

Guangzhou

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A thesis submitted to
Auckland University of Technology
in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Creative Writing

26th February 2009

School of Communication Studies

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed:

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Date: 26th February 2009

Abstract

Seth, a savvy but shy innocent from the American mid-West, discovers the hedonism of Guangzhou when he jumps ship with the Preacher. He becomes entangled with the patriotic Snow Flake and together, they visit her remote ancestral village. But they are followed there by the shadowy figure of Lin Jun who tests Seth's commitment to the values of his forefathers and his feelings for Snow Flake.

The novel examines what it is to be a Westerner in contemporary China through the character of Seth who, with no appropriate language skills, embarks on an adventure without morals – discarding his religious beliefs, recreating himself as his imagination sees fit and running wild with the Preacher and Snow Flake.

At the same time, the novel also asks how the West should best engage China on sensitive internal issues such as the suppression of religious, spiritual, democratic and artistic movements when China grows ever stronger and more influential. This question is presented to Seth when he is totally removed from his own culture and faced with an extreme event that, even in his state of mind, is totally contrary to his own moral framework.

The exegesis discusses Seth's dilemma from the perspective of cultural relativism, that is when can an individual from one culture declare an event which takes place in another culture to be 'wrong'?

The exegesis also discusses my own dilemma of writing about a culture that is not my own and concludes that *Guangzhou* both asks how the West can engage China on sensitive issues and is also my response to this very question.

Dazed and Confused in the People's Republic of China

Introduction

Guangzhou represents applied creative research into the question of what it is to be a Westerner in a contemporary developing country. This exegesis examines this through:

- An overview of the novel writing process;
- A review of relevant literature;
- An examination of cultural relativism;
- A discussion on writing about a culture that is not my own.

The Novel Writing Process

Between 2001 and 2005, I was based in Hong Kong and spent many weeks living, travelling and working in the People's Republic of China including the cities of Beijing, Shanghai, Xiamen, Qingdao, Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Kunming, Chengdu, Lhasa and Macau as well as the Provinces of Anhui, Guangdong, Fujian and the Autonomous Region of Xinjiang (Tibet). During the Master of Creative Writing, I wanted to reflect and write about my time in China but didn't know how to tackle such an immense, almost forbidding subject. Instead, I

wrote short stories about Quincy, a disturbed teenager of American and Chinese heritage. These stories didn't come to me at all easily. I squeezed out painful liberal realist fragments but whilst doing this, found myself writing character sketches and back story for Quincy's parents. One evening, mildly hypnotized by the second voice of *Bright Lights, Big City* (Jay McInerney, 1984), I tried something different and made Quincy's father, an American called Seth, the protagonist of a short story set in Guangzhou, a metropolis of six million people in southern China and coincidentally, one of Auckland's sister cities. Although readers (that is my fellow students) commented the story was fresh and captivating, something about writing in such a free and liberated manner disturbed me and I returned to the excruciating process of writing Quincy.

Eight months into the Masters, at the beginning of November 2008, my confidence as an author had grown to the point where I could reflect more deeply on my time in China and in doing so, came to two realizations. First, I wanted my protagonist to lose himself in China's culture and people. Second, such a novel would tune into the West's paranoia about the growing power and assertiveness of developing countries.

But the question for me was how to write such a novel - how would I capture the angst of such a protagonist? Although I had read a number of novels where Westerners live and travel in developing countries, their mental health was almost always extremely robust and their behaviour disappointingly sensible. On the other hand, the disturbed characters in postmodern texts such as *The*

Crying of Lot 49 (Thomas Pynchon, 1966), *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (Hunter S. Thompson, 1971) and 'City of Glass' in *The New York Trilogy* (Paul Auster, 1987), very much appealed.

But I was still faced with the problem of how to write the novel, how to put myself in the mind of the protagonist, the mind of Seth, see China through his eyes, act as he would. True, some of my own experiences would inform the novel. I had on several occasions experienced complete and utter disorientation whilst living in China. From this, it was clear that the aforementioned short story set in Guangzhou would be the launch pad for the novel. However, I doubted whether this would be enough. As chance would have it, a fellow student told me about National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo), an annual event to write the first rough draft of a 50,000 word novel during November. I decided to join in and the pressure cooker of rolling deadlines proved to be an excellent way to simulate the frenzied mind of Seth and the pell-mell rush that is contemporary China.

Literature Review

I have examined literary works in which the protagonist is a Westerner in a developing country in order to:

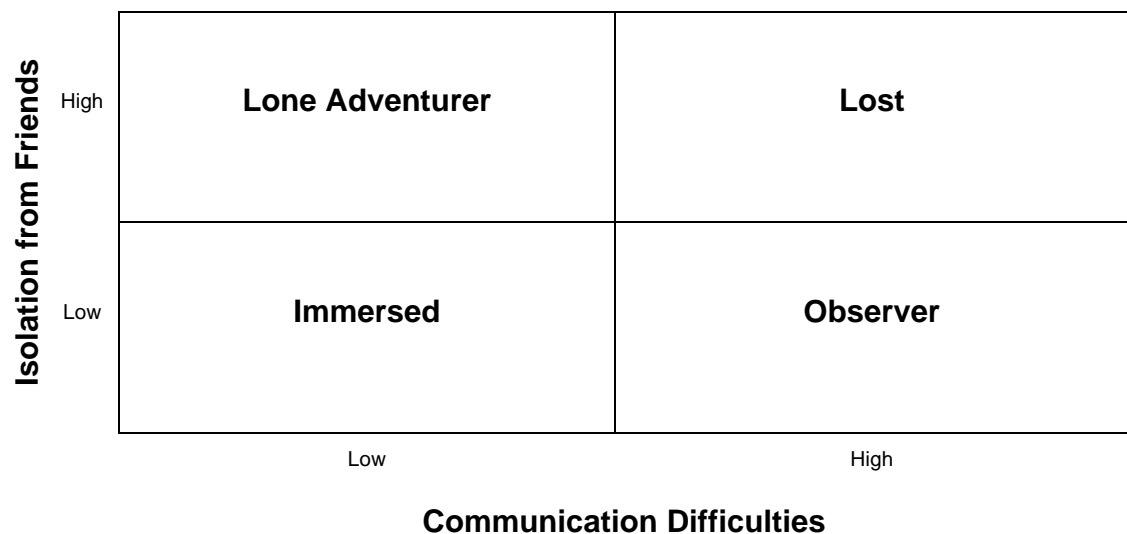
- Position the novel in its wider literary context;
- Inform subsequent discussion on the research question;

- Suggest a literary movement for the novel.

The literature review highlighted two main factors that influence the state of mind of Westerners living, working and travelling in developing countries. First, the ability to communicate without the assistance of an intermediary, be it a translator or an acquaintance. Second, the degree of isolation from friends and family. The different combinations of these factors (Figure 1) allow the definition of four states of mind:

- Detached observation of the country and its culture (the Observer);
- Total immersion in the culture and people (the Immersed);
- Adventurous, independent, self-sufficient (the Lone Adventurer);
- Complete disorientation, loss of moral compass (the Lost).

Figure 1: The Four States of Mind of Westerners in Developing Countries



So for instance, most travellers in China have language difficulties but tend not to be too isolated in that they are away from home for a relatively short time, are able to stay in touch through modern communications and may well be travelling in a group of people with a similar background. As such, travellers tend to be Observers.

In comparison, Westerners who move to China on a permanent or semi-permanent basis often develop reasonable language skills and although they are removed from their own country, are able to integrate to a reasonable degree with the local culture, making friends, falling in love and developing a deeper appreciation for the fine grain of life around them. Such people are the Immersed.

The third state of mind, the Lone Adventurer is rather strange and rare, for in this case, the Westerner lives in China, has good language skills but chooses to remain isolated, not needing the company of others, be they from his own culture or from the one he is living in.

Lastly, and of most relevance to *Guangzhou* are the Lost. The struggle of people to move to, integrate with and be accepted by another culture is of course, the story of immigration. Please note - *Guangzhou* is not concerned with these issues but rather with the opposite, in that it focuses on the Lost, those Westerners who decide to cut themselves off from their own culture and live in a

developing country with no appropriate language skills. To many, such a course of action has few, if any attractions. For some though, the opportunities for adventure, recreating themselves, running wild and rampant, is tempting in the extreme. But then the day comes, when the Lost witness an event that grossly offends them and they, through the mist of their warped values, must decide what to do.

As noted above, the literature review examined works in which the protagonist is a Westerner in a developing country. In this substantial body of literature¹, it is relatively easy to identify Observers, whether they are in travel literature such as *Riding the Iron Rooster* (Paul Theroux, 1988) or characters in novels set against the backdrop of war in Asia such as Fowler and Pyle in *The Quiet American* (Graham Greene, 1955) and Banks in *When We Were Orphans* (Kazuo Ishiguro, 2000).

The Immersed are less common than the Observers but relatively easy to find, examples include:

- In *Fragrant Harbour* (John Lanchester, 2002), Tom Stewart, an English man moves to Hong Kong in the 1930s, learns Cantonese and befriends a local nun. However, he never completely immerses himself in the Chinese culture because Hong Kong is a British Colony, a real home from home;

¹ Post submission of this exegesis, I will be examining other such texts including *A Passage to India* (E. M. Forster, 1924), *The Painted Veil* (Somerset Maugham, 1925), *Under the Volcano* (Malcolm Lowry, 1947), *Seven Years in Tibet* (Heinrich Harrer, 1953), *City of Joy* (Dominique Lapierre, 1985) and *The Year of Living Dangerously* (Christopher Koch, 1979).

- Philip Morgan in *The Chequer Board* (Nevil Shute, 1947) immerses himself to a much greater extent. After World War II, he stays in Burma, learns the language, marries a local girl and establishes himself as a respected figure in his village.
- The best example though is *Shantaram* (Gregory David Roberts, 2003), in which Lin, a convicted Australian bank robber is on the run and needs to hide from the authorities. He does this by flying to India (via New Zealand) and living in the Bombay slums where he learns not only Hindi but also a local dialect, Marathi. He becomes best friends with a local taxi driver, Prabaker and lives in Prabaker's home village for six months such that he can develop a better understanding of the people he is living with and actively helping in the slums.

With regard to the Lone Adventurer, I have not come across any suitable fictional characters in the literature review. The closest has been the real life character of Joseph Needham (1900-1995) portrayed in the non-fiction *Bomb, Book and Compass* (Simon Winchester, 2008). Needham was a British academic who was fluent in Chinese before he arrived in China in 1942 on a mission to provide British support to the Chinese scientific community during the Japanese occupation. Needham was a gifted and eccentric individual who being totally absorbed in his work, seemed to have little need for real friendship during his time in China.

And to the last state of mind. Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* (Joseph Conrad, 1902) is an exemplar of the Lost. In the story, Marlow, a seaman and wanderer, leads a river expedition into the African jungle to find Kurtz, a brilliant ivory trader. But Kurtz has lost his mind, succumbed to being totally isolated and surrounded by a very alien culture. As he lies dying in front of Marlow, Kurtz regrets what he has done, the atrocities he has committed – “He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision—he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath – “The horror! The horror!””

Figure 2 summarizes the findings of the literature review.

Figure 2: Summary of Literature Review Findings

Isolation from Friends	High	Lone Adventurer Joseph Needham in <i>Bomb, Book and Compass</i> (Simon Winchester, 2008)	Lost Kurtz in <i>Heart of Darkness</i> (Joseph Conrad, 1902)
	Low	Immersed Lin in <i>Shantaram</i> (Gregory David Roberts, 2003) Tom Stewart in <i>Fragrant Harbour</i> (John Lanchester, 2002) Philip Morgan in <i>The Chequer Board</i> (Nevil Shute, 1947)	Observer <i>Riding the Iron Rooster</i> (Paul Theroux, 1988) Fowler and Pyle in <i>The Quiet American</i> (Graham Greene, 1955) Banks in <i>When We Were Orphans</i> (Kazuo Ishiguro, 2000).
		Low	High
Communication Difficulties			

Interestingly, whilst some of the works reviewed tuned into a particular Zeitgeist, the one with greatest resonance for me was that of *Heart of Darkness*. Written in the final years of the 19th century when the British Empire was its peak, the novel questioned colonial attitudes towards ‘savages’ and ‘savage customs’ and in doing so, suggested that such views would contribute to the ultimate demise of the empire. The spotlighting of colonialism’s evils is largely due to the novel’s Modernism. One facet of this is Kurtz himself who, until his final breaths, is absolutely certain that he has the answers, that he knows without any doubt how to solve the problems before him.

In comparison, *Guangzhou* has been written at a time when neither West nor East is dominant². The novel celebrates many aspects of China, its exuberance and zest, dynamism and strength. At the same time, the novel questions the West’s attitudes towards China and its handling of sensitive internal issues such as the persecution of peaceful religious, spiritual and political movements such as the Dalai Lama, the Falun Gong and Charter 08. In general, the West’s approach is cautious and confused because the answers are by no means clear or straightforward. In the novel, Seth’s postmodern bewilderment, fear and paranoia reflects the West’s numerous China-related dilemmas. Seth’s confusion leads us to a discussion on cultural relativism, the principle that an

² The exegesis uses ‘West’ and ‘East’ in the interests of brevity. The terms are far from satisfactory – as are the alternatives, e.g. North / South, developed / developing countries, First / Third World. Similarly, the term ‘dominance’ does not imply superiority of West over East or vice versa, rather it refers to issues such as economic size, military prowess and technological advancement which can be quantitatively assessed.

individual's beliefs and activities should be understood in terms of his own culture.

Examining Cultural Relativism

Why should the West be concerned about such issues when they are largely internal and not a concern for the majority of people living in China? Is the West concerned about these issues because they appear 'wrong' when viewed through Western eyes?

Throughout the novel, Seth comes across situations and attitudes which are very different from those he has experienced before. Towards the end of the novel however, he is confronted by an extreme event which he finds disturbing and contrary to moral framework. As a result, he is faced with a dilemma on what to do: either take no action, maintain the status quo (that is, remain Lost); or behave as the Immersed would (that is, see the event through Chinese eyes); or act as an Observer would (that is, see the event from the perspective of his own culture).

Seth's perceptions of China are shaped by the norms of his own culture, that of the American mid-West. Hence, when he comes across a market selling live animals for consumption, he is shocked. Similarly, when he meets the elusive Snow Flake he is captivated by her Oriental beauty. In the first half of the novel, Seth is largely unaware that his perceptions are shaped by his own culture and falls into the trap of stereotyping those around him, most obviously Snow Flake.

This could be attributed to his youth, naivety and background but at the same time, it is not untypical amongst people visiting another country or interacting with a different culture.

Seth's awareness grows through the novel particularly when he leaves the city of Guangzhou and travels to Snow Flake remote's ancestral village. By the time, he is confronted by the extreme event, Seth's awareness has increased to the point where he understands the fundamental problem with cultural relativism. That is, at what point does an event transition from being 'right' in the context of the culture it is taking place in to being 'wrong' irrespective of the cultural context. Or put another way, when can an individual from one culture declare an event which takes place in another culture to be 'wrong'? If the individual has only seen the event from his own perspective, then it is easy to advise him to also view it from the perspective of the culture that it is taking place in. But what if the individual has viewed the event both from his own perspective and that of the host culture and still declares the event to be 'wrong'?

At this point, it is worth examining my postionality viz. a viz. *Guangzhou*. A comparison between Seth and I would show that we are similar in some respects (e.g. Westerners in China, fatherless, searching for our roots, questioning of religion and frustrated in our ambitions) but different in other respects (e.g. age, nationality, naivety, aspirations, prospects and degree of being Lost).

So what does Seth do when faced by the dilemma? He acts in a way that is consistent both with his own culture and background but also with his personal aspirations and prospects. This is the defining difference between Seth and I for if I was confronted by the same extreme event as Seth is, I would (I think, I hope) take a different course of action from the one he chooses.

My views on the fundamental problem with cultural relativism are examined during the next section.

Writing About a Culture That is Not My Own³

Writing about another culture is fraught with difficulties and leaves the author vulnerable to disapproval even condemnation. One such example is the controversy surrounding *The Penguin History of New Zealand* (Michael King, 2003) in which a writer of European descent established a version of history that was strongly disputed by many Maori. This is an interesting case because the author wrote (in his view at least) an accurate and objective non-fiction book. However, when authors write convincing authentic fiction about a culture that is not their own, the potential to offend can be even greater, with *The Satanic Verses* (Salman Rushdie, 1988) being probably the most vivid recent instance of this.

Another example is provided by one of the works examined in the literature review. The New Yorker criticized *The Quiet American* (Graham Greene, 1955)

³ It is to be noted that the novel includes two cultures that are not my own – both the Peoples Republic of China and the American mid-West. In this exegesis, I focus on the former given the greater degree of dissimilarity and potential to cause offence.

for portraying Americans as murderers and the critic Philip Stratford commented that “American readers were incensed, perhaps not so much because of the biased portrait of obtuse and destructive American innocence and idealism in Alden Pyle, but because in this case it was drawn with such acid pleasure by a middle-class English snob like Thomas Fowler whom they were all too ready to identify with Greene himself” (Nordgren, 2005).

The final example is more personal. Whilst watching the New Zealand premier of *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* (2006, dir. Ken Loach), a film that sympathetically portrays the struggle of the Irish Republican Army (the IRA) against the British between 1919 and 1923, I had an intense desire to walk out of the auditorium. The film offended me because growing up in the UK during the 1980s, the news was saturated with the atrocities committed by the IRA, its supporters and enemies: nail bombs exploding under bandstands in central London; the kneecapping of informers with Black & Decker power tools. I was particularly offended because I thought the director was an American and in the darkness probably muttered, ‘interfering foreigners’ and ‘clearly he doesn’t know what he’s talking about.’ But the film challenged me to think about how others perceived my own culture, forced me to ask whether us Brits had been manipulated by the media into supporting what was a costly and complex war. In the auditorium after the end of the film, I discovered that the director was actually English. This in turn forced me to put aside my prejudices and ask the only questions that really matter, Did the film work? Was it convincing, authentic? Did it make me think?

The above discussion is relevant in this exegesis for two reasons. First, *Guangzhou* is set in China but I am not Chinese. In this respect, some readers may complain about the novel's authenticity much as I did with *The Wind That Shakes the Barley*⁴. Second and more importantly, the extreme event that Seth is confronted by may well offend those with strong ties to the People's Republic of China.

Before we examine writing about a culture that is not my own in more detail, let us ask whether artists have the right to criticize their own culture. In many countries in the West and East, the majority would answer with an unequivocal 'yes' and some would go further and say that such criticism is an essential part of being an artist. However, this is very different from the current situation in China but it has not always been like this. In particular, the May Fourth movement of the interwar years produced many brilliant modern novels such as *A Madman's Diary* (Lu Xun, 1918) which criticized the past, questioned the present and defined the future. The issue though is that with the exception of the brief period of openness under the Hundred Flowers movement in 1957, the Chinese Communist Party incentivizes artists in various ways to examine only certain topics and to examine these only to a certain degree. Whilst the situation is by no means straightforward, it is clear that artistic freedom is currently heavily restricted in China.

⁴ I have already had a disagreement with a Chinese friend about the produce on sale at Bright Peace Market in Guangzhou featured in the first chapter. I have found such disagreements to be extremely common on sensitive issues in contemporary China. A classic example is the 'Tiananmen Incident.' Well-educated, liberal-thinking Chinese people in their thirties will tell you point blank that the soldiers were provoked to violence by the students. Such disagreements are enough to make you doubt your own view of events, even if, as in the case of Bright Peace Market, you have experienced them first hand.

There is an argument that these issues are internal and of no concern to outsiders. There is another argument that if I understood the Chinese perspective better I would have a different view. But my interest is not in the internality of issues or the validity of my views but about a more fundamental question, that is whether China's current position on certain issues is consistent with its emerging superpower status and leadership role. The fact that authors in China are forced to limit their exploration of this and many other questions is more than adequate justification to write a novel which aims to both entertain and encourage readers to consider how the West responds to issues that are considered 'right' by a culture that will in due course assume global dominance.

In conclusion, we have the following situation. If I was a well-known Chinese author living in China and published a novel which included the extreme event, it would be highly likely that the novel would be banned or suppressed. But does this mean that it is my prerogative to write the extreme event? No doubt my views would have more weight if they were made by well-respected Chinese authors such as Xinran and Laowu who live outside China and whose writings are critical of some elements of their own culture. But this rather misses the point on two counts. First, *Guangzhou* examines what it is to be Westerner in China and as such, it seems appropriate that it has been written by a Westerner from the perspective of a Western protagonist. Second and more importantly, the novel both asks how the West can engage China on sensitive issues when the country is in the ascendancy and is also my *response* to this very question. In short, there is no need for individuals to be afraid or meek about making their

views known on issues in China which seem fundamentally 'wrong' to them. Instead, individuals can positively and proactively interact with China and Chinese people on such issues. *Guangzhou* is my contribution.

Guangzhou

A Novel

James Muir

For Beverley and Snoop.

“All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz; and by-and-by I learned that, most appropriately, the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs had intrusted him, with the making of a report, for its future guidance. And he had written it, too. And I’ve seen. I’ve read it. It was eloquent, vibrating with eloquence, but too high-strung, I think. Seventeen pages of close writing he has found time for! But this must have been before his – let us say – nerves, went wrong, and caused him to preside at certain midnight dances ending with unspeakable rites, which - as far as I reluctantly gathered from what I heard at various times – were offered up to him – do you understand? – to Mr Kurtz himself.”

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

The Preacher said he'd be here, said he wouldn't move from this board pasted with timetables for trains to and from the city of Guangzhou. But he's not here and you're left staring at a dense array of characters, meaningless strokes and squiggles, a mass of information you'll never understand. It is too much - you close your eyes. The public address system does not let up from its insistent buzz, a train powers up its engines with a throaty sputter, a whiff of diesel makes you gag. You turn and look down the concourse, a vast hall almost devoid of people, topped far above by a latticed hood of steel and glass.

You see the Preacher now. He is two hundred yards away, back towards you, hunched forward, gazing at another set of timetables. Your shout is hammered into a pitiful whisper by the drone of the loudspeakers. As you stride towards him, the brakes of a train squeal. Before it even comes to a halt, doors burst open with a clatter that reverberates round the station and passengers spew from the train, a solid wall of humanity and chatter that pounds down the platform. You try to hold your course but the swirling, shoving crowd knocks you off balance. As you stumble, giddy panic pinpricks your back with a hot surge of sweat. You are to be trampled underfoot less than an hour after crossing the border. But the crowd is so dense that you cannot fall. You are swept along, caught up with its vigour and excitement as on a raft down a swollen river. The crowd thins as quickly as it formed. You drop out of the flow and are left watching the tailenders make their way across the pimpled concrete. The proud shoulders of an old lady carrying a baby swaddled in a crimson blanket. The

confused stumbling of a child separated from his mother, the scooped dimples around his mouth as they are reunited.

You sidle up to the Preacher but he doesn't acknowledge your presence. His barrel-chest strains against the buttons of his shirt and pulls him forward from the waist in a continual totter which, with the pendulum of skin from his neck, reminds you of a Thanksgiving turkey. That said, he is no bird brain, quite the opposite. His eyes dart and twitch, processing every detail.

The timetables he is staring at are not timetables after all. Instead, the pages of a newspaper have been separated, spread out, pinned to a board, imprisoned behind glass. The dense columns of characters are rarely interrupted by headlines. The Preacher takes a step forward so that he is no more than a few inches from the glass. He still hasn't looked your way.

Are you reading that?

Yes.

And...?

And what?

And what does it say?

I'll tell you another time.

If you want to go back, now would be best. Just jump on a train back to the border. Take your shore leave somewhere more familiar, wallow in the blandness of your own company. You pray to the Lord but receive no guidance. The same happened this morning once the guard had stamped your passport. The Preacher said it was because He could not see past the rolls of barbed wire

and chain link fence but you know Him better than that. The Preacher said the trip would be good for you, said it'd open your eyes, help you understand yourself and your enemies. You just need to silence the insistent drone that fills your mind, that pushes against your skull. You don't know it yet but apart from one blissful moment, you will not find peace for the next seven days and after that, a serenity you have not known before.

So you're here. You're in the heart of Guangzhou. It is noon. Beneath jaundiced skies, you and the Preacher look out across the Pearl River, swollen and murky, as it oozes through the city to seek relief in its final destination. Sampans, laden with plastic crates and hessian sacks churn the water, bows upturned as if thumbing their noses. One passes close by. The men aboard lean back against the cargo with legs akimbo or dangled over the side. They take deep drags on stumps of cigarettes and look out towards you and the Preacher with narrowed eyes. A man, better dressed than the others, his head bald as a pool ball, is definitely staring. You tug at the Preacher's arm and tell him but he waves you away without looking. 'Better get used to it,' he says.

You hear screams off to the left and ignore them. You do not want to leave the river. In some sense, it is familiar, comforting in this alien place. It brings back memories of services at the Mormon Tabernacle, father driving you home in the truck, him pulling up at a picnic spot, the two of you sitting side by side picking blueberries out of still warm muffins, looking out across to the Great Salt Lake. But here in Guangzhou, the screaming carries on, like the time father shut slammed the tailgate on your fingers and you could not get them out no

matter how hard you tried.

The Preacher leads you away from the river and towards the screams. They become louder, more pitiful, wilder, without end. You do not seem to be the only ones who want to find out more. The street is now full of people, dust and hubbub. The Preacher points at a canvas banner that hangs across the street, tells you it says Bright Peace Market. The place may be a market but it is anything but peaceful for the lines of caged animals, which squawk and screech, howl and roar, squirm in the stink of their own shit. The Preacher says it wasn't so long ago that a monkey's skull would be sliced open like a boiled egg and its brains eaten with a long-handled spoon. 'Did I mention that the monkey on the menu was still alive?' he says.

You pass a canvas shack with a wooden counter out front. A man wearing a pair of fuchsia rubber gloves puts a bucket down like he's about to start the washing up. He pulls out a plump frog that blows bubbles with its throat and looks over at you. The man picks up a square-cornered knife, the blade almost as wide as it is long, and wipes one side, then the other across his trousers. Chopped in half, the frog is watermelon, olive skin round pink pulp. The legs keep thrashing, scrabble across the wooden counter as if trying to escape. You walk away but a man follows, shaking a paper bag full of dried eyeballs, plucked from the sockets of snowy owls. He insists they let you see in the dark. You'd always thought that was the Lord's job but here in Guangzhou, you're no longer so certain.

At least the Preacher is here. Turns out he's been here many times

before. He doesn't say when or why or with whom and you don't like to ask because he's in full flow, telling stories, more than a few. How this is a city where no-one knows him but he is always the centre of attention. Where there are many laws but no rules. Where there is wickedness and debauchery, as much as he wants, as much as he can stand. You and he pass the afternoon playing pool in an empty hall. Sunlight slants through a skylight, catching the blue chalk dust that hangs in the air.

Even if you ignore the turkey genes that have moulded his body, it cannot be said that the Preacher is handsome or even pleasant looking. In less charitable moments, you wonder whether his grandmother could have loved that face. But there he is talking to a couple of girls, twins by the look of it. They are enchanted by his every word, delivered slow and patronising, in his southern drawl. You wonder why he doesn't speak to them in their own language. It's almost as if he's showing you the ropes, demonstrating how it's done round here. But you don't want to know - even if you cannot hear Him, you know He is still here, still with you. You turn back to the table, try your best to shut out the stories he is spinning for the twins, tales of glamour and riches, jazz and paddle steamers. You bend over, line up the cue ball and take the shot. The pink speeds down the table, bounces off the cushion way wide of the pocket. You turn to see the Preacher heading for the door, a girl under each arm. He doesn't even look back. You lean against the table and sip your lemonade.

By the time he returns, the sterile glare of neon seeps through the skylight. He chalks up, blows off the blue and clears the table without pausing,

each ball potted with a crack and a thud. But with the black he's different, plays it like a pin ball machine. It cannons across the table from one cushion to another until it trickles over the lip of the pocket. He sets up for another game, puts the triangle on the table, traces shapes inside, tickling the green baize with his fingertips. From the corner of the table, you watch him and do the same. Perhaps his grandmother hired the twins as a down payment on her will. Perhaps the Lord is not here after all. Perhaps it's your chance to find company, solace, whatever you want, right now, right here in Guangzhou.

2.

Outside, the night air is cool and refreshing. The Preacher swaggers into a drinking den but stops just inside the door, hands in pockets, scanning the crowd through his half-moon spectacles. A girl comes up to him, 'Hey, buy me a drink,' she says. He tells her no and she walks away. You look at him, surprised. 'I ain't gonna buy no chick nothing. Especially in this joint – it's full of hookers.' You think of the twins in the pool hall, wonder if they came free of charge. You want to ask his secret, his tricks of the trade but you say nothing.

The bar next door he declares clean. You and the Preacher take a booth of padded scarlet, screened off from the crowd. When he first came here, he tells you, he just played pool and drank beer. Then he got into ketamine cut with a little speed. You've no idea what he's talking about. He holds out a sugar cube. 'For what you are about to receive, may you be truly thankful,' he says. You bow your head, close your eyes, whisper Amen, pop it in your mouth, let it dissolve on the tip of your tongue. Sweet juices run to the back of your mouth and down your throat. But there's another flavour as well. You look up at him.

What's ketamine?

Tranquiliser.

Tranquiliser?

For horses.

It's too late now. You recite the Lord's Prayer as best you can. You ask Him for help but the buzzing in your head has become even louder. You grip the table as the booth pitches and rolls. Your tongue is too swollen for your mouth,

you champ on its edges as the Preacher pontificates about religion and democracy.

The table is now festooned with cocktails. You've been joined by a party who've ordered every drink on the list, some joker has even got the Goldfish. You slurp a strawberry daiquiri and pips become wedged between your teeth. You're afraid to smile, even speak. Your spittle pumps back and forth, rinsing as if at the dentists. Your tongue rolls into a tube, becomes a toothpick. You prod and probe as best you can but in desperation your hands tear off a strip of tablecloth and floss away like a pair of old school lumberjacks with a bow saw. The damn goldfish gives you a gummy grin from the safety of his bowl. He swims right up to the glass, goes all gilded and blurry, leaps out with the magnification. You find some wooden chopsticks in a waxed paper envelope and scrape them against each other until their tips are as sharp as spears. But he's cunning, floats in the open then darts away as you stab down, shelters under an ice cube or lemon wedge and smirks. Your own jaw aches and twinges. You lean back exhausted and close your eyes.

When you awake, it's just you, the Preacher and a tall glass of tomato juice spiked with a celery shaft. A girl appears, tall with clear skin, her midnight sleek hair concealing her ears. Her English is excellent even if words like fabulous and superb seem a little quaint. The Preacher asks whether she'd like a drink. She nods, hesitates where to sit, then slips onto the bench beside you, brushing her arm against yours.

The Preacher turns on the same Southern charm, even repeats the yarns

of jazz and paddleboats. She leans forward, delicate elbows on the table, slender fingers interlaced, a cradle for her chin. You expect them to make their excuses, leave the tomato juice alone except for you. But the Preacher is watching her, how she twists her straw, rubs her nose, fiddles with her bracelet. And as he watches, he becomes less and less talkative until you realise you're your turn to pick up the conversation.

You laugh with her, talk to her, drink with her. But you know the form. When it comes to girls, you might get close, might flirt, might be flirted with but will you see it through? Of course not. You will wind yourself up until He intervenes with a well-timed whisper and you will spend the next day pondering what might have been.

She stands up, trots off to the ladies. The Preacher leans towards you, beckons as if ready to deliver a sermon. You are not wrong. Your faces are inches apart, his breath steamy overlaid with wine, his skin the ashen matt of candle wax. He clears his throat. Number one, she is a Trophy Hunter seeking Westerners for the three Ps: passport, prestige, and of course, purse strings. Number two, she is a Long Haired Dictionary – a mythical creature who just wants to practice her English but is rarely found bar hopping at two in the morning. He leans even further forward. The Preacher takes your hand in his. To your surprise, it is as dry and cool as an autumn day. 'I don't want to talk to you as no evangelist,' he says. 'But three things remain – faith, hope and love. The greatest of these is love.' You look at him. He glows from within. He is right. This could be it. She could be the one for you.

The Preacher hails a cab. You hold the back door open and the Preacher parades his manners by clambering in first. She follows and you debate whether to squeeze in the back with them or take the passenger seat by yourself. You duck down and look in. The Preacher's scrawny arm is already across the parcel shelf, ready to cocoon her at the first opportunity. You stand up, hand on the door ready to close it. Cars whiz by, honking indiscriminately. You turn your back to the traffic, you watch your shadow lengthen then disappear as the traffic passes by. You bend down again and climb in beside her. She smiles. You are not sure whether the Preacher's glare is playful, serious or cunning. You wave the card for your hotel in front of the driver. He takes it from you, switches on the vanity light and holds it up to his eyes. Still he cannot make it out. 'Baitian e Binguang' she says. The driver nods, holds up his hand in thanks. You press up against each other as the cab lurches round corners. She squeals with delight whenever you or the Preacher lean into her. The three of you bounce up and down through the potholes, springs poking through the seat. She is squirming now, nuzzling your neck, blowing in your ear. You lean back, head lolling in bliss. She takes a break. You open your eyes, only to see her doing the same to the Preacher. She turns back to you, slips her hand between the buttons of your shirt, seeking, tweaking. She leans forward, unbuckles her heels, hooks her leg over yours, strokes the back of your calf with her toes. The Preacher lays his palm flat against her inner thigh. She flicks her tongue at him, traces slow circles in the air.

The three of you stumble into the hotel lobby, all marble slab and mood lighting. Cathedral hush smother your spirits until you trip on a rug, fall forward onto your knees. Their laughter soars up into the darkness. It takes a while to find the lifts, stumbling down dead-end corridors, rattling doors bolted top and bottom. But you find it, ride up to the eighth floor.

Out of the lift, your arms are round each others' shoulders, the girl swinging between you and the Preacher, kicking up her feet as if she were at a playground. Two lines of black doors flank the corridor, barely muffling the ecstatic moans and shouting behind. The Preacher's door is way before yours. His grip on the girl tightens. So does yours. She stops her swinging, looks at you, then the Preacher, runs her fingers through his hair, then digs her nails into yours leaving a rapturous, tingling line across your scalp. His door is the next one along. You cannot tell whether it leads to a garden of illicit joy or to the edge of a dank abyss. But the Preacher peels away, rummages in his pocket for the key and is gone with a smile and a wink. You salute him and call out good night.

Inside your room, the girl heads straight for the bathroom. You slump against the door and wall, take off your socks and shoes. The thickpile carpet between your toes would make a perfect resting place but the bed, no matter how far away it seems, is your destination. You fall into the scent of clean linen, your feet in blessed zero gravity. Fingertips stroke your temples, your hair, tracing each vertebra down to your tailbone. Her knuckles work in circles back up to your shoulders, thumbs kneading flesh.

You can hear her in the shower now, her clothes on the floor, mirror misted with steam. Water falls across her, soap glistens where she can't reach. Should you join her? You should wait, wait until she returns, floats on a perfumed cloud, hair in shining strands. She begins to murmur from within the downpour, gliding up and down through scales unknown. She calls out your name, merges it with her songs, plays with it.

You ask Him for help but He cannot hear you. You are alone in your moment of need, out of His sight and earshot, free to explore and experiment. You flip over and sit up, unbutton your shirt, unbuckle your belt, stand up and step out of your pants. You place one hand against the wall for balance as you peel off your underwear. You bat your penis from hand to hand as if trying to wake an exhausted tortoise, head hanging limp and shrivelled from its shell. As you straighten up, so does your reflection in the mirror opposite. Your biceps may have thickened from lugging trash in that airless room aboard the ship but your nickname of Bones still fits. Your father's olive skin drumtight across your mother's delicate frame but neither of them lay claim to your head, bulbous and bobbing, a balloon on a stick. You turn away, pull on your underwear, lie down on the bed, curl up into a question mark.

You hear a distant knocking. She's still in the shower, still singing but her melody falters. You hear a loud rap. The door to your room sweeps across the carpet. A policeman is standing just inside the room. The girl is looking down at you, wearing a robe of blossom silk, a knotted chord round her waist.

Why didn't you come when I called you?

Fell asleep.

You fell asleep?

The policeman is shouting at her, jabbing his finger with every word. Her reply is an unrelenting scream, occasional spittle arcing through the air to land in spots on his uniform. She looks over to you for help but you can only gaze at the caramel curve of her breasts. 'He thinks I'm a prostitute,' she says. The policeman stops his rant, she sits down on the bed next to you.

Pretend I'm your girlfriend.

Why?

So he won't kick me out.

I can't.

Just put your arm round me.

It's not right.

You are sitting on a bench that looks out across the Pearl River. Last time you looked it was almost five. It's only an hour or so until breakfast. You'd check your watch but she has fallen asleep on your arm and you don't want to wake her. An aged couple walks by. They pause and smile, wish you *zao shang hao*, and walk on a little further. They take off their clothes to reveal swimming costumes from the 1950s. She is in flamingo, sporting a garlanded cap. He wears trunks, once tight, now gaping. A web of veins purple down her thighs into the ravine between her legs, wrinkled skin dangles in folds. Hand in hand, they walk into the water and swim upstream.

You look down at the girl. She is waking, rubbing her eyes, sitting up. She looks over to you, shuffles the tiniest fraction away so that your arm falls from her shoulders. You sit there side by side. The swimmers float by on their backs, singing to each other and the dawn.

3.

You ask if she's hungry and she nods with the disdain of an over-pampered cat. You hail a cab. She gets in the front and slams the door, leaves you to the vinyl expanse that is the back seat.

The cab pulls up outside ornamental gardens. Concrete paths wind beneath cherry blossoms, linger by waterfalls cascading into pools streaked with carp, lead to a manicured lawn punctured by a skyscraper, an isolated finger of mirror glass that disappears heavenwards into the smog.

You and the girl join the line to enter the tower. You are not the tallest but you are without question the only Westerner. People turn round, stare for a moment then stare some more. You smile, they smile, they sometimes even wave. From behind, you hear whispered conversations, the odd snigger and a hissed *laowai*. As the line inches forward towards the x-ray machine, she tells you of the peasants who smuggle in bombs of boiled fertiliser to avenge the deaths of their children, killed by the tower's construction. When you step through, lights blink, outraged by the belt and chunky buckle that father wore on the campaign trail to places like Hanksville, Escalante and Moab.

You and the girl are the last ones into the lift. As you squeeze into the reek of stale sweat and chilli breath, the passengers stop talking and look up to the ceiling. You grip her hand and work your way to the back of the lift, lean against the wall and close your eyes. At first, the darkness helicopters around but then settles and soothes. You hear the doors close, feel the lift accelerate, decide to take advantage of the close packed bodies to caress the small of her

back. You feel her body stiffen and shift but she has nowhere to go. You trace figures of eight along her backbone, projecting lewd images onto the inside of your eyelids. As the lift doors open so do your eyes. But it is not her beside you. Instead, your fingertips press through the checked shirt of a teenage boy, his acne aflame with confusion. The lift empties. You are the last one to leave.

You step into the very middle of a restaurant called Coconuts, the size of a baseball pitch and filled with the sound of complaining battery hens. The place is crammed with circular tables, spaced just far enough apart for waiters to squeeze between. Around each table, a dozen people lean forward, turning the Lazy Susan this way and that, chopsticking delicacies from ceramic bowls.

A lady sitting at the table closest to the lift notices you. Her hair is piled on top of her head and her violet mascara has been applied in generous sweeps. She taps her neighbour on the shoulder and together, they announce your arrival to everyone at the table. Now you have twelve pairs of eyes on you. The two tables either side of the first stop talking and turn to look as well. Within thirty seconds, the whole room is staring. You can only hear the belch of the air conditioners and the clatter of the kitchen. People stand up for a better view, those behind them stand on their chairs and pretty soon, people are clambering onto the tables, weaving from side to side to see what all the fuss is about. In the far distance, you see a group of onlookers sway from side to side as if on a ship at sea, then disappear with a crash and splintering of glass and ceramics.

A wiry man wearing a maroon suit and slicked back hair, rushes forward, spits instructions into a microphone on a stalk. Loud speakers pipe in the

opening chords of a song you heard many times last night. The diners look towards the kitchen. The doors swing open and a line of chefs and kitchen hands stream out, wiping their hands on towels, straightening their paper hats. From a box held by a waiter, they pull out tambourines, maracas and bongos. They clap above their heads and the crowd joins in and as the room starts to sing, only the lady with the violet mascara is still staring at you.

The manager shows you and the girl to a small bare table behind velvet drapes. He lays the table with movements so deft that for a moment, you glance away from her. With a flourish, he places a china teapot on the table. The spout is chipped and dribbles on the tablecloth.

You discover her name is Snow Flake. Your mind fills with geometric patterns and memories of an autumn trip to the Tetons. You tell her how the crystals fell through the mountain air, landed on the back of your ungloved hand, melted into the remnant of a kiss. The way you stood with your mouth wide open, tongue stuck out so far your cheek muscles ached. The way one landed on your tongue with a glorious chilled spasm and distant taste of ice. She laughs and says perhaps it's not her real name after all.

The table is so narrow and her legs so long that even if you didn't want to, you cannot but help rub your knees against hers. She giggles, looks coy.

When we're in public, you must behave.

But nobody can see us.

No matter. I'm a respectable girl.

You take the opportunity to ask what she does. She pouts, pretends not

to understand, reads the menu, recommends the house speciality. When you try again, she asks the meaning of your name.

Appointed.

For what?

Don't know.

Who does?

Father.

And?

He wanted me to go into politics.

But you didn't?

Why don't we order?

She tells you about the crab restaurants which once lined Ocean Street but now lie pummelled in the foundations of the tower. How they remained even when the sea retreated under a barrage of dumper trucks, diggers, slam pilers and jack hammers. When you ask what a jack hammer is, she drills the forefinger of one hand into the open palm of the other. You watch her, then lean forward and take her hands in yours. She lets you hold them for a moment then eases away.

You can't work her out. This morning on the bench, she sidled away but now she seems proud to be out with you in public. Perhaps she really is the one. But you know there's nothing tender or caring about what you feel. You just want to hire a room by the hour on a street whose name you won't remember. She'll be pallid and exhausted, but you'll throw her on the bed and as you start

on her, you'll admire how her pale skin blends into the blizzard of sheets. But these feeling are surely not your own. This will go no further than this lunch and in six days time, you will cross back over the border, back into His sight, as unblemished as when you left.

You each have a crab buried under a carpet of wrinkled fire chillies. The manager lays out an array of tools - nutcrackers, two pronged forks and skewers of different lengths and diameters. 'Just use your fingers – I always do,' she says. That is the last time she looks at you, speaks to you, even knows you are there until all that is left on her plate is a neat stack of shells, hollowed out legs and empty claws, cracked and cleaned with the most particular care and attention. She waggles her fingers in a bowl filled with warm water and a slice of lemon. Your side of the table is flecked with splinters of shell, dabs of soy sauce, granules of brown sugar.

The manager reappears to clear her plate, brush away your mess. He glances at you, garbles to her. She laughs, looks over to you, says something in reply. He smiles, nods, looks at you again.

What did he say?

Nothing.

He said something. He said something about me.

Nothing that matters.

Just tell me, Snow Flake. Tell me now.

And if I don't?

I'll walk out now, leave you with the bill.

So the guards can bring you back ?

Just tell me what he said.

He asked if you enjoyed your meal.

And...?

Whether we're still hungry.

The manager sets down a tub of rice. She serves you, fills your bowl, then hers. You apologise but she waves you away, disinterested, points to your bowl as if rice was more important than rudeness. You change the subject, tell her about being a pilot aboard the aircraft carrier, about being launched on missions, catapulted into the blue. How you pull turns, skate across the sky, how on your return, the ship brings you to a standstill with her taut embrace.

Snow Flake's been leaning forward ever since you mentioned the word pilot. You tell her about the squeeze of gravities, the weightless rush at the top of a turn before you stall and fall and pull it together again. The places you've seen, the volcanoes that have quaked as you blasted over, the dragon you saw on top of ole smokey. She leans even further forward. A lock of hair unravels, falls across her face, but she does not move it. Instead she looks at you through a dark veil. Her lips move in a whisper.

What else do you do?

Isn't a pilot enough?

Yes but is there anything else?

That's all I can tell you.

The drapes twitch, the Preacher puts his head between the drapes. He is

freshly shaven, a line of fluffy down across his cheekbones marking the limit of his razor. 'Don't mind me,' he says. 'I just came to see how you two were getting along.' The manager brings him a chair. The Preacher pours tea for Snow Flake, then you, then himself. He leans back as if watching television. Snow Flake looks at him, leans forward. 'Is Seth really a pilot?' she says.

The Preacher looks at you. He places a hand on your shoulder and squeezes. He smiles, proud you have been watching him, learning from him. He turns to Snow Flake.

He is indeed.

And you, are you a pilot too?

No. I just work in the trash room.

4.

You catch a cab with Snow Flake from the bottom of the tower. This time, you open the back door for her with a flourish and as she climbs in, she tugs at your hand to follow. She garbles to the driver and leans back in the seat as if waiting. You start another pilot story but she interrupts.

Does the Preacher know?

Know what?

Know that you are the appointed one?

No.

Sure?

Yes.

She pulls down the arm rest and looks out the window. The cab heads away from the tower, drives through the gardens and joins the freeway, jammed with traffic, the tarmac hazy with heat.

Why don't you ask me about my job?

You wouldn't tell me before.

Try again.

Ok. What do you do?

Motorbike messenger.

Really?

No.

What then?

Used to be investor relations.

For?

A company that pumped out plastic figures of Mary, Joseph, Gabriel.

Christ as well?

In a manger, walking on water, crucifixion. And our best selling model.

Resurrection?

Sexy Jesus.

The driver is drumming his fingers on the steering wheel, looking at his watch. He checks his mirrors one by one, twists round in his seat, takes a good look then dips out of the queue onto the hard shoulder, skims along to the next exit, glides down the ramp, turns left at an intersection only to become stuck in another jam.

You still haven't told me what you do.

Don't worry – it's very worthy.

Jaywalkers of all ages thread their way across the road, whilst packs of two stroke mopeds probe between vehicles and, finding a weakness, surge through with a high pitched rev. The road is hemmed in on both sides by shops selling second-hand fridges, washing machines, equipment of all kinds. Crowds gather to watch the haggling, computer monitors lie screen down on the pavement, their backs ripped open, their insides hanging out like entrails. Boys tinker with vacuum cleaners, others strip power cables squatting amongst bales of copper wire.

The driver of the car behind you leans on his horn, a continuous blast drilling into your head. Neither Snow Flake nor the cab driver notices. You turn

round. You point to your ears. The driver takes his hand off the horn, gives you the thumbs up, carries on with his lament. You wind down the window but the fumes and damp heat pour in.

The cab pulls up at the kerb. Snow Flake leads you through the crowds and up a short set of granite steps to a gate topped with a carved crosspiece. The gate opens into a pebble-dashed square empty of people and surrounded on all sides by a low concrete wall. A banyan tree stands in the centre, its branches spread high and wide, but they are thin, almost bare of leaves, a pathetic canopy under the brassy sun.

A khaki clad guard emerges from a shack next to the gate, the top of his ears tucked inside his peaked cap. Snow Flake talks to him, he looks at you, nods, smiles. From a basket beside the gate, he takes out an orange and a crimson ribbon, gives it to Snow Flake and waves you through into the square.

You walk over to a thickset iron furnace embossed with strange shapes and animals from which a plume of smoke rises. 'It's for burning ghost money,' she says. Planted in the ashes in front of the fiery grate are clumps of glowing joss sticks, their incense is heavy and sweet. Next to the furnace, an official looking sign, black stencilled letters on yellow sits propped up against a chair.

What does it say?

Wishing Tree under reconstruction. No orange throwing.

That helps.

My pleasure.

But you soon see what the sign means. The branches of the banyan are

propped up by bamboo poles of different lengths and girths. You walk under the tree and into the scanty shade provided by the branches overhead. Wasps argue over the remains of a burst mandarin, swarming over the pulp, supping at a small puddle of juice.

Further in, the banyan's roots stand well-clear of the ground, muscular and flexed. Your hand runs over the trunk, mottled and pitted with age, lime coloured with lichen. 'Do you want to make a wish?' she says. You look at her, at the trunk, up into the branches.

She tells how the square used to be packed with people, bubbling with chatter, edged with handcarts hawking bitter teas and bowls of sweetened walnut paste. She, like everyone else came to write her dream on a slip of paper, tie it to an orange and throw it high up into the banyan, hoping it would snag a twig or wrap round a branch. There, the dream would twist and flutter, vying to catch the gods' attention, then be read, be considered, be approved and granted. She remembers the pell-mell rush to retrieve fallen oranges, the warm citrus miasma, the blackened eyes from elbows drawn sharply back, the fighting over the most favoured spots. The tree became luxuriant from the adoration of so many and the square became drenched with dialects from across the land. Until the day when a crack as loud and sharp as gunshot silenced the square and people watched amazed as the largest branch of all broke clear of the trunk, swung downwards, the vindictive finger of an angry god, crashed through the foliage, released a vicious hail of oranges, gouged a gruesome tear in the crowd below.

Snow Flake is looking at you, asking why it happened. You think the answer so obvious that it is better left unsaid but she is waiting.

Too many oranges?

That's what people thought to begin with.

And later?

The government said the banyan was poisoned.

Who'd do that?

Evil people. Jealous of the tree.

You believe that?

Of course. Why wouldn't I?

She tells you how the police maintained order in the square. People queued in lines straight and quiet as train tracks, collected their orange from one table, wrote their dream at another, were directed to a designated launch pad. A local business man talked of establishing a company, then a stock exchange listing to raise capital for the banyan, to allow everyone to share in his dream of dreams. He proposed a system of charges indexed to the weight of the orange, the choice of launch site, the length of the queues, the proximity to the next feast day, the phase of the moon. But still the banyan sagged and shed its leaves. On the day that a troupe of circus monkeys were hired to clear the oranges, the government announced the poisoner had been arrested and that he, jabbering and spumy mouthed, had been hypnotised by an evil cult.

Do you want to make a wish?

What about the sign?

It's ok for special visitors.

Am I special?

Yes.

From her bag, she pulls out a slip of paper and a biro and looks on expectant. You have no idea what to write. Perhaps your desire, carnal and selfish, for Snow Flake. But surely, you're more than just that. You remember not long after father's death flicking through a magazine whilst waiting for your first tattoo, coming across a photo of the aircraft carrier, lying broadside to the Golden Gate bridge. You ran your fingers over her long strong lines, decided there and then that you'd become a pilot aboard her. It wasn't what father would have wanted but this was politics of a different kind. And then the medical – failed – something wrong with your ears, they said. But they had a position aboard the aircraft carrier. Only when it was too late did you realise how miserable and low it was to work the trash room. But mother would never have guessed from the letters you wrote back home.

'Can I have some privacy?' you say to Snow Flake. She nods and turns away. You look at the blank slip of paper. Your forefathers trudged west across a continent unknown and dangerous, nourished by their faith. They saw visions in the desert, wrote new books for the book of books. They founded Salt Lake City, established a different way of believing. They pioneers, father a politician, you a pilot. It sounded so perfect but for you, it had not come to pass. Back home, there was nothing left to pioneer, nothing apart from being forever shadowed by those who'd gone before.

You fold the paper in half. She turns and smiles, hands you the ribbon and the orange.

What did you write?

I can't tell you.

Why not?

It won't come true.

You puncture the paper with a twig, thread the ribbon through and wrap it around the orange. She holds out her hand.

Give it to me.

Why?

Only the guard can throw it.

Promise not to peek?

You press the orange into her palm, the folded paper dangles from the string. She steps back and unfolds the paper.

You promised.

It's blank.

She gives it back and turns away. You must have a dream. Why did you want to become a pilot? Why did you leave mother, your home, your own country? You scribble three words – Power, Status, Freedom – and fold the paper once for every word.

Snow Flake turns, holds out her hand. You walk past her, picking your way round the roots and angry wasps, striding through the pools of light between the shadows until you are no longer under the tree. You are next to the

furnace in the heady aroma of the joss sticks with a clear view of the banyan, its sagging branches and bamboo props. The guard is running towards you and so is Snow Flake. You step back a couple of steps, then trot forward, pulling back your arm like a slingshot, pitching the orange with everything you've got. Its graceful arc cuts the air until it finds a branch at the very top. It ricochets off onto another branch and falls downwards where it is slowed by the dry rattle of a clump of leaves. Gravity calls, your dream flaps as if it were the tail of a doomed kite, nose diving towards the ground. The orange hits another branch, splits with a wet squelch and does not move.

Snow Flake gives the disgruntled guard a couple of banknotes, takes your hand, pulls you towards the gate. You keep turning to look back. Your dream is fluttering in the breeze, joining in with the hiss of the leaves. At the top of the steps, she turns, takes both your hands, pulls them down in excited tugs. 'That's more like the appointed one,' she says. 'Come and see me tonight. Unless of course it interferes with your mission.'

The elevator opens into a tiny hallway, hot and fetid, with four doors leading off. You check the address for the nth time. Your ear presses against the door. You only hear blood pounding through your veins until the buzzer's shrill cry. You watch the eyepiece go from clear to dark to clear again. The door shudders as its bolts are undone, a chain rattles free, the door opens.

He stands there looking at you, his physique filling the doorframe with no effort at all. You've never seen a man wearing rainbow boxer shorts or lilac flip flops with floral toe straps and certainly not one sporting both. You keep your surprise well hidden, bury it further for the lustrous hair that sprouts from his chin and droops almost half way down his grubby vest. The Preacher said people revered such whiskers as a sign of great virility.

The living room is a blank cream box with no windows, the armchair facing you the only block of colour. Set into the far wall is a door, out of which juts an old-fashioned key. The air conditioning whines ever higher then cuts out. The man secures the door and waddles to his armchair. It wheezes and crackles as he sits down. He grinds a cigarette into an ash tray. You hover, your weight shifting from one foot to the other. He flicks through a magazine and starts to read. You don't realise you're jiggling the hotel key in your pocket until the man looks over. From a pipe in the ceiling, water drips into a bucket as if marking time.

You skirt round the man until you are standing in front of the door. It is a fraction ajar, a thin line of light creeping round its edges. You remove the key

and push it open. Snow Flake is sitting on a single bed shoved into the far corner of the room. She leans back on a pillow wedged against the wall, a slim hardback book open in her lap. Velour tracksuit pants cling to her thighs and a striped t-shirt gapes as she leans forward. You close the door and turn the key – it locks with a reassuring clunk.

Who's that?

He looks after me, makes sure visitors behave.

So you are a prostitute.

You spread out your arms to see if you can touch both walls at the same time. She makes the noise of a fighter plane thundering just above the deck. You bring your arms down and she stops. You raise them again and she fires up the jet engines. You let your arms drop and both of you listen to the hum of the fluorescent light above. She clasps her hands in front of her, crosses her ankles, wiggles her toes. She looks up at you and twitwoos. You shuffle forward, raise your wings and begin to flap, eyes bulging, head swivelling side to side, all seeing and all wise. She twitwoos again. You have made it the foot of the bed, your knees press up against the edge of the mattress. Your talons scrabble against the wall. You look down at the juicy flesh of your prey, ask your question.

Are you going to charge me?

For what?

For tonight.

You're assuming.

I'm hoping.

So am I.

So it'll be free.

Of course not.

But you won't charge me?

No.

She turns the pages of her book until she finds what she's looking after. She begins to read in a high, chirping voice. You don't understand the words but the sorrow of the poem permeates the air. She hands you the book. You scrutinise the pages with exaggerated care, turning them towards her so she can see you tracing the columns of characters. You skim through the book, come across the sketch of a kitten looking out with pitiful eyes. You show the picture to her - she meows and licks her paws. You clear your throat.

The Owl and the Pussy Cat went to sea

In a beautiful pea-green boat,

They took some honey, and plenty of money

Wrapped up in a five pound note.

She laughs, laughs so hard that she slides down the wall, wriggles and twists until she is lying on her back, laid out before you, feet kicking up in the air. You watch until she stops, until she is quiet. She pushes her knees apart, presses her feet together until the miniature Maos on the duvet are framed by the diamond of her legs.

She asks whether you wrote the poem. You tell her that pilots wait for

hours, kitted up, ready to go, sitting round, playing cards, watching blue movies. But you're different, an aerial poet, cutting shapes in the air with words and wings. You tell Snow Flake of those moments when poetry comes to you whilst flying and you bellow out the lines above the roar of the engines.

That night, she's attentive and gentle. You lie there with her straddled above you. She asks if you want her tongue or butterfly eyelids. She grips the hem of her t-shirt and pulls it down, her breasts taut against the fabric. She asks you questions, rolls her t-shirt up one stripe at a time when you give her the answers she wants. She invites you to her ancestral village. When you agree and promise to meet her at the bus station no matter what, she switches off the light, swishes the curtains open to let in the city glow and drags her nipples across your chest. You push her off and squirm round her, clawing at the sheets to stop you falling off the bed. She wriggles out of her tracksuit pants and looks up at you wearing only the imprint of elastic about her waist and a mole on her inner thigh, the one-eyed guardian of the fur between her legs. She whispers one last question, 'Are you sure?' and closes her eyes as you answer to the rhythm of the poem.

When your watch sounds the alarm at four, you flounder around, trying to remember where you are, the bed too small, the window in the wrong place, the wall too close. As your hand comes up to prise the gooey sleep from your eyelids, you smell her honey crust on your fingers. You switch on the light. Her tracksuit pants are pressed into the sheet still diamondshaped, her t-shirt is

scrunched up under the pillow but she is not there. Nor is the key in the door. You get dressed and fast, pulling on your underpants stiff with dried sweat. You pick up your jeans. They're too light by far. Your wallet is not where it ought to be. You check the room knowing it must have fallen out as you tumbled and cavorted. But you're wrong – it's gone.

The door opens. The man holds out what looks to be an invoice. You grab it, walk back to the bed, sit down to examine it. Below an official looking letterhead, every favour bestowed upon you is itemised and priced. At the very bottom, the grand total is tallied up and chopped with a red seal. You go through the list again and realise you've scored some of her affections for free. The man lobs your wallet onto the bed. You open it – all your money has gone.

You've no idea what to do. Even the police back home would laugh at your plight. Best just to leave – at least you've still got your cards. But it isn't right. In this room tucked away from His sight and your conscience, you'd have paid for her services but she said there'd be no charge.

The man takes a step into the room. You stand, your eyes level with his chin. You're sure he's got your money. You charge him but he's more than ready for you, shifts to one side at the last moment, your fist only finding the void where he once stood. You're off balance, weight on your front foot, toppling forward. You try to grab something but you're down on all fours, the floor hard against your knees and knuckles. You shield yourself from another blow but he's walking away past his armchair towards the front door. You get to your feet and follow him. He undoes the bolts, rattles off the chain.

As you step past him, he taps you on the shoulder. You turn. Between his upturned fingers balances your wad of notes paper clipped, held out as a gift, a reward for good behaviour, passing a test. He smiles, closes the door, leaves you in the hallway to wait for the elevator

6.

The roar of engines echoes round the concrete bunker of the bus station, recoiling from one drab pillar to another, almost drowning out the babble of the waiting crowds. Arc lights hang from A-frames fashioned from scaffolding tubes, bolted into the tarmac next to each bus stop. They burn the colour from peoples' faces, cast shadows in multiple directions.

You see her. She is already on the bus, sitting by a window slid back to let her arm hang pale and slender against the grime of the bodywork. You walk over until you are standing on the kerb looking up towards her. She still hasn't seen you. Your hand closes round her little finger. You tug it, twist it, harder than you meant to. She cries out, you apologise. She pulls her arm back in, leans out the window.

You're late. The bus is about to go.

Not coming.

Why you here then? Come to say goodbye?

Perhaps.

Bet the Preacher said you should come.

Said it'd be good for me.

He's right. Get on whilst you can.

You clamber up the steps and look down the innards of the bus. Cool almost cold light flows through the blue glass gummed into the window frames. The passengers stare at you, their arms wrapped protectively round their possessions. They look hard-wired as if chasing something just out of reach,

something that everyone else already has but keeps tucked out of sight.

The driver takes your money, cranks the door shut, wrestles with the gear box, lurches the bus forward. The aisle is jammed with people squatting on plastic stools. You step over them as best you can, hanging onto the luggage rack as your foot seeks a scrap of floor to rest on. You reach her, sit down on a cushioned seat. She doesn't say anything, just rolls a blanket into a long sausage and wedges it between you, as if marking out her territory.

You soon find out that the driver has no fear of dying, let alone the grumbles of his passengers and that the bus has no suspension or air conditioning. Everyone slides back their windows and a humid, dusty wind cuts through the bus. The television is strapped to metal brackets welded into the wall just behind the driver. When it's switched on, the passengers close their windows, shut out the wind to better hear its racket. All except Snow Flake, she prefers to press her elbow against the outside of the bus, surfing the breeze with her hand.

You expect to see peasants in coolie hats toiling in syrupy paddy fields but instead the land is empty and barren, hard baked dusty fields between towns that are disturbingly similar, that are cut from the same pattern book. Just completed buildings slouch already decrepit, tiles peeling, concrete crumbling. And more blue glass, the sky back home snipped out at summer time, set into every shop and tower block as if to quench dreams or to prophesise what might be.

With dainty steps, your fingers meander down your leg until they reach

your knee. They wait there, joints flexing until with deliberate effort, they hop in slow motion across the roll of blanket towards her leg. Snow Flake grabs them before they land, pushes them away. She looks at you for the first time since Guangzhou.

A man at the bus station was asking about you.

What man?

Bald with spectacles, working for the PSB.

PSB?

Public Security Bureau.

What did you say?

That you're a pilot, a friend, here on holiday.

A pilot on holiday?

Yes.

You told him that?

Yes.

Why was he asking?

Thought it best not to ask. He asked about the Preacher too.

And?

Told him he worked in the Trash Room.

The Preacher has left.

I know.

How?

The man watched him cross the border last night.

She turns away, looks out the window. The toddler in front of you, her pigtails in ribbons, turns round and stares. You play peek-a-boo to take your mind off what Snow Flake has said. Her mother turns round, catches you pulling faces, tongue straining for nostrils, makes her daughter sit down again.

'I don't think it's important,' she says. 'If it was, he'd have waited for you.' She pulls out a bag of sunflower seeds, shows you how to shell them without using your fingers, just splitting and twisting them with your lips, teeth and tongue, then spitting the husk towards the floor between your feet. You get the hang of it, enjoy the crack and chomp of the kernel, the way it breaks up the whine inside your head.

The bus pulls up in a town, a distorted copy of the one before. The driver gets out and so do a few passengers but everyone else stays put. She's run out of seeds but can't be bothered to clamber over the passengers in the aisle. She calls out to some children playing in a tyre rut puddled with water. They listen, and run off towards a store.

A girl gets on the bus, even taller and slimmer than Snow Flake, skin luminous, hair in a bob, ears studded silver, a t-shirt sloganned Ruff across the swell of her tiny breasts. 'Is that girl more lovely than me?' asks Snow Flake. She notes your hesitation but is distracted by the *laowai* behind her, square and chunky. Snow Flake sits up to get a better view. Box Boy looks down the bus, smiles and waves at his audience. Then he sees you. The two of you eyeball, each wishing the other was not there, not sharing the same delusion of travel with an Oriental girl. He leans forward, whispers to Ruff, they get off the bus.

The children return with a woven bag, swollen with seed. She gives them shiny almost weightless coins and they run off, laughing and tugging at each others' clothes. She scoops out a handful for herself. You're still not sure whether they're worth the effort but do the same anyway. The driver returns, the seats fill up, the bus pulls out.

A new programme starts. Everybody, including Snow Flake, looks up at the television. A man in the front seat cranks the volume right up and the theme tune booms out. The passengers cheer and whoop and hum along, then shush each other as the presenter, a man with spiked orange hair and clearly wearing make-up, leers out from the screen. 'It's the Supergirl Competition,' she whispers. You recognise the format pretty soon. A Ruff look alike takes the stage, croons into a microphone, tapping her foot as she does. At the end of her song, the camera pans to the judges, whose comments are met by applause and groans from the studio audience and the passengers alike. Two other acts follow and the presenter reappears, his rouge reapplied with even more vigour. The screen shows photos of the three contestants and beneath them, numbers for viewers to text. The passengers are already brandishing their mobiles. Snow Flake is leaning right across you, chuntering to the couple on the other side of the aisle. She looks up at the screen, uncertain about the choices before her. Your hand hovers in front of her face, blocking her view. She pushes you away.

Stop it.

Do you know what you're doing?

Meaning?

You, and everyone else on this bus, is....

Is what?

Voting.

No we're not. We're showing our support.

Says who?

The government.

The sunflower seeds are addictive – you've probably eaten as many as her, nipping off the end with your teeth, flicking the shells apart with your tongue. But your lips are sore and chapped from gripping the shells and the rub of their splintered remains. You decide to be more careful, shell them with your fingers but you soon forget and only realise when the iron of blood spread across your tongue. You ask her for a tissue. She hands you a packet without looking away from the next round of Supergirl. You dab away trying not to let the tissue stick. She notices. 'I told you to be careful, didn't I?' She slips her hand round your neck, pulls you towards her and runs her finger across your lips. She puts it in her mouth, sucks it, tastes you, looks away with a smile.

7.

The roads become more potholed and the bus empties of passengers until it's just you and her and the driver grumbling along a gravel track, fields of tall maize on either side. Ahead is a forested rise, its foliage bright in the mid-afternoon sun. As the bus grinds up the hill, it fills with the engine's whine and the whiff of burning oil. Just after the road levels out, the bus comes to a juddering halt in front of a barred metal gate. The driver waves you down the aisle and out through the door, crunches the bus into reverse and drives off leaving you and Snow Flake in a cloud of dust.

You climb over the gate and follow a track that meanders beneath trees the likes of which you have not seen before. Their shrunken seed pods rattle in the breeze and dapple light onto the ground beneath your feet. Pools of sunlight merge with each other as the forest thins and the track ahead winds across open fields. You walk side-by-side, your shadows merged into one and thrown out in front of you.

You hear the put put of a two stroke motorbike approaching. The rider, a woman in her thirties with a scar slashed across her face, stops and offers you a lift. She pulls up her skirt, shuffles forward along the pillion, grips the petrol tank with her thighs. She plants her feet to steady the machine whilst Snow Flake then you climb on. Your hands slip round Snow Flake's waist, find their way beneath her vest and to her stomach, flat and taut. The rider negotiates the track with practised ease, accelerating over bumps and through dips, before she reaches the highest point and stops to let you take in the view.

Snow Flake's village is laid out below. Houses on stilts, some patched blue with tarpaulins, line a river whose chocolate waters mingle with the slate grey expanse of the ocean. The jungle thick and luxuriant fronts right onto the beach of coarse looking sand that runs north and south as far as you can see. On the horizon, a dark mass of land lurks in the afternoon haze. Snow Flake is pointing beyond the village, down the coast to a sturdy looking hut that stands by itself on a cleared plot of land just behind the beach, its tin roof glimmering in the sunshine. 'That's where we're staying,' she says.

It's all downhill from here and the driver lets the bike pick up speed between the tight switchback turns. Snow Flake is yahooping, her hair streaming back, caressing your face, her perfume mixing with the moist salty breeze. At the bottom of the hill, the track widens and the driver opens up the throttle. The jungle scuds past on either side until it is replaced by furrowed fields studded with the tips of sprouting plants, green almost luminous against the dark soil.

The track runs along the back of the houses, the river just visible through the stilts that support them. You expect to see people fishing the river, children chasing each other but the village is deserted apart from roosters scratching around in the dirt. Snow Flake signals to the driver who sets you down at the foot of a rickety staircase and drives off, leaving you listening to the whirr of cicadas and the clatter of mah-jong tiles on a glass-topped table. Snow Flake takes your hand.

My uncle's house.

Not your parents?

They're dead.

I didn't know.

We have to visit uncle. Just *ni hao* and go.

You climb the stairs and wait on the balcony outside a screen of shells strung across the doorway. You hear chatter and onions sizzle, smell chopped ginger and boiled rice. Snow Flake pushes through the shells and you follow. Inside, fifteen or twenty people sit on wooden benches, surrounding a long table laden with mounds of steaming morsels set on metal platters. She introduces each one in a bewildering torrent of syllables and tones and disappears into another room, leaving you standing there, grinning and nodding.

She returns with an old man in front of her. They shuffle forward together, her hands placed over his eyes, taking care not to let the blindfold slip. Her uncle is grinning like a child on his birthday. You find yourself tugging at your shirt, scratching the inside of your elbow. She removes her hands but his eyes are closed tight. He opens them and his smile switches to cold, hard indifference. But Snow Flake nudges him forward until he's so close that he's forced to shake hands. *Huanying, huanying*, he mumbles. His hand is rough and strong, a real peasant's hand. But there's something else too. You try not to look down but he catches you. He lifts his hand. A stunted sixth digit is piggybacked onto his little finger. It doesn't move when he waggles the others.

Uncle takes his place at the table, insists you sit between him and Snow Flake, calls for *yi ping hong jiu*. He fills your tumbler to the brim and does the same to his. You *ganbei* each other. The wine, warm and vinegary, catches in

your throat, its vapours those of tar macadam on a sweltering day. Everyone claps as the glasses are drained. He refills them with a steady hand.

You start out on the food, Snow Flake whispering what each one is. You say there's no need and ask her to stop. The tips of your chopsticks flick past each other as they chase mushrooms slippery in sauce. You manage to juggle one of them all the way to your mouth. The family murmurs its approval, uncle chinks your glass.

Snow Flake translates so you and he can talk and the rest of the table can listen. He finishes eating, his plate is cleared away. He drains his glass, makes sure the last drop has trickled out. He tells you he's proud of his family, has great hopes for them, especially Snow Flake. He asks whether you think she's attractive. The family sniggers at your discomfort and Snow Flake's too. Next, he asks who has the best English, Snow Flake or his first born son. Across the table, a boy of sixteen or seventeen, his hair a combed quiff, introduces himself in stammering Chinglish. He works in Shanghai, goes to language school, watches American films, talks to tourists. You *hen hao* him and the table claps again. You ask him what his favourite film is. 'Vampire Lesbos', he says with a dirty leer.

Uncle is slurring now and his son takes over translation duties. His questions edge in a new direction. You think it's just the wine but the table stops its chatter, their eyes flick from Uncle to his son to you. He asks about honesty and religion. He's heard of Jesus, His cross, disciples and miracles, has seen His book as well, thick and leather bound, pages thin as rice paper. He asks

whether you only tell the truth if you're holding the Bible. 'Of course not', you say, but your voice jumps up an octave and your cheeks flush. He apologises, says he was just joking, that it's been a great honour meeting you. You nod your thanks all the way round the table. Uncle stands up, clears his throat, bends forward, knuckles on the table, looks over to you. 'One more question,' he says.

Snow Flake jumps up and screams at him. Her cousin starts shouting and pointing at her. The children look up wide eyed, a baby starts to cry, a dog to bark. The argument goes on, words bouncing off the walls whilst uncle watches and smirks. He grips the wine bottle, lifts it a fraction off the table and slams it down so hard the dishes jump and a beaker of water tips.

Uncle repeats the question. Snow Flake starts to garble but uncle raises the bottle once more. A fly buzzes, circles above the leftovers. It lands on the rice bowl, walks round the rim, stopping occasionally to show off its iridescent body. It takes off and heads towards the son who is now standing, looking at you. 'Uncle asks if you fucky fuck Snow Flake.'

You and she are out of there pretty quick. At the top of the stairs, you pause. The sun has sunk behind the hill, the village is in shadow and above you, a cloud ripens golden peach against the evening sky. She listens to her uncle's ranting then bends down, picks up a balsa wood box and hands it to you. It's about the right size for a bottle of wine but too light and gives off a dull rattle when shaken. She grabs your hand and leads you down the stairs. At the bottom, you turn right, stride down the track towards the sea.

The villagers have heard the ruckus. They stand on their balconies, look

down at you, stare and point. Snow Flake sings out her *ni haos* and tells them you're her friend from far away. A couple of dogs trot after you, one stocky with pointed ears, the other more dainty, cream fur splotched hazel and charcoal. They sniff the air at your heels. The smaller one starts to yap, doesn't stop until he hears the husk of a woman's voice. The dogs turn back, scamper off to find their mistress.

After the last hut, the bush springs up again and track turns towards the river, which you cross on a humpbacked bridge made from blocks of stone. Half-way across, you look over the edge into the water but cannot see past the reflection of the darkening sky above. The path now follows the coast, cutting through the bush just behind the beach. A thick layer of smashed shells crunches underfoot, whilst insects whirl and whine all around.

After twenty minutes or so, the bush opens up to reveal Snow Flakes' hut, dark and squat against the night sky. Whilst she unlocks the padlocks on the door and windows, you rummage for a torch and penknife. You prise the lid off the balsa wood box and as you peel back the tin foil beneath, the acrid smell of gunpowder wafts up. Firecrackers snuggle together, their fuses tied top and bottom like an ammunition belt. You walk round the hut, trailing the firecrackers behind, stringing them up between hooks and nails you find set into the wall until the hut is decorated with explosive bunting.

You join her sitting on the ground, leaning against the hut, the concrete wall still warm from the day's heat. Out at sea, the first star burns bright and steady. Over the hiss of surf, snatches of music and laughter from the village

reach you. In the torch light, she is no longer the family rebel. Instead, she looks tired and uncertain of what comes next. But you're elated to be so far away from everything that you've ever known.

Neither of you can be bothered to fetch glasses so you drink straight from the bottle she found stashed in the hut. You pass it back and forth as if playing a game. The torch batteries run low, its light turns amber then fades away until the filament is an orange coil in the darkness. You put your arm round her shoulders but she stands up and gropes in the darkness for the firecrackers' fuse. She lights a match and the flickering flame casts shadows across the hollows of her eyes. You get up and retreat a safe distance. She however jumps up, rips a length of firecrackers off the wall and twirls them above her head, dancing in the shower of sparks and noise, chasing away the evil spirits.

The two of you sit down. The wall is cold now and you shuffle towards her until your shoulders touch. She swills the last of the liquor round the bottle so that it gurgles and sloshes, finishes it with a deep swig. You sit there next to her, watching the pall of smoke drift in front of the stars, feeling her edge away as if trying to escape.

You take out the pen knife, unfold the blade and lock it into place with a click. You puncture your finger with a jab of the knife point. You squeeze it until it throbs, until a bead of blood has welled up, a luscious ruby for Snow Flake. You reach out for her in the night, stroke her face, find her lips, prise them open. For a moment, she suckles on your finger but then pulls away.

You sit there in the dark, think about the Preacher, what he would do.

You tell her how the stars zap by when you fly at night, how they become etched on your mind, how you once skimmed low over the sea chasing a full moon, how it magnified as it sunk below the waves until you could see nothing but its craters and deserts through the screen of your cockpit.

She moves closer, her hand on your chest, her nose rubbing your neck, her lips whispering that it's warmer inside.

You awake alone on a mattress placed on the floor of the hut. Daylight filters through the gaps round the still closed shutters. A tap drips into an aluminium sink set into a makeshift workbench. You can see the pipe connecting the sink to the drain, a hole in the floor covered by a broken grill. An insect huge and glossy climbs through it and scuttles across the peeling linoleum into a damp looking cardboard box. But you chose to lie there listening to Snow Flake sing to the music of the waves against the shore, breathing in her musk from the sheets wrapped round you.

You get up and go outside. The hut is built from breeze blocks painted olive green, plants sprout from cracks round the window frames, the salty breeze has nibbled away at the tin roof. You follow the wall of the hut and peep round the corner. She sits at a table on a wedge of grass between the hut and the beach. When the breeze picks up, the stiff canvas shade flaps and the scarlet of last night's firecrackers dance about her feet. With a gloved hand, she picks an oyster from the pile on the table and with a knife sharp and wicked looking prods and probes the jagged line where the two halves of shell meet, until she finds a spot where the blade can slide in. She prises it open and scoops the meat into a ceramic bowl.

Zao shang hao, you say stepping from your hiding place and walking towards her. She looks up at you smiling, then closes her eyes, tilts back her head, lips pouting, inviting. Your face edges towards hers, the warmth of her forehead, the taste of her eyelashes, the sound of her breath. But then she

laughs, twists her head, pushes her hands into your chest, shoves you away.

You sit down opposite and she hands you another knife, the same design as hers. But there's only one glove and the razor ridged shells and their barnacles gnaw at your hand, leaving behind flaps of skin into which the oysters trickle their salt water. You moan and grizzle about how it stings but she says it'll be worth it. The pile between you becomes less and less until she takes the last shell and eases it open.

She brings out clean water and a bar of soap and you wash away the shrapnel encrusted on your forearms and ease the slithers of oyster meat jammed beneath your finger nails. She lights a tiny stove, its gas bottle no bigger than a can of deodorant and pours water into a saucepan. Whilst it bubbles away, you serenade her with an Elvis song your father used to like and she maracas with the jar of rice and joins in the chorus. When the water has boiled off and arranged the grains in neat hexagons, she switches off the gas, mixes it with a cup of oysters and drizzle of chilli oil.

After lunch, you set up a mesh rack and position it in the sun. As you arrange the oysters across the netting, the essence of those you've eaten for lunch seeps through your pores. A cool wind blows but you're clammy, can feel sweat bubbling up through your skin.

You and she step down onto the sand and head towards the sea. You'd go for a swim, wash away the stickiness but the water is fetid and slimy, its surface disturbed by bobbing detritus of every kind that washes up along the shore, odd gatherings of polystyrene boxes, lumps of shit, drink cans, all

meshed together with weed and fishing line. But Snow Flake doesn't notice, points out a rainbow in the oily sheen, digs in the mud until she finds a horde of soldier crabs who charge forwards not sideways, pincers waving above their sapphire shells.

On the way back to the hut, you agree to leave only one set of footprints between the two of you. She walks in your steps, you tiptoe in hers. You carry her. Then the two of you stand on one leg, her on the left, you on the right and hop your way forward. You make it, step up off the beach, walk across the grass, lean breathless against the hut. You tell her you can't remember how the small of her back blends into her legs. Or how your thumbs fit into the dimples above her buttocks. Or how a key hole of light forms when she stands and presses her legs together. When you take her hand and pull her inside, she doesn't protest.

You wake to the throaty rumble of a motorbike heading towards the hut, its tyres chewing through the shells on the path. Snow Flake is already looking out the window, pulling on her clothes, a jiggling silhouette against the evening sky. The noise becomes louder until the hut reverberates as if it were strapped to the underside of the bike. The engine cuts out to leave just the flap of the canvas shade. It might not be happening at all but Snow Flake turns and looks at you.

It's the man from the bus station.

What's he doing here?

Just answer his questions as best you can.

You hear the slap of flip flops stop outside the door, a polite knock, a voice, definitely male but mellow and lilting. 'His name is Lin Jun,' she says. 'He's waiting outside for you.'

The motorbike is parked against the side of the hut. One of its handlebars has shifted and scraped paint off the wall. Snow Flake runs her fingers across the deep gouge that it's left behind. He's round the front, standing on the grass, his smile so wide that even the skin across his shaven head is creased with joy. He bows towards you then Snow Flake. He lingers over her longer than you think necessary, taking in the way she's pulled her back hair, tied a scarf round her neck. But his look is more inquiring than predatory. Still you plan your handshake to be powerful and dominant, to make him wince, but as your grip tightens, his hand conveys calm and well being. You think about how the lustrous interior of shells and his gleaming cranium might be polished by the same person. Snow Flake sits down at the table, looks out to the distant block of a cargo ship far away.

'So Seth, what's your profession?' he asks. His English is plummy, the vowels straining far beyond their natural state, the accent of the Queen's son, incongruous and bizarre from his mouth in this place. You look across to Snow Flake who is pushing back the cuticles on her fingernails with the handle of a spoon. You try and convince yourself that she is not listening. 'I'm a technician on the USS Kitty Hawk,' you say. She doesn't look across but you think she pauses what she's doing for the briefest of moments.

You're a long way from home. What are you doing here?

Holiday.

We heard that you were the appointed one.

That's just what my name means.

We're not so certain - we think you're special.

I don't know what you're talking about.

It'll be much easier if you just tell me why you're really here.

I already have. Now who are you?

I come back tomorrow and show you.

He fits his helmet, walks over to his bike, kicks it into a roar and rides off towards the village. Snow Flake is spinning one of the knives on the table in front of her, watching it as if hypnotised. She slams her hand down, brings the knife to an abrupt halt.

What did I say? Answer his questions as best you can!

I did.

Why didn't you tell him you're a pilot?

Because I'm not.

Stop it! You've lied to the PSB! And he's coming back to find out why.

I don't think he's from the PSB.

What do you know? You've only just arrived in the country!

Where's his id then?

Who's he with then?

Don't know.

You sure?

Yes.

Together you watch Lin Jun's bike climb the hill behind the village, the beam of his headlight cutting a pallid swathe in the gloom until it disappears over the brow of the hill. She looks out across the sea to where the first stars burn bright and steady. 'If you're not a pilot, what are you?' she asks.

You decide to confess, to do it properly. You get down on your knees and tell her you're just the trash boy, that your stories of flying and far-off lands are mere fantasies. You ask forgiveness on the grounds that you made it all up for her but you know it's pointless. At least, you'll have your memories, the scars on your fingertips, true stories to tell.

She's livid, furious, seething, jabbering away at you in her own tongue, even as she goes back into the hut. She returns with a blanket and throws it on the ground in front of you. Once inside the hut, she locks the door and closes the windows. You wrap the blanket round your shoulders, lie down on the grass under the table and wait for sleep to replace reality.

Lin Jun's bike approaches but it is far too early for his visit. The throb percolates into your dreams. Your body is cold and aching. You roll over on the damp grass, try and will yourself back to sleep. You hear Lin Jun cut the engine to leave just the sound of the waves and the hum of insects. You open your eyes to find he's looking down at you, Snow Flake beside him. She squats down, strokes your cheek, rubs the back of your neck. 'Sorry about last night,' she says.

They help you up. The first tinge of day, a pale glow above the horizon separates sky from ocean, backlights the cross-hatching across the water, formed by the opposition of waves and breeze. Snow Flake folds the blanket, gives you a jumper against the chill. Lin Jun's eyes are wide and unblinking. He presses his hands together as if praying and bows to you.

Ready?

Snow Flake takes your hand and squeezes it.

We're ready.

Can we trust her?

Of course.

Lin Jun bows again and turns, beckoning you to follow. He steps down onto the beach. Your toes sink into the damp wrinkles of sand, splash through occasional pools of saltwater until you stand in the wet shining ribbon along the seashore that is not land or sea looking out to a sky that not day or night.

Lin Jun clears the flotsam from a strip of sand just beyond the reach of

the waves and unrolls a straw mat edged with cotton. He sits cross-legged facing out to sea, then lifts his feet on top of his knees. You and Snow Flake sit down as well so that the three of you look out across the sea to the sky's transition. You try and mimic Lin Jun's position, but your legs are too stiff. Instead you put the soles of your feet together, lean forward and hold your ankles. The distant indigo rim of the ocean shifts lighter and warmer then apricot. 'Close your eyes,' says Lin Jun, 'The most divine dawns are the ones you feel but do not see.'

You do as bidden. The lap lap of the waves becomes less distinct until only the buzzing that has plagued you since you crossed the border remains - gnawing, pushing, scratching, tearing at who you are. You want to grab your hair and yank it out in handfuls. You want to thrash your head around, rattle your brains until the noise stops. You open your eyes open. Lin Jun's face is totally peaceful, his smile welcomes the sun, his feet twitch, his splayed out fingers quiver. But tears run down Snow Flake's cheeks, salty trails of sadness in the morning light. You close your eyes again.

Lin Jun's hand finds yours. He holds it, connecting you to a reservoir of inner calm. The buzzing dies away into silence. Your weightless mind floats, drifts away through a silvered porthole to another place. Your breath slows and deepens, your shoulders relax and shift downwards. The sun's first rays crown your head with golden radiance then creep downwards, turn your eyelids almost translucent with pinkness and pleasure. Your torso soaks up the warmth, your knees tingle with new found freedom.

The sound of Lin Jun's bike shreds your thoughts. Snow Flake has gone, leaving a pile of churned up sand where her heels fretted in the sand in front of the mat. Lin Jun is running up the beach towards the hut waving his arms and shouting but it's too late. Snow Flake already sits astride the bike, revving its engine. She looks in your direction but you are too far away to see her expression. She shifts the bike into gear. It trundles forward, threatens to stall then bursts into full throttle, the back wheel kicking up a shower of shells as she tears off towards the village. Lin Jun bends down, hands on his knees, panting. He returns and sits down on the mat, his smile has gone.

Thought you said we could trust her.

About what?

About who I am, what we represent.

I've no idea what you're talking about.

And she's gone to report me.

For what?

You really don't know, do you?

No.

Lin Jun faces back out to sea, folds his legs once more, closes his eyes, asks you to do the same. Images of all that you've seen in this land flicker and jerk through your mind, only stop and come into focus at the Wishing Tree. You smell the sweet incense of the joss sticks, you see iron furnace, its fiery grate, the outline of someone nearby – you cannot tell whether it is the Preacher or Snow Flake.

Your can hear the waves lap again but they are more distant than before. Your hands cup your eyes, let in chinks of light between your fingers. The sea has retreated leaving the beach exposed to the glare of the sun, now halfway to its zenith. Lin Jun holds out a slip of paper, blue with the faint speckle of a bird's egg, a line of characters, ornate and meaningless, biroed across it.

Find the Preacher. Give this to him.

Why?

Come with me and you will understand.

You wedge the message at the bottom of your trouser pocket. Together you walk up the beach, then turn towards the village, the skid marks of Snow Flake's departure cut deep into the path. The breeze frolics through the bush, teasing the leaves this way and that. High above, a bird, a tiny speck hovering against the clouds, follows the path as well, its shrill cry a celebration or a warning, you cannot tell which.

As you go on, the bush grows ever thicker, the trees lean over the track until their limbs entwine into a tunnel through which only pinpricks of light squeeze through. The insects fall silent as you approach then start up behind once you've passed by. The track rounds a corner then straightens and widens, the tunnel opening up into a grassed glade across which the track cuts to the humpbacked bridge across the river. Lin Jun stops. 'This is as far as we go together,' he says. 'Hide yourself well. Wait, watch, decide what to do.' He walks a little further then sits down facing the bridge, folding his legs with particular care.

You edge forward along the track, dithering as what to do. You rest against a fallen tree stripped of its bark and bleached by the sun, white and smooth as bone. You hear the distant throb of motorbikes making their way down the hill towards the village. You try and see if Snow Flake is amongst them but the bush is too thick and close.

You push your way into the bush. Vines tug, thorns jab, fruit rots in a square of light on the ground, a spider's web dissolves across your face, something creeps through the hairs on the back of your neck. You get down on all fours and crawl along parallel to the track until you find a spot where through the undergrowth you have a view of Lin Jun and the bridge.

On the leaf in front of you, a dragon fly rests her copper filament wings, flexes her legs, then takes off not towards the sunlight but deeper into the bush. The cicadas start up as if orchestrated by a higher force, their whine that of thousands of metal discs spinning against each other at high speed, urged on ever faster by crackles of electricity. The leaf in front of you bounces and bobs as some creature lands on it. A black bug, fat and long as your thumb, head a mass of tufted golden hair, examines you with shiny all seeing eyes. He joins in with his comrades whining ever louder until the cicadas' whine threatens to puncture your ear drums.

The motorbikes are very close now, grinding their way through the village but Lin Jun does not move, just his fingers quiver as if in a trance. You hear them ride up the far side of the bridge and down towards him. The two men wear freshly ironed shirts, dark pants and heavy boots. They step off their bikes,

lift them onto their stands and hang their helmets from the handlebars. One of them saunters back to the bridge and looks out towards the village. The other man opens a pannier, pulls out a metal can and a newspaper and walks over to Lin Jun. He bends down, talks into his ear. Still Lin Jun does not move.

The cicadas fall silent so all you can hear is the man removing the cap on the can, the squeak of metal on metal, the rasp of grit caught up in the screw thread. He is holding it in front of Lin Jun's face, talking to him in measured even tones. The man is now holding the can above Lin Jun, tipping it degree by degree until clear liquid gushes out onto Lin Jun's head, anointing him, soaking his clothes dark so they hang in wet folds from his body or cling against his skin. But Lin Jun does not flinch. The leaves above rattle in the faintest breath of wind.

The man takes a few steps away. He pulls a single sheet from the newspaper, rolls it up and twists it tight. He calls out to Lin Jun again. He searches his pockets and pulls out a lighter that flashes in the sun. He flicks open the lid, lights the newspaper and holds it like a torch above his head. He calls out to Lin Jun and waits, then looks back to his colleague and lobs the flaming torch. It cartwheels through the air and lands in front of Lin Jun. For a moment, you think it's just water, perhaps a local ritual, some sick joke at worst but then the man steps back, raises his hand to his face and turns away as the petrol catches with a rush of heat and light, and cadmium flames wreath themselves round Lin Jun, his clothes vapourising, skin shrinking onto bone, head drooping onto his chest, the smell of charred pork.

Whilst Lin Jun burns, the man checks the oil in his bike and polishes the mirrors. Lin Jun's head slumps further forward and snaps off, falls with a thud onto the ground and rolls once twice, comes to rest, foam bubbling from his mouth and ears. The man walks over and toes it back into the pyre, then joins his colleague for a cigarette on the bridge.

When the flames have finally gone out, they kick dirt over the pile of smouldering bones and cram Lin Jun's remains into a cloth sack. They drag it up the bridge, sling it over the side and watch it float out to sea. They mount their bikes, kick them into life, ride off through the village and switch back up the hill.

You listen to the water flowing under the bridge. You lie face down in the leaf litter, letting the insects bite and sting and burrow, head in the nook of your arm, breathing in soil and detritus.

You awake to the sound of a motorbike coming across the bridge. You fear it is them coming back but instead, it is Snow Flake. You stumble through the bush and collapse onto the track. She cries out, kneels beside you, stroking your forehead. You open your mouth but it is dry and gummy with thirst. Her hair falls forward across her face, she pushes it back, hooking it behind her ears. Despite everything else, you realise this is the first time you've seen them. They're tiny, those of a new born.

Why did you take Lin Jun's bike?

First tell me you're ok.

Answer the question.

You wouldn't understand.

I need to know.

I went to the PSB.

Why?

He belongs to an illegal cult.

Illegal?

And evil.

You really believe that?

I knew you wouldn't understand.

You tell her what you've seen, show her the blackened earth, the drag marks to the bridge, even find a bone. She doesn't believe you, says the villagers have roasted a wild deer, puts her fingers in her tiny ears and screams at you to stop.

You perch on the edge of a plastic chair peering into the darkness of your hotel room in Guangzhou. The pillow that has replaced Snow Flake as your bed mate glows reddish in the three thirty seven of the bedside clock. Overhead the ceiling fan slices the air into cooling drafts that whisper across your bare back and rustle a newspaper lying somewhere on the floor. The compressor of the fridge starts up, rattles and whines then cuts out. You find yourself leaning over the pillow, stroking it, urging it back to sleep.

You turn the chair round and sit at the desk, pull the chain to switch on the lamp. Next to the telephone and your wallet that conceals Lin Jun's message, a pad of paper and a biro both branded with the hotel logo lie coupled together. You start writing, a juddering scrawl about how you and Snow Flake travelled back to Guangzhou, found a cheap room in the back streets, how once inside she wrapped herself round you, refused to let go, pawed at your clothes, begged you to tell her what Lin Jun said after she'd ridden off. You asked her to stop, your mind scorched with the roar of burning petrol and her screams of denial. She refused, blocked the door when you got up to leave, then lay sobbing on the floor when you pulled out the oyster knife and told her you needed to be alone, had to find somewhere else to stay.

And now you're writing about how Snow Flake will become a fable told to guys back home after too many beers, a tale of Oriental conquest when you jumped ship and crossed the border. The guys will sit there mouths ajar, jaws slack, lapping it up, asking if her pussy slanted like her eyes. And you

will give a pathetic laugh, wink on the outside but wince on the inside. And afterwards all alone, you will tell yourself the story of how you almost lost yourself in another world, how you almost became special in the eyes of someone else.

You stop writing, put down the pen, massage your fingers that have gripped too hard. If you leave, she will only exist thanks to the words on the page. You look at the paper and understand that nothing exists outside the text. You remember a time before you entered this land when nothing existed outside of God but now out of His sight, you've discovered there is life to be lived, frontiers to be crossed, adventures without morals to be pursued.

The telephone rings. You can no longer trust your hearing, so you pick up the receiver half expecting the purr of the dialling tone. Instead silence, then the voice of the Preacher.

You met Lin Jun?

Yes.

And?

Gave me a message.

Let's meet.

Not as easy as that.

You bargaining Trash Boy?

You've thought about this already but need more time to iron out the kinks in your mind, work through what all this means for you, for her, for the land where you were born, for the values of father and those before him.

I'm not bargaining.

Who is then?

Snow Flake – she snatched the message.

We'll get it back.

She wants something in return.

What?

Passport and ticket out of here.

Cheeky bitch.

That's the deal.

Meet me at the noodle shack by the river.

You switch off the lamp and blind from its glare, grope your way to the bed, slide your hands under the duvet and slip in beside the pillow. Your dream is set in a parched land, jagged hexagons of dried mud underfoot, purple saw-tooth mountains far ahead, an eagle's cry from the faultless vacuum above. You are at the head of a column of pilgrims, of your forefathers whiskered and waistcoated, marching west to their promised land, nourished by hymns and fierce belief, their brittle blue eyes searching for visions in the desert, their lives raw and ruthless, but determined to survive, define themselves, establish a new way of believing, become the envy of the world. A man trudges beside you, his head bowed, his spittle gluey with thirst. He says he cannot go on any more, sits down in the shade of a boulder the colour of blood. You squat down next to him, take off your belt with the chunky buckle, roll it into a tight coil, press it against his chest. He tells you to go on without him. You stroke his ashen stubble with the back of your fingers.

You wake clutching the pillows. It is late morning already but you lie woozy-headed watching a patterned slot of light creep across the carpet.

You get up, check the message is still in your wallet, look at yourself naked in the mirror, pull on yesterday's clothes.

The Preacher is already there, sitting at a table covered in a polythene sheet pegged at the edges, looking out across the river, a twisted napkin in front of him. A family of three slurping noodles are the only other customers. He brushes the napkin to the ground and smiles as if too much time has passed since you last met. 'What can I get you?' he asks, 'Go hard – this is taxpayers' money we're spending.' A young man wearing an embroidered cap notes down which of the gaudy pictures on the laminated menu you point at. Through the rough opening hacked into the side of his corrugated shack, you watch the man string out the dough until his arms bend backwards, then twirl it as a skipping rope until the dough becomes grainy, separates into a mass of thin strands. He climbs a wooden stepladder and eases the threads into a stainless steel cauldron that spews clouds of steam. The Preacher prods your knuckle with a chopstick.

Any joy getting the message off her?

Not yet.

Still playing hard ball?

Yup.

I'd do the same in her position. Anything to escape this place.

It's really that bad?

If you don't get the message, you'll be staying here full time.

Skull Cap places ceramic bowls in front of you, bows when the Preacher *xie xies* him, wipes away a tiny dribble of soup that has spilled onto

the polythene.

Is she excited about leaving, about going home with you?

Hides it well.

You should frisk her up, get her real frothy about it.

You're right.

This'll help. Wait until she gets her mitts on this.

You unzip the seal on the see-through bag that he hands over and pull out Snow Flake's passport, its cobalt cover scuffed, the spread eagle emblem faded as if well-used already. You flick to the photo page, she beams out, pleased to be from Utah as well.

Thought you could be childhood sweethearts.

Still ain't gonna be simple.

Been thinking about that. Had a word with the navy brass.

And?

You've got a decent desk job at HQ.

I have?

Not far from the beach – perfect for a sunset stroll.

He tugs another napkin from the metal dispenser, wipes his fingers one by one, screws it up, drops it under the table. He stands up, leans across the table, puts his hands on your shoulders.

Now go fetch me that message.

He lets go, waves to Skull Cap and totters off along the river, hands clasped behind him.

You walk up the granite steps that lead to the Wishing Tree, thinking

what to say to the guard, but he isn't there. As you pass through the gate, you see why. Across the pebbledash, the tree is still there but all its branches except one have been removed. It stands there shamed, stripped of its dignity, just a trunk and its ludicrous limb, no more hiss of leaves or delicious pockets of cool spotted with light.

Amongst the chopped and broken timber scattered on the ground, a group of men stripped to the waist smoke, drink tea from glass jars. On top of a scaffolding tower, a man inspects the last branch and holds a chainsaw, its petrol engine ticking over. He calls out, the men look up to the slip of paper twisting and turning at the end of a crimson ribbon and snicker.

Off to the left, smoke rises from the thickset iron furnace and heady incense curls from the clumps of joss sticks planted in the ash. The yellow sign has gone from the chair, replaced by a woman slumped forward, arms wrapped round herself, chin on her chest, hair obscuring her face. You call her name but she does not move. It is as if she cannot hear you, deafened by the blast of some giant megaphone, her mind shattered by the noise.

You're in front of her now. Her shoulders rise and fall with the tempo of her breath. You hold out your arms, passport in one hand, Lin Jun's message in the other, willing her to wake and make the decisions. Your eyes close, your weight shifts across the different bones in your feet. You hear the splutter of the chainsaw, the crackle of flame from within the furnace. The brassy sun beats on your head, shoulders and outstretched arms. You think of the crucifix shadow cast across the pebbledash. This is the last time your mind says that God cannot see you.

The chainsaw starts up, a furious growl soon joined by the branch's

scream as the teeth bite in. It doesn't last long, you hear the wood splinter and rip and the rush of leaves as the branch falls to the ground. The chainsaw coughs in its victory and falls quiet. Your eyes open, your arms lower. She stands up, takes her passport, turns the pages one at a time, scrutinising each and every stamp, disappointed with those too blurred to read, delighted she's been to Paris and London already.

You and she stand on either side of the furnace, sentinels guarding the entrance to a myriad of different futures. Your skin, already sensitive from the sun, cringes in the radiant heat. You take a step back as the hairs on your arms begin to singe. She seems unaffected, mesmerised by the flickering flames that play in the grate.

She turns to the photo page, reads her new name out loud. You promise to call her Snow Flake no matter what. You promise a log cabin holiday in the spring, the two of you crouching down to watch the carpet of saffron crocuses chase the snows up the alpine meadows.

The tips of her elegant fingers are hot across your face. 'I can't go,' she says. 'I don't want to leave.' She pokes the passport through the grate and into the furnace. A brief burst of flame, the fumes of molten plastic and it's gone. You hold out Lin Jun's message, willing her to take it and do the same but she takes your hand, holds it tight, looks up at you.

It's your message.

It's not.

Lin Jun gave it to you.

I didn't want it.

You're the appointed one. You must decide.

The reason for your hesitation becomes clear. It is not the fear of losing her, but the fear of going back home, of becoming feeble once more in the face of familiarity and routine, caught up in that desk job and those perfect sunsets. It is the fear of leaving this land, this country where you're watched, monitored, eavesdropped upon. But you find this calming, reassuring, your decision has almost no weight about it. It is clear you must do the right thing if you are to stay.

A throbbing whine fills your head as if the chainsaw had started up again but it rests on the ground and the men stand in a line, looking your way.

Take the message.

You know what I'll do.

Take it.

Straight to the PSB.

Yes.

The whine becomes louder, more insistent and piercing. The pressure builds up inside your head, seeks a weak point to erupt through, finds your ear drums, pushes until you know they will burst.

She reaches up and takes the message. For a moment, you think she is about to burn it in the furnace. You cry out, ready to stop her but she puts it inside her beaded purse. She walks away from you towards the gate. At the top of the steps, she hesitates as if she might look back but she carries on down into the street and the crowds below.

Inside your head, all is now quiet with a serenity that you have not

known before, a silence your forefathers discovered, the silence of pioneers,
that of fierce belief, determination without compromise.

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Glossary

Baitian e Binguan	White Swan Hotel
Ganbei	Cheers
Hen hao	Very good
Huanying	Welcome
Laowai	Westerner
Ni hao	Hello
Xie xie	Thanks
Yi ping hong jiu	A bottle of red wine
Zao shang hao	Good morning