

£5 UK / €8 EUROPE / \$12.50 REST OF WORLD

PEN INTERNATIONAL

Volume 59, No. 2, Autumn/Winter 2009



Context: Asia Pacific
Contexte: Asie Pacifique
Contexto: Asia Pacífico

The magazine of International PEN
Le magazine de PEN International
La revista de PEN Internacional

Bloomberg

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Editor's Note

Welcome to 'Context: Asia Pacific'.

The boundaries of this issue extend from the Afghan border with Iran in the west to Japan in the east, and from the Mongolian border with Siberia in the north to New Zealand in the south. It was never going to happen, of course, that a single published volume could wholly 'represent' the work of new and established writers over these thousands of kilometres. Yet: we are blessed with content.

One of our special guest writers, Uighur author **Nurmuhemmet Yasin**, was imprisoned in 2004 by Chinese authorities for his short story 'Wild Pigeon', which we present here in translation. We wish to honour him in absentia for his courage and clear talent for allegory. Another special guest writer, **Urvashi Butalia**, poignantly sketches Mona, a longtime friend and *hijra* (Indian transsexual or 'eunuch'). Featured in our Bloomberg 'Found in Translation' section are Chinese dissident writer **Liao Yiwu** on being unable to leave home; two poems by Afghan poet **Samay Hamed**, four dreamscapes from a collection by the Australian writer/musician **Peter Loveday**; and an excerpt from an untranslated autobiography by the defiant, prolific Bangladeshi feminist writer **Taslima Nasrin**. Also featured: a translation (rarely if ever seen in print) of a novel by the hilarious, tragically late Chinese author **Wang Xiaobo**, whose namesake protagonist Wang Er is neurotic, perverse and angry enough to rival Dostoyevsky's Underground Man; self-described atheist **Tabish Khair** defends God; **Malu Halasa** gives us her *haciendero* great-grandfather in all his imperious splendour; **Michel Hockx** holds forth on China's 'Web literature'; and **Vojtěch Novotný** gives a maths lesson courtesy of the New Guinean Onabasulu tribe. There are poems from India, Korea, New Zealand, the Philippines and Vietnam (some via other countries), and excerpts from new books by **Aamer Hussein**, **Tsering Woeser**, **Yan Lianke**, and the Burmese writer **Suragamika**.

We'll be back in spring 2010 with 'Words, Words, Nothing but Words ...?', our third themed issue to coincide with the London *Free the Word!* festival of literature, celebrating contemporary writing from around the world.

Until then, happy reading.

Mitchell Albert, Editor

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Marjorie Evasco

Despedida

El homenaje a Ted Berrigan y Federico García Lorca

Si muero, dejad el balcón abierto
Federico García Lorca, Despedida

Juan Rulfo está muerto. Hace veintiún años, se trasladó
con muslos pálidos a los árboles de sueños de Comala.
Hoy despierta a la luz de mi habitación.
Levantándose para preguntar a mis ojos,
en tonos tiernos:

¿A dónde vas, Margarita?

Quiero decirle:

Voy a la casa de Pedro Páramo, a tu pueblo
de los muertos que aman, desean, matan por pasión o esperan
como si la puerta de la vida nunca se hubiera cerrado de golpe.

En vez de eso le cuento que otra Margarita,
de apenas dieciocho años,
que, corneada en el vientre por un toro,
al dar a luz una niña al mediodía, casi se desangró.

Condenada a morir a las cinco de la tarde, su vida cruzó
el umbral y dejó el balcón abierto al sol.

*Traducido del inglés por Alice M. Sun-Cua y José
María Fons Guardiola*

Nguyễn Hoàng Bao Viêt

Que l'espoir déploie ses ailes

Et survole la tour d'angoisse
Et survole le mur de la honte
L'avenir est sinistre
Tel de lugubres nuages.

Que le fagot indifférent
Prenne feu en plein désert
La Mort attend, impassible
À ensevelir ses cendres dans le sable.

Que le poignard misérable
Ne soit plus utilisé
Qu'on l'enfonce dans son fourreau de terre
Tant pis, fût-il en proie à la rouille!

Que le fusil disgracieux
Ne vise plus la chevelure bleue
Ni le parvis du cœur
Où viennent chanter et danser les oiseaux.

Que ceux qui sont tombés
D'une mort absurde et injuste
Les corps préservés dans nos mémoires
Se lèvent et réclament la résurrection.

Que le grillon penseur
Après une nuit de pénurie
Découvre une pelouse fraîche
Dans le cerveau aride.

Que les douleurs de la déchirure
Cèdent la place au bonheur des retrouvailles
Affectueuses, les embrassades
Et les baisers, exquis.

Que la semence rêveuse
Germe avant la saison des pluies
L'orphelin souhaite
Plus belle, la vie.

Que chaque perle de rosée
Reflète les teintes des monts et forêts
Sur le flanc céleste du pays natal
Quand le printemps se renouvelle.

Que de l'amour naisse le fruit
Dans la chaleur conjugale
Et le langage soit naturel
Comme la Belle, sabots ôtés, trotte nu-pieds.

Que la paupière marquée par l'impact
Recouvre son teint rose et frais
Soit guérie la plaie
Sur le bout de la langue mutilée
De la poésie.

Que les pages du manuscrit
Commencées par le mot Amour
Transforment les lignes qui suivent
En espérance fertile.

Que les dimensions de demain
Soient à la portée d'aujourd'hui
Et la foi, en pas de lumière
Atteigne la mer d'étoiles
Divinement prodigieuse.

Que l'inspiration se cristallise
A travers la voix ingénue
De la source vive limpide
Soudain, à merveille, le lotus émet la parole
Ravie, l'âme souffrante sourit.

(Ban Van, 2008)

SPECIAL GUEST WRITER

Urvashi Butalia

Excerpt from a work in progress

Life of Mona

I

I first met Mona at a birthday party in a graveyard. This proximity of birth and death was to remain a theme throughout the many years of our friendship. The back wall of Mona's home in the graveyard abutted that of the morgue of a local hospital. Mona would often say to unsuspecting visitors, knowing full well the possible impact of her words: *I have the dead behind me and the dead beneath me.* She would point to the graves atop which people had built houses and add: *It's a good way to live.*

It was the 26th of January, a crisp, clear winter morning in Delhi, the kind of day that makes you glad to be alive. On this date, half a century ago, India had become a republic. Mona had chosen this particular day to celebrate the birthday of her adopted daughter, Ayesha; it pleased her that Ayesha had come into her arms precisely on 26 January: *She will be free, like India.*

The graveyard was called Mehendian, perhaps because it had once been covered with *mehendi* (henna) plants, though now only a lone tree graced its centre. Some one hundred people now jostled each other in it: men in long *kurtas* and *shalvars*, auto-rickshaw drivers, police constables, *mullahs* with long beards and groups of idle-looking schoolboys. The route to the graveyard, the walls of its compound, the pillars at its gate were plastered with posters inviting all and sundry to the party; it was certainly the most unusual party invitation I have ever seen. Beside a somewhat makeshift, unfinished structure stood a wall about five feet high, and behind it men and women cooked food in large vats. *Pakodas* were being fried, their delicious aroma wafting out along the clear morning air; vying with it was the mouth-watering smell of meat curry and hot, oven-baked *rotis*. At one end, abutting a couple of graves, two people were busy chopping bananas, guavas and oranges into a spicy fruit *chaat*. Mona walked among her guests, offering food to one, a cold drink to another. But something was amiss. She didn't seem dressed for a party; her clothes were crushed and somewhat grimy, her hair a bit dishevelled. She looked distracted and unhappy – and there was no sign of Ayesha.

It turned out that Ayesha hadn't come to her own birthday party because a few days earlier – or possibly it was some weeks – she'd been abducted. Or so Mona said. 'Abducted' is perhaps an odd word to describe what had happened to Ayesha, but she had indeed been taken away, by her adoptive grandmother (Dadi) and adoptive mother (Ammi) – who wanted to keep her from Mona. Mona was devastated. She'd known of Ayesha's 'abduction' before she'd planned the party – after all, they had lived together as one family. But she'd gone ahead anyway, in the

hope that making the party a public event would shame Ayesha's grandmother and mother into returning her to Mona's care. This didn't happen, but all the guests arrived nonetheless, and Mona was torn between her duties as a hostess and her concern over Ayesha's non-appearance. At some point she lay down in front of a small storeroom, defeated, but kept insisting that Ayesha would come. 'I know she will,' she said. 'They're sure to bring her, it's her birthday.' But you could see her heart wasn't in it.

We stayed at the party for several hours, although I don't think I realised exactly how broken Mona was by her daughter's absence; I was fascinated by what I saw around me. A bustling graveyard alive in the heart of Delhi, Mehendian was the headquarters of a sect called Jamia Rahimia. It housed two mosques and a school for the religious instruction of young boys and, somewhere deep inside its portals, the small editorial office of an Urdu newspaper that was, until recently, written by hand and then printed at a small offset press nearby. Mona had built her home – or had begun to build it, for it was quite unfinished – to encompass only a very small living area above some graves in which her ancestors were buried (she said), on land that apparently belonged to her family. The structure consisted of some walls covered in shiny white bathroom tiles with pictures of the Taj Mahal on them, making a semicircle round what appeared to be a water tank dug into the ground. At one end stood two other walls, built of trellised brickwork. At a right angle to these was an ordinary brick wall behind which, in an open space, stood the cooking pots. Between the two walls stood a door that was locked and that, Mona told me, led to a small storeroom. This was also where she slept.

I was intrigued by the motley crowd among whom our small group of middle-class guests stood out clearly. Most of them were male, though there were some women as well. Mona talked to everyone. Speaking to the men she became, or assumed the male persona of, Ahmed Bhai, and many of the men present addressed her as such. Speaking with the women she was Mona, or *baji*, or *behen* – all female terms. This quick switch from one identity to the other, and the ease with which she did this, was remarkable. Now she was Ahmed and now *baji* or Mona, and no one seemed to find this odd.

We left after spending several hours with Mona that evening. The party continued without Ayesha, and after a while no one mentioned the child. There was food to be eaten and conversation to be had and people to be entertained, so all this went on until dusk set in and the crowds began to dwindle. On the way home we discussed what we had seen; I spent a little time writing my notes on the experience and then put it out of my head. A few weeks later, Mona called. Was I a writer, she wanted to know (I'd gone there to talk to her about a book I was working on). Why didn't I write her life? There was so little people knew about the way *hijras* lived, and she would give me all this information. *Come and see me*, she said, *and we'll talk*. And so began this story.

II

Mona Ahmed was born a boy, the third child after two girls, in 1937. In the narrow, congested streets of Ballimaran in Old Delhi, where her father ran a small business selling skullcaps, her birth was greeted with joy. The family could now hold up its head, with a boy to continue the line. But things didn't quite turn out that way.

The boy gave his parents considerable cause for concern. 'From the moment I became conscious of myself as a person,' says Mona – and she puts this point quite early in her life – 'I felt I was a misfit. I was convinced I had been born in the wrong body. I really wanted to be a girl.' It wasn't only the physical fact of her maleness that made her uncomfortable, but also the cultural baggage that accompanied it. She liked dolls and 'feminine' things, and preferred girls as friends. This made her the butt of many jokes at school, as well as a source of anxiety for her parents. She was a lonely child, an outcast among boys who saw her as effeminate yet unable to join the girls because the society in which she lived was conservative: there was no space for girls and boys to play together. She often left home for school but instead spent the day sitting in parks, alone; it was not until much later in life that she would find what she believed was a place for herself.

'When I was around ten, in 1947, my family moved to Pakistan,' she says. 'But later we came back here. I was unable to get admission to a school, and my parents were quite concerned about my girlishness – so the *Maulana* [Muslim religious scholar] was brought in to teach me. He would read the Qur'an to me.

'One day, the *Maulana* molested me. I remember the terrible pain. I was bleeding and hurting. I told my mother, who told her mother, and later they told my father. Then my grandmother and father, they beat up the *Maulana*. At first he admitted he had done this, and later he swore he had not. So my father punished me by sending me back to him. I hated it – I was frightened of him. My mother fought with my father about this, but he refused to change, he was adamant. He insisted the fault was mine.'

Mona was sent back to school, but nothing changed. She only ever had female friends, and she would play female roles in plays. The boys and the older men in her neighbourhood teased her, making her the object of many lewd jokes; people would say to her: '*Apa hai, bhai nahin hai*' ('She's a sister, not a brother').

Mona was eighteen when she first met a group of *hijras*. *Hijras*, often called 'eunuchs', are transsexuals who live in structured communities. They may be born male, like Mona, and physically alter themselves ('I hated all those male genitals,' she says), or they may be born with ambiguous genitalia and come to identify themselves as being intersexual.

Tempted by the *hijras*' promise of a nearly female identity, Mona left home and travelled to Bombay, where she had herself castrated. At the time only quacks performed this type of surgery, then illegal, and in Mona's case the local anaesthetic did not work very well and the pain was agonising. 'Afterwards I felt an enormous sense of liberation,' she says, 'but at the time all I could think of was the pain.' Much later, though, Mona would tell me that although she'd always wanted to be female, she had not been prepared for the finality of castration. 'Suddenly, it came home to me that I had crossed the point of no return. There was now no going back.'

But Mona did go back – although unwillingly; the real point of no return was to come later. Her parents managed to trace her through a friend, who was then dispatched to bring her back from Belapur, the village where she'd gone to be castrated. 'I stayed at his home until my wounds healed, and then I went back to my parents' home. But things did not improve. My father hated the idea of my effeminacy. He used to ill-treat me, so I did not tell him about the operation.

But he would call me “*hij*” for *hijra*, and he would often say it would be better if I were dead. One night he even tried to strangle me. Then my brother-in-law came and took me away, and I stayed with him and his family for a while. But everywhere, things were difficult. I decided to go back to the *hijras*. My father protested, but the other people in my family said, “Let him go.” Maybe they knew about the castration. Anyway, I left.’

III

In the early days, Mona was happy with the *hijras*. She was treated well, and learned to sing and dance, skills that would become her route to earning money later. (*Hijras*, though otherwise marginalised, are valued as bearers of entertainment and good luck at ceremonies and weddings.) She felt increasingly that she had landed among her own kind, that her sexuality was finally not in question. ‘I thought I’d found a home,’ she says.

But new homes are not so wholly found, nor old ones left behind. Despite the violence and insults she had endured from her family, her connection to them remained strong. She refused to give them up, worrying about her sisters and offering to pay for their children’s education. For this, she was punished: in the *hijra* community, you do not live by the rules of ‘ordinary’ society. Once you’ve been inducted, family connections are to be severed, and loyalty to the *guru* (head) must be absolute. Disobedience, resistance, even questioning, are often punished with violence, or – worse – ostracism. Mona had indeed questioned the *guru*, Chaman, a legendary figure in the streets of Old Delhi. She flouted his instructions about not keeping in touch with her family. She would phone, send money at festivals, fund her nephews’ and nieces’ schooling. (She drew the line, however, at visiting them too often. Only when her father lay dying was she given permission to visit.)

There was another reason Chaman was reluctant to let Mona maintain contact with her family: every time she returned home, Mona switched identities, put on male attire (dull or dark-coloured *shalwar kurtas*, loose trousers with a long shirt that effectively hid her silicone breasts) and assumed her male persona. For Chaman and Mona’s other fellow *hijras*, such ambivalence about identity was simply not allowed: you either were or were not part of the community. As Mona describes it: ‘It’s like being in a nunnery – the community is your family, and you dare not go out of it.’

Mona also wanted something else desperately, and here, for some reason, Chaman indulged her up to a point. She wanted to be a mother. ‘Why,’ she wondered once when I asked her about her longing, ‘do people think motherhood can only be biological?’ Mona yearned to experience motherhood – it was the only way for a woman to be complete, she said – so she begged Chaman to allow her to adopt a child. As it happened, the *hijras*’ neighbour died in childbirth, and the widower was reluctant to keep the child – a girl. Mona, Chaman and Nargis, another of Chaman’s disciples, took the child in, forming a family with Chaman becoming *Dadi* (‘Grandmother’ – although Chaman is always only referred to as ‘he’); Mona was *Abbu* (‘Father’, although by this time she had become physically female), and Nargis became *Ammi* (‘Mother’).

The real role of mother was played by Mona, however. It was she who visited

paediatricians and midwives to learn how to hold, burp, wash, care for and bring up a child. Until the age of six – the birthday celebrated at the graveyard – Ayesha was raised by Mona. But Chaman grew jealous of the growing affection between Mona and the girl, and critical. He decided to separate them. With his customary authority, he took Ayesha away from Mona. Mona, fierce in her attachment, fought back with every weapon she had, but she did not succeed.

Desperate and despairing, Mona began drinking, squandering everything she had on cheap liquor. 'I would often wake up in some sleazy street,' she says, 'and find myself next to other drunks – beggars, thieves, rickshaw pullers.' When liquor did not work she turned to religion, at first praying five times a day and then going on the *Haj*. When she came back, as the male-identified Haji Ahmed, people greeted her with flowers and sweets – but Chaman did not appear, nor did Ayesha. Only when she committed the cardinal sin of going to the police, thus grossly violating the rules of the outsider *hijra* community, was she ostracised. As with everything else she fought this verdict too, trying to regain her place in *hijra* society – but she found no support. No one dared to go against the *guru*. In an attempt to forget, or perhaps to gain credibility, she began to build her home, making plans to turn it into an orphanage for poor children. A name board was put up, beds and utensils were bought; but the enthusiasm was always forced, and it gradually died away.

It took several years for Mona to live with the fact that Ayesha would not be returning to her and that there was no way for her to reclaim her child. Soon her store of love and the desire for motherhood gave way to a sort of indifference. We became friends, and my visits – originally meant to work towards an account of her life – turned into sometimes enjoyable, sometimes desultory chats about this and that. At first, Ayesha would figure often in these talks, and Mona would try to call her using my phone so that the girl would not recognise the number and reject the call. She later stopped doing that, as well. Once she bought a second-hand computer, hoping to lure Ayesha to her home, but to no avail. Then she just gave up. Today, Mona often tells me, the dead are not only above and beneath her: 'Sometimes I feel they're inside me too.'

Yan Lianke

Extrait du roman

Les jours, les mois, les années

Une terrible sécheresse contraint la population d'un petit village de montagne à fuir vers des contrées plus clémentes. Incapable de marcher des jours durant, un vieil homme demeure, en compagnie d'un chien aveugle, à veiller sur un unique pied de maïs. Dès lors, pour l'aïeul comme pour la bête, chaque jour vécu sera une victoire sur la mort ...

En voyant sa plantation toujours bien droite sous le soleil, l'aïeul retrouva son calme. Il quitta l'abri. Quelques rats affamés remuaient au-dedans du sac de grains, il saisit sa houe et y donna quelques coups. Des perles rouges se mirent aussitôt à gicler sous le soleil. Il continua à frapper, des polis voltigeaient et le sang se répandait à terre. Plusieurs dizaines de survivants couinèrent leur panique avant de s'enfuir dans toutes les directions à la fois, bondissant comme des flèches et disparaissant en un clin d'œil.

Le chien cessa d'aboyer.

Debout, la houe à la main, l'aïeul respire profondément.

alentour, le paysage rouge sang délivrait une odeur rance.

La montagne recouvrait soudainement sa tranquillité, grosse d'un silence plus pesant qu'auparavant encore. L'aïeul devinait que des milliers et des milliers de rats se cachaient dans les environs, susceptibles de revenir dès qu'il aurait le dos tourné. Il balaya du regard les montagnes dorées qui l'entouraient, s'assit sur le manche de la houe et, toute en ramassant les grains de maïs, dit, l'aveugle, qu'allons nous faire ? Peux-tu rester ici pour surveiller les lieux ? Couché sur le sol calciné, la langue pendante, le chien lui faisait face. L'aïeul dit encore, il n'y a plus d'eau, plus une gorgée pour moi ni pour toi ni pour le maïs.

Ce jour-là, il ne prépara aucun repas. Lui et son chien jeûnèrent toute la journée. La nuit tombée, ils s'installèrent près de l'abri du maïs. De crainte que des rats ne viennent, parce que quelques morsures auraient suffi à ravager la culture, ils veillèrent jusqu'à l'aube. Aucun rat ne vint. A midi seulement, voyant les feuilles de maïs roulées sous la chaleur, l'aïeul se décida à prendre la palanche et deux seaux.

Il dit, l'aveugle, garde bien notre maïs.

Il dit, couche-toi à l'ombre, l'oreille collée au sol, et au moindre bruit, aboie !

Il dit, je m'en vais chercher de l'eau, surtout fais bien attention.

Lorsqu'il revint, portant sur les épaules le contenu d'un demi-seau d'eau, le plant était sain et sauf. Au puits, en essorant le matelas ouaté, il avait découvert quatre rats noyés, le ventre dilaté, les poils dressés au milieu desquels des poux encore vivants continuaient à évoluer.

Ils mangèrent à leur faim. Ensuite l'aïeul se mit à piler les grains de maïs ;

c'est alors que l'inquiétude le reprit. Depuis l'incursion des rats, il restait moins de la moitié du sac de grains. L'aïeul en pesa le contenu, cela faisait trois kilos et deux cents grammes. Même en réduisant de moitié leurs repas, il leur faudrait cinq cents grammes par jour. Comment feraient-ils pour se nourrir dans sept jours ?

Le soleil se couchait de nouveau. A l'ouest, les montagnes rougeoyaient.

En contemplant le ciel irisé, l'aïeul songea que le jour où il allait manquer de grain arrivait finalement, celui où il allait manquer d'eau n'était peut-être plus très loin non plus. Il tourna la tête pour regarder la culture qui allait bientôt produire un épi. Il voulut compter le nombre de jours qui le séparaient de ce moment-là, mais il se rendit compte qu'il avait perdu la notion du temps, il ne savait plus quel jour on était. Il s'aperçut soudain qu'en dehors des moments qui scandaient une journée, matin, soir, nuit, aurore, il était incapable de savoir quel jour succédait à quel autre. Il sentit son cerveau se vider. Il dit, l'aveugle, sommes-nous au commencement de l'automne ? Il marmottait pour lui-même sans regarder le chien. Il n'est pas certain que ce soit la fin des grandes chaleurs, l'épi de maïs ne vient que vers la fin des grandes chaleurs.

Il cligna des yeux, pilant les grains sur une pierre légèrement concave. Il vit l'aveugle flairer quelque chose sur le sol, prendre dans sa gueule un rat mort depuis deux jours, se diriger vers le ravin et, à quelques mètres de là, balancer la tête pour lancer le cadavre au fond du gouffre.

L'aïeul sentit un léger relent de mauvaise odeur.

Le chien passa, tenant un autre rat dans sa gueule qu'il allait jeter dans le ravin.

Il nous faudrait un calendrier, dit l'aïeul en en fixant le chien, sans calendrier on ne peut pas savoir quel jour on est, on ne peut donc pas savoir quand le maïs sera mûr. Peut-être reste-t-il encore un mois avant le plein automne, peut-être quarante jours mais que mangerons-nous durant tout ce temps ? Les graines des semences ont été complètement dévorées par les rats. Il leva très lentement la tête. Du lointain, à l'ouest, lui parvenaient de misérables cris. Il porta son regard le plus loin possible. Il vit, entre deux faîtes, le soleil disparaître, englouti derrière une troisième cime. Restait un flot rouge brillant, s'écoulant du haut vers le bas de la montagne, se déversant jusque auprès de lui. Le monde entier se tut instantanément. C'était l'heure du silence le plus intense, entre le déclin du jour et la tombée de la nuit. A cet instant-là, autrefois, on voyait les coqs monter sur leurs supports et les moineaux rentrer au nid, le monde s'emplissait d'une pluie de gazouillis. Mais aujourd'hui on ne voyait plus rien, ni bétail ni moineau, même les corbeaux avaient fui la sécheresse. Il n'ya avait plus que le silence. L'horizon rouge du couchant se faisait de plus en plus mince et l'aïeul entendait le froissement des rayons qui se retiraient comme un pan de soie. Ramassant les grains émiétés au creux de la pierre, il songea qu'une journée encore venait de s'achever, et qu'il ignorait comment il pourrait passer la suivante.

Trois jours s'écoulèrent. Malgré la grande frugalité dont il faisait preuve, la quantité de grains s'était nettement réduite de moitié. Il réfléchit, où étaient donc passés les rats ? De quoi vivaient-ils ?

(Éditions Philippe Picquier, 2009)

Kshanika Argent

Whispering by Lasantha's Deathbed

Editor's Note: On 8 January 2009, the fifty-year-old newspaper editor Lasantha Wickramatunga of *The Sunday Leader*, Sri Lanka, was murdered in Colombo while driving to work by four gunmen on motorcycles who had blocked his car. Wickramatunga played a vital role in Sri Lanka's political culture. A former lawyer from a prominent political family and once private secretary to Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike, he was an outspoken critic of several Sri Lankan governments as a newspaperman. He had also been a longtime friend of current President Mahinda Rajapaksa – of whose administration he had been particularly critical in recent years.

In an editorial said to have been written days before his assassination and published shortly thereafter, Wickramatunga wrote:

[...] When finally I am killed, it will be the government that kills me. The irony in this is that, unknown to most of the public, President Mahinda Rajapaksa and I have been friends for more than a quarter-century. Indeed, I suspect that I am one of the few people remaining to routinely address him by his first name and use the familiar Sinhala address – oya – when talking to him.

Although I do not attend the meetings he periodically holds for newspaper editors, hardly a month passes when we do not meet, privately or with a few close friends present, late at night at President's House. There we swap yarns, discuss politics and joke about the good old days. A few remarks to him would therefore be in order here.

Mahinda, when you finally fought your way to the Sri Lanka Freedom Party presidential nomination in 2005, nowhere were you welcomed more warmly than in this column. Indeed, we broke with a decade of tradition by referring to you throughout by your first name. So well known were your commitments to human rights and liberal values that we ushered you in like a breath of fresh air.

Then, through an act of folly, you got involved in ... scandal [regarding misappropriation of tsunami-relief funds]. It was after a lot of soul-searching that we broke the story, urging you to return the money. By the time you did, several weeks later, a great blow had been struck to your reputation. It is one you are still trying to live down.

You have told me yourself that you were not greedy for the presidency. You did not have to hanker after it: it fell into your lap. You have told me that your sons are your greatest joy, and that you love spending time with them, leaving your brothers to operate the machinery of state. Now, it is clear to all who will see that that machinery has operated so well, my sons and daughter do not have a father.

In the wake of my death I know you will make all the usual sanctimonious noises and call upon the police to hold a swift and thorough inquiry. But like all the inquiries you have ordered in the past, nothing will come of this one, too. For truth be told, we both know who will be behind my death, but dare not call his name. Not just my life but yours too depends on it [...]

In May 2009, Wickrematunga was posthumously awarded the UNESCO World Press Freedom Prize. Accepting on his behalf, his widow and colleague Sonali Samarasinghe Wickrematunga, said:

In Sri Lanka, it has become the norm for journalists to be killed. Sixteen have been assassinated – all of them in commando-style attacks – since President Mahinda Rajapaksa took office in 2005. Media offices have been destroyed in raids, like the newspaper Lasantha and I edited. Journalists languish in prisons either without charge or on concocted ones. Like Lasantha, many have been threatened personally by the President or his brothers. Dozens, including myself, have been forced to flee Sri Lanka. I am certain if I return, my days would be numbered.

The free Sri Lanka in which I was born no longer exists. Our country has entered a Dark Age where the government unapologetically equates democratic dissent with treason.

After describing the war against the now-defeated terrorist organisation LTTE (or Tamil Tigers) as a ‘racist war’ and remembering the thousands of innocent Tamil citizens killed during the final days of battle or now being held by the Rajapaksa government in concentration camps, she continued:

It is urgent the world realise what is happening in Sri Lanka before it is too late ... A few days after Lasantha’s murder, an international journal opined: ‘For all those who argue that there’s no military solution for terrorism, we have two words: Sri Lanka.’ The journal might as well have said: ‘To all those who argue there’s no military solution for terrorism, we have just one word: terrorism.’ For that is the solution the Sri Lankan government has chosen: terrorism against civilians, terrorism against journalists, terrorism against dissidents of all kinds.

Whispering by Lasantha’s Deathbed

Throughout its history, every outspoken article published in *The Sunday Leader* has come with a price.

I wasn’t there when the press was sealed by the former regime, or all those years ago when Lasantha was first shot at, or when he was pulled out of his car and beaten by thugs. It was the price he was willing to pay for his freedom of speech, and ours, and our right to know.

I was there, however, on both occasions the press itself was attacked. No matter what happened, Lasantha refused to throw in the towel.

I’ve been there long enough to see just how he stood up for freedom of expression, for freedom of the press, whether his own or rival publications.

Everyone I interviewed would greet me with: ‘Ah, *The Sunday Leader*! Which dirty politician is Lasantha exposing this week?’

I watched people move like ghosts around Kalubowila Hospital, and listened to snippets of conversation. 'He's dead. He's dead. I said, he's dead!' muttered one woman quietly on the phone to someone who either couldn't hear or refused to.

I stood around like everyone else, in shock, amongst the police and STF [Special Task Force] safeguarding the politicians who dropped by. Many walked passed me muttering, 'What good are they [the police] now? He's gone. Too little, too late.'

Back at editorial, we burrow into a familiar hole called getting-the-story-out. It's only a matter of time until we encounter the hardest fact: we're on our own now. As we work to put out *The Sunday Leader* without Lasantha, questions are raised: who writes what, how many words, how many pages? No one asks the big question, though. How does *The Sunday Leader* go on without him? We just do what he taught us to do. We keep writing.

As I write this, my mind wanders back to the words of one man in particular at the hospital. I never got his name.

Shaking his head, he muttered: 'He did so much, no? For freedom, for our freedom.' He looked at an STF guard standing a few feet away, and the words he spoke next still ring in my ears. 'Funny, how things turn out. After all he did for us, we're still whispering in corners.'

I like to think those cops were laughing at the irony.

(This memorial tribute first appeared in The Sunday Leader, 11 January 2009)

Tsering Woesser

Extrait du mémoire

Mémoire interdite: Témoignages sur la Révolution culturelle au Tibet

Des années durant, avec l'espoir de mettre en lumière un épisode occulté de notre mémoire collective, j'ai sillonné les rues de Lhassa en transportant sur moi plusieurs centaines de clichés de la Révolution culturelle au Tibet que mon père m'avait légués. J'entrouvais le portfolio et faisais défiler une à une les images. Lorsque je les produisais, elles réveillaient le plus souvent de douloureux souvenirs. Parfois, cependant, j'hésitais. Je n'ai pas toujours eu le courage d'extraire ces photos de mon sac. Il faut dire qu'aujourd'hui encore, au Tibet, la Révolution culturelle reste pour les autorités comme pour la plupart de ceux qui l'ont vécue un sujet dont on ne parle pas. Au total, j'aurai interviewé plus de soixante-dix personnes. Elles appartiennent majoritairement à la génération de mes parents et une grande partie de leur vie est intimement liée aux mutations qu'a connu pendant ces décennies le Tibet. Beaucoup de ces intervenants sont Tibétains. Mais il y a aussi des Hans ou des Huis¹. Ils sont à présent cadres à la retraite, militaires pensionnés, anciens ouvriers, simples citoyens, employés de l'administration, intellectuels actifs ou pieux moines bouddhistes. Mais en d'autres temps, ces mêmes gens furent des gardes rouges, des rebelles, des « génies malfaisants »², des activistes, etc.

Les uns ont témoigné en chinois standard, les autres en tibétain. J'ai agencé après coup les propos de ceux qui ont accepté d'être enregistrés ; les paroles de ceux qui ont refusé, je les ai retranscrites de mémoire le plus fidèlement possible. J'ai demandé à ma mère de traduire ce que je ne parvenais pas à comprendre. J'ai écouté chaque phrase sans rien omettre, ne serait-ce qu'un soupir. [...] Malgré le fait que rien ne transparaisse généralement ni dans leur ton, ni sur leurs visages, il y a toujours un moment où ils se lâchent, où tout à coup une porte s'ouvre, une porte qui mène à cette réalité enfouie au tréfonds de la mémoire. Que celui-ci se retrouve au coeur ou en marge de ce passé en mouvement, à cet instant, apparaît la figure esseulée de celui qu'il fut dans sa jeunesse : ahuri, déchaîné ou délirant au point de se laisser gagner par une folie aveugle qui brouille leur souvenir. Et l'irruption en eux de cette figure leur faisait tellement violence qu'ils n'étaient plus capables de la contenir sous les dehors lisses et policés qui conviennent à cet âge où on ne doute plus de son destin. A la fin, ils perdaient le contrôle d'eux-mêmes, n'arrivaient plus à aligner de phrases entières ; leurs yeux se mouillaient de larmes. L'instant d'après, ils s'étaient ressaisis.

Ce ne sont pas les soupirs qui manquent chez eux, ni les regrets même si ceux-ci ont de la peine à être formulés. Et puis il y a ceux qui, en se retranchant derrière l'excuse qu'ils « n'osent pas parler », prolongent le climat de terreur qui régnait alors et qui, de la sorte, apposent une croix indélébile sur cette période de l'Histoire. Au fond, il est souvent arrivé que je mette en doute l'existence même chez eux

d'un sens moral. Faut-il admettre qu'à force d'étudier cette page d'histoire pour tenter de la circonscrire, on finit par ne plus poursuivre qu'un seul but : on veut établir chez l'individu l'existence d'un sens moral afin de prouver son existence à l'échelle du peuple ? Mais comment juger de ce « sens moral » ? Se définit-il seulement par la « capacité à distinguer le bien du mal » ? Il ne tient parfois qu'à un geste prodigué par un homme de rien. Ainsi quand « oncle Lobwang », qui était un homme politique, eut à subir le jugement public, un inconnu, cuisinier de son état, vint lui offrir en catimini un bol de gruau (*tsampa*).

Alors sommes-nous bien sûrs que c'est la recherche de ce sens moral qui constitue le but de notre enquête ? De quel droit, au juste, pouvons-nous juger ? D'autant qu'il ne fait aucun doute que, s'il nous avait été donné de vivre cette période, nous aurions pris part à ce mouvement. Nul n'aurait pu s'y soustraire ni se déclarer innocent. Tout un chacun, sans exception aucune, aurait été conditionné sans avoir eu la moindre possibilité de choisir sa condition. Cela veut dire que, tout au long de ce travail, nous devons garder à l'esprit cette considération : « Les bien-pensants font l'apologie de la vertu et méprisent la violence, mais ils sont incapables d'analyser les faits »³. Autrement dit, rien que cela, rien que tâcher d'« analyser les faits », représenterait déjà pour nous un grand pas. Mais, sur cette voie, les difficultés sont immenses. Et les facteurs qui doivent être réunis sont légions.

L'unique parade ne consiste-t-elle pas à se documenter, à réunir le plus grand nombre de documents ? A recouper un maximum de renseignements, à multiplier les sources afin de pouvoir, à travers ces témoignages incomplets et fragmentaires, recadrer même si c'est de manière approchante, ces *faits* dans leur *totalité*. Pour bien poser et comprendre le problème de la Révolution culturelle au Tibet, il ne suffit pas d'énumérer les maux infinis qui ont frappé le peuple tibétain, il faut encore se demander comment les Tibétains ont réagi face à eux. La question la plus complexe reste de savoir pourquoi tant de Tibétains ont pris le parti de Mao Zedong et, au cours de la Révolution culturelle, ont dénoncé leurs lamas, détruit leurs temples, brûlé leurs recueils de soutras. Il est clair que devant un tel anathème, devant un tel fanatisme, les gens n'ont guère eu le choix, si c'est un choix, que de tenter de survivre ; même s'il s'est trouvé certains Tibétains pour défendre au péril de leur vie les biens et les valeurs de leur peuple. Mais il est apparu au sein de ce peuple qui, depuis d'innombrables générations, pratiquait avec ferveur le bouddhisme des dissensions si graves qu'elles auraient pu mener à une crise totale. Face à un phénomène de cette ampleur, on n'a pas le droit de se satisfaire de l'explication qu'« à cette époque, tout le monde délirait ». Pas plus qu'on a le droit non plus d'oublier ce qui s'est passé. »

1. Les *Huis* sont un groupe ethnique de chinois musulmans. (N.d.T.)
2. Terme d'origine bouddhiste employé pendant la Révolution culturelle pour désigner les ennemis de la révolution. (N.d.T.)
3. Lucien Lefebvre, historien.

(Éditions Bleu de Chine, 2010)

FOUND IN TRANSLATION DÉCOUVERT EN TRADUCTION DESCUBIERTO EN TRADUCCIÓN

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Peter Loveday

De la serie de poemas en prosa

Sueños de piedra

Traducido del inglés por el autor

Repetición

Nunca me llama nadie. Pero una noche, ya tarde, me llaman. Es alguien que dice tener mi mismo nombre. Con esa excusa me invita a su casa al día siguiente. Voy por pura curiosidad. Vive en una zona alta de la ciudad con su mujer y su hija. Su casa es como una galería, los grabados buscan su sitio en las paredes. Las habitaciones conducen a otras habitaciones y a zonas oscuras apartadas al público. Las salas están llenas de posibles clientes mirando las obras de arte. Salgo al jardín. Unos turistas americanos beben vino y comentan lo que han hecho y lo que harán el día siguiente. No les pregunto si también tienen el mismo nombre que yo. En cambio, vuelvo dentro y hablo con la mujer del dueño de la casa, la mujer casada con el hombre que se llama igual que yo. Sintién dome como de la familia le hablo con entera libertad. Le explico que estoy trabajando en estos cuentos. La mujer del hombre que tiene mi mismo nombre ladea la cabeza, lleva el pelo rojizo elegantemente recogido con clips, un tirabuzón le cae hacia cada mejilla. No puedo evitar ver su parecido con las mujeres de los grabados que cuelgan en las paredes, con

vestidos largos y estampados de flores –como el suyo–, sentadas con sombrillas a la orilla soleada de un río. Vuelve a ladear la cabeza mirándome fijamente con confianza, aunque de modo inquietante. ‘Debe ser difícil,’ comenta finalmente, ‘expresar exactamente lo que piensas.’ ‘Dicen,’ continúa, ‘que se debe tener cuidado con las palabras que uno elige para no repetir lo mismo dos veces, a la vez que es necesario encontrar palabras diferentes para describir una cosa y así, de alguna manera, hacerse dueño de ella.’ En su cara aparece una sonrisa de satisfacción. Está contenta de haber sido capaz de expresar este pensamiento y darme un consejo. Me despido. Vuelvo a casa por calles desiertas. Viajo en un autobús de dos pisos que corre de noche por la ciudad tambaleándose de modo alarmante en cada curva. Por fin llego al apartamento, subo las escaleras que crujen y pongo la llave en la cerradura. Entro en mi habitación. Allí está, sentada bajo el edredón, con las gafas sobre la cabeza y su camión estampado de flores. Es, evidentemente, la mujer del hombre que lleva mi nombre. Me sonrío como si hubiese acabado de decir aquella frase comenzada hace tiempo, muy lejos de allí. La frase sobre la necesidad de buscar diferentes palabras para describir la misma cosa o una misma palabra para describir cosas diferentes. La frase sobre la importancia de hacerse, de alguna manera, dueño de las cosas.

Un trabajo

Me ofrecen un trabajo para el que estoy totalmente incapacitado, pero como si esto no tuviera importancia, lo acepto. Llego el primer día y paso toda la mañana intentando –sin éxito– abrir la puerta del despacho con la llave que me han dado. Para no decepcionar a quienes tienen tanta fe en mí, continúo yendo al despacho cada mañana, día tras día. Hasta que un día, por fin, cambian la cerradura y consigo entrar. Dentro hay dos mesas. Ocupo la más grande y hurgo en los cajones. No hay sino papeles para tirar y lápices rotos. Allí no hay pistas acerca de en qué consiste mi trabajo, qué es exactamente lo que tengo que hacer. Encima de mi mesa hay un ordenador. Lo enciendo y paso horas intentando acceder al sistema utilizando diferentes códigos. ¿Será este el objetivo de mi empleo? Nunca suena el teléfono, nadie viene a darme instrucciones o a pedirme algo. Empiezo a creer que tengo suerte, que es un buen trabajo para mí y que soy la persona más indicada para realizarlo. Al finalizar cada día, más conforme, cierro con llave la puerta detrás de mí y cada día, con menos aprensión, vuelvo a abrirla. Pero un día abro la puerta y la mujer

está allí. Quizás sea mi secretaria o mi jefa. Sentada delante de la otra mesa habla sin parar. Por lo visto no se da cuenta de que: a) No tengo ningún interés en lo que dice y b) no entiendo el idioma en que habla. Pero lo que dice parece tener gran importancia para ella y, por esta razón, asiento de vez en cuando con la cabeza, como si supiera de qué me está hablando. A veces se inclina hacia mí con las manos encima de la mesa, incorporándose un poco en la silla. ¿Me culpa por esta desgracia en que ha caído? Cuando me aparto de mi escritorio su mirada no me sigue. Es más, estoy convencido de que no me ve en absoluto cuando me levanto para apagar el aire acondicionado, y apenas me he sentado de nuevo, vuelve a estar encendido. Tal vez cree estar sola en aquella oficina, como lo creía yo. No sé cuánto tiempo llevo en ella ni cuánto hace que tengo este trabajo. Me levanto y me acerco a la ventana por la que nunca entra la luz del sol. No sé si es de día o de noche y sólo comprendo que es la hora de irme cuando me rinde la fatiga. Un día, forzándola, abro la ventana y descubro que fuera no hay nada más que otra pared a la distancia de apenas un metro. Arriba, en lo alto, un rectángulo de cielo descolorido. No estoy seguro de poder describir exactamente cómo llego a la oficina cada día o, peor aún, por qué voy allí. Y esto es precisamente lo que tanto me preocupa, incluso más que la naturaleza desconcertante del trabajo en sí.

Oscuro secreto

Los padres, desolados, entierran al bebé en el jardín. Trabajan toda la noche pavimentando el lugar donde yace. Tras los matorrales un vecino espía con suspicacia. A pesar del mal tiempo, al día siguiente, los padres del niño comienzan a reformar el jardín. Mezclan cemento, construyen senderos, un parterre de flores, un estanque e incluso una fuente para disimular el lugar. Esperan a la policía en cualquier momento. Convencidos de ello, un día se les presenta un desconocido vestido de traje. El desconocido tiene un interés preocupante en el jardín y las recientes reformas. 'La vida sigue,' dice con ambigüedad mientras saca un cigarrillo y da golpecitos con él en la pitillera de plata. Permanece allí, en el jardín, hasta que la pareja entra en la casa y cierra las cortinas. Y sí, la vida ha de continuar. La pareja sale de su casa cada mañana y va en coche a la ciudad sólo para confirmar que alguien les sigue. El hombre del traje se esconde en los portales apareciendo milagrosamente en todos los sitios a donde van. Un día bajan por un callejón – la madre empuja el cochecito vacío y el padre camina a su lado –, de pronto, ella se cae quizás alguien la empujó

hacia la zanja. El padre furioso, fuera de sí, coge al hombre del traje, lo empuja también a la zanja y saltando sobre él lucha en el agua estancada. Está lleno de rabia por la pérdida del bebé, por el oscuro secreto del jardín, por las sospechas del vecino que los vigila y, por encima de todo, por el desconocido del traje. Coge al hombre por la cabeza y la acerca a la suya. Abre la boca y prorrumpe en un grito tan fuerte, tan potente, que no puede oírse. El hombre se lleva las manos a los oídos con expresión de pánico en el rostro. El padre inspira profundamente como para gritar una vez más, pero se detiene de golpe. Mira hacia arriba y ve a su mujer, allí de pie con un bebé en brazos.

Los chicos gordos

Me han contratado los chicos gordos para cantar. Cojo el autobús que sube el camino escarpado y estrecho hacia el pueblo donde viven y trabajan. Tienen un restaurante allí y seguramente los encontraré con sus camisas caquis y delantales blancos a juego, doblando las servilletas de papel que colocan encima de la barra. Parecen larvas gigantes sin nada de cuello, con la forma cónica de unos cuerpos que se van estrechando hacia la cabeza. 'Es un último deseo,' me susurra alguien. 'Escuchar música por última vez. No tienen para mucho tiempo, sabes.' Como confirmándolo, mientras saco la guitarra y empiezo a tocar, uno de ellos inclina la cabeza sobre las cajas apiladas y se queda dormido, tal vez entrando en un sueño más profundo. El otro no tardará mucho en seguirle, aunque por el momento está doblando las servilletas, distraído, al parecer, con el deliberadamente lento pulsar de mis dedos sobre las cuerdas.

Taslima Nasrin

Excerpt from the autobiography

Dwikhandito

Translated from the Bengali by Nares Banerji

In the third instalment of her autobiography, this acclaimed writer and feminist joins Bangladesh's secular movement, divorces her husband and becomes sexually liberated. But her books are banned, and she is attacked and ordered to cease writing or forfeit practising medicine.

When Kaiser came to see me, Goon saw his car on the way to my house. After entering, he asked: 'Who is sitting in the car? Is she Kaiser's wife?' Kaiser's face instantly paled; but I took Kaiser and Goon downstairs with me to meet the wife Kaiser tried so hard not to mention. If I ever asked about her, he swiftly changed the subject. He had no end of uneasiness about her, and even about his two girls. If he could have proved that he lived only with his mother and brother, and had no wife or children, he would have been more comfortable.

But I didn't feel uneasy about Kaiser's wife or children when he cast his infatuated eye on me. I didn't move my hand away from his when he wanted to touch my hand. When he brought his lips nearer to me, my own came easily within reach. Kaiser shrank away the first day; his nervous fingers shook as they moved along my warm, awakened body. The ice of his shyness melted slowly in my warmth. I had a physical need, whereas he wanted love. His body gave me pleasure; my glow gave him satisfaction.

No bond had formed between us. We were not interested in each other's personal lives. Our relationship was entirely out of necessity and self-interest, or out of nothing at all. As there was no possibility of any damage to either one of us, it lasted. I was fine without Kaiser – but then again I couldn't do without him. He might come to me four days in a row, but if he didn't come on the fifth, I felt I was missing something. Kaiser became a habit. This time he hadn't come for two weeks, so I was somewhat startled when he suddenly returned.

When I was with him, when I locked my bedroom door, I loved him. He gave me pleasure, deep and secret. I was not letting myself be used any more like a mass of flesh under a man to give him relief. No man had ever enquired whether there had occurred a tidal flow of pleasure in my own body. Kaiser did not ask either, because that is the nature of men; but I asked *him* to enquire about it, to cause a tidal flow in me like the moon. I asked him to awaken me, to play me like an instrument. I asked him to love my body by touching every pore of it. I asked him to be engrossed in me. And he did. Kaiser derived pleasure from giving me pleasure. Gradually it happened that my pleasure became more important. All these arrangements were for my pleasure. It was I who enjoyed Kaiser, whenever I wanted to, any way I liked it. The fact that I needed him made him very proud.

Malu Halasa

Excerpt from the memoir

Eat Bitter

1

Salvador and Victorina caught the boat from Masbate, one of seven thousand simmering islands washed by the filthy waters of Southeast Asia. Crossing the Sibuyan Sea the boat stopped long enough at the islands of Mindoro and Lubang to exchange passengers and goods before continuing on to Manila. It was a few days' journey that my grandparents knew well, but one that my mother, Ofelia, was making for the first time as a baby. In Manila, the family boarded a crowded bus and endured ten hours of uneven dirt roads terminating at a Spanish colonial town seemingly snatched thousands of miles away from the other side of the world and dumped in the tropics. At its centre stood an imposing Gothic cathedral fashioned from stone, in a country filled with flower and fruit – ylang-ylang, guava, papaya. Nothing much happened in Binmaley, this sleepy, rural capital of the Philippine province of Pangasinan. If anything did, it happened slowly – even the unfinished business of death.

In March, the tenant farmers belonging to my mother's Lolo ('Grandfather') Gabino gathered dried leaves and twigs around the base of the mango trees. The bonfires fumigated the mango groves of insects and parasites while the acrid odour masked the furnace blasts of summer. After harvest, Lolo's overseers from *barrios* as far as twenty miles away carried sacks of money to the Big House on the edge of Binmaley Plaza. All his children, including his eldest son Salvador (my grandfather), had been born in the rambling mahogany palace where my great-great-grandfather Gabino lived. In the summer he was always visible through the upstairs windows, bare-chested, wearing a *sarong*. Most of the time he was yelling.

Gabino was a self-made man who had built his fortune from water and blood. He took three-quarters of the harvest from his milkfish ponds and rice paddies for his pleasure alone. The remainder was divided among an army of barefoot, unwashed, starving tenant farmers. He had been the country's first surgeon-general and supervised medical care in small hamlets and islands all over the Philippines, where knowledge of modern pharmaceuticals was tantamount to shamanism. When he retired, he returned to the Vinluan family seat in Binmaley and became the town's first doctor. He may have bled his land and peasants to death, but day or night, during the hottest temperatures or the worst hurricanes, he rode out on his stallion and graciously attended the sick and dying for free.

His was a generosity reserved for outsiders. More attuned to the suffering of others, he was neglectful of his own family's. When most of his sons went into law, medicine and dentistry at time when few were educated, he was rarely impressed and repeatedly told them so, although he begrudgingly commemorated their

achievements on a plaque showing their names and degrees on the front of the Big House. Salvador, my mother's father, was not among them.

Those who were of good health and not beholden to Lolo Gabino for either their medicine or livelihood considered him – by the standards of his day – downright ugly. He had mottled, dark skin and Chinese eyes. Before his marriage, his future in-laws warned their daughter Donatila that he wasn't much to look at. She, on the other hand, was known for her fine figure and beautiful features, most notably a snowy, fair complexion and wide European eyes. Her maternal grandmother had been Spanish. In a country where the downtrodden were alert to every opportunity to bribe, cajole and outwit their colonisers, a woman who could pass as Iberian was highly desirable in society. She was living proof that after a few *mestizo* generations, native features could be obliterated altogether.

But beauty is only skin-deep, and not even wealth can stop a soul from souring. Mean and brusque, Gabino was a strict authoritarian with a cruel, lashing tongue. In short, my mother's Lolo was a Vinluan through and through.

Salvador's visit to his father's house was distinctly uncomfortable. Before the main meal of the day the maids arranged plates of roasted fish, chicken, pork, seasonal vegetables and salad on the heavy walnut dining table, then quietly withdrew. Family members who lived in the house or within walking distance – Lolo Gabino's two teenage daughters Pilar and Pura, and his four sons, Israel the businessman, Frederico the bachelor lawyer, Jeremías the doctor who practised across the street and the dentist Hernando, residing next door with his wife – all took their places at the table. At its head Lolo Gabino was attended by his beautiful wife, my mother's Lola Donatila, on hand to fill his plate and water glass. The rest of the family began eating only after his first bite was fully chewed and swallowed.

Gabino's hospitality was prickly. Salvador, a journalist, was desperate to leave his meagrely remunerated profession. He also had another black mark against him: he had the audacity to want to be fulfilled by his work, a concept that was anathema to his father. As firstborn, Salvador was to have set a stellar example for his siblings. His wife and first child should have cemented his resolve to settle down. Instead, the combination of work and responsibility had made him dreamy and restless. Worse than that, his schemes were costly, and he expected his father to bankroll them. Gabino sneered: 'Money for what?' He glared over the heads of his other grown children, who ate dumbly. They spoke only if spoken to, secretly glad that their brother's presence deflected their father's daily criticism of them. Exasperated, the old man hit the table with his open hand and said, to anyone who was listening (although he was convinced he was talking to himself): 'How will you scoundrels end up?'

I like to think that the scolding my grandfather Salvador endured that visit was particularly trying. Upon departure, his bags burst with dried fish, jars of mother's love – Donatila's delectable green mango pickle chutney – and other delicacies. It was easier to take from Gabino's cornucopia for free than to waste money on inferior foodstuffs in Masbate.

The return trip would be arduous. In 1932, the year of my mother's birth, the journey home could take up to three days of hard travelling, depending on road and sea conditions. As a doctor, Gabino had seen children perish in less difficult circumstances. So when his son and daughter-in-law were on the verge of leaving,

saying their final goodbyes in fact, he declined to hand over the compact bundle wrapped in hand-woven cotton and softened pineapple linen, which fitted neatly in the crook of his arm. 'Ofelia will remain behind with us,' he simply declared. There was no warning or discussion.

My aunts maintain that the shock broke Victorina's heart, although my mother believed the opposite was true: no longer bound by having to care for a small baby, her parents were free to become young lovers again. They would eventually have four more children, all girls. But on that day – my mother always testified – Lolo Gabino did *her* the biggest favour of her entire life.

Throughout her childhood, whenever her parents returned to the Big House, they were relegated in her young mind to the status of strangers whose names were rarely mentioned without disgust. On the infrequent occasions her parents dined at Lolo's table, Gabino never failed to call her father 'a failure', and she felt increasingly embarrassed by his repeated entries for money.

2

Like his children, Gabino's tenants also lived in fear. A landlord's bitterness may not be as psychologically damaging as a father's, but it can be dangerous and unpredictable, with severe consequences. 'Never bite the hand that feeds and cures,' Lolo often warned. As a rule, people treaded carefully in his presence. My mother was too small to know or care. In any case she was spared his rancour. She said that when she peed in his lap, or vomited, all he did was laugh and hug her harder. She was his 'golden child', a little-known tradition outside Asia: an infant, usually a poor relation, is brought from outside to live with an older couple after their own children have grown up. In Malaysia, the child often becomes a cherished member of the family and is treated like a blood son or daughter. In China the opposite can be true, and the child might become a glorified servant. In our family, there were little golden girls who were volleyballed back into poverty once their adoptive parent died, or little girls from the ghetto who thought they were living a rags-to-riches fairytale existence until their half-siblings injected some kind of fiscal reality into the situation. My mother's aunt Pura accused her of being Lolo Gabino's 'pet'. She was there to beguile and entertain, and Pura never forgave her for it. (Pura had been the baby of her family, and for a long time the focus of her parents' attention. When it was withdrawn, her relief was short-lived.) Ofelia learned at a very young age to avoid being alone with her, because that was when she was pinched, smacked and teased the most.

3

The first floor of the Big House was taken up by a series of interconnected *salas* for entertaining and a formal dining room. These public rooms were filled with heavy furniture imported from Europe, and Binmaley's only gramophone. Behind these were the private rooms: a couple of bedrooms and Gabino's study. Along the back of the whole house stretched an uninterrupted veranda decorated with flowering plants and miniature palms. It overlooked a tropical paradise of fruit trees, stables and a storage barn. The veranda and the *salas* also doubled as makeshift bedrooms when Gabino's sons came for extended visits, and the maids would unroll their mats and hang up mosquito netting. They occupied the ground floor or what was

referred to as the ‘basement’, where all the cooking took place under my great-grandmother’s supervision, beside an enormous stone oven.

There were no parts of the house that didn’t belong to little Ofelia, even the rooms off-limits to the adults. When the men came in from the fields to do business, only Lolo and the toddler met them in the dining room. Sometimes she entertained herself by squeezing between the barefoot men as they stood around the walnut-wood table, their straw hats held in front of them or by their sides as a sign of respect or, more accurately, servitude. Or she sat quietly on my great-grandfather’s lap (he was otherwise alone and comfortable in a seat) ostensibly to count money – which he stacked into neat piles of fifty-*peso* notes. If Ofelia became bored or tiresome, Gabino distracted her by filling her small hands and pockets with cash.

Early on, she came to understand its power. Pura, using her nicest voice, often offered to help her with Lolo’s gifts, but Ofelia was stubborn as well as spoiled, and kept what was given for herself – though she was still too young to know why she should hold on to it. Once Pura waited and took a couple of bills after Ofelia stopped playing with them. Of course, the younger child threw a ferocious tantrum.

Her clothes and toys were scattered everywhere in the Big House. If she misplaced something, no matter how insignificant, Lolo made everyone from the maids to his own sons and daughters stop whatever they were doing and search for it. As little as Ofelia was, she was always asked her opinion. ‘Should we have the shaved ice *halo-halo* dessert tonight?’ ‘What colour material should be used for the new dress?’ She was told she was thoughtful and articulate. When she and Lolo rode out in their horse-drawn *carromata*, the townspeople called out: ‘How are you today, Ofelia?’ and the little girl answered in the polite manner Lolo had taught her.

There was no mistaking whose granddaughter she was. Her temper was becoming as legendary as his. On the smallest pretence, she lashed out at maids: ‘Leave me alone! Get away!’ When the older servants told her to respect her elders, she choose to ignore them, even though she knew she was growing up in a polite Catholic society where deference to the elderly was mandatory. She was aware of a pecking order, and at a tender age could already differentiate between weakness and strength, the very poor, the very rich and the nobodies.

4

Lolo Gabino was a typical *hacendero*. In some countries wealth, land and unquestioning obedience would have been enough, but in the Philippines, the landed gentry suffered from low self-esteem. The problem began the moment the Spanish set up a government in 1571. The galleons that brought silver from Nueva España to trade for Chinese silk and porcelain in Manila – the great technological leap of their day – also brought news of the tragic fates that befell those who moved too slowly or were too encumbered by their own native cultures. But unlike the natives of the Americas who first fell victim to European diseases and then died of broken hearts, the Filipinos were more resilient. They converted, intermarried and divided island lands into *haciendas* as fast as humanly possible. Many died brutally in the process, but there were also those who took a little more for themselves and, step by step, through corruption and greed, built vast fortunes. The Pinoys may have become adept at fooling their colonial masters, but they were better at fooling

themselves, and never got over their own prejudices of skin colour and class.

Their inability to be 'pure' Spanish meant they were afflicted with the overzealous passion of the converted, and they took out their frustrations on everyone. Lolo Gabino sat firmly, comfortably, on the shoulders of others. If he had any inkling that he was a member of a dying breed, he kept that secret to himself; otherwise the very people who sustained him – the peasants and the weaker members of his own family – would have eaten him alive like the headhunters of Ilocos.

(Unpublished, 2009)

Lee Gil-Won

Meditation on Ginkgo Nuts Left by My Father

When it reached the sea,
The river quieted for the first time,
After sending up clouds of spray, shaking the rocks,
And stirring up muddy water from time to time.

Father was a river running down this land,
Unable to gather and collect,
With fierce greed,
The trickling waters of the valley,
But letting them go on flowing.

Even while flowing,
He reared fish in his arms,
Forever fighting the polluted waters that flowed in.

They divided, dirtied, scratched,
And then all departed.
The river flowed all alone,
With the sunset hanging full on its back.

**He left behind a few ginkgo nuts that he would tap open and eat each day. I nuked them in the microwave and gobbled them all up at once. That was all.*

Translated from the Korean by Ko Chang-Soo

Wang Xiaobo

Excerpt from the novel

Love in an Age of Revolution

From Chapter 1: Wang Er (the author was also often called 'Wang Er' ['Wang No. 2'] in his youth, and in his work many of his characters take this name as well) harks back to his younger days working in a tofu factory. Widely suspected of being the 'artist' behind the pornographic sketches drawn in charcoal in the toilet, he earns the undying enmity of Old Lu – the fortyish, tough, plump, humourless factory leader and chairperson of the revolutionary committee – especially as her name was often scribbled next to the drawings ...

When I was a child, I thought that the time of my birth was ill-fated, and that in the future I would encounter endless calamities. Although this was unlike a child's way of thinking, it still proved to be true. Concerning this point, there are many things I can add. In the beginning of this novel I called myself Wang Er, and went on narrating without turning a hair. But there was one point where I had to change my voice to the first person. There is one thing that made me do this. In my childhood I went to the playground on campus and saw a purple-colored sky – this I could recount in the third person, until the part where I cut my arm. This is because the third person has an element of fabrication, whereas the scar on my arm is real. After getting to the part about cutting my arm, the fictitious part was over.

When I was six, I cut my arm. While I was crying, I thought: 'I am really unlucky. Heaven knows what other calamities are awaiting me!' And now when I play bridge, I am in the same kind of mood. Every time, before I look at my hand, I mumble: 'Heaven knows what bad cards I'm going to get!' If I'm playing in a tournament, the other players shake their heads over this habit of mine. However, this habit doesn't prove that I am not a gentleman, it only indicates that I am an incurable pessimist. When I was twenty-two and was chased by Old Lu in the tofu plant and hid anywhere I could, I had similar thoughts. Zhan Ba – my co-worker on the same shift – was witness. During that period I told him many times: 'I will continue to have bad luck because neither good luck nor bad luck arrives singly.' It wasn't surprising that just a few days later I gave Zhan Ba a beating, even breaking the cartilage at the tips of his ribs.

This guy Zhan Ba was pale and soft. Although he was taller than I by more than half a head, he had no strength at all. His eyes were as large as dragonflies' eyes. His shoulders drooped toward his funnel-shaped chest. Although his voice was low, it was effeminate. His penis was childish, with a very tight foreskin. Everything there is to know about this guy I have at my fingertips. That's because we always went together to take showers in the winery's bathhouse. My later

beating him up was also related to the bath. I had never imagined that one day I would beat him up. He was my only pal in the plant – how would other people look at me if I beat him up? It was my bad luck that caused something to happen that shouldn't have happened.

The following is the account of Wang Er's thrashing of Zhan Ba. In the afternoon of the day before the thrashing, when the next shift came to work, Wang Er said to Zhan Ba: 'Zhan, let's go to the winery to take a bath. You go get the soap now.' Zhan Ba didn't utter a sound, he just got the soap and followed Wang Er. Wang Er noticed that he didn't have a lot to say that day – very suspicious. When they arrived at the dressing room of the winery's bathhouse, after undressing, Zhan Ba let Wang Er go first. Then, after Wang had entered the bath, he hurried back to the dressing room, where he saw Zhan Ba's hand reaching into the upper pockets of his jacket – first the left pocket, then the right one – and taking out a half-cigarette. It instantly occurred to him that Zhan Ba was searching for a charcoal pencil. Coming to this point in the story, I am unable to speak of myself as Wang Er, because the feeling I had back then can only be expressed by using the first person. As far as I know, at most one out of ten thousand people cut their forearms severely at the age of six; similarly, only one out of ten thousand people are suspected of drawing counterrevolutionary pornography and are watched by people who stealthily rummage through their pockets. This feeling of being chosen as the one out of ten thousand was like winning a mega-lottery, like a full test tube of ice water was pouring into my brain from an acupuncture point on my temple.

Of course, this search was arranged by a superior, to rifle the suspect's pockets and find the charcoal pencil that had daubed the counterrevolutionary pornography. But Zhan Ba was not worthy of undertaking this assignment. I was immediately indignant, but I didn't yet think of thrashing him. It was when I saw his naked body in the bath that I suddenly felt that not hitting him wouldn't do. The next day he again went through my pockets. By then I had developed my plan of how I was going to beat him up. I had to beat him in such a way that he wouldn't utter a sound. I didn't expect that my hands would go out of control, resulting in an injury diagnosable only by X-rays. Now I was the one to blame. But I didn't get violent intentionally. When I was a boy, each time I got into a fight, I punched my opponent's ribs, but I had never broken anything. If I had known that I might break his ribs, I would definitely not have punched him there.

When the pornography was discovered in our plant, Old Lu had yelled and cried and called the public security office to investigate. The public security office passed on the duty to the local police station. The local police station, after sending a policeman to take a look, said that this case should be resolved within the work unit. At last the company's security department sent an old Mr Liu to perform the investigation. His clothes were greasy. His face was red from drinking. He carried a Zeiss camera, the kind that had been mass-produced in the 1940s. He took a photograph of the men's toilet, using a flashbulb the size of a child's fist. This bulb was stuffed with magnesium foil like shredded paper. After the flash, the bulb turned white and opaque like a cataract patient's eyeball. But there was no resulting photo, because when the photograph was taken he had forgotten to insert the negative plate. And it was impossible for him to take another photo, because he had used up the last bulb. There were no more left, nor could one be

bought anywhere. Obviously Old Liu didn't take Old Lu's request seriously. I knew this Old Liu. I thought he was a thoroughgoing bastard. The only difference between him and me was that he never got into trouble in his whole life. Old Lu was really pissed off. She began to direct the investigation herself, convening all the good people (Party and Youth League members, as well as activists) of our plant. I thought that the first step in their scheme would be to seek conclusive proof of Wang Er's guilt. This fellow Zhan Ba was among the convened.

Regarding the pornography incident, there is more to say. Supposing you were Old Lu living in that boring era, you would definitely feel vexed to death because you had nothing to wear except for a Chinese-style cotton-padded jacket and a felt overcoat and had nothing to do except carry an artificial leather bag to attend meetings. When the drawing appeared in the men's toilet and she became the focus of attention, of course she felt agitated and wanted to do something. I could understand all this. What I couldn't understand then was why she picked on me as a victim. Now I think it was probably because I preferred to wear disgusting black clothes, and perhaps because I wanted to become an artist. Whatever the reason, these habits clearly indicated that I was not a good person; on this point there is no doubt.

The following anecdote reveals that I was not a good man. It happened years later when I went to America to study and also did part-time work as a waiter in a restaurant. There were several weird chicks who always came to eat at the tables I served and tipped me very generously. They talked in a way I couldn't understand. After a few days the boss no longer let me work in front, but instead put me in back washing dishes. He said that this reassignment wasn't his doing, but was due to the majority of the customers telling him that my appearance was morally offensive. In fact I didn't have any moral blemishes; it was just that my appearance was somewhat fierce, and I had the habit of wearing black leather jackets. Wearing black leather is a habit I developed when I was a child, because black leather doesn't show the dirt and lasts a long time. I have no intention of provoking anybody at all, but a good man would never wear black leather no matter how dirt-free and durable it is.

Before I thrashed Zhan Ba I grabbed his collar and roared: 'Thief!' for several minutes. This so startled the people in the bathhouse that they came out to watch. I was completely naked, with soapsuds on me. Zhan Ba was ashamed, angry, and powerless – he couldn't help slapping me several times. That fit into my plan perfectly, for when people come to blows the one who strikes first is the villain. So I began to beat Zhan Ba, but only after everyone had seen that it was Zhan Ba who struck first. Zhan Ba was half-undressed. He was still wearing a woollen sweater and knitted cotton underwear with a hole in the middle. Half of his childish penis came out of that hole like a half-strip of fish gut dangling from a cat's mouth. I was ready to fight. I wore nothing. Before I hit him I had taken a quick look at him, and only then did I let fly. My first punch was to his right eye, and I blackened it. I immediately saw that having one black eye and one white eye is unattractive, so out of kindness I punched him in the left eye. This made Zhan Ba even prettier. I have some more things to say about this. First, Zhan Ba had pale skin and big eyes. Second, he had double eyelids. Last, his eyes were deep-set.

Anyway, after I punched his eyes black, he became even lovelier.

The winery workers cheered me on. My head was turned by my success. I forgot that in this business of fighting it is the one doing the injuring who is found at fault. I was completely naked, and as I was pounding my fists on Zhan Ba, I was so excited that my penis grew erect. That thing swelled straight and tilted like an ancient Direction Finder. (The Direction Finder is the predecessor of the compass. It is a magnetized spoon in a lacquer plate. Its handle points south, but this 'Direction Finder' of mine pointed at Zhan Ba.) Later, Zhan Ba complained to me: 'You hit me as though you were proud of yourself – your thing turned straight!' Of course, this was Zhan Ba's misunderstanding of my psyche. I have a lot of pictures of ancient Greek ceramic drawings of nude athletes, and after engaging in intense sports, their penises are all erect. The thrashing of Zhan Ba was violent sport. The erection is due to the increasing secretion of adrenaline; this physical response doesn't contain any sexual implication, nor does it imply that I am a sadist. I was also injured. My right hand developed an inflammation of the sheath surrounding one of the tendons (tenosynovitis). But I didn't dare mention this, because it was caused by my having pounded my fist on another person's flesh.

The result of my violence was that Zhan Ba gained notoriety for being a thief, although his going through my pockets was an assignment from the higher-ups. The higher-ups would never admit that they had ordered a search of an employee's pockets, since this was an 'undercover' assignment. I also got the reputation of being vicious and ruthless. In my view, this was fair; Zhan Ba and I were, in fact, squared in this incident and could resume our old friendship. But when we went to work, he sat on the toolbox doing absolutely nothing and gaped at me as though he had been raped. This made me impatient, and I said: 'Zhan Ba, don't feel that only you are in the right. You need to think about me. I am a careless person, you know. If accidentally someday I put my charcoal pencil in my pocket and brought it to the factory and you found it, what would become of me? I'd be finished! I had to beat you!' What I said drew him out. He complained that I had thrashed him like a hoodlum, and all my punches were dirty. He was admitting that my beating of him was justified; he just felt it had been too ruthless. I, too, have rational explanations for my behavior. First, what if there had been a charcoal pencil in my pocket and he had found it? The consequences would have been unimaginable.

So he initiated the viciousness. Second, if he had been superior in fighting skills, I would not have been able to beat him up like that – again, it is he who should be blamed. We argued over these things. In both aspects, arguing and fighting, he could not compete with me. Afterwards he wept like someone with no backbone. Zhan Ba's black eyes lasted for a while after he had recovered from his injuries. During that period of time his eyelids seemed to be dotted with black decorations. If you looked carefully you would find that these black grains were dispersed from the depths of his eye sockets. I always carefully scrutinized this masterpiece of my making. By all standards, these were a pair of pretty things.

This guy Zhan Ba was fond of learning. He always asked me questions while we worked. Sometimes it was a question of geometry, sometimes of classical allusion. I always answered as best I could. Once he asked me: 'What is "one piece of Zhan Ba keeps on poking inside"?' This baffled me. I asked him where he had

seen it. He wouldn't tell me. Then I figured it out myself: it must have been from *Dream of the Red Chamber*! In *Dream of the Red Chamber* the characters for penis – *ji* and *ba* – have the 'hair' radical. (I doubt the author Cao Xueqin coined the term.) Zhan Ba misread the *jiba* as *zhanba*. It was at that point that I started calling him 'Zhan Ba', 'Ah Zhan', 'Little Zhan' and so on. One night I listened to a Beatles song over shortwave radio. All day long at work the next day, I imitated the song with the lyrics: *Zhan Zhan Zhan Zhan Zhan Zhan ...* Other people who heard me calling him 'Zhan Ba' followed my lead and called him the same. In the beginning, Zhan Ba got pissed off every time he heard the name, and he wanted to kill me. (Obviously, he had already figured out the meaning of *zhanba*.) But he was never able to get close enough to me; I would grab his wrists and push him away. Then everybody called him 'Zhan Ba', and reluctantly, he had no choice but to answer to it. From then on he had no other name but 'Zhan Ba'. To my surprise, he bore me a grudge over this, and even joined the scheme to persecute me. This illustrates what a slimy little creep he was. But he disagreed with my appraisal of him. He rebuked me, saying that if I would allow him to call me 'Zhan Ba' at least once and I answered to it, he would acknowledge that he was a slimy little creep. I didn't try this with him, because whether he was a slimy little creep or not, I was already in trouble. In such a situation, what's the point in my admitting I'm a *zhanba*?

After I had thrashed and injured Zhan Ba, Old Lu called the police to come arrest me. But her speaking voice was too loud and her attitude was too strange, so the police had some suspicions. They didn't come to arrest me. Instead, they went to the hospital to visit Zhan Ba. This time Zhan Ba showed his true colors as a man. He told the police that he and Wang Er were just having fun, and it was purely accidental that Wang Er injured him. He also said that he and Wang Er were buddies; if the police apprehended Wang Er he would be deeply saddened. After hearing this, the police comrades turned and went back to the station and never returned. But their withdrawal could only keep me safe for a short while, because of Old Lu's ceaseless rhetoric against me. At every meeting she would say: 'Why should we cover up for Wang Er, a rascal, a violent thug, a bastard?' Because she kept on talking this way in the meetings, they couldn't discuss the tofu production problems on the agenda.

Translated by Wang Dun and Michael Rodriguez

*Copyright Modern Chinese Literature and Culture Resource Center
(Ohio State University), July 2009*

The original Chinese version, Geming shidai de aiqing, was first published in the Guangzhou-based journal Huacheng no. 3 (1994). It was later included in the collection Huangjin shidai (Beijing: Huaxia, 1994).

Michel Hockx

‘Web Literature’ in the People’s Republic of China

In the People’s Republic of China (PRC), literature on the Internet flourishes like nowhere else in the world – yet, paradoxically, it is also much restricted by censorship. Many scholarly publications have highlighted the censorship issues,¹ which have had massive media exposure outside the PRC.² This essay will mainly focus on the other side of the coin: the unrivalled popularity and cultural significance of electronic literature inside the PRC. In short, unlike most treatments of the Internet in China, I shall focus on what *does* get published, rather than on what does not.

It is well known that the number of Internet users in China is growing at an exponential rate. According to the latest statistics published by the China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC), there were 338 million Internet users in the country on 30 June 2009. Literary production abounds, and the term *wangluo wenxue* (literally ‘network literature’, here translated as ‘Web literature’) is part of most young intellectuals’ everyday vocabulary.

The first Chinese-language literary works to appear online were produced by Chinese students in the US, at a time when the Internet was not yet available in China. The journal *China News Digest – Chinese Magazine* (*Huaxia wenzhai*) is usually credited with publishing the first Chinese-language works of literature on the Internet. These were standard, linear works of prose and poetry included as part of a Chinese-language publication originally distributed by email, which is still in existence. Chinese-language newsgroups such as *alt.chinese.txt* emerged at around the same time, and also published literary work. None featured any interactivity or multimedia. Apart from the method of dissemination, they were no different from print publications.

The first users inside China to obtain Internet access were staff and graduate students on university campuses, who hosted several literary Bulletin Board Systems after the mid-1990s. Websites devoted to literary production began to emerge from 1997 onwards. The first large commercial website for creative writing was founded in Shanghai in the late 1990s, by the Chinese-American William Zhu. Called *Rongshuxia* (*Under the Banyan Tree*),³ its latest usage statistics date from 2005 and claim a membership of 4.5 million, with daily page views of over 7 million and an online database of more than 3 million works of creative writing.⁴

Rongshuxia shot to nationwide fame in 2000, when a man named Lu Youqing began submitting regular posts to one of its discussion forums that chronicled the last days of his life (he was dying of cancer). The ‘Diary of Death’, as it was soon called, attracted huge numbers of readers and responses, and was eventually given its own home on the site, where it remained until recently. Parts of it were also

translated into English.

Most electronic literary production in the PRC takes place in the context of, literally, millions of online discussion forums, which allow users to submit literary works and comment on other people's work. The typical format for these works of electronic literature is the thread, which is begun by an author submitting a work (or an instalment of a work) and extended by readers commenting along with the author responding. All comments and responses are added to the same text under the same heading; whenever a new response is added, the thread reappears at the top of the forum list and is thus kept 'alive'. Appreciative readers of a particular thread will sometimes simply submit the word 'Up!' as a comment, thereby sending the thread back up the list. The format allows for the use of multimedia, and often avatars and photographs are included in the posts. In formal terms, the most experimental element of this literature is its interactivity: many of the threads become multi-authored texts as they develop over time, and are potentially open-ended – although in some cases forum moderators will decide to close certain threads after a period of time, and file them away in a different part of the site.

Already in the days of *Rongshuxia*, and still nowadays, there were clear links between the worlds of electronic and print literature. *Rongshuxia* made those links most explicit through its Graphic User Interface, which would make posts appear either as pages in an open book or as printed on lined pages of paper.

There is a kind of cross-fertilisation between electronic and printed literature at work in the PRC today evident also, for instance, from the fact that most bookshops reserve separate sections for printed works of 'network literature'. If a literary work achieves fame online before being published in print, it will carry with it into print culture a genre label reminding readers of its electronic provenance. Most of these works are novels or collections of prose or poetry that might just as easily have been placed on the bookshop shelves – but this is not normally the case. 'Web literature' has become a new genre of modern Chinese literature.

Apart from relatively popular or commercial publications, many avant-garde literary groups (especially poetry groups) prefer to use online discussion forums as their main avenue of publication.⁵ Discussion forums have almost completely replaced the previously very lively scene in which semi-official literary magazines (sometimes referred to as 'underground literature', i.e. publications not officially registered with the relevant authorities) had dwelled. With poetry especially, it is by now generally accepted in critical and academic circles that the online scene comprises the country's most significant avant-garde. Many established poets and critics have joined the trend, and the scene's products have also found their way into print.

Generally speaking, achieving publication in print is still a measure of success for most producers of electronic literature in China. The typical route is as follows: an author contributes a work to a discussion forum; the work attracts many readers and comments, and remains at the top of the discussion board for a long time; forum moderators recognise the value of the work by including it in a 'best of ...' section on the website (where the thread can be read, but no longer added to); the editors of the site's webzine include the work in one of their issues (with none

of the comments and additions from the thread); the webzine appears in print; the author becomes known in print culture circles, and publishes printed work. The various stages of the process clearly show how the text is 'normalised' for consumption in print culture. (There is, of course, innovative work to be found that attempts to operate against this process.)

It is difficult to assess whether or not there is much pioneering work being done in China outside the sphere of online discussion forums or blogs. The kind of self-contained work by individual, named authors experimenting with hypertext technologies and specialised software that makes up the bulk of critically acclaimed Web literature in the West is rarely found in the PRC.

That this is so is perhaps partly because of the high start-up costs of such creations, but there are also cultural factors at work. Chinese writers throughout the last century or so have generally shied away from the Western modernist paradigm emphasising the unique, individual nature of a literary work as well as the elevated status of the author as Creator. Instead, modern Chinese authors have preferred to engage in a low-cost, high-speed literary economy in which it is more important to publish regularly and be in constant contact with one's readership. Much modern Chinese literature has traditionally been published (or serialised) in magazines and newspapers before appearing online, with print publications often following, without further revision of the text.

Some Chinese writers and critics consider this preference for rapid production and constant exposure to be a remnant of traditional Chinese literary practices, which saw members of the literati producing a steady stream of shorter texts on a wide variety of topics (called *biji* or 'random notes') throughout their careers. Aesthetic principles and tastes in China are determined to some extent by these traditions, which, for instance, also explains why the short prose essay – so marginal a genre in the West these days – is still one of the most popular forms of writing in China today.

The most innovative 'network writers' in China today experiment with the opportunities offered by interactive technology to develop this tradition further. Most noteworthy is the work of Chen Cun, a Shanghai-based author who was one of the founders of *Rongshuxia*, but who has since moved to other sites (including one he moderates himself). Chen was already an established print author when Chinese Web literature took off, and has since been increasingly active in cyberspace. He has consistently argued for a type of electronic literature that overthrows the print paradigm. In recent work, such as the long discussion forum thread titled *Random Notes on Sex (Xing biji)*,⁶ Chen harks back to the traditional *biji* genre while making full use of the possibilities of writing online. He began the thread with a flurry of short posts, some including images and sound files, on 7 September 2005. Comments and additions from other site users soon followed. Unlike most forum authors, however, Chen did not turn the next instalment of the work into a new thread, but added it to the same one. This crucial difference ensured that the longer the thread became, the more interactive it was, with author and readership constantly discussing the work and the work itself changing under the influence of the comments being made. The result was a thread that stayed at the top of the forum for more than half a year, when Chen himself used his moderator's privilege and declared it closed. Ironically, the last post contributed

to the thread was from a reader begging Chen to continue it. *Random Notes on Sex* and other similar projects initiated by Chen could not possibly be reduced to an 'original work' in the manner described above. If one were to remove the comments and responses and leave only Chen's text, much of it would not make sense – Chen was often responding directly to his readers. It is a multi-authored, interactive work that, although linear in much of its content, could not be recreated in print.

Interactive discussion forums are widely used in Western countries as well, and many of them are devoted to literature. However, the social community aspect of these sites often prevents them from being considered groundbreaking, avant-garde or 'important' in Western critical circles; lingering print-culture paradigms determine that 'important' works of Web literature (i.e. those worth archiving) must be self-contained creations by individual creators. In the PRC, and possibly in other parts of the Chinese reading world, innovation is moving into a different direction, employing the interactive features of Web writing to produce unstable, multiply authored threads and images that encourage participation and involve their readers in new literary and aesthetic experiences.

1. Wikipedia has a good overview article on Internet censorship methods in the PRC; see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet_censorship_in_the_People's_Republic_of_China. An in-depth study was also undertaken by the OpenNet Initiative in 2006–07 (<http://opennet.net/studies/china2007>).
2. Recent examples of hyped-up media reporting on PRC Internet censorship include criticism of Google for filtering search results from www.google.cn; most in the media neglect to mention that www.google.com is freely accessible to anyone in China as well. There are also frequent misleading reports about the closure of Internet cafés in China, which are still to be found on virtually every street corner in every big city – and are populated almost exclusively by online gamers, not would-be dissidents.
3. See Jin Baicheng, 'Company Grows out of Online Literature Website', *China Daily*, e-paper, 14 December 2005; www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2005-12/14/content_503203.htm (accessed 20 September 2009).
4. Information taken from www.rongshuxia.com/Link/Company.aspx (accessed 20 September 2009).
5. A very helpful list of avant-garde poetry websites in China is maintained by Michael Day on the Digital Archive for Chinese Studies website, where some forums are also archived. See www.sino.uni-heidelberg.de/dachs/leiden_old/poetry/websites.html.
6. See <http://bbs.99read.com/dispbbs.asp?boardid=18&id=21198&page=&star=>.

Suragamika

Excerpt from the novel

The Road Map

This experimental novel, which draws heavily on actual people and events, is made up of overlapping sections describing events along the endless and often-thwarted road to freedom since 1988 ('Atmosphere' and 'Environment') and narratives by Burmese characters ('Travellers') who tell of their experiences on this road. The latter are deliberately unnamed, denuded of any biographical details – only their emotions, perceptions, impressions, responses and fates are registered. Thus the author allows for a sense of conversation taking place between the reader and these individuals.

Atmosphere (August – early September 1988)

'We want democracy'
 'We want democracy'
 'Our revolution' 'Must prevail'
Bang ... Bang ... Bang ... Bang ... Bang
 'BSP' government' 'Must fall'
 'Interim government' 'Right now'
Bang ... Bang ... Bang ... Bang ... Bang
 'Democracy' 'Our cause'
 'Democracy' 'Our cause'
Bang ... Bang ... Bang ... Bang ... Bang

The army's tanks are rolling, not in the jungle but on the roads of downtown Yangon. Soldiers are serious and dutiful about killing not invaders but their own people, people with no weapons, people with hunger, people with desire, people with hope.

The whole of Yangon is now full of sad stories. A ten-year-old boy was killed by a distant gunshot while playing on the balcony of his own apartment; a thirty-year-old businessman was shot while taking a taxi to Yangon International Airport; a sixty-five-year-old homeless man was shot at a traffic light as he tried to cross the road; ten doctors and nurses from Yangon General Hospital were shot while working on the wards. People live in their homes not with any guarantee of security from the army, but with life-threatening uncertainty from the soldiers' guns. Every event triggers demonstrations in the streets.

Groups of people fill the roads from the Shwedagon Pagoda to City Hall, passing the Sule Pagoda: the Burma Musicians' Union, the Motion Picture Union, the Burma News and Periodicals Union, the Aeronautical Engineers' Union, the Workers'

Union, the Theatrical Artists' Union, the Printers and Publishers' Union, the Burma Lawyers' Union, the Rakhine² Union, the *Yahanpyo*³ Union, the Housewives' Union, the Beauticians'⁴ Union, and unions and unions. The mingling of the pagoda bells and shouted slogans are goose-fleshing and spine-tingling. Added to that are the sounds of tinkling cartridge shells, which in turn spark sounds of surprise and despair. People flee into the bushes and drains, and lie flat on the roads.

Rain cannot cool the heated protesters. People listen to the voices of those in whom they place faith, support and trust. Min Ko Naing, student leader of the All-Burma Federation of Student Unions (ABFSU), sprinkles cool raindrops of encouraging words on the crowd of listeners:

I'm proud of the people's tenacity and bravery against the military rule ... Nobody can overcome the people's strength. World history has shown that people with strong spirit, unity, courage and discipline can topple authoritarian regimes ... Without the people's participation, no political or social system in any country can succeed ... Our victory is not so far away, but, although the emergency military curfew imposed on 21 July has been revoked, we must be cautious about their plans to crack down on us. They are working on developing such a brutal plan right now. Ours must be a peaceful struggle for democracy.⁵

The rarely accessible compound at the West *Mou*⁶ of Shwedagon is now teeming with thousands and thousands of people wearing red headbands and armbands, carrying signposts and flags of unions they represent. Red people are standing, talking together, and listening to the Yellow Lady, Aung San Suu Kyi, surrounded by Green students.⁷ Red and Yellow paint the green grass of Shwedagon. Yellow delivers her warmth, courage, wisdom, intellectual energy and freshness to the Reds, with their passionate blood. Greens make sure the atmosphere is harmonious, lively and respectful. Yellow, Green, Red. Such a combination. The revolutionary flag in the days of British colonialism bore yellow, green and red. Now look! Yellow, Green and Red are here again. Yellow speaks:

In order to obtain democracy, the people must be united and in accord. United, anything is possible. If we are disunited, we have nothing. I have a great affection for the armed forces, founded and nurtured by my father;⁸ I know of the people's great love for my father, and therefore I would not wish to see any antagonism between the army and the people. Today I appeal to the army personnel to reciprocate this understanding and sympathy. May the army be one that the people can support and trust, and may it be an army that protects and upholds the honour and dignity of our nation. Let us not forget that we have not yet reached our goal.⁹

Travellers

What a terrible scene!

How can I find words to easily express my true feelings at this moment? I am nearly numb. No! The mercury in my emotional thermometer is simply bursting. Feeling beyond uttermost feeling. Not only numbness, but also something like unconscious awareness. Look! Look at *Phayphay!*¹⁰ It was my dream to see him in

the open air. Now look at him, in the open air. Look at him in the open air.

I hadn't visited *Phayphay* for quite a long time, since starting medical school in late 1995. We were not allowed to visit him after that. Then he got another seven years added to his sentence early last year. Later, because of the student demonstration, my school closed in December. I had enough time then to visit *Phayphay* in the remote prison where he was kept; but every time I see him I am filled with sadness, and can't express myself well. I always have something to hide from *Maymay*⁴¹ and from you, *Phayphay*. It is so painful for me to keep these secrets. I feel helpless. I really don't want you and *Maymay* to become upset. But things are happening that are out of my control. I have neither the power to resist these changes, nor the power to let you know what's going on.

What's going on? *Maunglay*⁴² Phyto has grown angry with you. He is now in his final year of middle school, and learning that most of his school friends are respected, with the kind of prestige that comes from being the children of former medical-school teachers or high-ranking officials. Then he begins thinking that we are neglected because of your imprisonment. He once openly told me: '*Phayphay* is not a good, dutiful father to us. He just thinks of his own interests, and doesn't care about us. He shouldn't have done anything that could hurt us, but he did, and he won't be released anytime soon. We will be forever ignored. I cannot understand him.'

I was shocked to hear him speak of you like that. I could understand him, but of course I also understand you. But he cannot. He doesn't want to tell this to *Maymay* as he appreciates her sacrifice and sorrow. He just tells me. Then I feel immensely confused. I can't explain your concern and sacrifice to him very well. Surely he won't accept anything I tell him. He is deeply affected by all the hardships we have been through.

I always make him accompany *Maymay* to visit you, so he can get to know you better, but then I don't get the chance to see you often. I hope *Maunglay* Phyto can learn to understand you better soon. Until now he hasn't said much about you to us. *Maymay* told me he just asks you about your past aims and future dreams rather than about your present situation. I hope he discovers the true you eventually.

Soon after the regime changed its name from SLORC to SPDC⁴³ *Maymay* got a message that you were going to be sent to another prison far away, and that we could meet you at the train station in our own town. As my school was closed, I was the only one at home with *Maymay* at that time, so the two of us collected some food and drink and left for the station. At first I wished *Maunglay* Phyto could have accompanied us, so we could all meet you in the open air together and chat for a while. If we had had enough time, I would have gone and got him from his school. But now I think it was better not to have come with him. If he had seen you as you looked that day, herded like a beast – oh, no, I can't continue thinking about this. Look at you! Look at you, in the open air.

Your dry, grey and black hair is cut short, and looks like a dusty bush on a shaved mound. Your bright eyes have changed; there is something mysterious about them. Your neat clothes have been replaced by a worn-out, crinkled, yellowish-white prison uniform. Your straight posture is gone: you look like a hanged Burmese puppet. Though you are wearing your famous smile, I see your mood. It is baffling.

Are you my *Phayphay*? Are you my father? Please, feel it. A father stands in the open air in front of his daughter, but they are separated by all sorts of barriers and burdens. Don't say a word. I'm sure you wouldn't be able to find words to express what I am feeling unless you've experienced the same thing.

I can empathise with *Maymay* immensely. On the platform she just stands and stares at *Phayphay* as though mute, paralysed, deaf and blind. The only proof of her being alive is the trembling of her whole body. My mind is so confused; there are ten suns and ten moons shining at the same time. I just want to evaporate, to disappear like a magician. I can't find the words, although I prepared many of them to say to *Phayphay* last night, as soon as we heard about the prison transfer. The only word that comes to mind now is just: *Phayphay*.

The grating sound of the iron shackles connected to the waists of the prisoners is like a horn in my ears. But a thoughtless remark pierces the air, and my eardrums:

'Hey, look over there. Prisoners – maybe drug addicts, or murderers! Let's keep away from this platform.'

Under the winter sun at noon, I only see darkness, feel only heaviness, hear only those painful words: *drug addicts, murderers*. The whole world becomes deep and dark at once.

(Unpublished, 2009)

1. The formerly ruling Burma Socialist Programme Party, overthrown in the 1988 military coup.
2. A mostly Theravadan Buddhist Burmese ethnic minority culturally related to the dominant Bamar group that gave the country its name.
3. Young monks.
4. Gay men as well as beauty professionals are called 'beauticians'.
5. Speech given on 23 August 1988 in front of Yangon General Hospital.
6. Decorated gateway to a pagoda.
7. Burmese student uniforms are white and green.
8. General Aung San, Burmese revolutionary, founded the *Tatmadaw* – the modern Burmese army. He was key to Burma's independence from Great Britain, but was assassinated before the event. His name still commands huge respect in the country.
9. Speech given on 26 August at Shwedagon Pagoda.
10. 'Pa'.
11. 'Ma'.
12. 'Little Brother'.
13. In 1997, the military junta ruling Burma changed its name from the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which it had used since the 1988 coup, to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC).

Marilyn Duckworth

Gerontophobia

I go to bed considering insulin
How much to flood the vein that is me
So that I may turn over in my grave
Composed, dead level?
But wake daily, measuring the panic dream, collecting
My thoughts. Am I still threaded?

The real worry is
How to know when a cup is empty
I dream, handling pink mugs, open mouths
Speechless. I can't read it.
It makes no sense
It makes dementia.

Sitting, emptying, under a bathroom bulb
Memory flushes, surges
Veins connect
And thread again. I'm back.
The cistern filling –
This is called a wake.

Why am I so in dread of mornings?
Mother in the evening signals her empty cup.
More tea? No – 'Switch it off!' she commands
Then cries, confused.
How to know if a cup is on or off?
Or a life?

Sunny Singh

Sobre santas y guerreras

De niña viví en Benarés, esa antigua ciudad en la India que parece aún más antigua de lo que podamos recordar. Aquellos días fueron especiales. Veranos idílicos bajo la sombra del guayaba en la casa de mi abuela; fríos inviernos tomando el sol en el jardín en compañía de un libro. Y el banderín de metal del viejo templo de Shiva – de Barhajothi – revoloteando muy por encima de nuestras cabezas, brillante en el sol, nos recordaba y nos decía junto con el sonido de las conchas repicando en oración que éramos afortunadas de vivir en la ciudad de Shiva.

Ya de pequeña escribía historias. Las primeras que recuerdo daban vida a un oso que no hacía mucho excepto vivir tranquilamente en una gran cueva y que de vez en cuando atacaba a algún intruso. Estoy segura de que los psicólogos podrían darle más sentido a este leitmotiv de mi infancia de lo que pudiera darle yo. A pesar de todo, mi recuerdo preferido es cuando me sentaba en una *peedha* – un taburete pequeño de madera – en la cocina. Mientras mi abuela estaba preparando la comida, yo cenaba. Siempre comíamos en *thalis* tradicionales – grandes platos metálicos que brillaban como el oro rosado – y en cuencos que hacían juego. Como niñas, cogíamos los cuencos grandes y los usábamos como flautas, como dos grandes flores de loto. Cenábamos en un *thali* y un gran cuenco lleno de leche caliente – de nuestras propias vacas – con *chapattis* machacados. Las verduras – algo combinado con patatas porque era melindrosa para comérmelas – las colocábamos en un cuenco más pequeño.

Mientras cenaba, mis tías y abuela hacían la cena para el resto. Mis tías tenían sus propias historias de sus días en la universidad mientras que mi abuela me contaba las suyas. Y yo tenía la mía, ¡la historia de mi oso! Mi abuela siempre escuchaba con paciencia las sagas épicas, complicadas e incoherentes, que debían – volviendo la vista atrás – haber sido terriblemente aburridas. Pero mi abuela fingía que le interesaban de verdad. Nuestra casa estaba repleta de historias. Cada uno parecía contar alguna historia del pasado, presente y en el caso de mi tío preferido, historias de tierras lejanas.

A medida que crecía en esa casa, me di cuenta de que lo que quería hacer era escribir historias. Claro está, no sabía precisamente sobre qué. De modo que le pregunté a mi abuela, fuente de sabiduría en mi niñez. Tenía la respuesta y me pregunté por qué no se me había ocurrido antes. Me dijo: ‘escribe historias de santos y guerreros’. Creo que quiso que escribiera sobre guerreros porque forman parte de nuestro legado y sobre santos esperanzada de que yo, de alguna manera, siguiera su ejemplo y su buena conducta.

El problema estaba en que el concepto de santo no estaba muy bien definido en la tradición Hindú. Mi abuela me contaba la historia de Meera-bai, la reina-poetisa

del siglo XV que abandonó todo para perseguir sus sueños. O si no me contaba historias del Mahabharata donde nadie es santo. Con frecuencia, mi abuela me narraba la historia de Sita – el ejemplo de santidad – cuando mi conducta no era ejemplar. Yo pensaba que Sita era un paño de lágrimas y tenía la corazonada de que a mi abuela tampoco le gustaba mucho. Pero esta historia debía contarse ya que Sita, a pesar de todo, es el modelo a seguir por todas las mujeres: modelo sostenido por los tradicionalistas en la sociedad. Además, aparentemente hemos trazado nuestra descendencia partiendo de Rama y Sita, así que de esta manera, la historia de Rama y Sita es parte de la historia familiar.

Por supuesto, mi abuela y yo acabábamos en riña: me negaba a aceptar que tales ‘bobos’ fueran nuestros antecesores. Mi abuela, en cambio, los honoraba – obligada a defender e intentar explicar cómo nuestra descendencia se originaba a partir de ellos, todo estaba anotado en letra minúscula en las páginas antiguas de nuestro Ramayana. Desafiaba a mi abuela tomando a Rama como el peor ejemplo de hombre y a Sita pensando que había pasado su vida con pasividad y lamentándose por su destino. Mi abuela discutía sin fuerzas hasta que finalmente decía: ‘Sí, sí, pero de esa forma está escrito en los libros.’ Contentas nos refugiábamos en otra historia que tuviera más aventuras, que fuera más violenta y sangrienta y en la que se mostrase *menos* moralidad. Supongo que por entonces, éramos dos renegadas – mi abuela y yo. Sin embargo, ni Rama ni Sita solucionarían mi problema con las santas sobre las que iba a escribir.

También podía escribir sobre los santos del *aghoris ashram*.² Los ascéticos que vivían allí, supongo, harían del *ashram* un lugar religioso. Hay que decir, no obstante, que los *aghoris* eran hombres de mirada salvaje, ojos enrojecidos, y humor impredecible. Siendo niña, supe que no eran muy agradables. El *aghoris ashram* además mantenía continuas disputas con su vecino, uno de los empresarios más importantes de la región.

Permítanme explicarle – los *aghoris* son una clase de secta religiosa hindú devota a Shiva. Su orden principal concierne la interrelación de la vida y la muerte. Como símbolo de este conocimiento, la verja del *ashram* está coronada con calaveras humanas. Obviamente, los *aghoris* no son los vecinos más deseados. La mayoría de los hindúes no desean su compañía. Consumen licor y dhatu,³ comen carne, hablan obscenidades y visten ligeros de ropa. Además, siempre han estado rodeados de rumores relacionados con el sexo – toda clase de práctica – aunque sólo han sido rumores. No se nos permitía acercarnos o entrar en el *ashram*. De hecho, mi abuela nos había prohibido acercarnos al *ashram* y dar limosna a los *aghoris*. Nuestro vecino empresario, por supuesto, no se acostumbraba a ver las calaveras desde su jardín. Todo resultó en una guerra tácita entre los *aghoris* y el susodicho empresario con una duración de casi tres años. El capitalista, a menudo, levantaba un muro entre su casa y el *ashram* para evitar la vista espantosa de las calaveras. Los *aghoris* esperaban a que el muro se hubiera levantado, cubierto de cemento y pintado para levantar, al día siguiente, su verja más alto que la pared para que sus calaveras pudieran elevarse y traspasasen el muro. La guerra entre los *aghoris* y el empresario se convirtió en un entretenimiento para el resto de la vecindad. Las calaveras tenían el papel de enseñar a los ciudadanos de Benarés, ¡cuando no son nada más que niños! Para la mayoría de los habitantes de Benarés, la muerte forma parte de la vida. Y por lo tanto no se debe temer ni

sentirse aterrorizado ante ella. En cambio, la muerte es algo de lo que hay que burlarse, reírse, algo que debe aceptarse como nuestro vecino molesto y finalmente, hay que abrazarla con afecto y amor. Por esto, Benarés es la tierra de la incineración y el Anandvana, el bosque de la felicidad.

Quizá por esto, nos burlábamos de los desfiles funerarios que nos encontrábamos en nuestro camino. Como puede ver, Benarés ocupa un lugar particular en la filosofía Hindú. Se cree que Benarés descansa en la cima del tridente de Shiva y que así, la ciudad no puede desmoronarse cuando Shiva danza el *tandava*. La ciudad posee ciertos poderes gracias a su posición mítico-geográfica. Si pasas tres días y tres noches en Benarés, se piensa que se está ofreciendo el alma *moksha*⁴ para ir más allá de la muerte – la liberación del ciclo de la vuelta a la vida, la meta de todo hindúes. Morir o ser incinerado en Benarés es un acto que se relaciona con el *karma*⁵ que garantiza un tiempo en el paraíso. Ésta es la recompensa no eterna para las almas entre la muerte y la vida. Se concede poco tiempo en el ciclo de la reencarnación para residir apaciblemente en el paraíso.

Esto significa que multitud de gente incinera a sus difuntos en Benarés, y a veces, la ciudad parece convertirse en un continuo mar de desfiles funerarios. En poco tiempo, se pueden avistar a los parientes de los difuntos manifestando su dolor, vestidos de blanco, pálidos y cansados, caminando de dos en dos. El cuerpo del difunto se transporta en una camilla de bambú, envuelto en ropa de color azafrán y cubierto de flores. A medida que el funeral prosigue, los condolientes y los que sostienen el féretro comienzan su cántico: *Ram naam satya hai* ('el nombre de Dios es verdadero').

Crecidos en Benarés, de pequeños teníamos nuestra propia versión. Cuando íbamos y volvíamos de la escuela, apretujados en los grandes autobuses escolares, nos asomábamos por las ventanillas y contemplábamos los desfiles funerarios. *Ram naam satya hai*, entonaban los condolientes. *Murda saala mast hai* ('el puto difunto esta feliz'), nos reíamos con alegría. Casi setenta golfillos se asomaban por las ventanas del autobús para burlarse del dolor en las calles de nuestra ciudad.

De mayor, a veces me he preguntado si debería sentirme avergonzada por haberme reído del dolor de todas aquellas personas que llevaban a sus difuntos a la tierra de la incineración. Sin embargo, el Benarés siempre triunfa: la muerte existe para reírse de ella y no para tomársela en serio. Si no, las sombras de la muerte se oscurecen y crecen tanto que podrían apagar la felicidad en el mundo.

Además, siempre recuerdo las sonrisas de locura que nos devolvían los *aghoris* por nuestra fechoría. Nuestro desafío burlón a la muerte y el dolor era encomiable. Desafortunadamente, la idea de escribir sobre santas se complicó debido al *masti* (locura y alegría) que todos los nacidos en Benarés valoran por encima de todo. El otro mandato que me impuso mi abuela era el de escribir sobre guerreros. Conocíamos muchos guerreros. Teníamos un gran repertorio de guerreros en nuestro propio árbol de familia, así que no tuve necesidad de buscar en ningún libro de historia. El hecho de que la familia hubiera vivido tiempos de gran revuelta fue de gran ayuda por lo que no fue necesario ir muy lejos a buscar guerreros. Mi padre fue oficial en la armada militar. Mi tío abuelo alardeaba en la ciudad mostrando su cinturón de cartuchos de fuego en su pretina de *dhoti*⁶ con su rifle en el hombro. Numerosos y diferentes familiares también formaban parte de este grupo de guerreros. Hay que añadir también los miembros de la familia

involucrados en constantes conflictos feudales, también a políticos, miembros de bandas criminales relacionados con el crimen organizado pero a favor de la amnistía, policías ... Así que la muerte, violenta, siempre estaba cerca.

Además, y como mi abuela me había dicho, la guerra ofrece dos finales posibles: la victoria o la muerte. Pero todas las victorias terminan de la misma manera, son banales y dan lugar al comienzo de otra nueva batalla. Es una letanía interminable de batallas para la victoria dando lugar a historias aburridas sin argumento. Las únicas historias que se pueden contar sobre guerreros son de cómo estos guerreros encontraron la muerte, gloriosa y felizmente, riéndose bajo el sol deslumbrante y cómo se oían las espadas haciendo gran estruendo, y la tierra llenándose de calor y fertilidad con la sangre derramada. Sin embargo, yo no he tenido una niñez aterradora, ni tampoco traumática. Al contrario, fue idílica. Una infancia llena de amor y afecto, en la que la lealtad y las risas han llenado nuestras vidas. A pesar de todo, nos enseñaron la realidad de la muerte – y su presencia.

No hay que sorprenderse entonces de que mis historias hablen de la muerte y la alegría de vivir. Son historias sobre personas que dan sentido a la vida ante la muerte o que reafirman la vida aun cuando se están muriendo. De alguna extraña manera – quizá arcana – yo soy una escritora de Benarés. Parte de mí es consciente de la fragilidad de la vida y su efímera belleza como los fugaces amaneceres sobre el Ganges. Así, otra parte de mí se da cuenta de que los amaneceres en el Ganges nunca mueren y que se repiten cada día; que la vida y la muerte no se pueden separar; son valiosas, terribles, y grandiosas en su unión.

A menudo me han dicho que escribo con violencia; que mis historias son molestas porque glorifican tal violencia. Pero, quizá, ésa es una lección que sólo pueden comprender aquellos que han vivido en Benarés: que han visto la belleza sublime de un dorado amanecer abriéndose camino como seda delicada sobre el Ganges en el *ghat* de Dashashwamedh; o el humo grisáceo de las piras funerarias que se eleva en el *ghat* de Marnakarnita. Ninguna imagen de Benarés estaría completa sin las dos caras de Shiva, la vida y la muerte. Asimismo, mis historias no estarían completas sin la imagen de la muerte – un Shiva de mirada salvaje e irresistible belleza manchado con las cenizas de las piras funerarias, con serpientes enroscándose en su cuello y extremidades, acompañado por un séquito de espíritus malignos y demonios – terrible pero asombroso al mismo tiempo.

Mis historias son como las de los escritores de Benarés milenios atrás – son una invocación a Shiva en todo su esplendor y su gloria.

1. Del Hindi. Pan redondo sin levadura típico del norte de la India. Hecho con harina de trigo, agua y sal.
2. Un término que proviene del Sánscrito que hace alusión a una construcción privada destinada a una comunidad religiosa determinada y su *gurú*.
3. Del Sánscrito. Se refiere a cualquier variedad de planta del género *Datura*. Las hojas y las semillas se utilizan para producir alucinógenos alcaloideos.
4. Del Sánscrito. Se refiere a la liberación de toda experiencia mundana y temporal. Liberación del alma en el ciclo de la vuelta a la vida (*samsara* o *mukti*).
5. Un término que proviene del Sánscrito. En el Hinduismo, hace alusión a la recompensa o castigo otorgado a una persona en su segunda reencarnación según sus acciones en la reencarnación primera.

6. Del Sánscrito. Especie de pieza de algodón que llevan los hombres hindúes que cubre la parte inferior del cuerpo.
7. Un término del Sánscrito. Generalmente, se refiere a un terraplén que conduce a la orilla del río destinado al baño.

Traducido del inglés por la autora con Rosalia Villa Jiménez

Tze Ming Mok

The *OUP Martin Manser Concise English – Chinese Chinese – English Dictionary* (New Edition) Is Talking Imperatives

call/can/can/canon, dilapidated/diplomat. iridescent/is virus/
vocabulary.

bicycle/blind: cursory/cut asbestos/ass, exude/face depict/
derisory ant/anus.

she'll/shit vile/virtue. smash/smooth thatch/theory, double/
down vagina/variable, make/malleable revolution/rickshaw.
arrogant/as blew/blood civil/circuit psychiatry/puff.

admissible/adversary, binge/bite him/hit batman/be grotesque/
grub fate/fax FBI/feel angry/answer latent/law farce/fatality
funny/future bloody/blow get/go.

dissolve/district manure/mark postscript/poverty: bargain/base
ark/arrive, frontier/fuel wallet/war, sadism/salad.

This poem has been assembled from the proclamations of the ubiquitous dictionary's 'running heads', that is, the words appearing at the top corner margins indicating the first and last words on the page.

Aamer Hussein

Excerpt from the novella

Another *Gulmohar* Tree

Usman, visiting post-war London from Pakistan, meets a young aspiring artist named Lydia who has, like himself, emerged from an unhappy marriage. As their relationship deepens, Usman must suddenly return to Karachi, leaving Lydia behind. Two years later, Lydia abandons her life in London and boards a ship to Pakistan, and the two are married. But as the years flit by, Usman feels a growing distance between them. He realises that he hasn't noticed the buds of the gulmohar tree unfurl and that he has lost sight of his love for his wife.

When friends asked how long ago and where they'd first met, he would recall: 'A socialist seminar, in 1949, at some lecture theatre in Bloomsbury, I think. Bertrand Russell was speaking.'

'No, Bertrand Russell's talk was much later,' she'd correct him. 'We met at Senate House near Russell Square, and the year was 1950. Later, tea and biscuits were served. You were one of the main speakers at a symposium, and I was merely a face in the crowd.'

Their meeting had taken place on an evening in early March. The hall was so cold that many people in the audience, relieved to find shelter from the rain, had kept their coats on. Lydia was there with her friend Jack, who had served briefly in India just after the war. Usman was representing Pakistan, still a very young nation, to a group of other intellectuals from Ireland, Indonesia, India and Egypt who were discussing the situation in their countries. The lively debate on national liberation, as the student magazines later described it, was actually more of a tournament, and at times showed signs of turning into a fistfight, with dissenting opinions about the moral rights and wrongs of the division of India and of Palestine.

Though Usman was the only Pakistani on the platform, and had been asked to speak about his country's aspirations, he belonged to no group or faction. He was in national dress: a long black coat with a high-cropped collar, fitted waist and slits on the side, worn over a white shirt, its cuffs emerging from under his coat sleeves, and voluminous white trousers. He had a tall, black woolly hat on his head. His shoes, she noticed, were laced and Western.

It was left to Usman to uphold the honour of his country against his Cambridge-educated Indian assailant, Dr Pratap Dongre, a well-known representative of his country's ruling Congress Party who thought that the creation of Pakistan was a conspiracy hatched by a posse of fanatics. Lydia, in the audience, was moved by the passion with which the Pakistani speaker, articulating his country's position, argued that new eras created new nations and that ordinary people in such circumstances performed as both kings and as pawns on the chessboard of history.

She was even more impressed with the quiet dignity of his public manner. An ardent reader of Yeats, she understood, for the first time, the poet's lines about the best and the worst, their intensity or lack of conviction. Some impulse made her decide to tell him how much she had learned from what he said.

Though she was the granddaughter of a Georgian émigré, Lydia had never before had a significant conversation with such a dark foreigner. But something about his haunted cheekbones, and his bewildered eyes shadowed by stray locks of greying hair, intrigued her. In turn, he, who had largely avoided contact with foreign women before, was drawn to the friendly manner and clear, low-pitched voice of this forthcoming yet shy young woman with dark hair, candid grey-green eyes and broad, square shoulders. Though she was dressed sensibly in a mannish navy-blue jacket with gold buttons, he noticed that she wore pearl studs in her pierced ears; a pearl-encrusted gold brooch was pinned to her lapel.

'I'm an illustrator – book jackets, magazine articles, children's stories, that sort of thing,' she informed him. (She would never have dared to describe herself as an artist.) As she might have guessed, he was a journalist by trade.

'I'm here in London on a year's secondment to the foreign desk of the *Daily Telegraph*,' he told her. His English, she'd noticed when he gave his speech, was syntactically adequate and quite rich in vocabulary, but his conversation was hesitant, halting. 'I'll be leaving at the end of May. And your name is ...?'

'Lydia Javashvili.'

'Miss ... Joshili?' he stumbled.

'You can call me Lydia,' she said, holding out her hand with a smile that moved him.

'Usman Ali Khan.'

He took her extended hand, but he didn't ask her to call him by his first name, which was relatively easy to say. Later, she'd hear his colleagues refer to him as 'Usman *Sahib*' in the common Pakistani way, which, he explained to her, meant 'Mr Usman', and she took to calling him 'Mr Usman' until the end of their days together. And she'd learn that the mess he'd made of her surname was deliberate: *joshili* meant 'plucky' in his language.

(Telegram Books, 2008)

Marc Mangin

Arrêts sur images*

(*ou comment la Chine m'a fait photographe)

Le temps virait doucement à l'automne et, bientôt, le vent de Sibérie soufflerait sur Pékin les premières gelées. J'avais découvert la capitale chinoise dix ans plus tôt, à la même saison, et conservais des Pékinois l'image d'hommes et de femmes emmitoufflés dans des manteaux de laine bon marché, pédalant au ralenti dans le froid à travers un dédale de *hutong* vers leurs misérables logis. Pékin était encore une ville silencieuse couchée au pied de sa Cité interdite et livrée aux cyclistes. Les clients ne se bouscuaient pas aux étals des boutiques d'État, trois ou quatre pas plus, ouvertes sur Wang Fujin, une rue poussiéreuse et mal éclairée. Un ciel pâle et brumeux glissait sur les toits de tuiles jusque dans les faubourgs, jamais très loin. Une route à deux voies trouée de nids-de-poule mais bordée par une double rangée d'arbres traversait la campagne pour relier le centre à un aéroport délabré au trafic réduit. On y échangeait ses derniers FEC, la monnaie réservée aux étrangers, contre l'un de ces souvenirs de dernière minute dont les touristes raffolent : un Bouddha en bronze, un morceau de soie, une fiole de parfum ...

J'y revins une deuxième fois deux ans plus tard, en 1993, puis une troisième fois, en 1998, toujours à la même saison. À chaque fois, l'automne cédait sa place à l'hiver sans transition. La température chutait brutalement et, lorsque le soleil ne parvenait plus à repousser les assauts du vent du nord, la neige tombait sur la grisaille.

Candidate à l'organisation des Jeux olympiques de l'an 2000, Pékin finit par construire un aéroport digne de ses ambitions internationales, mais la ville dissimulait le feu qui couvait en son sein. Aucun grand projet ne menaçait de la défigurer, les boteurs ne traçaient pas de pistes d'atterrissage à travers les vieux quartiers. Les anciens tapaient le carton devant leur porte, dans les *hutong*, ou bien s'affrontaient dans d'interminables parties de *mahjong*, sous un saule au bord des lacs. La fièvre du business épargnait encore la capitale du nord. Surpris dix ans plus tôt par une jeunesse impatiente de voir se traduire au plan politique l'ouverture réussie sur le front économique, les dirigeants chinois faisaient plus que jamais preuve de fermeté et de discrétion. Zhu Rongji avait reçu mandat de mettre le pays aux normes du capitalisme pour finaliser son entrée dans l'Organisation mondiale du commerce et Pékin ne désespérait pas de voir sa candidature retenue pour l'organisation d'une future Olympiade.

Le temps virait doucement à l'automne en ce mois d'octobre 2002 et, bientôt, le vent de Sibérie soufflerait sur Pékin les premières gelées. Depuis mon précédent séjour, la ville avait interdit son centre aux deux roues motorisées et mis en chantier un quatrième périphérique ; le nouvel aéroport avait été inauguré et le métro se modernisait, Wang Fujin se comparait aux Champs-Élysées, les tours de

fer, de verre et de béton sortaient de terre à la vitesse de gros champignons sous l'orage. Les plus grands architectes de la planète proposaient leurs savoir-faire. Dans la maison de thé attenante au Grand View Hotel, au sud-est de la ville, une hôtesse en *kipao* fendu jusqu'à mi-cuisse expliquait, en chinois, la cérémonie du thé à deux touristes qui le baragouinaient à peine. L'endroit était sobre, coupé du monde par des fenêtres en verre dépoli devant lesquelles se découpait l'ombre de services à thés en porcelaine. Le mobilier en bois laqué noir conservait l'empreinte des doigts. Aux murs, flottaient des rouleaux peints. Six poissons rouges, obèses, nageaient autour des bambous du bassin intérieur. Au fond de la pièce, les clients qui le souhaitaient pouvaient s'isoler dans les confortables salons privés mis à leur disposition et séparés de la salle par d'épaisses tentures.

Au moment de partir, la jeune hôtesse réclama d'être prise en photo. Sans y avoir été invitée, sa collègue se plaça à sa droite : derrière le comptoir, où la bouilloire programmée pour maintenir l'eau à une température de 80° chuintait, et devant un rayonnement de boîtes à thé, de tasses et de théières. Elles étaient prises entre les faisceaux de deux faibles sources de lumière. Si je voulais obtenir un peu de matière, il me fallait réduire la vitesse de l'obturateur au 1/15e de seconde et ouvrir le diaphragme de l'objectif au maximum, 1,2. Je ne garantis pas le résultat, bloquai mes coudes contre mon corps et retins ma respiration. Les deux jeunes filles étaient adorables dans le viseur, légèrement tournées de trois-quarts dans ma direction. Je les cadrai sur la gauche. Le rideau s'ouvrit et se referma avec un bruit sourd. Sans m'accorder une deuxième chance, elles retournèrent à leur service.

Les Pékinois aiment se promener dans le parc des Collines parfumées, particulièrement les fins d'après-midi automnales lorsque la lumière rasante du jour finissant teinte les feuilles des arbres d'un rouge flamboyant. Ce jour-là – était-ce une brume de chaleur ou bien de pollution ? – un filtre s'opposait à la métamorphose. Sur la plus haute des collines, là où d'ordinaire ils s'attardent dans une contemplation plus bruyante que méditative, les Pékinois se faisaient photographier en tenue impériale, les uns dans une chaise à porteurs brinquebalante, les autres sur un trône en contreplaqué. Une ambiance bon enfant qui ne faisait pas forcément une bonne photo d'ambiance. Sans lumière et sans ambiance, je pris le chemin du retour, résigné à rentrer bredouille. Au pied des collines, les architectes du parc avaient aménagé un plan d'eau coupé en son milieu par un pont en forme de dos d'âne, installé des bancs à l'ombre des arbres et construit un kiosque sans prétention d'où admirer l'ensemble. Comme j'arrivais par l'arrière, le kiosque et les promeneurs qu'il abritait se découpaient sur fond de lac. En me décalant un peu, le pont dont l'eau renvoyait le reflet apparaissait entre deux piliers. Il n'y avait plus qu'à cadrer, mesurer la lumière sur un point clair ...

Je repassai par la Chine six mois plus tard apportant, comme souvent en revenant sur « le lieu du crime », des tirages de mes photos. Je n'en avais pas fait beaucoup, mais la moisson me plaisait. Un homme notamment, très digne, la canne à la main, assis devant une échoppe, le coude posé contre des casiers à bière. Nous nous sommes regardés longuement à travers l'objectif, j'attendais qu'il acquiesce avant de déclencher. Je le saisis au moment où il esquissa un sourire. Un autre, plus abîmé par la vie mais très fier des gravures anciennes épinglées sur les murs de son taudis. Une femme en embuscade derrière sa fenêtre, à moitié cachée par le rideau. Et puis, les deux poupées de porcelaine ! Deux visages adolescents

poudrés par la lumière, surgissant de la pénombre imprégnée du parfum des meilleurs thés de Chine.

Je n'ai jamais revu ces deux jeunes filles pour leur donner une épreuve de la photo. Parties sans laisser d'adresse. La maison à la fenêtre de laquelle apparaissait l'autre femme avait été rasée. Je ne suis jamais retourné aux Collines parfumées non plus, mais les regards croisés dans le viseur de mon appareil photo, à l'automne 2002, avaient levé l'obstacle linguistique qui, depuis dix ans, m'empêchait de partir sur les routes photographier la Chine.

Photographier la Chine ! Quelle prétention. Elle ne m'a pas attendu pour se faire tirer le portrait et suffisamment de Chinois s'en chargent. D'ailleurs, photographier-t-on la Chine ? Photographier la Chine supposerait qu'elle soit « immobile », comme le prétendait un auteur célèbre avant d'être cruellement démenti par l'actualité, ou « immuable », comme le veut un mythe tenace. Peut-on photographier en Chine autre chose que la Chine ? Oui, son rapport à la Chine. Je le vérifiai, d'un film à l'autre. On photographie ce que l'on veut bien voir et ce qui se laisse bien voir ! La bonne photo volée n'existe pas ; la bonne photo est une photo voulue par l'un et acceptée par l'autre. Elle s'inscrit dans ce rapport. Je commençai par chercher ce rapport et la rencontre qui l'accompagne à Pékin, bien sûr, à Shanghai, ensuite, puis dans le Shanxi, le Shaanxi, l'Anhui, le Zhejiang, le Gansu, le Sichuan, le Ningxia, le Xinjiang, le Qinhai... Tantôt je la trouvai, parfois non. J'ai rapporté de Chine ce que la Chine a bien voulu me laisser emporter et, lorsque je me plonge dans les sept mille clichés accumulés depuis 2003, je me dis qu'elle a été généreuse avec moi.

La photographie, c'est ce qui en fait la valeur, immortalise plus qu'elle n'immobilise un instant dans le temps à travers un jeu d'ombres et de lumières entre celui qui l'offre et celui qui la reçoit. On ne photographie bien que ce que l'on aime bien. Elle traduit le sentiment saisi par l'objectif. À l'instar de la calligraphie, la photographie cherche, à l'intérieur du cadre contraignant de règles simples, la liberté qui l'élève au rang d'art. Le calligraphe Xiang Lin-Cai se laissa photographier dans son atelier, une pièce exiguë et sans charme, au terme d'un échange passionnant sur l'art. Il posa une feuille de papier sur sa table de travail, dilua un peu d'encre, y trempa son pinceau et, sans plus se soucier de moi, se mit à l'ouvrage d'un geste souple et décidé auquel il n'accorda aucune pause. Je n'eus pas le temps de réfléchir et plaquai, entre le mur et sa table, la seule place d'où lui faire face. De là, je n'avais aucun recul et, même en vitesse lente, je manquerais de profondeur de champ ... Dans tous les cas, impossible d'avoir le Maître et son œuvre. Je cadrai la feuille de papier, déjà à moitié couverte de caractères épais, et attendis que le pinceau s'y pose pour déclencher. Sur la planche contact se lisent mon embarras, mes hésitations. Sur une image le pinceau, droit, semble à peine effleurer la feuille. Les doigts de l'artiste le tiennent délicatement.

J'écris la Chine avec la lumière qui disparaît à chaque point de croissance. Je n'ai pas fini ! Je photographie la Chine à la recherche de Wang Lu et de *La terre chinoise*, ce fabuleux texte de Pearl Buck qui m'emportait loin du pensionnat où, enfant, je me morfondais. Je ne photographierais pas la Chine si je n'avais pas lu également Étiemble, Rickmans et Billettere, sans qui je n'aurais probablement jamais pénétré les écrits de Tchouang-tse, de Lao-tzi et des philosophes taoïstes.

Rachel Harris

Bollywoodistan

In a dusty small-town bazaar in southern Xinjiang, Uighur girls in coloured headscarves shop for provisions to an incongruous disco beat with the lyrics ‘Hello, little darling/I love you!’ delivered in a distinctly South Asian accent.

Soundtracks to the lavish, all-singing, all-dancing films of Bollywood are called *filmi* music, and are ubiquitous in Xinjiang. Brought directly from Pakistan by traders who regularly cross the mountains to Kashgar, they are shown at roadside stopovers in the Taklamakan Desert, at noodle restaurants, and at ice cream stalls in the bazaar. Hits from these Hindi films are popular with the local taxi drivers who terrorise peasants riding donkey carts. Even television adverts for locally made soap use cover versions of Bollywood hits.

Uighur enthusiasm for *filmi* music is evident in *hebbeli*, popular bootleg videos skilfully blending Hindi films with Uighur pop songs – depicting, for example, suave Bollywood megastar Amitabh Bachchan and scantily clad chorus girls lip-synching to Uighur lyrics with uncanny accuracy: *Khanimlar, ependiler, diqqet ... mushundaq yashash kerek!* (‘Ladies and gentlemen, observe ... this is how to live!’) In the countryside, local singers sing Uighur-language versions of Bollywood classics accompanied by the *dutar* (long-necked lute).

One major influence was the 1951 classic *Awāra* by legendary Bollywood actor, producer and director Raj Kapoor, which depicts a love story between a vagabond and a rich girl. One of the first films to be shown in Xinjiang following the Cultural Revolution, its core theme of class contradiction was deemed acceptable by the authorities. It was shown in villages throughout the province, projected onto sheets hung in the open. But class struggle was not what the audience took from this film. Instead it gave the viewers their first taste of filmed melodrama, romantic love and tragedy, filling an aching need for such things after the emotional wasteland of the Cultural Revolution.

‘It was the first film I saw that wasn’t Chinese revolutionary propaganda,’ says Aziz from the city of Shahyar. ‘They showed it in our village, and we [boys] climbed up onto the courtyard wall to see it. We sang the title song *Awāra Hoo* all the time.’

Kapoor’s films, evoking themes of collectivism and anti-feudalism, became hits across China as well as in other less developed countries. Mao Zedong was said to be fond of *Awāra*, and novelist Vikram Seth has described his astonishment at finding, in the 1980s, that Chinese musicians knew all the film’s hits when he sang them at a karaoke session in Nanjing.

This affection for Bollywood classics is shared across the border in the former Soviet states. Kapoor’s films were also dubbed into Russian and widely distributed throughout Soviet Central Asia, during a period of warm relations between India

and the USSR. A generation of Uzbeks, Tajiks and Kazakhs was brought up on Hindi films and *filmi* music.

Bollywood is big business in Tajikistan today. Many people can sing the hits all the way through in Hindi, without understanding a single word. Those who can afford it watch pirated videos, as there are few cinemas in the country. (In the summer of 2006, scenes from a new Bollywood blockbuster, the epic Indian independence drama *The Rising*, were filmed in the tiny Tajik village of Aychi, near the Afghan border.)

In neighbouring Uzbekistan, Uzbeks like to trace the enthusiasm for Bollywood deep into history and the Mughal conquest of India. 'There are many things our peoples share from that time,' says Saudarkh Hojaiwa, a leading film critic in Uzbekistan. 'They say the domes of the Taj Mahal had their inspiration in Central Asia. And the first Uzbek theatre switched between action and song, just like Hindi films do now. Plus, there are lots of other traditions we have in common ... Just like many Indian films, we'd never show a couple kissing.'

Scholar Keila Diehl, writing of the craze for *filmi* amongst Tibetan refugees in Dharamsala, India, speaks of the global 'unrestrained appropriation and juxtaposition of *filmi* music ... lush violins, reggae, *tabla*, melismatic vocal slides into electric bass, disco, jazz flurries ... true to no tradition in particular – the songs celebrate all traditions'.

Indeed, the songs seem to have an uncanny ability to be all things to all people. They seem to crystallise desire, representing freedom for Tibetans and, to take another example, roots and distant origins for Romany audiences in Eastern Europe. For Uighurs, in the early 1980s, these songs truly represented the possibility of the return of romance and emotion after years of cultural barrenness.

First published in Steppe: A Central Asian Panorama, issue no. 3, Winter 2008

Sampurna Chattarji

The S-Word

Sliver

I'd like to be
A sliver of orange
Turned inside out
And eaten.

Snatch

There is a song
that comes between us.
I listen to it in silence.
He listens in sorrow.
I never ask him what it means.
I know.
And so, between us the song sits,
a mute accomplice,
a shred of doubt
between my teeth.

Stain

Last night,
when the moon came up,
the egg began to hatch.
A lightning crack.
A scarlet break.
And last,
a vivid flow
of inconsolable turquoise blood.

Simmer

A boil sprouts on her knee.
As it festers she pesters it
to yield its oozing centre.
She worries the skin around it
inflamed with indignity.
She fondles it almost
but breaks off before it bursts.
Suddenly all over her they
spring,
lewd, uninvited.
She boils over
like a cauldron
covered and unattended.

Contributors

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Bernard Bourrit est un essayiste et traducteur. Il a publié *Fautrier ou le désengagement de l'art* (Éditions de l'Épure, 2006).

Urvashi Butalia is a writer and publisher based in India. She is the co-founder of Kali for Women, India's first feminist publishing house, and now heads Zubaan, an imprint of Kali. She's written and published widely on a range of issues; among her publications are *Speaking Peace: Women's Voices from Kashmir* (edited), *Inner Line* and *Katha*, two collections of short stories by Indian women (also edited) and the award-winning history *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*.

Marilyn Duckworth is based in Wellington, New Zealand. She is the author of fifteen novels, most recently *Playing Friends* (Vintage/Random House NZ, 2007). She has published one poetry collection, *Other Lovers' Children* (Pegasus Press NZ, 1975).

Marjorie Evasco nació en 1953 en Tagbilatan, en la isla de Bohool en Visayas, Filipinas. Escribe en dos lenguas: cebuano-visayano e inglés. Sus libros *Tejedores de sueños* (*Dreamweavers*) y *Tonos ocre* (*Ochre Tones*), han ganado el National Book Award de Poesía que otorga el Círculo de la Crítica de Manila. Vive en Manila.

José-Maria Fons Guardiola es un oriolano de adopción, filólogo y periodista. En la actualidad trabaja para el Instituto Cervantes como gestor cultural en Manila. Por su iniciativa, se publicó *Recoged esta voz* (2004), primera antología asiática de la poesía de Miguel Hernández en siete lenguas *nativas de Filipinas*.

Brigitte Guilbaud est professeur de chinois au lycée Turgot, Paris, depuis presque dix ans. Elle a écrit deux petits livres publiés aux Éditions du Capucin : *Une fronce dans le temps* (2001) et *La saison d'Aurélia* (2004).

Malu Halasa recently curated *Transit Tehran: Art and Documentary from Iran*, an exhibition of art, photography and documentary films for the London School of Economics. She co-edited *Transit Tehran: Young Iran and Its Inspirations* (2009) with Maziar Bahari, the *Newsweek* journalist and documentary filmmaker who was arrested in Tehran on 21 June. She is also the co-author of *The Secret Life of Syrian Lingerie* (2008), *Kaveh Golestan 1950–2003: Recording the Truth in Iran* (2007) and *Transit Beirut: New Writing and Images* (2004).

Rachel Harris is Senior Lecturer in Ethnomusicology at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. Her current research is in Uighur music. Her latest book is on the Uighur *muqam*: *The Making of a Musical Canon in Chinese Central Asia* (Ashgate, 2008). She has collaborated in the production of several CD recordings, and plays *dutar* with the London Uyghur Ensemble.

Michel Hockx is Professor of Chinese at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. He has published widely on modern and contemporary Chinese literary culture, and on modern Chinese poetry and poetics. His recent publications include *Culture in the Contemporary PRC* (co-edited with Julia Strauss; Cambridge University Press, 2005) and *Literary Societies of Republican China* (co-edited with Kirk A. Denton; Lexington Books, 2008). He previously published articles on Chinese Internet literature in *The China Quarterly* and the *Journal of Contemporary China*, and is preparing a monograph on the topic.

Aamer Hussein was born in Karachi, Pakistan, in 1955, and moved to London in 1970. He is the author of five collections of short stories, including *This Other Salt* (Saqi, 1999), *Turquoise* (Saqi, 2002) and *Insomnia* (Telegram, 2007). He is also the editor of *Kahani: Short Stories by Pakistani Women* (Saqi, 2005).

Rosalía Villa Jiménez es doctoranda en Filología Inglesa en la Universidad de Córdoba, España. Ha realizado parte de sus estudios de posgrado, presentando su tesina sobre la figura de la viuda hindú y la práctica del sati en la literatura angloindia contemporánea. Actualmente, está realizando su doctorado siguiendo la *misma* línea de investigación.

Ko Chang-Soo was born in 1934, and made his debut as a poet in 1966. His collections include *Songs Collecting Fragments* and *A Few Landscapes*. He was awarded the Translation Prize for Korean Literature in 1990 for his work translating approximately 1,000 Korean poems into English. He served as Korean ambassador to Ethiopia, Consul-General in Seattle in the US and ambassador to Pakistan. He is a senior member and advisor of Korean PEN.

Sambath Kong est en 1970 au Cambodge. Il a quitté son pays en 1975, après l'arrivée au pouvoir des Khmers Rouges. Réfugié en Thaïlande, il y restera un an pour s'installer ensuite en France avec sa famille. Adolescent, il découvre la photographie. Cette passion l'anime toujours. Il est publié dans divers magazines et exposé à Paris.

Lee Gil-Won is a South Korean poet who has published several collections of poems including *One Morning as a Tree*, *Sitting on an Eggshell*, *Meditations on Ginkgo Nuts*, *Hahoe Mask Self-Portrait* and *Haeri Poems*. He has held positions at the Korean Centre, International PEN, the Korea Poets' Association and the Korean Writers' Association.

Li Zhang est une ancienne lectrice de chinois de l'École Normale Supérieure (Paris) et professeur de chinois à l'ONU (Genève). Elle a traduit l'ouvrage de *Zheng Yi intitulé Prière* pour une âme égarée (Éditions Bleu de Chine, 2007).

Peter Loveday nació en Toowoomba, Australia. El es un escritor y cantautor, hoy en día reside en Barcelona, España. Autor de libros de poemas en prosa, varias novelas y de álbumes de canciones: *A Bend in the Road*, *Sea-shanties for Landlubbers*, *Moving Along* y *Room at the Inn*. Actualmente está finalizando un nuevo álbum de música, *Standard Ideal*, y también trabajando en nuevos proyectos literarios, entre ellos se encuentra en pleno proceso de finalización de una nueva novela. Su sitio Web es: www.peterloveday.com; su página Myspace es: www.myspace.com/peterloveday.

Marc Mangin est un journaliste, écrivain et photographe qui sillonne le monde, l'Extrême-Orient en particulier, depuis une trentaine d'années pour le compte de médias francophones. Auteur de nombreux ouvrages, sur les Philippines et la Chine notamment, il a également enseigné les techniques de l'écriture pendant une dizaine d'années au Centre de formation et de perfectionnement des journalistes, à Paris. Ses dernières publications comprennent *Chine, l'empire pollueur* (Arthaud, 2008), *Instants damnés* (chez l'auteur, 2009) et *En passant par la Chine* (Artgentique, 2009). Son site web se trouve à l'adresse: www.marcmangin.book.fr; ses blogs se trouvent à: www.en-passant-par-la-chine.over-blog.com et www.chine-empire-pollueur.over-blog.com.

Tze Ming Mok is a New Zealand Chinese writer living in London. Her poetry, fiction and journalism have appeared in journals, anthologies and magazines in Australasia and Asia, most recently in the *Kyoto Journal* and the New Zealand science-fiction poetry collection *Voyagers*.

Taslima Nasrin is a physician and the author of thirty-two books of poetry, essays, novels and short stories. She has been granted numerous awards including India's Ananda Purashkar, the Kurt Tucholsky Prize from Swedish PEN, the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought from the European Parliament and France's Simone de Beauvoir Prize. Deported first from her native Bangladesh in 1994 and then from India in 2008 because of her views on women's rights, secular humanism and freedom of expression, she is currently a research scholar at New York University.

Nguyễn Hoàng est née Nguyễn Ngọc Minh en 1940 à Saigon, Sud Viêt Nam. Elle est ancienne enseignante, traductrice autodidacte et indépendante, réfugiée « boat people » en 1979 et exilée à Genève, avec son époux et leurs cinq enfants.

Nguyễn Hoàng Bao Viêt est né en 1934 à Kiên Giang, delta du Mékong, Sud Viêt Nam. Il est poète, nouvelliste et journaliste exilé à Genève, et membre du PEN Club vietnamien en Europe, Centre des écrivains vietnamiens en exil (CEVEX) du Centre PEN Suisse Romand, de l'Association des Écrivains des Nations Unies (UNSW/SENU), de l'Association Indépendante des Journalistes Suisses (CH-Media) et de l'Union Internationale de la Presse Francophone (UPF), Section Suisse. Il était prisonnier d'opinion au camp de travaux forcés (1975–76) et réfugié « boat people » en 1979. Il est ancien éditeur et rédacteur en chef responsable de la *Revue Nhân Quyền (Droits de l'homme en Asie du Sud Est)*, une édition française pour la Suisse.

Michael Rodríguez is a retired English teacher and lifelong Sinophile. He lives and studies in the San Francisco Bay area.

Sunny Singh nació en Varanasi, la India. Creció en varias partes del país y el mundo incluyendo Pakistán y Estados Unidos; después desempeñó diversos empleos en México, Chile y Sudáfrica, como el de periodista o profesora, y trabajó para varias multinacionales, antes de dedicarse plenamente a la escritura. Escritora de dos novelas, *El libro de suicidios de la abuelita* y *Con la mirada de Krishna*, y de la obra de teatro *Birthing Athena*. En la actualidad reside en Londres, donde dirige un programa universitario de Creative Writing. Sus proyectos actuales incluyen un libro de cuentos breves sobre conflictos armados, una novela incipiente, y un trabajo crítico sobre teorías comparativas de estética y cine.

Alice Sun-Cua nació en Manila, Filipinas en 1955, y es una poeta, ensayista, traductora y médica. Publicó libros de poesía y ensayos de viaje. Ella es una traductora del poeta español Miguel Hernández al Hiligaynon, una de las lenguas de Filipinas y de Jaime Gil de Biedra al inglés.

Suragamika is a Burmese writer banned in 1988 by the state's Press Scrutiny Board. Suragamika has published approximately 100 stories and articles and four books. Suragamika was imprisoned for a time by the Burmese regime, but nothing can prevent this writer from speaking out about the experiences of the Burmese people. Suragamika has just completed a novel in English for the first time, and is now travelling throughout the world.

Wang Dun is Assistant Professor of Chinese in the Chinese Department at Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou, China. He grew up in Beijing and obtained his BA from the Chinese Department, Peking University, and his MA (2004) and PhD (2008) in the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures at University of California, Berkeley. His doctoral dissertation examines the role of modern fiction in reshaping the Chinese cultural landscape in the early twentieth century.

Wang Xiaobo was born in 1952 into a family of Beijing intellectuals. He was 'sent down' during the Cultural Revolution to the Yunnan countryside and, in 1971, to rural Shandong Province, where he became a teacher. In 1972 he was permitted to return to Beijing, and worked in a factory for four years before becoming a student at Renmin University, studying commerce and trade from 1978–82. He received an MA from the Department of East Asian Studies at the University of Pittsburgh, in 1988. He lectured at the Peking University Department of Sociology from 1988–91, then became a full-time writer. He had initially published stories in 1980, he did not become famous until his novella *The Golden Age* (also called *The Golden Years*) received a prestigious award in Taiwan in 1995. His writing was characterised by the use of simple words, and his style and sense of humour were imitated by many young Chinese. He died suddenly of a heart attack in 1997.

Tsering Woesser est une poétesse sino-tibétaine, née à Lhassa en 1966, qui habite à Pékin depuis 2003. Son engagement en faveur de la démocratie et pour le respect des droits de l'homme au Tibet lui vaut d'être placée en résidence surveillée. Bien que régulièrement censurée par les autorités chinoises, elle utilise l'Internet pour défendre ses prises de positions (<http://woesser.middle-way.net>).

Yan Lianke est né en 1958 dans la province de Henan et réside actuellement à Pékin. Il débute sa carrière littéraire en 1978, en tant qu'écrivain de l'armée. Ses romans, très populaires en Chine, ont obtenu de prestigieuses récompenses littéraires, et ont souvent été interdits par la censure. Tel est le cas des deux autres romans publiés en 2006 et 2007 : *Servir le peuple* et *Rêve du Village des Ding* ('un texte lyrique et désespéré ... de la très belle littérature' – *Le Monde*).

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Yan Lianke, Peter Loveday and Sunny Singh are represented by The Susijn Agency Ltd, London; see www.thesusijnagency.com

Special thanks to Romesh Abeywickrema, Anton Alifandi, Sharmilla Beezmohun, Kirk Denton, John Estrella, Kate Farquhar-Thomson, Ana Fletcher, Frank Geary, Megan O'Grady Greene, Witi Ihimaera, Lucy Kelaart, Kelly Leavitt, Kerstin Lehr, Cathy McCann, Kelly Pike, Mary Premila, Anita Roy, Jessica Sallbank, Lenah Susianty, Laura Susijn, Fabiola Sustendal, Rajesh Thind, Eleanor Ivory Rose Weber, Sara Whyatt

PEN International is supported by the Sigrid Rausing Trust, Bloomberg and an anonymous donor.

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Editor: Mitchell Albert

Design: www.weareunlimited.co.uk

Print: MRT Ltd, Bristol, UK

Proofreaders: Brandon Hopkins (English), Vincent Rey (French), Ana Fletcher (Spanish)

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