

FRAGMENTS

VOLUME II - THE BAMBOO GROVE

25 THE SOUND OF SWALLOWING

Fragment: Carefully Choreographed Vibrato | Waves of Almost Mournful Peristalsis

Time & Location: Autumn 1984 · China Youth Daily, Beijing | Huaxi Mountains, Guizhou

The office next to mine belonged to the Political News Department. The deputy editor was reporting on the latest developments in official propaganda.

His voice carried an excessively restrained low-frequency resonance. Every tremor had been carefully arranged.

He wrapped opportunism in the language of brightness and conviction. Across from him, the editor-in-chief listened with a gentle expression.

A long breath of relief escaped his chest. Followed by an even faker laugh.

The city was full of lip-syncing and counterfeit smiles. Even *China Youth Daily*, still known for daring to tell the truth, had begun manufacturing false news and false commentary. Every day, we distributed political dopamine.

Sister Rong became determined to turn me into a singer.

She paid out of her own pocket to hire one of the country's finest vocal instructors, who began teaching me how to breathe, place a tone, and project a voice according to the traditions of Western classical singing.

The discipline was undeniably beautiful.

Within a short time, my high notes could travel from the twentieth floor of a building all the way down to the ground below.

Sister Rong would stand there, head tilted upward, eyes shining with tears of joy as she listened.

In her apartment, beside the piano, I stood awkwardly like a wooden post, singing exactly as instructed.

She accompanied me with complete concentration, striking the keys with a passion that seemed to consume her.

The loose robe she wore revealed flashes of bare skin as she leaned into the music, oblivious to everything except the melody.
The music itself was intoxicating.

It stirred desire in me.
Yet just as that desire began to awaken, it vanished.
Not because of the atmosphere created by the music.
Not because of the tenderness in her eyes.
Not because of her patience, her warmth, or the intimacy of those evenings.

It was because I could not silence the sounds that ordinary people never heard. While others lost themselves in melody, I heard blood moving through arteries, distant machinery vibrating through concrete, hidden frequencies buried beneath every note. The world refused to become music. It remained noise.

I could not endure the humiliation.

So I walked away.
Without hesitation, I abandoned what might have become a career on the concert stage.

The vocal instructor considered it a tragedy.

She later told Sister Rong that my voice reminded her of **Plácido Domingo**, but carried an additional low-frequency resonance unlike anything she had ever encountered.

"If he enters the profession," she said, "he'll be extraordinary."

Neither of them ever understood.
I hated performing.

Out of pity, Sister Rong sent me away from political whirlpools.
My next assignment took me to distant Guizhou.
To write a story suitable for publication.
A story about farmers.

Three days and three nights by train.
A full day by bus.
Several more kilometers on foot.

Alone, I arrived at an impoverished mountain village in Huaxi.

"Reporter Bai."
I always liked hearing villagers and local officials call me that.

"Could you stay at my house tonight?"

The village Youth League secretary, Xiao Huang, asked timidly.
His voice carried the hollow low pressure of a body deprived of fat.
I could even hear the friction inside his frame.

"Of course."

"Where will I sleep?"

The house had walls.

Barely.

Wind entered from every direction.

It looked like countless homes scattered through the mountains of Guizhou.

A dozen mice conducted guerrilla operations across the room.

Three battered pieces of furniture stood inside.

The bedding piled beside the bed had turned black with age and grease.

Xiao Huang and I talked from morning until dawn.

Twenty-two hours.

Two notebooks filled.

My fingers cramped from writing.

At last I asked what I thought was a vivid question.

"What is the happiest thing young people here experience each month?"

He nudged a mouse with his foot.

Even his yawn seemed exhausted.

"Happiness?"

"Going down the mountain for market day."

"Eating a bowl of bean pork."

My aunt was a professor of parasitology.

She once told me that pork infected with *cysticerci* was a terrifying poison.

The parasites loved entering the human brain.

They could cause dementia.

Epilepsy.

Even schizophrenia.

Such meat was commonly known as *bean pork*.

Curious, I asked Xiao Huang to take me there.

A group of young villagers sat before a row of chipped porcelain bowls.

Their eyes never left the food.

Their fingers gripped oily chopsticks.

I listened.

Throats rose and fell rapidly.
Hungrily.

Chunks of parasite-ridden meat disappeared within seconds.
Dragged downward by violent swallowing.

Then came the sounds from below.

Wave after wave of movement.
Almost mournful.

Peristalsis.

The bowls emptied.

The young men wiped their mouths.
Then licked the remaining grease from the backs of their hands.

My legs began to tremble.

Everything I had planned to write about exposing the truth suddenly collapsed.
Into a pile of mouse droppings.

My throat felt full of sand.

"How much does one bowl cost?"
I asked.

"Ten cents."

Xiao Huang's voice was hoarse.
His heartbeat was so steady that it frightened me.

Suddenly everything turned white.

I nearly fell.

26 THE EQUATION OF TRUTH

Fragment: Sorrowful Low-Frequency Mechanical Waves | Nothing but the White
Light of Cowardice and Helplessness
Time & Location: Autumn 1984 · China Youth Daily, Beijing

That night, I sat inside the drafty shack.
The candle trembled without pause.
My ears remained full of the thick swallowing sounds from earlier that day.

I opened my notebook.
My hand shook.
I could barely hold the pen.

I wanted to write:
Poverty.
Outcry.

Instead, every stroke across the paper produced only irritation.
Dry noise.

Damn truth.

My scalp tingled.
My eyes closed.
I forced myself to do arithmetic.

Ten cents.
Parasites.
Protein.
Dignity.
Life.

The equations I knew so well began mutating inside my head.

One bowl of rotten meat equals half a life.
How much money equals one truth?

When the remainder required for survival reaches zero,
truth equals a fart.

People in the newsroom often talked about saving others.
None of them could hear the sound of organs grinding themselves away.

I closed the notebook.
The dull movements inside those villagers' stomachs returned to me.
Like trapped animals digging through dirt.

Holding my slippery press card, I forced myself to calculate.
Again.
And again.
Checking the results.

Rechecking them.

Back in Beijing, I went directly to Renmin University.
I gave a lecture to journalism students on interviewing techniques.
Afraid of losing the speaking fee, I never mentioned bean pork.

Sister Rong accepted my ten-thousand-word manuscript.
She immediately began reading.

When she reached the section about bean pork, tears began falling onto the pages.
Plop.
Plop.

Then she lowered her head and cried.

When the crying stopped, she lifted her head and continued reading.
The tears never stopped.

"No."

"No."

"This can't be published."

"I can't take it."

"I can't."

"Turn it into an internal report."

"I'll find a way to send it upward."

As she spoke, she gripped my hand tightly.

The words came one after another.

No rhetoric.

No disguise.

No room for interruption.

Inside her body, the nervous system.

The heartbeat.

The pulse.

The digestive tract.

Every low-frequency mechanical wave had synchronized into a single resonance.

Sorrow.

The sound made my own heart uneasy.

I returned to my office.

I did not go home.

I did not sleep.

Across sheets of manuscript paper, I began writing equations.

Mathematics had always seemed more trustworthy than truth.

Truth

=

A tiny number of people gathering information

A tiny number of people editing it

=

The remainder left behind by facts.

Truth

=

$(\text{Distortion} + \text{Selection})^N$

Truth

=

Idiot.

The final result was clear.

I was not truth.

I was the idiot.

At the bottom remained the only equation involving life and death.

Survival

=

Intake

-

Loss of dignity

I pulled at my hair.

Slapped my own face.

The anger would not stop.

In truth, I was never particularly devout about truth.

What I could not tolerate was disappointing people.

Again.

And again.

Sometimes leaving them with nothing but despair.

Inside the restroom, I stared into the mirror.

Black-dyed hair.

A pale face.
Bloodshot eyes.

There was no uncrowned king there.

Only the white light of cowardice.
And helplessness.

I refused to write the internal report.

The ten-thousand-word manuscript disappeared beneath a thick stack of old books.

Then I went home.

27 FATHER'S LIE AND PROHIBITION

Fragment: the Rhythm of Utterly Humble Pleading

Time & Location: Winter 1984 · Ministerial Residence, Wanshou Road, Beijing

The autumn air of Wanshou Road no longer carried the swampy scent of reeds and lake water that lingered around Houhai.

Instead, everything smelled of carefully maintained vegetation.

Cold.

Trimmed.

Disciplined.

The tall poplars and cedars possessed no such obedience.

Their leaves rubbed against one another in the darkness.

The sound gave the row of six-story buildings an increasingly imposing presence.

"You're back?"

Father reclined halfway into the sofa.

Across from him sat two military officers.

Their shoulders formed a connected right angle.

The red stars on their insignia resembled bloodstained ninja blades.

Each breath they took was measured.

Balanced.

Controlled.

"Sit."

Father's voice produced a faint echo in the spacious living room.

The echo carried exhaustion.
The exhaustion of a man who had returned to the summit.
It also carried something deeper than anything I had heard in the matchbox room
of Pocket Alley.
The sound of walking on thin ice.

The two officers rose and greeted me.
They came from a military compound near Huangsi.
The fingers holding their introduction letters were applying pressure.

"Chief, we're only carrying out orders."
One of them bowed slightly.
A humble tremor moved through his throat.

At last I understood.
The military wanted to recruit me.

Listening to them, I realized they regarded me as a human stepping stone toward
the summit of what they called *Human Science*.

"Hahaha."
"You've made a mistake."
Father released a ring of smoke.
It spun in the air.
Pale.
Perfectly obedient to its creator.

"He?"
"He doesn't have any special abilities."

A tiny crack sounded from his knuckles.

"If he doesn't write."
"If he doesn't do mathematics."
"He's an idiot."
"He spends all day staring into space."
"Heh-heh."

The officers remained seated.
Waiting.

"Was I unclear?"
Father smiled.
Performing kindness.

"Very clear."
"Very clear."
"Chief, we'll take our leave."

The heavy door closed behind them.

Father turned.
Stared directly at me.

Inside his slightly bent frame, waves of disordered low frequencies began colliding.

"Attention!"

"Yes, sir!"

I snapped upright on the wooden floor.
Like a Hero fountain pen driven into a desk.

"Bai Ying."
"Listen carefully."

Father bent forward even farther.

"This is the last warning."

"Immediately."
"Right now."
"Block up those troublesome ears of yours."

"In this world, every piece of human speech you hear may be a trap."

"Look at this building."
"Look at that wall."
"Look at the ceiling."

"None of it is insulation."
"None of it is privacy."

"It's a honeycomb."
"It's a sieve."

Suddenly he covered my ears with both hands.

The pressure changed.
Heavy.
Then light.
Then heavy again.

Inside his palms flowed the warm sound of blood.
There was no trace of power in it.
No desire to command.

No political will.

Only the rhythm of utterly humble pleading.

"My son!"

"Stop showing off."

"You'll start hearing the noise inside people's bodies."

"Stop showing off."

"You'll hear pens scratching paper miles away."

"Stop challenging those qigong frauds to their faces."

"Please."

"Please, Comrade Bai Ying."

His fist ground against the tea table.

He knew.

He knew everything.

I fired back.

"I never show off."

"Never."

"Right."

"Right."

"Your father chose the wrong word."

"It's not showing off."

"It's exposure."

"Exposure."

"Do you understand?"

His heartbeat accelerated.

"You really want them to lock you away?"

"Spend the rest of your life like a nail?"

"Let other people hammer you whenever they wish?"

"No."

"Absolutely not."

His voice softened.
His heart pounded harder.

I nodded.

"At ease."

The words seemed to consume the last of his strength.
He collapsed back into the sofa.

I intended to obey him.

Yet something inside me refused.

The mice covering the floor of Xiao Huang's house.
The bowls of bean pork lined up in perfect rows.

Neither of them would agree that I should surrender so easily.

28 THE SOUND OF A THROAT REPEATEDLY SWALLOWING SALIVA

Fragment: the Sound of a Matchbox Being Moved by "Mind Power" | Unable To Bear the Weight of Truth

Time & Location: Winter 1984 · Editorial Department, China Youth Daily, Beijing

The newsroom.
I sat at my desk by the window.
Holding a fountain pen.
Without any paper.

I opened a reader's letter.
One sentence caught my eye:

"The Master emitted energy.
The tumor disappeared."

Normally I would have burst out laughing.
Loud enough to startle the entire office.

This time I did not.

Father's prohibition remained lodged inside me.
Perhaps it was time to learn mediocrity.

From a room at the far end of the corridor came Gao Yong's voice.
I wandered over.
The editor-in-chief's office door stood open.

Gao Yong was conducting a demonstration for the newspaper's leadership.
Beside him stood two men in white lab coats.
"Human Science Experts."

Click.

A matchbox moved across a tabletop.

At least that was what everyone else believed.

To my ears, it was not mind power.
It was an extremely thin metallic wire.
Magnetized.
Dragging against the surface.

The wire was hidden inside Gao Yong's sleeve.
The sound it produced was pathetic.
Sneaky.
Obscene.

Yet inside that room full of silent observers, it expanded into thunder.

Most of them were veteran editors and reporters.
People trained to doubt everything.

"Do you see?"

"This is precisely what must be promoted to the nation's youth."

"The awakening of the Chinese nation."

The propaganda official spoke with solemn conviction.

Inside Gao Yong's voice floated an overtone.
Relaxed.
Cruel.

Amazing.
He could really spray nonsense.

I knew him.
Since childhood he had enjoyed persuading other children to believe things.

Any things.

More than once he had told me:

"Never use a scam."

"If people from Compound No. 7 get exposed, it's humiliating."

I leaned against the doorframe.

Listening to the performance.

I heard the master's throat.

Repeatedly swallowing saliva while preparing backstage.

I heard the audience.

Those self-proclaimed intellectuals.

Their racing heartbeats recording a belief they could no longer suppress.

In medical terms, I was a patient.

Noise tortured me constantly.

When frequencies violated nature itself, they struck the whitewashed walls of the corridor.

Shattered.

Into thousands of rusted blades.

My eardrums ached.

That evening an idea occurred to me.

I would try to trace the private conversations of Gao Yong and his father.

I sealed the doors and windows of my dormitory.

Pressed my cheek against the cold floor tiles.

Using acoustic principles I had taught myself, I attempted to exploit structural resonance.

Twenty kilometers away.

One target voiceprint.

Hum—

Hum—

Nothing.

I could not hear the familiar frequencies.

Could not hear the truth I wanted.

Instead, my ears filled with the background noise of the earth itself.

A beast grinding its teeth beneath the ground.

Sewage flowing through pipes.
Subway vibrations.
Someone snoring in a bedroom.

The sounds surged toward me like a landslide.

My skull felt as though it were about to split apart.

Blood began dripping from my eyes.

Capillaries rupturing under extreme vibration.

The field of white before me instantly darkened.
Stained red.
Sickening red.

Sampling had to stop.
Immediately.

I collapsed onto the floor.
Gasping.

My organs churned.

My body was strong.
Yet it could not bear the weight of truth.

I put on my dark glasses.
Left the audience of the qigong craze behind.

And locked myself inside that pale, silent world once again.

29 HUMMING WITH PRETENDED TENDERNESS

Fragment: a Tone as Still as a Lake Without Ripples

Time & Location: Spring 1986 · Ministerial Residence, Wanshou Road | China

Youth Daily | Zhengyangmen Restaurant, Beijing

Following Father's repeated instructions, I went to a cinema on a blind date.
The young woman was remarkably fair-skinned.
She possessed a quietness unlike any I had encountered before.

She was an electronic publishing engineer at a printing factory.
Progressive.
Forward-looking.
And utterly uninteresting.

A few months later, we were married.

The wedding banquet was held at Zhengyangmen Restaurant.
Only two tables.

There was no band.
No background music.
Only toasts.
Political slogans disguised as congratulations.
And the endless clinking of glasses.

Before the guests dispersed, Father called me over.
His hand curved into a half-circle.

"I spent my entire life working in secrecy."
"Do you know what secrecy really means?"
"The most important thing isn't keeping other people's secrets."
"It's keeping your own."

"Never forget."
"Never attract attention."

His tone was as smooth as a lake without ripples.

I smiled.
"Then why did you allow me to become a journalist?"

Everything that followed belonged to the young.
Yet late at night, her voice sometimes carried the faint sourness of aged vinegar.

Gradually that frequency amplified all the low-frequency machinery hidden inside her body.

It became a switch.
A switch capable of extinguishing desire.

At last Sister Rong surrendered to my persistent pleading.
She transferred me to the Editor-in-Chief's Office.
Night shift.

No more field reporting.
No more suffering over the difference between truth and falsehood.

I could remain silent.
Like a stone.

Every day my colleagues continued hammering out the rhythms of their era upon sheets of paper.
I pretended to be deaf.
Pretended to be mute.

When there was nothing to do, I played Go in the office.

Or sat holding a cheap six-string guitar.

Humming with pretended tenderness:
"Things of the past, let them stay in the past..."

Occasionally I sang Teresa Teng.
"Beautiful flowers do not bloom forever.
Good things do not come forever."
"The moon represents my heart."

Relaxation.

30 THE LEAD SINGER

Fragment: Carefully Suppressed Pride and Excitement | the Long March Suite
Time & Location: Winter 1987 · Central Committee of the Communist Youth League Auditorium, Beijing

The early winter wind in Beijing cut straight through flesh.
The cracking sounds in my knees, produced by the constant expansion and contraction of bone and cartilage, made me uncomfortable.

I stood beside a radiator.
Like a crow trying to keep warm.
Listless.

In three days, my wife would give birth.

Xiao Chang from the Youth League called.

"Hey, Bai Ying."
"Old Song wants you here."
"Join the choir."

"You're leading."

Old Song was the biggest official in the Youth League.

A major general.

When he led inspection tours through villages in northwest China, he liked singing with me.

After returning to Beijing, he pulled me into the Youth League Choir and made me its lead singer.

I had no interest in it.

I disliked singing under hundreds of watching eyes.

The ancestors of the Mongols sang differently.

They stood before their yurts.

On open grasslands.

Beside great rivers.

They sang for themselves.

No audience.

No flirtation.

No flattery.

But a political assignment could not be refused.

December 12 of that year.

The afternoon my daughter was born.

I arrived at Number 10 East Qianmen Avenue.

The twelve-story gray building loomed above me.

Like a shadow.

After locking my bicycle, I stepped inside.

Light filled the enormous interior space.

Everywhere, leather shoes clicked across polished terrazzo floors.

The voices.

The heartbeats.

Almost all carried carefully suppressed pride and excitement.

The sound of people imagining their futures.

On the highest floor sat Old Song's office.

Xiao Chang handed me a cup of chrysanthemum tea.

"How about becoming my secretary?"

Old Song looked relaxed.

Like an older brother.
No false notes in his voice.

"Oh, come on, Old Song."
"I can sing."
"Being an official is impossible."

"I'm too stupid."
"Too direct."

I did not say what I was really thinking.
A journalist's job is to uncover truth.
An official's job often requires the opposite.

To posture.
To conceal.

His expression never changed.
I heard him clearing phlegm somewhere deep inside his throat.

"Come on."
"Let's go sing."
This time he spoke like a general.

The auditorium seats were occupied by more than six hundred people.
Noise filled the audience.

Then Old Song issued a single command.
"Quiet."

The room fell silent.
Instantly.

I stepped to the front edge of the stage.
Raised the microphone.

I gathered myself.
Preparing to sing a section from *The Long March Suite*.

"Crossing Snow Mountains and Grasslands."

It was a Soviet-style symphonic musical.
More than a hundred mouths transformed into mechanized instruments.
Singing through ten consecutive scenes.

The hardships of the Chinese Army's founding years elevated into epic grandeur.

For a generation raised on Peking Opera and the erhu, the form had once felt revolutionary.

Behind me stretched a field of white shirts.
A snowfield flooded with political ambition.

Many years later, the flawless official language spoken by members of this choir would become some of the most influential voices in Chinese politics.

Directly behind me stood a man who, seventeen years later, would become Director of the General Office of the Central Committee.

From the corner of my eye, he appeared deeply absorbed.
Though I knew he sang off-key.

At that time, Old Song disliked him.
No matter how talented he was.
No matter how exceptional his execution.

The overture began.

31 THE CONDUCTOR'S BATON

Fragment: Obedient Low-Frequency Square Waves | The Khoomei Tremor of Bird and Man in One Body | a Shanxi Accent Carrying the Smell of Noodle Soup
Time & Location: Winter 1987 · Central Committee of the Communist Youth League Auditorium, Beijing

Old Song's baton pointed toward me.
It was not a piece of wood.
It was a reference point for power.
Every movement commanded six hundred throats to breathe and sound with the precision of pistons inside brass instruments.

A stream of air rose from my lower abdomen.
Climbed toward my throat.
White light flashed before my eyes.

"Snow stretches white.
The wilderness stretches vast..."

I could no longer hear my own voice.
I merely guided the melody through the air.
Letting it spread across the entire building.

Each chorus behind me arrived with mechanical precision.
The collective *ah-ah-ah* seemed manufactured rather than sung.

Under the baton, every brain in the hall resonated into a single waveform.
One obedient, low-frequency square wave.

The White Crow counted coldly.

Old Song's heart accelerated three times.
Seeking attention from higher levels.

Secretary Wang's applause lagged by half a beat.
Perhaps he was calculating some complicated personnel arrangement.

The man standing directly behind me maintained astonishingly stable
diaphragmatic breathing.
The fluctuations measured only a few hundred milliseconds.

I stood straight as a fountain pen.
The way I stood before Father during inspection.

Then something happened.

One of my high notes struck the old chandelier supports hanging from the ceiling.
A violent resonance erupted.

I did not know whether the vibration reached the feet of the future powerful men
sitting below.
But many of them shifted in their seats.
Subtly.
Nervously.

According to the score, I was supposed to begin low.
Build through a long middle register.
Then leap upward into a bright, unwavering A4.

"...high above the clouds..."

More than a thousand arms were already rising.
Preparing to applaud.

Instead, I stepped outside the script.

The khoomei tremor living inside both bird and man burst outward.
Layer after layer.

The world vanished.

Soundless.
Motionless.
Nonexistent.

A vacuum.
Cold and merciless.

At almost the exact same moment,
my body released a small burst of gas.

Old Song froze.
Like a piece of timber.

Then he pivoted one hundred and eighty degrees.

The baton pointed toward the audience.

A flick.
Two hundred and fifty milliseconds.

"Ah-ah-ah—"

The entire hall entered together.
Perfectly synchronized.
Perfectly ordinary.
Perfectly obedient.

Wave after wave rose over me.
Until cracked voices and broken notes buried everything I had done.

The baton sliced downward.
A rest.
Thin as steel wire.

Silence.
Then eruption.

The interval lasted a full three seconds.

The applause arrived late.
Explosive.
Relentless.

Every eye turned toward Old Song as he bowed repeatedly.

Only a handful of young women looked toward me.
Their eyes flickering.

Old Song's hand remained suspended in midair.
Behind the thick lenses of his glasses, a flash of alarm appeared.

I ran behind the crimson curtain.
Collapsed in a corner.
Curled into myself.

Headache.
Tears.
Blood from my ears.

By the time my vision and hearing returned to normal, the hall was empty.

I stepped into the dark corridor.
A small, thin figure emerged from the shadows.

"Old Lin."
"Long time no see."

I recognized the footsteps immediately.

"Bai Ying."
"That was professional singing."

He hurried forward.
Skipping our usual enthusiastic handshake.
Instead, he reached for the collar of my military coat.

"It's cold."
"Don't be careless."

He lifted the collar.
Pressed it gently against my cheeks.
Then patted it into place.

His Shanxi accent carried the warm smell of noodle soup.
The kind of sound that made people feel safe.

Throughout the Youth League system, he was famous for his attentiveness.
For understanding people.
Even Old Song admired him for it.

I ignored the elevator.
Ran straight down the stairs.

Outside, I turned and looked back at the building.

It had become a gigantic pan flute.

Every floor.
Every window.
Every compartment.
Produced its own frequency.

The sounds of humanity mating with power.

The northern side faced Chang'an Avenue.
Its frequencies were grand.
False.
Immensely solemn.

The southern side faced old residential neighborhoods.
There the background noise was different.
Ordinary.
Real.
Trivial.

I climbed onto my bicycle.
The chain rattled softly.

Shaking my head to an invisible rhythm,
I pedaled back toward the life of getting by.

My daughter had been born.

She brought family happiness.
And something even greater.

The sound of heaven.

That tiny body constantly emitted the stirrings of spring.
The signal of all things beginning to grow.

From the outside, our family appeared happy.

And just as Father had hoped,
I continued to keep myself secret.

Continued becoming ordinary.

Almost invisible.

32 THE LOW GROWL OF A HYENA

Fragment: a Cow-Like Murmur Behind Breasts | a Low Growl Like a Hyena
Time & Location: Spring 1989 · Temple of Heaven Park, Beijing

Ordinary life continued beneath my pen until that hot season between spring and summer.

Demonstrations.

Editorials.

Editorial meetings where the air seemed frozen solid.
Strict censorship.

My ears had grown accustomed to every sound around me.
Even my weak eyesight appeared to have improved.

The lenses of my glasses had changed from pure black to dark amber.
The White Crow had been asleep for a very long time.

Then a young woman appeared before me.
I glanced at the new intern from Tibet.
Han Chinese.
Dark-skinned.
Not very tall.
Hair falling to her waist.
Breasts modest and slightly drooping.
Apricot-shaped eyes.
Full lips.

A white blouse above a Tibetan skirt that made her legs seem remarkably long.

She stood there behaving herself.
The kind of innocence that concealed temptation.
"Your surname?"
I had already forgotten what the department head had told me.

"Miao Ping."
"He just introduced me."
"You important people forget things quickly."

Together we wandered through Tiananmen Square.
Among students sprawled around the Monument.

Listening.
Observing.
Taking notes.

When we wanted answers, we drifted toward another gathering.
When we were hungry, we bought steamed buns from street vendors.
When I was thirsty, she pulled a bottle of water from her shoulder bag.

After we finished writing our story, she suggested visiting the Temple of Heaven at night.

Before we reached the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests, she stopped beside a dense stand of trees.

"Teacher Bai."

"I'm tired."

"Let's sit over there for a while."

As she spoke, she pinched my fingers.

A surprisingly gentle frequency escaped my throat.
So soft it embarrassed even me.

Her hand felt warm.

Her heart was beating a little too fast.

It had been a very long time since I had touched another woman's body.

I made no attempt to calm myself.

Deep among the trees, she pushed me backward.

Then she lifted her Tibetan skirt.

A pair of pale thighs emerged from the darkness and swung across my waist.

She slowly pulled open her blouse.

Her breasts trembled slightly.

Rice dumplings beneath pale skin.

I offered no resistance.

She stripped away the distance between us with far more confidence than I possessed.

Her hands moved quickly.

Decisively.

The lights were far away.

The night was very dark.

Behind the movement of her breasts came a low murmur.

Slow.

Heavy.

Almost bovine.

Then—

"What are you doing?!"

A low growl cut through the darkness.
Like a hyena.

A figure emerged from the shadows.
A man.
Wearing a red armband.

The world flashed white before my eyes.

"We're in love."
"Mind your own business."
Miao Ping shot back immediately.
Her voice sharp.

Defiant.

"This is a public place."
"No hooliganism."
"Show me your identification."

The man's face remained hidden in darkness.
His voice dropped lower as he spoke.

33 BOOM!

Fragment: Eardrums Shattered by the Blast | a Rooster Trapped in my Throat |
Father's Final Silence
Time & Location: Summer 1989 · Qianmen Avenue, Beijing | Spring 1990 ·
Ministerial Residence, Wanshou Road &, Beijing

Miao Ping held lightly onto my arm.
Her fingers were trembling.

She did not know that I could go blind in an instant.
Nor did she know how terrified I was.

I was afraid of everything.
If the truth came out, I would lose my family.
Lose my career.
Even mediocrity itself would disappear.

My head was filled with Secretary Wang's furious voice.

That oversized pale face, completely out of proportion to his body, twisted and distorted in my memory.

He had demanded that one of my apprentices "tell the details."

Every detail.

How he and his girlfriend had made love in the office.

At that moment, the former student leader of the December Ninth Movement had shed every disguise.

He wanted only to pry.

And to be entertained by what he saw.

I stood up.

My vision began returning.

Pulling fifty yuan from my pocket, I stuffed it into the shadow's hand.

"Brother."

"Have a drink on me."

Ten days of my salary.

Enough to buy twenty-five cans of Coca-Cola.

We escaped.

Our final escape came on that morning that would later find its way into history books.

The tank tracks.

The gunfire.

The shouting.

The crying.

All of it had finally stopped.

Holding Miao Ping's hand, I followed the last group leaving the square.

We ran through a chaos of footsteps toward Qianmen Avenue.

Outside the Public Security Bureau, something dark flew toward us.

Landed beside me.

Boom!

An explosion.

A gas grenade.

Instantly, my eardrums felt shattered.

I was completely deaf.

I reached out blindly.
Searching.

No Miao Ping.

Not beside me.
Not on the ground.
Not in the air.

Nowhere.

That winter, I went to the newspaper office every day for only one purpose.

Lock the door.
Play mahjong.

Thanks to my ability with numbers, I routinely humiliated the other three players.

No White Crow.
No normal hearing.

Only a Japanese hearing aid Father had hurriedly obtained for me.
Enough to keep me connected to the world.
Barely.

Until soldiers knocked it from my ear.
Until Father brought me another one outside the detention center.

The sound of that blast was soon drowned out by a song echoing through every street in Beijing.

"Asian Pride."

The anthem prepared for the Beijing Asian Games by Wei Wei and Liu Huan.

Officially, it celebrated the rise of Asia.
Unofficially, everyone seemed to be holding their breath.
Preparing to compete in humanity's most solemn game.
Determined to finish first.

The news that arrived later made me laugh.

After the violence, Chen Dashan began living with Miao Ping.

Having heard rumors about her history with me, he became furiously jealous.
First he subjected the girl to endless verbal abuse.

Then he reported me to the authorities.

His reward came quickly.

For reporting me.

For publishing increasingly radical political commentaries.

Chen Dashan was promoted to department director.

According to the rumors, he continued living with Miao Ping.

He always looked exhausted.

Half-asleep.

I suspected the woman had worn him out.

The rooster in my throat crowed twice.

Then fell silent.

34 BECOMING A BLOCK OF ICE

Fragment: Eardrums Shattered by a Blast | a Rooster Trapped in the Throat | my Father's Final Silence

Time & Location: Summer 1989 · Qianmen Avenue, Beijing | Spring 1990 · Ministerial Residence, Wanshou Road & Public Security Hospital, Beijing

My aunt called.
"You should come home more often."
"Your father is terminal."

I returned to the ministerial apartments on Wanshou Road.

The red carpet had been worn down by decades of footsteps.
Along the edges, the fabric had frayed into a gray, exhausted fringe.

The lights were off.

The apartment smelled heavily of medicine.

A pair of Kenwood speakers, more than twenty years old, were playing *The Long March Suite*.

Father sat sunk deep into the sofa.

The broad frame that had once seemed indestructible had collapsed into a sharp, bony angle.

The military shirt he had worn for more than a decade hung loosely from his shoulders.

A deep hollow above his collarbone collected shadows.

He did not look at me.

His eyes remained fixed on the row of cedars outside the window.

"Gao Yong came by."

He spoke suddenly.

His voice sounded like metal scraping across gravel.

"Two boxes of wild ginseng."

I lowered myself quietly into the seat beside him.

Gao Yong's attentiveness toward elders had always been famous in Compound No. 7.

Every major holiday, he made the rounds.

Visiting retired officials and powerful families.

My father was usually his first stop.

"I told him to get lost."

Father finally turned.

Moonlight traced the hollows around his eyes.

Inside them lingered a faint trace of wildness.

"He's become an actor."

"Talking to me about opportunities."

"About the future of the nation."

"Bullshit."

"So damn fake."

"There's a rooster living in his throat."

"The sound that comes out never lands on the ground."

Suddenly he began coughing.

His body folded inward.

Shaking violently.

I rushed forward to support him.

My hand touched his back.

It felt like a length of pig iron buried in frozen earth.

At that moment, a faint scratching sound came from the balcony.
Something with claws was scraping against the aluminum window frame.

Scratch.
Scratch.

I walked over and pulled aside the curtain.

A crow.

The tips of its wings carried an unhealthy gray-white coloring.
Its head tilted.
Its black eyes remained fixed on me.
It never cawed.

It simply pecked at the glass.
Again.
And again.
As though the glass were my chest.

Father watched the bird.
Something stirred inside his clouded eyes.

"That thing..."
"It didn't come from Compound No. 7, did it?"
The instincts of the old intelligence officer had begun slipping into hallucination.

One week later, my aunt ordered me to come immediately to the Public Security Hospital.

Father opened his eyes.
The sharp, watchful gaze that had accompanied me my entire life had become two black pills.

I took his hand.
"Dad."
"I have a question."

"Go ahead."
His strength was fading.

"Why did you give me the name Bai Ying?"

"Cough..."
"When you were born..."
"...your eyes looked like an eagle's."

A trace of affection crossed his face.
"Back then..."
"I hadn't spent much time studying crows."

His hand grew colder.
The curtains were beginning to fall on his eyes.

"Dad."
"Dad."
"When did you know?"

He gave no answer.
He was gradually becoming a block of ice.

The human radio that had accompanied me for thirty-two years fell completely silent.

My aunt collapsed beside the bed.

Large tears splashed onto his dried, lifeless arm.

I did not cry.
I stood motionless at the bedside.
Removed my glasses.

I wanted to kiss that piece of iron.
The iron that had never rusted.

Bang.

The Kenwood speakers short-circuited.
Dawn was breaking.

The crow returned.

It pecked at the window several times.
Then flew away.

Had it come on behalf of generations of crows?
To thank the man who had raised me alone?

The thought flashed through my mind.
And suddenly I broke.

I wept uncontrollably.
Clutching Father's portrait against my chest.

From the television came a familiar song.
"Asian Pride."
Again.

I collapsed onto the carpet.

35 A BAMBOO GROVE FULL OF BLADES

Fragment: a Muddy Tide Churning Inside the Chest | Love Song 1990 |
Roughness With a Hint of Cracked Dryness
Time & Location: Spring 1990 · China Youth Daily | "Bamboo Garden," Old
Drum Tower Street, Beijing

New Year's Eve.
The fifteenth day after my release.
The third day after Father's death.

Secretary Wang called me into her office.

That oversized face looked unusually pale.
A thin sheen of sweat covered her forehead.
The heating inside Beijing buildings could be excessive in early spring.
Still, I was thirty years younger than she was.
I felt perfectly fine.

She smiled.
A practiced smile.
Steady.
As if controlled by a switch.

Yet inside her flattened chest, I could hear a muddy tide rolling back and forth.

As one of Father's former subordinates, she would never have risen so high without loyalty.

"Comrade Bai Ying."

The opening phrase established her position immediately.
Official business.
Nothing personal.
After all, my father would never hear any of this.

She spoke only three sentences.
"The Party Committee has decided that you cannot remain at the newspaper."

"I understand."

Although Father had brought me out of detention, nothing unfavorable had been removed from my file.
No one dared alter the political conclusion attached to that event.

"We'll give you three months."
"Then you must leave."

"I'll leave immediately."

The answer surprised even her.
"There will be no subsidy."
"No transfer to another government position."
In other words:
Find your own way.

"Fine."
I stood.
Took one final look at that enormous face.
It was so large it resembled a doll's mask attached to a neck.

That evening I walked through the city with my hands tucked into my sleeves.

Groups of armed soldiers patrolled the streets.
Ghostlike.
Expressionless.

The thick rubber soles of their boots struck the pavement with deliberate force.
An announcement of violence.

Young men standing in doorways hummed Luo Dayou's *Love Song 1990*.
Rubbing their hands together.
Stamping their feet against the bitter cold.

A friend guaranteed a loan for me.
One hundred thousand yuan.
Low interest.

I decided to start a business.

For weeks I studied the regulations governing private companies.
Every restriction.
Every prohibition.

Eventually I reached a simple conclusion.

The only thing I could legally sell was my brain.

I chose a name:
Superpower Consulting Company.

Even registering the company became a lesson in obedience.

A designated legal representative.
A bank account.
A fixed number of employees.

Most importantly:
A lease agreement proving the existence of an office.

At a corner along Old Drum Tower Street, I found a place called Bamboo Garden.

The former residence of Kang Sheng.

The bamboo inside the courtyard was gray-green.
Its leaves tipped with dry yellow edges.

Under the northern wind they produced a brittle rustling.

Sha—
Sha—

The place felt sinister.

The architecture distorted the natural movement of air.
The wind twisted through the bamboo grove.
Thousands of invisible blades seemed to be slicing against one another.

Two side rooms in the front courtyard became my office.

Ran Jun arrived for her first day of work.
Walking with a bouncing step.

The moment she spoke, I froze.

Her voice carried undisguised wildness.
Rough.
Dry at the edges.
Dangerously attractive.

The sound struck me head-on.

Her eyes resembled those of a large cat.
Patient.
Evaluating.

They moved slowly over me.

"What are you looking at?"

I carefully controlled my own voice.
Trying to conceal the desire that was quietly approaching.

"President Bai..."

She stretched out the last syllable.
Twisted her hips.
Sat down directly across from me.

"Being able to work for such a handsome boss makes me very happy."

She paused.

"Oh."
"Wrong word."

"It's an honor."

I knew she had worked in both state-owned and private enterprises.
At that time, experience like hers was valuable.

I was right.

The initial registration.
The paperwork.
The business structure.
The corporate image.

Ran Jun handled almost everything.

Then she arranged something else.

A courtyard residence outside Xizhimen.
Her own home.

A bed neatly made.
Almost obsessively neat.

Beside the pillow sat dolls.
Small trinkets.
Cosmetics.

The possessions of a teenage girl.

Arranged around the sleeping place of a grown woman.

36 A CONDUCTION MEDIUM

Fragment: the Restart of Long-Distance Hearing | a Breathing Pattern Both Aged and Authoritative

Time & Location: Summer 1990 · Bamboo Garden, Beijing

I removed my dark glasses.
A haze drifted before my eyes.
For a moment, it seemed as though Grandma Yang were lying upon it.

It was Ran Jun holding me.
Holding me tighter and tighter.
Until we fell together onto the bed.

The bedsheet was whiter than a woman's skin.
Almost luminous.
Waiting for Ran Jun's uninhibited cries.

The courtyard compound was extraordinarily quiet.
Dozens of ears had quietly perked up.

The White Crow, dormant for far too long, began to stir.

Breathing heavily, I lay on top of her.
Then suddenly realized something.

My long-distance hearing was returning.

And a woman's body could serve as a conduction medium.

Far away, I heard a familiar sound.
A cold little laugh.

"Heh-heh."

The man Father had mentioned shortly before his death.

I had heard that Gao Yong had already risen to bureau-level rank.
A political star among the Classes of '77 and '78 at Renmin University.

More details arrived.

His voice alternated with another.
An old voice.
Ancient.
Fragile.

The sounds were so faint that I had to press my ear firmly against Ran Jun's collarbone to hear them.

The softness of her body.
The intensity of my concentration.
Together they confirmed something.

The source was inside Bamboo Garden.
The inner compound.

Ran Jun's legs shifted beneath me.

I immediately sat upright.
Pulled on my clothes in a hurry.

"Darling."

She frowned.
The corners of her mouth drooped.
Like a displeased government cadre.

"That's not very gentlemanly."

"Where I come from, we'd call that heartless."

"Get up."

I grabbed my coat.

"We're going back to Bamboo Garden."

The inner compound had always fascinated me.

A sign hung at the entrance:
AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY

An armed guard in a military overcoat flipped through a registration ledger.
His fingertips produced a strangely cold friction against the paper.

I pulled Ran Jun along.
Into the narrow brick pathway between the bamboo groves.

The buildings were old.

Filled with the smell of decaying wood.

After only a few steps, a breathing pattern emerged from behind a row of carved wooden windows.

Extremely old.
Yet somehow still authoritative.

Gao Yong's father.

The old man who, according to rumor, had already survived two emergency resuscitations.

Recently relocated from Compound No. 7.

Beneath the veranda of the main hall, I gently placed my hand against a massive red-lacquered pillar.

Medium coupling.

Boom—

The pain arrived instantly.
Without warning.

My eyes erupted in agony.

The world filled with afterimages of bamboo leaves.
And floating red stains.

Inside the main hall, Gao Yong was speaking in a lowered voice.
Between tiny swallowing sounds, he was persuading his father.

"Dad."

"If this steel allocation gets approved, we can revive the project in Haikou."

"Then it won't just be about money."

"It'll become the foundation of everything our family does for decades."

A voice answered.
Like a broken bellows.

"Son..."

"Cough... cough..."

"Remember this."

"The roots of these bamboo plants are connected."

"Cough..."

"I've already made arrangements."

Gao Yong's fingernail tapped lightly against a rosewood tabletop.

A crisp echo.

It passed through the silent bamboo grove.

Carrying hidden currents of money.

The bamboo suddenly erupted into violent friction.

As if ten thousand green snakes were crawling through the darkness.

Something vast.

Sticky.

Cold.

Belonging to another era.

It traveled through the red-lacquered pillar.

Into my fingertips.

Straight into my spine.

I jerked my hand away.

Gasping for air.

A warm liquid rushed from my nose.

Heavy with the taste of iron.

"President Bai?"

Ran Jun grabbed my arm.

"What's wrong?"

I quickly put my dark glasses back on.

Hiding eyes that had begun to bleed.

Then forced out a dull, accommodating smile.

"Nothing."

"I've never seen so much bamboo."

"It stunned me."

I grabbed her warm, soft hand.
Covered my nose with the other.
And lowered my head as we left the inner compound.
Returning to the office.

Behind us, the bamboo grove remained.
Yellow-green.
Cold.
Sinister.

Still whispering:

Sha—
Sha—

What an eerie place.

37 HELP

Fragment: Happiness Swallowed Through the Throat | Leather Shoes Striking a Perfectly Measured Rhythm
Time & Location: Spring 1992 · Bamboo Garden | KFC, Tongzhou District, Beijing

I spent most of my time trying to avoid Gao Yong.
After a year of exhausting effort, Ran Jun and I had not secured a single contract.

One afternoon, I secretly opened the accounting ledger.

Just over one hundred yuan remained.
Next month's salary could not be paid.
Not even Ran Jun's.
I felt guilty.

"Someone's here to see you."
Ran Jun's low voice drifted in with the warm air from the courtyard.
I had been expecting him.

Years earlier, Yuan Qing had been studying at a junior college in Tongzhou.
A young man from Wenzhou.

After a failed romance, he had decided to end his life.

Then, by chance, he read one of my articles.
Immediately afterward, he wrote me a letter.
The title was simple:
My Last Letter.

There was no anger toward the woman.
No accusation.

Only disgust with life itself.
The letter barely contained a single coherent argument.
What happened next was strange.

Within a single day, the letter passed through the postal system, the newspaper's mailroom, the reader correspondence department, and the department director's desk.

Then it arrived in my hands.

I happened to be free that afternoon.
I opened it.
Read several paragraphs.
Then immediately grabbed the telephone.

That same day, I traveled to his school.
Invited him to lunch.

He was exactly twenty years old.

It was his first time inside a KFC.
The restaurant was bright.
Clean.
Almost foreign.

I ordered:
Ten pieces of Original Recipe chicken.
Two servings of French fries.
Two mashed potatoes.
Two Coca-Colas.

The bill came to eighty yuan.

Listening to the happiness he swallowed through his throat, I became certain of one thing.

That meal had saved a life.
Now he had come to repay the favor.

During our conversation, Yuan Qing quickly discovered the state of my company.
Within minutes, he picked up the phone.
Called an old classmate.

The classmate had recently become head of finance at a major state-owned enterprise.

Together they devised a solution.
A two-million-yuan advertising budget.
The money had originally been assigned to a state advertising agency.

Now they intended to redirect it to my company.

The arrangement was nearly perfect.
The contract was ready.
The funds were ready.
Only one day remained before signing.

Then Ran Jun told Gao Yong.

A mistake.
Or perhaps not.

Either way, the news reached him.

Tap.
Tap.

A pair of brand-new leather shoes approached my office.
The footsteps were balanced.
Measured.
Confident.

Then they stopped outside the door.

"President Bai."
"It's Gao Yong."
"Heh-heh."

I deliberately remained silent.
Only for a few seconds.

Just enough time to calculate the value of the opportunity suddenly standing outside my door.
"Oh?"
"Director Gao."
"What an honor."

"Please come in."

I knew I was smiling.
The smile probably looked natural.

After all, Gao Yong was an ordinary man.
No ordinary man could hear the deeply buried contempt hidden inside my voice.

By then he had already left the Central Propaganda Department.
Transferred to the Central Organization Department.
A bureau responsible for overseeing major state-owned enterprises.

38 THE SPECTRUM OF EXTORTION

Fragment: a Frequency Struggling To Resist | Low Frequencies Generated by
the Flow of Money

Time & Location: Spring 1992 · Bamboo Garden, Beijing

He sat down methodically.
His head resembled a millstone.
Turning slowly.
His narrowed eyes swept across the room.
Then stopped behind me.

"Ah."
"Very scholarly."

A bookshelf stood there.
More than a hundred books piled without order.

"Got a cigarette?"

"I thought you didn't smoke."

"Old friends reunited."
"My emotions are difficult to control."
"Heh-heh."

I almost laughed.

His performance of political composure had become fairly convincing.
Five or six parts out of ten.

Yet the nervousness remained impossible to conceal.

A frequency of resistance kept appearing.
In his fingertips.
In his throat.
In the friction of his knee joints.

"I hear you've landed a big contract."

After considerable effort, he finally exhaled a smoke ring.
The second one collapsed.
The third scattered even faster.

The conversation lasted half an hour.

A perfectly arranged chain of logic.
One airtight argument after another.

His narrow face gradually turned red.
A fleck of white foam gathered at the corner of his mouth.

Finally he stood.
Patted my shoulder.

His expression became solemn.
"Brother."
"We grew up together."
"Let's settle it this way."

He took his share.

Fifty percent.
Half of everything I would earn.

A harvest obtained through the leverage of power.

Oddly enough, I did not feel defeated.
Mathematical formulas flashed through my head.
One after another.

Remove emotion.
Remove expectation.
Remove the highest risk.
Remove the lowest return.

The answer seemed obvious.

What I lost today would inevitably become greater gains tomorrow.

I opened the door.
Stepped aside.
Extended my hand.
Escorting him out.

Then—

The turntable jammed.
A brief smacking of lips.
One click of dissatisfaction.

I heard it perfectly.

The two-million-yuan check lay on my desk.

I pressed a finger against the paper.
Moved it gently across the surface.

The friction generated waves of low-frequency vibration.
The sound was deeply comforting.
Ever since falling into the ocean of money, my eyesight seemed to have improved.

Without my glasses, I could read more and more words.
Especially numbers.
Especially numbers connected to money.

Without my dark glasses, the world no longer dissolved into white light at dusk.

The White Crow was sleeping peacefully.

Not pretending.
Not hiding.
Not playing dead.

Simply unnecessary.

I dismissed Ran Jun.
My explanation was direct.
"I was betrayed."
"The losses were substantial."

She cried.
Screamed.
Made a scene in the office.

At her place, I could never stay.

At mine, I could never bring her.
From the very beginning, I had never intended to tell her my deepest secret.

Father's lesson—
Keep yourself secret.

I used it on her.

Gao Yong happened to be traveling out of town.
No one remained to protect her.

I placed twenty thousand yuan into an envelope.
More than a year's salary.

Then I walked toward her.
Attempting to help her up.

Whoosh.

She snatched the envelope from my hand.
Rose to her feet.
Turned around.
And slammed through the door.

39 GOING IN CIRCLES

Fragment: the Wind Rustling Like Banknotes | Tears Striking the Tombstone
Base

Time & Location: Autumn 1992 · Beijing | Spring 1999 · Western Hills
Cemetery, Beijing

I bought a metallic-painted Santana.
Loaded my wife and daughter into it.
Then drove around the city.

Around and around.

Until I arrived at that peculiar spring.
In more than thirty years of life, I had never seen spring drape itself in politics.
Newspapers and radio broadcasts praised it every day.
Described its beauty.
Celebrated its charm.

Some articles became so excessive that they transformed spring itself into a woman intoxicated by aphrodisiacs.
The scent was everywhere.

"Spiritual pollution."
"Rectification."
"Readjustment."

All the grand slogans.
All the orderly arrangements.

One by one, they were overwhelmed by the smell of instinct awakening.
Then replaced by it.

Being a businessman allowed me to see another world.
Elegant restaurants.
Luxury hotels.
Mansions hidden behind high walls.
Household goods I had never imagined existed.

The wind in Beijing sounded like banknotes rustling.
Some people found it comforting.
Others found it disgusting.

I liked it.

With Gao Yong's fifty-percent partnership model acting as an aphrodisiac, his influence allowed me to secure small contracts from various state-owned enterprises.

Nothing spectacular.
Just enough to keep the company alive.

Enough that my wife no longer depended upon her beauty to earn admiration—or jealousy—from colleagues.
The title of *Boss's Wife* settled neatly upon her dignified face.
The metallic-painted Santana allowed her to step gracefully inside while hundreds of coworkers watched.

Even though our marriage remained sexless.

Around and around.

Black cat.
White cat.
We watched a great man depart.

Hong Kong returned.
Soon Macau would return as well.

Gao Yong invited me to dinner.
I felt uneasy.

That morning, I had just visited Father's grave.
The wind sweeping across the hillside was harsh.
A headache throbbed behind my eyes. I could barely keep my balance.
I took a few unsteady steps and moved behind the headstone.

There, carved in bright red characters, four words seemed to whisper from the stone:
Loyal Guardian of the State.

“Dad.”
I said it softly.

I did not regret arguing with his political views.
I did not regret visiting him too rarely during his final illness.
I did not even regret that I had never cooked a single meal for him.

But I regretted something else.
I regretted that I had always talked back.
Always challenged him.
Always pushed against him.
If only once—just once—I had held my tongue.

The tears would not stop.

They fell one after another, striking the marble base of the monument with soft, helpless taps.

40 THE SECRET RHYTHM IN THE ENDS OF HER HAIR

Fragment: a Two-Hundred-Millisecond Burst of Laughter | my Ears Begin To Ring

Time & Location: Spring 1999 · China World Hotel, Beijing

I parked my Nissan Cefiro near the restaurant.
After walking barely twenty steps, I saw that I had guessed correctly.
The parking lot was packed with luxury cars.

Carefully, I pushed open the gilded door.

"Welcome, welcome."

"Everyone, this is my childhood friend."

"The great talent, Bai Ying."

Gao Yong touched his face.

A fingertip brushed away a tiny flake of skin.

It disappeared into a smile so carefully assembled that even I felt embarrassed by its sincerity.

I sat beside him.

Immediately, I caught a faint fragrance.

Turning my head, I saw a woman in military uniform smiling at me.

No cap.

Short hair.

Sharp.

Confident.

The secret rhythm moving through the ends of her hair flowed directly into my bloodstream.

"This beautiful lady is Xu Yanan."

Gao Yong pushed a can of Coca-Cola toward me.

Pop.

I opened it.

Pretended to study the can.

Occasionally allowing my peripheral vision to drift toward the chest beneath the tightly fitted uniform.

The lieutenant colonel's uniform had been pressed to perfection.

Not a single wrinkle.

Yet no amount of military discipline could conceal the body's quiet signals from my ears.

She had dressed herself like a lady from a Tang Dynasty painting.

But deep inside her body, subtle rhythms of choice, curiosity, and approach still moved beneath the surface.

Those sounds could not escape me.

I had not touched a drop of alcohol.

Yet she already filled the entire room.

Slowly she turned toward Gao Yong.

A faint smile.
She stopped looking at me.

After several rounds of drinking, Gao Yong began to loosen up.
"I invited everyone here because there's an opportunity."

"A rare one."
He glanced at me.
Then turned toward the military officer.

As the conversation unfolded, I gradually pieced it together.

The department where Xu Yanan worked had unusually close ties with the owner of Macau Satellite Television.
The broadcasting licenses were valuable.

Rare.

Yet they remained locked away in safes.

Generating no income.

"My dear sister."
"Help us get one of those channel licenses."
Gao Yong raised his glass.
Drained it in a single swallow.
Thirty-year-old Maotai.

I was surprised.

Gao Yong had spent years in the Central Propaganda Department.
He understood perfectly how media could be used to shape politics.
Yet his ambitions had already expanded beyond politics.

Beyond the mainland.
Toward private media.
Toward money.

I had lived more than forty years.
Never once crossed China's borders.
The outside world still felt like a place called capitalism.

Xu Yanan answered his toast.
She emptied her glass as well.
Then tilted it upside down.

A small smile.

My vision began to blur.
A reddish haze spread across it.
My ears started ringing.

Then—

"Pff."

A brief laugh.
No more than two hundred milliseconds.
It pressed the pause button on my restlessness.

"If Director Gao asks personally,"
"how could I possibly neglect it?"
"I'll check with the ministry first."

She stood.
Perhaps a little over one meter sixty.
Yet seated beside her, I always felt she was much taller.

Graceful as a crane.

She walked over to Gao Yong.
Gave him a light embrace.
Then turned to me.
A handshake.

Brief.

Almost weightless.
And she was gone.

"President Bai is about to become an international media tycoon."
"Hahahaha."
Gao Yong rose again.

And emptied another glass.

41 PRIVACY BEFORE THE PIXELS

Fragment: the Faint Whine of a Hard Drive | Seductive Bodies Reduced to Pixels,
Mechanical and Silent
Time & Location: Spring 1999 · Superpower Consulting Company, Bamboo
Garden, Beijing

The moment she left, my senses returned to normal.

What Gao Yong had said reminded me of Phoenix Television, then at the height of its influence.

It reminded me of one of its reporters questioning Zhu Rongji in a Taiwanese accent.

It reminded me of that overweight man who always presented himself to the public like a Buddha, yet had once bowed and scraped before my father while speaking with absolute confidence.

For a while, fantasies flooded my mind.

I would become famous.

A cluster of illuminated pixels in newspapers and on television screens.

Every crisp sound of cellular metabolism inside my body seemed to overwhelm instinct itself.

Everything became applause.

Everything became the sound of money being counted.

Endless.

Back at the Bamboo Garden office, I remained dissatisfied.

I opened my Toshiba laptop.

Connected the modem.

Went online.

A form of investigation at any cost had begun.

The bowl of infected pork from Guizhou.

The ten-cent price.

Those thoughts no longer occupied my mind.

Before the millennium arrived, disposable income in Beijing averaged little more than a thousand U.S. dollars per year.

My Toshiba laptop had cost thirty-five thousand yuan.

The modem alone had cost several thousand.

Monthly internet charges could easily reach several thousand more.

China had already been connected to the global Internet for a decade.

Yet the speed remained slower than a donkey cart.

The costs discouraged almost everyone.

I did not care.
Not about money.
Not about time.
I had patience.

Enough patience to wait for every page to load.

The tapping of keys.
The hissing chatter of the modem.

Inside was a world built from zeros and ones.

Every byte carried temptation.
A temptation neither my gift nor the White Crow could resist.

Perhaps humanity could exist apart from flesh.
Perhaps a human being was not merely a carbon-based machine that produced sound.

The faint whine of the spinning hard drive mixed with my increasingly heavy breathing.

A strange duet.
Impossible to stop.

An erotic gallery from Japan finally began appearing on the screen.
Frame by frame.
Like a real woman slowly removing her clothes.

Countless objects of desire assembled themselves into pixels.

Mechanical.
Silent.

No scent.
No voice.

Yet somehow more captivating than many of the women I had encountered in real life.

I slipped a hand into my trousers.