea to Little Brother in their hut. Then, taking a deep breath, he cautiously approached White Beard's sleeping quarters among the sheep. He heard the sheep in their pens before he saw them, ghostly shadows in the mist. Angee paused, heart pounding, as the mist rolled back to reveal a strange carriage, a giant covered wheelbarrow longer than a man. He rapped on the side and an arm shot out, taking the mug of tea.

At first, Angee had been reminded of Feng's sedan chair parked silently outside the fan-tan school back in Xiamen, but

the more he saw of White Beard's watch-box, the more it resembled a coffin on wheels. A coffin-barrow. Every morning he approached it fearful that White Beard had teased the gods once too often with his coffin-bed and had died during the night. Yet each morning after taking his tea, the ghost raised the side flap, swung his legs out and regarded Angee wordlessly, his hands wrapped around his mug for warmth, his watery eyes soft and gentle in gratitude or sleepiness.

Angee listened to the low bleating of the creatures gathered around them, grateful for White Beard's resurrection, and enjoying the stillness before they inspected the sheep. White Beard crawled out of his coffin-barrow and Angee followed him through the muddy pools of stale and pellets where the sheep had crowded together for warmth through the night.

The flock parted bleating before them, jumping and crush-crowding, crashing and rebounding off the hurdles. In their wake this morning, a ewe lay dead on the ground, her fleece matted bloody and muddy from trampling by her sisters during the night. White Beard checked her gums for colour, teeth for age, felt her abdomen for any signs of disease, and, nodding to Angee, put the beast aside for eating. They continued through the flock, homing in on the stragglers. In a flash, White Beard grabbed a lame sheep and immobilised it between his legs, lifted the offending limb clear and poked its putrid hoof into Angee's face. Angee reeled back from the smell as White Beard proceeded to scrape the hoof out with a sharpened piece of bone for a knife, the sheep bellowing all the while. He pulled a bottle from his jacket pocket, took a slug and spat firewater over the exposed pink flesh. The sheep ran away on all fours into the thick of the flock once released.

Angee immobilised another limping sheep and White Beard examined its hoof, then shook his head. He ran his hand along its leg until, with a nod, he found what he was looking for. Gesturing for Angee to feel a swelling, he stabbed the leg and

pus poured out of the opening, oozing down its leg. White Beard took another toke and spat a little firewater onto the open wound. He smiled at Angee; Angee smiled back and, with a slap on its rump, sent it back into the flock.

So much he had learned about these creatures already in a few short days, and the lure of slugs of firewater to learn more!

When the mist lifted a little and Angee could make out the shapes of the trees on the riverbank, it was time to release the flocks. Sighing, he wandered back to the hut.

'Get up now, Little Brother, time to go.'

'I'm not going out there,' Little Brother said from the safety of his pallet, his sheepskin rug drawn up around his chin. 'Not with a dragon outside!'

'What?'

'All that hissing and snorting! I heard what I heard!'

'That was White Beard and I treating the sheep!' Laughing, Angee grabbed the sheepskin rug and tore it from Little Brother.

'Get up, Young Scholar — save your daydreaming for when you're with your flock.'

And, with a chuckle, Angee left him cursing in the hut, returning to White Beard. Laughingly, he recounted his exchange with Little Brother to White Beard, who smiled and nodded uncomprehendingly — Angee had forgotten for a moment that he did not speak the language.

Little Brother trudged from the hut to the yards, his bearing downcast. White Beard's mild eyes were full of understanding though not a word passed between them. He opened the first gate but the creatures held back, dumbly shy of the opening. Angee would have used the toe of his mutton-greased boot to get his charges under way, but White Beard had a special hooked staff, which he placed around the sheep's neck and, with a sharp tug, pulled it clear. Its sisters streamed out the gate in bleating companionship.

'Have a good day, Little Brother,' Angee called out, trailing his flock wandering off across the fields, hemmed in by the river. He could do with one of those hooked staffs to get Little Brother out of bed in the mornings. They followed the course of the river beneath trees whose bark was peeling in strips, where he scoured the riverbank for a suitably curved branch; but, more often during those first days he sat skipping stones on the river.

He watched as the stone skipped across the water, three, four times before disappearing, and rings swelled and rippled from every bounce, intersecting and overlapping before dissipating. He picked up another flat stone, measured its weight in his hand. How many bounces to the other side? And what over there would be different from this side? What was the point of crossing over when all was the same? Now he understood why hell, *Ti Yu*, also meant earth prison in their language. They were trapped as assuredly by the vast and undifferentiated earth prison extending in all directions beyond the horizon as if they were mouldering in a Xiamen jail cell.

The ruminants wandered slowly, not unlike the white-grey puffs of clouds blown across the vast vault of the southern sky, and, from time to time, Angee would wake up, discover his charges had moved out of sight and, gathering his satchel and hat, tramp off after them yet again. This pattern repeated itself between a dozen and 20 times a day until the lowering sun indicated that it was time to return.

There was perhaps an hour or so of daylight left by the time Angee returned and White Beard counted his sheep into their yard. His breath stank of firewater and Angee wondered whether he had been treating more sheep or just himself in their absence during the day. While there was always work to be done around the camp — butchering this morning's ewe, for example — Angee got the impression that, for much of his time, White Beard simply read his books and drank firewater.

The two flocks were corralled separately, in yards made of moveable timber rails, beams longer than Angee was tall, several rails slung horizontally between two crossbeams making each hurdle; several dozen of these placed together in a crude circle for each yard. Every few days the yards were moved 10 or so paces as several hundred sheep, corralled together, turned a heavily grassed patch into boggy marsh.

'Extraordinary,' Little Brother said, watching as a staggering White Beard tried to move the hurdles late one afternoon. 'It's like some Taoist ritual, moving it for the sake of moving it.'

'Come and help him, he's drunk,' Angee said. He wondered where White Beard got his supply from, and how he could secure a slug of firewater for himself.

'A drunk, sleeping in a coffin, what does it mean? Isn't it a bad omen, having a coffin follow the flocks?' Little Brother was away in his own thoughts; and once again it was just Angee and White Beard moving the hurdles. The new yards complete, the coffin-barrow was rolled to its new place between the two yards.

But where Little Brother saw the Tao, for Angee this routine had another, less elegant, meaning: they were encircled by shit. Surrounding their little hut and fireplace was a ring of patches of varying vintage bearing mute witness to the occupation of hundreds of cloven-hoofed ruminants: the current patch distinguished by the fencing hurdles; its predecessor a brown and moist patch of slime in the field; and, continuing before this, at varying stages in the transformation of sheep-leavings into more sheep-feed, islands of vivid green sprung up in the yellow sea of grass.

If White Beard was too drunk, Angee cooked the evening meal: chops in the pan, which Little Brother resisted. After dinner, White Beard staggered back to his coffin-barrow, where he sang and talked to his charges. The two shepherds huddled around the fire could hear White Beard's strange reedy voice fluttering in the wind over the heads of the clustered sheep.

'I wouldn't want to sleep in that thing,' Little Brother finally volunteered. 'No wonder he drinks so much firewater.'

'Yet he doesn't sound unhappy,' Angee replied. 'What do you think he's saying to the sheep?'

'Hard to say. Sounds like verse.'

'Like back at Red Devil's house under the tree?'

'Maybe.'

'Shall we do a reading?' Angee offered.

But Little Brother shook his head. 'I don't want to know what will happen tomorrow. I'm going to bed.'

Angee watched the departing lamp recede and enter the hut. He huddled by the fire, gnawing on the last of the chop bones, listening to White Beard's voice echoing from his coffin-barrow. And beyond, the distant, demoniac howling of some as-yet unknown creature. Angee shuddered, wondering if he would meet it tonight. What perverse pleasure the gods must have derived from placing them beyond the ends of the known world in this land of ghosts and demons, with a coffin-dweller for a guide. And no language but Little Brother's complaints!

There, that howling again. Angee threw his chop bone on the fire, listening to it crack and pop as he picked his way in moonlight to their hut, hoping the noise would keep the demons at bay tonight.

35.
ALONE AMONG THE SHEEP

JUST IMAGINE IT: the Number One Son of a provincial mandarin, a shepherd in this barbarian land! You could write a fiction fable about it, and nobody would believe you! But here I am, a shepherd, Sheepy among the sheep. What a name for someone who intended to do so much with his life! What stupid and base, careless creatures these are, and how stupid and base I feel to be their namesake and minister!

Sobbing, I put the lamp down on the floor between the pallets, each covered by a sheepskin. I might hate the creatures, their almost-godlike omnipresence in our lives, but the nights are very cold and I am grateful for the sheepskin's warmth. I tuck myself under and, for lack of other activity, doze, but fitfully, dreaming about — what else? — sheep: of being smothered by sheep, of drowning in sheep, of being judged by first one, then 10, then a hundred sheep, all bleating the guilt of my association with Second Wife, drowning out my protests. The green-faced demon, Hufashizhe, has gripped my shoulder and is shaking me, the sheep disappear and my hut returns. Someone else is shaking me. I look, wild-eyed and half-asleep, at Angee, frowning in concern over me.

'You've been having nightmares again, Little Brother,' he says sympathetically, handing me a mug of tea.

I drink my sugared devil tea and feel somewhat revived by its sweetness. But a bitterness remains in my memories: in my

former existence, that base traitor Ah Chiang brought me tea in my room, after which I would place incense on the ancestral altar of the Pavilion of Stone.

Instead of which I now trail Angee and White Beard through the flocks.

'Sheepy among the sheep, eh?' Angee smiles, slapping a ewe on the rump. 'Perhaps shepherding is in your bones and you never knew it.'

I glare at him until I see that he is laughing. Not with me, but at me.

White Beard shows us through gestures that he wants us to open the gate, let the sheep out and drive them across the fields. I look at Angee; he shrugs and takes the hooked staff White Beard holds out to us. The gate is opened and I head off with my flock, into another wretched day alone among the sheep.

'See you tonight, Sheepy,' Angee calls, laughing, after me, steering his flock to the east. White Beard watches me, his eyes twinkling, as I struggle to make mine lead off to the west.

They are truly stupid creatures, and it irritates me more than I can say to have to spend the greater part of my day in their company. Where one leads others follow, into danger or discomfort, and I need to shepherd them back onto safe ground, time and again. The unimaginable prospect of traipsing after these creatures, day after day, week after week, moon after moon, from dawn until dusk — unimaginable except that I am now living this boredom. This is what I do the livelong day: sitting when the sheep stop, rising to follow the sheep along the riverbank until, about mid-afternoon, we begin our slow march back to the hut.

The longer I spend in their company, the more contemptuous I become of their capabilities. Why not dragons, I protest to the heavens — now there is a creature worthy of a scholar's attention! But sheep? How my years of study have failed to prepare me for this! And how my expectations,

heightened by Father's own moderate success, have failed to prepare me for the crushing blow this supreme isolation has dealt me, with its attendant monotony and tedium, punctuated by more misery! You cannot even begin to imagine how it feels after a day in the fields with these obscene creatures, and having finally dispensed with them for the evening, to come face to face with portions of their dead flesh on our plate.

After eating his portion, White Beard leaves us without a word and retires to what Angee has come to call his coffin-barrow, parked between the yards.

'Why does he go there so soon after meals?' I ask Angee, whose eyes follow White Beard's departing figure.

Angee turns slowly back to me, 'Guarding the sheep?'

'From what?'

Angee shrugs. 'Perhaps he prefers the sheep's company to ours,' he says simply.

'He can't talk to them either,' I protest.

But Angee puts his hand up, silencing me. 'You hear that?' he hisses.

I crane to listen, but all I can hear at first is my heart pounding. The fire crackles and I jump.

'There it is again,' he says.

And now I hear it, barely audible over the sound of wind in the leaves: a howling.

'I heard it last night,' Angee turns to me. 'It sounds closer tonight.'

We listen to the howling, huddling into the fire, fearful of shadows dancing at the edge of the light. And knowing that whatever is out there can see us in the firelight.

'Should we put out the fire?' Angee suggests.

'No!' I object. The prospect of listening to the howling in the dark is too dreadful to countenance.

'Should we get White Beard?' Angee suggests.

'You mean, go out in the dark with all that howling? What if it attacks us?'

'But White Beard might be in danger alone out there.'

'No, I think it's coming from beyond the river,' I protest. 'Stay close, Angee.'

We sit listening to the growling approaching ever closer, the pathetic baaing of our flocks, until a gunshot jolts us both.

'Across the river, aiee!' Angee cries. 'I'm going to have a look. Coming?'

'I'm not going out there. The demon's got a gun as well!'

'That's White Beard's gun!' Angee snatches the lamp and heads for the yards, leaving me sitting alone in the firelight.

'Wait for me!' I call, running after him.

We find White Beard sitting up in his coffin-barrow, bleary-eyed, taking shots from his firewater bottle. At the base of the coffin-barrow lies a dead dog. I look at White Beard and he points to the yards, shaking his head.

He takes another slug and passes the firewater to Angee, who eagerly downs a mouthful.

'Ah, that's better! Here you go, Little Brother, this will warm you up,' Angee passes the bottle to me.

I am reluctant to put my lips to the bottle, but to refuse would be to isolate myself further. I take a sip; the firewater burns my throat and I come up coughing.

We stay with the flocks overnight, passing the bottle, but the wild dogs stay away. In the dawn light, the attacker looks less menacing: a scrawny yellow dog, its tongue lolling insanely in death. I toe it with my boot and feel that it has already begun to stiffen.

But it has taken a hefty toll on our flocks. In the yard, we count 10 dead sheep, their throats torn out. The survivors are more fearful than usual this morning, and resist being set loose in the fields. White Beard stays put in his coffin-barrow, watching me, as I struggle to get my charges under way. I feel as though I have somehow disappointed him, but what can he expect from someone who has no knowledge of these creatures?

The sheep stay close to me today, dependent on my protection. What piteous creatures to put their trust in me!

I sit under trees along the riverbank during the day, trying to catch up on lost sleep, but my mind is racing, worrying away at the same thought: what if there are other wild dogs nearby? Or something worse? What if it — whatever it might be — is already watching us, waiting for an opportunity? Will it attack during the day or wait for the cover of night?

If something chooses to attack us there is nowhere to run, nowhere to hide.

I scramble to my feet, and the sheep scatter, turning to look at me reproachfully from what they judge to be a safe distance. If my sheep feel nervy, how much more vulnerable am I, so many *li* from my companions and with only a stick to defend myself and my flock?

This last thought polarises me into action, and my flock find themselves homeward bound while the sun is still high in the western sky. But, before I reach camp, Angee comes running up to me, his face flushed. This is not like him.

'Are you all right?' I ask, fearful that he has been attacked during the day.

He points to a cart parked near our hut.

'Red Devil must have heard the gunshot,' he says, between breaths. 'I've been hiding out down by the river till you came back.'

'Perhaps he's just checking we're okay,' I suggest. We bring the flock in and, passing the cart, I note that its rear tray is laden with sacks: some welcome variety in our diet.

Red Devil is with White Beard, examining the dead sheep. He watches us closely as we struggle to secure my flock and it is a relief to escape his gaze for a wash in the river.

After our return, Red Devil gestures at the dead dog by the campfire. Angee and I look at each other, then at Red Devil blankly. He runs his finger across his throat, pointing to the

sheep yards, and holds up two hands, his fingers outstretched, pointing first at Angee and then at me.

'What's all that mean?' I whisper to Angee.

'Guess who'll be paying for the stock losses?'

'But it's not our fault!' I protest.

'Try telling him that,' Angee replies, glaring at Red Devil. 'Welcome to our new life, Little Brother.'

36.
THE SHRINE

IT HAS TAKEN me literally weeks to shake off the pall of depression that set in when I realised this was to be our new life. Everything was strange, unfamiliar, alien; and actions occurred without a context, meaningless and threatening. It was impossible to make sense of events around us. Apart from sign language, all was idle conjecture on our parts and — I am sorry to say — even the Tao was at first a poor guide in such a meaningless void.

And then the rains came. On nights before rain, White Beard acted more strangely than usual, twitchier, more jumpy and nervy and less disposed to spending time after dinner in our company. At first, we thought he had drunk too much of the devils' firewater in our absence during the day; but as Angee grew accustomed to his mannerisms, he recognised his sensitivity in predicting rain, as dependable a cue as the sheep's own restlessness, and something useful in their husbandry.

Our little hut leaks badly through its tree-bark roof, and everywhere the moistness seems to activate something in the wool, promoting the smell of greasy wet sheepskin. As if being enclosed by the smell of greasy wool is not bad enough, on such days we are still expected to take the sheep out wandering for their feed. It is impossible to light a fire outside, and useless to insulate ourselves against the cold; and so, tealess and sneezing on these wet mornings, we walk outside and within minutes are

drenched, a condition that continues for the rest of the day, a day more miserable than most, and one that we have been dreading all night, thanks to White Beard's prescience.

I proceed like an automaton, sneezing and sniffling, not knowing what I do or how I do it, let alone why. Only Angee, alternately bullying and nagging, kept me going through those first terrible wet weeks in the fields, till I came to a point where, the monotonous actions familiar, I could stand by myself again.

Over time the rains become less frequent; and, if I do not enjoy my routine, at least I can take comfort in being dry as I go about what now appears to be my lot in life.

Taking my flock into the fields each morning, I stop down by the river, where, on a ghostly tree trunk, I make another nick with my knife. This helps me to see the passage of time as the nicks mount up, tens after tens, placing these in a larger framework: I make 30 nicks between moons, less between our regular visits from Red Devil.

Every seven to 10 days — as measured by my rudimentary calendar — Red Devil appears over the hill in his cart, bringing provisions and checking the condition of the sheep, counting their numbers and making us explain any losses. He was not happy after the flocks' savaging by the wild dog; and Angee and I had our pay docked for our failure to protect our flocks from danger. While I came to look forward to these visits as a break in our routine — as indeed any break was welcome — Angee frowns and glowers:

'Checking on how much more of the money he owes us he can claw back off us.'

If nothing else, it means another face around the campfire of an evening, an occasional fourth for our card games, some more tobacco and firewater for White Beard and Angee. The smoke and fire burn my throat, make my voice raspy, but I find consolation in my crickets. Angee would teach them to fight; but I — recalling another gilded cricket-cage — would have them sing for their master.

Lying back, I look up into the sky and see sheep roaming the celestial vault as well as in the fields around me. Happily, today the sky is clear of the dirty fleeces warning of rain. Wisps travel slowly across the celestial vault, a sheepskin cast broadly across a pallet for a blanket; others are woolly puff-balls, ever-changing and transforming into faces and animals.

If my body is grounded in the fields among the sheep, my mind is free to soar among the clouds; and my thoughts inevitably drift back to my previous life in China. And to her. My memories have been burnished by my tears and, if her shortcomings no longer bear recollection, then her finer points — the smooth whiteness of her neck, the fall of her cloak, her delicate fingers cradling a cup of tea — fill my imagination to such an extent that I am a man possessed with love, needing to declare this love, and to dedicate my energies to its pure flame. But how?

I sit up and toss a stone into the river, watching as rings swell out across the water's surface, fading as they expand. Water gurgles and chatters, spilling over a string of rocks forming a race. Light streams as in a rainbow, catching the ground somewhere on the far side of the riverbank. What is on the other side? A fallen log straddles the gap — a footbridge of sorts from one side to the other. I skip from stone into stone, surrounded by water: dare I leave my sheep behind to follow the rainbow? The log is long, and water rushes rapidly beneath it. Duty, or fear, prevails; I go no further. In any case, I will not find her at the end of the rainbow. Eyes downcast, I note that the log has been in the water for some time, and in places its bark has split and swollen, peeling back to reveal the white inner rings of the tree and the smooth, pale fibres of the bark, white as *xuan* paper.

I feel like the young student of Cai Luan who wanted to make the finest paper for his teacher and who travelled all over China to find it. Years after his quest began, he came to an area in Anhui Province where a tree had fallen in the water by a spring, in which the bark had been washed for a long time. The

fibre was white but still strong, so he tried this bark for paper-making — the rest, as they say, is history.

I squat down and feel the inner bark: it is smooth, cool where the water submerges it, and lustrous white. Its whiteness is the whiteness of her skin. What I would have given to spill my ink on the skin of her beauty!

'A sign! A sign!' I shout, dancing back across the stones to solid ground, my mind reeling with revelation. 'She is in the rainbow, she is the rainbow!' I shout my emotions across the fields, and one or two sheep look up momentarily before resuming their grass-eating.

And so it comes to pass that I prepare a little shrine to her memory out in the fields, to which I come every day. I cannot call it an altar: an altar is for the memory of loved ones who have departed this life and, as far as I know, she is still of this world, living with Father at the Pavilion of Stone. No, I do not fancy her attachment to me is such that she would have abandoned this life at my unexpected departure; and I do not wish her dead, despite all that has passed between us, and her role in my downfall. My love for her lives on, nay, grows stronger and purer, as the hopes of it realising its object in this life grow ever dimmer. Removed from any possible further contact with Second Wife at this great distance from my old home, my love for her grows abstract; and my shrine stands as a memorial to a free and pure love, which will be my salvation.

I spend nearly a week, by the reckoning of my tree calendar, scouring the riverbank before finally selecting the ideal site. I find, set a little way apart from the trees by the riverbank, a cleft rock that suits my purpose admirably. It enjoys sunlight in the morning and is a favourite place for basking lizards. Nearby, under the trees, a small patch of flowers dots the grass with white and yellow petals, these colours of death a mirror of my own sadness. I pick these and scatter their petals on my altar, wedging clumps by their stems into fissures in the rock. They do not last, but that is the point. Each day, the faded and

shrivelled petals blown to the wind capture the ephemeral nature of my contact with Second Wife, her hasty rejection of the love I offered her. And, each morning, I refresh the flowers, honouring her memory and the memory of my feelings for her with another declaration of my undying devotion.

I would offer much more than flowers, but understand that I have to make do with what few objects I can find or fashion myself in the fields. I have no incense, save burning a mutton-fat lamp or pellets of sheep dung, which, for obvious reasons, will not do. I have no fresh fruit to offer, other than the berries and other inedibles fallen from trees lining the river. The only food I have is my lunch, a piece of stale bread and any leftover mutton chops, preserved in pan-grease from the previous night.

Before you accuse me of hypocrisy, I should add that, like so many other aspects of my new life, I have become resigned to the monotony of chop-eating. Offering mutton chops is no longer an insult, but rather a marker of how little I have to offer here.

I place my food offerings on my little altar-stone and sit back to allow the deities to consume their essence. I have nowhere to go, my sheep graze on, so I wait for some sign from the gods that my offerings have been accepted. The bread hardens, becomes rock-like and inedible, like the very rock-altar it lies on. Its transubstantiation complete, I toss it into the river rather than break my teeth on it, watching the concentric rings spread as it bobs slowly downstream, until the water boils from below as fish fight over the floating crust.

The little chop lies by itself on the rock, awaiting transubstantiation. In the full sun, it soon glistens, transforming itself from a hunk of dead creature into a sparkling jewel, the crystal of my memory and love.

But then the ants come. First one scurrying back and forth across the rock as if its feet are burning and it does not want to have them touching the warm surface for any longer than is absolutely necessary for its continued locomotion.

I brush it away, not wanting my offering compromised, but more come. And more. Then too many to sweep away, darting back and forth, sniffing each other, their antennae wagging furiously, and charging off for reinforcements. Another few minutes and there is a veritable stream of ants, at one end fanning out around my little chop, chomping off tiny pieces with their pincers, and from them a line tracing itself unsteadily across the rock-face and down to the sandy soil of the riverbank, away from the water and back into the grass. Tears sting my eyes as I stand up and trace the ants to their source, a mound resting against a fallen trunk.

I stomp the mound flat with my boots, kick dirt into the air so that it rains down upon me, and soldier ants stream into my trousers, biting my legs. I am bigger, but they are many; and, howling, I remove my boots and trousers and jump into the river. Defeated, I dress myself and follow my flock.

Returning to my altar later in the afternoon, what a changed scene I find! The little chop is nowhere to be seen; in its place is an imprint in grease on the rock. And the ant-mound has been mostly rebuilt by its workers, and is no longer a scattered sandy reminder of my loss of control.

Once again, my efforts at something greater and finer appear to have been in vain.

The setting sun hangs a few degrees above the horizon, a shimmering white ball of light casting flashes and brilliance across the river. It is getting time to return, to corral and count my sheep in, and yet I stay under the trees, watchful, expectant.

'Why am I here? What is the purpose of my suffering?' I bellow in frustration at the heavens. The sheep look at me, bleating and pleading to head back.

The first stars appear in the purple twilight sky. It is cold now; and around me sheep stamp and bleat, wanting to go home. And so do I, a lonely outcast from my society, looking for something in these jewels of the night world, shining down impartially on our people's suffering for millennia, from the

Shang diviners at the dawn of our great civilisation through to my own poor circumstance. I try to imagine her looking at the same stars, but somehow she, still cradled in the bosom of the Middle Kingdom, does not strike me as a stargazer, someone needing the solace of the celestial heavens.

If the heavens could only speak to me, what would they say?

But what was that? Through the cacophony of bleating, a faint yet distinct howling noise.

Please, my sheep seem to be saying to me, take us home.

There, that howling again, it sounds closer this time.

The sun has disappeared completely beyond the horizon, and I will have no way of getting my charges back to the fold safely. I do not want my pay docked again, but there is not just myself to consider. Preservation takes place over revelation; minimising suffering is the priority now.

But is this not the merest hint of an insight in itself?

The moon has risen above us; is that not, in its cusp, the hare pounding the elixir of life in its bowl? Or is it the three-legged toad who stole the elixir? I wonder what I have done in previous lives to end up here — or is it merely my actions in this life?

I bow my head as, my flock clustering close around me, we begin our lonely walk back to the outstation. And I recall an earlier, troubled time when I was less mindful of my duties and when the bonds of filial piety were strained to breaking point.

37.
FILIAL PIETY

FATHER RETURNED FROM his journey with the magistrate to find his house as he had left it — on the surface. There was talk among the servants of Old Master having reclaimed his place in the household, and not a little snorting and laughter. I waited, heart pounding, for the interview with Father in which I, as his deputy, would need to set out the activities and running of the household during the period he had been away.

Across the courtyard, Second Wife also waited for her interview with Father. We avoided each other, not wishing to give rise to any suspicions; but it was impossible to resume my studies just yet. I called for Ah Chiang.

He came to my room, bowing and scraping more than he had done at any time in those past weeks. His pigtail fell down over his shoulder and trailed on the ground, such was his supplication.

'What does Young Master want of his humble servant?'

'I wanted to thank you for your attentions these last weeks, for being so understanding of the needs of a scholar, and for reporting to Father on my steady application towards my studies.' I took a few coins from a silk purse hanging by its sash from my waistband and placed these in his hand.

Without looking up, Ah Chiang curled his fingers over the coins, weighed them, uncurled his fingers. When he raised his head to look at me, his mouth betrayed the faintest smirk.

'Surely,' he paused, weighing the words in his mouth as carefully as the coins in his hand, 'if Young Master expects me to help him in reporting the activities of the household while Old Master is away, Young Master can be more helpful to his humble servant Ah Chiang whom, as he knows, fate has dealt a cruel blow and saddled his family with crippling debts?'

'Perhaps I can be more obliging, and Ah Chiang can ensure that Father does not have to worry about slander from other servants in this house,' I handed over the purse.

Ah Chiang bowed. 'Young Master is most generous. Can I be of any other service for Young Master?'

'That will be all for now. You may leave.'

Ah Chiang left my quarters and hastened across the courtyard to Second Wife's rooms.

Later, preparing myself for sleep, I heard Ah Chiang's drunken voice, laughter and the clinking of coin and glasses coming from the servants' quarters nearby. In the Pavilion of Stone, lamplight coming from Father's bedroom and a soft, dear feminine voice troubled my repose.

That territory, so unknown and yet so close to my attentions of those past days, was a torture for me. I felt like a man at a keyhole observing a woman in her bath, and me drowning in that same bath. I dreamed of being her servant, of scooping the heated water and pouring it over her naked back arching in pleasure under the flow of warm water. Sleep, so often a friend and comfort for the lonely scholar, refused its consolation that night. Phantoms appeared before me: scrolls swelling and unrolling, the actors within floating up from the page, coupling and uncoupling, swirling around within my room as I lay thrashing alone on my wooden platform.

I listened for the faintest sounds — the scuff of sandals outside; the clink of a pot; the hiss of water. The creak of a bench alarmed me until I realised it was probably only the nightguard fixing himself a snack and lying down on a bench by the compound gates.

I felt like that wretched nightguard: on sentry duty, listening for sounds and disturbances that I had no desire to hear. The Villa of Tranquillity it was not! What a household in which to prepare for my examinations! Was ever a scholar thus distracted! And with these ejaculations, wallowing in self-pity, sleep claimed me for the briefest of interludes before morning cock-crow.

I rose from my bed, scooped water in my hands and splashed it on my face, patting gently with a cloth so as not to aggravate the efflorescence on my face, and, still not dressed for the day, I took my taper and made for the ancestral altar. I stepped out of my slippers at the doorway and into the gloom.

I drew back and tied the curtains, inspected the fruit. Some pomegranates in season had swollen and burst their skins, a pinkish-red glistening cleft ripe and moist, exposing dozens of tiny black seeds. Hastily, I turned these over so that their good side was upright. Next, I lit the lamps, watching transfixed as the tongue of flame moved from my taper to the wick, at first a tiny bead of light, the flame tumescent and arising, flashing warmth and light over the altar. There they all were, their tablets arranged in rows. And at one end, the coins, unremarked previously.

Usually I was not one to second-guess fate, but my present situation was intolerable. I would seek my ancestors' advice: I took the coins, whispered my question into my cupped hands as I shook the coins, and tossed them. A yin and a yang meant yes, two yins or two yangs no. At these odds, they were more likely than not to deny me her as well. Two yangs. I tossed another two times: two yins, twice.

Sighing, I put the coins back into their dish, lit fresh incense and bowed to my ancestors, praying for the forbearance to follow their direction. Thus kneeling, head down, I first noticed the chair in the corner and a pair of feet.

I spun round, startled. 'Father!' For it was he, sitting in the shadows.

'Speak with our ancestors before you speak with me, First Son.'

I returned to my prayers, conscious of his eyes having observed my every movement since I entered the room. Had he overheard my whispered petition as well? I heard the chair scrape on the floor as he got to his feet, and then he was on the floor beside me, kneeling and praying.

'Let us adjourn to the library now, First Son,' he said after we had completed our observances. I followed him through the sliding screen into the adjacent room where Ah Chiang and a tray of tea awaited us. I scanned the servant's face but it was serene and unperturbed, giving nothing away.

Ah Chiang poured the tea and was dismissed by Father. We sipped together and I cast my eyes over the shelves as had been my habit. Beyond the shelves was the screen leading to Father's bedroom. Blushing, I bowed my head: I could not look at the screen without thinking of her on the other side, and the phantoms of my sleepless night came back to me.

'Father slept well?' I inquired.

'Tolerably well, First Son. And you?'

'Yes, Father,' I lied to him.

He looked closely at me, eyes frowning and wrinkled, bending forward to measure my face the better. 'I see the pressures of studying for your examinations are coming out in your face,' he said, referring to the pustules ornamenting my chin and cheeks.

I kept my head bowed.

'Were you seeking our ancestors' guidance on your examinations?' he asked.

Surprised, I looked up, guilt written all over my face.

'This has been a challenging time for you, my son. And I have not been able to assist you as I would have wished. Forgive me the duties of my station, and may our ancestors afford you greater fortune in your examinations than befell me, so that you can attend to your own family's interests better than I have mine.'

Sobbing, I fell to my knees, kissing his hand. He took my head between his hands and raised it till I gazed at his old, wise, beloved face, which had seen so much of this world.

'That will do for now, First Son. I have some other pressing matters to attend to now. Come speak with me again after lunch.'

I wanted to speak, to tell him what had happened, but once my relations with Second Wife were broached there would be no turning back. Wordlessly, I left the library and returned to my room, not failing to notice half-hidden in the morning shadow Second Wife watching us from her quarters and Ah Chiang sweeping leaves in the courtyard within earshot.

I kept to my room but, like the others, kept one eye on movements in the compound. Like a game of chess, one move led to another. Shortly after my dismissal, Second Wife was summoned to Father's bedroom. A little while later my solitude was broken by a knock on the door from Ah Chiang bringing tea. As this was unsolicited, I wondered what he wanted.

'Young Master's interview with Old Master was satisfactory?'

'Quite satisfactory.'

'I was saddened to hear that Young Master did not sleep well last night. I hope the return of Old Master did not — in any way — affect your slumber,' he said, giving emphasis to the myriad possibilities.

He was fishing, so I gave him a bite.

'I am delighted that Father is home again. No, it was the noise of drunken servants which kept me awake.'

Ah Chiang was unperturbed.

'We too were overjoyed with the return of Old Master, and look forward to the household resuming its normal rhythms now its head is back in place.'

I waited for him to continue.

'However, I worry that Young Master is in mourning, and wonder if Ah Chiang could help Young Master.'

'Pray, why in mourning?' I could not help but ask.

'Why, Young Master had taken to scenting his person, to powdering his face like an opera singer, and when these attentions to his person ceased so suddenly at the time when Old Master returned, I feared something ill had befallen Young Master.'

'Perhaps, as you say, it was no coincidence. Perhaps Father presented me with some bad news, for which I felt it necessary to lessen the attention to my person. But as we have already discussed, Father need not have his tranquillity disturbed by your idle wonderings.'

Ah Chiang smiled, before continuing: 'Perhaps it is as Young Master says. But I still wonder whether Young Master's slumber could be sweetened. If I sent a companion to his chamber? The cook's daughter is an agreeable thing.'

So this was where the conversation had been heading — he wanted to pimp for me! I wondered, however, whether pimping was his only objective. I did not trust Ah Chiang enough to dismiss him out of hand. But I knew I did not need to be the subject of his more intimate attentions, which would be used against me in future.

'And would she cook for me?'

'She would do whatever Young Master desires.'

'Thank you, Ah Chiang, for your concern. I will consider your offer and speak to you further,' I closed the interview without more money changing hands. I needed to rid myself of his smothering attention. I stood up: 'Now I need to do some more study.'

'But the Pavilion of Stone is presently occupied,' Ah Chiang said, this time not even bothering to conceal his sneer.

The scoundrel was right: with Father in his bedroom, the library was for obvious reasons out of bounds. 'I will study in the courtyard, under the ginkgo. Arrange seating for me, will you, and bring my tea there.'

Ah Chiang left me and I looked through the volumes piled beside my bed; but none appealed to me in my present mood. If I were not to be enriching myself with a book, what of the other scholarly activities? I was a poor chess player and an indifferent lute player; these were not likely to lift my spirits. And so, with heavy heart, I picked up my painting kit and carried this outside, intending to practise my lines on something familiar and monotonous.

My inkstone and brushes on a table beside me, my back to the Pavilion of Stone, I waited, brush poised and ready to dip, for a flash of insight to transfer to paper. That rooster, there, his bamboo cage hanging in the sunlight: a few brush strokes for the rustle of his tail-feathers and I had him. Hens walking and scratching, pecking worms and having a dust-bath: a few curlicues and I had their bent heads, their flapping wings.

Squatting barefoot in a shady corner by the kitchen, toes splayed, nails chipped and cracked, the cook's daughter. What was she doing in the frame? I had barely noticed her before; and now, a short while after Ah Chiang offered me her services, she appeared again. Perhaps I was being set up — or was I becoming too suspicious, my fevered mind working overtime?

I held my brush steady, watching for any movement, as if trying to catch a butterfly in a net. She was occupied sorting through a bowl of beansprouts, rinsing these in a bowl and transferring fresh ones to another bowl for the evening meal. The sprouts wriggled like little homunculi as her hands darted into the water, choosing and rejecting. When she thought no one was looking, she stuffed a handful raw into her mouth, wiping her runny nose with the back of her hand in the same action.

My brush trembled in my hand. Certainly, she was no Second Wife: her splayed toes and dirty bare feet could not be further removed from the golden lilies kept wrapped in socks; her brown skin and streaked tangled hair were the marks of a

physical life spent under the sun, in contrast with the shadowy beauty of our mistress. Her posture was anything but dignified, the universal squat suggestive of voiding one's bowels or the act of childbirth. But for all that there was an earthy sensuality about her, which, combined with her youth, had a certain undeniable appeal. I wondered at the extent of Ah Chiang's connection with her and the intimacy of his knowledge of her. While I was thus preoccupied with my thoughts, she became aware of my attention. She looked up and smiled at me from across the courtyard.

But my brush could at best describe a dribble before the paper fell and everything went dark.

38.
LI BAI AND DU FU

I HEARD THE sound of voices talking, the feel of a wet cloth on my brow. I blinked, unseeing.

'He stirs,' said a voice. 'Call Old Master.'

A hand took mine. My eyes took time to adjust to the light, and I saw the face of my own dear Father leaning over me, his brow furrowed with lines. His eyes sparkled with tears.

'First Son, you live! Praise be to our ancestors. Prepare a suckling pig!' he shouted to the servants waiting outside my room. Then, turning to me, he almost whispered. 'My child, I was so afraid for you.'

'What day is it?'

I had been in a fever for a day and a night. There were fears I would not survive. Had I spoken of her in my fever? Better I had died than speak of her! But Father did not give the impression of being any more aware of events in his absence. And I was in no state to refuse his attentions.

After my collapse, Father could not have been more solicitous to me. He personally saw to my meals, serving me medicinal herbs and special healing dishes. He even fed me blackened chick in a claypot. How my chop-numbed mouth waters to think of it now!

This consisted of a day-old chick, which had been stewed at least that long in a medicinal broth consisting of bark and roots, and which when served had turned an even velvety black.

If I felt fragile, out of sorts, its tiny body was even more so, its soggy bag of skin coming apart at the touch of my chopsticks. If I felt I had lost my way, how much more so this poor creature, its body having lost its sense and purpose: its muscles falling away from bone, its sinews and ligaments coming loose, its bones a soft chew, the texture of just-steamed young bamboo, firm not crisp; the beak and skull, the repository of mind, bursting softly in my mouth with a spurt of brain gravy. Notwithstanding the recuperative value of its medicinal broth, dwelling in my attenuated state on the poor creature's diminished condition helped me feel more reconciled to my own circumstances.

In my illness, Father had arranged for Ah Chiang to attend to the morning incense on the altar. I was keen to resume this filial responsibility from the interloper, and this, together with further bed-meals of blackened chick, roused me from my torpor, and I recovered.

Later, when I was out of my bed, Father sat with me under the ginkgo tree in the courtyard and read to me. While his readings were from works I would be tested on, he had the sensitivity and grace to not mention this and put me under what he saw as any additional pressure or danger of a relapse. I welcomed his attention, but these sessions paled in comparison with my earlier readings in the library with Second Wife: I missed her intimacy.

Father also saw personally to our tea tray, favouring me with a special rose blend he had brought back from his travels, and moved my chair so that the sun did not shine in my face. He set up my painting kit and condescended to allow me to capture his image. We played chess, and he was patient with my poor understanding of strategy.

'Son, that will come to you when you have lived as long as I,' he said gently, taking one of my bishops off the board.

Sometimes Second Wife sat with us as well, following our movements on the chess board as she did her embroidery. There, in that ménage à trois enacted in full view of all the household

staff, I still lacked reason to speak to her directly. She, for her part, virtually ignored me as well. We were the son and wife of the head of the household, not related by bloodlines, and would not under usual etiquette have any basis for communicating directly with each other.

It was a period of peace, at least on the outside, while my heart pounded. Often these palpitations were mistaken for nervous attacks arising from my fever and, in a strict sense, they were; but not in the broad sense of having addressed myself excessively to my studies as Father supposed. Rather, it was my proximity to Second Wife that delayed my complete recovery, if a return to my state before knowing her was possible. The chaperoned nearness to my loved one, to feel her presence, smell her jasmine, without any opportunity to engage her directly, tore at my heart, made me feel like my chest was being ripped open in punishment for my transgressions. Our courtyard had become the Third Court of Hell, where every day my heart was being cut out for my unfilial feelings.

Father continued to balance his duties with his home life. Once, when the magistrate required his attendance at the *yamen* government office in Tong An township a few days to the east, he arranged for Second Wife to sit with me alone under the tree as I recovered. Inevitably this arrangement, sanctioned by Father, became the subject of further speculation among the servants. They took to calling Father the Old Tortoise, in reference to his apparently being cuckolded by his son under his own roof. At first, I ignored this, my attention trained on a closer subject. Her.

At last I had the opportunity to talk with her alone. But I found her a changed person, unwilling or unable to recall the intensity of our earlier times together.

'First Son, your father has returned and I must look to my master.'

'But what about our days in the library together? What of Li Bai and Du Fu?' I reminded her of the romantic association

these Tang poets had for us especially. 'You spoke of wanting to walk with me out of this compound, out of the city and into the mountains where the clouds embrace us, and hide our embrace from the world below.'

'I cannot walk with these feet,' she said flatly. Being outside, she still had her slippers on: the tiny red silken wraps, reminding me of how I would fain have drunk from them, brought tears to my eye. She remained unmoved. I pleaded for a sign, some acknowledgment of our earlier companionship.

'You asked me to read to you, you shared my passion for their poetry. Have you forgotten that?'

'I will ask your father to read some of their works to me this evening.'

This betrayal of whatever we had had turned me against her. Notwithstanding my own near-betrayal of Father, her cold calculation in taking what I found most dear, what I had given her, and introducing it into her conjugal life, which excluded me, was almost more than I could bear. She it was who had shown me the hidden scrolls, who had drawn back the screen on their private life to include me for a brief moment; and now she was taking something private and precious of mine and rendering it to Father. This time the screen closed between us, leaving me on one side and Second Wife on the other with Father. As a form of tribute to the master of the household, it was a heavy tax on my person.

For the servants, the household was effectively back to normal, with Father back in command, Second Wife attending to her Master, and me back in the library with my studies. But I could not concentrate. Was I the only one aware of the knowing smirks of the servants? She might not have been sitting with me any more, but her significant absence resonated in my solitary cell. It was all I could do to withstand the tide of her indifference.

A week, two weeks passed, and, while on the outside I had made a recovery from my ague, inside I remained feverish with distraction. She continued to ignore me, but I found I could

no longer ignore her. One morning, when Father was at the *yamen*, I had Ah Chiang bring her to the library under the pretext of speaking to her about her son.

'Don't you think this is somewhat irregular when Old Master is absent?' he took it upon himself to ask me.

'It is not your place to tell me how to conduct myself. I do not tell you how to organise yourself, although perhaps given your financial problems my advice may have been advantageous.'

Ah Chiang scowled and went to Second Wife's chambers. Shortly afterwards, I heard the rustle of silk and the sound of her slippers being discarded at the threshold.

I stood as she entered, my heart in my mouth.

'You sent for me, First Son?' she acknowledged my greeting.

I invited her to sit and drink tea with me. She sat with her eyes downcast, not touching the cup in front of her.

'Second Wife?' I almost whispered, and she looked up. 'It has been a long time since you have been in the library with me.' She did not speak, so I continued: 'You look well.'

'Do not look at me, First Son,' she said in a low voice.

'You came to me and I offered to read to you. You told me you were lonely. You were interested in me. And when I returned your interest, you took me further.'

'What do you want of me? What do you expect me to do? What can I do to stop you from bothering me in this way?'

'Bother? You call it bother? You bothered me when I was studying. You told me you were lonely. You showed interest in me, and then when I returned your interest, you lost interest.'

'I will tell your father of your advances towards me — and Ah Chiang will back me up.'

'Ah Chiang?'

'Yes — he is my cousin after all.'

'And do you really think Father would accept the word of a servant over that of his First Son?' I was bluffing, but I was so hard up against the wall I had nothing to lose. I knew already

from our chess games that sometimes attack was the best form of defence. I had her there and she knew it. Check.

'And you would throw me away, just like that?' I saw her face crumple momentarily before resuming its inscrutable sheen, facing me with what looked like hatred.

I was shocked at her response, reflecting the strength of my own feeling, and realised that she had me in check as well.

It was intolerable. Retaining an honoured position in my own household was one thing; but to do this at the cost of destroying the thing I had loved most was quite another. What was the use of prevailing, when it meant that the object of my attention took all the blame? She too gambled — that I would not act against her. When it came to the arts of war, I was but a beginner — yes, say it, harden my heart and forget it was ever a name so dear! — a stripling. And, like a stripling, I hesitated before doing what a man more familiar with the ways of the world would have done quickly and without passion. Certainly, to strike in that way would cause pain as well, but the speed and severity of the blow would numb its victim, be a kindness in itself.

I knew I was vulnerable should I fail to press home my advantage. And yet I equivocated. 'Speak to me at least. Was I just a distraction to you?' I asked, my eyes stinging from tears. 'Did I mean nothing at all to you in those weeks?'

'Why do you torture yourself with these questions, First Son? I am your Father's wife, I cannot be involved with you.'

'I was acceptable company for you when he was absent,' I said bitterly.

'If it makes you feel better to blame me, then blame me. Do you know the penalty for incest?'

Now it was my turn to be silent. Incest was akin to treason and, accordingly, carried the keenest penalty our justice system could administer, as disagreeable a death as one could meet outside of war: disembowelment and the throwing of your body to the dogs.

'Aiee, I wish this teacup contained poison and I could drink it to be rid of this situation.'

'That would be the honourable thing to do if we had transgressed. But we did not.'

Second Wife looked at me in surprise. 'Your words deceive you, First Son, the damage is as good as if our transgressions were real. Everyone knows. Soon your Father must as well, if he does not already. For your Father's honour, let me go please.'

Her rejection of me, perfectly understandable and yet quite unbearable, shocked me into a belated realisation of the precariousness of our situation. I had been so thoroughly focused on my relations with Second Wife that I had left myself wide open to the unsavoury interests of others. I had paid Ah Chiang and there would doubtless be further approaches from the scoundrel to keep his silence. What hold did he have over Second Wife? It became a simple question of which one of us he would have thrown to the dogs sooner.

If Father found out, who knew what he would do? Denying me the chance to sit my exams would be the least of it.

The claustrophobic net we had spun for ourselves was getting tighter. I paced around the room, in ever-diminishing circles, passing the table with its tea things and the bookcases filled with knowledge, which had been my companions those past months, until I came face to face with my human companion. I needed air, to think through my options clearly, before I became the target for another's enmity — but still I sought something more from her.

'Answer me this before you leave. Why, when I was sick, did you not come to me? Did you not care?'

Second Wife looked at me and, for the first time in our interview, her face softened. 'I heard you at night, could hear your cries across the courtyard, but could not come to you. So many times I wanted to come to you to help calm the demons fighting with your spirit, but I feared you would turn me away.'

'And why did you not tell me of this before?' I looked at her through my tears. 'Make even a passing reference to my health while we sat with Father in the courtyard? I have been torturing myself thinking of you these past weeks, tortured by what I thought was your indifference.'

'Perhaps it was better for you to misinterpret my actions as indifference. If you care for me at all, do not speak to me again about this. I am going now … Stripling.'

That name again, reminding me of all that had passed between us! My thoughts floated back to where we had been just a few weeks ago until I remembered the realities of our latest meeting. I looked up to catch Second Wife, but she had gone already.

Father complimented me on my improved chess skills the next time we played.

'You seem to have developed quite a command of the varied and particular manoeuvres permissible and under what circumstances to attack and yield. Who have you been playing with?'

I paused, wondering whether to come clean, seek his mercy, before answering: 'Ah Chiang.'

'Why, the sly devil! He never ceases to surprise me, that one.' He moved his piece and took one of my knights from the board. 'You're leaving yourself a bit exposed there, First Son.'

I jumped a little at his words, but not so dramatically that Father noticed or saw fit to comment. I wondered whether he knew of the circumstances of my exposure to Ah Chiang; and, if he did, how much he knew. Had he heard talk of pomades and powder?

I concentrated on the board. His last move had left my knight in striking distance of his queen. I moved my piece and took her off the board.

'Well done, First Son! But look what that move has left uncovered,' Father said, showing a clear passage through to my king. 'Checkmate, I believe. Another game?'

I shook my head.

'Always remember, never show your hand too early, avoid becoming a target for others; and be prepared to sacrifice a lesser jewel to gain the greater jewel.'

He knew then, had me caught in propagating a lie against him, with Ah Chiang's connivance! I looked up, ashen-faced, and was met with amusement, quite unlike the stern and difficult judgment I felt I deserved. Father laughed and continued.

'And, as for the pawns, don't even worry about losing them. They are merely there to do the bidding of the king and queen. Speaking of pawns, Ah Chiang has not been the best teacher for you, I fear.' Ah Chiang looked up in surprise from his nearby duties. Father leaned over the chessboard, speaking softly so that the servants would not hear, before continuing.

'First Son, it has been a difficult time for you and I since First Wife, your mother, died; and my work has taken me away from this house for much of that period, at a time when you have your exams to attend to as well. Forgive me.'

'Forgive me, Father, I have not been the sort of son you would have wished for at this time.'

Father looked at me with interest, but I did not elaborate on my failings beyond the rhetorical apology.

In his silence, I saw fit to make another request of him: 'Before my exams, let me make my peace with our ancestors who are all-knowing and who guide us through our lives.'

'Ah Chiang!' Father clapped his hands and the servant materialised in a sweep of black. 'First Son is to go to the mountains to clean the ancestors' graves. You will accompany him and look after him.'

'But Father,' I protested before Ah Chiang, 'I know the way myself.'

'Make preparations for departure tomorrow morning.'

Ah Chiang nodded, his mouth curving into a smile, as he bowed and backed away. After he had gone, Father turned to me: 'First Son, I have decided. This is his chance to make

amends as well. His condition was not always as base as it is now. Do not deny him the indulgence I have granted you.'

'As you say, Father,' I agreed, feeling the eyes of the scoundrel watching us from the kitchen, wondering what was in store for us all.

39.
ORCHIDS

'AIEE, WHERE HAVE you been so late?' a voice calls out in the dark.

All I can see is a lamplight and at first I fear it is Ah Chiang, with Father's indulgence, scolding me. But it is Angee, carrying a mutton-fat lamp, which he shields with his other hand.

'We were getting worried about you,' he says.

'I'm sorry, I got a bit held up this afternoon,' I mumble, a little more sheepishly than I would have liked.

'Never mind, Little Brother, let's get these sheep put away and have some dinner. I'm glad you're back safe.'

At the folds, White Beard nods to me, his eyes flashing in recognition of a familiar, even if he does not speak. I feel as though I am the lost lamb, returned to the flock. These people care for me, even if they show it in funny ways; and my resistance to their solicitude is not merely undeserved, it demeans their concern, their humanity.

Humbled, I chew my mutton chops in silence, swirl my bread around the communal pan to soak up the grease, drink my tea, lost in my memories. Did Father really know or was he as blind to Ah Chiang's deceits as I was? If Father knew, when did he find out? Was it before sending me off with Ah Chiang? And if so, was Ah Chiang acting independently or following Father's directions? Had he made Ah Chiang accompany me to

introduce him to the ancestors, so that if I were to be erased from the family records, a surrogate son in waiting would be ready to step into my place?

Could that really have been Father's intention, that I would disappear so thoroughly, so finally, from their lives? My head is bursting with speculation; I do not know what to believe. Not that it matters anyway, at this great distance. If I formerly styled myself a Du Fu, now I have become a very Li Bai, wandering alone in the fields, with Ah Chiang assuming my place in the Villa of Tranquillity. Damn him, I think bitterly, damn them all.

Next morning I gather my flock and check them — they are still wary of me after our late return last night — and head west towards the river. According to my tree-trunk calendar, we have been here almost three moons now. It has been more than a moon since the last rain, but the river still flows brown and strong.

In the shade of the trees, my shrine to Second Wife stands a little distant from the waterline. I pick a few flowers from where they grow among the grass and cram them into a cleft in the rock, watching abjectly as bees come and sip the pollen from my offering. There will be no sign, no escape, today or any other day — this is my life, for better or worse. Then, as my sheep drift further down the river line, I leave the shrine behind.

I follow the sheep, my mind a blank — today I am the sheep, and they my shepherds. Lying on my back on the grass among my sheep, my heart heaving fit to burst, I look overhead at the clouds. All above me, the celestial vault is awash with delicate hues of mauve, dove-grey, off-white and tiny patches of blue; and I recall the Ming Masters, those wandering artists who would stop, humbled by the immensity of the natural environment, and would in a rush of engagement capture the essence of a place in verse or in vertical scrolls of ink-washed landscape paintings. The image of a grotesque outcrop, a taihu lava-rock bubbled and jagged, from which an ancient twisted

cypress springs, its rugged, battered trunk and twisted boughs hanging low and from which, at its endmost branch, a few tender leaves shoot forth. The rock, a symbol of the enduring strength of man; and the cypress, batted and ravaged but still capable of putting forth life: the dignity and integrity of a man. Yes, it is I, the suffering artist, wandering lonely as a cloud.

Led by creatures who regard every tussock and stone with considered interest, it is as if a blindfold has been taken from my eyes, hinting at a strange barren beauty, which I do not yet understand. Would that I could take up an inkstone and brush, unfurl my scroll and confidently execute an image of the land before me! A new scroll telling her the story of my new life here!

But as I pick up my imaginary brush and unfurl my scroll, what do I see around me? A river flat, spreading horizontally, and brown muddy water. And sheep, their scruffy dirty coats an unwelcome reminder of rain clouds. No, it will not do. I spread my scroll sideways, emphasising the horizontal flatness and the vastness of dimension all around me, a landscape for which my classical training has not adequately prepared me. Lacking the tremulous excitement of deep mountains or rushing water, I am confronted with the enveloping calm of grassy flatlands and river trees along the muddy brown watercourse. This landscape has a different tempo, which requires a different way of seeing, a different approach to the unrolling scroll of my experience.

But make it meaningful, in terms she will understand. Ensure that the images on the scroll of my life strike the right notes, convey through symbol my story and my feelings for her. Perhaps a group of men in a landscaped garden appreciating flowers, composing poetry while drinking wine. A favourite image of the Ming — she would understand it immediately, celebrating as it does the pleasures of nature and good companionship. It speaks, without rancour or blame, of my new life here and my old life with her. But what flowers would I depict, and what message would I send her? The chrysanthemum, the darling of

recluse Tao Qian, emblematic of my retirement from public life? The peony, with its suggestions of my lost wealth and nobility? The magnolia, highlighting her feminine sweetness? Or cherry blossom, her beauty? And what about the orchid — if two people speak with one mind their words will have the fragrance of the orchid, according to the *I Ching*.

Confucius had more to say about orchids suited to my present circumstance: '*Though growing in the depth of a hidden vale, unseen and unappreciated by men, it never discontinues its sweetness. Though living in poverty, unrecognised by society, a gentleman is content, nevertheless, and he never fails to cultivate his mind.*'

And so it is with me, my talents unrecognised and my ambitions necessarily unfulfilled, still seeking to maintain my integrity.

Yet she was never my orchid friend. I never truly enjoyed orchid relations with her. I shudder to think of another domestic scene — the cook's daughter, squatting splay-footed in the compound that wintry afternoon of my collapse — which was in so many ways the beginning of the end for me.

What a consolation my earlier diligence in study is now! Lacking books for companionship, I can still draw upon sources from my memory. Yes, orchids, combining with plum blossom, chrysanthemum and bamboo: the Four Gentlemen of my garden. Perhaps I could even add a solitary bird perched on a tree branch, looking down on the happy gathering: the word for bird, homophonous with longevity, it would show that I have survived, here among the withered peonies and chrysanthemums.

And as I look around here, I see birds: many-coloured birds; birds with red heads and green wings and blue tails, trilling and twittering as they fly and bomb the trees; screeching and squawking white birds with ludicrous yellow and pink crests, waddling on the ground picking grass seeds and fallen tree nuts; a shrieking flock of pink birds with grey heads, massing more greatly than my sheep. An abundance of colour

and noise that drowns out my serene cerebral images, and brings me back to my surroundings.

If birds are too hard, perhaps I could paint her shrine and my offerings, show her the strength of my feelings in this isolation? Keep my scroll small and intimate, in accordance with my diminished circumstances: a finely detailed picture of petals scattered, ants marching across the rock and through the grass, carrying off portions of my chop offering. But these images are perhaps open to misinterpretation.

I imagine her unfurling my scroll, overwhelmed by emotion as she deciphers the coded images, reading in the image the story of my suffering and my love for her; weeping for the noble young man she cannot forget.

Oh, this is madness! If I were to complete my scroll — and I cannot, because my life continues — how would I get it to her? The best I can hope for is to dedicate my love, offer the scroll of my life on her shrine before burning it. Yes, burn it, let my dreams taper off like smoke into the sky.

If my thoughts strike you as melancholy, think what you have done for love, and judge me not. And if you still question my sincerity, and reject me modelling myself on the Four Masters of the Ming, perhaps you will permit me to draw sustenance from the model of the Eight Eccentrics of Yanzhoe?

Ahead there is a little gully through which a creek runs. My sheep have wandered down to the waterline where a number of them stop to drink. I too stop and rest, lying back on the grassy slope, listening to the chattering brook. I do not fancy it is speaking to me, but here and there flashes of sunlight on the moving water draw my attention to the crystalline purity of light all around me. There is something pure and clean, a newness and freshness quite unlike the light at home. Not until the sun has reached its greater altitudes does the quality of this antipodean light wither and fail, leaching the colours from the land.

But what is this before me? Alas, one of my sheep has wandered down along the brook back to the river and is in

danger of being dragged off by the current. The plaintive bleats of its sisters rouse me from my reverie and I half-slide, half-scramble down the gully and along the watercourse to where the poor creature struggles, leaning into the current, scrambling and sliding as its hooves graze the riverbed. I grab handfuls of wool on its back, pull it hard towards the riverbank, but its wet weight is greater than I imagined, and I am pulled over into the current as well. Intent on self-preservation, I release the sheep and its head goes under. Its eyes are wide with terror as it surfaces, a short way downstream, and before it sinks a second time it lets out a piteous bleat to its sisters.

I run up and down the riverbank much of the remaining afternoon, trying to find the wretched sheep, but she has disappeared. In the evening, when I return with my sheep, I say nothing about the missing ewe. But White Beard counts my flock and frowns when the last one enters the fold. He holds up one finger before me, but how am I to explain that it was washed away downriver? I try miming its struggles in the water, my eyes bulging like a sheep, my head bobbing under and then rolling over and over on the grass as my body is dragged along the pebbly bottom.

Angee has been watching my playacting from the campfire: 'So you are telling White Beard that it drowned?'

I nod furiously, forgetting in my excitement that Angee and I both speak the same language.

Angee calls out to White Beard and, when he has his attention, draws his hand across his neck in a gesture of throat cutting.

White Beard nods and, shutting the last hurdle so that the sheep are confined within the yard, trudges over to the campfire. I follow a minute or so later, smelling the sour oil of frying mutton chops.

Angee looks up at me over the frypan: 'How did you lose the sheep? That's what you're meant to be doing in the field, stopping them from drowning.'

'Well, I got distracted.'

'By what?' Angee casts his arms around, as if to emphasise the supreme lack of distractions available to us out here. It also suggests, if you have found something interesting to do out here, please share it with me.

'By a painting.'

'A painting?' Angee's surprised tone makes me realise the ridiculousness of my answer.

'Look, I was daydreaming and I fell asleep, okay?'

'Her again?'

I nod.

Angee passes me a chop: 'Why didn't you say so in the first place?'

We chew our chops in silence, sip our tea, stare at the flickering of the fire and the stars above until: 'Little Brother?'

'Uh-huh?'

'What was the painting of?'

I frown. I can barely articulate my thoughts to myself, let alone Angee. What will he make of the Four Floral Gentlemen? I struggle for a way to share it with him.

'A group of men sitting together.'

'Really?' Angee seems quite chuffed. 'You mean, like the three of us here sitting around the fire?'

I look at White Beard picking his teeth with a chop bone.

'Yes, I suppose a bit like this.' The Three Eccentrics of Borambola.

'What are they doing then? I mean, in your picture?'

It is a perfectly reasonable question. One that warrants a reasonable and sensible answer. The type of answer a reasonable and sensible person would gladly provide, given our close association. And precisely the type of answer I am unable to give him. But why? Is Angee so undeserving of my confidence? I think not. But there is so much to explain, to give my feelings their proper context.

'Well', I tremble, 'I think they're admiring orchids.'

Angee bursts out laughing: 'Well, it sure don't smell like orchids around here, Little Brother. Just sheep and grease. Want another one?' he offers the chop-pan.

I shake my head. White Beard tosses his bone on to the fire and, without a word, heads for his coffin-barrow among the sheep. I stand up and walk down to the river, leaving Angee alone to his chop. Sometimes having a language in common is more of a barrier than not.

But in the clear light of day, I begin to see it a little from Angee's perspective. And it is absurd: there are no orchids in a place such as this. Without the symbolism of orchids, my story about the painting means nothing. I would have let it drop, but Angee does not.

'How's that painting of yours coming along?' he asks me with interest when I return.

'Oh, I've had a bit of trouble,' I begin, wondering if I can break off the deception here and now. But, seeing his face drop, I add, 'but I think I'm on track now.'

'Good. Looking forward to seeing it.'

'Right. Shouldn't be too much longer.'

After this exchange, he speaks often of my painting. I try to put him off as long as I can, but I recognise that having started this unfortunate story, and not having punctured it early on, he has increasing expectations of a picture. What began with me trying to tell the truth is now turning on its head into a lie of its own, and I do not know how to get out of this one.

I drifted into this territory of lies and dissimulations once before, to my eternal regret; and here I am getting tangled all over again. My subsequent days are spent worrying about how I will get out of this ridiculous corner I have quite literally painted myself into; and looking for the missing sheep.

So I bury my pride and ask her. That is to say, I stop and meditate by her shrine while my flock grazes nearby one morning.

This same day I find the carcass of the unfortunate sheep — or what remains of it, after wild dogs ate their fill. Its woollen coat is still attached to its backbone, its limbs splayed and its head intact: it has been torn open and eaten from the stomach out, into which cavity ants are streaming. I cannot help but look into its eyes, still open and staring into nothingness, and I feel keenly its sense of let-down.

Is this a sign? I think of the Four Floral Gentlemen, and sniff the air.

It smells all right, but not of orchids.

40.
SHEEP HUSBANDRY

'HOW'S THAT PAINTING coming along, Little Brother?'

'Okay. What have you been up to today, Angee?'

'Oh, the usual. Just chasing sheep. Tea?'

'No thanks, I think I'll have a wash first.'

Angee watched as his countryman wandered across the open ground to the river. After a day alone, Angee usually welcomed the first opportunity for some small talk. But Little Brother seemed to be going the way of White Beard, preferring solitude to human company. Angee worried that his countryman, with so much isolation, was beginning to lose his mind here. That nonsense with the painting was just the latest example of his delusions.

Sure, it was lonely, going off into the fields, being by yourself all day long, with several hundred sheep in your charge, but it was a job. And one that paid so much better than in China. His contract told him that he earned in a month what it would take him a year to earn in China. Not that he could read it. Just five years here, like the contract said, and they could go home to China with enough money to retire. If they kept their wits about them, did their job properly and kept their expenses down.

Angee also worried about the way his countryman looked after his flock. The devils might have nicknamed him Sheepy, but of the two of them Angee was clearly the one with the

knowhow when it came to animal husbandry: he was the Big Brother. White Beard, wordlessly, had shown them what to look for in managing their flocks: he taught them how, in addition to any injuries, to examine and treat the foot diseases, the flyblown diseases affecting their rear ends, eye diseases and bloat, when one of the sheep's four stomachs was so full of gas it needed to be punctured or the animal would die. And soon, with lambing, there would be new skills to apply.

Shortly after they arrived, it had been time for breeding. First a couple of young rams, their short horns showing their immaturity, were released among the flock for a couple of days. Nobody explained to Angee — indeed, nobody could — but Angee understood this was meant to bring the females into heat. Each evening, as he returned his flock, White Beard watched carefully as the ewes and hoggets ran past into the yard. Grabbing one, he waved Angee over to show him a ewe in heat, lifting the woolly flap of her fat tail to reveal her swollen and glistening vulva. Angee smiled in recognition at White Beard, who took a swig from his bottle of firewater and handed it to Angee to do the same.

At first, there were only a few, which it took the expert eyes of White Beard to identify, but in a matter of days most of the flock were in heat. It was distracting listening to their bleats demanding that nature take its course, as the ewes rubbed up against wethers more interested in the grass than obliging their sisters' biological impulses.

They came back from the fields one afternoon to find Red Devil at the camp site, watching over another sheep. Angee frowned: why fawn over one creature when they had hundreds in their care? He raised his eyebrow to White Beard holding the gate open; White Beard smiled and swivelled his hips, gesturing at the sheep. So this was the breeding ram!

A solid cube of wool and muscle on four cloven hooves, its curled horns describing an entire circle. And, at the other end, its balls hung deeply between its legs, almost reaching the

ground. Angee wondered how it did not drag them or trample on them sometimes. He could not help but admire such a creature, given the responsibilities of its job.

'Wouldn't have the energy if it had walked here,' Angee joked with Little Brother.

'Energy for what?' Little Brother asked absently, watching Red Devil.

'Me-ri-no,' Red Devil volunteered, which Little Brother of course repeated.

The ram spent several days with Little Brother's flock and then with Angee's. Angee watched fascinated as the ram went about his duties. Now that he had seen it in action, it was no wonder its balls were so large: they were required to produce a prodigious amount of seed — and replenish its stocks rapidly — to cover the flock quickly and efficiently. Truly it was an emperor among sheep, haughty and superior among its fat-tailed concubines.

Angee's own balls ached as he watched the ram go about his business. If, like Little Brother, he was planning a painting, his would be full of jagged lines and splodges, the tension of being so near to excitement and yet so far removed. He imagined a yawning chasm spanned by a tiny bridge, broken away in parts, a river gushing far below — and, across the bridge, on the other side of the chasm, within smelling distance but tantalisingly out of reach, the sweet nectar he craved.

Carefully, he stepped onto the bridge but a rope snapped and he slipped, his hands grabbed the remaining rail and he swung in midair. Pebbles fell, bouncing and echoing off the walls before hitting the water far below. He called out for help, but he was all alone and no one could hear him. And the lure of nectar continued to haunt him.

And so it began. Alone in the fields by himself, unobserved and in the absence of any women, he could grab a female sheep and relieve himself. He chased the fat-tailed ewes

until he cornered them among trees; leapt on them from rocks; tripped them up and tackled them with his shepherd's crook; tied their forelegs together — all the while recognising that he was merely upping the ante for some great reprisal. Once, chasing some ewes, he ran a few into the river where, terrified by the strength of the current, they accepted his assistance, and he so surprised himself by the strange sensation of a floating ewe, at once cool and warm, that he tried it again and again. If he was indiscriminate and intemperate in his newfound occupation, tenderising his flock until his cock was rubbed raw, at least Angee diligently shared his attention around his flock, following the example of the breeding ram.

If at first he was not choosy, he shortly acquired a taste for hogget. Being younger than the ewes, they were smaller and easier to handle; and, not having lambed, they were tighter. For Angee, monitoring the variations and milestones in his flock became second nature, notwithstanding his unorthodox objectives. Grabbing a sheep, immobilising it by clamping it between his knees, he checked its mouth and, if the telltale two adult teeth were absent, he knew he had a hogget.

It was easy enough to hide his tracks while the ram was about, but after Red Devil had collected it to take it to the next flock Angee found himself unable to stop, and — like the gambler that he was — he took ever-greater risks. When White Beard counted the sheep in at the end of the day, he would stop a certain ewe or hogget and, after examining it, give Angee a funny look, as if something was amiss. Perhaps he knew from his own experience: after all, he had been there in the fields far longer than they had, and had certainly felt and understood the loneliness a man felt among sheep. Or perhaps it was just his preternatural knowledge of sheep husbandry. It was uncanny, the way White Beard was able to predict the rain; and it was quite possible that he was on to Angee as well. But he said nothing, and with White Beard's tacit approval Angee became ever more emboldened.

The sheep did not even seem to particularly mind his attention. They seemed more surprised than anything and once they realised that he was not a wild dog about to tear their throat out they usually stopped protesting. Once he released them, and he buttoned his trousers and lay down under a tree to catch his breath, they ran off and continued grazing as if nothing had happened. Or, if they retained any lasting upset, it was more likely due to an unexpected swim than his exertions. Angee admired their stoicism — or was it their stupidity? Stupidity was a marker of the animal realm; and he feared his congress with his flock placed him in the animal realm as well.

It had become his obsession. Angee could not stop, swinging arm over arm under that broken bridge, chasing that nectar, teetering over damnation. But he was a man, with passions, when it was all said and done; and if this was to be his personal hell, then so be it. He was less likely to catch something from the sheep than from some of the flower girls and boat-girls he had known back in Xiamen. Added to which there was no risk of pregnancy. But still something gnawed away at Angee. He was grateful for the sheep and the solitude that afforded him a kind of release, but what he really wanted was a woman.

From time to time, the men were joined by black devils wandering out from the big house at Borambola. Their visits were a welcome break in the routine and a few became familiar to Angee. One, a stripling with fair hair, seemed a particular favourite of White Beard's. Usually the striplings travelled alone, but sometimes they were accompanied by an older black-devil female. And once a devil girl joined them at their campfire. They stayed overnight and disappeared as suddenly as they had arrived.

If the older one's familiar manner suggested a special relationship with White Beard, the way the younger one stared at Angee and Little Brother, even as she stuck close to her auntie, suggested opportunities. But she never came back. If White Beard was really so prescient, why had he not assisted his

shepherd in arranging another meeting with her? For the flock's sake, if not for his shepherd?

Angee noticed a number of the ewes in his care growing larger and having more difficulty moving around; and White Beard confirmed through an examination of their abdomens that it was not another attack of bloat, but that they were in fact pregnant. On hearing the good news, Angee beamed. He felt pleased and proud, almost as if he were the father-to-be himself.

Coming back late one afternoon, after a particularly exhausting chase before cornering a cheeky hogget with soft brown eyes and a clean pair of heels, Angee was met some distance from the outstation by Little Brother.

'What brings you out this way?' he asked, wondering whether he had been seen in action.

But if he had, his companion was not letting on.

'A surprise,' Little Brother skipped along beside him.

'You're in a happy mood.'

'Uh-huh.'

'Any clues?'

But Little Brother ignored his questions, humming a tune to himself. 'And just what have you been up to today, Big Brother?'

'The usual — just chasing sheep,' Angee replied carefully.

They reached the outstation and yarded the sheep by themselves.

'Where's White Beard?' Angee asked. Something was definitely different tonight.

'He's entertaining our visitors.'

Angee's heart raced. He pushed the last of his flock through the gates and closed it before turning away, feeling almost disloyal to his girls as he barely whispered: 'Are there women, Little Brother?'

'Guess again. Let me give you a clue. Me-ri-no.'

'Red Devil's back with the breeding ram?' Angee felt a surge of jealousy.

'No, he's gone already. But he asked to pass on his best wishes.'

'Aiee!' Angee laughed and took a friendly swing at Little Brother's head.

'He brought our supplies — tea, flour, sugar. And some black stuff, medicine for treating the sheep and lambs when they're dropped. Oh, and extra firewater for the five of us.'

Five? Angee shuddered: how much more did he owe now?

'I give up, who're our visitors?'

'The striplings are back to help us. It's nearly lambing-time, and it seems we need a few extra hands to help look after the flocks. But that's not all. They've speared a kangaroo and we're having it for dinner! They're cooking it already. Mmmm! Can't you smell it?'

It did smell different: cleaner, earthier, less cloying than the mutton they subsisted on. A distinct absence of the smell of fat cooking.

'Coming?'

'Just let me wash up first. I'm feeling a bit sticky.'

Cleaning himself up in the river, Angee wondered what the kangaroo would taste like. He found his mouth watering as the smell of burning flesh wafted down to the river and felt an almost sexual pleasure in the expectation of eating something new. After night after night of chewing mutton chops, which increasingly bore more than a passing resemblance to their boot leather, Angee was not disappointed in the kangaroo. The roo meat was lean and tender: cooked in strips directly on the firewood, right alongside the damper, it was singed on the outside and bloody inside. Juices trickled down their chins as they ate the best meal they had had in ages, washed down with copious supplies of White Beard's firewater.

After dinner they all sat up and played cards. And Little Brother came into his own. Dosed up with firewater, he showed a whole new side to his personality, reciting poems, the words of which no one other than Angee could understand.

His head cocked to one side as he listened, White Beard seemed to catch something in the rhythms of Little Brother's language. And then he spoke too — at first softly, his reedy voice wavering, but more confidently after a few more tokes on his firewater bottle — in cadences that Angee half-recognised from his coffin-barrow monologues.

Little Brother's eyes shone as he listened.

'What's he saying?' Angee yelled across the fire.

'Not a clue. We're sharing poems, and we don't even have a language in common!' Little Brother laughed till tears streamed down his face.

And Angee laughed too, for the absurdity of it all. Glowing inside and out, he felt more at peace with himself and the world than he had in a long time.

On nights like this, Angee came closest to convincing himself that he enjoyed their new life. It could hardly be more different than his old life in Xiamen, but he had steady work, and he could indulge his passions without fear of reprisal. If only the striplings had brought their sister with them. With a woman, their camp would have been quite idyllic.

41.
LAMBING

ANGEE WOKE THE next morning feeling as if someone had split open his head with an axe. Had the striplings done him in last night? Groaning, he felt his head with his free hand, but it remained intact — it must have been the firewater. He had not drunk as much in a session since before he had left Xiamen, and how many moons ago was that now? He was clearly very much out of practice. He could barely remember stumbling back to the hut last night.

Sunlight streamed through the open door flap, and Angee got to his feet shakily. Beside him, on his pallet in the little hut, Little Brother snored on. Angee shook him gently by the shoulder:

'Hey, wake up, we've got work to do.'

But Little Brother just rolled over and went back to sleep.

Angee stepped outside, his hand shading his eyes, to the campfire where the other men nursed sore heads and mugs of steaming tea. Before helping himself to a mug, Angee took one back in to Little Brother.

'Wake up or I'll tip this over you!'

At which Little Brother sat up. His face was puffy and he looked like he had been fighting.

'Here, drink this,' Angee proffered the mug of tea. 'I've put extra sugar in it.'

'What happened last night?'

'Too much poetry. Come on out when you're ready.' And with that, Angee headed back to the campfire and made himself a mug.

There was still a chill in the morning air as the shepherds made their way around to the yards. The sheep seemed somewhat agitated, but whether this was because some were very close to lambing, or because they were being let out of the yard a little later than usual, Angee neither knew nor cared.

With extra hands at the outstation, Little Brother and Angee were paired off on one run and the striplings on the other. They took the run to the west, Little Brother's run; but to save face for the senior shepherd, White Beard gave Angee the shotgun. He mimicked a wild dog approaching the flock and then shooting it.

White Beard remained at the outstation tending to injured sheep and any ewes that were too close to lambing to travel far. Their plaintive eyes looked like Angee felt.

It was a strange sensation to be together again in daytime, after so many moons spent alone among the sheep; made all the more unreal that first day by their hangovers. With only half as much to do as usual, their time stretched endlessly before them. Most of that first day together they slept in the shade of trees, stirring from time to time to check where their flock had drifted to, and uprooting themselves, wandering along till they caught up with the flock and then positioning themselves again under another tree. For lunch, they had leftover roo and damper, and after lunch rested in the shade of trees.

White Beard had shown Angee how to use the shotgun the previous night by the campfire, but in the harsh light of day he struggled with the rusty flintlock. His head still ached and the screeching of birds in the trees overhead did nothing to improve his temper. Frustrated by his inability to set the catch, he banged the butt against a rock and it went off with a roar.

The boom echoed and the shot tore through the tree canopy, causing leaves and twigs and a few injured birds to rain down on and around Little Brother.

'Aiee, sorry, I was just having some target practice,' Angee explained.

Little Brother looked at Angee, wild-eyed, as if he had been interrupted during a journey to the other side, and not all of him was back among the flock yet. Angee wondered where he had travelled in his imagination, but before he could ask, they had work to do.

The shot had more than disoriented Little Brother: it had startled the flock, which charged here and there before following one terrified ewe plunging into the river current so that, with more than a dozen floundering and bleating pathetically as they were dragged downriver, the two shepherds had their work cut out for them. They managed to rescue most of the sheep, but by the end of the day there were still two drowned ewes to explain to Red Devil.

Little Brother had not spoken to Angee all afternoon. Tired and frustrated, without a word passing between them, they turned their heels for the outstation. Angee was used to Little Brother's silences and, as he walked back, he savoured in anticipation the pleasures and companionship of others in the evening ahead. After yarding their flock and freshening up in the river, there was more fresh roo meat and cards after dinner, even if Little Brother drank tea instead of firewater.

They played five-card, wagering sticks and stones at first, but this rapidly proved unsatisfactory, and so they switched to gambling from their stores. After a few games together, down a few ounces of tea and sugar, Little Brother and White Beard drifted off to one side, reciting verse to each other. It was only Angee and the striplings playing cards now.

The striplings were quick at cards, and knew many variations played with seven, nine or 11 cards apiece for three hands; but Angee was quicker. Having won back Little Brother's

losses, he added to their supply of tobacco as well. Agitated, the striplings complained to White Beard, voices raised, pointing at Angee.

'What have you done now?' Little Brother glared at Angee.

'Just got us a little bit ahead at cards,' Angee chuckled.

'Why don't you just give them back their precious tobacco?'

'But I won it fairly,' Angee protested. Little Brother was still angry at Angee for his having set off the shotgun without warning and this was his way of getting back at him. 'What if they have something to trade? Like their sister?'

'What?' Little Brother squawked in disbelief, and at that moment Angee would have shot him too: the lack of women was no laughing matter. 'Look, just give it back for tonight. It's not worth starting a fight over a little tobacco.'

'What about over a woman then — is she worth a fight? You'd know about that, wouldn't you?' Angee said, his voice heavy with sarcasm.

Little Brother looked at Angee sharply, before replying: 'The striplings did give us the kangaroo, remember. Let's not get them offside.'

'But what's the point of gambling if we square off at the end of the night?'

'It might have stopped you having to come here,' Little Brother said softly, 'if your creditors had shown you the same generosity.'

'But you don't understand,' Angee was amazed at the turn of their conversation.

'No, I don't,' Little Brother said, 'and now I'm off to bed. Goodnight.'

Grumbling, Angee did as Little Brother suggested — he did not want to be badgered about this day after day in the fields.

The striplings took back their tobacco with evident delight. White Beard brought out his bottle of firewater and offered it to Angee to settle the night's disagreement.

The striplings smiled and nodded at him, and he wondered when they would be getting another visit from their sisters. Would they bring her again for a bottle of firewater? Angee fingered the string of coins he kept around his neck, his savings from his moons here. It felt like a millstone dragging him down, a burden he would gladly relieve himself of for the right company.

But he had no words, and he refused to play-act. And with these thoughts, he too drifted off to bed.

Next morning, Angee rose early to find White Beard already busy in the hurdles. During the night, a few of the ewes had lambed, and more were close to delivery. White Beard moved from ewe to ewe, checking carefully their swollen abdomens and reddened genitals, making a mental note of their readiness, and which ones were in trouble.

The ewes did not need much help in lambing, and in most cases White Beard let nature take its course. Only if a limb was twisted inside or two lambs attempted to be delivered at once did he step in and lend a helping hand, reaching in and sorting out the blockage.

It was easy to tell when a lamb was coming. The ewes ceased bleating, their faces intent with the effort of pushing, eyeballs straining until with a sudden rush the lamb would shoot from the birth canal, landing on the ground in a puddle of birth fluid and blood. The ewe would turn and lick her newborn, freeing the lamb from its birth sac as well as drying it with her tongue, imprinting her smell on it, bleating softly so it recognised her unique voice; and the little lamb, exhausted and gasping for breath, still dazed from its fall let alone the bright vastness it now found itself surrounded by, would stagger to its feet after a few minutes and nuzzle its mother's teats for its first drink. It was remarkable, the frequency of multiple births among

sheep. No sooner had one been delivered and coaxed to its feet than the mother ewe resumed her glazed faraway stare in readiness for the next lamb to be born.

At first, Angee assisted White Beard with the problem deliveries, holding the ewe's head as White Beard strained at the business end, but after a few deliveries they swapped; and, by the time Little Brother appeared, Angee's forearms were slick and bloody from pulling and twisting lambs into the world.

In the thrill of new life, Angee had almost forgotten their dispute the previous evening. Almost. Smiling, he beckoned his countryman over: 'Want to have a go at being midwife?'

Little Brother approached warily, a look of disgust on his face. Seeing Angee's bloodied arms, he shook his head, looking as though he wanted to throw up.

'Well, chuck this in the pan for breakfast then!'

Angee tossed him an afterbirth, which Little Brother failed to catch cleanly, smearing muck and blood all over his shepherd's smock.

Little Brother screamed as he realised what he had been tossed, and ran off howling towards the river.

'And make another billy of tea while you're about it!' Angee yelled after him. He had shown Little Brother who was the Big Brother once more. He winked at White Beard and the old shepherd's weathered face crinkled into a smile, as together they stood and watched the forlorn figure in the bloodied smock running across the grass.

42.
MOUNTAIN OYSTERS

NOT ALL LAMBS were born in the confines of the hurdles near the outstation and under the watchful and experienced eye of White Beard. If the ewes did not need much help with delivery, the additional shepherd was needed with every flock to manage and disperse the scavengers that threatened to descend on the new lambs in expectation of easy meals. A distressed ewe, her newborn lambs bloody and wet beside her, the afterbirth on the ground, was in real danger in her weakened state of having her swollen and bloody rear end pecked at by crows and other carrion birds. Or a pack of wild dogs, sniffing blood in the air, would descend and take away newborn lambs as they sat, spindly weak legs curled under them, still dazed and blinking at the trauma of their delivery, their mother helpless to intervene. On these occasions, the shotgun came in handy. But it was a mixed blessing, as too often its loud report scattered the ewes and even induced labour in some, encouraging yet more scavengers to pick on them in their discomposure.

Occasionally a newborn lamb lay still in its puddle of birth fluids, not responding to its mother's increasingly frantic licking and bleating. In these cases, the shepherd stepped in and quickly removed the dead lamb, allowing the mother, after a moment of confusion, to concentrate her energies on its surviving twin. Or a new mother, disoriented by birthing, would reject one of her lambs at first, and it would need to be hand-

reared or raised by another ewe; if not, it was destined for the shepherds' pot. Chopped and cooked quickly, sugar-glazed, they were good eating, their flesh tender, paler and milder than the older beasts. Under White Beard's careful instruction, Angee learned how to drape and tie the dead lamb's skin over a surplus twin or triplet. Placing the lamb with the distraught mother, she would smell the familiar scent and raise the new lamb as her own.

After the incident of the slippery afterbirth, Little Brother was none too communicative with Angee. He kept largely to himself in the fields; and what Angee had imagined would be a cheery time spent together, sharing duties and chatting with each other, was to a large degree every bit as solitary as before, when he had been alone among his flock. It was a double punishment for Angee, with none of the pleasures of companionship and none of the consolations of solitude. He was finding it increasingly inconvenient to have to curb his habits or be caught out, a situation made all the more difficult by being among a completely different flock presenting new opportunities, and with only half as much to do as usual.

Until he spent time with him, Angee had not realised just how much of the time Little Brother spent talking to himself. Like White Beard muttering to his sheep of an evening, Little Brother spent a good part of each day declaiming verses of one sort or another. He had no idea what White Beard spoke of, but if it was anything like what Little Brother rambled on about it was not worth hearing. Not knowing the devils' language might have been a blessing.

While they shared a language, Angee could barely see the relevance or purpose of these verses declaring the beauty of a land they had left behind. To talk of a landscape of cloud-capped mountains and pine glades — when surrounded by this dun-coloured realism — was stretching credibility even for Little Brother.

Yes, Little Brother was a seriously odd young man, worthy of comparison with White Beard. But how much of this was due to his upbringing and how much to his recent experiences? Here, starved of human companionship, freed of the shackles of culture and history, Little Brother had developed in unique ways. But then so had Angee; and what would Little Brother make of Angee's own magnificent obsession?

But while Angee felt constrained by the presence of his countryman, Little Brother seemed strangely unconcerned by his countryman's watchful presence and he continued in his daily routine. Down by the river, near the shade of some trees, there was a special rock on which Little Brother made offerings: an altar of sorts. Angee pretended not to notice, looking across the river to the grasslands on the other side and wondering who might be there, as Little Brother carefully placed flowers and other decorations on the rock, talking to it all the time as if it were a person. Angee stayed where he was, skipping stones on the river's surface — the best he managed was four skips before it sank — until, from his vantage point between the trees, he could see that Little Brother had finished his communion with the rock. Then they were free to wander further along the windy course of the river.

As the days wore on and the weather grew warmer, the surviving lambs became stronger and more frolicsome. Their new fleeces fairly shone white against the thistle-burred dun colour of their mothers' backs, and it made them easy to look out for. It was a pleasure to lie back in the shade of a tree and watch the young lambs gradually find their confidence: a few tentative steps away from their mother, a distraction of a field mouse or a cricket in the grass would send them off on another tangent until, looking up in panic, bleating piteously, they charged back to their mother for another draft of milk before repeating the experiment all over again. Not all their adventures were so innocent: occasionally, wandering from their mothers, rootling behind rocks, they would startle a resting

brown snake whose bite proved rapidly fatal. These dead lambs usually found their way onto Little Brother's prayer rock, where he muttered verses over them. No explanation for this peculiar practice was forthcoming; and Angee refused to ask for one. He did not want to needlessly encourage Little Brother in his eccentricities. Their absurd exchanges over the non-existent painting had been sufficient warning.

Life went on. As with everything else in the fields, familiarity with the routine led to boredom, and when the monotony became too much, it was easy to forget why they were there among the sheep. At least at night there was drinking and cards, as well as whatever new morsels of food the black shepherds had managed to trap during the day — lizards or little furry creatures tossed whole on the embers — or sheep-parts White Beard considered worthy of eating. Angee spent a large part of each day idly wondering what new delicacies awaited them that evening. As well as the lambs that did not survive, their flesh tender and sweet, there were other treats, such as the afterbirths of the ewes, rich in blood and quite unlike muscle in their texture, which White Beard chopped up and covered in flour before frying; and, perhaps best of all, after castrating the male lambs, a whole dishful of sweet testes, glistening and slippery like oysters. Whether eaten raw or fried quickly in the pan, doused in fat or sautéed in firewater, the rich taste fairly exploded as you bit through the external membrane and the juices burst into your mouth. What a change from mutton chops!

Before the lambs were weaned, White Beard taught Angee and Little Brother the rudimentaries of castration and docking. Wordlessly, he showed them why it was necessary to remove the lambs' tails, by showing the hideous effects of flystrike on an old ewe. So badly blown and maggoty had her rear end become, the smell of rotting flesh so pronounced, that White Beard had no alternative but to slit her throat and cut her up for feed.

Castration was more difficult to justify on the grounds of the health of the flock, as well as being more personally challenging to Angee. Interestingly, Little Brother had no problems with the principle — 'We've been doing this to young scholars in our country for centuries' — but he balked at the practice.

'Come on, Little Brother, help me,' Angee called out, struggling with a lamb. Little Brother held the lamb's head and forelegs with evident distaste. 'Think of these as imperial eunuchs in the making,' Angee joked. But his joke fell on deaf ears and, after the first lamb was finished, Little Brother refused to participate further.

'Is this because I threw the afterbirth at you?'

'No,' Little Brother paused, 'but now you mention it, that was not a kind thing to do.'

Angee's ears burned, but he needed cooperation: 'I'm sorry. There — I've said it. So will you help me now?'

'No,' Little Brother said, half-smiling. 'But thank you for apologising.'

'We've got to do this.'

'I don't think so.'

When pressed for an explanation, Little Brother mumbled something or other about the barbarism of needless mutilation of healthy body parts.

'Look, how about you offer the scraps on your altar?' Angee said, irritated.

At this, Little Brother's eyes welled up with tears, and he turned aside.

And then it struck Angee with dull force — perhaps Little Brother was a eunuch himself already? Had his family seen to it before his departure? The poor creature! It would explain his lack of interest in his sheep and women, his passive acceptance of his fate; his declared reluctance to be involved in this aspect of sheep husbandry; and his having taken offence at

Angee's careless words. He would need to take a closer look next time when they washed in the river.

Angee waited till Little Brother had composed himself before continuing. If he cursed himself for having being so thoughtless before, he would doubly curse himself for what he was now preparing to concede.

'If I do your share,' Angee began, 'what will you do in exchange for me?'

'What if I give you my tobacco and flour ration?'

It was a tempting offer. After his initial success, Angee had found the striplings more than a match for him at cards, and his string of coin was being steadily whittled away. But he could smell a deal coming.

'Throw in a couple of bottles of firewater each week.'

'It's not worth that much!'

'Suit yourself, which half will you take?' Angee asked sweetly.

'You wouldn't do this to me?'

'Try me.'

But Little Brother knew him too well: 'One bottle every week — you drink too much already.'

'And you sound like my wife,' Angee snapped back, groaning at his loose tongue. It was not the sort of thing to say to a eunuch. What he would give for a woman out here!

'Take it or leave it.'

'You're bluffing,' Angee said; but he knew he would not get a better offer than this and shook hands on their deal. 'When do I get my first bottle?'

And so it was that Angee undertook the castrations for their flocks. As the lambs frolicked with their mothers, and Little Brother strolled around or sat under a tree sleeping, Angee set to work. These young lambs were so trusting of the shepherd's soothing hands! Their bleating — as they were removed briefly from their mother — silenced with a thumb

thrust into their mouth as a makeshift udder, while with his free hand Angee made a quick incision in the scrotum, squeezed from above the rudimentary testicles through the slit and snipped these off. At first, Angee preferred to use a knife, but when he became proficient and the sheer volume of young lambs requiring attention meant that he needed to perform castrations by himself, he found the lack of another hand necessitated him to follow White Beard's example in using his teeth to sever the balls from the body. A steady nip with his incisors at once severed and crushed closed the testicular tubules, preventing further bleeding.

He had seen a man at the port in Xiamen lose a couple of fingers, his hand crushed between wooden crates. A loud crash and a scream and the man, pale, dazed, staring at his transformed hand, which scarcely even bled, a reminder for where the missing digits had once been. Amid shouting, a bottle of spirits was called for and the man was leaned against one of the offending crates and forced to drink until he passed out; after which time, waking up, head splitting, his throbbing hand was heavily bandaged. And by the time the bandage was removed, his missing fingers were merely a memory.

Which was more than the young lambs felt. Perhaps it was a good thing, but animals — young ones especially — had less of a sense of their own bodily integrity, and less distress at their mutilation and destruction. They grew up not knowing what they lacked.

But people were the very opposite, Angee reflected. Their self-awareness aggravated any sense of lack. The sense of lack fed their desires. And, as he worked on each lamb, his thumb remained firmly in its mouth and, as the lamb strained and suckled for milk that would not come — a strong sucking sensation reminding him of something elsewhere that he had not enjoyed for such a long time — he severed its generative organs. At least it would be released from that cycle of desire. But for Angee that release was too horrible to countenance, and

he made a point of eating a goodly proportion of all the testes he removed, so that his own manhood would not be in any doubt.

He could not help feeling a mixture of sympathy and contempt for the poor dumb creatures in his care: sorrowful that they should surrender their manhood so readily, yet scornful that they could be so readily duped. Not unlike Little Brother, he thought. Filled with disgust and self-loathing at his appointed role as their despoiler, it took a few draughts of firewater to get the bad taste out of his mouth of an evening.

At least they all got to enjoy the proceeds of his labour, even Little Brother. He could scarcely believe that an educated man would willingly submit himself to that violation. Perhaps it was the price of admission to secret knowledge.

He wondered why the striplings did not participate in castrations, and thought initially that it was because White Beard favoured them to do less demeaning work. However, one night over cards, the men's faces lit up as they roared with laughter, their mouths open, and he could see they lacked their upper front incisors. If it were only one, he would have put it down to fighting, but both were missing the same teeth, as well as displaying certain pictorial scars on their bare chests and upper arms, images similar to those he had seen carved on trees as he ran his sheep during the day.

In time, Angee came to accept this as his fair share in the hunting and gathering for meals in which they all participated, which kept the mutton chops off their plates and which enabled them to sit down after meals as equals and gamble over cards.

But he rapidly lost his taste for these delicacies. What was the point of feeding his vigour when he had no outlet for it? Perhaps it was too much of a good thing, but his dreams became ever-more vivid, reminding him of just that which he could not have, overwhelming him with a frustration that knew no release.

For Angee, mountain oysters came to symbolise the whole futility of life.

43.
RUMINATING

'THESE ARE GOOD, Angee,' I say, helping myself to a few more of the delicacies quivering on the plate before me. I open my mouth, letting each one slide down my throat rather than savouring the taste of the integument and its filling.

'Freshly gathered, Little Brother, all yours for a bottle of firewater,' Angee replies, already shuffling the cards. 'No, I won't have any more. Give the rest to the others.'

But White Beard and the striplings have eaten their fill of appetisers and have already started on tonight's main course of roasted lizard. Knowing they will not keep, I sit back happily and, with my chopsticks, pick off the remaining mountain oysters one by one. Only when the plate is empty do I put it aside and consider the lizard.

The lizard was first rolled over the open flames to sear and score its skin, then buried deep in the ashes in the embers where it was left just long enough to take the pearly translucence out of the flesh, to cook and set its meat. The legs are ready first, and I gratefully accept a forelimb to chew over while we wait for the fat belly to cook. The flesh between the toes has been dried by the fire, and while the meat tastes something like chicken, the foot is quite unlike a chicken-foot. I salivate at the memory of the soft pimpled skin, dipped in honey vinegar, melting in my mouth; and the sensation of sucking and rolling the tiny bones around in my mouth, spitting them out like marbles. Finishing

the limb, I help myself to a strip from the belly. I wonder how it would taste if it were first gutted and the cavity filled with leaves, fruit and seeds collected from our run — some of the things we routinely use to flavour our billy-tea. We Han, after all, are justly famous for our cooking.

Back home, I did not take much interest in food preparation: that is the preserve of the servants. I did not realise until I left the Middle Kingdom just how important food is to me. In our isolation, food is one of the few remaining pleasures available to us, one we can share freely, notwithstanding any language barriers that remain.

In one sense, to have meat and animal parts to eat every night is a feast compared with the noodles and soup that made up so much of our diet in the Middle Kingdom. It embarrasses me to relate how, unused to this diet, our bowels erupted in protest. It really is possible to have too much of a good thing. All this flesh needs breaking down with some rice and vegetable, yet there is none provided with our rations. There is the unpleasant white powdery stuff that White Beard calls flour, which he uses for making a kind of fire-baked bread as well as for coating meat and organs before frying. The white powder has no taste of its own, so White Beard adds salt, pepper and sometimes even sugar from our limited stores to vary the flavour, a marginal improvement only.

Fortunately, the striplings readily source birds and fish as well as red meat, and more recently Angee has provided a good supply of lamb parts, keeping those ghastly greasy chops off the dinner plate. We have plenty of time on our hands, and can at least try to vary our diet in interesting and nutritious ways. Perhaps I should try my hand again at food-gathering, provide some new flavours to balance and vary our evening meals?

My earlier efforts were not a success. I did not know what was good, so I gathered up nuts and seeds, fallen fruits and even a few flowers and brought them back to the camp to show the others. How they laughed at me the first time! I had

picked up some devil-talk by this time and asked White Beard what was wrong.

'The boys say it's women's work, that food-gathering.'

I told Angee and all he could ask was: 'Where's the women?'

But we are all men in our little settlement, we have no women to entertain us or to gather food for us. Five lonely men. I wonder what sort of special meal I might have prepared for her using local produce. But she would have turned her nose up at it anyway.

'You playing tonight?' Angee interrupts my reverie.

'Thanks, but no,' I reply.

'Oh,' Angee says flatly. He has been losing heavily to the striplings. He knows that he can at least beat me, but I do not fancy being his dupe any more. If he chooses to gamble and lose, that is his business. But he still deserves an explanation.

'I've got a few things on my mind, just want to think them over.'

'And you haven't had the whole day and tomorrow and tomorrow's tomorrow to do that?'

I smile at Angee: 'I want to enjoy the moon.'

'It's her again, isn't it?'

In not answering, I confirm his suspicion.

'Stop wasting your energy on that woman back in China. Admit it, Little Brother, you need a woman out here as much as I do. You can't hold a dream, feel it sweaty and tart in your hands. Let's go talk the striplings into bringing their sisters back to camp.'

Embarrassed, I laugh and walk away. I wander off across the ground, past the hurdles where the sheep bleat softly to each other in their sleep, towards the river, where the trees were stand out sharply against the night sky.

I look up into the sky where a million stars are overhead. My head tilts back until I can see the jagged silhouette of a dead tree and, through its branches, the half-moon, rising on its arc.

The blackness of the branches, the whiteness of the moon; but there are no white flowers in this image, no smell of plum blossom. The sky is huge here, a vast vault as in my childhood. It is the same moon as back in the Middle Kingdom; but I am a different person now.

I wonder whether she ever gazes on its whiteness and thinks of me, as I do so often of her. Tears welling in my eyes, I turn away from the moon, blinking through water at the multitude of stars in the sky, and I remember another full moon, sitting on Father's knee, as he pointed out to me the stars and constellations.

'The stars are like the heart of the Emperor, like our Middle Kingdom, the numbers beyond comprehension. In this way, the Emperor's heart is an inexhaustible source of pardon and love.' He held me close and I could feel the warmth of his rice-wine breath on my cheek. 'First Son, see Tien Sun, the Weaver's Star, and near it the cowherd? The weaver and the cowherd were so much in love with each other they neglected both cloth and cows. As punishment, they were banished by the Emperor to separate stars.'

'Banished for ever? Never to see each other again, the young lovers?'

'First Son, you must understand the Emperor was seriously displeased with the way they neglected their duties. The fabric was not woven, the cows were not milked: people and animals suffered. The Emperor banished them. But he is not so cruel — understanding the reasons for their waywardness — that he condemned them forever. In consequence, they are freed from their banishment and allowed to come together for one night every year, as in the sky the stars come close together on the seventh day of the seventh month.'

Father did not tell me as a child that this occasion is a special one for lovers. I learned that later, from her, in the courtyard of the Pavilion of Stone. And now we are even worse off than the weaver and the cowherd: separated by a vast

distance, without even the compensating pleasure of a once-a-year reunion.

'And what of a Father's heart? What about his capacity for understanding and forgiveness?' I speak aloud, in the moonlight, alone, and it is as if I can hear his familiar voice, a wind rattling the leaves in the trees.

'A Father is the Emperor of the household, but his love has its limits as well.'

I lie flat on the ground, an imperial supplicant, praying for pardon and love.

'Forgive me!' I sob at the stars.

But the wind merely catches my voice, takes my words and echoes them through the trees. The leaves shake with hollow laughter, and I, unable to die out here under the lovers' moon, am forced to pick myself up and wander back to the camp.

As I draw near, I can hear gentle bleating and White Beard's reedy voice ushering from his sentry-box, rising and falling with the wind as he recites verse in devil-talk to the sheep, over and over, a sleep mantra. Angee and the striplings are still around the fire playing cards as I return, but I pass them as if in a trance. And, with the sound of White Beard's words echoing in my head, I crawl into the empty hut and sleep, devoid of dreams.

Gathering up my flock for our run the next morning, we are met by Red Devil coming over the rise mounted on his horse.

'What can he be wanting this early in the day?' Angee grumbles.

'How should I know?' I retort. 'No cart, no supplies, that much is clear.'

He rides up to us, causing the leading sheep to veer off towards the river. Our eyes meet briefly and I mouth a greeting, which he ignores, turning away towards the outstation. I stand watching him ride away, wondering, until Angee elbows me in the ribs.

'Come on, we've got work to do.'

The last time Red Devil visited — in the cart — he brought a book recording our pay and bills at the station store. After clothing, rations and firewater for Angee, I had but a few strings of coin to show for my moons in the fields, but even that pittance was more than Angee had after gambling and losing so heavily. His IOUs to the striplings easily exceeded the sole string of coin he had left.

Angee is flat and uncommunicative in the fields. When we come back to the camp, White Beard and the striplings are busy preparing dinner.

'Why Red Devil here today?' I ask.

White Beard looks up, his forearms red with blood: 'Lambing all done. Tomorrow these boys walk back to station.'

'What's he saying?' Angee cuts in.

I explain to Angee and his face falls: 'You mean no more cards at night? No more kangaroo, no more lizard?'

'And back to chops,' I confirm sadly. I look over to a nearby tree where a freshly killed lamb hangs head-down. It has been skinned and gutted, its neck a long deep slash. Blood drips into a bucket below. Its skin, with the fleece still intact, has been stretched out to dry, roped to another tree. I wonder what Red Devil would have made of this.

White Beard follows my eyes, reading my thoughts.

'Red Devil say it drown,' he chuckles.

I explain to Angee.

'Great — that's another one we'll be docked for.'

'Dinner?' I ask White Beard.

White Beard pats his chest and points to his mouth, before dipping his hands into a bucket containing the entrails, fishing out the organs and separating these from their integument. I look away and see some root vegetables, potatoes or onions, lying by the fire. This looks more promising.

'Hey!' I call out to Angee, pointing to the vegetables.

Angee nods with delight: 'That's women's work, do you reckon there are some women here tonight? What a party we'll have, Little Brother!'

But there are no women, and the dead lamb's eyes stare into nothingness. I shrug and take the bottle of firewater offered me by one of the striplings.

The bottle is passed around as White Beard picks over the entrails, chopping up the heart, lungs and liver and mixing these with flour and the chopped vegetables and a handful of pan-grease. He adds liberal amounts of salt, pepper and sugar and even a sprinkling of tea and gum leaves to the mix. Scooping it up in his hand, he stuffs the mixture into each of the lamb's four stomachs and ties shut both valves with a piece of string.

Our billy is on the fire and the water is boiling merrily. White Beard takes the first of the stuffed stomachs and drops it into the boiling water. Then, looking up at us all, he smiles happily: 'Haggis!'

'Haggis?' Angee repeats disbelievingly.

'Looks more like a bomb than our dinner,' I mutter to Angee.

'Good thing it's from a lamb, a sheep's stomach wouldn't fit in our billy-can. Wonder what it'll be like inside?'

I am curious as well, and game for anything tonight. I take another swig from the bottle and my belly burns. I imagine my own innards stuffed and boiled, but it is only the firewater.

Each stomach is boiled for a good 20 or 30 minutes, and we sample these while playing cards. Our meal stretches out over the evening, our hunger building again between portions. Cut open, the haggis steams a heady perfume of minced meats, not unlike a large *gao-jee* dumpling or *lap-sung* sausage. My mouth waters in anticipation.

It tastes like a stomach filled with organs: not unpleasant but lacking spice for my taste, apart from the distinct hint of billy-tea it has picked up in the can. I think longingly of our own tea-smoked ducks, and feel unbearably grateful for even this poor substitute for the memories it evokes, a gift from White Beard to the striplings who tomorrow will once more be as absent as Second Wife.

My head spinning already, I laugh out loud with the others, fighting back the tears, determined to enjoy our last night together.

44.
BUSH TUCKER

IN THE MORNING, the striplings are gone before we wake. White Beard rose early with them and is wearing a cloak of animal furs when we greet him in the morning chill. He looks at us and turns away, not speaking. Nursing a headache, I am in no good humour myself.

'What's wrong with him?' I ask Angee.

'Who knows? Haggis didn't agree with him? Missing his mates?'

'Nice fur coat — must've been a gift from the striplings?'

'Looks like he traded it,' Angee nods towards the tree where the lamb is still hanging and, sure enough, the skin is gone.

'Wonder what we could have traded with them? Maybe a ticket out of here?'

'Oh yeah, and back to the station, under Red Devil's nose? Lambing's hardly done and he comes here, telling the boys to move on elsewhere.'

'Just be grateful he's left us alone for now.'

'No he hasn't. What are we going to eat now? Who am I going to play cards with?'

I nod: 'Reckon they'll drop in again?'

'Dunno. If they do, they'd better bring their sisters next time.'

'With their vegetables,' I add hastily.

Collecting our flocks, White Beard observing us in silence, Angee and I head off in opposite directions for the first time in well over a moon.

It feels strange to be alone again on my run, to resume my old habits unobserved. I wonder how Angee feels resuming his solitary routine. If we did not speak much, Angee's nearby presence has been a comfort to me. I wonder whether he felt the same way about being with me.

I feel ill from last night — too much firewater and not enough roughage — and wonder what I can do to ease my stomach. I cannot eat grass, I am not a sheep and lack their four stomachs for fermenting and breaking down the fibre that almost exclusively makes up their adult diet. But what about other meat-eaters? Down by the river, I have observed native dogs picking over river grasses to broaden their diet or induce vomiting. Either would suffice for me at present.

I wander over to the river and have a look. The water feels cool in my hands and I scoop some over my head. There it is: the green weed, streamers of it in the current. At home in the Middle Kingdom, seaweed is dried and consumed for its vitamins; perhaps I can do the same here?

I tear out a bundle, roots and all, and examine it. Shredded, it would make a nice bed for a whole cooked fish, steamed and served with ginger and chilli. My mouth waters for the unattainable. But eaten raw? I am not a dog — not yet anyway — and I toss it back into the river in distaste.

I rummage in my satchel for a piece of bread and touch upon my old cricket-box. I pull it out and examine it carefully. It was such a long time ago, that interrupted walk beyond Flying Cloud Pavilion, where I had hoped to catch a few singers or fighters.

Crickets have been my passion since childhood. I had hunted crickets before and after school: in early morning, when the dew had not steamed off the long grass-blades near the lake;

and towards dusk, when the sun's heat had faded and dropped, coaxing insects from their hiding places in the cracks in the rendered walls lining the alleyways of our neighbourhood. Those I caught I placed in an inner chamber, feeding them a dab of rice-and-water paste scraped into the food receptacle with my thumbnail. Singing, I carried these in my pocket as I strolled to school, pulling them out to show or trade with my classmates, taking them home and placing them in a silver filigree cage, training them to sing or to fight.

There was something fine and noble about my childhood cricket play, the summer catching and training and tending, the quality of love and attention, something pure and simple that my relations with Second Wife lacked.

I wish I had a few crickets now to put in her box. Roasted and dipped in honey, they are delicious, crunchy and sweet. I could catch a few and cook them quickly on the fire. But this is not the purpose for which she gave me this box. Still, I am a different man to the one she knew, all those moons ago: descending into animal urges and in danger of losing the finer nature for which she once regarded me so well; yet, I have learned so much about myself and others. I hurry over to her shrine and place the cricket-box prominently on the little rock, letting her take it back if she so wants, challenging her to give me a sign. If she is my local deity, let her make her presence known, earn this one-sided worship. Sitting back, resting in the shade of a river gum as the sheep and lambs chew grass in the open, I doze and dream of her, my hand sticky and sad.

Later in the morning, waking from slumber, I make to shoo away a lizard basking torpid on her rock, but hold off a moment as a praying mantis flies down and lands on the rock half a body length distant. It balances on its four back legs, its two forelegs angled before it, as if mocking my sorry worship here. I hold my breath and watch transfixed as it begins rocking from side to side, its feelers thrusting high in the air. Suddenly, the mantis is in the lizard's mouth and I hear the crunch of

crushing shell. The insect's legs still wriggling, the lizard slides down into the grass to consume the rest of its meal in privacy.

Eat or be eaten — that is all there is to it. Lizard tastes good — we enjoyed it with the striplings. I miss their company, but especially their contributions to mealtime. With their departure, we are facing chops all over again. My stomach spasms at the thought, and I determine this time to do something about it.

And so it is that I cast aside my thoughts of the Chinese flowers of my earlier scroll dreams and begin to concentrate my energies on local blooms, in a daily search for new flavourings for sheep-meat. The shrine becomes disordered, my offerings less frequent and abundant. Instead of picking flowers for their beauty and colour to decorate her shrine, I sample their pollen, their petals and the stalks, savouring the taste; and I move beyond flowers to grass stalks and seedlings, to nuts and fruits growing on the trees along the river and down in the gully. It becomes my contribution to our evening meals.

Ever watchful for new food sources, I begin to study the habits of local creatures. This careful observation is a reverence of sorts; a humbler, simpler form of offering, more appropriate to the teeming variety of my surroundings than the lofty ambitions of absence, which my shrine was. I begin to identify markers of a whole system of life around me: the half-eaten fruit and pellets of native cats and possums, scattered as they forage through the bushes and the trees at night. Stooping, I pick the fruit up and, with my moistened fingertip, I taste its tartness, not unlike an unripe peach. They could be good as a sauce with chops, their tartness cutting the greasiness of the meat. I source these strange fruit to trees sprouting in the shade of the gully and collect a smockful to take back to the camp.

Spring moves into summer: the lambs grow fast and fat on new grass, the fields lush and sprinkled with colourful flowers. Along the gully, the sombre trees and bushes burst forth in blazes of red and yellow fruit, their trunks peppered with the

telltale shells of cicadas, whose summer song trills from dawn to dusk. Unlike crickets, these fine singers are unpleasant to eat, their fat greasiness reminding me unhappily of chops.

My powers of observation grow daily, and I feel a simple pleasure in learning how to see and interpret my surroundings. I think back to the ants' nest near the shrine and of how some moons back I stomped on it to disperse its occupants, to prevent them interfering with my arrogant design. But I prevailed only temporarily: the ants came back and swarmed over the rock as caterpillars fell from trees and wedged in a crevice, scorched themselves dry and dead where I had made my earlier offerings. I have to learn to accept my place, to flow with and not fight my surroundings, to acknowledge what is before me instead of seeking something distant and unattainable. To abandon false worshipping of a distant life. In short, to see myself as part of this world and not aloof from it.

When not otherwise occupied with food-gathering and my sheep, I sit still and silent for hours, conscious of my breath coming and going, seeking a harmony between myself and my surroundings so its nature will reveal itself to me. I watch the doings of small creatures in the fields: the flies landing on sheep droppings or the midges atop still pools in the river, balancing delicately on their six legs like acrobats. In the dappled light, I see two moths tied together in propagation, their mottled wings blending with the patterning of the tree trunk to make them almost invisible. Wasps building a cellular nest on a native rose bush, its thorns abundant and its flowers a delicate shade of yellow above their nest; the dew-draped tracery of a spiderweb slung between twigs; a frog gazing at a moth perched on the tip of a grass stem; a beetle sipping nectar from a blossom. Many green and yellow cicadas perched on twigs. But no crickets.

I look in all the places my childhood collecting suggested would be good shelters, good observation and showing places, but without success.

At last, on a grass stem early one morning, I spot two crickets, their forelegs up, their feelers thrusting high, glaring each other down. My heart beating with trepidation, I slowly get out my cricket-box to capture one or both of these spirited fighters. I can see the fine hairs on the grass stem providing purchase for my two beauties. Then something moves, ever so slightly, on the grass stem and I realise that there is a third cricket, mounted end-to-end with one of the other two. I recognise two males facing off over fertilising a female, one already in the process of doing just that, but prepared to fight to retain his position. To couple and fight at the same time, what does this signify? Is it an omen, a metaphor of my relationship with Second Wife under Father's roof?

Tearfully, I move away, unable to watch the crickets' tiny life-and-death struggle, leaving these creatures I have been seeking high and low for weeks to complete their own business undisturbed. But, my senses heightened, I pick up the faint smell of a wild dog's stale on a tree trunk: territorial markers that I have not registered previously. I am just one of many here in the fields, overlapping other creatures with their own boundaries, creatures who have from the first been observing me, my sheep and especially my gun under sufferance.

And, as at the Pavilion of Stone, unable to interpret the signs, I continue to crash through the undergrowth, unwittingly upsetting the delicate balance. To think I fancied myself a scholar in those days! Twelve moons later, I feel more alone than ever, and wish the earth would swallow me up. But a quick death is not the way our culture repays its traitors, as I think of her, over and over.

45.
SCHOLARLY PURSUITS

'TEACH ME, STRIPLING, teach me how to read. Teach me characters, so I can help you with your study. Let me be useful to you.'

On that day she wore a long white blouse over a gauze skirt and embroidered trousers. Her long silky hair, freshly washed, hung loose to dry in the morning sun that was streaming into the library.

'And what will you teach me in exchange?'

Ah Chiang, unannounced, delivered a tray of tea. He must have heard my words, for he muttered a few angry words to Second Wife, who waved him away. She watched him walk away, then turned to me.

'You know, the servants are all talking about us.' She paused, giggling: 'They are scandalised by our behaviour.'

'Oh? What do they say?' I asked, more to hear her voice than out of curiosity about what our underlings busied themselves with.

'They talk of this unusual arrangement whereby First Son and Second Wife sit together all morning like a married couple.'

'A married couple?' I giggled, but my heart swelled.

'And today Ah Chiang grumbles about my hair being down with my husband's son.'

'Ah Chiang? I'll have him whipped for his impertinence.'

'Stripling, be calm. He is my cousin after all, and my closest male relative here. He is only saying what he thinks is necessary to protect my reputation.'

I resented the intrusions of the outside world, of any ties and obligations we had in society beyond ourselves. To admit others was to slide open, ever so slightly, a screen beyond which lay our separate lives, whole other parts of her life tantalisingly out of reach to me. Such as that unwelcome intrusion of Ah Chiang, who had family ties predating my intimacy with her: what to make of their relationship, when she listened to him, a virtual servant in our household?

'But I am a scholar, why should Ah Chiang worry about me!'

'Scholars are men too. What of the hero of *A Visit to An Immortal Grotto* — he was a man and scholar? Or are you living your *Dream of the Red Chamber* — surrounded by women while your father is away?' she continued.

'How do you know these works?' I was surprised to hear her talk of the seventh-century tale of a wandering scholar's liaisons with a spirit-woman in a cave, let alone the lengthy rhapsodising of a young man in his gardens surrounded by women. I had read these and dismissed them as so much frippery.

'Your father reads them to me.'

'Father?' To think he spent his rare idle moments on these romances; but then he was reading to Second Wife. I felt angry and confused: my irritation at his precious time wasted on less exalted pursuits was rapidly replaced by pangs of jealousy at their intimacy; and the new knowledge that I was merely repeating an activity that she had enjoyed with another, rather than it being unique to us. Forgive me my youth; I did not yet understand that all relationships repeat themselves in one form or another.

I looked at the wood and rice-paper screen beyond which lay Father's bedroom. The screen tantalised and maddened me

— and I fell to wondering about what else went on beyond there: what else did Father do with her when they were alone together? Presumably, in there she could wear her hair down without attracting Ah Chiang's adverse comment? I wondered why she chose to spend time with me, to the detriment of my studies: was I merely a plaything, a distraction until Father returned? I sulked over my book, refusing to engage in further conversation.

'I see you do not want my company this morning. Permit me to leave you now.'

But I did not want her to go either, I wanted her to see and think of my anger. To wonder what had caused it, to dwell on my feelings, to focus her attention on me for myself and not as a substitute for another. But I did not know how to speak of this without sounding churlish. I stood to acknowledge her exit, watching as she slipped her golden lilies into her tiny slippers and tottered down the few steps of the Pavilion of Stone and across the courtyard to her quarters.

If she had arranged things so that I reprised her reading sessions with Father, could I not perhaps arrange my time with her to my greater satisfaction, to reprise other activities? What of their ultimate private pleasure together, the acts of love: could I not reprise these, with Second Wife as my mentor? I was too lovelorn to consider in full the implications of such an arrangement on my relationship with Father.

I spent the rest of the morning pondering this question until the rumbling in my stomach was greater than that in my heart, and I retired for lunch and a rest. Refreshed and replete, I returned mid-afternoon to the library shelves. I was keener than ever to impress her, and there was a practical application to this study, which I admit I found tantalising. It took a while, but eventually I found what I was looking for, nestled between Lu Yu's *A History of the Manufacture of Ink* and Chen Jen Yu's *The Study of Mushrooms*.

It was a new field of knowledge for me, and I approached it in the same fashion as other fields of study, that is to say,

rigorously. In no time, I could expatiate on the Arcane Maid's Nine Positions, and the 30 amplifying these as catalogued by the Mystic Master of the Grotto; I could discuss the merits for male and female of 'Wild horses leaping' versus, say, 'Wild ducks flying backwards'. But it remained a mystery, an abstraction, it did not live for me. The Tantric masters describe sex as a battlefield between men and women, where one fights, vampire-like, to extract one's partner's bodily fluids while withholding one's own; where breathing and bodily control are tested to the very brink: technical mastery of one's feeble flesh, rather than pleasure, being the objective.

No, the fleeting explosion of pleasure followed by a warm afterglow of satisfaction belonged elsewhere: at the moment of apprehension of a finely crafted lyric, or that moment of sensation of not-quite falling into a vertiginous watercolour landscape, or even the dizziness of unbalance captured in a windblown ancient cypress, its trunk split and bleached by an unknown lightning strike. Or — my thoughts returned to the mud — by what the cook's daughter offered.

I shuddered, struggling to convince myself that this was another field of study legitimately pursued. But without a mentor it would remain abstract. With Father due back shortly, I had little time to lose, and I determined to discuss it with her the next day.

But how to broach such a topic, so vast and prone to misinterpretation? Perhaps I could leave the volume concertinaed open on the table, the woodcut showing the composition of the bodies and, on its facing page, words describing the satisfactory movements to be made in the position? But the servants might find it, and who could say what stories they would tell? What if I left it closed on the table, near the tea things — the servants could not read and would not display an interest in a scholar's leisurely reading, but Second Wife might get up and flick through its concertina sheets. But what of Ah Chiang? Could I be certain that he could not read? He was, after

all, Second Wife's cousin, and before the family fell on hard times he might have had the opportunity to study letters. No, it seemed all too risky.

I did not know how to bring the book to her attention. It would be a game of give and take, in which I would bide my time — at least as challenging as the coition depicted inside — in which we would tilt at each other seeking revelations without giving away one's own position. The final release would be all the more sweet for its elaborate preamble.

She was with me again the next morning, but her manner was more reserved, as if a screen stood between us. I confess that all my carefully laid plans flew out of my head when I saw her. Perhaps my distraction was a factor, but her companionship was not agreeable that morning and I wondered whether I could put her out of the library to concentrate the better on how to realise my plan. But when I suggested I needed solitude to further my studies, she grew angry.

'You are so hard, so fine. But you do not understand me. You do not treat me as a woman, and I am very lonely.'

Was this the access I needed? I trembled as I asked, 'So how would you have me treat you?'

But the screen drew closed as rapidly as it had opened: 'Aiee, forgive me, I talk nonsense, I feel like I am going mad in my loneliness!'

I felt like the scholar in the red chamber: always wanting something but failing to achieve my goal. It was impossible: I could not study with her there, nor could I study when she was absent. Clearly, I needed to be more explicit. I put my book down open on the table and, fabricating a reason why I needed to go to my room, I excused myself, leaving Second Wife with the prospect of 'Stepping Tigers'. I returned 20 minutes later to find the book — and Second Wife — absent.

She did not come the next day, nor the day after. What did she mean by taking the book away? I grew feverish in my solitude,

maddened at the thought of having lost her companionship, even if it was to remain of a non-physical nature.

She was back on the third day, however, without the book. I was so glad to see her that I could scarcely control my emotions: the prospect of having lost her had been too great to bear. She smiled at me, a look my emotions lead me to believe was one of general approbation. I could not resist: 'What did you do with the book?'

'Book? I cannot read, what would I be doing with a book?'

'But my book — I left it here the other day when I went to my room. And when I came back it was gone, and so were you. I thought you had taken it.'

'Stripling, perhaps one of the servants tidied up after you and put it away.'

I started to panic: 'But — but I need it for my studies.'

Second Wife smiled. 'What is the name of your book? Perhaps I could go and ask the servants for you?'

'The name is not important — the servants cannot read anyway.' I was relieved to not have to speak its title.

'Very well, what did it look like? Did it have pictures inside it, by any chance? What were the pictures of? Could you describe one to me?'

It took a while to realise she was only teasing me.

'Stripling, you must be more careful with your books. If you leave them lying around open you cannot know whose eyes have seen their contents.'

The blood pounded in my head, and my mouth was dry. I tried several times to mouth a few words, to no avail. I sipped my tea and moistened my lips before croaking: 'Did — did you see it?'

But she refused to answer: 'Let me leave you to your studies now.'

'Will you come again tomorrow?'

'Yes, if you want me to.'

I stood and watched her as she departed again. At the doorway to her quarters, she turned, ever so slightly, and glanced at me. And that glance, so fleeting and so provocative, was the end of my studies for that morning. Hair like silk and skin like porcelain, eyes like almonds and lips like cherries: I could not think of Second Wife other than in the idealised terms popularised by the Ming romances I once so disparaged.

And I resolved to be the romantic lead myself, if I could.

I took to pomading my hair, taking greater care over my nose hairs and wispy beard, cleaning between my teeth with a twig after meals. I tried powdering my face, but it was too hot in our compound and my skin bubbled and erupted into pustules.

We read the romances together; the Five Classics gathering dust on their shelf. I taught her characters and she recited passages to me of heroes rescuing heroines from the clutches of evil. We sipped tea and drank in each other's fragrance in the lamplight (we had taken to sliding the library screens closed, to avoid the prying eyes of the servants). But this of course only increased their curiosity: tea was offered four times in an hour, when usually it was difficult to get a second pot of water in that time.

One day the Arcane Maid's treatise reappeared on the table near the tea things. I looked at her in surprise.

She nodded, smiling, as if in invitation: 'Now let me test you.'

'And if I pass the test, what then?' I smiled back; but she ignored me.

'Describe 'Seagulls soaring!"

'The woman lies on her back on the table. The man stands near the edge of the table and lifts the woman's legs high. He inserts his jade stalk into her cinnabar grotto.'

Silence.

I looked up; she was fumbling around in her blouse. I imagined her breasts beneath the fabric, warm and quivering and round like two mounds of freshly congealed tofu topped

with two lotus seeds. How I desired the lotus seeds, and I would claim them as my reward, as the hero who prevailed in the romances always did.

But Second Wife had other plans: she drew a key from between her breasts and looked at me expectantly.

'There are other books in here, you know, special books your father keeps locked away.'

'You mean the family records?'

Second Wife shook her head, her loose hair shining in the light: 'A reward for a student of literature!'

She drew back the screen separating father's bedroom from the library and placed the key in a lock concealed within the frame of the screen. She opened a narrow cupboard door, revealing a number of scrolls stacked snugly within. I had not been aware of this cache of ancient manuals: were these Father's own literary efforts? Or maps of the known world? Or something else?

'Do you know the *Chin Ping Mei*?' She took the top scroll from the hidden cupboard and ran her fingers along its silken shaft, toying with the silken ribbon holding it fastened. I watched transfixed as, rubbing it faster and faster, her hands worked at the ribbon until, with a sudden flurry, it came free. The scroll curled open and tumbled out of her hands, spilling words and illustrations across the floor. Spent, she sat, head bent forward, hair tumbling over her face and shoulders.

I had heard of the story of the Golden Lotus — indeed, all scholars had, but its existence was often disputed, banned and outlawed, for how could such a story have been imagined in the Middle Kingdom? The fluid calligraphy describes acts I could barely imagine, were it not for the drawings: a man and a woman, a man and two women, two women, two men and a woman, their faces serene and inscrutable, but their robes in disarray and swelling out from the men's robes the reproductive member, a woman astride it or kissing it or more.

I glanced at the scroll where it lay on the floor and read of *nipples like bone buttons* and *a navel like the inside of a shell*. Women clasped men with their golden lilies, their sex in the woman's instep, *the soft and fleshy curled instep a sanctuary*. I bowed my head in embarrassment and saw Second Wife's very own golden lilies demurely covered in socks. Swooning, I longed to drink wine from her tiny silk slipper, that epitome of pleasurable closeness.

I look at my sheep grazing around me, oblivious to my suffering. My familiar name of Stripling weighs heavily on me now. So much arcana to which Second Wife was privy, a whole new continent of experience for me!

Of course, I was shocked: would you not be to have your father's private collection thrust before you? And by your father's own wife? It was not the keeping of such material that upset me — indeed, anything relating to life was a fair subject for depiction and description and classification in a scholar's library — it was rather the manner in which I had been granted access to this material. I had been shown a private part of his collection by the woman with whom he pleasured himself reading these tales.

I watched as her foot curled ever so slightly towards mine.

Did that happen or do I dream it at this distance? Aiee, my mind is poisoned with guilt!

Did she not, I protest to a startled ewe, invite me to feast at her table? Or was she toying with me? Had she planned that such a display, overblown and intemperate, would stay my attentions? Or was it the final hurdle in ensuring my departure from the household, in preparing the way for Ah Chiang? Was he really her cousin or something more to her?

I was too young to be a philosopher, and too inexperienced in the ways of the world at the time to have seen the Tao in all this: that in my hour of success with Second Wife lay my failure. That knowledge, hard-won and cherished, has come to me only a good while later. Perhaps it is better after all that I am

now a recluse rather than cause further disharmony in Father's house.

Bleating, the sheep beckon me to return them for the day, and I am too exhausted to resist.

46.
THE ODD ONE OUT

'IT'S YOUR DEAL.'

Little Brother picked up the cards and shuffled them slowly, thoughtfully. He dealt five each, first to Angee and then to himself, alternating the cards.

Angee picked at his hand: a pair of threes and a mixture of face cards. Would he throw out the pair, with a view to securing a high pairing with one of his existing face cards; or would he stick with what he already had and seek to consolidate his hand?

He looked at Little Brother, who was humming quietly to himself as he looked at his cards. He seemed relaxed and happy and if Angee did not know better, he would have thought Little Brother had found himself a woman. But there were no women here. There was nothing here. Clicking his tongue with disgust, Angee cast his low pair into the middle: 'Give me another two.'

Little Brother peeled another two cards off the pack, placing them before Angee. He picked them up one at a time, trying to make the sensation of expectation last. The first was a nine: no good. Angee placed the tips of his fingers on the back of the second card, as if trying to feel its value through its face. He looked at Little Brother, who smiled back at him.

'What is it?' he asked, a little too sharply perhaps. It was just the two of them, after all — White Beard had already taken himself to bed and was talking to himself among the sheep.

'Nothing,' Little Brother replied, somewhat taken aback.

Angee wondered whether Little Brother was bluffing. Or was Angee simply becoming paranoid? Had the long moons of isolation finally broken his spirit? He picked up his last card: another nine.

He pulled a coin off the string: 'Here's one.'

Little Brother put a coin down beside Angee's: 'I'll see you.'

Little Brother smiled sweetly, his cards written all over his face. Angee took another two coins and put them in the middle.

Little Brother tossed his cards down, shaking his head.

'What did you have?' Angee asked him.

'I'm not sure, three of these and two of those. Is that any good?'

'Well, you could have played on a bit longer with a hand like that,' Angee suggested.

'That's enough for me for tonight,' Little Brother said, standing up and stretching.

'Don't you want to play any more tonight?'

'I'm sorry, but I just don't see the point. If we were doing a reading, then there would be some purpose to the cards. But to play to slide coins back and forth between us,' Little Brother's voice trailed off.

'Go on,' Angee said, his anger welling up inside him, 'you've started saying something, say what you mean.'

'It's like, I've been thinking about this awhile—'

'It's a wonder your head doesn't explode, all you do is think all day and all night,' Angee interrupted.

But Little Brother was unperturbed: 'You wouldn't want to sit around here carving a jade ball, or scriptures on a grain of rice, would you?'

'I haven't got a clue what you're talking about,' Angee said petulantly.

'Well, playing cards here feels like that for me, a means of facing down boredom with the same activity every night. We've

got boredom under control now, so what's next? You know what I mean?'

'All I know is you say you don't want to play cards with me any more. And White Beard won't keep us company unless the striplings are here.'

'I'm going to listen to him talking to his sheep. Goodnight.'

'You're as mad as White Beard in his coffin-barrow,' Angee snarled after the departing figure, regretting his words the moment they were out of his mouth. But Little Brother ignored him, wandering off into the darkness. How had things got to this impasse? Surely he was not alone in wanting something more from this life?

In the glow of the dying fire, Angee checked his own progress: up a few coins on the night, barely enough to keep him in firewater, let alone tobacco. It wasn't fair. Somehow White Beard managed to maintain a steady supply of both without ever being in hock to the station store. Did the foreign devils pay more to their own kind than to others?

Perhaps Little Brother was right after all. What was the point of pushing coins between the two of them? It did nothing to increase their own supply of money, taking from each other. They should be robbing others. It had been much better when the striplings were here, and they had played three to a hand, even if most nights they outplayed Angee. Three was much better than two, let alone a two where his opponent was so unengaged as to not care whether he won or lost; at present, it was little better than solitaire.

But solitaire was worse, Angee thought, as he shuffled the deck and dealt the cards in the familiar piles, one through seven, the top ones face-up. He had never felt so lonely in all his life. He had been in many difficult situations, worked far away from his home village, filled his idle time with passing companionship; but here, with just the sheep and the three of them, he found the all-embracing solitude distressing. White Beard was quite mad and perhaps Little Brother was going crazy as well. Angee felt

that he was the sanest of the three, and that made him the odd one out.

He wondered what had happened to Little Brother here in the fields. Ever since he first knew him, pushing a mop around the decks of their ship coming to Australia, Little Brother had seemed different from the run of other men. Angee had put it down to his book-learning. But there were no books out here, nothing obvious to explain his eccentricities. Just his woman dreams at his prayer-rock, which Angee dismissed as the pathetic and wasted recollections of another place. Besides, were there not other consolations available out here?

Angee checked himself. Already facing an appointment with King Chu Jiang in the Second Court for his gambling, no doubt another king in another Hell Court would want to see him about that matter. But what could the gods have expected of him? The work was so dreary and lonely, so unrewarding and unfulfilling, that it was almost the only way a man could cope with tending the sheep. He had been steadily adding to his account in hell on that score as well, but settlement of that debt could wait a while longer.

While he was catching his breath under a tree the next day, a flock of pink birds landed on the ground nearby. Clutching his sheep to him for cover, Angee watched as the galahs continued grazing, unworried by his presence. In their time in the fields together during the lambing season, Little Brother had regaled him with stories from the Emperor's chronicles, of an adventurer bringing back wonderful creatures from his voyages to the south, rewarded handsomely by the Ming Emperor. Here, all around him, waddled his fortune squawking at his sheep. If they could only get a few galahs back to Xiamen they could pay off their contracts and debts and have a nice amount left over for their families. All day Angee thought excitedly about his plan, how it would make a Gold Mountain of their travels here, and resolved to speak of it to Little Brother over dinner.

But it was hard to begin. White Beard's presence imposed a silence that Little Brother followed, and the three men ate their chops without speaking. Tonight, they were stewed in a sour fruit sauce made by Little Brother, which cut the grease but added little to the taste of the meat. Angee mopped up the communal pan with a hunk of the fire-baked bread White Beard called damper. He looked at Little Brother sitting cross-legged, noting with jealousy how he was even adopting the sitting posture, the wordlessness of White Beard.

Finally White Beard, unannounced, stood up and went off to his coffin-barrow among the sheep. Little Brother stood up and wished him goodnight, was rewarded with a nod. Angee spat into the fire.

'Doesn't say much, does he?'

But Little Brother remained silent. He resumed his seat by the fire and picked carefully over the bones on White Beard's plate.

Angee watched with growing irritation for some time until he could no longer resist another jibe: 'Are you going to save up his scraps for your prayer-rock?' Seeing Little Brother flinch, Angee continued: 'What do you miss most about Xiamen? What about that woman you're always talking about?'

Little Brother looked up: 'She is my father's Second Wife, and I hope they are happy together in Xiamen. It is better that I am no longer there. I'm washing the plates. Coming?'

Angee whistled: it showed a lot of spirit to shit in your own nest like that. Explained a lot about Little Brother as well. No wonder he had been so hesitant to reveal the exact nature of his relationship with the mystery woman back in Xiamen until now. Or perhaps he was calling Angee's bluff, expecting him to back off at the sniff of any intrigue involving his stepmother? If so, what a play! He should apply some of his verbal skills to cards. If they ever played cards again. Perhaps Little Brother could teach him a thing or two after all. He ran after Little Brother.

'But don't you ever think of what will happen when we finish our contracts here?'

'I used to think about it all the time, but somehow we've been gone so long I think about it less and less now these days. I'm just enjoying the here and now, taking each day as it comes.'

'But what about when we are finished here? When you return home? Don't you want to take some money with you?'

'I hadn't thought about it before, to be honest. But now you mention it, I suppose you are right. I suppose I should try and save some of my salary here. I know I have a few strings of coin, but beyond that, whatever is written in Red Devil's book back at the station store, I haven't kept up to date. But it's not important.'

'Yes, we really should check where we stand,' Angee agreed. As if he did not know already! The last time he looked, his own account was firmly in the red, what with the new boots and trousers, soap and rice, firewater and tobacco that he had purchased through the station store. Not to mention the likelihood that Red Devil was cheating them for supplies. He had precious little to show for his labours here, just like back home in Xiamen, for that matter.

They reached the river, and the muddy bank was slippery. Angee grasped a shrub, easing himself down the slope to the waterline. Little Brother put the pans in the water and began cleaning. Angee squatted on the bank beside him, scooped up some sand and mud and water, scoured his bowl with this mixture; then, checking for stuck gobs of mutton fat like grains of gold in a pannikin, he poured the slurry back into the river.

'Listen,' Little Brother tapped him on the arm. There was the faint creweek of a frog, the plop of a fish breaking the water surface. A zizz of a nearby mosquito, and Angee slapped his calf.

'Gotcha!' he brought his bloody hand up close to his face, then rinsed it in the river water.

'The mosquitoes eat us, the fish eat the mosquitoes, we eat the fish.'

'Right,' Angee finally steered the conversation to his subject. 'You know, today I saw some beautiful pink birds, grazing on grass seeds among my sheep.'

Little Brother looked across at Angee, his smile lighting up the riverbank. 'That's nice,' he said, scrubbing the communal pan.

'I mean,' Angee struggled to explain just what he meant, 'do you remember that famous sailor you told me about?'

'You mean Zhong He, the Muslim eunuch mariner? Sailed to the south and to Africa?'

'Yes, that's him. Came back with all manner of wonderful creatures and the Emperor rewarded him with vast catties of gold, enough for his ancestors to worship his memory and keep his name alive to the present day.'

Little Brother frowned: 'Yes, from the *Imperial Chronicles*. I seem to recall the Emperor was very pleased with his giraffe. It had nice spots. What of it?'

'Well, if we caught some birds and took them back home, we could sell them for an enormous sum of money. Pay out our contracts, even pay off our family debts and still be left with a nice nest egg to see us through our later years. Enough,' Angee tried the woman angle again, 'to pay for a sumptuous wedding party. With that kind of fortune, you could forget about your father's Second Wife and choose any woman you wanted.'

Slowly and deliberately, Little Brother put his bowl down on the riverbank: 'Why not just enjoy them here, without worrying how much money they'd make you in the Middle Kingdom? Look at the birds and see birds, not strings of cash.'

'That's fine for you to say, you come from a mandarin's family, you have money waiting for you when you return home.'

'And that has made my time in exile more comfortable? Perhaps it made it harder at first, thinking that someone should be bailing me out all the time.'

And just who do you think has been bailing you out out here, Angee wanted to ask, but checked himself.

'Besides,' Little Brother continued, 'I don't know that I will ever be returning home.'

Angee assumed that Little Brother was joking. Nobody would choose to die in a devils' land, to ignore their family's ancestors and their own children. So he returned the banter: 'I'd like to see something of this land as well. Perhaps we could leave this place together? Try our luck somewhere else? What say you to that, Little Brother?'

'I've done the dishes, let's go back to our hut now,' he said flatly, picking up the plates and heading back, not waiting for Angee.

Angee squatted by the riverbank a while longer, shaking his head. Perhaps Little Brother was still upset about his father's wife; and so the woman card had been the wrong one to play? But why should he be sensitive to Little Brother's feelings when Little Brother showed so little consideration for Angee's worries? He felt betrayed by his countryman, that Little Brother had so coolly abandoned any fraternal feeling that had developed between them over time.

Angee groaned. He was drowning in debt in this life and the next, with nobody around to help set him free. Not White Beard, not the striplings and certainly not Little Brother. Of course Little Brother could afford to be indifferent to money — his precious father had grown fat on taxing families like Angee's in Hai Chong. Unlike any of their fellow passengers on the ship, Little Brother did not need to earn money to pay off family or other debts. His mandarin father was as bad as Red Devil when it came to money.

Cursing his bad luck, Angee slapped and squashed another mosquito who had the misfortune of sharing the riverbank with him that night. He wished he had never got to know the silly mop-man all those moons ago.

47.
MIXING THE FLOCKS

AS IF BEING offside with Little Brother was not bad enough, the next morning Red Devil appeared over the rise on horseback. Unannounced as always, his timing could hardly have been worse for Angee, who, preoccupied with one of his ewes, had been telling her about his conversations with Little Brother and did not hear the hoof-beats of Red Devil's approach until it was too late. He barely had time to drop the ewe and pull up his trousers before Red Devil was upon him, shouting something.

Jumping down from his horse, Red Devil struck him with his riding crop. Angee fell to the ground, cowering, trying to protect his head and still-swollen member from Red Devil's boot. He rolled aside, through the grass and sheep manure, shielding blows, until, with a sudden lunge, he was able to intercept a swinging boot and, twisting it, bring Red Devil to the ground.

This was the devil who had first cheated him and had now beaten him, lying on the ground holding his ankle, looking angrily at Angee. From the way he held his ankle he might have sprained it: perhaps Angee in his self-preservation had twisted the swinging boot too sharply.

Angee stood back, holding the horse's reins, waiting for Red Devil to say or do something. His sheep kept their distance, watching the two men warily.

Grimacing with pain, Red Devil unlaced his boot and rubbed his ankle, which was already swollen. Putting one arm on the ground, he raised himself to a standing position and held his hand out for the reins.

Angee handed them over, watching Red Devil warily. He made to get back up on his horse, but, unable to put weight on his sprained ankle, he motioned to Angee to help him up. Upright again, he grunted at Angee, pointing with his crop to where his boot and sock lay on the ground. Angee moved over and picked these up, stuffing the sock inside the shoe, stepping back smartly out of the way as the riding crop slashed the horse's rump and Red Devil galloped off towards the camp site.

There was bound to be trouble arising from this, Angee thought grimly to himself. But as it was out of his hands, he tried not to think about it.

A little while afterwards, Red Devil returned with White Beard and the two devils examined Angee's sheep for any signs of injury, paying particular attention to their rear ends. As most sheep problems affected their feet or their bums, it was an obvious place to look, and Angee did not especially worry. He watched with interest as White Beard rapidly worked his way around the flock, stooping and crawling after the ewes, nodding as Red Devil, still on horseback, spoke sharply to him.

Still, Red Devil must have told White Beard, for when he finally looked up at Angee he had a peculiar glint in his eye, almost a nod of respect from one shepherd to another, a silent acknowledgement of their shared appreciation of a good fat-tailed ewe. Angee smiled: it explained a lot about White Beard's preference for solitude. At least, if Little Brother had to take after one of these devils, Angee was glad it was White Beard and not Red Devil.

They departed as rapidly and as mysteriously as they had arrived, leaving Angee wondering where this was all leading.

That evening, on his return from the fields, he was greeted by a tearful White Beard, who, instead of counting his

flock into one yard while checking for any injuries, separated Angee's sheep into two yards, old and young, mixing Angee's with Little Brother's flock. Little Brother had already returned his flock and stood by, watching puzzled as the two flocks, which they had struggled to keep separate on every evening they had been here, were now deliberately mixed together.

Angee wondered whether White Beard had finally snapped.

'What's going on?' he asked Little Brother.

'Red Devil was here today and has ordered us back to the home station with one of these flocks tomorrow.'

'But who will look after the remaining flock? Surely it doesn't take two of us to move one flock when we have been doing a flock apiece for so long now? Will White Beard be here by himself?' Angee recalled the glint in White Beard's eye, and, knowing his dark secret, could not help imagining what he might get up to with the sheep once the two shepherds were out of the way.

'I don't know. That's all I could get out of White Beard. He spoke about something else with a fire, but I couldn't follow him — it didn't make sense.'

'Back to the home station? Well, that will make a change from being out here.'

'But why move us now?' Little Brother protested.

Angee shrugged.

'Do you still have your *I Ching*?'

'But I gave it to you?' Angee shook his head.

'I don't have it, I've checked already. I think we should do a reading.'

'You make it sound like you are expecting the worst,' Angee joked, uncertainly.

'I am,' Little Brother replied.

To which there was no answer. Why, when they had been left out here for so long, should Red Devil demand their return?

And why should White Beard be so upset? Clearly something was wrong, and joking about it would not make it go away.

Grumbling, Angee went to the hut and burrowed around in his few belongings until he turned up the book. Between its covers, the stalks that they had collected so long ago, on the road to Borambola, were dusty and broken. Angee shivered. It was a bad omen in itself: they had not maintained their attention to the *I Ching* and now, when they needed to consult the oracle, the means was unavailable to them. He came outside and told Little Brother the bad news.

'We could always use coins,' Angee said hopefully, holding up his remaining string of cash.

'Stalks would be better,' Little Brother insisted. 'Come with me to the river.'

Angee hesitated: the last time they had been there together they had argued.

'Come on,' Little Brother insisted.

Following Little Brother, Angee wondered whether his recent partiality for ewes had accidentally set this chain of events in motion. They were separating him from his sheep, so perhaps the time of settlement was drawing near? Perhaps the Hell Courts were all nonsense, designed to keep people meek and fearful. Perhaps not. Where would it all end?

They looked up and down the river. For a watercourse that they encountered every day, it was remarkable that they had not recognised a supply of stalks previously. Was their recent inattention to the *I Ching* coming back to haunt them? Angee shivered, even though the evening was warm.

'Perhaps we'll have to use coins after all.'

'I suppose it would be better than nothing,' Little Brother agreed.

'Perhaps we're better off not knowing,' Angee said, hurrying away from the river, back towards the camp site, where the broken stalks of an unwanted oracle were destined for the evening fire.

48.
TALLOW

THE NEXT MORNING, the two shepherds were up early. But not before White Beard, who was among his flock, talking and tending to his charges slowly and lovingly. After drinking tea and eating leftovers, the two shepherds gathered their hats and smocks and crooks and made to go into the yard to round up their sheep.

By the morning light, the difference between the two flocks separated out the previous last night was clear to see. In the one yard, the many lambs were bigger and bouncier, the ewes and hoggets healthy and strong, full-bodied and well-fleeced. In the other yard, it would have been hard to imagine a more motley collection of skinny, ill-fleeced, flyblown, broken-toothed, rotten-footed old ewes and runty wethers. These were the sheep they were to return to the home station.

Mixed in with the others, the poor state of their charges had been hardly noticeable over time. But now, separated into the good and not-so-good, it was impossible to avoid the conclusion that they had not properly looked after a goodly proportion of their flocks. But what else could they have done? Without experience in looking after sheep, without training and support, isolated without language to communicate the necessaries, it was all the more remarkable that the sheep in the good yard outnumbered those in the poor yard by nearly two to one.

Angee opened the gates and Little Brother walked around the hurdles to the far side of the yard, shooing at the sheep with his crook. The sheep, bleating with fear and uncertainty, hobbled and limped their way out through the gates, all but a few who hung back, unable to move without some sterner attention from Little Brother's crook. One old lame ewe was quite unable to move and White Beard stepped in.

He stood between Angee and the sheep, put his hand up to stop them. Then he turned and spoke softly to the sheep as she relaxed to his touch. He gestured to the two shepherds to move on and leave this one behind. Angee shrugged and continued: what difference would it make if they were up or down one lame ewe at this stage?

Looking south, with the sun to their left, there was a strange plume of brown smoke dirtying the southern horizon. Angee had noticed it yesterday in the fields but thought little of it at the time, given Red Devil's more noteworthy appearance. But today was another matter: it was a bad omen marking their return to the home station.

'What's going on down there?'

But White Beard only shook his head sadly. Unnerved, Angee ran back to the hut, fished under his sheepskin blanket until he found the battered book, and stuck it in his trouser pocket.

'What's he so upset about?' Little Brother asked Angee on his return.

'Let's go, no more answers here for us,' Angee replied.

They made slow progress across the fields, the sheep wanting to stop and settle frequently as had been their habit until this morning. Lacking the stronger and fitter leaders who would charge ahead and cause the others to run in their wake, the flock moved more slowly than usual, and the sun was already high above them before the two shepherds reached the hilltop from which they could see down to the home station.

'Look there!' Little Brother called to Angee.

They had not seen the station for many moons, not since they first ventured into the fields, and its distant familiarity was now shadowed with foreboding. There was the boss-house, the storage shed, the kitchen garden and beyond it the watering stream. Thick black smoke curled into the sky from a nondescript wooden building set off to the side, near the stream.

'Why don't they put the fire out?' Angee called back to Little Brother.

They stopped a while on the hilltop, allowing the sheep to graze as they looked down at the station, wondering what awaited them there. The smoke in the sky was a worry. Looking back, they could see the old run that had been their home these recent moons. More carefree there, less burdened by others, Angee felt a little sad to be leaving it, and he wondered when they would be returning to their little hut. If ever.

They gathered themselves up and headed down the hill, rushing the sheep ahead.

A couple of the striplings ran out to meet them, whooping and yelling with delight, and assisted them in steering their flock towards the shed from which the smoke was coming. A couple of hurdle yards had been hastily erected at the near end, between the house and the shed. But Angee could see another flock was yarded there already.

'Where are we going to put ours?' he asked Little Brother. Something seemed wrong here.

At the far end of the mysterious shed, away from the house, smoke plumed into the air. The smoke became thicker and seemed to cover the entire sky. The smell became worse, more pronounced, a thick, greasy smell that reminded Angee of something deep down, which he could not remember. He heard the dull roar of fire crackling and a rumble not unlike thunder, although the sky was free of rain clouds. Heat radiated in the air and the building seemed to shimmer before them, like a mirage. Suddenly, Red Devil appeared at one of the shed's doorways, his blazing red face streaked with black like a demon.

Angee jumped back and Red Devil laughed, a deep laugh that he had not heard since the days and nights they had travelled on the cart — an unwelcome recollection. Red Devil pointed to the yards already occupied by someone else's sheep.

'We can't mix them up,' Angee protested to Little Brother.

'Or we'll never know which ones are ours anymore,' Little Brother agreed. The two shepherds had been drilled nightly by White Beard in the importance of this by. They held their ground.

But Red Devil limped over to the yard and flung the gate open. He was directing them to discard the number-one rule of shepherding.

'On the other hand,' Little Brother began.

'I tell you, I don't like this,' Angee grumbled.

The shepherds filled the yard with their sheep, watched by Red Devil. This done, he directed them to follow him into the shed.

Inside, the smell was appalling, and the smoke was thick in the air, so thick that Angee could barely see before him in the darkness. His eyes stung and his nostrils were assaulted by the weightiness of that smell: a smell of meat, boiling and separating. Angee recognised it from the mutton chops in the cooking pan. But this was a thick, oily smoke, quite unlike that from their nightly open-air fires, the greasy mutton smell a thousand, million, billion times more pronounced, carrying in the air, smudging and soiling everything it met, like charcoal staining their skin. The walls were caked in the dense black residue, charcoaled thick and absorbing light like an ancient pagoda interior crusted with incense residue; only this shed had the sour reek of death rather than the jasmine freshness of rebirth.

Angee shuddered: it was as if they had passed through the gates of hell. All around them, the thick smoke and smell permeated their clothing, their hair, their skin. Through their

eyes and their nostrils, their mouths, it entered their bodies and choked them, assaulted them. In the haze, he heard shouting and bleating and dumping, knives slashing and cutting, blood spurting and bodies falling, as the butchers slaughtered the unwanted sheep: a slash of a knife across its throat, then cutting a hole in the skin, a fist into the hole, punching an opening in the bag of dead animal until the skin came away from the body. The men who worked in the shed were black and glistening, sweating and stained by the oily smoke. Angee saw in them Ox Head and Horse Face, the escorts of the netherworld; and the manifold functionaries of Hufashizhe, the horned demon, upholders of the laws of hell; and the judges, stern and unwavering, unspeaking like Red Devil. And everywhere the dull roar and whoosh of the flames, the crackle of the fire-pots, for which they were all destined.

The two shepherds were placed at the end of a line of men. Little Brother grabbed Angee's arm, a look of dread in his eyes as it became clear what they were now required to do. Having spent these past moons caring for their sheep, they were now to become part of the machinery of their mass destruction. At the far end, frightened sheep were pushed in from the hurdle yards, slipping and skidding on the bloodied sweaty floors. Angee's blood pounded as striplings pushed sheep into the maw of the shed to have their throats cut, their fleeces flayed, their limp, dead, skinned bodies chopped up. And, at their end of the shed — by which point what had been sheep were now grizzled chunks of bleeding, dripping meat and bone — their job was to load the chunks into the huge copper pots cooking and smoking furiously, separating the fat from the meat and the bone, which, skimmed and allowed to cool, was tallow. Their mutton-fat lamp oil.

Little Brother turned to his side and threw up on the slippery bloody floor, chunks of unidigested chop meat adding to the animal refuse coating everything.

If only he could be sick as well, Angee thought. But outweighing his physical disgust at the destruction of half his

flock was the metaphysical horror of what the shed represented: punishment without any hope of liberation. Here, in this wooden shed on the fringes of this station at the end of the world, something was happening that was more gruesome and disgusting and unconscionable than the most feverish chroniclers of Chinese history could have imagined and described. Here, animals, innocent and stupid, their only crimes their fragility, their weakness, their age, were chopped up and boiled down to create tallow, oil for lamps and soap. Killing the sheep before their allotted time would cast their souls back into the same species to perpetuate its encagement in that body.

Aiee, this shed was worse than hell. Hell had a reason, a logic to it. Hell was a place where you were charged on your deeds in this life; and were rewarded or punished accordingly. Hell was not cruel: its punishments, though often gruesome, were visited on those who deserved them. And once punished, you were not expected to go around in another cycle of punishment and retribution. But here, cut down in this death factory before their appointed time, these sorry souls would be forced to endure the cycle of existence as sheep again. Over and over again, a circle without release. In this place, souls were truly lost.

'Come with me,' Angee grabbed Little Brother's arm and dragged him outside. He drew a cup of water, tipped it over Little Brother's buzzing head, poured a second down his throat. It revived him; but the relief was only temporary, as Red Devil, shouting at them, ordered them back inside to feed the pots.

Little Brother was in tears, distraught from exhaustion; and Angee's miseries entered a new phase, as the horrors before him unlocked the terrifying ghost stories from his childhood. He lumped and slipped, hacked and sweated, treated worse than any animal. And always the screaming of sheep, the roaring of Red Devil, urging the men on, driving this tallow factory of death.

After the chunks of sheep were boiled till the tallow could be skimmed off, the useless pieces of flesh were hauled out

of the pots and tossed onto the cooking fires. Although cooked and skimmed until there was no more tallow to render, the flesh and bones still bore a fair portion of fat and grease; and, tossed onto the fire, they took the flame readily, spitting fat, reeking and attracting wild dogs, which came running, howling and snarling, to this barbecue to end all barbecues.

The shed continued working late into the night, lighting up the station buildings with an eerie glow as the cooking-pot flames leapt, casting terrible shadows, the smoke obliterating the stars. If this was the way the sheep were treated, the animals that had value in this strange society, what then for the poor shepherds who were scorned and ignored, left to their own devices on the margins of the property for moons at a time? Would this death factory become their funeral pyre as well? The prospect was too horrible to contemplate. And Angee was not interested in finding out. He was not prepared to have these foreign devils place him, surplus like his unwanted sheep, on an endless cycle of death and rebirth, going in circles, advancing nowhere, without hope of salvation.

Little Brother had collapsed and was resting against the wall of the shed, caked in soot. Angee worked on, stoking the pots, inured to death yet wondering what awaited him for his complicity in this suffering. Already Red Devil's sneakiness — running him into debt — had set him up for a nasty time facing the Judge in the Second Court. His own carelessness, his overweening confidence in the fields, which he feared had contributed to his sheep's downfall, would ensure a stern hearing in the Ninth Court, where all crimes not punished elsewhere found their retribution. But most of all, Angee feared his appearance before the Judge in the Seventh Court: the punishment for driving others to their death, as they had done today with their flock, was to be thrown into a wok of boiling oil, just like these appalling tallow-pots.

Red Devil limped through the shed, yelling to the men to stop work. The two shepherds, dazed and in shock, staggered out

into the night. Angee felt numb all over. His arms and face were smudged black with soot and grease; his smock was ragged and torn. Beside him, Little Brother was ashen-faced. Angee took his arm as they followed the others down to the creek to wash. Tired men stripped off their blackened and bloodied clothes, their pale skin luminous; in the fire glow, they appeared as headless and armless creek ghosts.

Little Brother was in a bad way. He sank into the pool, wanting to submerge and never resurface, until one of the workmen, laughing, threw a cake of soap at him.

'Come on, Little Brother,' Angee urged, 'wash yourself, put the shed behind you.'

'Not that soap,' Little Brother said firmly. Angee understood: if washing meant using the end product of this hellish process, Little Brother preferred to remain acrid and filthy.

The laughter of others echoed around them. Men played in the creek and the water boiled.

'I feel like I'm in the cooking pot, being rendered alive,' Little Brother whispered, his voice distant, his eyes glazed.

Angee splashed water on Little Brother's face, and his eyes rolled back into his head.

'You were sinking there,' Angee said, a look of concern on his face.

Little Brother held out his hands to Angee. They trembled and his palms were blackened with the tarry smoke residue. He scraped at his hands and arms with sand and mud from the creekbed, scrubbing till his skin was scratched and bled, but still there were dark residues under his nails. Angee had to stop him from tearing at his nails, such was his desperation to erase the physical traces of their labours.

Angee helped him from the water. They sat there alone for a few minutes, their arms around each other, sobbing and exhausted, until the station bell sounded for dinner.

'You hungry?' Angee asked him.

Little Brother shook his head. 'Probably mutton chops,' he groaned.

It was then that Angee made his decision: 'Come on, Little Brother, this is no life for us. Let's get away from here, leave the station tonight. We've been so far together, good times and bad, let's share the next adventure.'

'But how would we get out of here?'

'I can get a horse for the two of us, Red Devil's horse.'

'You mean you'd steal it?'

'No, I'd borrow it. A chit on my station account.'

Little Brother was quiet for a while, which was a good sign. Then he shook his head: 'Sorry, Angee, I can't.'

'You mean you'd prefer to stay here? After everything that they've done to us?' Facing enough trouble in hell already, Angee was not going to stay any longer, or go through another day like this one.

'I know. But I feel here lies my fate, to go back to our hut and serve out my time here, face down my exile here rather than running away.'

Angee recalled their first divination from the cart, and drew Lok See's *I Ching*, now smudged with sheep grease, from his pocket: '*When the way of dwelling together is exhausted, you must turn away*. It's time to leave here, Little Brother. Don't be afraid. I'd be with you all the way.'

Little Brother smiled sadly at his countryman: 'As you say, perhaps it is time for us to go our separate ways.'

Angee shook his head in disbelief: as usual, their conversation was taking a different turn to what he had expected. He cajoled, urged, ridiculed his countryman to come with him, but Little Brother would not be swayed.

'No, I was meant to be here and stay here. I will stay and try to find meaning in this exile.'

What Angee had first interpreted as Little Brother's fear of the unknown was actually another form of resistance. Now he was the one who felt fearful, uncertain, as at so many stages of

his life's journey: 'So you would have me go alone, after all we've been through together?'

Little Brother took the string of coins from around his neck and placed it over Angee's head: 'Not completely alone — you have my blessing. Good luck, Big Brother,' he said through tears.

Angee's heart swelled — it was the first time he had been addressed thus.

'And you too, Little Brother,' Angee held out his arms and the two men embraced. Then it was time to leave.

Angee headed off under the cover of the gully, holding the string of coins to stop any rattling, skirting around the shed and house, which was still lit up like daytime. He came up near the back of the stock shed where, sure enough, Red Devil's horse was stabled. Its saddle was resting on a nearby rail and so were the saddlebags, stocked with provisions, ready for an early start the next morning. Angee whistled: these were good omens, as if he were meant to abscond.

The horse whinnied softly as Angee approached, but it recognised the familiar manly smell of hard yellow soap on raw skin.

It had been some time since Angee had ridden a horse, but when he viewed it as an overgrown sheep his sense of balance and timing returned.

He rubbed the chestnut horse on its neck, its shoulder, and it relaxed to his touch as he tossed the saddlecloth over its back, hefted the saddle over and tightened the strap around its girth. The horse snorted at the familiar feeling, expecting more, but Angee reassured it.

'No whip for you tonight, my beauty,' he whispered into its neck. Angee raised himself up into the saddle and urged the horse out of the stable, out through the gates of hell, away.

PART FIVE

SHEEP DREAMING

Those who stare long enough at landscape, are rewarded occasionally by the feeling that the landscape is staring back at them.

John Berger, *About Looking*

49.
A MISSING SHEPHERD

WILL O'NEILL CONSOLED himself with the knowledge that, despite what had happened to Caramel, it had been a good few days' work improving the Borambola flocks. Working around the clock, more than 30 per cent of the station's livestock had passed through the temporary tallow-works set up in the shearing shed with its yards and race. The few hundred sheep they had got rid of — the old and weak, the broken-toothed, the lame and simply useless — would net the station sixpence a head now they had been turned into tallow. That was a lot of soap and candles for the home country. And the sheep they left behind were stronger and better, good wool-bearers and meat-growers all. In one fell swoop, they had saved on shearing this season, reduced overstocking and purified the stock, improving by dozens of guineas the station's finances.

Nevertheless, that good work would not be bringing back Caramel any sooner. He could not understand how the Celestial had managed to slip away unnoticed. You would expect not to see a blackfella, they knew how to be invisible, but a Celestial — given that O'Neill's two were the only ones in the entire district — was another matter entirely.

O'Neill left the house shaking his head. The front door creaked and slammed shut behind him and the sun bore down on his bare forehead.

A few of the natives sat in the shade of trees, Ruby among them, watching his progress without comment. He thought of

going over and saying something to her, but had second thoughts; and he continued across the yard to the stables where he saddled old Doris.

O'Neill had plenty of time to think matters through as he plodded over the rise to Wright's station on old Doris. He wouldn't get far: a Celestial on a fine horse like his Caramel was bound to arouse suspicions among his neighbours. Although, if the chase was to be on the likes of old Doris, Angee's prospects of remaining on the lam increased substantially. He wondered how his neighbour would handle a situation like this, but it was difficult to compare. For starters, he would not have tolerated Celestials on his property. Then again, if what Mary had whispered to him about Wright's station management was true, there were other issues over there. From her, he knew that there had been problems with ticket-of-leave men up and leaving, grumbling about their pay and clothing.

'And their meals?' he had asked her, when they were alone together in the kitchen garden, out of sight of the house behind the water tank.

'Not the meals,' Mary had protested, 'my cooking may be plain but there is plenty of food for hungry men.' She stamped her little foot and took a swing at O'Neill when she realised he was teasing her.

'Who appreciate a poor girl's honest efforts,' she added, teasing him back. He tried to grab her around the waist but she had slipped into the shadows of the water tank, and his knuckles grated on iron. Then, she bathed his bleeding hands and fed him a slice of pie she had made, with fresh cream from Wright's milker.

O'Neill smiled at the thought of pretty Mary. He was looking forward to seeing her again, but felt embarrassed by his silly mount, which showed him in a less than admirable light. He felt unseated, as it were, by a Celestial. He hoped the Celestial did not hurt Caramel, or there would be hell to pay. There would be hell to pay anyway: when he caught up with the

Celestial, he'd be giving him a good thrashing. He dug his heels into the flanks of old Doris, who, farting in protest, broke briefly into a canter before resuming her walk.

Wright met him at the verandah in his singlet: 'Trade her in, Will, that old nag's only good for making glue!'

'I've boiled down quite enough animals for the time being,' O'Neill was in no mood to brook Wright's humour this morning. 'And I'm here to talk to you about Caramel, among other things. My Celestial's run off on him.'

Wright's eyes widened, but O'Neill cut him off: 'Yes, I know — I know what you think about this and before you start I'm not interested in hearing your opinion yet again. What I want is for you to prepare a warrant for the courthouse. You know as well as I do that I can't run one up for myself.'

Prevented from stating the obvious, Wright was at a loss for words. He ushered O'Neill into his study where he sat down at his desk and took a pen and paper as O'Neill began dictating the charge sheet.

'Missing: one Celestial—'

'Don't say missing, say "absconded",' Wright directed. 'That's his offence.'

'Absconded?'

'It's Latin, ab as in "away from", and—'

'—"sconce" as in head,' O'Neill cut in, 'thus meaning to run away from the head or head station.'

'I think I prefer your parsing to my schoolmaster's,' Wright laughed. 'Will, you could have taught me pig Latin with that fine example. Now back to this fellow. What happened?'

'I think it must have been when the men were all gathered around after their wash that the Celestial snuck up to the stables and took off on Caramel.'

'How about a description?'

'A bay gelding, 16 hands—'

'The man, not the horse!' Wright interrupted.

O'Neill paused. He could more readily describe the missing horse than the Celestial who had absconded in debt. Admittedly, he had not paid them much attention after he had delivered them to the home station; and he barely had time for them in the field, seeing them only every other week when he dropped off rations and any provisions they requested from the station store. There was the silly grinning one who had tossed their billy-can in the creek, but it was the other one, the one with the scowl, who had disappeared.

'What about this Celestial?' Wright pressed his neighbour for a description.

'His name's Angee. Black hair, yellow skin, last seen riding a bay gelding belonging to Borambola.'

'Surely you can do better than that? I seem to recall your — Angee — was aged between 30 and 40 years, with a strong build,' Wright scratched the paper with his pen.

'And a sullen appearance,' O'Neill added. What more was there to say? That he had caught him fornicating with the sheep? But that was in a distant paddock and, besides, the sheep were dead. It had no bearing on a missing-person notice and would make Borambola the laughing stock of the Riverina.

'What about the other Celestial?'

'Sheepy? He's slighter, a light complexion, speaks a little English and understands it well. But he's not much of a shepherd, he's lost a lot of sheep on the run. Just as well he comes cheap.'

'Yes, but is he around still?'

'As far as I am aware, he is still around, back on the run with Boswell.'

'Just the two of them? You've left your remaining Celestial alone with the mad Scot?'

'There may be some blackfellas helping out Boswell. You know how he prefers their company to ours.'

Wright grunted: 'Well, has this Celestial got any idea where his countryman might have gone?'

'You think I should talk to him?'

'It might help,' Wright suggested gently. 'Don't you think it strange that one would leave and the other stay?'

'No,' O'Neill said flatly. 'What's so strange about the useless one sticking around and getting fed and the good worker running away on a good horse he could sell for more money than he would see in months?'

'Is there anything else you know about this disappearance?'

'One of the station blacks saw him riding off.'

'Good — a witness. Who?'

'Ruby, my — housekeeper,' O'Neill chose his words carefully.

'Watching from your bedroom window, was she?' Wright's face creased into a grin. 'And what did she tell you? About this Celestial?'

'That one man, a yellow-fella, come around to the stables by hisself and rode off on a horse.'

'What was the Celestial wearing?'

'A blue serge shirt, moleskin trousers and a cabbage-tree hat.'

'A veritable squatter's outfit!' Wright laughed. 'After he sells your horse, watch out he doesn't try to take your land as well!'

'He took the clothes from the blanket and roll I keep in the stables.'

'Speaking of which, what was the Celestial's account?'

'He's earned 12 shillings a month since he joined us, and the store ledger shows him as having acquired goods to the value of nearly £15 in that time. A fair bit of rum in that total,' he added.

Wright crossed out a few lines on the warrant and added a heading, before reading it out.

'Absconding in debt. Reward offered for information leading to the return of one Celestial. Answers to the name of Angee. Aged between 30 and 40 years, with a strong build and sullen appearance.' He looked up at O'Neill. 'But do you really

want the troublemaker back? Surely, the Celestial's departure is a blessing in disguise?'

'Do I? He owes me. He's done barely one of the five years on his contract. And what about my Caramel?'

Wright returned to the warrant, speaking as he scrawled: 'Inquiries to O'Neill of Borambola or Wagga Courthouse.'

'How much reward then?' O'Neill asked.

'Well, perhaps the equivalent of several months' pay. That's what I'd be fining him, if I were magistrate on the day. I think maybe £1. Plus another couple for the horse.'

'But that's a good three guineas out of my tallow profits!' O'Neill protested.

But it was pointless to argue further. Wright was already grunting over his boots, which he had found resting on an old armchair. The irresistible process of the law had been set under way, which would build its own momentum, not stopping until it had delivered someone's form of justice.

Wright, landowner and magistrate, stood up in his boots and underwear, and gave his neighbour his marching orders.

'Now go back and talk to your remaining Celestial. I'll have the notices posted at the courthouse later.'

Outside, O'Neill threw his leg over old Doris once more and, with a sharp kick in the ribs, got her nose out of the grass, grunting in protest.

'Hurry, mind,' a smirking Wright called after his departing neighbour.

50.
STAYING ON

I STILL HAVE nightmares about it, that day when everything changed forever.

When the nights are hot, and the wind blows, the campfire licks and dances and in its smoke I can see, as clear as if it were before me again, the flames and the stinking vats into which we cast the pieces of sheep. If its effect on Angee had been more dramatic, triggering his immediate departure, in the days since he left the full consequence of what we experienced has grown on me.

Back out in the fields with White Beard, the two of us manage as best we can with a flock that has been boxed and nearly halved by the tallow-rendering. If the survivors are stronger and fitter than their missing sisters, the character of the flock is sadly diminished. Missing are many of the old sheep that White Beard knew by name or a particular detail — a wall-eye, a broken horn, a hind-leg limp — all fed into one end of the death machine, which was the tallow shed, walking in fearful and coming out in pieces.

Perhaps we are the same at our outstation, White Beard and I, lacking the companionship of Angee: diminished by his absence. I wonder whether I should have made good my departure with Angee, backed him up as it were, but I realise that it was not to be. In truth, I was frightened of the unknown world outside the boundaries of our sheep run; but having stayed behind alone, it is a different world anyway.

Now that it is just the two of us, White Beard speaks often to me. It is as if his tongue has been unstuck by the recent drama we have all shared. Without Angee around to speak with, I turn to White Beard's language; and my few words of devil-talk increase rapidly. White Beard points out objects and gives them names in the devil-talk, and I learn to string these together into devil-babble. So much so that, when we are next visited by Red Devil — only a few days after our return to the outstation— he is impressed by my ability to communicate in his devil-tongue.

He arrives on horseback late one afternoon. I watch White Beard taking the measure of his arrival on an old, limping horse who barely keeps her head upright.

I do not know what Red Devil wants of us.

'Tea?' he says.

White Beard grabs the billy-can and scurries off to the river, leaving me with the new arrival. Since it appears he will be staying for tea, I get out the pan and a few mutton chops. He stands mutely, watching me. I point to a log by the fire, offering him a seat. We sit opposite each other in silence. I can hear the lambs calling to their mothers.

'Good weather?' he asks.

'Yes,' I nod. 'Maybe rain soon.' We look at the sky, its bruised dark clouds withholding water.

'Ah, rain,' he says, running his hand over the dusty ground.

'Big rain, water up and down, camp no good no more, go walkabout with the striplings,' I repeat what White Beard has told me a number of times.

'Walkabout?'

I nod vigorously: 'Walkabout. To backblocks.'

'Ahh!' he looks at me with approval. 'There's good feed out there. Pigface and saltbush. Gives the mutton a good taste.'

'Taste good? In the meat?' I will have to try this flavouring.

Red Devil watches me for a while.

'White Beard to the river, get water for tea,' I explain.

Red Devil smiles: 'Not White Beard. Angee.'

'You hear talk from Angee?' My heart leaps.

But White Beard returns and the devil-babble goes on, too fast for me to follow; and my hopes of hearing news of Angee will have to wait till later. They talk in low voices, from time to time looking at me over the fire, and, when I meet their eyes, glancing away.

After dinner, I take the plates down to the river and listen to the frogs singing across the water. If I cannot understand them, at least I cannot see them looking at me; and I wonder whether Angee is camped somewhere downriver listening to frogs as well. Finally, I return to my hut to find Red Devil snoring in Angee's pallet beside mine. I realise sadly that the hut will now always smell a little differently, and this link to Angee will fade as well.

Fortunately, Red Devil is a late sleeper. I rise before dawn, as usual.

'What he want this place?' I ask White Beard as we remove the sheep from the yard.

'Asking about Angee.'

'An' what you tell him?'

'That if he hadn't killed so many of our sheep my shepherd wouldn't have run away.'

I smile at this: 'An' what he say to that?'

'He said he's the boss and can do whatever he likes.' White Beard scratches his chin and I wait in silence. 'And he can. I tell the young boys he has a piece of paper which says the land is his. That's his whitefella magic, that a piece of paper controls all this land, more than the people and families who live here longtime.'

I puzzle over these comments, but it does not make any sense to me. Perhaps it is like a Chan riddle: something absurd, designed to help you break through a mental block. Or another illusion: the paper is the land, but burn it and the land remains. I feel I am on the brink of some discovery, but jammed, like the clouds above.

51.
FLIES

TAKING THE COMBINED flock out each morning, everything is, on the surface, much as it was before. Nothing has changed, and yet everything has changed. Here I am, stuck in the fields, sticky, the clouds overhead threatening rain but not obliging, with many hours of solitude ahead of me. I stand up and stretch, looking around me, the only human for many *li*. I miss Angee more than I realised I would, in funny ways: his familiar smell in the hut. Now when I mark the tree trunk, I am measuring the time since he departed. I wonder how he is going, wherever he might be now.

With Angee's departure, the last human link to what was my home ceased. I now have as little control over Angee as I do over Second Wife or Father or any of the others still dwelling at the Villa of Tranquillity in the land of my birth. I am completely isolated now.

But still I seek comfort in exile, and take heart in my culture's long and illustrious tradition of retreating from the world, of seeking enlightenment and revelations through solitude. Remember Lu Hong, the illustrious mandarin from 11 centuries ago renowned for his knowledge and integrity, who chose the scholarly path of seclusion? In a mountain hut in a remote location bestowed by his emperor, far removed from the perils of court service, Lu Hong was able to concentrate on what was important to him, painting and writing about the joys of his isolation.

Liar! I toss a stone in the river, watching the ripples spread until the current overtakes them. Nobody hears, nobody sees, nobody cares. What a fool I have been to believe these romantic notions when the reality of seclusion is so much more grim! Whereas Lu Hong enjoyed a mountain fastness, cool and conducive to thought, I struggle with the heat and insects of a river flat where nothing is known or recorded. Even the river, at this time of year, boils with hatching creatures, metamorphosing with wings to take to the air and annoy me.

I had no choice in my exile. Young and inexperienced, I lacked the leavening social interaction of imperial service and intrigue: a grain-store of memories to draw upon in my solitude. Exiled to these flatlands, a place the polar opposite of the imperial court, my isolation is all the more complete. Here, my social interaction, apart from with White Beard of an evening, is with sheep.

I wonder how Lu Hong would have coped here, holding court with sheep amid the flies?

Our poets and historians have completely failed to prepare me for the reality of my new life. Indeed, they have made it harder for me than for Angee, who — happily for him — does not carry the baggage of literary notions with him. And Angee knows when to be decisive, responding by taking flight after the great event of the tallow-shed, whereas I remained rooted to the spot, and continue to be plagued by little things like flies.

I console myself with the notion that perhaps our ways of realising ourselves are meant to be different. But what sort of a life is this for one with such prospects as myself?

And what of the sheep who never emerged from the tallow-shed? What is the meaning of their life and death? I look around me as the surviving sheep continue grazing, serenely, almost beatifically, unconcerned by their sisters' demise and my impending crisis. I pick up a rock and throw it at the nearest

one. It hits her on the flanks and only then does she look up in surprise. Flies cling to her woolly head.

'Go away! Leave me alone! Shoo!' I hiss, waving my hands and running at her. She takes to her heels and the rest of the flock follow in her wake.

But it is no use: it only makes more work for me. Where they have run to I will have to follow, to gather them up for our return later. Wearily, I trudge after the stampeding flock, feeling even stupider than a sheep, wishing — like the shepherd-boy-cum-mystic, Wong Tai Zing — that I could turn my sheep into boulders so that I could concentrate on weightier matters. But stone sheep are the stuff of fables, more lies for the gullible spun by our illustrious historians.

Four centuries before Lu Hong, an incarnation of the rain priest, Chih Sung Tzu, the shepherd, Wong Tai Zing, spent his early childhood on Golden Flower Mountain in Chekiang Province, tending his flocks on the Hill of Red Pines. It was a lonely life: seldom visited by outsiders, the Hill was densely forested and often hidden in clouds and fog, masking the many caves pockmarking the mountain. Hungry, poor and lonely, he was blessed at 15 by a fairy who took pity on him, leading him to a stone cave and teaching him the secret of brewing the elixir of immortality. With this potion, he lived for 40 years in seclusion from the rest of the world until his brother found him. At first, his brother's efforts to find him were in vain, but he persevered and, grey-haired, he was finally led to the cave following the guidance of a Taoist fortune teller.

I imagine Angee and myself in the Wong brothers' situation. There is a shadow at the entrance of my cave and I look up from my meditation, seeing another human form, the first in four decades. Gradually, it dawns on me that the figure before me is not a wraith, not a spirit, but Angee.

'Little Brother, is it really you? After all this time?' His hair is long and straggled, his pigtail streaked with grey, his face lined and wrinkled.

'So you have found me,' I say at last, my voice croaky from long silence. 'What have you seen in your wanderings?'

But Angee, as always, ignores my question, asking another of his own: 'Little Brother, where are your sheep?'

I point across to the eastern slopes of Golden Flower Mountain, covered in white boulders. At the sound of my voice, they transform once more into the living creatures I am now chasing.

I have by this time come within 50 metres of the flock. Stragglers and lambs have by now joined the main group — all, that is, except me. Fortunately, in their blind charge, they veer away from the river and the gully, so there are no more broken limbs or drowning sheep requiring special attention.

I approach them cautiously. Regretting my blood-rush of before, I call out to them soothingly. At the sound of my voice, a few turn, gazing in my direction, while the majority simply continue eating grass. They might as well be Wong Tai Zing's flock of stone for all I can move them.

We have a longer walk than usual back to the outstation, and the sun is very low in the sky before we come in sight of the hurdles. At this, the sheep hurry on expectantly, their shadows casting before them. Finally, I catch up with my sheep and meet with White Beard at the hurdle-gate. His face is obscured under the brim of his hat. When he looks up, I fear he has the pox: his face is a mass of black spots, but I realise they are flies. Why not brush those annoying creatures off? How can he stand their dirty little feet tickling his eyes, his nostrils? Seeing my puzzled face, he smiles, but does not speak. I wave the flies on my face away and, in a few moments, a new batch settle where the last were.

Suddenly, White Beard grabs my wrists and speaks: 'Leave them be. If you disturb them another group will only come to take their place.'

The new ones crawl and sip at my skin like the ones just gone. I desperately want to brush my hand across my face. But, in White Beard's firm grip, my hands stay clear of my face.

'Don't disturb them and they'll settle down soon enough, like sheep.'

So he claims that the flies grazing on my face are like the sheep grazing in the field. If that is the case, I could as readily turn them into boulders as well. This is almost worse than water torture, as flies crawl around my nostrils, tickling the hairs inside.

But then something marvellous happens. The flies stop walking everywhere, settling in the one place, stop tickling my skin. And, because they are on my face already, there is no room for others to land and irritate me.

For White Beard, everything comes back to sheep; but this time it actually makes some sense to me as well. Is this the answer, to accept and not fight your circumstances? To put aside dissatisfaction and desires and be content with what one has? To accept the hand of fate and make the most of the life dealt you?

My head still buzzing with the stories of Lu Hong and Wong Tai Zing, I look at the old shepherd strangely. Who is he really, I wonder, and what does he want of me? But he only smiles at me, his milky eyes watching me carefully.

Feeling the tension drain from my body, White Beard grunts and lets go of my wrists. I want to smile at White Beard, but I worry that this will disturb the flies once more. My eyes express my wordless gratitude for his teaching.

And then I sneeze, a great sneeze that clears my nose and my face. The insects fly clear of the gale-force wind shattering the calm of their landing place. Now I can smile and White Beard bursts out laughing. Gobs of snot cling to my lips and dangle from my chin: a silvery beard of my own. I laugh with him too as I wipe my face on the back of my sleeve, making a snail-trail, a silver rainbow on my sleeve.

We herd the sheep and White Beard stops one that has a funny walk. It is the one I threw the stone at. He looks at me puzzled and I shake my head. Then, laughing, he gives her a good crack on the rump and she shoots into the yard with the others.

'Chops for dinner?' It is neither a question nor a statement; it is simply the way things are.

I nod. I will accept chops as calmly, as resignedly as I accept the flies on my face.

52.
DANCING IN THE FIELDS

AND YET I must confess that eating chops remains a challenge for me. I cannot wave my hand and shoo away my deep-felt cultural reservations like a bunch of flies; which in turn also continue to present a challenge. Whenever I feel bored, I cannot help but absently flick my hand across my face. But clearly something was revealed to me that afternoon over the flies. I cannot say what it was, but I feel different, renewed. Inspired, even.

White Beard is alone, more alone than anyone I have ever known, and more completely satisfied in his solitude than I have ever imagined possible. He is a better example for this lonely shepherd than Lu Hong with his imperial sponsor and Wong Tai Zing with his mediating fairy.

I would like to sit with White Beard around the campfire of an evening, learn from his example, but he has reverted to his solitary habits. Frustrated, I listen to him intoning to the yarded sheep. So, instead of learning from my master, I will take the next-best option. If the sheep have absorbed his teachings from their nightly sermons, I reason, then I will seek to learn from the sheep.

I sit and watch the sheep, using them as the subject and the object of my meditation, but it is hard. Until I realise that the sheep have not changed; it is I. They are as they have always been, serene and stupid, standing around in one place until it is time to move on, eating and drinking, contented and

undemanding. My increased knowledge of my ovine charges appears to be the only thing that has changed. But with a changed perspective, does not the whole world change? The world is only an illusion, Lord Buddha taught, and all we can do is change our impression of it. So what fear does death, another illusion, hold?

If my body is willing, my conscious effort attuned to my meditation, I still cannot control my thoughts. It is boring, and my mind cannot fail but wander, back to the China of my upbringing. Try as I might, I cannot get my mind back on to the straight and narrow of concentrating on the sheep before me. I fight myself, think all the more about things I should not be thinking of, things that do not belong out here: my thwarted ambitions, the imperial honours, my missed opportunity for service.

I cannot say why I have such trouble meditating. Other scholars faced down boredom and overcame it, embracing the tedium of existence: carvers of jade balls within balls, an excruciatingly slow activity, fraught with frustration when a fine stem of curved jade could snap at any moment; or spirituals who carve verses of the Buddha on rice grains, cutting between heartbeats. Why do it? It makes no sense unless you think of the challenge and the concentration, through the intense bodily focus, achieving a sort of meditation and release.

Sitting cross-legged under my gum tree, concentrating on my breathing rising and falling steadily, seeking to make my body at one with my surroundings, the outside world still continually intervenes; and my confidence withers. It is like when I was distracted from my studies by Second Wife, although I no longer blame her for that, recognising it now as the first step of many leading me here. For a moment, I delude myself with the notion that if I could only recapture that level of discipline, enlightenment would surely follow; but I abandon this notion as vanity and an illusion, an attachment to my former life that is no longer relevant here.

Growth hurts. I learn to welcome the pain, seeing clearly through tearful eyes, eyes watering from cramped leg muscles and aching heart, and riding it through as another barrier, another illusion. Slowly, on cramped legs, I walk the narrow path of simplicity before venturing on to the open highway of compassionate action. Alone in the fields, compassion appears to be an illusion, except in the case of my sheep.

And, without realising it, I have become a good shepherd to my flock.

When they wander far off, I follow them. I uncross my legs, get up and walk the narrow path of simplicity to a new resting place under the shade of a river gum. Patiently, I lead them home along the open highway of compassionate action, home to White Beard's wordless greeting and tally, my wash in the river and chops for dinner. I sit among the sheep of a night, listening to my sage's reedy-voiced monologue from the guard-box.

I am in the sheep and the sheep are in me. Steadily, I face down my boredom, accepting my routine, living supple not solid, expecting nothing, patiently waiting for something to reveal itself.

I recall my mopping on the ship, the focal point in my journey here, the watching and smallness, a better preparation for this life than my earlier book-learning.

I think of my life these days, and how my own rustic hardships are not so far removed from the lives of countless of my countrymen, tilling rice fields barefoot, toes splayed as they drag their plough through the mud, conical hats rendering them faceless and insignificant like ants. There was a time when I looked down from above on my fellows, toiling insignificantly, or so I thought. Now I am a man among men, neither better nor worse, honest in my toil. And I feel the warm glow of compassion welling up inside me.

But I check myself, for it is a false glow. My newfound identification with my absent countrymen is in danger of

becoming another fetish to worship, a barrier to insight. But as rapidly as I cast aside illusions, others spring up to replace them. What of my newfound concern for my sheep's welfare, my belated pleasure in my shepherding skills — perhaps this too is founded in pride rather than humility? Aiee, my flock are a constant distraction, but still I persevere.

Don't block the thoughts, I tell myself, accept them, see where they lead. I think about the exams I planned to sit, about life as a county, provincial and finally a national mandarin serving the Emperor. I see myself sitting in the imperial waiting room in my fine robes, waiting for the Son of Heaven to enter and condescend to authorise my documents with his seal. But why this thought now, I wonder? What relevance is this reminder of abandoned ambition? Still, I let it lead on. If, as White Beard suggests, everything comes back to sheep, then my imperial service ambitions could find a home in these fields too.

And then it hits me. My insight is as profoundly, as physically felt as if someone has punched me in the stomach. I double over, gasping, my hands on my knees, my lips almost kissing the ground before me.

Here, where I sit and idle away my time till my flock are ready to move on, is as surely a waiting room as any I would have found in the imperial palaces. I have discovered it is possible to be as bored in the fields as in the Emperor's service. What has eluded me until now is the recognition that boredom is the same everywhere, whether crawling after sheep or waiting for an emperor's seal.

Some of you might fancy that I am the Emperor in the fields, telling the animals when to move on and when to go? One leading the many. But let this shepherd assure you it is the very opposite.

Have you not seen, as I have learned over many moons now, how completely these sheep rule my daily existence? Are not sheep, these mute beasts, like emperors: getting you to move on when they have strayed far away, forcing you to stay when

you would rather be elsewhere, when they have found a patch of grass they wish to enjoy awhile? Making you second-guess their needs and desires? And you bored, waiting for something to happen? As inscrutable and quixotic in their actions as any senile emperor? Encouraging your own murderous thoughts at times?

And I realise that, in one way at least, I have arrived. I have achieved an equivalence of function as a shepherd as I would have being a mandarin. I, First Son, have realised Father's ambitions for me, in achieving pure boredom sublimated through service.

It seems paradoxical, and it is. But is this not the Tao of Shepherding, which White Beard has mastered, and which he has unveiled to me?

Confucius taught that filial piety reigns supreme, but there is an earlier, higher duty to oneself. The duty of every human being is to search out their spiritual father, for under his guidance one can be freed from the cycle of reincarnation and return to his original home in the spirit world. I consider the long shadow Father has cast over my existence, his values instilled in me; and yet there was more that he was unable to provide, and which it would be unreasonable for a dutiful son to expect Father to provide. I reverenced Father and Mother, their role in giving me this life, but to have found a spiritual father, a sage such as I have discovered in White Beard in these at-first unpromising fields — now that is something!

Everything comes back to sheep — I recall his reedy voice from the guard-box, floating out over our flock at night. Or is there something more? Trembling, I wonder whether he is a bodhisattva in our midst, and what his message might be for me. Patience, I counsel myself, all will be revealed in time. I know already that with his guidance, I will be able to put behind me the worldly expectations of my physical father and cast aside feelings of guilt and inadequacy and betrayal arising from my involvement with Second Wife. Indirectly or otherwise, that

tangled liaison is what brought me to the fields, which has — in an extraordinary way — provided my salvation.

I smile beatifically at my sheep. What would Father make of my insight, its fundamental challenge to the ambitions he fostered in me?

The revelation that boredom is the outcome of decades of effort, preparing for and sitting three sets of exams, the ultimate reward for a mandarin or imperial attendant of the highest order, is not a happy one. The material comforts and influence in matters of State, which accompany such a weighty office, are undoubtedly pleasant, but hardly compensation for a wasted life. So why would any sensible person want the position? Yet it is also easy to understand why, having secured the rank, one would not devalue the achievement, as doing so would render one's own efforts a waste of time.

Seen in this light, why should imperial service be a state to be aspired to? My mind races on, rending the intellectual structures of my education, clearing my mind by dismantling, brick by weighty brick, the towering cliff-top edifice that is Confucianism. For the chimeras of influence and wealth? Bricks crumble in my mind's eye, a hole in the outer wall grows. For the prospect of idle time? Well, I have achieved that in the fields without the need to sit exams. A whole wall caves inwards, dust and dirt belching from its maw.

The tower leans and groans under its own weight. I walk up to the tower, look at its lichen-clad walls. While I am not a rich man here in material terms, I have food and clothing more than enough for my needs. The tower topples and falls, stones bouncing off the cliff-face, splashing into the water below, sinking without trace. Others tumble and rest on the hilltop, but they will soon disappear as well, as the grass grows taller, wild and untended by man, covering the ruins of what was once a mighty structure dominating the landscape. And on the grass, ewes graze placidly with their lambs dancing in the fields.

I am freer than I have ever been, than I could ever become in China. I have nothing superfluous out here — and that is everything I need.

I look at my own charges all around me; I watch the lambs dancing and tumbling in the long grass, and I chuckle with delight at their simple joy. It is a beautiful day, the sun clear overhead in a pretty cloud-dappled sky, with a gentle breeze. Standing up, my mind cleared of the rubble of Confucianism, I feel light and insubstantial, dizzy almost, as if I could float away with the clouds. I watch the lambs, wanting to dance with them, but feeling shy.

I imagine Second Wife watching me, surprised at such indecorum.

What silliness, I tell myself, there is nobody to observe you here. And what if there was anyway? It is a beautiful day, a revelation. As is every day lived fully.

I move one foot, then the other, slowly at first so as not to startle my sheep. The lambs continue their merry game. I jump from one foot to the other, awkwardly, then more fluently, moving freely until I am dancing. My arms rise of their own accord clear of my body, whirling freely, as the remaining shackles slip from me, and I feel what it is to live like a sheep.

My lambs and I dance, while the ewes munch on, ignoring our delight. And the image of Second Wife slips from my mind, as Lu Hong and Wong Tai Zing join in my dance, holding hands with me in a circle.

53.
LIFE WITHOUT BARRIERS

RED DEVIL WAS paying us another visit when the rains began.

The clouds in the sky darkened, as they had many times before without giving up their precious water. But the sheep knew this time: turning their tails towards the stormy horizon, they huddled together in rows radiating outwards. We could smell it before we could see or feel it, a musty, rich odour, which cleaned your nostrils; and then fat drops, as if in slow motion, bursting on impact, scattering their moisture in the dust. Soon the land was sodden, and we were too, slick and joyful, our clothes clinging to our skin. But the sheep stood still, impervious to the wet, the lanolin in their fleeces keeping them dry, as the rain washed over them, the dust streaking their fleeces, water puddling in the gouges of their hooves.

It was too wet for a fire outdoors, so we used the fireplace in the hut. Fortunately, we had maintained a stack of dry tinder and logs in the chimneybreast. Unblocking the chimney proved a challenge at first — possums roosting there protested at their eviction — but we had a little fire going soon enough. At first, the hut filled with smoke, which stung our eyes and throats, but wiggling my shepherd's crook in the cavity released a pile of soot and wet sticks — a disused nest of some sort — which came crashing down into the grate, nearly putting out our fire.

Looking at Red Devil huddled near the fire, his wet clothes steaming, I recalled the rains shortly after I had first

arrived: how miserable I was then! But now, it is merely a minor physical discomfort, which does not disrupt my equanimity any more than it does the sheep, who continue to graze the wet grass, snug and secure in their water-resistant woolly coats. White Beard has given me a spare oilskin, an old crinkled scrap of material with a hole in its middle; and an old misshapen hat, greased with lanolin, protects my head. My skin feels clammy and smells of lanolin, but that is all right.

The rain eases up after several days, and Red Devil takes advantage of the break in the weather to depart while I am out with my flock. Later in the day we are joined by a sizeable contingent of the striplings from the station. Now we are a camp of a dozen: striplings, a few women and children thrown in for good measure. And their dogs.

Women at last! After so long in exclusively male company, I think sadly of Angee who, had he been more patient, would have found what he most wanted.

Clearly, something is going to happen, and I look to White Beard for guidance: 'Rain pushing river up to flooding. Tomorrow we go walkabout with sheep.'

I look at the numerous hurdles that make up the yard. Even with a dozen of us, we cannot carry a great number: they are far too heavy.

White Beard reads my thoughts: 'No fences where we're going. We are our own fences,' he says.

I cannot imagine how we will manage sheep without fences; and I ponder on the words White Beard has used, which could be read on several levels. Does he mean we will have to fence in the sheep ourselves? Or does he mean that we put up barriers to our own experience, that we limit ourselves? Smiling at my frown, White Beard pats me on the shoulder, a rare intimacy, and I stop worrying.

But there is more to come. Tonight, White Beard slaughters a sheep for our combined dinner, while the striplings tear apart one of the hurdles for firewood under his mild

approving gaze. I watch, struggling not to protest, fighting the voice within me. And yet, as they prepare a fire in a pit between the wet stones, I am astounded at their bushcraft in lighting damp timber. I turn to White Beard, who smiles calmly and nods, and I intuit.

We are revolting against our own routines. Permitting the destruction of all we hold dear — burning the hurdles he has laboured daily to maintain, and killing the sheep we have spent all day and night guarding and protecting — hastens the destruction of our existing order. What were the events in the tallow-shed if not the upending of our world? I think of Angee and wonder where he is now, how his lessons in living are proceeding. Do not fear what you cannot control, I tell myself; be like the surviving sheep. Like the survivors, you have been spared from the flames of hellfire for another purpose; let it unfold in its own time.

The flayed carcass hangs by its hind legs from the branch of a nearby tree, blood draining from the slash in its throat into a basin below. In the meantime, a few women clean the fleece and skin: it will make a good wrap for a child on a cool evening such as tonight.

Shivering, I draw closer to my sage, who speaks gently: 'We have debts to these people. This is their land and they allow us to use it,' he says. 'But we never give anything back. It is time to share what we have.'

I nod, and see for the first time from the striplings' perspective. If, as White Beard said earlier, Red Devil has paper saying the land is his, but it belongs to these people — the striplings, their mothers and sisters — then it makes sense that we should slaughter a sheep or two for our travelling party. From the striplings' perspective, it is a perfectly reasonable levy on Red Devil's use of their land. A different logic informs White Beard's actions tonight: people need feeding, and fewer sheep need fewer hurdles to fence them in at night.

After the carcass has drained, a few of the striplings take it down from the tree and carry it over to the pit where they toss it onto the ashes. They cover the sheep with grass, then push the burning hurdles back on top before covering the lot with earth.

Usually, I help White Beard with the cooking, when it is just the two of us, but tonight we are the guests and they the hosts. I realise that — my sage apart — I am the oldest male in the group. The women are of all ages, from young girls to grandmothers; but the males are all striplings, beardless youths. A couple of them I know a little from the lambing time and I realise that my continuing and unbroken close association with White Beard could mark me to some as an initiate.

White Beard is respected not for his white skin but for his white beard, and in that I realise that the striplings and I share a common respect for the wisdom of the aged, which crosses our cultures. As a group, the striplings take their lead from an older woman, who is on familiar terms with White Beard. He calls her Auntie. Their share of the meal preparation finished, White Beard and Auntie sit back together playing with a few of the children.

Not wishing to presume a seniority I have not earned with the group, I hastily make tea in the billy, adding a few of the leaves and herbs, resting in a boat-shaped carrier, which the women used for lining the sheep's cavity.

After dinner, the striplings, women and children settle themselves down near the fire to rest. I hold back, uncertain, wondering whether I should sleep here in the open as well; but I take my cue from White Beard, who retires as usual to his wheeled guard-hut.

In the sputtering light of my mutton-fat lamp, I look around the little hut, the twin pallets with their fleeces and the sheepskin door-flap. I pull down the door-flap and here, in the dark, the reassuring smell of Angee has lingered longer than that of the recent occupation by Red Devil. It has become a home of sorts for me in the season we have been living here.

Undressing, I feel the familiar tug of my workman's clothes: my smock, torn and patched; my boots — how much harder than slippers were these, and how my tender feet protested at first! Savouring my last sleep in my old familiar hut, tired and awash with emotions, I fall asleep.

A bird's squawking breaks into my dreams: and I wake cold and stiff, cocooned in my sheepskin blanket. The hut feels dank and empty, the shell of a home. I go outside and find bodies stirring around the camp. Going down to the river to fill the billy, I am joined by a few of the striplings and we race each other across the still-damp grass. Suddenly, one stops, bidding the rest of us to do the same.

He raises a finger to his lips. '*Wagga*,' he whispers, extending his fingers, his brown eyes wide.

'Wagga?' I repeat, not knowing what it means or where it is.

Then I hear it again, caw-cawing like the crying of a child, coming from a black raven-like bird some distance away, picking worms and grubs from the dew-damp grass. The stripling points to the bird and then himself, suggesting their connection. Then he shouts something and his brother bird rises into the air and we, our arms extended like birds in flight, run on down to the river. I fly across the grass like a wagga-bird, with bird's eyes seeing details I would ordinarily miss — the grubs and worms wriggling in the moist earth, fat jewels of dewdrops on grass stems — and come to a halt at the brown belt of water.

With the recent heavy rains, the river has risen by at least my height and is lapping at the tree trunks lining the raised bank. A fast-moving mass of brown, any sheep unlucky enough to slip in while taking a drink would be unable to get out. How much longer before we start losing sheep on this run? Surrounded by water on three sides, it will be only a matter of time before the river overflows its banks and starts sweeping them away. And, once flooded, the land will be useless for grazing until the water recedes. I worry about our little outstation

being inundated, but the markers of our occupation — the hurdles and the little hut — are still some metres above the waterline.

I boil the water and make tea, and take a mug to White Beard in his guard-box. Watched by the striplings, I tap on the side flap and he throws it open, looking around with wild-eyed incomprehension before his eyes come to rest on me: 'Sheepy!'

He clambers out of the guard-box, not without difficulty, and takes his tea. I follow him in his morning inspection of the flock. Every element of our exchange is observed with great interest by the striplings.

'Water is high,' I observe.

'Time to move on,' White Beard nods, tipping his head away from the river.

I shudder as I recall the last time we herded sheep to the south. White Beard's face darkens. It is a painful memory for him too.

'Not back there,' he reassures me. He points further to our left, a path skirting east of the slopes between here and the home station, and beyond to other suitable land. He directs me to open the hurdle-gate and shoos at the sheep with his crook from the other side of the yard. The sheep scurry out into the open grass, not knowing what the day holds for them.

I go back to the hut to collect my oilskin and hat. I roll and stuff them in the small satchel I carry into the fields with me most days. I feel under the sheepskin for my little cricket-box. Its image of cloud-ringed mountains can still be made out dimly through the dust and scratches; and I slip it into my satchel as well. Coming out of the doorway, I meet up with White Beard. He has no bag.

'What about your things?' I ask. 'And food?'

'The land will provide,' he says simply. Then he walks away from the camp site, not turning back, recognising that the force of his absence will drag us after him.

And so it is: first the women, balancing small children and their coolamons on their hips, follow in his wake. Behind them, the sheep herded on by the striplings and their dogs; and, bringing up the rear, as if reluctant to leave the camp, myself. I look forlornly at our billy-can and frypan resting on the fire-stones. Unsure of what to take and what to leave behind, I dally, until the others have got some distance ahead. Then, like a stray sheep left behind grazing and looking up to find itself separated from its flock, I run after the others, leaving the camp near empty-handed as if we are just going away for the day.

As we climb, away from the river flats, to country the floods will not submerge, the landscape changes, subtly at first, then more pronounced. Up here the grass is rougher, more tussocky and wild, interspersed with waist-high stalks of thistle and other fleece hazards. But their purple bud-heads are welcome in this palette of dull greens, as are the flashes of colour as a bird wings overhead. Trees are fewer away from the waterline, and the birds concentrate in these to watch us. Apart from the ubiquitous cockatoos and parrots perched high, their heads tilted to one side eyeballing us, the crows the striplings collectively call wagga-wagga squawk and caw-caw in the air, wheeling and diving at the women's coolamons, making clear their desire to have none of us, but partaking of our feed if possible. Kangaroos stand up in the high grass, observing at a safe distance our passing and the sudden presence of so many ruminants competing for grass.

And, in the middle of all this, the sheep, walking and running a little, then stopping to nibble grass and take stock of their sisters. It is slow progress, but then we are in no hurry. We have no set destination, no deadline for arrival: travelling is the thing. I take my cue from the striplings, who are watchful and attentive, alert to changes in their surroundings — reverent almost — and I recognise that, for the time being at least, they are in their element.

In the evening we stop and make camp under a stand of gum trees, their bark striated with what appears to be script, but

which I know from observation in the fields are insect trails. Coils of peeling bark hang down like scrolls. I start as one of the women shrieks and runs towards the tree, shoves her arm deep into a cleft in the trunk and pulls out of the hollow a clawing, hissing ball of fur. She smiles, her teeth brilliant, the possum protesting, until she smacks its head against the tree trunk and it falls still. She tosses the dead possum into her coolamon filled with nuts and berries gathered during the day's walk.

As we men look after the sheep, the women and children prepare the food. The lizards are slit open with a sharp stone and the stringy guts thrown to the dogs. The possum is skinned and cut into pieces. White Beard supplements these with another sheep, which he separates from the flock, flicking it expertly onto its back and dragging it, bleating piteously, by its forelegs across the ground, to where the striplings wait. The terrified sheep upends itself and runs away, chased by the striplings and their dogs, laughing with delight.

I am struck by how the remaining sheep, despite having one of their number killed and skinned and cut into pieces before their eyes, hang near the camp. While I worried that they would drift and separate, making their overnight care problematic, they continue to cluster tightly.

White Beard sees me watching the flock.

'They don't know how to be free any more,' he says. 'And you?'

I shake my head, unable to answer. Perhaps there is safety in numbers, in that if one of you is to be lost, the others will survive.

Unused to the open, I rest by the fire, huddled close like the sheep with the women and children, my head pillowed on my satchel. Children sprawl left and right, their faces soft and unformed in sleep; the younger ones cuddling their mothers and sisters, the older ones cuddling a dog for warmth. I have not slept this crowded since our boat journey here. And I wonder how Angee has managed on his nights outdoors. There are

unfamiliar noises, which the walls of my hut filtered out: the scrabbling of a nocturnal mammal through the grass, a breath of air rustling the leaves, the yip and cry of dreaming children and dogs are enough to startle me into wakefulness all over again.

And, barely audible, the chatter of low voices as the watchmen-striplings talk to each other to stay alert. Alert for what? We are completely unprotected, completely open to the environment. I cannot sleep as I lie worrying about attacks from night monsters, listening.

I have seen a number of huge burrows dug into banks or under rocks, a great midden of earth piled high at its entrance. The holes were quite large enough for a man to crawl into; but that might mean facing the monster slumbering within. The dogs sniff at the entrances to these holes, growl and run off. I fear the nocturnal creatures that dug these, wonder whether they eat sheep, and whether they are on the move as we rest.

Anxiously, I listen to the striplings' voices and look at the moon, shining bright, surrounded by the stars, in the vast vault overhead. My people looked and saw toads, saw the hare in the moon pounding the elixir of immortality; I wonder what stories these people tell to explain patterns in its luminosity. While I cannot understand their words, I can tell from the tone that their discussions are serious rather than joking. When they camped at our outstation previously, they played cards and drank firewater with Angee, but now they seem too busy to bother with distractions such as cards.

As the days progress in the fields, wandering with the sheep a little here and there, I take pleasure in watching the striplings as they reacquaint themselves with their land. As I hear their laughing and whooping to each other over each speared kangaroo, each lizard dragged struggling from its tree-root hole, as I note their awed silence around a cluster of ancient rocks piled like marbles, I begin to recognise how these people are in and of this land in a that way my sheep and I are not.

I finger the cricket-box in my satchel. For so long it has been my amulet, giving me a sense of connectedness to other places. After Angee's departure, it was my remaining link with my past. A little box with my memories trapped inside. Everything my culture stands for, and everything that is not in this new land. My culture is one of boxes, of barriers affording privacy: of life lived within walled compounds, a world separate and complete, as in Father's Villa of Tranquillity. But here there are no walls, no barriers to experience. The striplings are completely open to their environment, its benign and malign influences, its droughts and floods. And I know that White Beard expects no less of me, as he urges me to experience life without barriers. That is why he left everything behind at the outstation.

What are boxes, I wonder as I stand under the open sky, what purpose do boxes serve? Are they great walls keeping the barbarians out, or hurdles keeping night monsters from the sheep? Do boxes serve to isolate people, to restrict perception? There are boxes in our minds as well, of cultural superiority handed down through long learning, but these psychological constructs are harder to smash down than the physical barriers.

In my cricket-box view of this world, all I can see are isolated details, details that I have focused on to the detriment of the whole picture. Last season, when I spent time in the fields alone, I saw things in terms of my own culture; and how could I not? Focusing on discrete details, I saw the flowers, the birds, the trees, as a Ming artist would treat them, layered with isolated meaning. Like the unfilled space in a Taoist landscape, so were the vast skies and flat lands of this country at first.

But now, as I look at the land around me, layered with meaning to the striplings, I begin to see something else in what seemed like an emptiness to me, and I recognise that what surrounds us represent a veritable treatise on living for my stripling companions. Whereas I have relied on volumes locked carefully away in a library, their references are all around us.

And I realise that I have been as good as illiterate as I focused on details, plucking items in isolation from their surroundings to fill the boxes in my mind.

I recall the once-familiar images by Masters of the Taoist landscape. I studied these at the Pavilion of Stone, their effects and influences, but their names elude me now. Cheerfully, I realise it does not matter any more; I am no longer studying for an exam but living my life alongside my companions, as freely and as fully as I can.

When you look at the landscape long enough, sometimes the landscape looks back at you.

As we drift through the day, the sheep between us, I think more about what White Beard said about the devils' magic, how a piece of paper says the land belongs to Red Devil instead of to the striplings. We are not so unlike after all. I know keenly how difficult it is to lose your home — I who have lost my land and home through kidnapping — and I appreciate all the more the privilege of being with these people travelling through their land, of their sharing with me. I take comfort from their presence, their sense of belonging; I feel their energy in the land protecting us. They know its connections, understand and respect its interrelationships: how kangaroo is to grass is to cricket is to crow is to person. And what the rocks, trees, hills and rivers mean to the whole.

Drifting with my sheep, lost in my thoughts, I step into a burrow opening, twisting my ankle. I limp on awhile, but the pain gets worse and, by afternoon, I am crippled. I fear being left behind as the others move on, but an amazing thing happens. Several of the women, who have had little to do with me, wander away from the trees along the stream to an area where the mud is thick and black. They fill a coolamon with the black mud and Auntie smears that black mud over my ankle till my leg is painted all over.

It feels good to relax, and the pains are not so sharp when I lie with my back against the warm rock like Auntie suggests. As she leans over me, kneading the mud into my ankle, I see the

scar patterns on her arms and torso. They resemble patterns I have seen carved on tree trunks, but these markers are on living flesh, moving and alive. As she massages my ankle, I wonder at the story of the land carved into her own flesh. And I miss the warmth of flesh, actual flesh and not the wraiths of intimacy, for the first time in moons.

While Auntie ministers to my swollen ankle, I watch the other women as they gather reeds along the stream. They place bundles in their coolamons and I think of an earlier waterhole and of gathering reeds with Angee while Red Devil slept in the noonday sun.

White Beard notices my changed expression as we sit around the campfire in the evening, waiting for the sheep and lizards to cook.

'Why this land taken from the striplings by Red Devil?' I ask.

He laughs and explains to Auntie beside him. She smiles and reaches across for the coolamon filled with reeds.

'This be my man—'

White Beard interprets as Auntie picks a reed stalk from the coolamon.

'—he be a strong fella-stick, but I be stronger and see what happens.'

Auntie bends the stalk in her hands until it snaps in half. She tosses the two pieces aside and picks up a bundle of reeds.

'Now, this be our people—' Auntie shakes the reed bundle and it sways in her hands. '—it be a weak floppy one all alone, but together no one can break us.'

Auntie tosses the reeds onto the fire and they flare up before us. I shield my eyes for an instant, but when I pull my hands away, I see White Beard smiling triumphantly at me.

Tonight is just another night around the fire — men watching the lizard skin bubble and split, women talking softly among themselves, preparing nuts and fruit in season, children running around us yelling and screaming, pulling hair — and yet

tonight is different. Everywhere I feel traces of my old life. I think of the time Angee and I have been here; and remember other fires we have sat around together, playing cards and drinking. I feel the warmth of other fires in a faraway courtyard under an ancient gingko tree.

I pull my satchel towards me, spilling its contents on the earth before me. The women, sensing something is coming, fall silent, watchful. I look to White Beard, but he is impassive, waiting.

But the striplings are less reserved. One takes up my cricket-box and starts jumping and leaping around the fire, miming me in the long grass as they have seen uncomprehendingly from afar. Another pulls the hat down over his head and mimes leaning down before a pile of rocks, making offerings, lighting twigs in the fire and inserting these into cracks in the rocks, bowing and bending. I laugh to see my former seriousness ridiculed so mercilessly.

The game grows as a third, emboldened by his brothers, grabs a sheepskin and tosses it over one of the women and proceeds to mount the sheepskin. Her coolamon spills and under the fleece she shrieks with laughter, and we all laugh with recognition at this image of Angee come to life before us as well.

I call to the stripling with the cricket-box and show him how to open the concealed panels, miming how the box is used for housing your catch. Opening the panel, I mime grabbing a wriggling insect between thumb and forefinger and placing it carefully inside the chamber. He mimes popping the cricket into his mouth. I mime listening to it singing; then challenge him to a cricket-wrestle. We scramble together in the dirt, laughing until the tears stream down our cheeks.

And I realise I can never go home. Even if I were to return to Tong An County and the Villa of Tranquillity, it would not be the Tong An I once knew. I have retained their memories static, in my little cricket-box, frozen in time. But she will have grown older, remaining with Father in their isolation all this

time; and I am not the same quavering scholar any more. I could no more make sense of my new-found feelings with them than I could with one of my flock.

I do not even need to speak. Slowly, around the camp an aura passes, and the striplings stop their games and look at me. Nodding, they come over and sit down in a circle facing the fire. When we all are seated, I gather up the cricket-box and toss it on the fire.

It takes a good while to ignite and I admit that I am tempted to reach in and retrieve the box, to hang on to this piece of my old life.

But then Auntie starts singing, a deep nasal song whose tremors at first distract and then move me. The women and the striplings join in, their voices a low throb as the wood takes the flame, giving off a sweet, incense-like smell. The little ivory image of the mountain resists awhile the flames. I think of a now-distant land as I sit and watch it burn, mesmerised by the dancing flames, until with a crack the ivory image comes clean and disappears into the ashes.

Perhaps it is the incense, but my eyes sting and water. I wipe my face with the back of my hand, streak ash and dirt over my face as if in mourning for a past life.

My spirit free, I wrap the old oilskin around my shoulders and curl up for the night with my people. Tomorrow we will move on, leaving this place of memories behind. But tonight, I have felt the warmth of Second Wife close to me once more, as I say goodbye to my memories.

54.
DEVILS' JUSTICE

ANGEE SCRATCHED IN the dirt with his makeshift hoe, a wire pole with its end hammered flat. The Keeper of the Keys let him out to do this — and for this he was supposed to be grateful? The garden Angee tended ran along the full length of the building that housed prisoners and where, in a separate room, the Keeper of the Keys slept.

Constructed of wooden slabs, the buildings were not unlike the old shepherds' hut he had shared with Little Brother. Halfway up the slab walls a mud line marked the recent floods when the Murrumbidgee had swelled and risen above its banks, inundating the main street and threatening the township. Angee was glad he had not been here then, having to watch with dread fascination the water's rapid rise from his cell window. From the mud lines, he could tell that he would easily have drowned in his cell.

Other slab buildings enclosed either end of the garden, forming a courtyard of sorts, with the fourth side open to the main street and the curiosity of foreign devils passing by on foot or horse. As Angee dug and scraped, he noted how they rode much better than he did, sitting high and relaxed in the saddle. Perhaps that was why he had not got very far. That, and his obvious physical difference: the astonished stares he drew as he gardened constantly reminded him of his otherness in this country.

A large black bird landed on the grass near where he worked, regarding Angee, its head cocked on its side, cawing like a demanding child. For the first time in many moons, he thought of Young Hoa, his own abandoned boy in Xiamen. He turned up a worm and tossed it in the bird's direction.

He had seen many of these birds in his travels, before being brought here.

It all seemed so long ago now, that day when the world turned upside down. After taking Red Devil's horse and kit, he had with difficulty trotted down the road by moonlight. Without much of an idea where he was headed, it was hard to keep up the pace once the sun heated up — the horse seemed to drift and want to rest. As he lay in the shade of trees, the horse tied to a branch eating grass nearby, he wondered where he might go. Everything more than a few *li* from their hut was unfamiliar to him. He was probably better hiding in daylight, but he wanted to put more distance between himself and that place. He felt better after a few swigs of firewater from a bottle Red Devil had thoughtfully stowed in his saddlebag.

At the first fork in the track, he turned west, following the setting sun, away from the direction they had come from when they first arrived. It was all new to him now; he had no idea where he was going, as long as it was away from the station and that hateful tallow-shed. Once or twice a rider passed him, but Angee pulled his hat low over his face and kicked the horse along.

At first, he avoided the other properties strung along the river: a sole Celestial on a horse like this was bound to raise suspicions. So he stuck to the back ways, crossing fields. But after a few days, his provisions running low, he had no alternative but to head where people lived to seek food.

Outstations seemed like good places to find food and were likely to be unoccupied during the day when shepherds like himself and Little Brother were out in the fields. He tried a couple of these and was not disappointed, managing to supplement his provisions with meat, bread and even firewater.

He scraped around the roots of a rosebush, removing what he thought were weed bulbs, although with these devil-plants it was impossible to tell what was weed and what was flower. Gardening for the Keeper of the Keys meant a change from sitting in the stifling heat of his cell all day long, listening to the groans of drunks nightmaring — or worse, sobering up to the knowledge of where they were — or the distraction of working women in the adjacent cell. It was the closest he had been to women in a long time and, while he could not see them — the cell window was set too high in the wall — he could hear their voices and smell their scent. No soft-speaking flower girls these; their taunts and provocations shouted through the high window linking their cells were almost too much to bear.

He kept his head down, digging hard in the dirt.

'Chinaman!' a slurred voice yelled at him.

Had they put him up to this provocation? Angee shifted his balance to his rear leg, hoe-tip slightly clear of the ground, ready in self-defence. Only then looking up, he faced the Keeper of the Keys. He seemed to be drunk again, his hair sticking up all ways, a stupid leering smile on his stupid, smug red face.

But his companion was of far greater interest. His devil-clothes notwithstanding, the stranger's honey face and almond eyes marked him as one of Angee's countrymen. Angee nearly dropped his hoe in surprise as he heard only the second voice since the boat speak language to him.

'I'm from the devil court. I've come here to help you tell your story in devil-talk to the devil judge tomorrow.'

Who was this brother-stranger who worked with the devils? Angee was disappointed it was not Little Brother standing before him offering assistance. Did Little Brother even know what difficulties Angee had got himself into?

The Keeper of the Keys laughed and staggered back inside. Angee and the stranger continued to regard each other warily, until the sounds of soft laughter began again.

'You ever get a go yourself?' he asked Angee.

Angee shook his head: 'At least I get to do the gardening, get out of the cell.'

'Where you from?'

'Xiamen.'

'I know that from the way you talk. Where exactly?'

'Tong An County.'

'Ah, my mother's from Tong An but my father's from the south, from See Yap.'

That explained the odd inflexion in his language, Angee thought, with every fifth or sixth word a different Hokkien to what he spoke with Little Brother.

'But I grew up with Mother,' he continued. 'Father didn't know about me, it seems.'

Angee nodded. There were lots of people passing through Xiamen and it was not hard to guess what sort of work Brother See Yap's mother did.

'Still, I've come good now. What are you doing locked up here?'

'I don't know. I ran away from Red Devil's station, but I haven't been able to speak to anybody here. Nobody knows language.'

'I do. Tell me what happened.'

Angee looked at Brother See Yap warily: you could not trust a Kwangtung man. He wished Little Brother was here instead of this bastard son of a flower girl. Having spent so long together in the fields, sharing the highs and lows, Little Brother understood, without all these questions.

'I could not stay there any more.'

'Why?'

It was no use explaining to a stranger, so Angee fell back on a secondary irritant: 'I hardly ever saw any money. Little Brother—'

'—You worked with another son of the Middle Kingdom?' Brother See Yap interrupted.

'Yes, from Xiamen also,' Angee replied, irritated. 'He wanted to stay on at the station, but I could not.'

'Do you have your contract with you? The paper the devils gave you when you got off the boat?'

'It's inside.'

'Let's go in then.'

They went through the open doorway, leaving behind a small crowd, who, barely used to seeing one Celestial, had certainly never before seen two of them talking to each other in their singsong. The crowd blinked and held their positions for a few minutes, not sure whether what they had seen was an apparition; but if it was real, tomorrow's court proceedings would be well worth attending.

Back in his cell, Angee dug under the blanket and pulled out his battered *I Ching*. Somewhere in the book's pages was the piece of paper, worn and rubbed, that the devils valued above all others. He handed it to Brother See Yap.

'It says Angee — that's you? — is to get 12 shillings a month, paid every three months, for five years.' He looked up: 'Is that what you were paid?'

Angee shook his head: 'We weren't paid coin. It all went into a big book. And each time we needed things, Red Devil wrote in his book. So after many moons I only had a string of coin to show for my labours. But I lost all that at cards to the striplings.'

Brother See Yap looked at Angee with interest: 'More sons of the Middle Kingdom?'

'No, sons of the land. Black devils.'

Brother See Yap nodded and continued: 'It says you were to get rations of flour, meat, tea and sugar—'

'—Pah, devil-food and no rice!' Now it was Angee's turn to interrupt. 'What does it say on the other side, in the devil-tongue?' he asked.

'Ten shillings per month — that's the one the devils will be using in court tomorrow.'

'So I've been cheated every month,' Angee said softly, eyes downcast.

'Not just you, Brother Angee, I've seen a lot of documents like these. It says one thing in our language, which sounds like a lot back home, and another in the devil-tongue, which we only discover is not enough after we arrive. And here the devil-tongue is the one which matters, in their devil law. It's devils' justice, not our own.'

Angee wondered whether Brother See Yap was telling him the truth or saying things to justify his own intervention. Where was Little Brother — simple, guileless, pure Little Brother — when he needed him? You could not trust the son of a flower girl, abandoned by his See Yap father. But then he was hardly a model father himself, having as good as abandoned his own children in their Tong An village to go to Xiamen longer ago than he cared to remember. Besides, he was hardly in a position to negotiate with the devils for himself.

'Why do you work with these cheating devils?' he asked.

Brother See Yap smiled: 'I fulfil a minor function in their administration, and help my countrymen.'

'There's no money to be made in this land.'

'Not true, Brother Angee — there's talk of a New Gold Mountain to the south. Of pulling gold out of holes in the ground. More money than you or I will ever see. In this land.'

'Tell me more,' Angee said with interest.

'Yes, and the fields are full of people from my father's country. Just like home,' he added, somewhat unnecessarily.

'Not our people?' If there was nobody to speak language with, Angee would be almost as lost at the New Gold Mountain as he was here among the foreign devils.

Brother See Yap smiled: 'The devils don't know that. To them we all look and talk the same.'

But the gold was surely tempting.

'Let's go,' Angee said suddenly. 'Let's knock the Keeper of the Keys on the head and go, you and I.'

But Brother See Yap shook his head: 'The devils make life hard enough here without inviting their justice to be visited on us. I'll stick to this work, thank you.'

'Aiee, you even speak in riddles like a devil!' Angee frowned at the thought of being so long among the devils that you took on their manners and habits.

But Brother See Yap was unmoved: 'Now, back to your appearance in the devil court tomorrow. I think I can get you off without being charged. Put on a bit of a performance for the devil judge and the other devils. But I will need something for my efforts.'

'But what have I got to pay you with in here? I don't have any gold, remember. That's why I ran away.'

Brother See Yap tapped softly the little book Angee still held between his hands.

Angee winced. He had no money, and all he had of any value was the old *I Ching* Lok See had given him. It was his last link with his old drowned friend.

'I can't help you without something for my efforts,' Brother See Yap gently reminded him.

Like a drowning man, his grasp slipping, Angee released the book into Brother See Yap's hands.

'Brother Angee, I'll see you in the devil court tomorrow.'

And with that he left Angee alone in his cell.

But Brother See Yap's words did not calm Angee. Shaking his head, Angee closed the cell door, shutting himself in, stewing in his room as the moans from the next cell became louder, more insistent; the moans of the damned like himself.

What did tomorrow hold for him in the devil court? He entered their hell, shared their release, and dozed; but in his frantic dreams, Angee imagined himself already dead, saw his appearance before the unfamiliar devil judge and his judgments in Hell Court as one and the same thing. But this was not the hell he had grown up with, which he knew intimately with its

familiar punishments. This hell was populated with foreign devils, with his countrymen as their lackeys.

With its unknown judgments, the prospect of facing devils' justice was truly terrifying.

55.
MASTERS AND SERVANTS

'THE FUTURE OF *Australia Felix*, indeed!' Wright had snorted as he drove the buggy along the Port Phillip Road. 'Now we're all having to go to Wagga to sort out your ruddy Celestial experiment!'

O'Neill's face had reddened, but he had kept quiet for Mary's sake.

But that was yesterday. And now she was beside him in the gallery. There was a chill in the air this morning and he had spread the riding blanket over their legs. O'Neill had suggested they arrive early to secure good seats — and it was as well they did. The telltale marks of the river's peak during the recent floods — a brown sludgy film on the courtroom walls — disappeared rapidly fro view as men and women, talking loudly, thronged into the gallery. There was a carnival atmosphere in the dirty courtroom as excited children, kept out of school to attend the sitting of the Wagga bench, pulled pigtails and fought over seats.

'I could see from the way your shoulders bunched you didn'a like what he was saying to yee,' Mary smiled shyly. Indoors, she had her bonnet off, and her black eyes shone.

O'Neill thrilled to this intimacy with his neighbour's Irish maid: 'Twenty solid miles of Jim Wright's ranting, peppered with withering observations from Catherine Wright in the back.'

'She said, "James, if you are travelling I insist on coming with you"—'

'I only kept my mouth shut for your sake.'

'—an' when he agreed, she demanded that I accompany her. Her lady-in-waiting indeed!' Mary snorted derisively.

'You didn't miss anything yesterday afternoon.'

'Nor did you, stuck in that hotel with Missus Wright and her *delicate* constitution, taking a glass or three of medicinal brandy in her room an' having me fussin' all the while over her petticoats.'

'Poor you!' O'Neill was emboldened to reach under the blanket for her hand.

They had reached the township in the afternoon. Catherine Wright, having taken too much of the fresh air, insisted on retiring to her room at the Squatters' Hotel, attended by Mary, leaving O'Neill and Wright to make their rounds of the town. Having disposed of his wife, Wright seemed a little lighter, more talkative, as they walked down Fitzmaurice Street, the swollen Murrumbidgee to their east.

'If it's not the floods it's the goldrushes. The Crown are down a police sergeant after Wills disappeared a month ago; and I wouldn't want to see his deputy, that drunkard Talbot, promoted into the position. Giving him more money would only encourage him into further dissolution and debauchery.'

O'Neill nodded, observing crows and cockatoos jockeying for position in the eucalypts lining the river, the afternoon shadows of their fights cast onto the far riverbank.

'You should take your place on the bench, neighbour.'

But O'Neill was listening now to the faint first creweeks of frogs along the riverbank.

They had proceeded to the courtroom and its adjacent lockup, where they were met by a George Macleay, who, Wright informed him, was both Keeper of the Keys and Clerk of the Court. With his hair like an unmade bed, he reminded O'Neill of too many men the bench had sentenced; only possession of the court keys separated him from guests of the Crown.

'Will O'Neill of Borambola,' he shook hands with Macleay. 'I understand you've got a Celestial in your lockup? Goes by the name of Angee?'

'He's been here in my charge for over seven weeks now. Mister Wright, I've got him doing a spot of gardening for his daily exercise and to fix the place up.'

Wright grunted approval: 'Yes, it does seem a bit tidier out there since my last visit. Has he told you why he ran off?'

'Can't tell you, Sir. He doesn't speak any English, and I bin waitin' for the interpreter to arrive all this while. Seems he's bin busy on the Bathurst circuit recently. Trouble on the goldfields and all that.'

'Think of that, Will, Celestials being tried on the Bathurst circuit,' Wright smirked. 'You should have bought a station out Bathurst way, they would have catered to your *progressive* ideas about Celestial labour.'

Macleay sniggered in chorus to his boss's comments, and was emboldened to opine: 'Boss, you'd have to wonder whether having discovered gold is such a good thing, if it means we're going to be overrun by Celestials!'

'What about markets for our mutton and wool?' O'Neill chipped in. 'I wouldn't consider the goldrushes a problem, not after the drought.'

And the squatters closed ranks on that score. Wright grumbled something or other to the Keeper of the Keys and they were on their way back to the hotel.

'Will ye look at the man now?' Mary giggled and squeezed O'Neill's hand under the blanket as Wright, in his wig and black gown, strode into the courtroom. By this time the gallery was full to overflowing, and townsfolk stood at the back. At the front of the room, Macleay and Talbot rose sharply from their chairs; and to one side a Celestial remained seated, sipping tea by himself.

O'Neill pointed out the interpreter to Mary who protested: 'But he's wearing a suit, like one of our own?'

O'Neill had no idea when Angee's case would come up and had to sit through a few matters of land sales, licence grants and the seemingly unrelated cases of public drunkenness before Wright got to the cases to be heard under the *Masters & Servants Act*. The gallery became a little more lively and Wright was required to bash his gavel a few times to restore their silence.

'Will William Cullen stand up and identify himself to the court?' Wright asked the men sitting in the defendants' box. A sandy-haired man in his twenties stood up, his hands clasping a hat. Macleay approached Cullen with a Bible and got him to place his left hand on it and, with his right hand raised, repeat: 'I swear to Almighty God that I will tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help me God.'

Wright gestured to Macleay to approach the bench: 'Is this the same fellow who charged his employer over failure to provide rations?'

'Yes, against George Mitchell of Bywong station.'

'Is my neighbour Mitchell here?' Wright scanned the courtroom.

'He's not represented, Sir,' piped Macleay. 'Heard you were sitting, said you'd fix it for him.'

The gallery erupted and Wright frowned at the clerk's indiscretion. It meant he would have to protect his fellow squatter's interests from the impartiality of the bench. He turned to Cullen: 'You are charged with absconding from service,' Wright was at his most fearful and magisterial. 'How do you plead?'

'Not guilty, your worship.'

'Don't "your worship" me, young fellow, you ran away from George Mitchell's property and caused him no end of trouble finding you.'

'I never — never meant Mr Mitchell no harm, Sir.'

'I find that difficult to believe, young Cullen, after you preferred charges in this court. Charges which were dismissed, remember that.'

'But he didn't give me my rations,' Cullen continued in his defence.

'If I recall the matter rightly, George Mitchell didn't feed you because you refused to work,' Wright observed, to laughter from the gallery.

'And he threatened to strike me. I'm — I'm not a beast of burden. It's not fair.'

'Fair!' Wright challenged from the bench another's attempt to define the word in his court. 'And what's fair to George Mitchell in all this? You answer me that.'

'Sir, I did my work, but he refused to pay me other than in kind from his store. And he charged double the going price for goods at his station.'

'And you think he's running a charitable house for your kind?'

The gallery rumbled in chorus, waiting for young Cullen's response.

'My kind, Sir? I'm a poor young man, wanting another chance in this life. All's I asked was that I be paid fair, and when he refused, I sought my fortune elsewheres.'

'Impertinence!'

'You be a squatter as well, your worship?'

'Two months' hard labour, after which you will return to the duties of your master,' Wright thundered at Cullen.

'This court is not a court of justice and it is useless looking for justice in it!' Cullen complained, to jeers from the gallery.

'Another month for contempt of court, Mister Cullen!' Wright bashed his gavel, indicating that the matter was closed. 'Clerk, have him stay on here and clean up some of that blasted flood damage, man.'

Macleay nodded and noted the terms of the hard labour in his court clerk's book. The man was led from the stand back to the lockup by a staggering Talbot.

'Light his breath and he'd go up in flames!' Mary giggled across the blanket.

Talbot returned with O'Neill's Celestial in irons.

'The court now calls on Angee,' the clerk read out.

O'Neill looked across to the dock where his Celestial sat glaring at him. He shuddered.

'I call on Angee to stand up and identify himself,' the clerk repeated, looking straight at the Celestial, who remained rooted to his seat. The interpreter whispered into the Celestial's ear and Angee rose to his feet. The Bible was produced by the Clerk of the Court, at which the Celestial and the interpreter conferred.

'Permission to approach the bench, Sir,' now the interpreter stood up from his tea.

'Permission granted,' Wright nodded. 'What is it?' he hissed once the Celestial was within earshot.

'He cannot swear on the Bible, he is not a Christian, Sir.'

'This is my court and he will swear on what I tell him to,' Wright growled.

'Then you must realise,' the interpreter continued smoothly, 'that I cannot guarantee the truth of his responses.'

'He must swear, that's the law.'

'I have something else to ensure the truthfulness of his answers.'

'Very well. Get on with it then. Clerk,' he called out to Macleay, 'note the changed arrangements for swearing the defendant's testimony.'

The interpreter spoke low and fast to Angee in what O'Neill could only presume was their language.

'Usually I would have the man write his name on a piece of paper and then burn it, but Angee cannot read or write, other than to mark his name with a circle,' the interpreter explained. 'This time we require something special. Have you finished your cup of tea?'

Macleay nodded in surprise.

'Then may I borrow your cup?'

'What's happening with your Celestial now?' Mary whispered. The gallery sensed something was coming, watching intently the exchange between these court officials.

Carefully, the interpreter turned up the cup, emptying any dregs out onto the saucer. He took the cup across to Angee and said a few words to him low and fast in their language, their eyes flickering to Wright and O'Neill as they talked.

'The defendant is ready to swear now, Sir.'

'Please proceed,' Wright said, his voice heavy with sarcasm.

At a word from the interpreter, Angee raised the cup in the air and brought it down hard upon his head. The cup shattered, and pieces of porcelain were scattered across the floor and into the gallery. Women screamed and children roared with delight as they dove under the seats to retrieve the broken pieces of the Celestial's oath.

'Order! Order!' Wright smashed his gavel on the bench time and again, in the process smashing his own tea cup and sending even more pieces of broken china flying across the courthouse.

O'Neill could not help smirking: it was a scene more reminiscent of the Tarban Creek asylum than Wright's exalted Wagga bench.

'What the blazes do you think you're playing at here?' Wright growled at the interpreter. 'You're turning my courthouse into a circus!'

But the interpreter was unmoved. O'Neill strained to hear his words over the hubbub of voices in the gallery.

'I have only sought to ensure that Angee recognises he must tell the truth. If he lies, he will be broken into so many pieces as that tea cup. That is the Chinese law.'

Angee's head was bleeding from a nick above his eyebrow. Carefully, the interpreter collected the dripping blood on a piece of paper and wrapped it into a twist.

'Ooh, what's the Celestial going to do now?' Mary squealed, fascinated and appalled, and O'Neill squeezed her hand.

The gallery watched transfixed as the interpreter played to their prejudices and fears. O'Neill had to admire the interpreter: this was the type of spectacle the townsfolk had assembled to witness, and he would ensure they were not disappointed. This time the interpreter addressed the gallery directly rather than the bench.

'This is the second part of Angee's oath. I burn this paper with his blood to swear that he is telling the truth today. May I have your pipe to light it, Sir?' he asked a smoker in the front row.

The man shrank back from the interpreter, clutching his pipe.

'Then the case cannot proceed.'

'I'll have you charged with contempt, if you don't let me proceed with the case in my courtroom, d'ye hear,' Wright shook his gavel threateningly at the interpreter.

'I am not a party to this charge, I am merely an instrument of this court. But, as it is your jurisdiction, I will surrender to your interpretation of the law. Sir,' he said and sat down beside Angee. All Wright could do was waggle his gavel at the interpreter, not knowing whether he was in earnest or jest. The audience in the gallery thought very much the latter, and were talking among themselves as if they were at a fair rather than in a courthouse.

'You'll be fine now,' Brother See Yap whispered to Angee.

'Angee, stand up,' Wright ordered the defendant. 'Why did you abscond from service? Ask your Celestial countryman my question, and no more funny business from you, mind now,' Wright warned the interpreter.

'Why did you run away from the devil's station?'

'The pay was bad and I could not get ahead. Plus Red Devil — that one over there with the fiery beard — made me do

dreadful work, killing all the sheep we had been looking after. It was barbaric.'

'I was not paid sufficient for my needs, your worship,' the interpreter replied.

'What does your contract provide for?'

'Tell him about your contract now, Brother Angee.'

'It said I would get rice but I did not. And tea, but I did not know it would be the devils' black tea instead of our Wulong-cha.'

'Twelve shillings a month plus rations, but I never saw any of the money, it was all spent at the station store.'

'I think I've heard that already today,' Wright mused out loud, earning laughter from the gallery for the first time. 'Ask him why he stole a horse and saddlebag from Borambola.'

'Why did you take things from the devil's station?'

'I borrowed a horse to ride away, a blanket to sleep on, and rations to eat while travelling. When I was caught the horse and blanket were returned and the rations were only a few days' feed, which I would have had back at the station anyway. Nothing was lost to the station, so why have the devils been keeping me here all this time?'

'Hmm,' the interpreter paused.

'What's his answer?' Wright pressed.

'Brother Angee, we'll have to do better than that to get you off the hook.'

'I don't know what else to say.'

'I must have been possessed by the devil,' the interpreter responded, to a roar from the gallery. At which the interpreter sat down with a chuckle, leaning over, whispering to Angee: 'The devil'll have to finish this off quickly now or completely lose control of the courthouse.'

'William O'Neill, approach the bench,' Wright roared above the noise. Mary squeezed his hand as he stood up.

'What do you want to do with this Celestial?' Wright asked.

'Take him back, have him see his contract out.'

'After all the trouble he's caused you? Took your horse and all?'

'I've got the horse back and now I want my workman back as well. Must have thrown him,' O'Neill chuckled. 'Not a fraction of the beating he's got coming to him back at the station.'

'So, I could say that you can ensure his wayward habits will be curbed in the future?' Wright smiled knowingly at his neighbour. 'Because if he runs away again, I'll be going after *you* next time for creating a public nuisance. Now let me get on with my work so I can wrap up this circus.'

Wright waited until O'Neill had resumed his seat before addressing the court: 'I have spoken with the overseer of the station where this — Celestial,' he said the word with obvious distaste, 'is contracted, and he has agreed to drop the charges on the basis that the said Angee returns to the station to complete his contract. Explain that to your countryman,' he glowered at the interpreter.

'Case dismissed. Costs to Angee for bringing the circus to town today.' Wright stood and stormed out of the courtroom to laughter and cheering.

'See?' Brother See Yap turned to Angee, 'I said I could fix it for you and I did.'

'What happens now?' Angee asked, still bewildered.

'The charges have been dropped and you're free to go back to the station you worked on.'

Angee's face crumpled, his head in his hands.

'Got to go, Brother Angee. Thanks again for the book.'

But by the time Angee looked up, Brother See Yap had already vanished.

The gallery emptied quickly after the proceedings, but O'Neill and Mary waited, unwilling to break their bond under the blanket. Now it was just the two of them, the clerk and Angee remaining in the courtroom. They watched, the silence

enormous between them, as the clerk prepared the prisoner. Angee caught O'Neill's eye and scowled, and O'Neill waggled his finger threateningly at Angee.

'You'll keep,' he glowered, staring after his Celestial as he was led back to the lockup.

Alone at last! O'Neill turned back to Mary, but she had already folded the blanket.

'I don't know how you can live with such persons on your station, Will O'Neill,' Mary said wonderingly. 'Such extraordinary — practices — as we've seen here today.'

'You get used to it,' O'Neill said, more gruffly than he intended.

'Mmm, I'd be interested to hear more of your stories.'

'Can I buy you a Devonshire tea then, Miss?'

56.
REINCARNATION

AS THEY DROVE in silence along the dirt road, heading east back to the station he had run from, it all felt like a bad dream to Angee: his reincarnation gone wrong, repeating episodes from a previous life. Here he was, alongside Red Devil, in their cart, going down another track — if this time without Little Brother — having laden the cart with provisions in much the same way as they had done so many moons ago after getting off the ship. The ship that had discarded Lok See whom Angee felt he had discarded by surrendering his *I Ching* to Brother See Yap.

He wondered if Brother See Yap's talk about the New Gold Mountain had been real, or if it was just another of his fancy tricks. Angee rubbed his head where the teacup had cut him: the cut was real enough, and throbbed truly enough that he knew it had all in fact happened, had not been some crazy dream.

He felt as damned as the wretched sheep he had driven to their death, spat out into the same point in the universal cycle of suffering. In what could have been a reincarnation, new opportunities, after his appearance in the devils' court, here he was heading back into the same circumstances as before he ran away, his persecutor alongside him.

Angee had difficulty comprehending what judgment had been visited upon him in the devils' court. He had expected the usual punishments — the cangue, or a beating — anything but

to be returned to the station. The shame and pain of the cangue and beatings would pass, but the open-ended prospect of being spat out into the same life as before was something exquisite and awful crafted by a particularly savage judge. What greater cruelty could there be, after his having made clear the unsuitability of that existence by running away from the station?

His wrist chains rattled softly as Angee shifted his weight on the hard wooden bench. Chained like a beast of burden, a common prisoner. The cart rumbled along the dirt track and Angee thought some more about his fate. Gambling had been his downfall. Once he had fallen into debt he was no longer his own person. He was a slave, to be passed from master to master as circumstances and whim dictated. And, in the course of his slavery, he had been tasked to do disgraceful things by this same Red Devil. Angee wondered whether his shipment and shepherding experiences were not punishment enough in themselves.

There had been no money in his work. All he ever saw for his labours were scratches in a big book that Red Devil kept. This was barely more comprehensible to Little Brother. He wondered what Little Brother had been doing since his departure, and whether he would see him again. He realised he missed him, his friendship, his companionship and above all their ability to speak language with each other.

Lok See had warned him of the punishment awaiting a gambler: King Chu Jiang of the Second Court of Hell would order the punishment of being frozen into blocks of ice, like the ice his heart had become in pursuing his obsession. The horse-headed demons of the Second Court would see that the pain of his suffering in ice — its length and depth and intensity — was consistent with the magnitude of his transgression.

Angee knew he was damned. But so was everyone. A liar like Brother See Yap would have his tongue cut out. And his mother, the flower girl, would be thrown into a pool of blood as her punishment.

The cart hit a bump and Red Devil cursed beside Angee. Even you, Angee thought to himself — noting his red beard, his red face shadowed by his broad-brimmed hat — have punishments awaiting you in hell. You, who have caused pain and suffering the equal of any vicious moneylender in the Middle Kingdom, would face your special punishments in the Fifth Court where King Yanluo was judge. King Yanluo was cruel and impartial, and discharged usurers and moneylenders into the arms of Hufashizhe and his demon brothers, who tossed these miserable beings onto a Hill of Knives, their bodies impaled, while a bearded mandarin counted on his abacus the number of souls dispatched in this way.

Wriggling only made the pain worse, driving the knives deeper and increasing their suffering until it became too much to bear; until the scavenging cats and wolves made it even worse, tearing at living flesh, lapping at still-warm blood, dismembering the sinners' bodies and denying them the integrity of a burial intact. It would be hours, if not days, before vultures came to pick the remaining scraps of flesh from the knives, preparing spaces on the hill for more sinners to be punished. And in the meantime, the screams and groans of repenting sinners as their lives ebbed away. And the smell! Of blood, of human excrement as bodies oozed and drained slowly, covering the hill in a sticky black sludge of sinners' fluids.

He looked away, to the hills on either side of the road. Rippling in the gentle breeze, the grass flashed silver and green in the afternoon light, the shadow of their cart long across the ground before them. In the warm daylight, Angee's thoughts seemed out of place, unreal. But soon it would be night in this place, with its strange noises and scampering beasts emerging from their holes in the ground, when anything could be imagined and acted out.

Angee laughed out loud and Red Devil looked at him oddly. If there was a special place in the Hell Courts for him, there was also one for Red Devil.

57.
FROM THE KITCHEN GARDEN

ANGEE SCRATCHED IN the ground with his makeshift hoe. The grass and weeds around the pumpkin vine trailing along the ground fell away under his deft cutting, leaving the flowers and fruit clear to grow. He hobbled over to where the beans trailed up wooden stakes leaning against the wall of the house. One had been knocked over and he made to bend down to pick it up, but wincing, checked himself. His side still ached, the skin still broken and raw where Red Devil had beaten him; and his shirt stuck to the still-weeping flesh on his arms, sides and back.

What a welcome return to the station! As an example to the others, Red Devil had stood him in the middle of the yard before the big house. As the black devils watched from under the shade of trees, and a few unfamiliar white devils from the station store looked on, Red Devil took the horsewhip and proceeded to use it upon Angee, whose hands were manacled from the journey. Against Red Devil's onslaught, Angee could barely hold his arms up to protect his head from blows and cuts. The skin on his arms tore and bled and, with his sides exposed, Red Devil jabbed him hard and deep with the thick blunt handle of the stockwhip, bruising and winding him. Angee fell curled into a ball, and what the whip had not touched, Red Devil's boots attended to.

Nobody tried to stop Red Devil until, his energy spent, his fury subsided as well. And, with a last well-aimed kick to Angee's kidneys, he turned his attentions to unloading the provisions into the station store. Only then did the black devils come to Angee's assistance, scuttling from the shade of the trees across the yard to where he lay bruised and bloody in the dust.

That was three days ago and today was the first day he had been able to walk without help. It still caught his breath, but he was mobile again. If he had not passed out, he had had his moments of delirium; and his wild thoughts filled his head with revenge.

'This is for Lok See, for losing me my book,' Angee speared a melon with his hoe, imagining it was Red Devil's head he was splitting open. He watched with pleasure as the pink flesh spurted and seeds spilled over the ground; then, turning to see that nobody was watching from the house, he scraped earth over the spilt seeds — sowing a new crop or covering a shallow grave: it could be either. He scraped some more with his hoe, stirring up the earth, and imagined Red Devil dragged into a shallow ditch, his head pillowed on a dog, showing Angee's contempt for him in the afterlife. Covering the last moist traces of seeds and pulp, Angee thought with pleasure of scraping earth over Red Devil's body, then rounding his flock over the grave, the nervous survivors pissing and shitting and stirring dirt into mud, trampling the earth until no trace of the grave remained.

But that was an opportunity lost. He thought of the many times Red Devil had visited them at the outstation, and of how many occasions — had his mind turned to it — he might have been able to effect such vengeance. But to kill a man and bury him then and there was more than he alone could have done. It would have required the cooperation of Little Brother, whose support he could not count on. Just look how he had let Angee run off by himself in his moment of need. No, it would not do, he could not have carried out such a plan and got away with it. Someone would have found them out.

But getting away with it was no longer part of the equation. Angee leaned his hoe against the water tank, looking at his little patch of earth. Another hoe, another earth-prison, another hell — now there was only one way of settling the score. He spat in the dirt. If this was reincarnation, the purpose of his new life was starting to take shape.

Beyond the kitchen garden there was a space of open ground, which ended abruptly with the large wooden shed where they had destroyed their flock; and beyond it a little way, the ground gave way to a gully where the creek ran into a waterhole. Sheep were massed in a pen to the side of the shed and were being taken in twos and threes down the gully. He wondered what dreadful torments were being visited on the dumb creatures this time around, and he picked up his hoe, as if to arm himself against his memories.

There were other bits of the garden to attend to, for which he needed other tools. Angee hobbled over to the station store, where one of the foreign devils who had watched his beating a few days ago lounged on a hay bale. He made a kind of chopping motion with his hands, indicating he wanted a pair of shears. The devil nodded in the direction of the tools and left Angee to help himself.

There were the shears, which Angee used for trimming bushes around the house. There was a stone and oil for sharpening the blades. There were the tools, similar to what White Beard had used for scraping sheep's feet, and for removing stones from horses' hooves, metal combs with wide long teeth for combing tails and manes. But there was more: Angee looked around but the devil had put his hat over his face. He noted the axes for chopping firewood, lengths of metal pole for heating and hammering into ironwork. It was a veritable arsenal: Angee gasped and his sides hurt. He grabbed the shears he needed and left the shed quickly so as not to arouse suspicion.

With so many weapons, he could kit out his own private army, bring down more than Red Devil. But he could not do it alone. He needed to get others onside. He recalled his brother coolies in the barracoon, at the start of their adventure, each man kitted out according to his needs at that time. But where were his brothers from the Middle Kingdom who would take his side, no questions asked, when he needed them now? He had only Little Brother to turn to, but he was probably out with White Beard and their sheep many *li* from the home station.

He resolved to bide his time, watching and waiting as he dug in the garden, his plan taking shape. In the days that followed, as he worked in the garden, Angee saw devil strangers armed with shears come and go from the large shed. At first, Angee suspected that there would be another round of mass destruction, this time by blade, but his suspicions proved wrong when he saw sheep appear from the other end of the shed, their wool missing, bleeding from nicks in their skin, looking scruffy and cold and out of sorts as they ran down a ramp and into a pen with their other naked and bleating sisters.

The remaining black devils not out with the flocks were enlisted to help in and around the shed, and Angee was left alone with the gardening. A few flocks had been herded into separate pens at one end of the shed. His curiosity of several days getting the better of his lingering fear, Angee strayed from his vantage point in the kitchen garden towards the shed, watching as sheep were taken down from the pen and forced to swim in the creek and the waterhole, several at a time.

It remained a mystery until one day he saw Little Brother and a few of the striplings herding their flock to the shearing shed. Angee's heart leapt at the sight of his countryman. After Brother See Yap, with his devil's suits, Little Brother looked just like he remembered him: his queue hung down his back and beneath his shepherd's smock were the familiar pyjamas. Little Brother's figure among the black devils looked out of place, yet he seemed to be speaking with them as if they understood language. Perhaps Little

Brother had changed too since their time together, having found a new circle of companions. Angee turned and headed back to his kitchen garden, disappointed once more.

But he was not long back to his work before Little Brother came looking for him.

'So it's really you!' his arms gripped Angee. 'I just heard you had come back.'

Angee winced as his still-tender sides were squeezed.

'Whatever's the matter?' Little Brother looked at him, concerned. 'What happened to your eye?'

'A welcome-home present from Red Devil,' Angee said sourly.

'You mean he beat you?'

Angee nodded, changing the subject: 'What are you doing over there? What's going on?'

'We're washing the sheep for the shearing. Their coats got dreadfully messy out on the backblocks, seeds and needles snagging in their wool, and dust coating the fleece.'

'Aiee, I've been watching for days wondering what was going on!'

Little Brother laughed: 'After we wash them the devils cut their wool.'

Angee's face clouded, in memory of their time together in that shed. But Little Brother laughed: 'Don't worry — since the floods everything's changed, and the sheep are worth too much to kill these days. Haven't you heard of the New Gold Mountain? Everyone's been talking about it here.'

'I heard about it at the devil court. I though you would be there to help me,' Angee said, his disappointment obvious.

Little Brother's face dropped: 'I didn't know where you had got to, Angee. But at least we're back together again now. Come along and help us.'

'I can't,' Angee said. 'Red Devil wants me to look after the garden.'

'Oh, I'm sure we can sort that out,' Little Brother said breezily. 'You're too good a shepherd to leave on gardening duty. Besides, Red Devil wants all hands on shed-duty for the shearing. He's over at the shed now — why don't we go over together and speak with him?'

'You speak the devil-tongue now?'

'Enough to get by,' Little Brother laughed. 'After you left I had to learn it or there was nobody to talk with.'

'What about the striplings?'

'Only a little,' Little Brother laughed. 'But White Beard speaks their language. Let's go.'

'Over there?' Angee could barely conceal his reluctance.

'It's only a shed, all right? Come over and put your memories behind you. I'll help you.'

'Very well,' Angee finally agreed.

'So, tell me about your adventures.'

58.
CHINESE WHISPERS

IN THE GARDEN, surrounded by Angee's handiwork — the smashed pumpkins, the tortured and twisted tomato and bean vines — I listen with growing disbelief and alarm to Angee's story. Rambling and splenetic, he concludes with: 'I can't take much more of this. I'm damned in this life and I want out.'

'You mean you'd rather—', I check myself, not wishing to put the word in the air between us.

Angee nods grimly and I feel fearful.

'Now you listen to me,' I turn on him. 'You think you've had it hard, what about the striplings? The things I've learned in our time apart. Did you know all this land used to be theirs, but now Red Devil says it's his?'

Angee smiles slowly: 'That's good, you're angry. Let's stand up for them, for us.'

I shake my head, but Angee continues working away at me: 'You've been shabbily treated like the striplings, like me.'

'But Red Devil's never done anything bad to me,' I protest.

'What about that woman in your father's house, what she did to you?'

'But you don't understand,' I toe the dirt sadly. 'I deserved that.'

Angee slams his hoe down near my foot.

'And how do you think I could understand, Little Brother,' he says sourly, 'when you've never been prepared to share your thoughts with me?'

I look at him, stunned at the sudden change in his manner.

'After all I've done for you, and you still won't trust me with your fine secrets, Young Scholar,' Angee growls. 'Tell me what happened then!'

'All right!' I snap. 'I'll tell you if you're so curious to know!'

And so I finally tell Angee about my life at the Pavilion of Stone, and of my downfall. If I begin with a cold anger, as I proceed my manner softens. I speak of Father's hopes for my succeeding him in the county and provincial mandarinate examinations; of Second Wife, who consumed my interest and distracted me from my studies while Father was absent; and of the dissembling of Ah Chiang, who turned out to be the worm in our apple. I even speak of Mother, who had such ambitions for me and who, through sickness, was spared the grief of my unseemly demise. I tell him how, travelling with Ah Chiang to Mother's grave, I was captured and brought to the ship.

'I think you know the rest,' moist-eyed, I conclude my story.

'I was on deck when you arrived,' Angee says in a hushed voice. 'I saw how the sailors tore your shirt from your back, and insulted you. But I could do nothing.'

'There was nothing to be done,' I say sadly. 'All my punishments have been justified.'

'But that's unbelievable! Apart from this thing with your father's Second Wife, from what you've told me it doesn't sound as though you ever did anything to warrant being kidnapped and sold. Doesn't the injustice of that upset you?'

'Not any more,' I sigh. 'I probably deserved it, and I've learned so much here. Perhaps I caused Father some misery. I overstepped the bounds of filial piety in my attachment to her.'

'But that hardly justifies the treatment you've received! Me? I'm a gambler. I knew the risks involved, but I couldn't stop, couldn't help myself. That's why I'm here, away from my family.' Angee pauses, then shrugs his shoulders.

'They're probably better off without me anyway.' He turns away, wiping his runny nose on the back of his hand.

He has his painful memories too. Here is a man who has stood beside me for much of the past season, sharing a hut and food with me, and yet I have continued to deny him my brotherhood. Did I really think myself above him all this time? We are both flesh and blood, have shared so much together. Instinctively, I reach into my pocket for my talisman, but the little cricket-box is gone.

'Surely things will turn around for us? Perhaps we could do a reading to see what the oracle says,' I suggest.

But Angee shakes his head: 'My book's gone — the interpreter at the devil court took it as payment for getting me off.'

So it is just the two of us, no other memories to hang on to any more.

'I'm sorry, I really don't know what to say. I should have told you earlier, but didn't know how to. And then it seemed too distant to bother with after a while.'

Angee laughs slowly, unnerving me. Finally, he looks up: 'Aiee, Little Brother, you're full of talk about your precious striplings and how hard done by they are by the white devils. But back home it's different. You and your mandarin lot are as bad as the devils here.'

'You sound like a Taiping,' I say coldly. Father was dismissive of those rebels and rascals.

'Little Brother, if you were serious about what you say you've learned here, you'd see our mandarins are just like the white devils here, helping themselves to what belongs to others. And you'd be a Taiping too.'

I feel dizzy; my eyes cloud over and I see my own upbringing as if through someone else's eyes. If I have envied Father his limited success in the examinations, I now see clearly, as if for the first time, what his role has been: a pawn in the imperial bureaucracy, an attendant in his home district to a local

magistrate. A large figure in a small pool, a small ripple in the larger pool.

Little by little, I am coming around. If at first I was shocked by Angee's words, I soon wonder how I have been able to maintain for so long my own increasingly untenable and contradictory positions. Through Father, I feared the Taipings' desire for justice welling up from within the Han heartland; but I have seen and felt the same desire among the striplings. I have seen them at one with their land, land the white devils have taken over, like the Manchu Qings did centuries before with we Han.

And then it hits me. We Han are like the striplings, in thrall to another culture. Their Europeans are our Qing. I shudder — is this not another paradoxical insight from the fields, the Tao of Shepherding manifesting itself again?

Angee is right, but how did I fail to make this connection myself earlier? Have I been unconsciously protecting the memory of Father? I think of all the terrible things the Qing have done to we Han in their imperial fiat and of Father's limited local role in effecting their policies. But was his career stifled because he had not progressed sufficiently through the examination system, or because he was not a Manchu Qing? A prisoner in his own country, enslaved to an administration not his own, a forced collaborator? Had this ever really been my ambition? And I understand Father, a pawn and not an actor beyond the confines of the Villa of Tranquillity, and forgive him.

So what did I think I was doing, dressing like their subject, my hair long and plaited in the Manchu style?

'Little Brother, are you all right?' a familiar voice filters through the air to me.

The cloud shifts back to where I stand, and I see Angee looking at me expectantly; see in his eyes the Taipings' brotherhood of man. In Father's eyes, their ragtag army might not have been pretty, but they had right on their side.

I look at Angee dully: 'Cut this — thing — off!' And with that, I bend my head till my queue hangs limply down my back.

'Are you sure?' Angee asks.

'It's no use to me any more,' I say simply.

He saws at the rope of hair hanging down my back. It comes away after a few motions and my head jerks forward, relieved at last of the inherited burden of the Qing.

'Sharp blade you've got there,' I say, impressed.

Angee nods, the coil of hair dangling in his hand like a dead snake.

'What should I do with it?' he asks.

I lift my head. It feels strange after so many years, a nakedness and a liberation: 'Throw it away.'

59.
SHEARING

THEY HAD BEEN going at it for some hours now, steadily working through the catching pens, and the noise of men and sheep inside the shed was getting louder, more insistent as the shearers worked their way through the last flock. It was all activity in the shed, and O'Neill welcomed it. The fleeces piled up to the sound of clicks. Good as money in the bank, O'Neill thought, with no small satisfaction. And after last year's drought, they had some catching up to do.

'Move it out!' one of the shearers yelled, slapping the sheep on the rump and watching, laughing, as it skidded down a ramp into the counting pen outside. The shearer rushed back across the board to the catching pen and grabbed another startled ewe by her fleece; then, flicking her deftly onto her back, dragged her by the forelegs across to where his shears lay.

'How many is that, Stumpy?' one man yelled as he dispatched another sheep down a ramp.

'Forty-five for you, Johnno,' the rouseabout shouted back as he chalked up the score sheet.

'And you, Billy?'

'I'm level-pegging you,' Billy, a raw-boned and red-faced giant, yelled back. He wiped the sweat trickling down his face on the sleeve of his checked shirt, held back momentarily as Stumpy the rouseabout stepped on to the board and grabbed the fleece where it had peeled off the sheep, tossing it in one

continuous motion onto the wool table. Billy grunted and grabbed the next sheep in one meaty paw, dragging it seemingly effortlessly back onto the board.

It was backbreaking work, bent for hours at a time over sheep after sheep after sheep. O'Neill knew he could no longer squat down over a sheep week-in, week-out, his back simply would not let him any longer. So this season, once more, the shearers held him to ransom.

They had finished the properties upriver and moved over here a few days earlier. They swarmed in, regaling his stationhands with tales about high jinks and sprees at the sheds upriver. He remembered their presence at Borambola last season only too well: they had stirred up the local women, which upset the men, who then refused to work around the station. But the Wiradjuri men were upset anyway — the shearers were sidelining them from the main jobs, squeezing them out of any opportunity for shearing and getting them to do the sweeping and clearing.

They demanded decent meals for a hard day's labour, and a place to sleep. All he had to offer at Borambola was the store shed, which some of the shearers felt was below them. And so O'Neill had reluctantly agreed to let the men sleep on the verandah of the homestead. If Ruby was hard-pressed to cook enough to fill the shearers' bellies every night, she was even less inclined after O'Neill sent her back to her mob under the trees during the shearers' stay. He did not want to offer them any encouragement this season.

If these were the future of the Riverina, these sun-bronzed sons of the sheep-belt, Wright was welcome to them. Who would want to have a sheep station, and be at the mercy of the working man like this? He shuddered to think what Mary would make of them when they were done here and descended on Wright. Or worse, how they would play up to her cooking. They made him look old and tired. Shearers were the self-styled aristocracy

among itinerant farm workers. Cocky and swaggering, young and full of the sort of confidence this young land needed, they made you believe they could take on the whole world and win.

O'Neill would be glad to see the back of them. But that was not the end of things. After the shearing was finished, there would be the pressing into bales, the loading of carts to haul along the river to Adelaide; and droving the shorn sheep into Victoria, where the recent discoveries of gold had created tent-cities almost overnight and where meat, any mutton, even the four-tooth ewes they had been forced to boil down last season, gathered a good price. If only news of the goldrushes had come a few months earlier.

'Get out of my way!' Billy yelled at one of the station hands sweeping up the loose clippings on the shearing board, his broom getting underfoot. He dropped the broom and gathered by hand these loose trimmings, stowing them in a large basket separate from the main body of fleece. This second-quality wool was still good for padding.

Another shearer had finished with his sheep and, having sent it skittering down the ramp, was coming back for another one when he tripped over the long broom being swept by Angee.

'You blasted Celestial!' the shearer yelled in his face.

Angee snarled and held his ground, his broom poised.

The shearer looked at him, sized him up. Half-smiling, he gave Angee a good backhander with his meaty forearm. Reeling backwards under the blow, Angee came up against the prone form of a sheep, which bucked and took his legs out from under him, sending him sprawling on the shearing board.

'Ruddy Celestial — shift!' the shearer whose sheep Angee had tripped over yelled at him, 'or I'll give ye the shearing of your life!' He waved his shears menacingly close to Angee's throat.

Angee scrambled to his feet, dragging his broom behind him across the shearing board, just in time to get out of another

shearer's way, but not clear of his sharp tongue: 'Ye damned heathen, move it!'

Wherever that one went there was trouble. Amazing, O'Neill thought, how one had turned out so compliant and the other so disagreeable at every turn. After Angee's departure, Sheepy had turned into quite a reasonable worker; and there was no doubt about it, without another Celestial to talk to, his English had gone ahead in leaps and bounds. O'Neill had watched as Sheepy and his Wiradjuri companions washed his sheep in the waterhole, and stowed them in the sweating pens overnight for today's batch of shearing.

O'Neill was fond of the silly Celestial with his odd mannerisms; felt vindicated in his own experiment. Sheepy was coming around to their way of life, if his having cut off his pigtail recently was any indication. So when he had approached O'Neill and asked about taking Angee out of the kitchen garden for a few days to help out in the shearing shed, he was of a mind to agree.

He reasoned that Angee could hardly be any worse on the job than someone like Stumpy, a sad-sack itinerant if ever there was one, who had drifted on to the property a few weeks back and, after showing a bit of sweat in the storeroom, dozed there most days or hung back and talked to the shepherds while they waited for their flocks to be shorn.

O'Neill shook his head at the thought of having had to go across to Wagga to collect Angee from the courthouse, the latest in a long list of irritants, and one that had given his neighbour Wright the opportunity to lecture him in public. Still, he had taught Angee a lesson when they got back to the station, a lesson he would not quickly forget.

'Where's the sodding sweeper gone?' Johnno called from the shearing board, 'I'm slipping on locks and bellies here.'

O'Neill looked around. The broom leaned up against the doorway, but Angee was nowhere to be seen. Nor Sheepy, for that matter — perhaps they were outside with the flock.

Cursing, he grabbed the broom himself and swept, anxious to keep the shearers working, to finish this last flock and be done with them all.

60.
THE HILL OF KNIVES

'LITTLE BROTHER, COME on!' Angee hisses at me across the shearing shed.

I follow Angee to the doorway, where he grabs my arm and pulls me into a corner, out of sight of the others.

'That dog of a devil!' Angee hisses. 'Soon he'll be sorry he struck me down! Come with me, I need your help. Now!' Angee says, tugging my arm.

I lean my broom against the wall and follow Angee along the side of the shed till we are nearest to the home station, then he makes a dash for it across the open ground. I run after him, uncomprehending.

At the kitchen garden, near the homestead, Angee rummages in the shadows of the water tank. Pulling back a hessian sack, he reveals a selection of homemade spears and knives.

I look at the weapons, goggle-eyed.

'I took the shafts from the garden,' Angee cackles. 'Used to have beans running up them, this is a much better use for them though. Now help me carry them back to the shed.'

'How do you propose we get these across the open land without being seen?'

'Easy,' Angee says, wrapping up the sharp ends with the sack. 'We'll sling a basket on the poles and carry each end on our shoulder, then walk across the open land. If anyone sees us

they'll think we're bringing food down to the shed from the kitchen.'

I look in the basket and there are more shear blades, snapped off and sharpened into knives.

'What's going on?' I ask, scarcely daring to guess at the answer.

'You told me about the striplings — well, here is the chance to repay their friendship.'

'But in blood?' I say doubtfully.

But Angee ignores my question.

'I need you to help me now,' Angee says. 'I need you to speak to the striplings. I need numbers, tell them I'll help them. I have enough weapons for everyone, I just need their help.'

'But why?' I croak in disbelief.

'You saw what that devil did to me inside, knocked me down and held the shears at my throat like I was some animal to be slaughtered.'

I nod.

'Well, I refuse to be treated as an animal any more. I'm not going to allow myself to be taken to face devil justice again; no, this time it will be for keeps. I know what I'll be facing in Hell Court, but it will be justified. At least I'll have the satisfaction of knowing Red Devil will be suffering in Hell Court as well for his sins.'

'But violence only breeds violence,' I protest.

'Violence only understands violence. And now it's their turn to take some from us.'

'From us?' I am puzzled by my inclusion.

'Yes, from us. And by us, I mean the striplings as well. You told me this was their land. Look at the women and children now, look at the striplings, working as servants on what was once their territory. It's worse than being made to be a servant in your own family home,' Angee pauses, looking me squarely in the eye, before continuing: 'It's like the servant taking your place and kicking you out the door.'

That last image hits home, as Angee knew it would. I see Ah Chiang in my mind's eye, in the company of Father and Second Wife.

Angee sees the change in my manner, and works away at this point: 'Little Brother, I know you've suffered a lot, fallen a long way from your destiny. But so have these people. These white devils are all the same. If they didn't kill the striplings themselves, they've surely benefitted from others who did the dirty work for them. All deserve punishment for killing the striplings for their land. And you know the punishment for that,' he pauses, looking at me.

I do, recalling the images in illustrated books, detailing the exquisite tortures awaiting sinners. I turn the pages in my mind's eye to the page glossing the Fifth Court of Hell and see once more the words, *'For the crime of plotting another's death for property, the punishment of being tossed onto a Hill of Knives.'*

I look again at the poles, at the basket packed with sharpened shear blades, at the hillside above the shearing shed.

'So this is your plan? Be the judge and executioner all in one?' I look at him in disbelief. 'Is this your Taiping army to set against that shed full of devils?'

'I want to give these people the chance to help me put things to rights. You don't have to strike a blow, just help me arrange my forces. Be impartial, play the mandarin to my King Yanluo. You always wanted to be a mandarin, didn't you?' Angee plays to my former desires. 'Well, Little Brother, now's your great opportunity.'

'Angee, don't you see, this is madness!' I shake my head.

But Angee is no longer listening; his eyes have glazed over as he repeats a forgotten phrase from our early days together: 'When the way of dwelling together is exhausted, you must necessarily turn away. Examine what separates and what connects people. Polarising is a time when you can connect with what is truly great — so what'll it be, Little Brother, are you with me or against me?'

I am astounded to hear Angee recall the lines from the oracle. To me, they speak of a simpler time, before we arrived at the station. How innocent it all was then, picking reed stalks along the riverbank while Red Devil slept, when we could not comprehend anything outside our own immediate circumstances. And I recall another more recent lesson in the reed stalks, when Auntie showed me how brittle is a single stalk, but how strong is a bundle.

And I understand anew. Alone, Angee is doomed, but if there are more of us than the shearers we can perhaps negotiate our way clear. Will the striplings help me save my countryman from himself? I can only find out by asking. And in the interim I have to humour him.

'We'll be missed if we're not back in the shed soon,' I suggest.

'Let's go, Little Brother,' Angee urges as we lift the poles onto our shoulders. I imagine we present a strange sight scuttling across the grass with a large bundle bobbing between us. Fortunately, the shearers inside are too preoccupied to pay attention to anything outside, and we make the cover of the far wall without attracting attention.

We lower the basket from our shoulders, and I look helplessly at Angee. There is a new savagery, added to his sense of futility, in his manner; and I fear this is all going to end very badly.

61.
SMOKO

'SMOKO!' BILLY CALLED, as he let go his sheep, bald and bleeding from a number of nicks on its flanks. Johnno looked up. The catching pen was empty and he peeled off for a rest as he finished his sheep. The other shearers followed the lead of the two guns.

They had the fire going and the water was hot, ready for sweet black tea all round.

'Cuningdroo tomorrow then?'

Johnno grunted: 'Oh, I dunno, maybe I'll head back to town for a spree.'

'And blow all your blasted pay on drinks and women!' another one of the shearers chipped in.

'Well, it's not as if I have a family to support now, is it?' Johnno retorted.

'Or have my sights set on a parcel of land like Mister O'Neill, do I now?' another asked rhetorically.

'Or the neighbour's parlourmaid!'

Laughter all round.

'We'll be seeing her soon enough — fresh scones and cream all round — and she can have the pick of us!'

More laughter.

If they only knew the things he had done and seen in his youth, in these new lands, O'Neill thought, they would regard him differently. Thank the Lord he had the station — and Mary — to think of these days, otherwise he would be just like these men.

One of the shearers whistled: 'Will ye get a look at that! Over there, on the hillside.'

'Say, Mister O'Neill's got his Celestials and blackfellas putting on a war dance for our smoko.'

O'Neill started. He looked along the rise masking the river flats beyond. He pinched himself to make sure he was not imagining it and looked again. No, it was definitely there. He looked to his left and to his right: all the shearers were staring open-mouthed, stunned into a rare silence.

A small group of men had assembled there: Wiradjuri mostly, but at their front, Angee and Sheepy. They fanned out across the crest and down the hill, holding in their arms what appeared to be spears.

'Where the blazes did they come from?'

And how did they all manage to slip away without being noticed? At the time, busy with counting sheep and ensuring the shearers kept working steadily, O'Neill had not noticed the shedhands disappearing one by one. By smoko-time, only a few were left and these men had run off up the hill to join the others. What did they mean by this?

Now the warrior party had the shearers' attention, they started singing, a low, nasal rhythmic tune, over and over, swaying with their spears and stamping their feet as they sang.

'What's going on?' Billy asked.

'Are they going to attack us?'

'Cut it out — a mob of blackfellas led by a couple of Celestials?'

'Yeah, an' whaffor?'

'Mister O'Neill?' they turned to him.

O'Neill's blood froze. The hillside bristled with their homemade weapons, blades glinting in the sunlight. Every frontiersman's nightmare, arrayed on the hill before him. And he recalled an image from years ago, dredged up from the deepest recesses of his memory where he had buried it, hoping to forget about it forever.

A still, misty morning. Telltale wisps of smoke leading them to the campfire around which a dozen or so figures were huddled for warmth. The nervous snorting of the horses, his own shallow breath. The cock of a rifle like a branch snapping. The screaming and wailing as rifle-fire cut down the men, as horsewhips knocked women to the ground, spilling babies from their arms, the women howling but unable to get back to their children. Men holding their sides, puzzled, as the red fluid seeped between their fingers. A thin wail for a mother who would not come, teary eyes wide with fear as he raised his rifle-butt. Crunch. Then silence. The woman's eyes boring into him, uncomprehending; his horse stepping back to let her approach and examine the bloody mess at his feet.

Was this frontier justice?

'Mister O'Neill?'

The fire simmered and died and O'Neill saw before him again the figures on the hill waiting for him, ready and armed this time. Saw these young men, their crumpled faces, looking to him.

Cut to a courtroom and another woman's eyes boring into him, as she squeezed his hand under the riding blanket.

'I wouldn't blame a man for standing up for hisself. I could be proud of a man who drew a line and said no more. That's what makes a man for me.'

Her eyes shone as she spoke, but O'Neill was unsure whether it was the ardour of her words or the wind lashing her face. His face.

He started, recalled where he was. What was he protecting them — or her — from anyway? Soon they would be descending on Wright's property. He had had enough. First Wright, then the shearers and now these Celestials winding up the Wiradjuri, pulling some stupid stunt on the hill. Why would they not leave alone, let these people be?

O'Neill looked at his shaking hands, the hands that had encircled hers. They had pulled the trigger before, but that was a lifetime ago.

The shearers were muttering among themselves and he was a good hour from Wright's station, and an hour back. This time he was it — what passed for justice — and he would decide, not be swayed into action by an intoxicated mob egging each other on.

When could you say it all started? Did it go all the way back to when he collected two startled men from The Rocks more than a season ago? When had the first warning signs registered? Was it with the billy-can tossed into the stream? Or when he caught Angee interfering with the sheep? Or when Angee absconded on his horse, putting him to all that trouble? Or when they returned to Borambola and he gave him the thrashing of his life?

He saw her shining eyes, her glowing cheeks, watching him intently. Now he had her undivided attention, he felt calm and resolute. She would be proud of him.

62.
THE END OF THE SCROLL

IT FEELS STRANGE on the hill. Looking down as if from afar on the shearing shed, the waterhole and, beyond, the homestead. Devils pour out of the shed doorway and stand, arms on hips, looking up at us blankly. To my left and right, my warrior brothers sing, a low nasal chant, as they stamp their feet and spear-shafts in time. I mime their movements, stamping and humming a meditation over and over.

I think of Father and Second Wife, watching me from afar, as I stand up beside my countryman and the striplings. I look back, without rancour, without jealousy, without sadness, as we face down our Qing, the White Devils. And I am reminded of a long-ago lesson in the Villa of Tranquillity. One day, a disciple of Confucius asked the Master: 'If a king were to entrust you with a territory you could govern according to your ideas, what would you do first?'

To which the Master replied: 'My first task would certainly be to rectify the names.'

'My name is Shiu Pi, my name is Shui Pi,' I shout, over and over, stamping my feet until it becomes a meditation in itself. The striplings' chant continues, Angee smiles at me, shaking his spear in the air above his head. Then there is a puff of smoke from the shearing shed and Angee falls to the ground beside me.

'Angee!' I cry, bending over him. Blood seeps from a hole in his heaving chest, stains my hands vermilion. He looks at me

and nods, trying to smile as blood bubbles in his saliva. Then his head rolls back, his eyes open, staring at the clouds.

Through tears, I look up, and see the station as in a rainbow, light stretching from the station house and over my head to the crest of the hill where the striplings stand, tense and uncertain. Unlike their fathers, these youths have grown up in the shadow of the firestick and know its destructive power at a distance. Against it, spears are useless. The striplings drop their weapons and move swiftly to the side. Their challenge on the hill has demonstrated their warrior qualities; but they will not contest the firestick. My flock has retreated and I am the breakaway sheep, drowning in the current raging around me.

I look down the hillside to where Red Devil stands with his shotgun, surrounded by shearers cheering and slapping him on the back.

It is just Angee and me now. I look at my vermilion hands and wonder bitterly what good luck is this? I never supported his crazy plan, and yet I find myself inextricably bound to Angee. And only now does the Tao of Shepherding reveal to me its greatest jewel.

At last, tearfully, I see freedom for what it truly is, recognise its true nature and essence. The last and greatest paradox to be revealed to me: that true freedom comes only through connections. That true freedom is meaningless without its opposite, worthless without commitments. Of all my illusions, freedom has been the hardest to shake. It has taken Angee's death for it to melt away and reveal its true nature. Only now, in recognising that we are bound to act in a certain way, that what will happen is meant to happen, only now am I truly free to act without passion, without ego or ambition.

I look at my blood-stained hands and it is a good omen. Like the Taiping, we are now bound as brothers. Now it is up to me to make good that show of brotherhood. And yet, I am scared of the pain, unsure of how I will deal with it. I only hope it does not take too long.

Standing up, I wipe my eyes as I look for the last time at the striplings, their discarded weapons between us. I hold my blood-stained hands high for all to see and run down the hill towards the shed shouting: 'I am not Sheepy. I am Little Brother, First Son, Shiu Pi!'

The striplings, emboldened by my warrior cry, yell and cheer as I run towards the shearing shed, waving my spear. I watch Red Devil break his rifle, unload and reload the shell, snap it back into line.

I run on as he takes aim at me.

'Little Brother, First Son, Shiu Pi!' I shout my mantra, which will protect me from harm.

I see our image as in a scroll, a scroll pored over by Father and Second Wife. The young mandarin-warrior charging with his troops, challenging the foreign devils who have invaded their territory and cut down his friend.

Then another puff of smoke from the shearing shed and something causes me to lose my footing. I stumble and roll over on the ground. My side is wet and I think of White Beard's earlier exhortation to cast off my old oilskin and hat, to live life without barriers.

So much I have learned in these fields, I feel strange to be leaving them, but a part of me will remain: my friendships.

I rest my head back, pillowed on a tussock of grass, and cast my eyes back to the scroll spread out on a low table in Father's library. The larger part is rolled up to the right, the remainder for unfurling — the story remaining to be told — lies to the left. Father unrolls a little more to follow my life story's progress and reaches the silk borders marking the end of the scroll. I see two men on the ground, the striplings tossing down their spears and shearers swarming up the hill from the shed. Second Wife bursts into tears and Father puts his arms around her. I want to call out to them, to reassure them; but then my world blackens and I can see no more.

It takes a few moments to adjust to the darkness. My eyes widen, desperate for any source of light in this enveloping gloom. At last, I see the flickers of a flaming torch in the distance and I stumble along towards it. I feel my side: it is still wet, there is a hole where the bullet has entered, but there is no pain any more. As I near the light, I hear wailing and screaming getting ever louder. I feel alone, and not a little frightened in this new adventure.

But there is Angee, waiting at the gates for me, flanked by Ox Head and Horse Face.

'So you decided to come along with me this time! You don't look too bad, considering what you've just been through,' he says, poking his finger into the hole in my side.

'You neither, Angee,' I smile, looking clear through his chest where the bullet has passed through.

Angee and I are the only ones who fell on the Hill of Knives today. Ox Head and Horse Face push open the creaking wooden gates of hell, and an acrid smell hits us as we enter the underworld. Angee leads the way for me once more, as we head towards the First Court of Hell. We walk close together through a narrow passageway descending steeply, our way lit by torches set into the wall.

'This isn't so bad,' Angee observes.

'After all we've been through,' I reply.

'Together,' he says, smiling and holding out his hand.

The passageway opens out and we find ourselves in the King's chamber.

'Shiu Pi and Angee?' a horned demon hisses our names.

'Hufashizhe?' Angee asks.

The demon nods, his lantern eyes wide and yellow.

'He's uglier than I ever imagined!' Angee whispers into my ear. He seems excited to be here, almost childlike in his delight at finally arriving at a place we discussed so often.

We are announced by Hufashizhe; and there, high up in his throne, sits King Ching Wan, haughty and severe, and to his

side his mandarin accountant, impartial as ever. The mandarin scans his ledger, turning pages until he finds our names.

'Angee.'

My friend stares at the mandarin, wide-eyed.

'Your past good deeds outweigh your crimes. Although you have gambled, I have taken into account your treatment and your willingness to stand up for others. Take the Silver Bridge to Paradise.'

'Little Brother,' Angee chuckles, 'look at all the women waiting for me on the other side!'

I look across the bridge and see White Beard, the striplings and a number of women sitting around our campfire, sorting through our few possessions: my cricket-box and queue, Angee's *I Ching* and a string of coins. White Beard looks up sharply, sensing something, and a rainbow splays out behind them, crystallising the image of these young warriors and their family, whose land we contested, and who will hold on, keep challenging. My eyes swell with tears as the image fades. But Angee's shine with expectation.

'So they finally produced their sisters for you,' I laugh through my tears. 'See, you should have stuck around the station after all.'

The mandarin frowns at me: 'Shiu Pi.'

'Yes, Sir?'

'You have learned well from your mistakes and acquired great understanding in your past life. Take the Golden Bridge to Paradise.'

'Well done, Little Brother!' Angee rushes to embrace me. 'You've made it big time.'

I look over the Golden Bridge I have been offered. My heart leaps. There, on the far side, wait Second Wife, smiling shyly, Father to her left and Ah Chiang to her right. If this is my Paradise, it has been in my grasp all the time; I simply did not know it. To think that I let all this slip through my fingers!

For me, the Golden Bridge; for Angee, the Silver Bridge.

'Suppose this is where we part company,' Angee says softly. 'For good.'

I look at him sharply: 'Not after all we've been through together. When there's so much unfinished business.'

Angee whistles, his face slowly breaking into a huge grin, as he pulls a coin out of his pocket: 'Well, Little Brother, which one is it going to be?'

'Your toss, Angee.'

The Guardian of the Bridges raises an eyebrow. The coin flies in the air, spins over and over, its metal flashing in the torch-light. What will it be: numbers or characters? The coin reaches the peak of its arc, holds steady a moment in the air, before coming down crashing on the mirror of retribution, causing it to shatter into a myriad pieces. Hufashizhe and his minions scrabble on the ground to pick up the pieces.

'Hey, sorry about your mirror,' Angee says to King Ching Wan.

Hufashizhe looks up from the shattered glass, snarling at Angee. But somehow he does not seem terrifying any more.

'Guess that means no bridges for us this time?'

'Silence, minion!' the mandarin thunders, tearing a page from his ledger and crumpling it into a ball, which he tosses into the chasm the bridges span. We watch with dread fascination as the paper ball falls into the abyss, our prospects for Paradise getting ever more distant with it. The mandarin points to a narrow path fringing the chasm: 'Go through to the Second Court,' he orders.

As we set out, I cannot resist glancing across the Silver Bridge. On the far side, I see a stone tablet, with my name carved on it: the successful graduates, supplicant on their knees before the Emperor, their queues dragging on the ground, waiting to be admitted to the third level of the mandarinate. The lure of ego, which I thought I had conquered under White

Beard's guidance, pulls me ever so gently; but imperial service is not for me this time round. I rub my head, feel my spiky hair, and laugh. I take Angee's hand and together we walk towards the Second Court of Hell.

The Villa of Tranquillity, the imperial mandarinate, were illusory paradises. My spirit's yearnings now stretch beyond their horizons. I have seen and learned much while in the fields with White Beard, Angee and the striplings. And the Tao of Shepherding has taught me well.

Paradoxically, I have found community in my isolation and experienced a world without emperors, where everyone is equal, in which we can learn from each other, without fear or jealousy, without reprisal. I have learned more about life from my time in the fields than a hundred libraries could have taught me and I look forward to a reincarnation in which we all — black, yellow and white devils alike — live together in harmony. The lessons from our little outstation remain isolated, vulnerable, but worth fighting for. I smile, and I sense White Beard smiling with me.

King Chu Jiang looks down from his throne as we enter his chamber, swarming with supplicants and demons. To the King's left, another eager Hufashizhe, ready to dispense punishments; and to his right, a berobed mandarin recording these disdainfully in his ledger. Angee and I look at each other and laugh.

'They could have been us in another life,' he quips. 'I'm glad you're here with me, Little Brother,' he adds.

'Me too, Big Brother,' I say, as we turn back to face the judgment of the King.

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