

## I Heard a Bird Singing

*Once upon a time, there was a Dragon King who lived on the top of a big mountain in a palace built with golden bricks and covered with silver shingles. The King, dressed in a sparkling yellow dragon robe and sitting high above on his dragon throne, issued his royal commands to his subjects. One day, the King ordered that trees be planted around the palace. And they must be the same kind with the same shape and same color. The King's wish was immediately fulfilled. Trees of the same bright red color and the same heart-shaped leaves were planted around the palace. The King, looking down from the top of the mountain, was pleased with what he saw and further demanded, "You are all my subjects." His thunderous voice echoed through the hill and valley. "You must always strive to maintain your color, mind you, because that is the color of loyalty, your loyalty to me, your King. You must not let the color fade; you must not change the shape. Keep still and quiet unless I tell you otherwise." All the trees cringed. Awed and silenced by those words, they offered their leaves—their hearts—for the King to play with, to tear, or to burn, at the mercy of his boundless power.*

*As days went by, some of the younger trees became more and more restless and resentful. "Our eyes are so burned all day by this red color," they burst out one day, "that our vision is all but a blur now; our sight is trapped in the forest and we can hardly see a meter away. Our voices have*

*been silenced for so long that our throats are growing rusty and our words caged within like dead birds." Adult trees nervously turned to these grumbling youngsters, hushing and shushing them. Their trunks were shivering with panic and their voices shaking with fear. "What do you need your voice for? You should be grateful just to be alive. Understand? You'd better watch out your mouth, or you will bring disasters to your families and yourselves. The King is on the top of the mountain. He knows everything about us. So you'd better shut your mouths, now and forever."*

That was the warning I grew up on, the warning that was passed on to us from our parents' generation who had learned through endless class struggles and political movements how words—a slip of the tongue or a single sentence spoken ten years earlier—could turn one into an enemy of the state and wipe out one's existence.

"You know how your father escaped being smeared as a rightist in the 1957 Anti-Rightist Movement?" My mother often reminded us. "He didn't say anything during those arranged study sessions and meetings. If he had, this family wouldn't be here, I tell you. We would be plowing fields and planting rice in some remote village. We would grow old and die there. So would you."

And she was right. In the chilly early spring of 1957, the Party called for all intellectuals, Party members and nonmembers alike, to voice their views to help the Party improve itself. Not knowing that this was a trap set up by the Party and its Great Leader to identify and capture any potential enemies, or—to use Chairman Mao's own words—to "lure snakes out of their lairs," many authors, poets, artists, researchers, and professors spoke their minds freely. As a result, they were labeled as anti-Party rightists and were uprooted from cities and forced into exile in rural areas and labor reform farms. If my father had done the same, he would have had his city residential permit revoked like many others and been sent to a labor farm or back to his home village. If my mother chose not to divorce him, like many other wives were forced to do—for their children's sake—she would have been expelled from the city along with her husband. My second sister, my brother, and I would have been born peasants.

The lesson was learned by all. Watch your mouth. Say the right things. Follow the crowd. Parrot the words. Grown-ups warned themselves, each other, and their children. Remember, the sun is always shining, the east is always red, and the Party is forever great. To survive was to say what everyone else said and be able to show that you were the same as everyone else. Think as stipulated by our Great Leader and his Party, cast away all doubts, and keep to the slogans. Learn to lie, to wear a mask, and to extinguish your voice or else hide it deep at the bottom of your heart. Words could get you into trouble and disaster always came from your mouth.

Remember, remember.

And yet . . .

I didn't want to remember. I tried to break the imposed silence by telling stories, stories I heard from my grandmother and my father and later learned on my own. I listened to my voice flapping its wings over the silent wall into an overcast sky. Like a bird, once it has flown from its cage, it will not want to fly back into it again.

When at the age of twenty-one, my mother had her first child, my oldest sister, in the spring of 1954, my grandma moved from Bengbu, an industrial city in the north of Anhui Province, to Hefei, the provincial capital where my family lived, to help take care of her first grandchild, and three more afterward. She became a migrating bird, flying back and forth between Bengbu and Hefei. Each time she came, she had to stay longer and longer, as my parents had to leave us more and more frequently. My mother, working full time as a librarian, was obligated to go to the countryside at least once a month to assist peasants with political movements. My father, an author and also a Party member, had to spend a good six to eight months in the distant rural areas, working as a Party secretary in different communes and writing at the same time.

The void left by my parents was filled by my grandma under whose wings we all huddled, feeling her soft blue cotton dajing shirt, smelling the fragrance of her hair oil, and listening to her mellow voice from which folk tales, opera romances, and ghost stories

trickled like a clear-water creek. The heat and humidity of summers retreated as we sat on our cool bamboo bed under the dark blue starry sky. My grandmother, sitting right beside our bed, waved a big palm fan back and forth to chase away ferocious mosquitoes that otherwise would have eaten us alive. As the fan danced with a steady rhythm, it turned into a magic wand with whose help we flew to the quiet and vast Moon Palace where we would meet the beautiful Moon Lady (Chang-O) who offered us a jar of sweet osmanthus wine and invited us to dance with her. We would follow Jade Rabbit, gliding over the surface of the moon, trying to catch a floating cloud. From the moon palace, we would then fly toward the Silver River (the Milky Way) where we joined the Weaving Fairy (Vega) on one side and then the Buffalo Boy (Altair) on the other.

“Did you see those two smaller stars on each side of the Altair?” my grandma would sigh. “They are the Weaving Fairy and Buffalo Boy’s children—a boy and a girl. When the Weaving Fairy fell in love with Buffalo Boy, she sneaked out of the Heavenly Palace and married him. They lived a happy and peaceful life on earth, the Buffalo Boy plowing in the field and the Fairy weaving cloth at home. But the Fairy’s mother, the Western Celestial Queen, had her snatched back to the palace and forbade her to return to earth. The Buffalo Boy, with the help of a magic water buffalo, flew all the way to the Heavenly Palace, carrying their children on a shoulder pole, one on each side. When he was near the entrance of the palace, the Queen pulled out her hair pin and scratched a Silver River in the sky that forever separated the Buffalo Boy and the Weaving Fairy. But every year, on the seventh day in the seventh month of each lunar year, magpies with red, orange, blue, silver, and golden feathers gather from all corners of China to build a bridge across the Silver River so that the Weaving Fairy and the Buffalo Boy can be together for that day.”

The icy chill of the roaring north wind subsided as we curled up inside our cotton quilt, watching different dramas unfold from behind my grandmother’s magical curtain of words. We followed Liniang to the Peony Pavilion where she secretly became engaged to

her lover against her father's wishes. We followed the route of the Princess of White Snake to the Broken Bridge over the West Lake in the city of Hang Zhou, an earthly paradise, where she fell in love with a handsome and kind-hearted scholar and fought to the death for their love against an evil monk. Then we listened to the wrongly accused Dou O, her voice of protest echoing through the heavens, declaring that on the day she was to be beheaded, the river would turn red and there would be a snow storm in June (the Sixth Month according to the lunar calendar). Everything happened exactly as she predicted. The power of her words finally carried out vengeance for the injustice done to her.

After each story, my grandma never forgot to add, "What I have told you, do not tell to anyone else, hear me? Those are all old stories. Don't tell them outside the house. Remember."

We all nodded, knowing well that the word "old," as in the old society, always carried with it a derogatory connotation. The Party and its Leader called on people to build a shining brand-new society and urged them to transform themselves into new people with pure revolutionary minds and spirits. These stories about fairies, spirits, ghosts, and immortals were the "remains of a feudalist society" that didn't fit into the new revolutionary era. But to me, these magical "Once upon a Times" took me on an unfettered flight from which I didn't want to return.

Once upon a time . . .

I heard another voice joining me in this flight: the voice of my father. During the limited time he stayed at home, one of my father's favorite things to do was to tell us stories. Every afternoon, around seven or seven thirty, after we finished our supper, my father would pull from his bedroom—which was also his study—his dark brown rattan armchair and place it in the middle of the living room. My siblings and I would go grab our small wooden stools and put them in two rows around the armchair—my brother and I in front and my two older sisters behind—and wait for the story to begin.

Most of the furniture in our household was loaned to us by my father's work unit, Anhui Provincial Association of Arts and Literature, and thus all stamped with its red seals. But the armchair belonged to my father and didn't have such a seal. Whenever he was home, he would sit in the chair at his big writing desk either reading or writing. The original brown of the armchair had faded into a shadowy yellow, but its surface was smoother and shinier than when new. "It was the finest and strongest rattan," my father told us. "It would only grow more solid through wearing." In this old but sturdy armchair my father leaned back, his long legs crossed, his left arm resting casually on the armrest, and his right forefinger and middle finger holding a burning cigarette. Our eyes followed its light blue twirl of smoke as it curled up in the air before drifting out of the windows. When he stubbed out the cigarette and slowly put it down in a dark blue marble ashtray on the coffee table nearby, that was his signal. He would clear his throat, take a deep sip from his big brown ceramic tea mug, glance around at each of his four little children sitting with their chins propped on their hands, and ask, "Now, are you ready?"

We always were, eagerly yet patiently waiting for him to draw up the magical curtain. Once he started telling, he wouldn't allow anyone to distract or interrupt him. Everyone had to be very quiet, as he put it, to be in the *milieu* of the story itself. Whenever he saw fit to stop, without warning, he concluded the way a traditional storyteller always did: "Well, everyone, we stop right here. If you want to know what happens next, wait until next time."

With that, he slowly rose from his armchair, his eyes sweeping over each of us with an intriguing smile. Then he strolled back into his study and disappeared into his own world of stories. Long after he left and after all my siblings had gone to play, I would still be sitting on my stool, immersed in those characters and what had happened and wondering what would happen to them next time we met. Most of the stories my father told us, I learned later on when I started reading on my own, were works by authors of Asia, Europe, and North America. Without knowing it, I had been acquainted

with characters and stories created by such authors as Tagore, Dickens, Hardy, the Brontë sisters, Balzac, Molière, Maupassant, Flaubert, Zola, Chekhov, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Melville, Hawthorne, Mark Twain, and Hemingway.

These and other books were shelved in the pine bookcase standing in the innermost corner of my parents' bedroom. About two meters high and one meter wide, the bookcase had double doors, the lower half of which were solid pine wood and the upper half clear glass, through which rows and rows of hard cover and paperback books could be seen. The bookcase was built by my grandfather as a wedding present to his beloved son-in-law. My mother often said that the most expensive property they had was all in that bookcase: the major portion of my father's salary and royalties, which amounted to a few thousand yuan a month, was spent on books. Like my father's old rattan armchair, the bookcase was free of the red seal. It was another piece of furniture my parents could claim as their own. It was their priceless treasure which, my father often said, would eventually be passed on to all of us.

By the time I learned to read, however, I would be warned to stay away from the bookcase and its treasure. In the summer of 1966, with his own first big-character poster, Chairman Mao lunched an unprecedented wide-scale political movement with the intention of purging the Party of any possible opponents and enemies, using middle school and college students as its driving force. The movement would later be known as the Great Proletarian Revolution. Mao became the Commander in Chief who conducted numerous reviews of the students, now organized as Red Guards. There were around two million at each review. Those students, who streamed into the capital from all over the country, assembled in the middle of the night, filed in at both sides of the Tiananmen Square for ten kilometers from east to west along Changan Avenue, waiting to be reviewed and to catch a glimpse of Chairman Mao the following day or the day after. Their Commander in Chief, accompanied by Deputy Commander in Chief Lin Biao holding his little red

book of Mao's sayings, would drive in an open jeep past tens of thousands of students who waved the little red books, screaming themselves hoarse, wildly shouting "long live Chairman Mao." Then they all went home to "make revolution"—to smash up everything that was old; they ravaged homes, wrecked schools, destroyed temples, and attacked any enemies or potential enemies of the Party and its leader.

The revolutionary whirlwind, raging in every corner of the land, dazzled and terrified everyone. Big posters and slogans covered walls and filled the streets, written on the lampposts and even on the roadways. Pamphlets and leaflets fluttered in the air, as cars with big loudspeakers shuttled back and forth broadcasting Mao's sayings. Party leaders of various ranks were escorted by the rebelling masses onto open trucks and paraded in public. They all wore dunce caps with humiliating slogans on their heads and placards on their chests with their names in black characters with big red Xs through them. They would be forced to kneel, and were beaten and kicked while their arms were twisted backward by students. Other Red Rebels wielded leather army belts to whip these men and women mostly in their forties or fifties. The brass belt buckle struck their backs and heads with heavy thuds. Some of them would fall down, their hands clutching their heads while blood oozed between their fingers.

"Next, it will be our turn," I heard my father whispering to my mother one night after we all went to bed. They and my grandma were talking in lowered voices in the next room, but I could hear them. The images of those Red Guards and the bleeding faces of those in the parading trucks reeled through my mind and kept me wide awake and deeply worried. Some big-character posters were already put on the wall outside our complex, citing my father as one of the biggest "ox ghosts and snake demons" who were accused of using their novels and movies to engage in anti-Party and antirevolutionary activities. I knew it was only a matter of time until he would be hauled out for the mass denunciation meetings and street parades.

Then I smelled something burning. I got up and my sisters too. We tiptoed to the bedroom door and saw letters, notebooks, and photos piled up in our white enamel washbasin burning. My parents were squatting around the basin and sorting out letters and documents, sometimes tearing up pages from thick notebooks and throwing them into the fire. After the scorched paper burned thoroughly, my grandma, who stood beside the door as if on guard, sprinkled water from a smaller basin onto the ashes before shoveling it into the dust bin. My mother was holding a black-and-white photo, in which she wore a short-sleeve floral-patterned qipao (evening gown) and sat on a chair, smiling at the camera. She gazed upon the picture for a while and slowly placed it on the top of the burning pile. With a dull crackle, its edges began to burn. The photo started curling and then flattened out. In an instant, the smile was swallowed by the fire and the floral gown turned into ash.

“What about those books?” My mother sighed. My father shot a glance at us, stood up, put both his arms around our shoulders and said, “Go to bed, children. Do not tell anyone what you saw tonight, hear me? Now go to bed.”

The bookcase. And all those books. What were they going to do about them? I knew these books would cause trouble for us. Since the goal of the revolution was to cleanse people’s souls of any alien elements in order to develop a pure revolutionary mind, it was necessary to destroy everything that was old and cultural, produced in the pre-Cultural Revolutionary era. Books, of course, were considered particularly dangerous and deserved the most thorough scrutiny and extermination. They were one of the major targets during those frequent home ravages—expected and unexpected, organized or randomly conducted by zealous revolutionary loyalists, including Red Guards.

The first thing in the morning, I hurried to my parents’ bedroom to check on the bookcase. It was still there, but with a different look now. Inside its double glass doors my father put a large piece of thick, brown kraft paper and on its outside, he pasted a huge

poster of Chairman Mao smiling above the Tiananmen Palace. He also locked the bookcase and gave the key to my grandma. Under no circumstances, my father warned, could any of us open the bookcase and take any book out of it.

In the following days and months, Red Guards and other rebel factions from local and provincial art school and opera troupes, who wore red armbands and faded green uniforms and caps, would break into our house, smashing up antique porcelain vases, tearing up any books they found, searching anything they considered old or suspicious. They confiscated my father's collections of traditional Chinese painted scrolls, a rare collection of handwritten history volumes bound together by fine silk strings, and his two manuscripts.

My father wasn't at home to witness these ravages. He was going through sessions of confession and self-criticism in a secluded camp outside the city and would later be sent to the labor farm to have his thoughts reformed and soul remodeled. But the bookcase survived, thanks to the poster of a smiling Chairman Mao in front and the brown kraft paper in the back. Its survival, the very fact that it was still standing there with all its treasure hidden inside, gave me enough courage to go against my father's warning not to be anywhere near it. Every day, after returning home from school, while my grandmother was busy preparing dinner, I found the bookcase key at one inner corner of the first drawer of our chest where my grandma hid all the other keys. Carrying a small stool, I sneaked into my parents' bedroom and closed the door quietly behind me. I placed the stool beside the bookcase, stepped on it, and began peeling off the Mao poster; after that, I slowly rolled the poster over and carefully placed it underneath the bed. I opened the doors one at a time so that they wouldn't make any noise, and then all those books, about ten shelves in all, greeted me with a smile that rippled over their dusty spines. I pulled the stool over and sat down or sometimes stood on it, drawing one after another book, straight from their rows, from the top shelf to bottom, leafing through pages and stopping whenever I felt like it. To my amazement, I recognized many

familiar faces and voices, the ones I had met and listened to in my father's storytelling. I conversed with these characters and listened to their stories for hours and hours, only to be interrupted by my grandmother's gentle yet loud voice calling us to supper.

In haste I put whatever book I was reading back in its place, closed both doors, used the paste my grandma made out of a mixture of sticky rice and water to reattach the Mao Poster, picked up my stool, and hurried out of the bedroom into our living room where my grandma was setting dishes on our big square dinner table. Guiltily, I rushed to the green plastic chopstick case hanging on the kitchen wall, grabbing a whole bunch and quickly dividing them into five pairs. Then I turned to the dish cabinet to get the bowls, again, five. It had been a few months since we all could sit together with our parents for our meals. I didn't even remember when the last time was that I needed to set up seven pairs of chopsticks and seven bowls. But now I didn't feel as sad or empty as I used to, preoccupied with that wondrous land I couldn't wait to return to.

From that land the characters kept coming back to me, whispering into my ears, in Arabian, Japanese, French, German, Russian, and English. Each voice told his or her dreams, fulfilled or unfulfilled, sweet or bitter, heavenly or hellish. These various human dramas—tragic, comic, tragically comic or comically tragic—crowded into my brain and helped to push away the constant worries and chaotic surroundings, offering me a glimpse into the strength of humanity—how much humans could take and still survive with grace and dignity. I now started looking around with newly acquired hope and faith, knowing that some day, maybe not too far away, things would go back to normal. Father would return home, sit once again in his magical rattan armchair, and tell stories; mother would finish her seemingly endless assignments and come back to us, and we would be allowed to read what we loved reading and to do what we enjoyed doing.

These characters and their stories brought me so much wonder, excitement, hope, and joy that I found it difficult to hold them all to

myself. I felt like a river overflowing with words and stories, and then, on one of those quiet late afternoons when I sat on the stool in front of that pine bookcase, I decided that some day I would let the river flow out of me. I wanted to let these stories be heard. I wanted to hear my own voice as well as theirs.

Like my grandmother and my father, I became a storyteller too.

It all started on a rainy evening in the late fall of 1972, at a military farm on the outskirts of the city. It was my first year of middle school. Every semester, we would go to the villages, factories, or military training camps to “learn from peasants, workers, and soldiers,” as called upon by Chairman Mao, who believed “petty bourgeois intellectuals” like us should go through thought reform at an early age. To better serve this purpose of thought reform, our school opened a branch campus at a military farm about sixty miles away from the city. We would spend one third of our semester there, undergoing military training and working in the fields at the same time. The dorm for girls was a vacant military warehouse where there were two rows of big communal brick beds padded with dry straw. About twenty of us slept on these beds next to each other, with about fifty centimeters of space each. On this particular rainy day, we stayed indoors instead of weeding the sweet potato field. We studied the latest of Mao’s directives and exchanged our thoughts with one another, as our teachers asked us to. We soon became bored. After the teacher left, we gathered in groups of three or five and started chatting. A small black speaker in the corner of the room was broadcasting a snatch from the opera *Red Lantern*. The daughter of the revolutionary martyr was singing in solemn high-pitched notes as she vowed to carry on her father’s unfinished cause. It was one of the eight revolutionary operas we grew up listening to. Each of us could sing every song and speak every line verbatim.

The rain kept rattling on the glass windowpanes and the air inside seemed to stand still. Yinping, a girl who had just transferred from another school and who never cared much about what others

thought of her, stretched her arms and yawned, "Oh, my, so boring. I wish someone would cut off that damn wire of the speaker." The other girls and I nervously exchanged looks. But no one said anything. I was then one of the two monitors of our class and felt obligated to say something. "Let's get some rest, then. Tomorrow we still have work to do," I suggested. "What?!" Yinping burst out laughing, "Go to sleep? Now? Not even seven yet!" Other girls started giggling. Yinping seemed to be encouraged and continued, "I wish we could do something, anything." Then, all of sudden, she fixed her stare squarely at me. "I know your father is a writer, right? You must have heard lots of stories from him, right?" Before I could even respond, she hopped across two or three beds and landed on mine, the tiny brown freckles on the bridge of her nose turning red with excitement. "Yes, yes, maybe you could tell us one or two?"

The room suddenly became quiet. Raindrops gently tapped on the window; their steady beat seemed to soften the ear-piercing voice of the opera singer. Several girls started moving toward our direction, and before I realized it, they had formed a circle around me. I thought of those moments when my siblings and I sat just like that around my grandma and my father, waiting for the story time to begin. How long had those "Once upon a Times" been gone? How long since those voices had vanished?

I felt my eyes a little wet and heard my voice slightly trembling. "OK," I broke the silence, "only one, only tonight."

But that turned out to be the first of many times when I told stories, whether we were in the branch campus, villages, factories, or other military training camps. When we were back at school, I continued my storytelling, despite the limited time and constricted space. Every morning, our regular classes were preceded by a fixed fifty-minute reading period called the *daily reading*, a session strictly reserved for reading and reciting Chairman Mao's little red book—especially one collection entitled "Three Old Pieces." Regardless of levels and grades, every class in the entire school was mandated to have such a session. It was the class that started our day. Each

student had to hold his or her little red book in front while reading it aloud. If anyone was caught doing something else, such as idling around, dozing off, or worse, reading for other classes, he or she would be warned at the first offense and disciplined or even expelled at the subsequent ones.

After these required morning reading sessions, other subjects, such as math, Chinese, physics, and chemistry, started piling up on us one after another, until four in the afternoon. The precious ten minutes between each class was all we had. Like my father, I broke down each story, so the audience would always have to wait until the next session. As soon as we finished our mandatory exercise during the first recess, all the girls rushed back to our classroom, sitting in a circle around my desk, urging me to continue whatever story I was telling. I remember it took me several weeks to finish the story of *Les Misérables*. One time, just as I reached the moment when Jean Valjean and Javert were standing face to face with each other outside the wall of the convent, the bell rang, but nobody moved. Dozens of eyes focused on me, waiting for me to go on. I looked over the crowd and saw our math teacher—who was also our homeroom teacher—standing on the platform, his eyes rolling with suspicion in our direction from behind his thick bottle-bottom-like glasses.

I cut myself short and whispered, “Teacher Wang is here. Wait until next time.” I then quickly sat down at my desk, grabbing my math textbook and pretending to read. But somehow I couldn’t concentrate. The teacher’s seemingly penetrating eyes made me uneasy and nervous.

One hot summer afternoon I went home to find my mother, who had returned three days before for her monthly home visit, sitting on one side of the dinner table with my grandma on the other. Both looked worn out and worried.

“Your home classroom teacher visited today,” mother said. Her voice trembled deep down in her throat. My heart started sinking. To any student, a home classroom teacher’s visit usually meant trouble, mostly serious. A model student, who excelled in both academic and

political performance, I had never had a teacher's visit until now. I waited anxiously for my mother to continue.

"Your teacher said you told stories to your classmates. Some are not good ones. Others should not be told at all. It is just not appropriate or acceptable for students like you to be involved in that kind of activity."

My mother paused, exchanged a perplexed look with my grandma and sighed,

"You have always been such a good child, so understanding and all. What got into you this time? Haven't you forgotten the old saying 'Disaster always comes from one's mouth?'"

My heart dropped with a heavy thud. It all came back—the warning that had been passed down to us, the warning not to tell, the warning that we grew up on. When my grandma told us not to retell those old stories, when my father forbade us to be anywhere near that bookcase, they must have acted upon this warning in order to prevent any possible disaster from descending upon their grandchildren. How could I forget this ghost-like warning? How could I think that I could tell whatever stories I wanted to tell to others? I closed my eyes for a few minutes, feeling caved in by a darkness in which I could see no end ahead.

It was a moment before I spoke again to my mother and grandma. "Don't worry," I assured them. "I won't tell anyone stories any more. I have been so foolish. Sorry." Holding my hands in hers, my grandma said: "Don't blame yourself. It's my fault too. Just be careful from now, OK?" I nodded; my nose felt a little sore, but I bit my lips to hold back tears. There was nothing I could or should say now.

Before I had time to act on my own, however, I had a major push from the outside, a push so strong that it would silence me for years to come. Not long after my mother's warning—and my teacher's, of course—a large-scale political campaign was launched; its goal was to wage battle against the spiritual corruption from Western bourgeois ideology and any sentiments associated with it.

Unlike other political movements, this one specifically targeted schools—from elementary through middle and high school.

The reason for this campaign was that certain manuscripts written by anonymous authors—probably very young ones—were found circulating among the students. Since 1966, with the exception of Mao's selected works, almost all the old books had been out of print and few new ones were published. For those who wanted to write books and have them go public, the only avenue was through underground transmission. Similarly, those who wanted to find books, any books other than Mao's works and a handful of revolutionary memoirs and novels, had to engage in clandestine activities—borrowing or trading books with each other, swearing secrecy, wrapping the books with innocent and harmless covers (such as pictures of heroes and heroines from the eight revolutionary operas or natural scenery). In this sneaky manner, published or unpublished books were passed from one person to another.

The manuscripts that were being circulated on middle and high school campuses were considered especially harmful and dangerous because the majority of them were romance and love stories, such as *The Maiden's Heart* and *Shaking Hands Once More*. In the lexicon of that era, the word "love" could be understood and interpreted only as loyalty toward the Party and Chairman Mao. Any other connotation would be threatening and corruptive to revolutionary minds. As a result, the meaning of love in its human sense was nonexistent; it became a forbidden and shameful subject for men and women, young and old alike, because it would only disarm and eventually destroy their revolutionary willpower. In the new society, people loved and married for the sake of revolution, and that was how the new plays and films of the time portrayed it.

As an initiative, school authorities nationwide called on all those who had read or heard about these underground manuscripts to come forward, turning in any such books in their possession or providing information for tracking them down. Those who had the books but chose not to turn them in would be expelled from school;

those who had read them, and thereby had to a certain degree indirectly helped “spread poison,” were to engage in serious self-criticism and write letters to the school authority promising that they would not under any circumstances repeat their mistakes.

The scale of this campaign soon accelerated into another mobilized political movement that intended to purge schools of any “unhealthy, pernicious, poisonous” elements—from the feudal remnants of the prerevolutionary China to the bourgeois influence from the Western world. The folktales about those beautiful and witty fairies and spirits I heard from my grandmother would fit the former category while the stories I learned from my father and later on my own would fit the latter. To avoid any potential danger that might fall upon my family, particularly my father, who I knew couldn’t afford to have any further troubles, I did self-criticism profusely during the class meetings for telling these stories and took the blame for my own foolish action. In both oral and written forms, I promised, over and over again, that I would be true to my honor as a model student and that I would never do anything that was incongruent with the revolutionary cause.

From that time on, I restrained myself from telling stories to anyone in school and didn’t even want to talk much. Now and then, when a few of my neighbors’ kids came to my house to play, they would plead with me to tell them some stories. I reluctantly obliged. Since they didn’t go to the same school with me, I didn’t have to fear their reporting on me. But this sneaky way of telling often made me feel guilty as well as nervous, even if we were at my house and those kids were my neighbors. The fun was lost; the sense of wonder was lost and, along with it, my own voice.

Before long, I stopped telling stories altogether. After graduating from high school, I settled down in my father’s home village where I worked with peasants in the fields from morning till night with little time or desire to tell stories or even to think about storytelling. But the world of words was not completely lost. It was brought back to me by the villagers—men and women, old and

young—who seemed to have endless stories to tell and could find any place to tell them. The revolutionary storm in urban areas had made little direct impact here in the village where the peasants labored from dawn to dusk in the most primitive ways of farming—backs to the sky and faces to the earth.

As a way to survive, they created their own world that was alive with the sound of human voices. At the end of each long day of fieldwork, either planting and harvesting rice or picking cotton, I would join the villagers who, whenever weather permitted, always gathered in the open courtyard inside the village ancestor hall. We would stand, sit, or squat on the stone steps, holding our rice bowls, and get ready to tell and listen to stories. Most of the villagers were good storytellers who could tell stories about everything—from the Silver River and down to the Lu village, from folktales of ancient times to the legends of different dynasties—it seemed to me there was nothing they didn't know or couldn't tell. One of those storytellers, who was one of my great-uncles, a man with rough dark skin and deep wrinkles on his wide forehead, could remember and act out every episode in the classic novels *Three Kingdoms* and *The Outlaws of the Marsh*. Each time he finished a story, he would, like my father, repeat the phrase, "Well, everyone, if you want to know what happens next, wait for the next chapter." Listening to him, I remembered the voices of my grandmother, my father, and my own, the voices that had been lost one by one in the distant silence.

Three years later in the late fall of 1977, about a year after Mao's death, the new leader lifted the ban on college admission that had been imposed since the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. Overnight, every new and old high school graduate, tens of thousands of them, ranging from ages eighteen to forty, who had been denied opportunities to pursue higher education for the past ten years, were now for the first time eligible to take the national entrance exams that might give them a chance to go to college. This sudden turn of events put everyone on edge. It was as if we had been plodding hopelessly through a vast desert and now suddenly saw the

only oasis ahead. That was where hope perched; that was where life started. The competition among the exhausted travelers was frighteningly fierce, since no one was certain how long that oasis would exist and when it would disappear. Ten years' bitter and desperate struggle merely to stay alive made it difficult for us to believe in anything at all.

After two rounds of national written tests, I became one of the lucky travelers who finally approached that land of hope, my eyes moistened by its greenness and my thirst quenched at the sight of its clear-flowing water. With tears welling up in my eyes, I cheered, but I couldn't hear my own voice. It was shrouded in too thick a cocoon to break free, at least not yet.

It was in early March when I arrived on the campus of a small liberal arts college located near the Yangtze River. The dorms were still under construction. The male students, who outnumbered the female ones, moved into the only finished dorm. All the girls, about twenty of us, from different departments, English, math, physics and chemistry, would spend our first few months in college in a deserted Buddhist temple that had been recently converted into a temporary residence. The first days flew by as we were busy cleaning our beds and unpacking our suitcases and canvas travel bags. Here and there, I saw a golden sunflower hair pin, a piece of blue and white ribbon, a purple floral patterned hair band, although not yet any jewels. It would take a while for us girls, who had harbored for years both desire and dread over these girlish accessories, to realize that it would be safe now for us to show our feminine side without fear of being accused of pursuing a petty bourgeois lifestyle. Out with these small and simple girls' items came a little nervous yet much relieved giggling and laughing.

Night fell early in March. The spring was here, but the wind was still howling as if in its last attempt to show off its powerful presence. Not wanting to go outside, all the girls went to bed and climbed into our quilts—cherry red, sky blue, lavender purple, and sunflower gold, with stripes and floral patterns—and waited in silence for bedtime.

Lying down on my upper bunk bed, I studied those triangular crimson wooden beams that supported the temple ceiling. On their surfaces were exquisitely carved entangled figures of dancing phoenixes and flying dragons, gazing upon me from the ceiling with their weathered and mysterious eyes. Once upon a time, they must have witnessed the glorious days of this temple, with its worshippers flowing in and the incense forever burning. What happened to this temple? Where were those monks and worshippers? There must be so many stories hidden behind the eyes of these dragons and phoenixes. But who would know if no one was able to tell them? Who would listen to silence if that was all they could hear?

Then, as if to answer my questions, a voice projected itself into the quiet night.

“It is too early to sleep. It is too cold and dark to go outside. Can anyone tell us a story?”

The clog was unplugged; the water started flowing. It couldn't stop. The words, suppressed in my chest all these years, now billowed like the ocean tide washing over the shoreline. Like someone who has been living in a desert for years and who now for the first time approached the ocean, I plunged into its surging waves and swam with my arms wide open. Out of the water, I ran along the shore, inhaling fresh and cool ocean air, picking up beautiful shining seashells and watching the tide carry the fine silvery sand far away to the ocean depths.

I started telling stories once again. The temple was listening, the night was listening, and I was listening. I heard my voice flying out of the temple, like a bird with newly grown wings. Having toured around the sky and seen everything behind and beneath it, the bird flew back and alighted on my shoulder and stayed. I realized that I had left behind a long-forgotten warning—you must not talk. Disaster comes from words.

Yet, I do remember not the warning but the need to tell. My grandmother once told me, one story you tell or listen to gives you one

more life to live. In listening to her and my father's stories and in telling my own, I live multiple lives and speak in a multitude of voices.

The following are some of those voices, voices of the people who, once silenced in the land of the Dragon King, now choose to remember, to tell, and to live.