

NOSTALGIA

A green parasol tree, around thirty feet high, towered outside the gate to the family home, every year hanging heavy with large clusters of nuts. Hoping to bring them down, children would hurl stones into the branches, the occasional missile sailing through the canopy to land on my desk, at which point my teacher – whom I respectfully knew as Mr Bald – would stride out to give those responsible a scolding. A clear foot in diameter, the leaves would wilt in the summer sun before springing back – like a fist opening out – in the resuscitating night air. At this point in the day, after drawing water to scatter over the overheated ground, our family's old gatekeeper, Wang, might gather up a battered old stool and head off with his pipe to swap stories with my amah, Li. And there they would sit and chat, deep into the night, the darkness interrupted only by sparks from his pipe.

While they were out there enjoying the cool of one particular evening, I remember, my teacher was enlightening me on the principles of verse composition – my task being to come up with a poetic match to a given subject. To his 'Red Flower', I tried 'Green Tree'. Objecting that the tonal patterns were not consonant, he told me to go back to my seat and think again. Not yet nine years old at the time, I had not a clue what tonal patterns were; but since my teacher did not seem about to share his mature wisdom

with me, I returned to my desk. After a long, fruitless ponder, I very slowly opened out my fist and slapped it resonantly against my thigh, as if I had swatted a mosquito, hoping to communicate to my instructor the extent of my mental discomfort, but he continued to take no notice. On and on I sat, until he at last drawled that I should approach – which I smartly did. He then wrote down the characters for Green Grass. '“Red” and “flower” are level tones,' he explained, 'while “green” is falling and “grass” rising. Dismissed.' I was bounding through the door before the word was out of his mouth. 'No hopping and skipping about!' he drawled again. I carried on my way, although more sedately.

The parasol tree was out of bounds. In the past, whenever I had made for Wang, badgering him for stories of the mountain people, my teacher (who, I may have already mentioned, was bald) would follow close on my heels. 'Wicked child, stop wasting time!' he would glower. 'Had your supper? Then go back inside and finish your homework.' A moment's hesitation would bring his ruler down, hard, on my head the next day: 'Wicked, lazy, stupid boy!' Since my teacher was fond of settling scores in the classroom, in time I chose to avoid the tree. Experience had taught me that the next day would bring me little joy, unless it was a holiday. If only I could fall ill of a morning, then recover of an afternoon, thereby winning myself a half-day's reprieve; or if my teacher could sicken and – ideally – die. But if neither of these optimal outcomes resulted, I would have no choice but to return to Confucius the following morning.

And there I found myself, the next day, suffering another lecture on *The Analects*, my teacher's head swinging from side to side as he glossed each and every word. He was so shortsighted he was almost kissing the book, as

if he wanted to gobble it up. I was always being accused of not looking after my books: of leaving them in a state of disastrous disrepair less than half a chapter in. Well, they didn't stand a chance with my snorting, dribbling teacher – their chief instrument of destruction – blurring and mangling the pages far more efficiently than I ever could. 'Confucius says,' he was saying, 'that at sixty his ears were obedient to the truth – that's "ear" as in ear that you hear with. By seventy, he could achieve his heart's desire without breaking the bounds of social morality...' The exegesis was lost on me, because the characters were obscured by the shadow cast by his nose. I enjoyed only a privileged view of his radiantly bald head perched over the page – as a reflecting surface it had none of the clarity of the ancient pond in the back garden, offering me a blurred, bloated, clumsy image of my face.

As time dragged on, my teacher seemed to be deriving unholy enjoyment from the exercise, agitating his knees and giving huge nods of his head. My patience, by contrast, was wearing thin. Although the lustre of his pate succeeded in holding my interest a while, soon even that began to pall, and I began to wonder how much more I could stand.

'Mr Yangsheng! Mr Yangsheng!' A strange, blessed voice, shrill with desperation, came from outside the gate.

'Is that Yaozong?... Come in, come in.' Looking up from his disquisition on *The Analects*, my teacher walked out to greet his visitor.

I had initially been flummoxed by my teacher's inexplicably respectful attitude towards this Yaozong – one of the Jins, our neighbours to the left. Though the family was very well-off, he went about in old, ragged clothes, and never ate anything but vegetables, so his face was brown and puffy as an out-of-season aubergine. While he always made a great fuss of me, Wang

never made much effort with our miserly neighbour. 'Hoarding money's all he's good for!' he would often say. 'And as we never see a penny of it, why should we waste our breath on him?' It didn't seem to bother Yaozong, though. He wasn't half as quick as the old man: whenever Wang was telling his stories, Yaozong just mumbled vaguely in response; he never really understood what they were about. My amah told me his parents still kept him on a short leash, and never let him go out into society – so he could keep up with only the most vacuous conversation. If talk turned to rice, he would be able to grasp only that bald fact – he couldn't distinguish between the glutinous and the non-glutinous varieties. If it then moved on to fish, he couldn't distinguish between – say – bream and carp. When he didn't understand something, you needed to add a great welter of footnotes, most of which he wouldn't follow either, and which you'd then have to retranslate even more obscurely, generating yet more puzzlement. Since incomprehension was the inevitable result, making conversation with him was never particularly rewarding. To the astonishment of Wang and others, however, my teacher treated him with peculiar deference. I drew my own, private conclusions: I knew that, having failed to generate a son by the age of twenty, Yaozong had hurriedly acquired three concubines. It was around this time that my teacher became a staunch defender of Mencius's dictum that there were three ways of betraying a parent – of which dying without descendants was the vilest – and promptly invested thirty-one pieces of gold in a wife for himself. His excessive respect for Yaozong was presumably down to the younger man's virtuosic show of filial virtue. Wang's unschooled intelligence was no match for my teacher's bottomless erudition; small wonder he had not plumbed the depths of my learned friend's

thought-processes. I myself had settled upon this explanation only after days of bemused pondering.

‘Have you heard?’

‘Heard?... Heard what?’

‘The Long Hairs are coming!’

‘The Long Hairs?... Ha! Impossible.’

Yaozong’s Long Hairs were the Hairy Rebels to my teacher – the Taipings¹ to the history books, perhaps. Wang called them Long Hairs, too – he told me he’d been twenty-nine when they came by these parts. As he was over seventy now, it must have been more than forty years ago, so even I knew it was impossible.

‘I heard it from Mr San at Hexu – any day now, he said...’

‘Mr San?’ My teacher – who worshipped the great Mr San as a god – paled and began pacing around his desk. ‘He must have got it from our revered magistrate. Perhaps we should be on our guard.’

‘Maybe eight hundred of them, they’re saying. I’ve sent one of my servants to make further inquiries at Hexu. To find out when they’re actually going to get here.’

‘Eight hundred? Impossible. Maybe they’re just bandits or local Red Turbans.’

My teacher’s power of reason had won out – he knew they couldn’t be Taipings. Though it hadn’t yet dawned on him that Yaozong was incapable of distinguishing between different breeds of outlaw – bandits, pirates, White Hats or Red Turbans were all Long Hairs to him. So my teacher’s new hypothesis was entirely lost on Yaozong.

‘We should be ready to feed them. The guest hall in my house is too small

to fit them all in, so I’ve asked to borrow the Zhang Suiyang Temple for the other half of them. Soon as their bellies are full, they’ll leave us alone.’

Despite his dimness, Yaozong had at least gleaned from his parents the art of welcoming invading armies with food and drink. Wang had told me that Yaozong’s father had met the Long Hairs: he had flung himself on to the ground and begged for his life, knocking a big red lump up on his forehead. But he managed to stay alive, at least – and ingratiated himself by running a kitchen to keep them fed, turning a healthy profit on the proceeds. After the Long Hairs were defeated, he managed to get away from them and return to Wushi, where he gradually succeeded in becoming comfortably off. Yaozong’s current plan – of winning them over with a single square meal – was nothing to his father’s ingenuity.

‘Rebels always come to a bad end,’ my teacher pronounced. ‘Look through *The Simplified Outline and Mirror of History*² and see for yourself – they never get anywhere... Or hardly ever. Fine, give them something to eat. But, my dear Yaozong, don’t get your own hands dirty – let the village headman take care of it.’

‘Quite, quite! And could you write out an Obedient Subjects notice for us to paste on the gate?’

‘No hurry – there’ll be time and enough for that sort of thing if they do come. One more respectful piece of advice, my dear Yaozong. While you don’t want to get on the wrong side of people like this, you mustn’t get mixed up with them either. Back when the Hairy Rebels were up in arms, sticking up notices of submission didn’t guarantee anything, and after the bandits fled, anyone who had surrendered suffered at the hands of government soldiers. Let’s forget about it until they’re about to reach Wushi.

Right now you should concentrate on finding somewhere safe for your family to hide – not too far away, though.’

‘Excellent, excellent, I’ll go over to the temple right now to tell the priests about our plan.’

And so Yaozong left us, exclaiming with admiration at the advice he had received; though it was uncertain how much of it he had actually understood. People used to say that my teacher was the cleverest man in the town of Wushi – and with reason. He could have survived, unscarred, through any time, in any place. Since the great creator Pangu cleaved heaven and earth in two, unleashing tireless cycles of bloody chaos and orderly peace, dynasties have waxed and dynasties have waned. And yet, through it all, my teacher’s family – alone in the empire – seem never to have been doomed to political martyrdom or to lose their lives in following rebel causes, left to flourish in tranquillity up to the present day, to preach the wisdom of Confucius (who, let it not be forgotten, by the age of seventy could achieve his heart’s desire without breaking the bounds of social morality) to ungrateful wretches such as me. If one were to try to explain such a phenomenon in evolutionary terms, one might infer my teacher had inherited this mighty talent from his forefathers. I later came to believe, though, that he had picked it up from books. For how could Wang, Li and I – for all our own hereditary resources – possibly compete with the intellectual profundity that he had brought to bear on the afternoon’s dilemmas?

Off Yaozong went, but class failed to resume. Looking rather troubled, my teacher now said he too was going back home, and that I could take the rest of the day off. I bounded joyously off to the parasol tree, undeterred by the summer sun overhead. For once, the territory beneath its canopy belonged

to me, and me alone. Before long, I caught sight of my teacher hurrying off, a large bundle of clothes under his arm. In the usual run of things, he returned home only for special festivals or for the New Year, invariably taking with him his multivolume crammers on writing eight-legged civil service examination essays. Today, extraordinarily, he’d left the whole set standing solemn guard on his desk, taking instead the clothes and shoes he stored in his battered old trunk.

Out along the road, I saw ant-like swarms of humanity on the move, their faces covered in terror and confusion – some burdened with possessions, others empty-handed, all running away, Wang told me; most of Hexu seemed to be heading for Wushi, and vice versa. He’d seen trouble like this before, Wang went on, there was no need for us to panic. Li, who had gone round to the Jins’ to ask for news, reported that next door’s servants hadn’t yet left, but that she’d seen a crowd of (she supposed) concubines gathering up powder, rouge, perfumes, silk fans and clothes into suitcases. To the concubines of the well-to-do, flight – it seemed – was a spring outing, for which lipstick and kohl were bare necessities. Being rather too busy just then to make further inquiries of the Long Hairs, I headed off to catch flies, which I subsequently used to tempt ants out of their mounds, trampling them first to death before pouring water into their nests to highlight the deficiencies of their flood defences. All too soon, the sun slipped behind the branches of the tree, and my amah called me to dinner. How had the time passed so quickly, I wondered. On a normal day, I would still have been suffering the torments of poetic consonance, as my teacher grimaced wearily at my efforts. After dinner, Li took me outside. There, as ever, was Wang, enjoying the cool evening air. Unusually, however, tonight he had a great crowd gathered

open-mouthed about him, as if transfixed by some demonic creature. Under the bright moonlight, their exposed teeth looked like rows of decaying bone dice.

'Back then,' Wang pronounced, in between draws on his pipe, 'the doorman here was an idiot by the name of Zhao – Fifth Uncle Zhao they all called him. Soon as he heard the Long Hairs were coming, the master told everyone to run away. "Once the master's gone," reasoned our man Zhao, "who's going to protect the house from robbers if I don't stay on?"'

'Fool!' my amah interjected, forcefully demonstrating her contempt for the idiocies of our sage forefathers.

'Old Mrs Wu, the cook, wouldn't go either, over seventy she must have been – just holed herself up in the kitchen. For days, she heard nothing but the tramp of footsteps and dogs howling – she must have been scared out of her wits. Then even that stopped – the whole place was silent as the grave. One day, she just made out – still far off in the distance – the sound of a vast army approaching, till at last she heard them passing by the wall of the courtyard. In another while, several dozen Long Hairs burst into the kitchen, waving knives about, and dragged her outside. "Where's the master, old woman?" they seemed to be shouting (she could barely make them out). "Where's his money?" "Great king," she replied, bowing, "my master has fled. I've eaten nothing for days – give me some food, I beg you. I don't know anything about his money." "Hungry, are you?" one Long Hair laughed. "Try this!" Then he hurled a round object at her, so matted with blood it took her a moment to realize it was Zhao's head...'

'Didn't she die of fright?' Li screeched again, as the rest of Wang's wide-eyed audience let their jaws hang a few degrees wider.

'When the Long Hairs knocked at the door, Zhao wouldn't open up. "The master's away!" he shouted back at them. "You just want to loot the place!" Then the Long –'

'Any more news yet?' My teacher was back. After a moment of panic, I saw his expression had lost its usual note of severity, and dared to hold my ground. If the Long Hairs really did come, I now thought, they might throw his head at Li, freeing me from *The Analects* to dedicate myself to ant-drowning.

'Nothing... After the Long Hairs destroyed the gate, Zhao came out and got a proper look at them – terrified he was, then they –'

'Mr Yangsheng! My servants are back!' Yaozong shouted as he re-entered the compound.

'And?' my teacher asked as he walked up to him, his shortsighted eyes bulging unnervingly. Everyone turned towards Yaozong.

'Mr San says it's all lies about the Long Hairs, it's just a few dozen refugees passing by Hexu. A refugee... a refugee's like a beggar – like the sort of beggar my family gets all the time.' Anxious his audience might not understand the term 'refugee', Yaozong exhausted his linguistic resources in attempting a definition – and barely filled a sentence in the process.

'Refugees! Ha!' My teacher burst into laughter, as if mocking the stupidity of his former panic, and sneering at the refugees' deficient ability to inspire fear. Everyone else joined in – compelled by my teacher's mirth.

Having received Mr San's intelligence, the gathered company scattered with a buzz of chatter. With Yaozong also gone, quiet returned to the parasol tree, leaving only Wang and a handful of others. 'I must go and tell my family the good news,' my teacher said, after pacing out a few circuits. 'I'll

be back first thing tomorrow.' And off he went, this time taking with him his essay-writing primer. 'So your homework's going to do itself, is it?' were his parting words to me. 'Back to your books! Stop wasting time, wicked boy.' Feeling persecuted, I silently fixed my gaze on the light in Wang's pipe. Its flickering glow – as Wang puffed away – reminded me of an autumn firefly sunk into grass. Busy remembering how last year I had stumbled into a pond of reeds while trying to catch one, I stopped worrying about my teacher.

'All that fuss about the Long Hairs,' Wang nodded, leaving off his pipe. 'They were terrible to begin with, but they came to nothing in the end.'

'Did you ever see them?' Li quickly asked. 'What were they like?'

'Were you one?' I wanted to know. When the Long Hairs were about to descend on us, my teacher had left; the Long Hairs, I therefore reasoned, were a force for good. And since Wang was always kind to me, I further deduced, he must have been a Long Hair himself.

'Ha-ha! No, never... Mrs Li, how old would you have been back then? I must have been in my twenties.'

'Only ten. And my mother took me off to hide in Pingtian, so I never saw them.'

'I fled to Mount Huang... When the Long Hairs got to my village, I happened to be away. My neighbour Niusi and two of my cousins weren't so lucky. They got dragged out on to the Taiping Bridge, had their throats slit, then were pushed into the water and left to drown. Niusi was strong as an ox: he could carry nearly three hundred pounds of rice a quarter of a mile – they don't make them like that any more. It was near twilight by the time I got to Mount Huang. Up at the summit, the sun was still caught on the

treetops, but night was falling on the rice paddies at the foot of the mountain; it was getting dark. When I got to the foot of the mountain, I looked behind me and calmed down a bit as soon as I saw no one was coming after me. But there didn't seem to be a soul on the mountain – it was lonely out there on my own. I pulled myself together a bit, but when it got properly dark, the whole place was silent as the grave – except for a kind of crrr-crrr-crrr-wour-wour-wour sort of noise –'

'Wour-wour-wour?' My question slipped, almost involuntarily, out. Mrs Li gripped my hand to stifle any further interruption from me – as if speaking my mystification aloud would bring calamity down on her.

'Just a frog. And then an owl – sends a shiver down your spine, an owl's hooting... In the dark, you know, Mrs Li, a tree looks a lot like a man... Look again, and it's a tree, ha! When the Long Hairs were on the run, people from our village chased them out with spades and hoes. There were only about a dozen of us, against a hundred of them, but none of them stopped to put up a fight. After that, there was the daily treasure hunt – that's how Mr San from Hexu made his pile.'

'Treasure-hunting?' Yet again, I was mystified.

'Whenever we were about to catch them up, the Long Hairs would throw bits of gold, silver or the odd jewel back at us to slow us down – so that we'd stop and fight over them. I got myself a beautiful pearl, big as a broad bean, but before I had time to count my blessings, Niu'er came and bashed me over the head with a club and ran off with it. I'd have been a rich man, otherwise – though never as rich as Mr San. Around this time it was, Ho Goubao, Mr San's father, went back home to Hexu and found a young Long Hair, his hair tied back in a queue, lying inside a broken closet –'

'Bedtime,' Mrs Li ruled. 'It's starting to rain.'

'Not yet!' I protested. It was like being tantalized by a cliffhanger at a chapter's end – I had to hear right through to the end of the story. My amah wasn't having any of it.

'Bedtime! Up late tomorrow and you'll get a taste of your teacher's ruler.'

Fat drops of rain tapped down on the great leaves of the plantain tree in front of my window, like a crab pattering over the sand. I lay on my pillow, listening to the sound gradually fade away.

'Ow! I'll work harder, I promise...'

'Bad dream? You woke me up from mine... What was yours about?' Mrs Li was by my bedside, patting me on the back.

'Oh... nothing... What about yours?'

'About the Long Hairs... Tell you about it tomorrow – go back to sleep, it's past midnight.'

Winter 1911

OUTCRY

PREFACE

When I was young, I too had many dreams, most of which I later forgot – and without the slightest regret. Although remembering the past can bring happiness, it can also bring a feeling of solitude; and where is the pleasure in clinging on to the memory of lonely times passed? My trouble is, though, that I find myself unable to forget, or at least unable to forget entirely. And it is this failure of amnesia that has brought *Outcry* into existence.

For four years of my childhood life, I divided my time between the pawnshop and the pharmacy. Which four years it was, I forget – all I remember is that the top of my head reached exactly up to the counter in the pharmacy, while in the pawnshop it was twice my height. I would push clothes and jewellery across the latter, take the money contemptuously slid back at me, then make my way over to the former – to buy medicine for my chronically ill father. Back home, there was still work to be done, because our doctor seemed to have built his substantial local reputation on prescribing the most elusively exotic adjuvants: winter aloe root, sugar cane

that had survived three years' frosts, monogamous crickets, seeded ardisia... Most of them were excessively difficult to get hold of. And still my father went on sickening, day by day, until finally he died.

I think it's true to say that any once-comfortable family that falls on hard times sees soon enough what the world really thinks of it. And so I made up my mind to enrol in the Naval Academy in Nanjing: to go in search of different people, different paths. My mother was left no choice but to scrape together the eight dollars I needed to cover my travel costs. Though she said that I should do as I please, she still wept, which was natural enough, because back then a Confucian education was still the route to respectability. Only the utterly desperate, society deemed, stooped to studying Western sciences. By following the course I had fixed upon, I would be selling my soul to foreign devils, only intensifying the contempt in which we were already steeped. I was also imposing upon her long separation from her son. But I had no time for such misgivings. When finally I arrived at the Naval Academy, I made many new discoveries: natural sciences, mathematics, geography, history, drawing and physical education. Though physiology was not on the curriculum, we caught glimpses – as wood-block prints – of works such as *A New Treatise on the Human Body* and *Essays on Chemistry and Hygiene*. When I compared what I remembered of the diagnoses and prescriptions of our traditional doctors with what I had come to learn of modern medicine, it gradually dawned on me that practitioners of Chinese medicine are – intentionally or otherwise – comen. I began also to feel a powerful sympathy for those they had deceived – both the sick and their families. The translated histories I read, meanwhile, informed me that much of the dynamism of the Meiji Restoration¹ sprang from the introduction of

Western medicine to Japan.

Thanks to the rudimentary knowledge I picked up in Nanjing, I found my name subsequently fetching up on the register of a medical school in rural Japan. A glorious future unfurled in my mind, in which I would return to my homeland after graduation and set about medicating its suffering sick – people like my father, to whom Chinese doctors had denied a cure. In times of war, I would become an army doctor, all the while converting my fellow countrymen to the religion of political reform.

I have no idea what progress has been made in the teaching of microbiology since my time, but back then we were shown the outlines of microbes as images on lantern slides. Because lectures sometimes finished early, the teacher would make up the remaining minutes by entertaining students with slides depicting picturesque landscapes or current affairs. As it so happened that the Russo-Japanese War² was ongoing at the time, our lectures were often concluded by scenes from this conflict. In this classroom setting, I found myself obliged to echo – with my own claps and cheers – my classmates' jubilation. There came a day, though, when I suddenly found myself staring at a great mass of my fellow Chinese – a people I had long been deprived the pleasure of encountering. One stood in the middle, tied up, surrounded by a crowd of his countrymen. Though they were all of them perfectly sturdy physical specimens, every face was utterly, stupidly blank. The man tied up, the caption informed us, had been caught spying for the Russians and was about to be beheaded by the Japanese as a public example to the appreciative mob.

Before the academic year was out, I had left for Tokyo. For I no longer believed in the overwhelming importance of medical science. However rude

a nation was in physical health, if its people were intellectually feeble, they would never become anything other than cannon fodder or gawping spectators, their loss to the world through illness no cause for regret. The first task was to change their spirit; and literature and the arts, I decided at the time, were the best means to this end. And so I reinvented myself as a crusader for cultural reform. The majority of the Chinese students in Tokyo at that time were studying law, political science, physics, chemistry, policing or engineering; no one had any interest in the humanities. Nonetheless, despite the prevailing apathy, I managed to search out a few comrades-in-arms. With a few other necessary associates about us, and after some discussion, we decided to begin by publishing a magazine. Since, back then, most of our compatriots had their faces still turned to the past, we were determined to take the forward-looking title *New Life*.

But as publication approached, first those who had pledged to write for us, and then our capital, melted away, leaving only three of us, without a penny to our names. After such inauspicious beginnings, no one had any sympathy for us. Later still, fate scattered us three survivors too far from one another to meet to discuss our marvellous dreams for the future. And that is how our *New Life* ended in stillbirth.

The experience filled me with entirely novel feelings of futility and failure. In the immediate aftermath of it all, I could not explain why things had worked out in this way. But as time went on, I came to think that a lone individual will be encouraged by support, and stimulated to struggle by criticism. But indifference – being left to shout into an abyss – generates something else: a peculiarly hollow sense of desolation. It was then I began to feel lonely.

My loneliness grew with every day that passed, coiling itself like a great poisonous snake around my soul.

And though I was unreasonable enough to feel the sorrow of it, I couldn't stir myself to anger. Because the Tokyo fiasco forced me to reflect realistically on myself: that I was no hero, no demagogue capable of rousing the masses with a single battle-cry.

But I had to do something about the loneliness, because it was causing me too much pain. So I tried all manner of opiates: attempting to merge into the massed ranks of my fellow countrymen, immersing myself in study of the classics. Later still, I experienced or witnessed things that intensified my feelings of loneliness and sorrow – things that I preferred not to remember, that I preferred to bury (alongside my head) deep in the sand. But my quest for intellectual narcotics had had some effect; I had succeeded in ridding myself of my youthful ideals.

There was a three-room apartment in the Shaoxing Hostel in Beijing. The story went that a woman had once hanged herself on the locust tree in the courtyard outside. Even though the tree later grew so tall no one could reach its branches, still the apartment remained unoccupied. For years, then, this was where I lodged, copying out ancient stone inscriptions. I suffered very few visitors, and applied myself to realizing my sole ambition: to permit my life to ebb quietly away, without undue stimulation – either technical or intellectual – from my inscriptions. On summer nights, when mosquitoes hung heavy in the air, I would sit beneath the locust tree, cooling myself with a cattail-leaf fan, glimpsing scraps of blue sky through cracks in the dense foliage overhead, as nocturnal caterpillars dropped icily on to my

neck.

An occasional visitor was an old friend by the name of Jin Xinyi.³ Setting his large leather briefcase on a battered old table, he would take off his gown and sit himself down opposite me, looking as if his heart was still pounding from fear of a dog he had encountered along the way.

'What's the use in this?' he asked one evening, flicking through my book of inscriptions.

'None at all.'

'Why are you doing it, then?'

'No reason.'

'I thought, maybe you could write something for...'

I knew what he was driving at. Although he and a few associates were now working on a magazine of their own – *New Youth*⁴ – so far they had been rewarded only by indifference, by neither criticism nor support. Maybe, I thought, they were feeling lonely. This is what I replied:

'Imagine an iron house: without windows or doors, utterly indestructible, and full of sound sleepers – all about to suffocate to death. Let them die in their sleep, and they will feel nothing. Is it right to cry out, to rouse the light sleepers among them, causing them inconsolable agony before they die?'

'But even if we succeed in waking only the few, there is still hope – hope that the iron house may one day be destroyed.'

He was right: however hard I tried, I couldn't quite obliterate my own sense of hope. Because hope is a thing of the future: my denial of it failed to convince him. In the end I agreed to write something for him: my first short story, 'Diary of a Madman'. And once I had started, I found it impossible to stop, rattling off poor imitations of fiction to keep my earnest friends quiet,

until in time I found myself the author of some dozen pieces.

I thought I had changed: that I was no longer the kind of person who felt the imperative to speak out. Yet neither could I forget the lonely sorrows of my youth. And so I found myself issuing a few battle-cries of my own, if only to offer comfort or sympathy to those still fighting through their loneliness, and to alleviate their fear of the struggles ahead. I have no interest in passing judgement on these things of mine: on whether they are brave, despondent, contemptible or ridiculous. But since they are battle-cries, I naturally had to follow my generals' orders. So I often stooped to distortions and untruths: adding a fictitious wreath of flowers to Yu'er's grave in 'Medicine'; forbearing to write that Mrs Shan never dreams of her son in 'Tomorrow', because my generalissimos did not approve of pessimism. And I didn't want to infect younger generations – dreaming the glorious dreams that I too had dreamed when I was young – with the loneliness that came to torment me.

These attempts of mine are no works of art; that I understand perfectly well. And yet I now enjoy the great good fortune of seeing them collected together and passed off as a volume of fiction. Though I feel some unease at this undeserved stroke of luck, it also brings me some happiness – that they might, at least fleetingly, find a readership.

And so I have dispatched my pieces to the printer and, for the reasons given above, named them *Outcry*.

Lu Xun

3 December 1922, Beijing

DIARY OF A MADMAN

At school I had been close friends with two brothers whose names I will omit to mention here. As the years went by after we graduated, however, we gradually lost touch. Not long ago, I happened to hear that one of them had been seriously ill and, while on a visit home, I broke my journey to call on them. I found only one of them at home, who told me it was his younger brother who had been afflicted. Thanking me for my concern, he informed me that his brother had long since made a full recovery and had left home to wait for an appropriate official post to fall vacant. Smiling broadly, he showed me two volumes of a diary his brother had written at the time, explaining that they would give me an idea of the sickness that had taken hold of him and that he saw no harm in showing them to an old friend. Reading them back home, I discovered his brother had suffered from what is known as a 'persecution complex'. The text was fantastically confused, and entirely undated; it was only differences in ink and styles of handwriting that enabled me to surmise parts of the text were written at different times. Below, I have extracted occasional flashes of coherence, in the hope they may be of use to medical research. While I have not altered a single one of the author's errors, I have changed all the local names used in the original, despite the personal obscurity of the individuals involved. Finally, I have

made use of the title chosen by the invalid himself following his full recovery.

2 April 1918

I

The moon is bright tonight.

I had not seen it for thirty years; the sight of it today was extraordinarily refreshing. Tonight, I realized I have spent the past thirty years or more in a state of dream; but I must still be careful. Why did the Zhaos' dog look twice at me?

I have reason to be afraid.

II

No moon tonight; a bad sign. I went out this morning – cautiously. Mr Zhao had a strange look in his eyes: as if he feared me, or as if he wished me harm. I saw a group of them, seven or eight, huddled around, whispering about me, afraid I would catch them at it. Everywhere I went – the same thing. One of them – the most vicious of the bunch – pulled his lips back into a grin. I prickled with cold fear; their traps, I realized, were already in place.

Refusing to be intimidated, I carried on my way. A gang of children blocked my path ahead – they, too, were discussing me, their eyes as strange as Mr Zhao's, their faces a ghastly white. What quarrel could these children have with me, I wondered. 'Tell me!' I shouted, unable to stop myself. But

they just ran away.

Mr Zhao, all the others I saw that morning – what was the source of their hatred? All I could think of was that twenty years ago, I stamped on the Records of the Past, and it has been my enemy since. Though he has no personal acquaintance with this Past, Mr Zhao must have somehow got wind of the business, and resolved to take up the grudge himself. He must have rallied everyone else I saw against me. But what about the children? They weren't even born twenty years ago – so why do they stare so strangely at me, as if they fear me, or wish me harm? I am hurt, bewildered, afraid.

Then the answer came to me. Their parents must have taught them.

III

My nights are sleepless. Only thorough investigation will bring clarity.

Those people. They have been pilloried by their magistrate, beaten by their squires, had their wives requisitioned by bailiffs, seen their parents driven to early graves by creditors. And yet, through all this, none looked as fearful, as savage as they did yesterday.

The most curious thing of all – that woman, hitting her son. 'I'm so angry, I could eat you!' That's what she said. But looking at me all the while. I flinched in terror, I couldn't help myself. The crowd – their faces bleached greenish-white – roared with laughter, exposing their fangs. Mr Chen rushed up to drag me home.

To drag me home. Back home, though, everyone was pretending they didn't know me, that same look in their eyes. The moment I stepped into the

study, the door was latched on the outside, as if I were a chicken in a coop. I had no idea what lay at the bottom of it all.

A few days ago, one of our tenants – a farmer from Wolf Cub Village – came to report a famine. The most hated man in the village had been beaten to death, he told my brother, and some of the villagers had dug out his heart and liver, then fried and eaten them, for courage. When I interrupted, the farmer and my brother glanced at me – repeatedly. Now – now I recognize the look in their eyes: exactly that of the people I passed yesterday.

I shiver at the very memory of it.

If they are eating people, I might well be next.

That woman scolding her son – 'I could eat you!' – those bleached faces and bared fangs, their roars of laughter; the farmer's story; the signs are all there. I now see that their speech is poisoned, their laughter knife-edged, their teeth fearfully white – teeth that eat people.

I don't think I'm a bad man, but I now see my fate has been in the balance since I trod on those Records of the Past. They keep their own, secret accounts – a mystery to me. And they can turn on you in an instant. When my brother taught me to write essays, he would always mark me up if I found grounds to criticize the virtuous or rehabilitate the villainous: 'It is a rare man who can go against received wisdom.' How can I guess what they are really thinking, when their fangs are poised over my flesh?

Only thorough investigation will bring clarity. I seem to remember, though only vaguely, that people have been eating each other since ancient times. When I flick through the history books, I find no dates, only those fine Confucian principles 'benevolence, righteousness, morality' snaking their way across each page. As I studied them again, through one of my more

implacably sleepless nights, I finally glimpsed what lay between every line, of every book: 'Eat people!'

All these words – written in books, spoken by the farmer – stare strangely, smirkingly at me.

Are they planning to eat me, too?

IV

I sat quietly a while, through the morning. Mr Chen brought me some food: a bowl of vegetables and a bowl of steamed fish – its eyes glassily white, its mouth gaping like the village cannibals. After a few slippery mouthfuls, I could no longer tell whether I was eating fish or human; up it all came again.

'Tell my brother,' I said to Chen, 'that I feel stifled inside – that I want to take a walk in the garden.' Chen left me without a word but shortly afterwards unlocked the door.

I did not move; I wanted to see what they planned to do with me next; I knew they would not relax their grip so easily. And so it proved. My brother brought an old man in to see me. My visitor approached slowly, head bowed, afraid I would catch the savagery in his eyes, sneaking glances at me through his spectacles. 'You seem well today,' my brother said. 'Yes,' I answered. 'Dr Ho here has come to examine you,' my brother went on, 'at my request.' 'Be my guest!' I replied. My executioner, of course! Come to check how fat I was, while he pretended to take my pulse. Presumably his fee would be a slice of my flesh. Yet I felt no fear: my nerve remained steadier than those of the cannibals about me. I held out my wrists to see how he would go about it. Taking a seat, the old man closed his eyes, held

my wrists for a considerable length of time, stared blankly a while longer, then opened those terrible eyes of his. 'Avoid overexcitement,' he pronounced. 'A few days' rest and you'll be fine.'

Avoid overexcitement! Rest! Of course: they want to fatten me up, so there will be more to go round. 'You'll be fine'? They were all after my flesh, but they couldn't be open about it – they had to pursue their prey with secret plans and clever tricks; I could have died laughing. Indeed, I burst into uncontrollable roars of mirth – a laughter that rang with righteous courage. The old man and my brother blanched at the robustness of my morale.

But my boldness succeeded only in sharpening their appetites – the braver the prey, the more glory for the hunter. 'To be eaten immediately!' the old man muttered as he left. My brother nodded. *Et tu!* And yet I should have foreseen it all: my own brother in league with people who wanted to eat me!

My own brother was a cannibal!

I was the brother of a cannibal!

And destined to be eaten myself – this brother of a cannibal.

V

These last few days, I have reconsidered a couple of my earlier suspicions: perhaps the old man was not my executioner, perhaps he really was a doctor. But he will still have eaten people. In his *Book of...* what is it? *Herbs?*... Li Shizhen openly observes that boiled human flesh is perfectly edible.¹ He must have tried it himself.

Neither were my suspicions of my own brother unfounded. When he was teaching me history as a boy, he once told me people could 'exchange sons

to eat' in times of scarcity; or then again, while discussing a notorious villain, he told me death alone was too good for him; that 'his flesh should be devoured, his skin flayed into a rug'.² For hours afterwards, my heart pounded with fear. A few days ago, when the farmer from Wolf Cub Village told him about the business with the heart and liver, he merely nodded; nothing surprises him. At heart, he is ruthless; still perfectly ruthless. If sons are fodder for the dinner table, then anyone could be. I used to just let him preach at me – to let his sermons pass me by. Now, I know his lips were smeared with human grease, his thoughts only of eating people.

VI

There is darkness all around me. I cannot tell day from night. The Zhaos' dog has started barking again.

Fierce as a lion, cowardly as a rabbit, cunning as a fox...

VII

I know their ways. They do not want, or dare, to kill me openly; they fear the vengeance of the ghosts. Instead, they conspire to drive me to suicide. I see through their plans, most of them – I remember their looks on the street from a few days ago, and my brother's behaviour. Their first, fondest hope is that I should sling my belt over the beam in the ceiling and hang myself; that they will achieve their heart's desire without staining their hands with my blood – I hear their gasps of jubilant laughter already. Failing that, I could always pine away, of melancholy or nerves. Though my corpse would have

less fat on it, it would still be a corpse.

They can eat only carrion. I remember reading in some book somewhere about a fearfully ugly creature called a hyena, with terrifying eyes and a fondness for dead meat, capable of chewing the most enormous bones down to a pulp. I shiver just to think of it. This hyena is cousin to the wolf, the wolf cousin to the dog. The way the Zhaos' dog looked at me the day before yesterday, he's in on it, too; and that old man who couldn't look me in the eye – but he couldn't fool me either.

It's my brother I feel sorry for. He's only human: he must feel the dread of it, and yet still he conspires to eat me. Has he become hardened over time – can he no longer see how wrong it is? Or is his conscience in pieces: does he commit his crimes in the full knowledge of their evil?

A curse on all cannibals – beginning with my brother. And if I am to turn them, I must begin with him, too.

VIII

They should have been able to see it for themselves.

Suddenly, another visitor. A young man, barely in his twenties, his features a blur – except for his broad grin. He greeted me with a nod; I found no sincerity in his smile. 'Is it right to eat people?' I asked him. 'What are you talking about?' – his smile did not flicker. 'No one's eating anyone; it's not a famine year.' I knew then that he, too, was of their number: that he too feasted on human flesh. Screwing my courage, I determined to press him further.

'But is it right?'

'I – I don't understand the question. What a... sense of humour, you have... Lovely weather we're having today.'

The weather is indeed fine, and the moon indeed bright. But I will repeat my question: 'Is it right?'

'No...' he mumbled, beginning to sound vexed.

'So it's wrong? Then why is it going on?'

'It's not...'

'They're eating each other here and now – in Wolf Cub Village. Look here: it's written in all the books, in fresh red ink!'

His face went a ghastly white. 'Maybe,' his eyes bulged, 'maybe that's how things have always been...'

'But does that make it right?'

'I've had enough of this. You shouldn't be talking about it.'

I sprang to my feet, my eyes flying open. He had disappeared. I was covered in sweat. He was much younger than my brother, and yet already he was in on it with the rest of them; his parents must have taught him. And he will have taught his son; even the children stare at me like wild beasts.

IX

Craving flesh, dreading the teeth of others, eyeing each other with fear...

If only they could leave it all behind them, how easy, how comfortable their lives would become. Such a tiny thing. But they are all part of it – fathers, sons, brothers, husbands, wives, friends, teachers, pupils, enemies, perfect strangers, pulling each other back.

X

Early this morning I went looking for my brother. I found him standing by the door to the hall, staring up at the sky. Approaching from behind, I placed myself between him and the doorway.

'I have something to tell you,' I said, taking care to keep my voice soft, meek.

'Go on.' He spun round to face me, nodding.

'A few, difficult words. Primitive men probably did eat human flesh. But their thinking changed, developed over time, and some of them stopped – they were determined to become human, genuinely human. Those who wouldn't give it up remained reptiles, some of them changing into fish, birds or monkeys, then finally men. But they remain reptiles at heart – even today. The shame of the cannibal, brother, before the non-cannibal! Greater than the reptile before the monkey.

'Thousands of years ago, the royal cook Yi Ya steamed his own son for his king to eat. We all know it's been going on – since the creation of the earth itself. That revolutionary, Xu Xilin, a few years back – didn't they eat his heart and liver?³ Then there's the Wolf Cub villagers; and last year, I heard that a consumptive ate a steamed roll dipped in the blood of an executed criminal.

'And now it's my turn to be eaten. I don't expect you to fight on my behalf, alone against the rest of them. But do you have to join the conspiracy? They'll do anything, eat anyone: me, you, each other. Pull back from them, change – and we will all live in peace. However long it's been

going on for, we can decide to stop today, we can! I know you can do it. Why, when that tenant of ours wanted his rent reduced the other day, to start with you said it was impossible.'

As I began my speech, his lips curled back into a scornful smile. Then his eyes shone with a terrible, savage gleam. When I set to exposing their awful secrets the colour drained dreadfully from his face. A crowd gathered outside the gate, Mr Zhao and his dog among them, craning forward to listen in. Some faces remained only a blur, as if masked in gauze; on others, I saw the same bleached pallor, the same bared fangs as before – their lips distorted into smiles. I recognized all of them: the eaters of human flesh. But I knew they were divided in their thinking. Some believed that the eating of men must go on because it was how things had always been. Others recognized it for the sin it was, and yet still they ate, terrified of exposure. The more I said, the angrier they became, through their frozen smiles.

My brother chose this moment to show his true, unrepentant colours.

'Clear off!' he roared ferociously at them. 'Where's the fun in gawping at a madman!'

Another of their ingenious devices: to discredit me as insane. The plot was too well laid; they would never change. And when the moment arrived for me to be eaten, there would be not a murmur of opposition, only sympathy for my butchers. Death by character assassination – a method tried and tested by the farmers of Wolf Cub Village.

Chen stormed in through the gate. Though they wanted to shut me up, I was not yet finished with my audience.

'You can change! In your hearts! Soon there will be no place for cannibals in this world of ours. And if you don't change, you will all be eaten.

However many children you have, you will all be destroyed, like reptiles – by real humans, just as a hunter kills a wolf!'

Chen chased the crowd away. My brother disappeared. Then Chen coaxed me back inside. A stifling darkness hung over the room; the beams and rafters shuddered, then began to swell – piling distendedly down on me.

They pinned me to the ground; they meant me to die beneath them. But I struggled through my illusion, drenching myself in sweat.

'Change, in your hearts!' I gasped. 'Soon there will be no place for cannibals in this world...'

XI

The sun will not come out, the door does not open; two meals, every day.

As I held my chopsticks, I thought again of my brother. Now I know what happened to my sister. I can see her now, in all her heartbreaking vulnerability; only four years old when she left us. I remember my mother's uncontrollable sobs, my brother's efforts to stop her. He'd probably eaten her himself, and all the crying was making him uncomfortable. If he had any conscience left...

I wonder if Mother knew.

I think she must have known, even though she didn't say a word about it as she wept – maybe she just accepted it. When I was three or four, I remember my brother telling me, as I sat in the courtyard enjoying the cool of a summer evening, that a filial son should cook a piece of his flesh for a sick parent. Mother said nothing to contradict him. If it's all right to eat a

piece of flesh, then why not a whole person? But the way she wept that day;
the memory of it, even now, is painful. How inconsistent people are!

XII

Further thought is painful.

I now realize I have unknowingly spent my life in a country that has been
eating human flesh for four thousand years. My sister, I remember, died
while my brother was managing the household. He probably fed her
secretly to us, by mixing her into our food.

I, too, may have unknowingly eaten my sister's flesh. And now it's my
own turn...

With the weight of four thousand years of cannibalism bearing down
upon me, even if once I was innocent how can I now face real humans?

XIII

Are there children who have not yet eaten human flesh?

Save the children...

April 1918

HAIR

Early one Sunday morning, I tore the previous day's page off the calendar.

'October Tenth – Double Tenth,' I exclaimed, glancing at the new page. 'Revolution Day.¹ It's not marked!'

And promptly succeeded in irritating one Mr N, an acquaintance a generation older than me, who happened to have stopped by for a chat.

'Good for them!' he snapped. 'Why should you care, anyway?'

Now, this Mr N of mine was famed for the eccentricities of his mood: for his habit of flying into inexplicable tempers, or coming out with views some way out of step with conventional wisdom. Whenever this happened, I was careful not to offer any encouragement, leaving him to mutter it out of his system.

'Oh, they know how to celebrate Double Tenth in Beijing. First thing, a policeman turns up and orders you to Fly the Flag! Yes, yes, officer, mumbles your model citizen, sleepwalking out to stick a faded old rag up. Then comes back out when it gets dark, takes it down and shuts up shop. Unless he forgets, of course, and leaves it up overnight. What does the Revolution mean to him? What does he mean to the Revolution? Not a thing.

'I never celebrate October Tenth either. If I did, I'd start thinking back over

everything that actually happened in 1911. I can't bear it. All those old friends – young men, quietly finished off by bullets, after years of sacrifice. Or tortured in prison for weeks. Or just disappeared off the face of the earth, along with their hopes and ambitions, their corpses thrown who knows where... Mocked, abused, persecuted, their graves forgotten. No – I don't want to remember any of that. Let's try and dredge up some happy memories instead – things we can feel proud of.

'You know what I'm proudest of?' he now announced, suddenly smiling and rubbing his head. 'Since the first Double Tenth, I haven't once been laughed at or insulted in public.

'Remember that for us Chinese, our hair is our pride and fall. How many pointless victims has it claimed over the millennia, I wonder? Let's start with the ancients: now, they didn't seem to concern themselves much about hair. Look at their penal codes: decapitation saved for the most hideous crimes; removal of sexual organs next. Shaving the head was right at the bottom of the list of punishments. Though I suppose we'll never know how many lives have been ruined over the centuries by the stigma of baldness.

'Before 1911, whenever we talked about revolution, we'd always go back over the massacres of the Manchu conquest in the middle of the seventeenth century, at Yangzhou and Jiading. But it was just rhetoric. Back then, the Chinese weren't really fighting for the nation. They were fighting for the right not to scrape their hair back into queues and shave the fronts of their heads.

'But once resistance had been stamped out, and the old guard had died, the queue became a great immovable. Until the Taiping Rebels came along, letting their pigtails loose. I remember my grandmother telling me about

those times – about how bad they were. If you let your hair grow, the government soldiers killed you; if you didn't, the Taipings did. What is hair? Dead protein. But how many Chinese have suffered, or even died because of it?

N stared reflectively up at a beam across the ceiling.

'And I'm one of them,' he went on. 'When I went abroad to study, I cut off my queue – just because I couldn't be bothered with it. But the diehards among my classmates were furious – and the supervisor the government had sent to keep an eye on us. He told me he was going to stop my grant and send me back home. A few days later, of course, he'd had his own queue hacked off and fled back to China. I seem to remember Zou Rong (remember Zou Rong – author of *The Revolutionary Army*?² Probably not) was one of the hairdressers involved. He was sent back to Shanghai for his pains, where he died in prison.

'Within a few years, though, the family fortunes had gone to the wall. If I didn't find myself a job, I was going to starve, so I came back. First thing I did when I got to Shanghai was buy myself a false queue – two dollars was the going rate at the time – then went on home. My mother somehow managed to keep her mouth shut about it, but the first thing anyone else I met did was to examine this new appendage of mine. And the minute they worked out it was false, they'd smirk and start plotting to turn me in to the authorities for immediate decapitation. A relative of mine would have informed on me, if he hadn't been more afraid the Revolution might actually succeed.

'Then I decided to come out into the open: to get rid of the thing and start going about in Western clothes. But I got insults wherever I went – idiot,

fake foreign devil, etcetera, etcetera. I tried swapping my foreign clothes for a long gown, but it only made things worse. When I couldn't stand it any longer, I added a walking stick to the ensemble. My persecutors gradually gave up after I began paying back their sartorial advice with a few sharp raps. Now, I only had problems whenever I went somewhere new – where my reputation didn't precede me.

'But the whole thing made me miserable – still does, when I think back over it. When I was a student in Japan, I once read a newspaper article about the travels of a Dr Honda around the Malay states and China. As he couldn't understand either Chinese or Malay, he was often asked how he got about. "This is the only language they understand!" he replied, picking up his stick. The whole thing put me in a fury for days – and then, years later, here I was speaking the same Esperanto. And being understood.

'The year the last emperor came to the throne – 1909, that would be – I was in charge of student affairs at my local middle school. The other teachers treated me like a leper, while the local officials watched me like hawks. Every day I felt like I was stuck in an ice house, or waiting for my own execution. And just because I had no queue. One day, though, a handful of students suddenly turned up at my room and told me they wanted to cut their queues off. "You can't!" I said. "Would you rather have a queue, then?" they asked. "Of course not." "So why can't we have ours off?" "It's not worth the trouble, right now. Just wait a bit." They flounced out, scowling, then went and cut them off, anyway.

'What a nightmare that was. Everyone was talking about it, but I had to pretend I didn't know a thing, just let them sit through my classes – the only crew-cuts in a sea of pigtails. But soon it began spreading like the plague:

three days later, six students in the local teacher-training college cut theirs off, too, and were expelled that same evening. They had nowhere to go – couldn't stay at school, couldn't go home. Somehow, they got by until a month or so after the Revolution, when everyone finally stopped treating them like criminals.

'And my problems weren't over either. Even in Beijing, in the first year of the Republic, I still got heckled. Until the police cut the queues off of the people who'd given me grief. Finally, things got better – though I didn't risk leaving the city.'

For a brief moment, he actually looked pleased with himself.

'And now you idealists are making all this fuss about women cutting their hair.' His face darkened again. 'Just asking for trouble! No school will take a girl who's cut her hair; or if she's already in school, she's expelled for it. You want them to be revolutionaries – but what are you going to arm them with? You give them an education, but where are the jobs for them afterwards? Keep your hair and find a husband, is what I say – count yourself lucky if you can forget all that guff about freedom and equality. Because your life won't be worth living if you can't. What is it that Artzybashev says in *Sheviriof*?³ You promise their children and grandchildren paradise on earth, but what can you give *them* in the here and now? A good question.

'China will never change – never has done. Even Creation didn't change a hair on its head. You've no real poison in you, so why do you insist on making enemies for yourselves?'

Realizing, from the expression on my face, that I wasn't particularly appreciating his increasingly untrammelled harangue, he immediately fell silent, got to his feet and picked up his hat.

'Going so soon?' I asked.

'Yes,' he replied. 'I think it's about to rain.'

I silently escorted him to the door.

'Goodbye!' he said, as he put his hat on. 'My apologies for having disturbed you. Luckily, tomorrow is October eleventh, and we can put the whole thing behind us.'

October 1920