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# Maverick

*In the wildness is the Soul Mountain. There are Wu Xian, Wu Pan, Wu Di, Wu Xie, Wu Luo and other great wizards. They go up and down the mountain to pick herbs.*

—The Book of Mountains and Seas

This is it, Shan Gui, June 6, 2006. In six hours, the Coffey Dam will explode. The river will rush in and we'll all go under.

The wind is blowing. Clouds are gathering on the Twelve Peaks of Wu Shan. Below us, white water tears through the narrow Wu Gorge, sending up clouds of mist on the steep slopes. In six hours the river will rise to the red mark—175 meters, and everything will go—the gorge, the slopes, the mist, and our home under the dawn redwood. The river will become a lake: tame, servile, voiceless.

Without the river, can you still find your way home, Shan Gui, my mountain spirit?

Tall grasses dance on your grave, whispering our song like seductive girls. But who can sing or dance like you, with your phoenix voice and deer spirit? You are the goddess of the Twelve Peaks.

“Call me *lazi*,” you said, head cocking in such a way that always set me on fire. “Not because you got me in your net or because I can swim for days without rest or food. I’m a fish because the river is my home, and I breathe better in the water.”

I laugh and call you Shan Gui over and over again. I love the sound and its echo—mountain ghost, mountain spirit, mountain goddess.

You're a seer from the river and sea, and I become one through your amber eyes.

Today is our thirty-sixth anniversary. Thirty-six years ago I pulled you out of the river. The jolt to my hands and heart when I got you in the net still feels fresh. For five days I had been throwing the net into the water and pulling it in. But nothing came to me, not even a shrimp. This had never happened before. My father, a master hunter and fisherman, had taught me everything I needed to know to live with the mountains and rivers. I was delirious with hunger and grief when the net tightened suddenly, and the boat started drifting sideways. I grabbed the rope. The weight was pulling me down into the river. It wasn't a rock. I could tell because I knew every inch of the river like my back yard. It wasn't a white sturgeon—the river elephant as we fishermen called it. Through the water I saw the shadow of a regal body with gold and green scales. My heart pumped. I had caught a *lazi*, a dragon fish, a royal Chinese sturgeon, King of the Long River. A thousand pounds for the green sturgeon, ten thousand for the elephant, as the fishermen's saying goes.

"Wu Pan, Wu Pan," I shouted my name to the sky, "Old Heaven has finally opened its eyes. You are not going to die. Not yet!"

As I pulled in the net, my mind raced. I could sell the sturgeon on the black market and buy enough corn and sweet yams for the winter and spring till the summer crop ripened. I'd even have some left over to buy a piglet and raise it to sell, and then I'd buy two piglets, plus clothes and food. With decent clothes, I could go to the market and meet people, perhaps even bring a girl to my shed.

Then you emerged from the water, shimmering silky green and gold. You curled in my net as if you were lying at home in a hammock. I rubbed my eyes. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Was I hallucinating from hunger? True, it had been three days since I ate my last yam, but how could I mistake a fish for a woman? Slowly, you stood up, a cascade of black hair to your knees, a green dress shredded like a fishing net that revealed your white belly and pink nipples. Blood rushed to my face as you walked toward me. I had

seen this face, this smile, this forest of hair. But where? I closed my eyes. Light came through my eyelids and lit me up from inside.

I started weeping. I hadn't cried like that since my mother vanished in the river and we were forced to leave the town where our ancestors had been settled for five thousand years. "Cry no more and grow up fast, my little son of hope," Father sang as he carried me to the bell tower on his back. I was five, still unable to walk or talk. We lived like cavemen in the mountains. My playmates were monkeys, deer, birds and other animals who came to the shed for the food I had saved for them. I didn't cry when the Red Guards took my father away and called me down the mountain to claim his body a week later, his head purple and swollen from being hung upside down, ropes cutting deep into his ankles.

"Take me home, Pan Ge," you said.

I opened my eyes wide. I had heard this voice, the voice of blue wings laughing in the wind and calling me *Ge*—brother or *Pan Ge*—Hope Brother. It had been singing to my sleeping soul for the past ten years. I had tried to hold onto the wings, only to awaken to my father's back at the fire, rings of smoke rising from his pipe.

I looked into your brown eyes where light shines from within. How did you know my name, the secret name only two people on earth knew? "Keep it hidden until you're out of danger," Mother had told me. Father would call me Wu Pan when he was teaching me Wu's secret knowledge. To the outside world, I was known as *Gou Dan*—dog shit, a common name for sickly children. We are sick because of our past, it is believed, but if we keep our heads low, we may slip through the gods' wrath and live a normal life.

You took my hand, and a door cracked open in my brain. I had a glimpse of a white gibbon with blue eyes, two children hanging onto her breasts.

"Let's go, Pan Ge, before the sun sets behind the mountains."

I followed you along the thin path. You didn't say a word, but every time you bent to pick a flower or an herb, every time you paused to listen to the hushed sounds of the forest, the door opened

wider, and things father had tried to teach me came out one by one: the names of the plants, the tunes of birds and insects, the rocks, the soil, the clouds, and the words that link them all together.

You walked fast, your feet barely touching the ground. I had no trouble keeping up with you. I no longer felt the pang of hunger, and my body felt light and swift. You seemed to know where we were going, and I was willing to follow you to the edge of the world.

Before the sun went down, we arrived at the bell tower. I gazed at the tomb under the tree where Father had lain for six weeks. There was no headstone to mark the spot, as he had wished. Grass and flowers already covered the grave. I gazed up at the bronze bell. No one knew when it had been built, how this giant thing had been hoisted to the tree where it hung like a green ear. The chain that hooked the bell to the tree had grown into the trunk.

Father had been ringing the bell six times a day, seven days a week, since we came to live here. Its sound traveled all the way to the brine pit in the valley. There was always someone from the Wu Clan to ring the bell. No one knew how it had started, but since people began producing salt in the valley, workers had been using the bell as their clock to make the salt and to go about their daily life. Father was once trapped in a landslide. The workers missed their cue to add minerals to the salt that was crystallizing, and the whole batch was ruined. When they realized that the bell hadn't rung for a long time, they rushed up to the mountain and dug him out. He continued ringing the bell even after the Red Guards smashed all the ancient salt-making equipment and the workers all scattered. Since his death, I tried to ring the bell every day. It was father's wish: keep it alive as long as we lived.

Under the tree were the ruins of an old temple. Our hut stood among the stones in the shadow of the pagoda canopy. From the back window, I could touch the knotted, shredding trunk. I loved the smell from its brown bark, loved the rumble from its belly in the middle of the night. I used to put my arms around the trunk. Father laughed and said it would take twenty kids like me to circle the tree.

He said it was older than the first man, older than the giant dragons that terrorized the earth for hundreds of million of years, older than the green sturgeon in the Long River.

You didn't say a word. Without looking, I knew you were also looking at the tree and the bell and the things around us—the mountains near and far, the river in the distance.

"We're home, Pan Ge," you said.

You took my hand and walked to the hut. As soon as you stepped in, the dim humble place became a paradise. You wiped, cleaned, and washed as if you were home. You laughed as you caught my gaze, and then pushed me to the fire pit. I lit the fire. Through the heat and smoke, I watched you move here and there like mist circling the mountains. As a child, I had often gazed at the Twelve Peaks across the river and daydreamed of climbing the slenderest peak—the famous Wushan Goddess. The more I looked at you, the more you resembled that goddess. Was I in a dream? I pinched my thighs. I heard you laugh. Then I smelled the dinner—a fish and rabbit grilled to a perfect golden brown served on a blue slate.

I've never questioned how you got the fish. You are the river goddess. Fish run to you just as the river runs to the ocean. But how you captured the rabbit remains a mystery. The mountains had become barren since trees were cut to fuel the furnaces to melt steel, grow oranges and corn. Only Father, the master hunter, could bring game home. He never touched it himself. He hunted only when *I* needed meat. When the Red Guards took him away, all the animals and birds left suddenly, as if they had followed him to heaven.

After I licked clean the slate, you put a crown of flowers on my head. We walked into the open air. We floated in the clouds. And suddenly I started to sing. I'd never sung in my entire life. I didn't talk till I was six. Those who visited Father for medicine hinted that I was possessed by evil spirits, and something should be done about it. Father told them I would speak when I was ready, and I did. But I couldn't learn the sacred chanting for the gods and ghosts. Father

didn't seem to worry a bit as he trained me every day, as if he knew I had them inside like an egg, waiting to hatch.

I don't know what magic you wove into the crown. As soon as I put it on, light broke through my thick scalp and an O formed around my mouth. From my belly button came a long sigh—wuuuuu. “You can't be a shaman unless you know how to let the sound come out from your guts,” Father said. “It's the first step to connect us with gods, animals, and plants.” Wuuuuuuuu—the sound of my family name and heritage as high priest, shaman, astrologist, mathematician, artist, seer. As I chanted, songs flew out of my mouth like birds, and my limbs moved with the rhythm of a crane. And quickly you joined in. We danced around the tomb, luscious with scented grass, till the bell broke its silence and rang on its own, and birds, hundreds of them, joined our chorus from the tree's canopy. And we knelt down to thank the earth, the sky, and our parents.

That day we became husband and wife. We were both sixteen, two wild monkeys in the hidden mountains of Wushan.

*After the caviar was harvested with the hormone injection, the sturgeon queen was transported to Beijing for research and tour exhibitions. On the way to the north, she turned her giant body around to face the Long River, her home. The workers turned her around three times, and each time she turned to face the river. No one understood how she managed to turn the thousand-pound mass in the truck's narrow tank. In Beijing, thousands of people visited her daily, but the sturgeon refused to eat. She is on a hunger strike.*

*This is the second sturgeon on exhibition. The first one died after six months' hunger strike.*

—Beijing Evening News

Pan Ge, my Hope Brother.

I've been in Beijing for six months, in a giant tank. Every day, a river of people flows to the show. They plunk down fifty yuan for a ticket—a big chunk of their earnings for many—to have a glimpse

of “the living fossil of the sea,” “the panda in the water,” “the treasure of the Long River,” as the loudspeaker blasts at the entrance. Poor suckers! All they see is a body emptied of seed, a body vanishing.

They gawk with their oily eyes and tap the glass with their fat fingers. They think they’re my masters because they’ve paid good money for their tickets. They have no idea they’re vanishing, too. We all come from the same origin. Our appearances are mere illusions.

In six hours when the Coffier Dam blows up and the water rises, everything along the river will go—the fields, the roads, the villages, the cities, the mountains, and our water fir. My Long River, artery of my home, how it’s plagued by dams! Forty-eight thousand of them, all built in the past two decades. But nothing compares with this one—the Three Gorges Dam—the biggest on earth that will turn the mighty river into a placid lake. Once the white blood stops running, nothing will be the same again.

Pan Ge, you’ve often asked me where I came from, whether I was a dream, a passing cloud, an apparition of the Goddess Peak across the river. Well, I’m all and none of them at the same time. My family has been the keeper of the lost knowledge of transformation. We change from one form to another with the breath of the earth. Our lives renew before death comes. By not clinging to life, we become immortal.

I come from a family that knows no father. In the morning, I rise with the mist from the river to receive the first shaft of light on the peak. At dusk, after I see off the twilight, I come down as drizzle or thunderstorm. When night falls, I roam in and out of sleeping souls, adorning their dreams with love and sex. I fulfill young peoples’ fantasies, lovers’ prayers. I answer women’s pleas for husbands and children. I balm injured animals and lead fish out of dangerous waters. I have many names—Goddess of the Twelve Peaks, Yao Ji, Fish Woman, Ugly Woman Cadaver, shaman, witch, whore.

For you, I have only one name—Shan Gui—mountain spirit. And for you only I kept my womanly form, though I had to pay a big price eighteen years later.



The night I crossed the water, Mama cried. "You'll go through many cycles of violent death and you'll know the pain of a broken heart—all because of your foolish attachment."

I hugged her with my dissolving arms. Who else knew more about the pain of passion and attachment? She gave up her own Mama for a fisherman who saved her from a speedboat. For a whole year, she stayed in the forest of Wushan and nursed his starving son till he grew teeth and uttered his first word. And the man didn't even know what she had sacrificed for his son. But she didn't care. She just wanted to be near him. Because of her foolish attachment, I had to share her breasts with a filthy boy who couldn't do anything except howl for milk. I couldn't stand him. I wanted her for myself. I wanted to be with my grandma, my aunts, and the rest of the clan. Then one day, he looked me straight in the eyes, and I was smitten. I belonged to him as he belonged to me. When she realized what was happening and took me away from the boy, it was too late.

Pan Ge, you're that filthy, toothless boy who took half of my mama's life, who changed my path as a mountain spirit. But no matter, you stole my soul with your green chert eyes and I am yours for this life and many lives after.

*O soul, come back! Why should you go far away?*

—The Great Summons

Shan Gui, my love, when you shed your tattered dress and placed your feet in my lap, the fog in my brain cleared. Suddenly I remembered you, my milk sister, daughter of our white-browed mother. You used to kick me with your lovely feet when your mama wasn't paying attention. You wanted her breasts to yourself, and I can't blame you. I was constantly hungry for her milk, pungent and sweet, almost as good as my own mother's, but more powerful. I'd probably have kicked you even harder if I had to share *my* mother.

Guess what I missed the most when your mama took off with you? Your feet, warm and smooth like jade, soft and firm like

breasts, and more fragrant than flowers. I missed the kicking on my head and chest, mischievous and regular like my heartbeat. The moment you left, I uttered my first word—*jiao*—a waning moon that comes into my dream each night and fades upon my awakening, leaving no prints.

You vanished so fast, so completely. The only trace of your existence was my first word, first step, first bite of nuts. Even that became foggy soon after Father began my training. “We don’t have time left, Son,” he said. “You have a lot to learn, and my days in this world are numbered.” I didn’t know what he meant exactly, but I liked the idea that someday I’d be a Wu man like Father, a messenger between heaven, earth, and the underworld. Besides chanting and studying the stars and constellations, I also learned how to fish and hunt, tasted plants, flowers, animals, insects, fish, soil, and stones to know how they worked individually and combined as medicine. Some killed pains, some expelled gas and toxin, some helped women have babies, and some enhanced the pleasures of the body and mind.

I studied hard and grew up fast.

On my sixteenth birthday, Father woke me at dawn and took me deep into the ruins.

“There used to be a temple here for the Wushan Goddess.” He pointed to a stone half buried in the red soil and roots. “When the King of Chu came here on a hunting trip, a beautiful woman visited him in his dream and offered to make love to him. When he woke up, the only thing he could remember was her fragrance and the promise she had whispered in his ear: ‘I live on the sunny slope of Wushan. In the morning, I rise with the mist. At dusk, I come down with the rain. Whenever you want me, just look for me at the Sun Terrace.’ The king built a temple with the hope that he’d meet the beautiful goddess one more time, but she never visited him again, in dreams or real. When he returned to his capital down the river, the King of Qin, his crafty rival from the north, sent him a dozen beauties and promised more girls if he would visit the Kingdom of Qin. His minister Qu Yuan begged the king not to go.

Over the years, Qin had trained the best swordsmen and generals. Their king's ambition was to wipe out all his neighbors and bring China under his thumb. He had succeeded in conquering all except for one—the Kingdom of Chu, his last and biggest conquest. The Kingdom of Chu had more land, more people, and more advanced civilization. Of all the resources in Chu's territory, the brine industry was the jewel on the crown. The King of Qin had been salivating over the brine pits for a long time, especially the ones in Wushan, the land of treasure and magic. Whoever controlled the pits would rule China.

No matter how much Qu Yuan pleaded the king to stay in his own land, the King of Chu would not listen, determined to find his goddess at any cost. He had no idea that Qu Yuan, his most loyal and upright minister, was a great shaman like us, apart from being a great poet. As a shaman, he would have known about the magic mushroom that could bring Goddess Yao Ji to the king, the very goddess who had made love to him in his dream. Who is this Yao Ji? She is the twenty-third daughter of the Sun God. She died a young virgin, yet the mushrooms on her grave can enhance sexual power and attraction. It also brings desperate lovers together in their dreams. Had the king trusted and consulted his shaman minister Qu Yuan, he would have fulfilled his dream, and the goddess would have helped him defeat Qin, and China might be a totally different country today. Instead, he exiled Qu Yuan and ventured into his enemy's territory. You can guess what happened. The love-crazed king was held hostage and died heartbroken in a strange, hostile land.

“Years later, the deceased king's son visited Wushan, accompanied by Master Qu Yuan's student Song Yu. When the young king saw a cloud floating on the mountain like a beckoning girl, he asked his poet what it was. Song Yu told him the love story between the old king and the goddess. That night, the young king dreamed of the goddess, dazzling and gentle like the sun and the moon. She was about to make love to the king, but stopped in mid-action, put her clothes back on, and left the room. Had she left without looking

back, things wouldn't have been so bad. But she turned her head and gazed at our young king with sad eyes, leaving his Majesty prostrated on the floor, weeping as dawn broke. Like his father, he ignored his duties and searched among girls far and near for his dream goddess, and ended up losing his entire kingdom to the King of Qin.

"Love is a dark hole," Father said pensively, his face to the river. "Once you are in, you're done for." He looked me up and down as if checking for the hole in me. "But it can also lift you high like a rocket." He stopped, his hand on my head. "Wu Pan, my good son, you're a grown man now. You have never shown any interest in girls. I thought it was a good thing. I thought you needed all your energy to focus on your apprenticeship. You still need a few more years to complete the learning. But we're running out of time. *I am running out of time.*"

I should have paid more attention to his last words, but my eyes were fixed on the stone half buried in the red soil. A carved face, broken but recognizable, was churning fog in my head. I had seen the face, somewhere, long ago. But my brain was a sieve in the river of memory. I clawed the air with my fingers. Who could help me? Who would help me?

Father grabbed my hand and brought me down on my knees. "Son, kowtow to the Goddess of Wushan. Today you're turning sixteen. It's time to taste the mushroom. It's time you know a few things about love."

*The Sun God's daughter was called nu shi—woman cadaver. When she died, her body turned into a plant. It has yellow flowers, and it bears fruit. Whoever eats it becomes beautiful and alluring.*

—The Book of Mountains and Seas

Mama said:

"For your foolish attachment to a mortal being, you'll perform three impossible duties and die three painful deaths before you can redeem your place at home. First, you must find a new route

through the Gezhouba Dam so the green sturgeon pods can return to their birthplace in the Golden Sand River. Second, you must find another new route through the Three Gorges Dam so the green sturgeon can go home and spawn. If you can't find a new route for the royal fish, the flower of the river and sea, you must sacrifice your own life to show them that their origin is no longer there and they have to settle for a new home. You'll hurl yourself against the dam over and over, your flesh splashing over the concrete. You'll be shredded by the turbines, your blood dyeing the reservoir scarlet red. Your violent death may or may not be enough to shock them into finding a new home, but it's the only chance for those stubborn prehistoric creatures. They have seen the rise and fall of dinosaurs, the coming and going of the big ice and floods, the birth of mammals and humans. Will they survive this? We can only hope, before they disappear, before we all disappear.

"I don't know if they'll ever adopt a new home below the dam. For millions of years, they've been living like this: born in the Golden Sand River, swim to the sea, grow up in the ocean, then go back home to mate and spawn, no matter how many rocks and dams they have to jump over, how many fishhooks or nets await them. Once they return to the river, they stop eating or sleeping. The only thing on their mind is to swim upstream and produce their young at home. Their faith have moved all heavenly beings. We want to help them. Those ancient noble souls deserve to have a place on the planet.

"If your sacrifice can't stop them from the mass suicide," Mama continued after a long pause, "you'll have to offer your body as a breeding vessel. You'll be kept in a tank as eggs grow in your belly. You'll feel extremely agitated because your sturgeon instinct will urge you to swim to your place of origin at any cost. But you will be restricted in the tank until the ova are ready to be harvested, and you'll be injected with hormones to let go the caviar that will be hatched in a tank then released into the river. After you're emptied, you'll be shipped to the capital in the name of scientific research and

displayed for money. You won't be able to eat because you'll be homesick. You'll hear the calling of your lover, but you won't be able to reach him. You'll wither in front of the crowd. Even in your dying, you'll not be left alone. You'll be prodded and cajoled to please the crowd. This will be your most painful death because you're away from your home air, soil, and water. Without them, you become nothing. Your organs will shut down one by one, till your heart stops pumping. Once that happens, your soul will plunge into the dark abyss from which nothing ever returns. I won't be able to pull you out, even with the help of your grandma, aunts, and sisters."

"Aren't you scared?" Mama asked in despair as I waded into the river, my insides boiling as my organs began dissolving and reshaping. "Once you cross the river, you may never come back."

*A fisherman pulled up a large green fish with a white belly. He pulled it into his boat and covered it with straw. When he returned home, the fish was gone but under the straw lay a beautiful girl. She became his wife for three years. One day she told the fisherman she had to go home, and then vanished in the river.*

—Wushan folklore

Father said:

"We're destined to live in between. It's written in our name: Wu—五—two humans standing between sky and earth. And we're destined to be separated, be it from lovers, friends, or enemies. See the post in the middle, the post that holds the sky? It's a wall that supports us, but it also keeps us apart. All things are relative. All things change. So no need to laugh when you have your way; nor should you despair when everything goes against you."

*In 223 B.C., the King of Qin finally defeated the King of Chu, unifying China for the first time. As soon as he was ordained as the first emperor, his most trusted minister came to Wushan, and paid a secret visit to Wu Fang, head of the Wu Clan at the time, known for his skill at healing the wounded*

*and sick children. Rumor had it that he had found a secret elixir. No one knew what was said between them, but after the minister left, Master Wu summoned the twelve leaders of the Wu Clan branches and ordered them to leave. Each leader got a map that marked his escape route and the shelter where his clan was to settle. The farthest place was Fujian, where the land stopped and the sea began. A month later, a troop of swordsmen arrived in Wushan and found an empty stone house. Villagers told the soldiers that they saw Master Wu flying around in the mountains with his leather herb sac. The swordsmen combed through the forests but couldn't find anything*

—Wushan folklore

I don't have a choice, Mama, I wanted to tell her, but even my voice was transforming. The water had already been crossed when you gave your other breast to the boy. As we suckled your nipples, we entered each other's world through the river of your milk.

Mama, I know how much you wanted to cross the river, to throw yourself into the arms of your beloved shaman, to taste love's flesh and blood. But you lingered on the shore, hovering around him as a dream, an unfulfilled longing. You were afraid of losing your place on the Twelve Peaks, afraid of getting lost forever in the dark place. But we are all being sucked into that hole, yes, we the invisible force of dreams, spirits, and imaginations, they the formidable world of metal, rock, body, and logic. Two forces that used to be one and whole, but were severed when the first arrow was made to kill, the first compass to point directions, the first law to punish crimes, the first sage to set things in order.

I'm an anomaly, Mama. So are you. It's in our blood to love, to upset order of things. We can't help it, just as our ancestor, Yao Ji, the twenty-third daughter of the Sun and the Western Queen Mother, chose her exile to love a mortal being on earth. How she angered her celestial parents! They had assumed she would choose to stay with them in the palace where she could live forever without a single worry. But no, she chose Wu Peng instead, the humble messenger between heaven and earth. She chose to terminate her immortal

status and die next to her beloved. Her parents wanted to recant the choices they gave her, but couldn't. Breaking their word would shake the kingdom's foundation. But allowing their daughter to die would also crack their heavenly superstructure. They were put on the spot by a sixteen-year-old girl, and they didn't like it one bit. So they banished her to Wushan where her lover performed rituals to please the gods for his tribal people. They turned their daughter and her eleven maids into pillars on the mountain peaks. There to this day, Yao Ji receives the first ray of the sun and sees off the last gleam of twilight. There she witnesses the ebb and flow of the water, the joys and sorrows of the people on the banks. During the day, she hovers near her lover as cloud, rain, bird, fish, or deer. At night, she enters his dreams with the help of the herb that grows on her tomb, and they love to their hearts' desire. If he wants her in blood and flesh, however, he must find her through *chou nu shi*—the Ugly Woman Cadaver—the sacred whore who sings, dances, makes love with priests in temples and teaches the youth how to love in mulberry woods during festivals. If she changes into the human form at any other time or place, she and her lover, his tribes included, will meet horrible deaths with unspeakable pain, and be condemned forever to the dark place where light is swallowed and nothing can be seen, heard, smelled, or touched.

This is her story, Mama, a story that each member of our female kingdom knows by heart, though we never speak of it. We don't need to. We follow her steps every day as we roam the mountains of the Three Gorges gathering herbs for lovers and mothers. We hear her wild calls as we guide fish and dolphins to safe places, help the young get away from boats and turbines. When we bathe in the sacred pond for regeneration, her spirit passes on through our bodies. We're all her clones.

You're an anomaly, too, Pan Ge, a mistake like the union of your parents. They were not even supposed to meet. Your father was about to marry his cousin from Fujian, with the mission to recover the secret knowledge of transformation. It had been lost since the



Wu Clan fled to escape the emperors' greed for the elixir. Their marriage would have pieced together many puzzles and increased their power a hundred fold. And your mother, the number one beauty of Chongqing City, had been engaged to a Flying Tiger pilot, son of the most powerful warlord from the north. Then she went to the mountains with her girlfriends one day and felt sick. She stopped eating or sleeping. At night, she became feverish, a maverick according to her mother and father, singing and dancing like a courtesan. Her father brought in Chinese and Western doctors from Chongqing, Chendu, Wuhan, and Shanghai, but no one could tell him what it was, let alone cure her. As a last resort, her mother took her to a humble looking young man in a dim alley. His store was lined with tall cabinets where hundreds of kinds of herbs were kept in small drawers. He brought out tea. As soon as her lips touched the amber colored liquid, she calmed down. When he put his fingers on her wrist to feel her pulse, she blushed, the first time since she fell ill.

Her mother was thrilled, thinking her daughter was cured. As soon as they got home, however, she broke her engagement with the Flying Tiger pilot. She was locked in her room while her parents prepared to rush the wedding, hoping the ceremony and her bridegroom would bring senses back to her. They were also anxious to wash their hands of her. Once married, she would no longer be their problem. A married daughter was dumped water. That very night, she climbed out the window to join her bright-eyed doctor. They went to his hometown in Wushan that very night and didn't return to the city until they learned that her family had run her obituary in the *Chongqing Daily*.

You're the son of a ghost, Pan Ge. You mama was willing to give up everything for love, and so was your father. When he dissolved his engagement with his distant cousin in Fujian, word spread throughout China where the branches of the Wu Clan lived. They all denounced him. To be denounced by the Wu Clan is worse than death. He became a motherless calf, a wild ghost, a maverick. No

matter how much fortune and knowledge his father had passed to him, he would be alone forever. No one would lend him a hand when he was in danger. But they were happy. The moment your father and mother met each other, their souls exploded like fireworks, and their spirits joined as one. Nothing could break them apart, not even death.

You were not supposed to be born, Pan Ge. Babies are the results of souls pining for their counterparts. Since your parents already found each other, there was no need to have a third wheel. You were born to pay off the debt they left behind: their extreme happiness at the cost of other people's pain. Everything has a consequence, even love. Your fate is to shoulder the sorrow your parents escaped. That's why you couldn't eat, talk, or walk in your earlier life. You were not supposed to live beyond two, not supposed to do any of those things a normal person enjoys. When your mother disappeared in the river, you were supposed to follow, not to join her in the other world, but to linger along the bank as a wraith, forever hungry and homeless.

But your father saved my mama from the river. He pulled her out of the water after she was injured by a steamboat and nursed her back to life. When he released her, he had no idea that she would be following him, that she would save his son twelve years later.

*Of the three gorges in Badong, the longest is the Gorge of Wu  
Baboons' crying bring tears to travelers' sleeves*

—Wushan folksong

I was hanging on my last breath when she picked me up from the floor and held me to her chest. Mother, I thought, and opened my eyes wide. She had been gone for three days. Already, she had turned silver-gray everywhere: her hair, her eyebrows, her chest, even her hands. Her whole body was hazy like a cloud. The only color came from her blue eyes. I smelled the milk, and turned my head to latch on. Pungent liquid flowed into my mouth. Immediately I realized she was not my mother. My own mother's milk didn't taste as

strong. I wanted to turn away but the milk kept coming and I swallowed as quickly as I could so as not to be drowned. Soon my curled fingers and toes opened up, and my body started to float in the white river. Out of habit, I reached for the other breast. A soft warm thing kicked my hand away. I opened my eyes and saw your foot, pink pearly toes wriggling and dancing on the sole of a crescent moon. I stared, forgot to suckle.

My father was lying motionless in the ash, next to the fire. He had chanted and spun himself into a trance to make me eat the porridge.

That was 1959. I was five years old.

Many things happened in Wushan that year. I guess many things had already happened in Wushan and all over China. The biggest thing, however, was the Land Reform. Peasants confiscated the land from the landlords and divided it evenly among the poor. Those who resisted giving up their properties or had made enemies in the past were executed. Before the killing wave reached the mountain city of Chongqing, my father voluntarily handed over everything he owned—hundreds of acres of orange groves along the riverbanks and a dozen teahouses in Chongqing, the center of business and industry of the Three Gorges. He moved to the quiet town of Wushan with his wife. When the ripple finally arrived in the deep belly of the Long River two years later, he had nothing under his name but an herbal store in his ancestor's stone house that nobody in town would want. He was awarded the title of "Enlightened Landlord" and the government wanted him to go to Chongqing and Beijing as a model of the Land Reform. He declined the invitation, citing his wife's health as an excuse. She was about to give birth and the fetus was a breach.

That fetus was me, ill-starred the moment I was born. My mother was in labor for three days. When I finally came out with the cord around my neck, I was not even breathing. Just as Father tried to revive me, Mother started hemorrhaging. Had he not been the best doctor in the region, neither of us would have survived. We had four peaceful years after that. Father practiced medicine with

herbs and needles. When those didn't work, he would sing and dance to drive away bad spirits. For those who lost their fortunes, he sought oracles from *The Book of Mountains and Seas*. He never accepted money for his services, only small gifts like eggs, vegetables, rice, or homemade fabric. Born in a wealthy warlord's family, my mother had had everything done for her by maids before she eloped with my father. In Wushan, she wove, sewed, and cooked like everyone else, and she was happy. So was I, hanging on my mother's breasts like a monkey. I had been given rice, meat, fish, and vegetables. Mother chewed them up good and fed them to me mouth to mouth, but I spat them out, then shut my mouth tight. At five, I was still hairless and toothless. I had barely taken my first steps, had yet to utter anything that resembled a human word. People thought I was possessed by spirits. They wouldn't say out loud that I was retarded. They loved my father as they loved Buddha and Chairman Mao. Probably more. Buddha lived in the Western Paradise somewhere far away, and Chairman Mao was unreachable in Zhongnanhai and the Forbidden City. But my father lived with them. Anyone could holler and walk into his store whenever they needed him, day and night.

Finally they suggested that Father do something about me before it was too late. Father shook his head. My son will walk and speak when his time comes, he said.

Clinging to Mother's breasts, I listened and watched. I had no sound, but I had memory. My body stored everything around me in colors, shapes, and smells. Mother was white and round and soft and light. Father was black and square and firm and strong. She gave off the fragrance of milk, cloud, and river. He smelled of trees, rocks, and beasts. And the rest of the world was a vortex of white teeth hanging low in the sky.

In 1959, the sleepy town of Wushan was jolted awake by drums and gongs and people shouting "Big Leap Forward into Communist Paradise." Crowds gathered to cheer as they threw their woks into the homemade furnace to melt iron for the state-owned steel plants.

China was frog-leaping into the communist paradise where everyone would be equal and get whatever he needed. Why keep the pots when one could eat bread and beef to his heart's desire from the commune's canteen? And why keep the cows when the fields would be ploughed by combines?

No one mentioned the big flood that drowned many people on the banks that year. No one paid much attention to the drought that followed the flood. They turned a blind eye to the withered crops in the fields, and they cheered for the village leaders who reported to Beijing the fake news of the biggest harvest ever in Wushan history.

Father's face became darker and darker. He paced the house and stayed up late reading *The Book of Mountains and Seas*. He took longer trips to the mountains and rivers but brought home almost nothing. Mother finally asked him what was happening. He told her in a hushed voice that he had smoked and stored his catch in secret caves, along with bags of rice, flour, corn, dried fruit, and sugar.

We must be prepared, he said.

Soon, the bread from the commune's canteen became smaller till it was replaced with porridge that became thinner until that stopped too. People began to fight for the bark on the trees and the weeds on the roadsides, then for the white soil that made their stomachs bulge like drums. More and more bodies were found in beds, on the streets, in the fields. People began to leave in large groups in search of food in other parts of Sichuan, other provinces. This had never happened to Wushan, the treasure bowl that had fed and sheltered people and beasts alike since one could remember.

People visited Father at night. They wanted to know when this would all end. Father sat in silence, head and palms raised to the heavens. He had no heart to tell them that this was only the beginning. The drought would keep going for another two years. Over a million people in the Three Gorges would die, and more would flee down the river to search for food in Hubei Province. He couldn't look further into the future, because it was just one dark wave after another until the whole place went under.

Before dawn, when everyone was deep in their sleep, Father placed a strip of dry meat or fish and a small bag of grain at the doors where old people and children were dying. He went out every dawn until the young party secretary of Wushan caught him in action.

Our whole family was locked up in the cowshed. When night came, the secretary's military men took Father to our house, which had been turned into a makeshift interrogation room. They shouted and beat him with bamboo sticks. They wanted to know how he got the food and where he hid the rest. When they couldn't get a word out of him, they hung him by the ankles and beat him with a hot iron.

Then one night the Party Secretary came himself and took Mother away. I bit and kicked, but the secretary's military man hit me with the butt of his gun, pulled me off her breasts. I heard Mother scream throughout the night and I screamed with her. Father held me tight in his arms. Suddenly I heard her running past our shed toward the river, heavy footsteps and raucous laughter chasing after her. Then everything became quiet. At dawn, the secretary came and ordered us to get out of Wushan immediately.

"Listen carefully, Wu Luo," he shouted, his breath stank of white spirit. "Since you refuse to confess your crime, you can no longer live with the poor peasants and proletarians in Wushan. Considering you have a retarded child, the Party decided that you can stay in the Bell Tower for free. The only service is to watch forest fires, and to ring the bell every four hours for the workers in the brine pit. You must show gratitude to the Party. And don't forget to thank the old Man Wu. If he hadn't kicked the bucket a week ago, you and your son would be living on the streets. Leave now, and make sure you don't do anything clever up there."

"Where's the mother of the child?" Father spoke for the first time since we were locked into the cowshed.

"She ran to the river," the secretary said. "I tried to catch her, but she was slippery and fast. When I got to the bank, there was nothing but a fish in the river, long and slender and white like a beautiful

woman, but I swear to God it was a fish with fins and tail. I'd have jumped in to pull her out if it was your wife, I swear to God."

Father nodded and walked into the mountain with me wrapped on his back in a bedsheet, a wok on his chest, an axe, a knife, and an old fishing net. He walked without stopping for water or food, and I finally fell asleep to the rhythm of his heartbeat. When I woke up in the hut, the sun was setting. A fire was burning in the pit in the middle of the room, licking the bottom of the wok. In front of me, a bowl of corn porridge was cooling. Did he get it from one of the caves where he stored food? Did he endure the torture to save this for me? Father picked me up and fed me with a spoonful of the yellow gruel. I turned my head. The smell made me sick.

Father cried. "Son, you must eat, for me, for your mother. She'll live as long as you are alive. She'll come to you someday, I promise."

I took a sip and threw up. My tongue, my throat, my stomach and my intestines had never been touched by anything other than milk. Father threw the bowl on the floor and howled. He howled with his head thrown to the sky, his chest heaving as if he were spitting out his lungs. He howled till he collapsed on the ground. I crawled to him. I wanted him to get up and watch me try the porridge again. Before I reached him, things went dark.

I woke up in your mother's arms. Her soft body was covered with white hair from head to toe. Her hands held me firm to her chest. She gave me her breast. She gave me you. Her milk saved my life, but you lit up my dim soul. When we finished nursing, we played among the stone hedges under the giant tree. You called it *shui shan*—fir from the water. You talked to me with your secret language that only I could hear, and you seemed to understand my gibberish perfectly. It was a hot summer that year. Small cones hung like partridge eggs among the green needles. One day your mother took us to the pagoda-shaped treetop and picked a bunch of cones. Inside there were seeds, tiny compared to the giant tree. She popped some in her mouth. So did you. Without thinking, I followed suit. The oily nuts tasted good. I grabbed more from your mother's palm.

She smiled as you laughed and applauded, pointing to my chewing mouth. I started laughing too just because you were laughing so deliciously. Suddenly I froze. I opened my mouth and dug out the half-chewed pine nuts. I was eating something other than milk!

Sometimes I wonder how we could have kept this big secret from Father for such a long time.

True, we hung out only when he fell asleep or went out hunting, fishing, working in the fields, or meditating on *The Book of Mountains and Seas* in the cave. As soon as he was gone, you two would appear out of nowhere, silent and fast and dazzling like two stars sailing through the sky toward the earth. And we would nurse and play to our hearts' content. How could he not know? People climbed high mountains and crossed dangerous rivers to seek his advice for everything: lost child, lost object, lost fortune, lost directions. They came with tears, and left with a big smile. Father knew everything. Saw everything. But how could he not know what was going on with his son? How could he not see *us*?

Once we were laughing so hard that we didn't hear him coming until he called out, "Son, is that you laughing?" I froze and shut my eyes tight. He came in, listened to the fading sounds of swinging trees and the echo of your laughter in the forest.

"That is the calling of a white gibbon," he muttered. "Strange. We haven't seen gibbons in the Three Gorges for hundreds of years. They all went to the South Sea when our virgin forest was cut down." He knelt and looked me in the eyes. "Was that you laughing?" he asked again. I cried *jiao* and got away. His feet smelled funny, not at all like your fragrant moons, and his burning heart terrified me.

"What did you say?" His eyes popped like twin bells. I looked up. Where were you and your mother? I wanted to go up to the treetop and crack more nuts. Father grabbed my arms and opened my mouth with his fingers. "Wu Pan, you got teeth," he said. He let go of me and called out in the direction of the river. "Pan's mother, did you hear him talk? Did you see his teeth? Our son is growing up. Soon, he'll become a man. Soon, I can come and join you."



Perhaps you were invisible, you and your mother? If so, was I also invisible around you? The moment I uttered my first word, ate the first bite of solid food with my own teeth, and took my first step into the world, I lost you. You vanished into the forest with your mother, who had also become my mother. I called out loud, but my sound no longer reached your ears. Only dark fog flowed through my heart. I clawed my throat, trying to take out my newly gained voice. Before I learned how to speak, we could hear each other perfectly. I tried to hold onto the memory of your smell and the sound of your laughter. Even that faded into a ripple, an echo, a twilight dream.

I grew up quickly as Father's apprentice.

*There seems to be someone in the fold of the mountain, with eyes that hold laughter and a pearly smile.*

—Nine Songs: Shan Gui

Pan Ge, love is anomaly, chaos, the overthrow of all orders. Without it, however, the world would never have come into being. In the beginning, when everything was in perfect order, when darkness and light balanced each other like a mirror image, nothing could live. Everything was a ball of heated light. Then something strayed away from the order, a maverick, an extra that tipped the balance, and *bang*, the universe was born.

You are that maverick, Pan Ge, with one foot in your world of folly and desire, the other in my world of dreams, cloud, and darkness. When my mama picked you up from the ashes and placed you next to me, you crossed the river. So did I.

*The thunder rumbles as the rain darkens the sky. The monkeys chatter, and apes scream in the night. The wind sighs and trees rustle. I think of my woman, alone in sorrow.*

—Nine Songs: Shan Gui

My love, we had eighteen years of pure joy.

The world around us was a chaos. Red Guards stopped coming to the bell tower after Father's death, but stories about their terrible force continued. They destroyed temples, forced monks and nuns to kiss and do things in public to entertain crowds. In the Big Cold Mountains, they dragged Master Zhang out of the Soul Mountain Temple. Master Zhang was a true sage and a great Taoist. When he was alive, he helped thousands of people. When he died, his body remained soft and supple as if he were just sleeping. His disciples put him in a gilded chair on the altar of the Soul Mountain Temple. For hundreds of years, Master Zhang sat in the hall as he watched a blind monk throw bones on the floor to predict the future. He was famous for the accuracy of his oracles. But the rascals dragged the sacred relic through the town, then left it on the street. The body rotted quickly. Everyone in town was scared, but not those rascals. They thought they were immortal, and nothing could touch them. But you know what? Everyone involved died violently. None of them lived to their full age. That's retribution. That's justice.

Apart from the Red Guards, there were factions among factory workers. They stopped everything to make revolution, to guard Chairman Mao and his party line. They armed themselves to the teeth. Heaven knows where they found the weapons: rifles, machine guns, grenades, daggers, clubs. They fought one another to death, leaving cities filthy and paralyzed. Some of them came all the way to Wushan trying to convert the peasants into revolutionaries. But the peasants had learned a lesson from the Big Leap. They had seen their entire families and villages and towns wiped out by famine because of a few people's foolish ideas. They were not going to repeat the same tragedy. So they allowed the workers and Red Guards to paint bloody slogans on their walls and listened to their slogan shouting. They let them sleep in their straw beds and fed them with corn and sweet yams until their stomachs bloated with gas and diarrhea, their bodies swollen with rashes

from flea bites. Then one morning, they fled quietly, leaving the peasants to tend their fields and row their boats into the river to feed their families.

Still the unsettling rumors from the capital darkened our valley from time to time. Old generals were dying off one by one, those old heroes who still had guts to stand up for people like us. Many were tortured to death. New faces popped on Tiananmen Square, then vanished. There was Lin Biao, who fled after trying to assassinate Chairman Mao, but his plane went down in the Mongolian Gobi. Beijing officials said it was an accident, though everyone knew it was hit by a missile. Everyone on it died: his wife, his son, and his generals. Why was he in such a hurry! Wasn't he supposed to be the next emperor? I guess he got impatient, or scared. Chairman Mao had fiery eyes that could see through everything. That pale scrawny man had a traitor's bone in the back of his head. He hid it under the green cap, but he couldn't fool my eyes. He couldn't fool Chairman Mao's eyes, either, I bet. That was why he had to flee to the desert.

But people suffered. There was not enough food to feed the country, not enough fabric to clothe the old and young. The markets were silent, only lines of green faces staring into space, hands clutching stacks of coupons for salt, sugar, soap, rice, tofu, meat, fish, cotton. My heart burned with pain—needles stabbing my body from all directions—strange pain that came to me when I learned walking and speaking.

But you soothed me and told me to be patient. You opened a garden near our hut, then an orange grove down the valley. Everything thrived under your green thumb. When we needed meat, you picked the date and time for me to hunt or fish, and I never returned with an empty hand. Our hut was always clean, our stomachs full with delicious food, our bodies warm with the clothes you wove and sewed. We gathered herbs and dried them in the sun, not to sell for money, but to give away, along with dried food and meat. People came to us secretly the way they had visited Father. You insisted that

I perform the ritual. “You’re a real shaman, now,” you said. “Just start singing and I’ll join you.” So I chanted and sang and danced, and you stepped in as you promised, your slender waist and strong legs swirling around my clumsy body. And soon I went into a trance, doing things I couldn’t imagine when I was awake. The patients moaned and writhed with me until they felt better. They wanted to pay for the service with money. But we had no use for the printed paper. They brought eggs, chickens, ducks, cloth—things hard to find in stores, but we had more than we needed. So they went away, their sacs full of the herbs and food we gave them, their faces full of smile, their children laughing, and I no longer felt the pain.

They called me Master Wu Pan. They said I was better than my father, my grandfather, my great-grandfather.

But no one seemed to notice you. How could they not see your moon face, smell your fragrance or feel your jade skin?

Perhaps you were invisible to human eyes as we were invisible to my father? Perhaps the whole tangible world—you, me, our love, our mountains and rivers, the whole earth—was nothing but a dream.

But no matter. When night fell and visitors went home, when I held you tight in my arms, our breath intertwined, nothing was more real or precious. As days and weeks and years went by, that preciousness grew more urgent. I sensed something was up. More and more, you turned your gaze down the river at the end of the horizon, where the big dam was about to seal the river at Gezhouba. One day I caught you weeping under the tree, your body shaking with sorrow. Nothing could comfort you, not even my songs, my awkward dance, or my love. Then one day, you told me that the path to the natal place was going to be blocked forever.

“What are you talking about?” I shouted, though deep down, I knew exactly what you were referring to. “What natal place? This is our natal place, the most beautiful place on earth.”

But you wouldn’t look at me. “To save a few yuan,” you said, eyes fixed on the distant mountain and river, “they scratched the original plan to build a narrow pathway for us! They are forcing us to

find a new home behind the dam to spawn. There'll be a lot of deaths!" you shouted. "There'll be an annihilation!"

"What annihilation?" I asked in panic. "And who's they?"

You just wept and gazed at the blue mist down the river, and I knew your time with me was up. My heart tightened. There was no cure for the ache except for patience. You had to do what you needed to do, and eventually you'd find your way back. This is our home, this pagoda tree, this hut, this garden and grove, this mountain and river, this dream.

So one day, you fell in the orange grove and couldn't stand up again. Your bones had softened. They no longer supported your nimble body. Soon you couldn't lift your head, arms, legs. Your ribs and joints seemed to be melting into large chunks of soft plates. I gave you herbs, needles, massages. I chanted and danced and spun day and night. But you kept slipping away.

"Pan Ge," you called in a whisper one night. I froze. In the pitch darkness, your face glowed a pale luminescent green. I clutched your withered hand. It was time for you to go, I told myself, my heart split in two. I wished I could cry, but my eyes were burning dry. Now I understood why Father never shed tears over Mother's disappearance. Sorrow was a wildfire that scorched everything along its path.

"Pan Ge," you whispered. No sound came out of your lips, but I heard you loud and clear. "Get me ready for the journey."

I took out the crowns you had made on our wedding night. Eighteen years later, and they were still green and fragrant. I took out the tattered green dress you had on when I pulled you out of the Long River. Then I took out the snow lotus we had brought back from the Gold Sand River six months before.

I should have known what was happening when you said you wanted to go to the Gold Sand River. I was listening to the radio about the grand completion of Gezhouba Dam, the biggest dam on the Long River, when you came over and placed your hand on my shoulder. I wasn't paying attention, because the government was

announcing the plan to build another dam in the Three Gorges, bigger than the Gezhouba, bigger than any other dam on earth. I was trembling when you squeezed my shoulder and said we must go to the Gold Sand River to pick snow lotus. I thought you were joking. The place was hundreds of miles away, hard to reach either by boat or the mountain road. Even if we got there, there was no guarantee that we'd find the flower. It grew only at the snow line among frozen rocks. Besides, how could we leave when they were planning to flood our home? Then I looked up and saw your eyes and I knew we had to go. We packed some bread and clean clothes and set off. For three months we walked along the ancient path that our ancestors had used for thousands of years to carry goods back and forth between Chongqing and the upper river. There were thousands of dams on the river, some small, some huge, some old, some new, and many still incomplete. You didn't say a word about it, but I knew you were weeping inside. I also knew our trip to the Gold Sand River had something to do with the two monster dams. The mountains became higher and colder, and the greenery thinned until there was nothing but rocks, rocks, and rocks. The air was freezing. The wind whipped our faces. Our food was long gone. You walked with such determination that I knew any plea to return home would fall on deaf ears. When we finally arrived, we saw a monk crawling out of a cave that was sealed with rocks. His beard, covered with icicles, ran all the way to his groin like a glacier. His eyes lit up when he saw you.

"What is real, what is illusion?" he asked, palms pressed to his chest.

"A flower is not a flower, a dream not a dream," you answered, bowing deeply.

The monk walked away laughing like a madman. You entered his cave and came out with a white gauze scarf. In the center was a furry white flower hugged by green leaves. Dark lines in the center swirled like a vortex. It looked frozen, but I knew it was very much alive.

You ran straight to the river and dipped the flower in the roaring white water, then wrapped it carefully in the monk's *hada*.

"We can go home now, Pan Ge," you said, looking straight into my eyes for the first time during our three months' trek, and all the ice in my heart melted away.

Slowly I dressed you in the green dress. It wrapped around your boneless body like a hammock. I started weeping when I remembered it had been eighteen years since I pulled you out of the water. For eighteen years, we had never been apart. We woke up together, ate together, worked together, and went to bed together. How was I going to keep living without you? Weeping, I put the crown on your head. You'd lost your bones, limbs, and voice. But your hair still shined with blue darkness, the deepest black I'd ever seen. I tied the *hada* around your neck. How you looked like the Goddess the Twelve Peaks! Finally I put the snow lotus between your parched lips. Then I lay down next to you as we had lain next to each other for eighteen years.

When dawn came, you were gone. Only the flower remained.

I picked it up. Its subtle fragrance filled my lungs, and the dark cloud in my heart cleared. In that moment of clarity, I saw you in a river path, alone and covered with blood. But the path also pointed your way home. I saw our home. Our home would be under the water, together with the souls and spirits, the animals and trees, the history and legends of the Three Gorges. And I'd be with you again, forever, in our origin. And I felt peace for the first time since our trip to the Gold Sand River.

*There is a kingdom of yellow people. You Yin is the king. He is the son of Emperor Xun. He came to the mountains and established the kingdom of Wu. His people are called Wu, with Pan as their surname. They eat grains. They wear nice clothes even though they don't weave, and they have plenty to eat even though they don't farm. Phoenix gather here to sing and dance. They sing and dance at their own will. And beasts, big and small, live in harmony. It's a land where all treasures come together.*

—The Book of Mountains and Seas

Wu Shan, my home where the sun rises and falls, the moon waxes and wanes. The mountains are steep, the gorges deep, and the river is long and fierce. There, morning mist dances around the mountains like a tender lover. At dusk, she changes her face and comes down as rain or thunderstorm, depending on the mood of a sixteen-year-old girl. There, the water nurtures many lives. There, the first gibbon came down from the tree and made the first arrowhead to hunt, the first hoe to plant grains, and that first gibbon became the first man who gathered herbs to cure, who drew and painted in caves and rocks, who counted the stars to predict the future.

“Guard the river,” Mama said. “Guard it with your dream. It’s our path from the land to the sea, from dark to light. If the river stops moving, we’ll all be stuck forever.”

We are foam in the sea. Things we see and touch and hear and smell—you, me, our ancestors, trees, rivers, mountains on the earth, sun, moon, and stars—are specks of dust in the universe. What is the universe compared to the dark matter invisible to our eyes, unreachable to our hands, and inaudible to our ears, incomprehensible to our minds? And what is that vast darkness compared to the love that holds time and space together?

Here I am, afloat in a tank of blue chemicals for a big show. They tap the thick glass to awaken me. They play this strange, vulgar noise called music. They give me shrimp, squid, and other live gourmet food. They send in divers to puddle around in the tank hoping to coax me into a dance. But I have shut down my body to save my heart. I’m saving my heart for the big wave. When it arrives, a path will open through the steel and glass and concrete. It will take me home, to Wu Shan, to my Brother of Hope.

Hope stands as long as the heart keeps going.

*There is a fish called yu fu—Fish Woman. Its withered body is half woman half fish. She comes alive when God Zhuanxu dies. As the northern wind blows, big water rises from mountain springs. This is the time when snakes*



*turn into fish. Such a fish is called Fish Woman. She comes alive when God Zhuanxu dies.*

—The Book of Mountains and Seas

“Guard the tree, Wu Pan,” Father shouted as the Red Guards took him away. I couldn’t see him from the treetop. But the wind sent his voice, the secret language he had taught me. “Guard it with your name. We have hope as long as the tree stays alive. So do the mountains and rivers.”

The tree is the ladder to flee the rising sea. It has been home for generations of Wu witches and wizards. They invented machines, jewelry, words, gun powder, weapons. They knew the past and future from grass, bones, turtle shells, and stars. They cured the sick and revived the dead with herbs. For thousands of years, they were believed to possess the ingredients of the Elixir that had been buried in twelve secret chambers. Every emperor wanted this formula. Every emperor wanted to live forever. The witches and wizards tried to explain to the emperors that there had never been a formula. Even if it had ever existed, it would have been broken and lost long ago, along with the clan that scattered all over the world. But no one believed them. They were chased relentlessly, bribed with power, land, gold, and other worldly things. They were punished when bribery failed, their families were killed, relatives exiled, and their women sold into brothels.

No matter what happened, one of us always stands by the tree, guarding. When we were exiled here, Father circled the tree twelve times thanking it for leading us home safe and sound. He spent many days and nights under its canopy, the only place he seemed to be truly relaxed and happy. He called it dawn red wood, because the trunk burned with scarlet red when touched by the morning light. I called it mother of the garden because I liked the way it talked to me in the middle of the night.

But you called it water fir. I laughed, I argued, I cajoled, but you stood your ground. You’ll understand why when the time comes, you said.

The time has come, Shan Gui. In six minutes, the river will rise to the red mark on the trunk. With its roots in the water, your prophecy is fulfilled.

Around me and across the river, mountains are shaved clean. Forests have been taken down, along with the houses, buildings, factories, schools, hospitals. Garbage has been dug up and trucked away, filling the valley with a five-thousand-year-old stink. Graves were dug up too, ancient and new.

The government sent workers to cut down our dawn red wood, our water fir. They ordered me to remove the tombs, take the bones somewhere else. The reservoir must not be polluted.

“Who knows what sickness your father died of? T.B.? And how do you know your wife had never been infected with aids? Eh?” The young cop’s beady eyes stared at me with lust. “I heard your wife was a beautiful creature who roamed the mountains at night. Is that right?”

I sprawled over the tombs. I must not look into his eyes. I must not kill him with my hatred. He raised his gun, but the peasants he hired for the digging pulled him away. They knew me. They had come to me for herbs and oracles. My great healing power was equaled by my curse, though I had never used it. But they knew.

Above the red mark of 175 meters, trees are dying mountain by mountain. They know what’s coming. Every tree has a spirit, every blade of grass, every grain of sand. They choose to die with their brothers and sisters.

On the barren hills and abandoned beaches, teams of archaeologists dug like mad with shovels, spatulas, and toothbrushes. They were racing against time. They said the Three Gorges hosted the earliest humans and oldest cultural artifacts that traced as far back as three millions ago. There were tears in their eyes as they talked.

Yet who will cry for the tree that survived the ice age and is about to go under? And the green sturgeon that has been spawning in the Gold Sand River for millions of years but is blocked forever behind the dam? Who will cry for the one million people displaced

from their homes and land? And you, Shan Gui, who will bring you back from the far north?

The river rumbles with impatience. It has six seconds to go. In six seconds, the river will no longer be.

But it will never die.

At your grave I wait. When the hot wind blows from the North Pole, the sea will rise like mountains, shattering every chain on the river's throat and limbs. And you, my mountain spirit, will come home in your original form, free, naked.