What We Dream Of

Sample translation by Jon Cho-Polizzi & Elizabeth Sun

("farewell," 9-27)

The day we bring A'bu home is a day like any other. It's early morning on a Tuesday in April; the sky over Shanghai is neither grey nor blue. It isn't raining, and the sun isn't shining either. It just is how it is.

My eldest uncle, Da Jiujiu, is standing on the sidewalk holding a giant, framed portrait photograph of A'bu in his hands. It's wrapped in a thick, black cloth. But where the cloth wrapping has slipped away, her tidy hairdo shows through at the top left. Da Jiujiu looks tired and meek. He always was the quietest and most gentle of the brothers. "That's not proper for a firstborn," the family says. "He should be the one to take matters into his own hands, organize the family reunions, and hold speeches in a loud, confident voice."

But Da Jiujiu doesn't take much into his hands unless someone else puts it there.

On this particular morning, he's standing very straight. His suit is a bit too wide around the shoulders; he looks far more fragile than he really is. He's actually quite strong: Every evening, he does one hundred squats. His body is wiry, only his face is soft. Da Jiujiu looks very much like his mother. His son is standing one step behind him, holding the urn. Until the day she died, A'bu drank out of the cup he gave her all those years before. The cup that said London on it. He—the eldest of us grandchildren—came to visit far too infrequently. Even less often than I. He used to visit from Singapore, then from Switzerland. For a while now, he's come to visit from the UK.

Beside them stands the neighbor whose name I don't know, but who always gives me a friendly nod whenever I walk past his building. He's spread a huge umbrella over both of them, so that A'bu's ghost doesn't make an early departure to her hometown and get lost along the way. I'd definitely get lost, too; I don't know the way. From Shanghai to Shaoxing, without any idea how we get there. Lucky for me, I just have to get on the bus with twenty-three other people and one ghost. Watch out the window, as the metropolis slowly thins into oblivion.

Da Ayi hands me two tiny scraps of red paper, demonstrating how I should stick them in my shoes. As the eldest auntie, she knows all the rules: "Better put the red side facing out so you don't have stains on your socks later."

To be honest, I wouldn't mind hanging onto a few stains from this day, but I don't want to do anything wrong, and so, I follow her instructions.

"Why paper in the shoe?" I ask, and her answer is: "Just to be safe."

I want to ask: "Safe from what?" but Da Ayi has already disappeared among all the other feet, and so I just defer to the answer that fits in pretty much every situation here: Protection from evil spirits.

There are so many things that protect you from evil spirits. A mirror across from a door to reflect them away. A bridge built in a zigzag because ghosts can only travel in straight lines. Why not red paper in your shoes, too?

We file onto the bus. I'm almost the last one. A'bu's ghost and the men sit in the front, Ma's brothers with their sons. Next to them sits my cousin whose eyes have been permanently swollen ever since he had to hammer a nail in his father's coffin four years ago. My aunties sit behind them with my cousins' wives, as if by tacit agreement. I make my way down the aisle to the back and

collapse on a bench across from Ma. The aisle lies between us; I have two seats all to myself. My cousin turns around in front of me and hands me a plastic bag with two mantou in it and some slightly sweetened soy milk. Both feel uncomfortably warm in my lap.

“Eat something, it will do you good,” she says, staring at me bright-eyed. She’s always completely in the moment, never lost in thought.

The driver starts the bus, and I stare out the window. The views out over Shanghai are the best, especially from the window of a car. I slide over to the glass and lay down my bag on the empty seat beside me. Outside, high rise buildings are being replaced by tracks for a bullet train. Inside, the plastic bag rustles. I open my soy milk; it’s the good kind with the modest, red label on the bottle. I take a big slurp. It feels like someone is hugging my stomach from the inside. All around me, hungry mouths are biting into pale, rice flour buns.

A'bu begrudgingly dunked her mantou every morning into a mixture of ground black sesame seeds and sugar, yearning all the while for a little bowl of rice soup with pickled vegetables. The older she got, the more she missed the tastes of her childhood—salty, sour, bitter—and the more she demanded that those around her cared for her like a child. “Everything’s a circle,” Ma told me once. “We start out completely helpless and end up helpless again.”

The atmosphere inside the bus is pleasant. Very different from the last time, when we had to bury Ma’s brother. People are always somehow prepared for the death of the eldest, and yet, no one really knows how to orient the family after they are gone. My cousins laugh and talk. Ma shows her sister pictures of her garden on her phone. Da Jiujiu has his head tilted to one side; he probably isn’t sleeping: His temple slaps against the window every time we hit a bump. Only Da Ayi sits completely upright. Her hands are folded in her lap while she stares nervously at the sky: “Hopefully it doesn’t rain when we climb the mountain. Hopefully.”

I have a disposable camera with me from the drugstore around the corner in Berlin. I want to document A'bu’s final journey, this moment, too, and so I spin the little wheel and peer through the viewfinder. The scene is hard to capture. From my seat, I see only the backs of heads. I could stand up and take the picture from the front, but that doesn’t seem appropriate. Today is more a mission than a pleasure trip. And so, I hold the camera as still as possible and hold down the wobbly shutter-release. There aren’t any pictures of A'bu as a young woman, and there can’t be any pictures of A'bu as a ghost. But now there is a picture of this bus ride.

I’m not sure how long we travel. Maybe three hours? Shaoxing is a little more than two hundred kilometers from Shanghai. We’re not in a hurry, but we also don’t take any breaks. At some point, the driver turns the bus past the green line of hills and into the next city. In 1923, the year A'bu was born, Shaoxing was still a village. Today more than five million people live here. I was still a child the last time we came here. Ma tells me that we had to transfer into narrow little boats back then to travel to the foot of the mountain where my grandfather lies buried.

“And then we had to walk over rickety footbridges, hike along tracks, and climb the many steps up the mountain. Do you still remember?”

I nod.

It was a long journey, and just taxing enough. Visiting the dead should not be easy. I don’t remember the boat ride, but I do remember the bamboo forests and the puddles where my cousins and I caught tiny frogs, holding them in our hands for just a moment before letting them go free.

“There’s that one picture of me,” I say, “between those thick culms of bamboo. They were so smooth and cool. When I put my ear to them, I could hear water rushing inside.”

“Yes,” Ma says, and she looks pleased.

Today, we don't need a boat anymore, and I'm a bit disappointed when the bus stops directly at the foot of the mountain where a steep trail peters off into the straggly green. For the last few kilometers, we've been accompanied by cars and rickshaws filled with a lot of middle-aged men I've never seen before. They're blowing horns, banging little bronze cymbals together, carrying huge bouquets of neon-colored paper flowers. It's a nice kind of greeting: so loud, so shrill, it's almost ostentatious. A'bu was no celebrity; her life was small and humble. No one knows exactly when she was born. We in the family always guess: "Sometime in January." But it's clear where her life began. And I'm happy that so many people have come to celebrate, to welcome her back to her place of birth.

As I'm leaving the bus, one potbellied man is still blowing passionately on his instrument, expelling notes of unbridled lamentation. Little groups are forming everywhere, a few hands are being shaken; the men from the city are gifting fancy cigarettes to the men from the village. They clasp these between their thumbs and index fingers, puffing greedily. The women don't smoke. No one really pays any attention to me. Sometimes I make eye contact with someone. Sometimes someone stares at me for a few seconds with an open mouth. We won't stay here for long. Only the bus driver pulls his cap down over his face and stretches his legs out on the dashboard.

"He'll rest here 'til we come back," says Da Ayi, linking arms with me and pulling me in the direction of the footpath.

We're still not in a hurry, but the train of now more than thirty people is slowly preparing for departure. The sky is blue, and Da Ayi is relieved. They say we'll only need half an hour to reach the gravesite, but we have to keep taking breaks along the way. We trade off supporting Da Ayi: first me, then her son, then Ma. We help her climb the stairs. I know her feet are hurting. We're conquering a mountain. And we'll only get there when we all get there together.

By the time I take the last few steps to the gravesite, the majority of the troop's already there, resting on tree stumps or leaned against the little walls. One of the men who carried the heavy bouquets of paper flowers wipes himself with a handkerchief—first taking care of the sweat on his bald head, then rolling his t-shirt up to the chest to dab his belly. Only a few meters away, another man begins to chip away at the mortar in the wall behind the altar with a chisel. Beside me, a woman suddenly begins to wail, loud and unrestrained. I don't even know her, and yet here she is, crying out her pain to the world at the death of my A'bu. Just like that, without any fanfare. And I can't join in. How unfair that her suffering can be so loud while I feel no pain in this moment.

I've never been to a funeral like this. When I was a child, we only came here twice to visit, to bring my A'gong fruit and then bow at his grave after. Then again, no funeral I've ever been to has been like another. When my oma died two years ago, we stood around during an appropriately cold snap somewhere between winter and spring in a graveyard in Lower Saxony. Silently, we held hands, gazing down at the heavy casket in the deep hole before us. Maybe a few crocuses had already been blooming. Some of us cried a little, but nobody wailed. And nothing was even remotely neon-colored. After the ceremony, we all came together to eat cake. I passed along between the gravestones with my youngest cousin, and I asked him what he thought. He only shrugged. And then he flicked a strand of hair out of his face and asked me if I wanted bubble gum. It was so completely different, and yet, everything was still the way it should have been. Oma belongs in a graveyard by a chapel in Lower Saxony. And A'bu belongs here on this mountain in Shaoxing in the middle of a wild bamboo forest. Lucky for me, now is not the time to ask myself where I belong. It's time to walk slow circles around the grave.

We pass the stone altar three times; we all hold a red carnation in our hands. Suddenly, there's some confusion, naked shoulders pushing past the sweat-soaked shirts. Sentences, words,

and lamentations fly through the air in at least two different dialects. I understand: "Be careful!" "We don't need that." "I'll do it!" And then the hands of many men all place the urn in a small opening between the rocks. A'bu's portrait leans against the open grave. Someone's holding an umbrella over the picture and the urn again. Someone else is wrapping them in a red, polyester cloth. The man who opened the grave with his chisel is stepping forward. He's carrying a small, dirty bucket of mortar in one hand. For some reason, I don't like him. The grave is sealed; the urn disappears.

I wait until it's my turn. I have this routine with prayer, a choreography I've known all my life. I stand before the altar and lower my gaze. I place the palms of my hands on top of one another on my chest and bow three times. I repeat the process on my knees: one, two, three. Someone's placed a cushion down on the sandy ground. Finally, I bow low over the earth, a few pebbles cling to the palms of my hands, and my forehead scrapes the sand. Sand is not so very different from ash, I think. It's just less fine. More grainy. One, two, three. Thirty pairs of eyes are watching me. My own eyes remain fixed on the cracks where the mortar is drying. It hurts a little: the idea of A'bu without a body I can touch, cling to, or even see. But my pain is still not ready for the public. I'd like to cry and show everyone it hurts for me, too, but I can't cry during this choreography. I stand up and make room for the next person.

Ma does not cry either, and that makes things easier. Ever since I was a little girl, I've tried to do everything like she does. At least in China: praying, eating, speaking Shanghai dialect. She was like my compass in this world—if I did everything like Ma, then I did everything right. And now, Ma isn't crying either. She doesn't really look sad at all. A little tired and a little serious, yes, but everyone always says that Ma looks stern by nature. I always have to think of this whenever she accuses me of having been a too serious child. Now I'm not sure whether she's making an effort not to look too sad for me and the others, or whether her sorrow also just has no place here in this moment.

"She was old. This is the easy death, the proper kind," Ma told me two weeks ago when she announced A'bu had died. And I had agreed with her wholeheartedly by murmuring, "Hm."

Ma spent the majority of the last thirty years 8,569 kilometers away from her mother. As the crow flies. Every few years, when we'd saved up the money for plane tickets, she'd sat with A'bu on the sofa on those summer afternoons, letting A'bu knead her arm. I'm quite certain they never talked about the why. The why-did-you-go. There really was no simple answer. Even the classic in-hope-of-a-better-life did not really apply. Most people hope for a better life than that of their parents. Ma could have had a better life in China, but she wanted a different one.

Whenever I ask her why she does something, Ma usually says: "Well, I'm a strange person," and she laughs. One time, I asked A'bu what kind of child Ma had been, and she said: "She always ate fish like a cat."

I don't know what kind of a person Ma was before she became my mother, but I think she never meshed well with the paths that had been chosen for her. She didn't want to look like everyone else, and she didn't want to do the things people told her to do. And those are not ideal attributes for life in a country that does not leave you in peace. While I descend from the mountain step by step, I'm painting portraits in my mind of the person Ma did not become. They're blurry images, at best: Ma as a teacher. Ma frolicking with her girlfriends, flying a kite in Zhongshan Park. Ma without the German language. Ma as the wife of some Chinese professor who rubs the bridge of his nose with his index finger while reading the newspaper. Ma as the mother of a different daughter. And Ma doing gymnastics with A'bu on the little square in her apartment complex in Changning. I paint and I paint, right over the edge of the picture frame. There are more

photographs of Ma sitting on a plot of an urban, German garden than there are pictures of her in Shanghai with her mother.

It's noon by the time we get back to the valley. People from the neighborhood have erected two white pavilions on the big parking lot and are spreading out thin sheets of plastic on the tables. Massive pots are already boiling in the background; now and then, a man in a white apron removes a lid or two, poking his nose into the steam. Another man is setting out tidy, individually sealed sets of porcelain dishes on the tables. The arrangement is simple; everything about it feels right, too. I'm tired of all those carbon-copy restaurants with their heavy curtains and gold-plated decorations, where we sit around big tables spinning the glass lazy Susan back and forth. I want to be right here, here where there are no walls, here where we drink beer and take disgusting shots of schnapps and laugh and spit our empty shrimp shells out beside our bowls. Occasionally, someone caresses my shoulder with their hand as they pass by me, and I can't imagine a more loving gesture.

We move in small groups from table to table. Da Jiujiu with his wife and their son, Da Ayi with her husband, my cousin with her husband and their little son, and so on. Everyone clanks glasses; they wish each other a long life and good health. I make these rounds, too, together with Ma. We move as a single unit, we raise our glasses often, and I'm happy the beer we're drinking is so light.

At some point, I see my cousin standing by an electric scooter, smoking and inspecting the bike. He waves me over, and I walk over to him with a smile.

"Can we borrow it for a little while?" he asks, and a young man with blond-frosted tips nods his assent.

I hop on behind him, and we take off in the direction of Old Town. I hold tight to the scooter with one hand, my other arm wrapped around my cousin. He's wearing a bracelet with thick, wooden beads like a monk, and his hair ripples like mine in the humid air. He always was my favorite cousin, and ever since he lost his father, I really want to be close to him. When I was younger, and we came to visit during the summer holidays, he used to take me to basketball games. Our few attempts to speak English to one another failed then. And so, he'd just spoken Chinese with me, and I had done my best to understand him without knowing the words. Usually, we didn't need to speak at all. We sat beside each other on park benches or at the dinner table. Or we wandered through shopping centers where he bought us soft drinks and bowls of steaming húntun. Now, ever since acquiring his own wheels, he always picks me up or takes me to the airport when I fly back to Germany. I recognize his car immediately: metallic blue with white flames over the fenders. I never really realized how much we meant to each other until he fell into my arms at his own wedding, crying into my silk dress as the bags under his eyes swelled with tears. We stood there on the brightly lit stage, shiny faces staring up at us from the many tables. In the background, something by Céline Dion. Now, here we are, flying through Shaoxing on a scooter, and I'd like to cry into his leather jacket.

With its many bridges, canals, and winding alleyways, this part of the city still recalls its past. As a young girl, A'bu must have run along these banks, in black and white, because of course, before 1930 there was no color. I know very little about her life. For so long, we didn't have a common language. And when I finally learned Chinese, that didn't help much either because A'bu was already growing hard of hearing and she only spoke Shaoxing dialect anyway. All the things I know about her life were told to me by others. And I learned what I know about the context from history books. Line after line of years and dates, as if there was nothing more between them.

From 1927 to 1949, China was in civil war. From 1937 to 1945, this war was interrupted by the invasion of Japanese soldiers. These soldiers committed heinous war crimes. They murdered, plundered, and burned villages to the ground. They raped. Chinese prisoners of war and Chinese civilians were used for human experiments. The Great Chinese Famine stretched from 1958 to 1961. Estimates of the casualties vary from 15 to 76 million dead. From 1966 to 1976, Mao Zedong proclaimed the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. At least 400,000 people lost their lives during this political campaign. Millions more were subjected to torture, locked away in prisons, or deported to forced labor camps. During this time, hundreds of thousands of young people left their homes and cities to work for years in remote villages as part of Mao's Down to the Countryside movement.

All of these things happened during A'bu's lifetime. But I would not have known it from looking at her. To me, hers was just an ancient body: wrinkled but robust, with shimmering blue veins under tissue paper skin. I remember it so well. Her strong, grey hair and her split earlobes; the little lump over her right shoulder blade; her upper lip dipping below the rim of her teacup to test the hot water; and, of course, most of all: her hands.

I spent so many hours at A'bu's side, letting her knead my arm. "Thick," was all she usually said then, or sometimes: "Thin." And it sounded like a diagnosis. As a rule, I was usually too thin at the start of every visit, and somewhat thicker by the end. In the summer, when my arms didn't need to hide away inside the sleeves of a woolen pullover, A'bu's jade armband swept over my skin, smooth, heavy, and cool. I always imagined the stone could cool my overheated body back down to a normal temperature. Nothing feels quite like jade in the summertime.

One time, I asked Ma why A'bu's earlobes were split. "They tore out her earrings," she said. I was still very young back then, and I lacked the courage to ask for more details. Today, I see a soldier marching through my imagination, approaching a young woman. Red flames dance in the background. Then I push away these thoughts. Maybe it's a good thing that some stories have no illustrations.

"We're here!" My cousin parks the scooter in front of a low wall. We hadn't talked about where we were going, but I'm not surprised by our destination. I hop off and stare at the hut where A'bu used to live. It's been a long time since anybody's lived here. There are many holes gaping where once there was a roof. Slate shingles piled loosely over one another. There are higher houses—better maintained and still occupied—on the adjacent properties. To our left, a long bamboo pole extends from an open window. A red shirt hangs from it, fluttering in the breeze between undergarments. Onions grow in enamel bowls on a nearby staircase with no handrail.

We enter the small garden and stand together in front of the well. Someone has rolled the enormous stone cover a little to one side. I bend over the hole but can see only darkness. I think of a bucket and my aversion to bedpans.

"We used to get water for the toilet from here sometimes," I say, after first composing the sentence in my head. My cousin nods.

He takes a small stone from the ground and tosses it into the blackhole. One must always cast stones into wells. Then he whips out his phone. I take a few steps closer to the hut, and peer through the glassless window. As a child, I always thought this house was creepy. It was very dark. And in the middle of its single room stood the table where I ate white rice from a pretty bowl under the watchful eyes of our extended family. I refused all the other food, and this made Ma uncomfortable. Sometimes she tried to slip me little bits of fish. She'd place a scaleless chunk onto the rice. I found it appalling how the white grains of rice slowly soaked up the darkness of the soy

sauce. Carefully, I steered my chopsticks past the fish, picking at a few wizened beans. "The child eats like a Buddhist monk," someone said, shaking their head. The rest of the table laughed.

Now, little more than rubble remains. Beside me, a mop leans against the wall, as though it could still be put to use here. The wide strips of blue cloth at one end are tattered. To make it, someone might have shredded old Maoist uniforms or the suits the streetcleaners wear. Who can say?

"It's much smaller than I remember," my cousin says softly, without looking up from his phone. I run the tips of my fingers over the crumbling shingles of the roof.

"I want to take one with me," I say.

My cousin glances up. "Yeah, a memento. I want one, too." He reaches past me and removes another shingle from the roof. "We should take some pictures. This house will soon be gone." He says it with some certainty: You wouldn't need a bulldozer to demolish the place for good. In just a few nights, a strong wind could blow it all away. Or maybe we'll take the wrong shingle, and the whole roof will collapse like Jenga.

I stand before the wooden door. I've almost got to duck to avoid hitting my head on the roofbeams. I probably look pretty silly standing here with a slate shingle in my hand. Like I'm presenting some precious document on a stone tablet. My cousin takes a couple pictures, and then we trade places.

The whole thing takes us less than ten minutes. There's nothing more to do or see. I actually would have liked to have stayed longer, sat down on the little wall and just stared at the hut. But sometimes it's better to allow life to keep moving.

We brought A'bu home. We cried, we drank, we held hands and felt humbled. We did everything right. And yet, I still feel like I've forgotten something. What's missing? I press the shutter-release three more times on my disposable camera: the well, the mop, and the faded picture of a songbird on the wall. Then I clamor back onto the scooter with my cousin, one dusty shingle clutched in my hand. Suddenly, I feel like a thief. Is it right to take something away from where it belongs? I don't have red paper in my shoes anymore, and there's no one here to hold an umbrella over my head.

"dreams" (37-53)

"They visited me yesterday in my dreams."

"Who?"

"Everyone who's already passed. My Baba. My Mama. My brother. Your Oma. Your Auntie."

"What did you dream about?"

"That they were all there."

"Was it a good dream?"

"Yeah."

Ma and I are sitting in the kitchen. The kitchen is her favorite place in the entire house. She often spends nearly the entire day there. Weather permitting, she goes out from time to time into the small garden. If not, she peers out through the glass door. Right now, she's sitting on the chair at the head of the table, as she does every evening. A large print of Monet's *Water Lilies*, some framed embroidery of small birds, and a scroll with Chinese calligraphy hang on the wall next to her. I've given up on going into the kitchen after sunset and asking Ma why she's sitting there in the dark. Instead, I'm a couple steps away from her, observing the silhouette she makes in front of the window. She's wearing the blueberry sorbet-colored hoodie she gave me one Christmas. I gave it back to her because I hardly ever wore it. And Ma likes this hoodie a lot. She's also wearing gray sweatpants and the wool socks she knit for herself. She holds a toothpick in her right hand.

"What did you do then, in your dream?"

She wrinkles her forehead. I can't quite make out her face, but I'm sure that's what she's doing. She always does that when she's thinking. Outside in the garden, the solar lamp switches on.

"We wanted to go on a trip. I had to pack a bag, but there was something I couldn't find, something important. I told them they should go on ahead without me. And then, suddenly, they were gone."

"I usually can't remember my dreams."

"I didn't used to remember mine, either."

She says it as though I were still growing into this ability, as if—in certain situations—her life were simply a template for mine.

"Hm. But why can you remember them now?"

"Huh, no idea. Some things just happen this way in life," Ma says and laughs. I'm not satisfied with this answer.

"When was the last time you fainted?"

"It has been a while. Why do you ask?" She wrinkles her forehead.

"Well, you always told me you fainted pretty often in the past, and I also fainted pretty often in the past, but this doesn't happen so much anymore."

"That is because you are my daughter."

In the darkness of the kitchen, every color becomes a single, pleasant blue. There isn't much contrast between Ma's face and Monet's *Water Lilies*. Dreams, memory loss, fainting—what if all these things belong together?

"Actually, they're all the same," I say.

"What are?"

"Sleeping, dreaming, and fainting. You're not awake. You're somehow away. Somewhere else."

I think I can see Ma nodding slowly. I'd always had a special relationship with these conditions of non-waking life. Chronologically speaking, there were three phases, one after the other: sleepwalking, nightmares, and fainting. Fainting was the final step. I sometimes worry I haven't quite outgrown it. Up until a few years ago, I still fainted frequently. Maybe my blood pressure was too low. I don't know for sure since I never got a proper examination. "The exact same thing happened to me when I was younger," Ma said. She had also never seen a doctor for her fainting spells. She would never let anyone slice open her body. And not because she distrusts medicine, per se: She distrusts the people who practice it.

Ma's told me countless times about how she used to lose consciousness in her younger years. She would often dab my forehead with a damp cloth, as I slowly came to, my head resting in her lap. It helps me to know I'm not the only one. Before I lost consciousness, my stomach would cramp, and a dull pain would rush through my body. I'm not sure whether this fainting was just a natural reaction. It was the same for Ma, but she was better at gritting her teeth. Physical pain makes me squeamish. When Ma tells me, "You're not made of sugar!" I always want to reply, "But actually, I am. I *am* made of sugar."

My fainting is like a hereditary disease. Okay, maybe not really a disease, but some kind of condition. I never got a diagnosis, after all. One time I fainted at school. Passing between the desks on the way to my own, I suddenly felt dizzy. It was like my legs had disappeared. The next thing I can remember were all the worried faces over me. My teacher wanted to call an ambulance, but by then, I had been telling my friends for a while about this condition of mine. That it sometimes happens. That there's no reason to panic. And especially, that there's no reason to call an ambulance as long as I come to. As long as I come to with a few gentle slaps on the cheek. Another time, I collapsed in the bathtub when I was home alone. Luckily, I already knew the feeling of an impending fainting spell. So, I sat myself down on the floor before the flickering in front of my eyes turned into a black wall. When I came to, I was shivering. My back hurt and my body was covered in cold sweat. My gaze wandered, oscillating from the bathroom ceiling to the clock on the wall. Its hands indicated that twenty minutes had elapsed. I would have liked to know where I had gone in those twenty minutes, and if it had been dangerous.

The nightmare phase came before my fainting phase. These began when I was around six years old, and lasted until I was about twelve. I can no longer remember these nightmares. I only know I often woke up screaming. Sometimes, I fell back asleep immediately and forgot everything the next morning. I was so embarrassed by my night-time screams that I couldn't trust myself to sleep over at friends' or to invite my girlfriends to my place. Eventually, I stopped screaming in my sleep. I hardly ever scream at all these days. Maybe I screamed so much during these nightmare nights, I screamed enough for a lifetime.

Before this nightmare phase came my sleepwalking phase. This one is the hardest to explain. That a body can exist in a state where all its motor functions are working, and yet remain unconscious, or at least unconscious in this world. Ma often tells the story of how her daughter—not yet five years old—got up in her sleep, walked to the top of the stairs, and just stood there. Sometimes she was so worried she couldn't sleep herself, listening for the sound of my footsteps.

"托梦". Mom says into the unlit kitchen.

"Huh?"

"托梦." It means something along the lines of 'sending a dream.' The person you dream of entrusts themself to you. They come to you. They decide.

Thoughts swirl in my head. At night, Ma receives visits from the dead. They visit me during the day, or at least so I thought. It probably doesn't even count as a visit since I have to summon them myself. Sometimes, I smoke a cigarette in order to remember how my Jiujiu smoked his cigarettes before he died. Ma sees him at night without having to do a thing. He sends her a dream. Maybe I shouldn't try to control it. Maybe I have to be powerless, surrender control, in order for these things to just happen. Sleepwalking, nightmares, fainting.

"That means there's nothing I can do. Either they come, or they don't."

"You just have to wait," Ma says.

"I hate waiting," I say.

Ma heaves a sigh past her toothpick.

"What did you dream of when you were my age?"

"Hm. I am not sure. I have to think about what I was like back then."

Ma massages her left foot with one hand. I bring myself to my tippy toes and then roll myself back down onto the sole of my foot. Up and down. Ma often does this when she stands, as well. We stay quiet for a while.

A few months back, I found a photo with the year 1987 written in pencil on the back. If the year is accurate, then this photo shows Ma at twenty-three. Four years younger than I am now. In the photo, she has two braided pigtails, and is wearing a short-sleeved blouse and a pleated skirt. She's standing on Beijing's Tiananmen Square. Out of focus, you can just make out Mao's portrait in the background. Ma looks like a different person in this photograph. Maybe she was a different person. In any case, she was still a long way from being my mother.

"人身自由，成名成家，美好生活."

I repeat her words. Ma waits for me to translate them. She sometimes acts like a teacher.

"Alright: Freedom. And bringing something forth? And a good life?"

"Yes."

"Okay. But what does freedom mean to you? And a good life?"

"No one can say for sure. These are things that we can only dream of. And strive for. "

"Aha. Very wise."

We laugh.

"And, 'to bring something forth' - what exactly does that mean?"

"It means, you know: Always keep learning. Keep striving and keep bettering ourselves. Education. It means you do not want to stay a laborer. Not a peasant or a soldier in the People's Liberation Army."

"If not that, then what?"

"An artist or an academic, for example."

But Ma did not become either of those things. She worked on and off as a translator for a large German automobile manufacturer. Because her degree wasn't recognized in Germany and continuing education would have been expensive, her employment always remained part time. She was once recruited by Germany's intelligence services, a job which would have paid quite well. But she herself would have paid dearly in exchange for this income boost, and Ma didn't want to live a life of secrets. And so, she became my mother and poured everything she had into and around me.

"Do you think your dreams came true?"

"The second part, no. But that is okay. I do not need dreams anymore at my age."

I want to disagree with her and tell her that dreams don't disappear with age. That one should always dream, regardless of whether one is a child, a grownup twenty years later, or a

retiree. But I'm not in the best position to tell her such things. What do I know about life at the age of sixty-five? Instead, I calculate how much time I have left before I need no longer dream.

"And what is your dream?" Ma asks.

I prefer asking questions to answering them.

"Hm. Kind of like your own dreams back then, actually."

Mom is now kneading her other foot. She nods. I'm not sure whether it's in reaction to my answer. Or whether she's agreeing that her past dreams are also applicable to my own life. Perhaps? Or perhaps it's simply a good neck exercise.

"You know, I recently had a dream that I can still remember."

"What was it about?"

"A'bu and Oma."

"Interesting. What happened?"

"Hm. We were holding hands."

I laugh again. And Ma laughs too. She seems satisfied with this short response. We don't always have to say everything out loud.

"Do you still remember your mother's hands?"

"Of course. You never forget your mother's hands."

I hold my left hand up, right in front of my eyes. At this point, I can only just make out the silhouette.

"You have such small hands!" Ma always says this about my hands and feet. Says that they don't fit with my body. That they stopped growing too early.

"I know."

"Like a child's."

"Yeah, yeah. I am a child. Yours, to be exact."

We laugh in the dark.

I fall asleep.

My legs dangle over the deep yawning abyss. I'm sitting in an oversized chair. The wood feels cold to the touch, even through my pants. I'm sitting between Oma and A'bu, holding their hands. Both of them are at least ten yards away, and yet, I can still hold their hands. They, too, are sitting on ridiculously large chairs. From a distance, our bodies must all look equally small, even though I'm a head taller than Oma and two heads taller than A'bu. These chairs are as big as a single-family home. Their sweeping legs stretch out like tree trunks. The view from up here is nice. Trees sway next to us, their crowns in the wind. A river meanders between the legs of the chairs. In the distance, a great, full moon is rising over a panorama of mountaintops.

"有山有水," A'bu says. Oma nods and says she's always been quite fond of mountains and rivers.

Oma's hands are about the same size as mine. Her nails are oval and slightly yellowed. Her gold wedding ring is just a bit too tight and looks as though it would be difficult for her to remove. I particularly like the palms of her hands: firm and smooth like potato dumplings. And I like her hands when she plays "Oh, How Joyful" on the slightly-out-of-tune piano on Christmas Eve in the living room of the corner house above the discount supermarket. These notes summon the entire family to gather around her, the piano, and the Christmas tree. To sing carols together. We follow "Oh, How Joyful" with "Oh, Come, Little Children." I love "Silent Night" the best, even if the octave is too high for me.

A'bu's hands are smaller than mine. Narrow and bony. Their skin is thin and wrinkly, but still soft, spotted with age and streaked with blue-green veins. Her fingernails are short and round, as yellowed as old documents. She only grows one pinky nail a bit longer to scratch herself more easily. She wears a wedding band on the ring finger of her other hand. As a kid, I thought that it was made of gold. But now when I examine it closer, it seems too light and too dull. Brass maybe? The ring fits loosely, and I wonder how many times it's slipped from A'bu's fingers. From here, it would fall a long way down, probably deep into the river. Was there a celebration when she and A'gong got married? Did she want to marry him, or was it just another part of life, like brushing your teeth?

With her free hand, A'bu pats her shoulder and lower back. She swings her arm back and forth beside her tiny body, raising her right hand to her left shoulder and then lowering it back down to her left kidney. I like her hands best when they stroke my own arm. Or bring a soup spoon to my mouth. Or when she uses them to brace her lower back, the way pregnant women sometimes do, except A'bu does it while gyrating her hips, first clockwise, then counterclockwise.

"How do you two even know each other?" I ask.

"From photo albums and from your stories," Oma says. She squeezes my hand tighter.

"You two have a lot in common," I say. Watching as the moon rises. "Like children, for example."

A'bu nods. She had six children, three boys and three girls. They all have names that connect them with each other. Sometimes they had to carry one another to A'bu while she was working someplace on the other end of the city as a housekeeper. The older siblings would carry the younger ones for miles, just so A'bu could breastfeed them during her lunch break. A'bu and her children also carried red stones to stack, one upon the other, and eventually built a two-story home with a view out over the field.

"There, where the field marked the edge of the city: That is the center of today's Shanghai!" A'bu says.

Oma nods, as though she'd been there before. Oma had had eight children: five boys and three girls. Their names are normal names. And they never carried one another to a factory. Instead, they and Oma carried mountains of laundry, dishes, and the responsibilities of a large household. Much later in life, A'bu lost a son to cancer. She had to attend his funeral. Her hands had to stroke his coffin, and she had to realize that not every tear can be contained. Oma nearly had the same experience, but then she was permitted to pass just before her daughter did. "I'm scared," she'd told me the last time I visited her at the hospital. Before the end, her hands had searched for God, as if she could hold onto Him. They'd gotten lost for a quick moment, but then they'd found Him again, just in time.

"And we know war," Oma says loudly, and A'bu nods again. They squeeze my hands even tighter.

"The Japanese," A'bu cries out in a shaky voice.

"The Communists," Oma exclaims and coughs.

I don't know what A'bu's hands were doing when the soldiers ripped out her earrings. Years later, she would occasionally run her fingers softly over her split earlobes. I also don't know what Oma's hands were doing when the Nazis started deporting Jews. Years later, she gave me a book called *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit.* Fingernails dig into my palms.

"Ow!" I cry. But Oma and A'bu stare obstinately straight ahead.

The moon has stopped rolling over the mountaintops. It stands still and begins expanding, grows bigger and bigger, as though it were being inflated by an air pump. It grows until it covers the entire landscape behind it, shining so brightly I can barely keep my eyes open. Suddenly, it begins to wobble, like a coin spinning on its own axis, slowly losing ground to gravity.

"Watch out, the moon!" I scream.

We let go of one another. The moon tips forward, straight toward us. I want to leap into the river, but my body is unable to move. All I can do is watch as the moon lurches inescapably closer. I press my hands over my eyes and wait to be crushed by the moon. I wait and wait. But nothing happens.

Cautiously, I reopen my eyes, and the moon is lying there before us like a huge, round tabletop. A thin crack runs through its luminous surface. The chairs shrink down, and Oma tucks a napkin into her collar.

Twelve plates fall onto the moon. They land with a *clang* on the hard surface, but they do not break. The moon has landed a bit too close for comfort to the sideboard with the ornate keys where the good Sunday porcelain is kept. The white and blue set. Twelve plates steaming away in the middle of the table. A meat dish, a potato dish, and some overcooked vegetables. Folded hands, a table prayer: "Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest. And let this food to us be blessed. Amen." Oma prays the loudest. People I don't really recognize seat themselves at the other chairs.

I run my hands over the ironed, white tablecloth, remembering another made of thin, crinkly plastic. On the yellowed wallpaper next to the cupboard with the photo albums and board games hang photos of the others who are now stuffing their faces. The dead watch in black and white from the opposing wall.

"The living have no place at this table," A'bu murmurs.

Potato dumplings, Leipziger allerlei, red cabbage, Kasseler pork, brown sauce in a saucier that's actually a magic lantern. The red cabbage leaves purple stains on the tablecloth. I'm holding a small, tarnished silver spoon with rose filigree, and imagining a wider spoon of porcelain, with transparent ovals spread across its surface that look like grains of rice. Or single, plucked petals from a daisy. This spoon is white and blue.

"The potato dumplings are delicious!" Someone yells in Oma's direction. "Yeah, truly excellent!" A gruff voice chimes in.

The men serve themselves seconds. The women claim they are already full after one and a half dumplings. A large pot of rice steams directly in front of me. I scratch around in it a little with my spoon, trying not to dig too deep.

"Anyone else want some?" I ask. But no one answers. Girls cover their bowls with their hands. The older diners look worried.

"Rice once saved my life. And anyone who leaves a single grain of rice uneaten will be struck down by lightning," A'bu admonishes, while the other women spoon up their morels with bowed heads.

Red cabbage, 白菜, potato dumplings, 饺子, green beans, 虾, a pot of soup, and 鱼, so tender that it almost falls apart. A slender figure picks out the fisheyes, showing off for those who look disgusted. I use my chopsticks to scrape the white flesh from the bones and place it in A'bu's bowl. A'bu prefers that her eldest son to do this for her, but she smiles at me, too. 木耳, lean cutlets, jelly-like rinds, wobbling cubes slowly falling like dominoes into the dark red sauce, 毛豆, und sticky-sweet lotus roots. Small towers of shrimp shells, chewed beans, and fishbones rise from the rustling plastic tablecloth.

"Would you like anything else? Dessert?" Oma asks, heaving a giant carton of vanilla ice cream onto the table, seemingly from out of nowhere.

"Did you already have some meat?" A'bu asks, sliding a shiny domino onto my plate.

"No," I say. "I've already had everything, baicai, jiaozi, lüdou, xia, yu, mu'er, paigu, maodou --饱了,饱了, I'm so full!" I drown my remaining rice with a ladle of winter melon soup.

Flushed faces exchange stories, gold Shaoxing wine sloshes over the rims of tiny glasses, someone opens a can of beer. The men ask if it's alright for them to smoke, and they light up. They then begin their monologues, but they don't ask permission for that. The door to the solarium is cracked ajar, allowing the fumes from their cigarettes to escape. A few seats over, someone swipes the wide-bladed knife over a bit of purple cabbage and then steps out to smoke on the balcony. Others follow, many carry a pack of cigarettes tucked into the breast pockets of their plaid short-sleeved shirts. Tomorrow, a pen will be stowed in the same pocket. Ashes fall by accident on the geraniums.

"How many worlds exist between a plastic tablecloth and one made of cotton?" someone at the table asks.

"One thousand worlds!" Oma calls out.

"Ten thousand worlds!" A'bu responds.

"No world," I say, but the words fall soundlessly from my mouth, as if someone wrapped them up with cotton balls.