

CHUNG Wenyin

Extract from the novel *Decayed Land*

Farewell at the Harbor

It was the last time Yunmei went out to a far-off place.

It was a strange idea. She wanted to head for Keelung Harbor. People did not stop her from doing it, for they thought she missed the harbor where her husband Chung Sheng came back to Taiwan. But at first, Yunmei was not going on account of Chung Sheng. Actually, she just wanted to go to a shop selling imported goods in Keelung and buy a new dress there. One day, she met an old friend of hers, who eyed her up and down and said, "Look at you! The coat you are wearing must have lasted for some twenty years!" Suddenly she felt so ashamed and embarrassed for her old clothes, so she decided to buy one or two pretty dresses.

"But why come all the way to Keelung to buy dresses?" When she was taking the train, her inner voice started to ask her, but she could not answer. Perhaps she wanted to grab the chance to travel. Only when she boarded the train bound for Keelung did she realize what Keelung Harbor had meant to her. The big ship at the harbor sent her a husband, but the big ship at the harbor also sent away her love to her Jap teacher. The harbor was glistening with lights reflected from the ships, which stabbed at her pupils sensitive to light. The harbor made her get lost even without the help of sea fog. The waves kept pounding on the shore, sometimes violently, sometimes smoothly. A few big ships threw out brand-new cars, which reminded her of the scene when Chung Sheng met his friend Hueicheng here. Hueicheng was coming back to Taiwan after he had finished his studies in Japan. Back then, they were so young, and life seemed so promising. Who knew that just a few years later, Chung Sheng would be dragged forward with his feet chained? When he was killed, his eyes did not close and his heart could not rest. What he did had affected his family, and his soul had haunted the old ancestral house, never departing. But Hueicheng was no better off. He had been tortured. A villager came back from Taipei. It was rumored that Hueicheng was hung up, with his hands nailed on a rope. He was doused with ice-cold water in winter, with his head hanging low, as if he were dead. On hearing this, Hueicheng's wife fainted. Someone said the villager was almost blind, "How can he be sure who was being hung up?" Someone used warm ginger soup to wake up Hueicheng's wife. She heard people chatting and burst out crying. She jumped out of bed to find her kids, pulling them to get out of the house. In the pouring rain, the slim wife and a few little kids knelt down on the muddy road, praying to gods, "Let Hueicheng come back safe and sound." The villagers pulled them up and took them inside. Hueicheng's wife seemed to lose her mind when she came into the house. She had gone insane for several days, without eating anything. When the kind-hearted Yunmei learned about it, she made traditional tonic herbal soup to boost the wife's physical strength.

Unexpectedly, Hueicheng's wife did not benefit from the tonic. It actually worked to the opposite effect. When she was forced to swallow the herbal soup, she could not make it through the night. Yunmei felt regretful and mournful, which made her cry for days. It turned out that Hueicheng did not die. A few years later, he was released from prison, and he took his kids away from the old house, deliberately losing touch with his acquaintances.

Those days felt so far away, thought Yunmei. The fog at the harbor was as befuddling and bewildering as it had been. When the fog dispersed, a few smiling young faces emerged, which seemed so vividly visible to her even at the present moment. She seemed to see her own bizarre figure at this harbor. She asked herself why she had come all the way to buy dresses here. She laughed at herself, being so old. Why wouldn't the young sailors at the harbor land? In their wandering life, did they find love to anchor themselves everywhere? Yunmei squinted her eyes to look at the ship. Then she thought of her father, who was a fisherman. His life had been engulfed by the sea. Going toward the sea or toward the island, he could only find premature death.

Men died prematurely, women were traumatized, and the island was full of mourning.

When she left the bay, Yunmei strolled along the busy shopping street along the pier. The news on the TV wall reported a department store's anniversary sale. In the news, people lined up for hours to buy La Mer-brand cosmetics, which cost tens of thousands of NT dollars, yet the products sold out. Only she looked like an old restless stray dog, with her discolored overcoat and her gray in her unevenly dyed hair. What her granddaughter would call herbivorous boys and flower boys walked by, and she looked up to stare at the bizarre clothes of the new generation. What kind of clothes would she like to buy? She stopped by several shops, but nobody came to bring her in. She would stop at the shop windows, not daring to come inside until she found something she liked. After shopping for a while, she bought a pale purple overcoat and a red sweater. She preferred colors that made her stand out.

But perhaps because she had stood by the harbor for too long, with the cold winds blowing at her, she caught a serious cold when she got home. An old person like her could not stand such chills, so she lay in bed for a long time. When the Chinese New Year came, her grandkids cut off the price tags, and helped her change into those new bright-colored clothes.

The purple and the red brushed away Yunmei's bitter memories, and colored her Keelung Harbor with new shades and tints. The misty harbor that had once broken her heart would have nothing to do with her from then on.

In just a few years, she would enter years of serenity and tranquility, like the quiet time before a deer dies.

Blossoms of the Four Seasons

That night, Yunmei insisted on taking a rest in the grocery store.

But actually, she could hardly fall asleep. She looked around at things displayed in the store, wondering how she had been pent up here in such a small place for so many years. This tightly-packed and decaying shop had taken in her whole life, protecting her against the need to go out to earn a living. Even though it was barely profitable, it was all she had. Many things had existed since the store was opened, and no one had ever come to claim them. When she ordered those things, she had told those who sold them to her, "Everything has its owner."

But now, even she doubted it.

After going shopping that day, Yunmei caught a cold at night. Satin, Chung Liu's daughter, saw that she did not come to the sitting room for breakfast. She sent for someone to find Yunmei at the grocery store. Yunmei was reclining in her old wicker chair, sagged into her shape. Part of the back of the chair was stained in a deep brown color.

They said she should not have gone to the harbor with the winds blowing so hard.

After she recovered from the cold, Yunmei lost most of her vitality. She suffered from lethargy, which was almost unheard of at that time. She always hid under the blanket, without making any sound, as if she were in a coma. Her kids were quiet by nature, and they got used to the mother who lay still under the blanket. Lying that way, Yunmei looked like a child curling up in cloudy dreams. She always played Debussy's 'L'après-midi d'un Faun,' and fell asleep before long. The turntable had not been thrown away because she had hidden it.

It was only many years later, after Yunmei went to Taipei to claim her husband's corpse, that people knew she no longer belonged to this world. How could a person live on when she did not feel she belonged to this world? Her destiny, as revealed by her palm lines, was made invalid.

Later when her kids interpreted her case as post-traumatic stress disorder and depression, she could not care less. No matter what they said, she felt she was affected by a heart disease—a disease that came with the death of love, a plague of love. Wasn't it clear to them? Love without future was just like withered flowers.

Yunmei still remembered how one day, when she reached her late middle age, she woke up and clipped open the black cloth that covered the mirror. She looked at herself, touching her poor breasts and lonely body. That day, she could not understand why she decided to go to stay in Taipei for a while all by herself.

Back then, West Niang was also a very old woman. She thought her own life had been wasted. Since her daughter-in-law still had the energy to move around, she had nothing else to say. She just said, "Your kids all live in school dorms. Now you have time all to yourself, and you should live for yourself. You came to the Chung family as a young girl, and then you became a widow without enjoying your life. Poor girl!"

After hearing that, the tearful Yunmei left the Chung family.

People knew that she went to Taipei, but they did not know what a woman in her forties could do in Taipei.

It wasn't long before they saw Yunmei again: she said she could not get used to living in

Taipei. Moreover, West Niang had fallen ill, so Yunmei moved back in with the Chung family again. She opened a grocery store. Kids spread the word that Ahmei Grocery Store was open.

When the villagers saw Yunmei, who had come back from Taipei, they felt she became much prettier, and that her breast seemed fuller. “Really? Can you really judge with your eyes?” “Otherwise, can we peep at her when she takes a bath?” The gossiping girls sent Ahsia, who had the best eyesight, to peep at Yunmei. Under the full moon, Ahsia peeked at the middle-aged woman’s body through the seam between the planks. A magical moment came in sight. “She’s gorgeous!” “What a pity! She had no man,” sighed a girl. “Is beauty for men?” said Ahsia.

Yunmei never mentioned what she had done in Taipei that year, and no one dared to ask.

It seemed as if she had never left that year. The grocery store remained open, and she continued to recline in her wicker chair, peering through the gaps between the glass jars of candy at the villagers, coming and going on the small road.

Thus she let her beautiful body nestle in the dark shadow, aging little by little with the passage of time.

In her old age, Yunmei squinted to watch the TV news, in which the kids of Chen Chin-hsing, a notorious kidnapper and murderer, were sent to America for quarantine and protection. She was reminded of her poor daughter Gueihua. Though the cases were different in their impacts, the fathers of those sad kids were both executed—one for political reasons, the other for infamous crimes. But kids were kids, after all. They were supposed to be exempt from their fathers’ crimes or notoriety, and yet they ended up forced to leave the island so that they could forget the injury inflicted on them.

The week Gueihua left the winning numbers of Patriotism Lottery were announced, and West Niang won a small sum. They scraped together the small amounts of prize money and sent it to Gueihua, getting her enough to cover her fees for the first few years. It was such a coincidence, but perhaps West Niang had foreseen it. During the time when the male family members were disappearing, West Niang always believed that with losses come gains. If the misery of the previous generation was inevitable, could the next generation be guaranteed happiness?

Maybe if West Niang were to survive into the modern age, she would not have believed in such stuff. What happened later proved that Yunmei’s idea was closer to reality: every generation had their own stories, and their own misery.

In her old age, she often remembered that bleak afternoon when she went to the North to claim the corpse. The whitening sunshine pulled out her shadow, as long as a monster. After that ruthless gunshot, she became a widow, a deserted woman. Being deserted was more terrible than being parted. The feeling of fracture could no longer be mended; the feeling of emptiness could no longer be filled up. In the afternoon, when she alone was bathed in the vast deadliness of the village, her heart would throb in pain, suddenly constricting into convulsions.

But she was not the only one left behind. The whole village was deserted, and turned to ruins.

Yunmei, who lived to be extremely old, lived across two centuries. Her pale body with her haggard dark shadow moving around in the grocery store became a most familiar figure for the villagers. Nobody would ever forget her hand taking candy and cookies out of the jars, or the hand that took the rice wine from the shelf behind her. The final contact Yunmei had with the Western world was that she at long last entered a MacDonald's for a hamburger and some french fries. Then she went to a café for a cup of latte. Her grandkids laughed when she wrinkled her brows, sipping the coffee. Hsiluo was full of many brightly-lighted shops. She went around with wonder. When she saw a convenience store that stayed open twenty-four hours a day, with customers moving in and out, she marveled at the miracle that this small town finally rose up from its sad past.

A shop named Convenience Store occupied the shiny street corner, with the fixed expressions "Welcome" and "Thanks for coming." The module-like brightness shone upon items in the fridge—lunch boxes, meat over rice, pastas waiting to be heated. "Even the fruit looks so pretty!" said Yunmei, staring at the fridge. She thought people would no longer visit her dark gloomy grocery store to buy things. Nevertheless, her life story and secrets of her heart were all buried in that grocery store. With the change of times, the dim light that revealed the bereavement for her husband and son would be replaced and erased.

When even the street corners in the little town became occupied by big business syndicates, Yunmei's world had shrunken into the dull light bulb on top of her grocery store. The warm yellowish light could no longer feed people or quench their thirst.

Then she asked her kids and grandkids to take her around to the bus stations. Some old nostalgic aura still lingered there, not far from her memory. Her husband had taken her to one of the stations to take the bus to Taipei. That time they went to Keelung, a harbor where it was always raining. She still remembered the rainy, misty harbor. They stayed in a small hotel, where they had the most beautiful night. She also remembered the day when her Japanese teacher was to leave Taiwan. It was raining on that day as well. "Sakura, sakura.... Sayonara!" "Kasan¹, what are you thinking?"

Asked by her child, she smiled as she surfaced from the concave hole of memories. "I wanna buy a new dress and new shoes," said Yunmei. Then she said she wanted to watch the sea, the sea of her childhood, the sea of her dream and fantasy.

But when she got close to the sea, she saw a whole block of giant monsters. Her kids and grandkids told her it was the Sixth Naphtha Cracker of FPC. "What cracker?" she could hardly understand it. "Sixth Naphtha Cracker, the one with chimneys sending off white smoke."

¹A Japanese way to address one's mom.

“Oh, how come it is here by the sea?” Yunmei narrowed her eyes to look to the distance. She could not see the sea clearly, which made her sad.

In her old age, Yunmei was most concerned over Chung Sheng, the youngest son who bore the same name as his father. Sheng’s skull was lopsided, his shoulder slanting, and his limbs not agile at all. He walked with a limp. Rain or shine, many people saw Sheng limping in the sandy storm every day. He always carried a bottle of rice wine, wearing the baseball cap someone gave him during an election campaign. On the car’s visor was the shape of Taiwan. From a distance, the green picture of a sweet potato that signified Taiwan would jump into people’s sight.

Sometimes at night, Yunmei would think of getting a woman from the Mainland to serve as Sheng’s companion. But then she would rethink—why make another woman more miserable? In the past, when her father talked about bought women, he referred to Jap women, but now people bought brides from across the Taiwan Strait. The world was always changing, which made her unable to get used to it.

Yunmei thought perhaps someday this kid would get drunk to death on the road. Fortunately, when Sheng really did get drunk and died in a roadside ditch, Yunmei had been dead for years. She never witnessed the destiny she had foretold for her son; otherwise, that would certainly add to the pain of her life. But people in the neighborhood sighed when they mentioned the two Chung Shengs, who died in such different ways—the father died for a revolution, while the son died of drinking too much. It was a disgrace to die at night by freezing, stuck in the ditch, unable to get up as he was too drunk.

Sheng lived as a tragedy and he died as a tragedy. He was a distorted fetus that had been beaten and injured by the butt of a gun while he was still in his mother’s womb, and he was born like an alien, an alien that was often drunk. If the son was an alien, wouldn’t that make his father an alien as well? “What alien?” Yunmei smiled as she asked herself. She remembered her husband Chung Sheng once told her that Mozart was an alien, who left the earth early because he did not like it here on earth. “So you don’t like the earth?” she asked. “I do, but it needs to be revolutionized,” Chung Sheng answered her as he blew off the oil lamp. She smiled, looking at the profile of Chung Sheng in the dwindling light. “Revolution means getting yourself killed. A revolutionary needs to get ready for the scaffold, unlike those people,” thought Yunmei as she watched those protesters who gathered on Ketagalan Boulevard. It was the last time she watched TV, and the screen was all red, a color she disliked. Fortunately, Yunmei left the world earlier than her son Chung Sheng, and that would save her a lot of trouble and torture. The name “Chung Sheng” represented a utopia in her heart. Once she regretted naming her youngest son after her husband. When she looked at her handicapped son descending into alcoholic dissipation and insanity, she knew that all forms of remembrance were futile.

When she felt that all was futile, the great fire of age had burnt her body almost to the end. She was left with only a flickering light, the only remembrance of her vast pain. When she

thought of some people, the memory could not stop her pain; instead, it made it worse. Sometimes West Niang would enter her dream, praising her for being a good daughter-in-law. She embraced all the female virtues of worshipping the ancestors, and taking care of descendants. The village head once visited the Chungs, telling the family that if they were willing to vote for his political party, he could have a Chastity Arch set up for Yunmei. Unfortunately, Yunmei, who happened to lie in bed with her lingering breath, heard it all. She used her walking stick to knock on the floor to summon her kids and grandkids into her room. She told them never to accept anything in her name, not even a monument or an arch. "What Chastity Arch? I was forced to be a widow. Who needs that arch? That god-damn KMT!" grumbled Yunmei in anger, preferring to die rather than vote for that party. Many people thought she was having her last hoorah, with her memory being replayed. It would have been too pathetic if it had been the bounce of her memory. Wouldn't it be embarrassing if her last words were about the widowhood she hated, and the party she detested?

Then a man appeared by Yunmei's bed. Many people gossiped about it heatedly.

Wu Chien-guo, the executioner who had made Yunmei a widow, walked past the hallway. His figure was the same as what he had been years ago, but he was quite elderly now. The villagers did not like to see him, even though they knew that he was nothing but an executioner. Of course, the one who really had Chung Sheng killed was not Wu Chien-guo, but he executed it after all. The elderly Wu walked with the help of a walking stick. Strange to say, in his old age, his eyes were especially keen. In his youth, he had poor eyesight, which turned better and better thanks to the Eye-Opening Sutra. But many people did not buy his story, doubting as how reading a sutra could better one's vision. Yet Wu insisted on that, saying, "Belief creates power." He also believed that his sincere repentance could win him the forgiveness from the soul of Chung Sheng, who had been his childhood friend.

Still, the family was bereaved of a father.

Wu might well repent, but he could not serve as a father of the family.

Yunmei felt guilty for her kids, for she had been a kid brought up with her father's love. The happy memory she entertained in old age was the time she had spent with her Do-san, her dad.

When she was in a girls' high school, she had to wear her uniform with her name and school name embroidered even when she went to the theater. And she had to apply to the school for permission three days before, specifying what movie she would watch at Hsiluo Theater, and with whom. Once she went to the movie with her cousin, but she was written up for that. She asked the school authorities why she could not go to a movie with her cousin. "Cousins easily fall in love." She laughed at the bizarre logics. Was the movie they watched *Les Miserables* or *Burning the Red Lotus Temple*? In her old age, it seemed she had a remote in her hand, channel surfing. However, that age of spiritual incarceration seemed to have happened only yesterday.

In a family without a father, the kids did not have a role model. Yunmei lamented this. "A

father is much better than a hundred teachers or lovers,” she remembered being told so by Gueihua in her letter. At the end of her life, she always felt she owed something to her firstborn, Gueihua, and her youngest son Sheng. Gueihua was far away, in a distant land, and Sheng immersed himself in liquor. One so far away, and the other just nearby, but she felt she owed both of them something. Sheng had never left his hometown. Chien-tsoo-lun was his heaven and his earth. He always had a bottle of rice wine in hand, and many people called him “Moron Sheng.” He walked with a limp, raising dust as if it were a sandstorm. People could see him even at the entrance to the village. In his eyes, the sun looked like a windshield wiper, slanting to the right and then to the left. In his eyes, the world was moving, unstable and blurry. The autumn before she got seriously ill, Yunmei attended her last temple ritual marking a water god’s birthday. For three days and three nights, the sutra was chanted to pray for exemption from disasters and assurance of bliss. People whose prayers had been granted would thank gods by sponsoring Taiwanese operas. The actors did their best to put on the show, but only stray dogs and cats looked on, with just a few people watching. People swarmed into the temple to get charms and turtle cakes.

Moron Sheng forced his way into the crowd and got two turtle cakes, one big, the other small. He gave them to Yunmie, slurring his words, “Mama, this... for...you. Long... live!” Yunmei burst into tears. People were chanting the sutra outside, loudly. In the Underworld, the sinner bitten by snakes would repent and no longer feel pain anymore. She saw her deceased husband Sheng. She knew it would not be long before she met her husband.

After winter set in, Yunmei’s body became bent. Not to be seen as a hunchback, she no longer went out; instead, she kept lying, without getting up. She was a woman who had held on through silencing storms, through bloody slaughter, through many lonely nights of solitude; she could not hold on in days of peace. Like her, the old house could not hold on any more. The damp blanket was musty. She thought of ancestresses, women who survived on this barbarous island. They suckled on barbarians’ breasts. They compared themselves to three pests and three vices—snakes, chickens, and pigs; greed, anger and obsession. They lived through water and fire. Back then, people often saw arches set up for chaste widows. When their men died young, women still insisted on remaining widowed to shoulder the responsibility of caring for their parents-in-law, to observe the virtues of loyalty and filial piety. For many years, Yunmei felt she had been against such a history of widowhood in her heart. Even though it did not show, yet she wanted to leave so desperately. However, she ended up staying here till her old age, winning a reputation that she did not deserve.

She knew what it meant to be filial, what it meant to be chaste, but she knew nothing of widowhood.

Lying there, Yunmei often saw the mirage of a harbor full of Japs, waiting to be expelled. The misty sea slowly sent her back husband Chung Sheng, and slowly sent away her Jap teacher,

whom she had admired and adored. The big coal-powered ship breathed out thick smog of melancholy departure, the whistle blew out their unspoken and unspeakable feelings. Standing on the pier, Yunmei waved her hand at the big ship. The newly-wed Yunmei could not stay out for too long, even though Chung Sheng understood her need to see her teacher off, just as she understood he had a woman in Japan willing to do anything for him, even to die for him. But a man's understanding just touched upon the surface, while a woman's understanding could penetrate to a man's core. Occasionally, the sleepy Yunmei would dream of Chung Sheng. He was so young in her dreams, with no sign of aging. Thus she preferred not to dream of him, thinking that a wrinkled woman should not see her husband, whose age was fixed. But her Jap teacher in high school was also fixed at a relatively young age. Yet in her dreams, she was not ashamed when seeing him. Perhaps it was purely a Platonic admiration—Yunmei told herself so.

But she received no reply to her letters from across the sea—a void address, coordinates invalid.

In her day, her academic performance at school was excellent. She poured all her strength and melancholy into her letters, but there was no reply. Her high hope was left empty.

All those years, the letters she received did not come from Japan, but from a strange address in Taiwan with an unfamiliar name. Little by little, the name was no longer unfamiliar. She secretly imagined the name to be her admired teacher. The letters were signed by someone called Wu Chien-guo. She had no idea who he was, nor why he kept writing to her. Who on earth was he? Why did he have such great love gushing at her? Was she to fall in love with this stranger? Why were his letters full of regret and repentance to her? All the letters were put in a drawer of her bureau.

One day she asked her youngest sister Yunlien, who came to towel her body, to take all the letters out.

She took one of the letters to read, "Yunmei, my hands were stained with blood, the blood of my friend. All your misfortune happened because I pulled the trigger. I need to ask you for your forgiveness."

"Who is this Wu Chien-guo? I am not a Catholic father. He wrote so many letters of confession, and they all have these similar repeated sentences. These letters are like the confession of an executioner. He said he killed Chung Sheng, but I won't buy it. The one who killed Sheng was the president, not someone called Wu Chien-guo," Yunmei mumbled to herself, putting the letters into a bundle with a rubber band. She asked Yunlien to fetch a lighter for her. She clicked it, and burned them all with the lighter. She rubbed her eyes. Then after thinking for a while, she talked to herself, "This Wu Chien-guo must have been dead. His letters stopped coming two years ago." Yunlien was confused by that, thinking that her sister was lost in dementia, unable to tell the present from the past.

When she was in pain, Yunmei, who had converted to Buddhism, would listen to the Buddhist song recorded by Vegetarian Ahma in her old age. Nobody knew who had recorded that,

and the tape always remained in the Chung family. "People sigh over the pain of life, but where is the pain?" Only when she heard this would Yunmei gradually fall asleep.

But her younger sister Yunlien smiled all day long. Some said her life was given by gods because once, way back, when people needed to get away because of air raids, Yunlien, who was still a baby, was put on the altar of Guanyin, the Buddha of Mercy. Her mother put her there for fear that her cries might have got people killed, as they revealed people's whereabouts. When she had to go, the mother told the baby, "If you are lucky enough, then we can come back hearing you cry." After saying that, her mother prayed to Guanyin. After the air raid ended, at sunset, the bloody twilight descended onto the ironwoods. Her mother was all anxiety, wondering whether the baby would become a grudging or a marvelous spirit, if she did not survive. A grudging spirit would complain about being deserted by her mother, who left her behind for her own survival. But a marvelous spirit would be happy about sacrificing herself to let the whole family live. But a baby knew next to nothing of sacrifice, so she would most likely turn into a grudging spirit. The mother walked home alone, way behind other villagers. She slowed her pace. Her brain went blank during the air raid, but now she was afraid, worrying about this and that. In particular, the big setting sun looked like a big bloody mouth, waiting ahead silently, as if to devour her.

Only when she went home and saw her baby smiling all to herself did she feel relieved. Yunmei often recounted the scene to Yunlien, who was several years younger than she. Yunlien always smiled when hearing this, as if it had nothing to do with herself. Her smile made people assume that she was indeed a lucky person. "Lucky Yunlien," many old people called her by that nickname.

The Typhoon Wayne made Yunlien, too, a widow. She was as tough as a man—an oyster picker who drank the salt water, staying by the sea till her old age.

After her stand in the fish market was closed, she would go to take care of her eldest sister Yunmei. She reeked of the bloody smell of seafood and fish, but Yunmei did not complain. After all, she did not have much of a choice. Her Gueihua lived abroad. Moron Sheng was always drunk. The rest of her kids went across the Strait to earn RMB in Mainland China. There were just few people who could accompany her.

Spring Flowers Dream of Dewdrops

That day, Yunmei suddenly felt like eating cream cake and beef soup. She had never liked sweets, nor had she eaten beef, which had been a banned food in the Chung family. Due to her whims, Yunlien went to town to order a small cake, and then she went to the market to buy some choice beef. In the evening, she made the beef into a stew. Shortly after Yunmei ate it, she passed away.

People said duck was poisonous, but nobody said beef was poisonous too. Yunlien sighed

over her sister's bad lot, which made her unable to eat up a whole bowl of beef soup.

Nor did Yunmei taste the cake, for when the cake was delivered, she had breathed her last.

The Chungs often held the funerals for their long-lived women as if they were festivals. Red invitation cards, red banquet tables, red flowers at the funeral venue—everything was so glamorous and well-decorated, and it was as auspicious as if someone were getting married.

Yunmei lay in the coffin, prepared by the father of her maiden family long ago. That coffin, which was supposed to bring good luck to her husband so that he could be a government official, failed to do its duty. Now it could only perform the task of housing her body.

The moment when her coffin was closed, Yunmei saw the sea. She saw the joy her father had felt when he was able to marry this sea daughter to the prosperous Chung family. She also saw herself, who had not been deflowered on her wedding night, standing in the dark, waiting for her flesh and bones to go into decay.

When Yunlien put her sister's room in order, she found an undelivered letter in the drawer.

It was the last letter Yunmei wrote to her Japanese teacher.

親愛なる先生：

夢で出会う先生の面影。この世界は寂しさに溢れていても、あなたと一緒に過ごした青春時代を思うだけで心が休まります。あの戦争が終わり、港の船があなたを連れて行ってしまいました。私の青春も終わりを告げ、時が経ち夫を得て子供も生まれましたのよ。でも夫は瞬く間に天に召されて、四人の子供たちもそれぞれ離れていきました。長女は強迫障害が強く牧師を通してカナダに預けられ、向こうで勉学を続けました。息子ははお腹にいる時に銃で撃たれて知的障害。能無しだとずっと嘲弄されました……先生、青春時代には人の世がこれほど、邪険だなんて知りませんでした。人の生の暗い影と深い淵について貴方も教えてくださいませんか。当時は先生もきっと人の世が朝日

のように美しいものだと思っていたのかもかもしれませんね、風に吹かれる女学生の微笑み、あの美しき日のように。でも貴方が帰国してから、私の祖国の島は棄てられました。本当の「祖国」は来ず、身は分断され心も死に絶えたのです。

先生がもう一度台湾にいらっしゃって、私の青春をもう一度燃え上がらせ、この流れる血を止めてくださったらどんなに嬉しいことでしょうか。でも貴方は何処にいらっしゃるのかしら。貴方が残っていた住所は希望のないただの座標軸の一点？お返事がありませんでした。貴方はかつてこの港から広がる海原とこの南の島を眺めていたのでしょうか？故郷の雪国では暖かな潮汐が夜の夢によりそっているのかしら？あの高速で走る列車の中ではクチナシとジャスミンの香気は漂ってる？私はこれから孤独な葦、仮面をかぶった悲しきクラウン、飛び去ってゆくイメージを前に、悲しみに暮れないようにしなければ---再會した時のためにもね。

お返事がない。まるで砂漠の石のように、白日の追憶は熱く、夜は氷のように冷たい。

二崙のこの村に午後の雨。貴方との思い出。雨宿りしたあの木の洞。あの尋常でない大雨。先生がいなかったら生きていたくないわ、あの時、取り乱した私はこんな風にいいまし

たね。洞の外では狂おしい雨。私の声は雨音にほとんど押し消されたけど聞こえたらしく、貴方は笑いながら「君はずっと生きていくよ、桂子」と。ほら、この大雨はきっとやむよ。怖がらなくていい。貴方の暖かな手が私の手を包み、生徒たちに見せてくれたあの向日葵の絵のように悲しい中にも希望がありました。

長い間、あの大雨の時の暖かい手が荒れはてた私の目を日夜撫でてくれる。この島が受けた不義と冷たさに耐えて、私は沈黙を続けてきましたわ。貴方は蠟燭の灯のように、私の斑になった影を照らしてきた。死と同じように崇高な愛、蠟燭のように短い青春。岩よりも堅い不幸、野草よりもでしゃばりな白髪。たとえ残酷に定められていた運命だったのだとしても、それに屈従はしませんでしたよ。私は今もこの村にいて、そっと誰にもわからずに遠く貴方がいる方を見ながら、海辺で待っています。

これからの人生は潤いのない枯れ果てた砂漠。もう人生に貴方からの恵みはないのでしょうか？

これが貴方への最期の問い合わせになりそうです。

お返事をお待ちしています。

Yunlien, who did not understand Japanese, took the letter to a professional translation house in town. It was translated thus:

Dear Sensei,²

I see your image in my dream.

The solitude of this world does not include you. When I think of the time I spent with you in my youth, I feel serenity in my heart. When the big war was over, the ship in the bay took you away, thus ending my youth. In fleeting time, I had a husband and kids. Before long, my husband was taken back to the heaven by God. My kids were scattered—my frightened eldest girl was sent by the priest to the US to be brought up and study there; my little son had been injured by a gun butt even when he was still in my womb, so he was born retarded. People have nicknamed him “Moron.” Dear Sensei, in my youth I never realized there was such wickedness in life, and you never taught us about darker shadows and deeper abyss. I think you, at that time, also thought life was as beautiful as the morning sun, as the smiles on the faces of your female students. Beauty and bounty were brought forth by the winds every day. When you returned to your country, my homeland became a deserted island. The real “fatherland” did not arrive, but we were beheaded and deeply traumatized.

Sensei, how I wish you could come back to Taiwan, to rekindle the flames of my youth, to stop my wounds from bleeding. But where are you? Is the address you left me just some hopeless coordinates? You never reply to my letter. Have you ever stood by the harbor, looking to this distant island, the island of the southern language? In your snowy homeland, do warm tides accompany you in your slumber? Do your high-speed rail trains bring forth the fragrance of cape

² The Japanese way of addressing one's teacher.

jasmines? I think I am solitary silver grass from now on. Like a sad clown who puts on a mask, in the fleeting images, I practice not feeling melancholy. I rehearse the scenes so that I may see you again.

But you, who never reply to my letter, are like the stone in the desert. In the daytime, you are burning hot in memory, but when night falls, you are so icy cold.

This afternoon, the rain is falling in the small village of Erhlun. I still remember you as we took shelter from the rain in the big tree cave. It was an extraordinarily heavy rain. If it had not been for you, I wouldn't have wanted to live on. Back then I told myself, as if I had been out of my mind. The rain raged on outside the tree cave, drowning out my utterance. You heard what I said, smiled and told me, "You will live on, Keiko." Then you went on, "The big rain will let up. Don't be afraid."

Your hands warmed up mine, like the sunflowers in the painting that you had shown us, so sad and yet so hopeful.

For so many years, your warm hands in the big rain rubbed my rough days and nights. I've tolerated the injustice and indifference of this island, silencing myself. You are like a lamp that sheds light on my mottled shadow. With love as high as death, youth as short as a candle, misfortune more tenacious than stones, gray hair more barbarous than weeds, I never succumb, even though cruelty has long been written in my obituary. I still stay in this village, waiting in a posture that does not show, walking to the seaside to look at the direction that points to you.

From now on, my life will be waterless, dry and deserted. Is my life really deprived of your grace?

This is my last question.

Looking forward to your reply, keiko

Translated from the Chinese by Hsu Paofang
