By the time the woman with bound feet hobbled up to the execution ground, mud-spattered from head to toe, Mr. Wu You was already in the ground. A few bloodstains and some bristly hairs were all that remained. A fine rain was still falling as way off in the distance a wedding party of men decked out in reds and greens was on its way to fetch a bride, their horns blaring, their drums banging. They disappeared from view on the opposite bank of the river.

Translated by Howard Goldblatt

GREEN YELLOW & Ge Fei

That fleet of fishermen's boats owned by nine fishing families, which served as floating whorehouses on the Suzi River, vanished more than forty years ago. Yet folk stories about them are still being told and retold.

The Gazetteer of Mai Village (1953 edition) has this to say about the boats:

Persecuted by soldiers and harrassed by local gangs, the Changs, who were the last of the nine fishing families, moved ashore one day at dawn to Mai Village.

This very sketchy entry was the work of the compilers, three teachers of the old-style private schools. Nothing is said about these people's situation after their move, though the entry does describe in some detail the scenery of that day on which they came ashore under "a sky splashed with many colors." A newly published book, A History of Prostitutes in China, by Tan Weinian, gives a vague, ambiguous account of the nine fishing families that is simply indiscriminately copied from The Gazetteer of Mai Village. In his better days, Professor Tan had earned my silent emulation of his personal style, as well as the seriousness of his writing. And now? His discussion of this topic, Mai Village and the nine families, was riddled with errors, one after another. Amid the uncertain words, the image of the aging and sad professor, looking ridiculous in a pair of loose riding breeches, flashed across my mind; he seemed to be trying to stride across a brazier. On page 427 of his book, Tan Weinian mentions, as many other scholars have, the controversy over the meaning of the term "green yellow." He repudiated the popular proposal that it was the name of a pretty young woman, saying that this was "at the least" a "careless" assumption. As for taking the term to refer to the changing of the seasons, from spring into summer, as some people have proposed, this was even more absurd, he maintained. Based on his instinct and stubbornness, Tan believed that "green yellow" was the title of a work, a year-by-year record of the lives of the prostitutes associated with the nine fishing families on the Suzi River. He also believed that, barring the unexpected, the record was still to be found somewhere among the people.

Enticed by this intriguing assertion, I decided to go back to Mai Village for another visit. Just before leaving, I ran into Professor Tan in a wineshop and brought up the subject of my trip. As in the past, after he had heard me out, he immediately responded in an impatient way and, gesturing his hand in disagreement, said, "You'll find nothing there."

1

Elytis once wrote, "Trees and pebbles cause time to elapse." Yet one may say that nonetheless, people are unlikely to forget things that happened forty years ago.

One evening three days after I arrived at Mai Village, I met an old man by the low hazel bushes along the Suzi River. He was repairing the fence of a sheep enclosure. Like many of the villagers, he did not want to talk about the "shameful events" of the past. Shades of sorrow had etched heavy lines on his face and caused the skin on his face to appear hard as stone. Standing there by the wooden fence of the enclosure, amid the strong smell of sheep, I hesitated for a long while. Finally the old man began to talk to me. He looked as though it required a strenuous effort to recall the past, and he seemed to be trying to revisualize certain scenes, to bring them before his eyes and then stabilize them there. He talked with heavy hissing sounds and turbid guttural noises. These noises caused some difficulty for me, and to take notes on what he said, I often had to ask him to pause or repeat when I could not follow him.

According to the old man, the shabby boat with the awning stretched over it arrived at the riverbank in a drizzling dawn. It was the rainy season of early summer and somewhat cold at dawn. The man Chang had with him a thin and weak little girl. They made

their way with difficulty along the muddy, hilly road toward the village, their figures wavering in the strong southeast wind. Almost the entire village saw them coming. Behind them, their wooden boat, moored at the riverbank, was wrapped in flames; its burning bamboo cabin crackled briskly in the drizzling rain. This man from outside was a shrewd one. Perhaps he had burned his boat so that the villagers could not refuse to let him stay.

When Chang and the girl arrived at the village, they were exhausted. Chang found the gates of all the houses shut against them, and so he stood in the rain with his daughter for a long time. About noon, people peering from the cracks in their gates saw that Chang and his daughter were being led away by the ferryman. "Even now," the old man said, "I still don't know Chang's given name. His daughter's name, I think, is Young Green. She is old now and lives by the back of the village. Anyway, she doesn't use the name Young Green anymore."

"What happened after that?"

"I'm not sure. The day they came was three, maybe four days before the Dragon Boat Festival. I remember, because the old ferryman's boat overturned on the festival day, and three people were killed in the accident. The villagers felt that the bad luck was brought by the newcomers. That Chang never did talk or smile much; it was as if he had something on his mind. Maybe he couldn't get used to being in a village."

The old man showed no response whatever to my casual mention of the term "green yellow." An odd impression he gave as he recounted the past was that while he was revealing something he was also covering up something. At the end, as I was leaving, he added something.

"I used to go to the Suzi River every day at dusk," he said, "to fetch water. Sometimes I would see that outsider sitting on a low stool in front of his gate, doing nothing and watching his daughter catch butterflies on the hillside all covered with mugwort. But most of the time their old pinewood gate was closed by the time the sun set. He was probably a good father. Two years later, the daughter seemed suddenly grown up."

The Suzi River flowed silently by my feet, giving off coolness from its surface. Along the riverbanks were scattered shabby abandoned cabins, some with walls tumbling down, some with roofs caving in. It was early autumn, and there was no one working in the fields. Villagers were gathered near the walls, taking in the sun and waiting for the ripening of the cotton crop. The villagers, including the roaming yellow dogs, showed no interest in my visit. As a matter of fact, the first day I arrived at Mai Village it took quite some effort just to give them a vague idea of the purpose of my visit. But they did arrange for me to stay in a flour mill on the east side of the village. The mill's machinery had broken down the previous week and had been sent for repair to a town some dozen kilometers away.

I returned to my room and again smelled the suffocating dust. This village lacked warmth and curiosity, I thought. It wasn't just that poor man Chang—any newcomer from outside the village would feel lonely here. It was still early. I lay down on the bed near the wall. Just as I was dozing off, an incident from the past came suddenly to my mind. It was nothing special, but somehow the recollection of certain things in it made me somewhat uncomfortable.

2

It was at dusk one hot day nine years ago. On the main road to Mai Village I met an old rags-and-malt-sugar man.¹ He was sitting on the embankment of a roadside ditch, shaded by a chinaberry tree. He had the look of an honest working man. Two bamboo baskets, weathered to a dark gray color, lay in front of him. He held a bamboo flute in one hand. His sad eyes looked as though he were expecting something. Across from him was a vast field of jute, turned a lavish vermilion by the setting sun. His manner attracted my attention and made me want to talk to him. For some unexplainable reason, I felt he had been sitting there all day, puffing slowly at his long-stemmed pipe. As I approached and stopped beside him, I could see all the marks on his face left by the years. Only then did I realize how old he must be.

He told me his name was Li Gui and that he was from a town named Heng Tang. I recalled Heng Tang as a place often mentioned in a classical reference book of song lyrics. He said that he had been lost, probably since that morning. "It seems that everything's changed here," he said. I sat down beside him under the chinaberry tree, and he handed me his long-stemmed pipe.

"There are no holes in your flute," I remarked.

"But it makes music. Right now I don't have the energy to play it."
He smoothed the flute lightly, staring at the bend in the road ahead
and at the village at the far end of the road as though he could hear
the sounds from there.

"Do you live here?" he asked me.

"No, I am passing by."

Then, unable to find any suitable topic for continuing our conversation, we sank into silence. To me, the silence was natural. Finally, the old man asked if he could go to the village with me for lodgings that night. I agreed.

It grew dark as we walked toward the village on the deeply rutted road. We passed through a mud-walled courtyard and, stopping at the first lighted house we saw, knocked on the door. The man living there was a medical man. He carefully sized us up and asked some questions. Finally, he reluctantly agreed to let us stay for the night. He took us to a room on the west side of the courtyard, a room filled with hay. He lit the oil lamp on the altar against the wall, and his face showed the worry and alertness that were typical of people in rural areas. Before leaving, he told us he was going out of the village to make a house call to see a woman suffering from eczema.

The old man and I lay down next to the piles of hay. We heard the doctor locking all the other doors and then leaving the house. It was after that that something strange happened.

About midnight, it suddenly began to rain heavily, and I was awoken by the sound of thunder. The courtyard was deserted, and the gate had been blown open and flapped repeatedly and loudly against the mud wall. The window of the west room where I was sleeping was not tightly closed, and traces of raindrops blew in on my face. When I got up to close the window, a flash of lightning produced a sensation that something was wrong. I felt my way to the door and lit the oil lamp. The old rags-and-malt-sugar man was not in the room. The two bamboo baskets, however, were still there beside the door. Probably he has gone to the outdoor toilet, I thought, he can't have gone

I. The rags-and-malt-sugar man collects rags and other discarded things from people and gives them malt sugar in return.

far. But rain was pouring outside—everywhere was the sound of torrents of water. In the wavering lamplight, I looked at the depression on the hay where the old man had slept; my heart felt a little chilled.

It was probably quite a while later that, half asleep, I heard the door pushed open quietly. The old man appeared at the door, barefoot, his ragged shoes in one hand, his trousers rolled up above the knees. His bare legs, which showed beneath the knees, were very fair skinned, quite at odds with his age and rough life. Covered with mud all over, he leaned against the door and smiled slightly at me, seeming to imply that he did not have to explain what he had been doing. He went back to the place where he had slept earlier and lay down. In the very dim light I saw that one of his toes had been scratched by something sharp like a piece of glass or nail; it was bleeding.

Soon after that, the rain stopped. I remained wide awake the rest of the night. Even now, I often think about this incident. The doctor came back the following morning, with an oil paper umbrella under his arm, looking depressed—the patient had died. I told him I would like to stay on, probably for another couple of days. He agreed. At noon that day, the old rags-and-malt-sugar man picked up his bamboo baskets and said goodbye to me. I watched him step over the threshold and walk onto the narrow wooden bridge that spanned the Suzi River. Over many years time has shrunk and eroded him, as flowing water does pebbles. In my mind, he left the impression of an honest and pitiful man. Events proved my judgment to be correct.

In the winter of 1967 I was at Lezhou, transferring to a long-distance bus for Achuan, when I chanced to notice on a map showing the bus routes that the town of Heng Tang was a stop on the way. I decided to go there on my way back from finishing my business. I did not know why I wanted to see this old man—perhaps to find a certain feeling I had lost to him, maybe to dispel a vague dread in my memory.

I found Li Gui soon after I got off the bus at Heng Tang. He lived in a small river valley behind a bamboo wood. I remember that it was noon on a bright sunny day. A pretty girl was washing his bedding in a pond in front of his house. After that, since I was often in the Lezhou area to learn more about its dialect, I occasionally stopped off at Heng Tang and visited the old man. Gradually the people there, particularly that girl, took me as their close friend.

3

My investigations into "green yellow" had been quite fruitless. The long river of time always silently drowns everything, yet memories will contrarily bring to the surface long-sunken fragments from the bottom of the river, like green grass shooting up from under the snow. During my days in Mai Village, I roamed around, searching for traces of the past, while one by one the nights were lost to imaginings of the distant past.

Early one morning I went to the doctor's house where I had stayed nine years earlier. The room filled with hay plunged me once again into memories of that rainy night. To me it was an incident scarcely worth mentioning, and I could not see that there was any connection with the tales of the nine fishing families. The doctor recognized me after just a short hesitation.

He said he did not know much about that "short man, so like a shadow." He said, "I was very young then. Once when that outsider had scabies, my father went to his shack by the river to see him, and I went with him. The man looked very healthy; no one expected him to die when he did. I remember he was married for a second time to a woman named Emerald. That woman looked quite pretty to me, but she did not make the man happy. The dark shadow on his face never seemed to lift. There was a lot of gossip in the village. Some said he had lived on those whorehouse boats for nearly thirty years and had been with more than one hundred women.

"River fish cannot survive once ashore"—this was how the doctor put it. "One evening in the spring, in the twelfth year after he moved to Mai Village, Emerald appeared at our window, her hair uncombed. I remember my mother gave a long sigh and said, 'That unfortunate man has died.' It was quiet in the night. The woman's cries and moans stirred up a flock of magpies on the trees. The next morning my mother and I went to the shack by the river. When we got there, the lid of the coffin had already been nailed shut. The coffin had originally been purchased by the old ferryman with his life savings, but now someone else was using it. Young Green, the daughter, was sitting on an embankment by the road, her face twisted in a grimace with the shock of her father's death. He was buried hastily at noon that day. It was a drizzly day, typical of early spring, and I remember that the black coffin, wet in the rain, looked very shiny. After the

burial, when Emerald was talking about the night of her husband's death, her hands still trembled uncontrollably. She said, 'It seemed like he just stopped breathing suddenly.'"

The doctor was cleaning his wood-handled surgical knife with cotton balls, looking a little distracted. "I never exchanged a word with that outsider. His thinking . . . perhaps . . . his daughter . . . Several times, when my father was returning to the village from his rounds in the evenings and I was with him, we would see that man sailing a small boat around the reeds on the Suzi River, his daughter Young Green with him. Probably he always missed his life on the river."

When I asked him about the various speculations about the term "green yellow," his answer startled me.

He said, "I've never heard the term around here. Still, it may exist. On the boats of the nine families, the prostitutes were generally divided into two kinds, the young and the old. Could the term refer to the two kinds? Women are like bamboos, first green and then yellow."

The doctor walked me to the gate as I was leaving, and as we walked together, he told me, as though he had just remembered, that there was a young man named Kangkang who lived in the ancestral temple of the village. "Maybe he can tell you something else."

4

Standing by the crumbling wall that formed a courtyard, I stared questioningly for a long while at a wooden grain box. It was a very large courtyard. Through the purslane growing on top of the wall, waving in the wind, I could see the faint outline of the green mountain behind the village and the vast expanse of the clean fields about it. The autumn wind, carrying leaves turned partly yellow, blew into the courtyard, bringing with it a chilly message.

"This was the coffin of that man," said Kangkang, pointing to the grain box. He looked like an honest young man. He was squatting on a stone roller beside a well and turning over in his fingers a few pieces from a broken earthenware bowl. He seemed very patient with my roundabout questions.

"That summer, we had heavy rains off and on for more than twenty days. The houses and trees in the village were all flooded, and the villagers all fled to the mountains. A few days later, the rain stopped, and the water level started to drop slowly. One morning at dawn, I was standing on the upper floor of this ancestral temple, staring out at the treetops and roofs that were sticking out of the water. Suddenly I saw a black thing, not far away, floating this way. I went downstairs and waded toward it. It was a coffin. It seemed to be made of good wood and looked very sturdy. The wood was soaked with water, so it had gotten very heavy. My younger brother and I got it home with a lot of work. That evening the village doctor came to my home. He was startled when he first saw the coffin in the yard. He said, 'I thought somebody else had died.'

"At first we didn't know where it came from. I thought it had to be from the graveyard outside the village. The flood must have broken the fence and set the coffins afloat. The graveyard was about one to two li away from the village. Strangely enough, the coffin seemed familiar with the roads; like a black dog, it headed straight for the village. The next day, my brother and I went to the graveyard. We did find a grave site on the outer edge of the graveyard that had been washed open by the flood. The opening in the grave mound was large, a deep rectangular hole, like a blooming cotton boll. Much later, we learned it was the grave of that Chang. My brother and I filled the hole with earth and built up the mound to its original rounded shape.

"That night our family argued around the coffin. My brother was shrewd; he was only seventeen, but he already had a sweetheart, a girl in the neighboring village. He insisted he wanted to use the coffin timber to make a big bed for his marriage. In the end, he was only stopped by my mother's tears. She said, 'If newlyweds sleep in a bed made out of a coffin, they will have nightmares.' On this matter, my father, sitting to the side, did not say a word. I knew what he thought. He probably wanted to keep the coffin just as it was; it looked almost like a new one. But in the end we remade it into a grain box. At harvest time, we use it for threshing grain; at other times, we move it into the house for storing grain."

"Did you see anything in the coffin?" I asked.

"No." Kangkang paused a moment and then said, "That doctor also asked me; he asked whether there was money in it."

"I mean, did you see a book?"

"No."

I noticed that he was like a girl in the way his eyes moved about as

if trying to cover his feelings. Earlier, when he was telling me about the flood, I had already noticed this.

"There must have been something in the coffin," I said. "That man died only a few decades ago. Not everything would have rotted away."

Kangkang's boyish face showed uneasiness. The pieces of broken earthenware clinked noisily in his hand. After quite a while, he stepped off the stone roller, walked to me, and lowered his voice: "Nothing, I mean absolutely nothing; not even human bones."

I was stunned.

"At first I wondered too. How come not even a bone or a hair of that bastard was there? Maybe his grave was robbed a long time ago. Only my brother and I know about this; nobody else. I feel a bit afraid. Sometimes I just want to cut up the box and burn it as firewood."

The box lay motionless in a corner of the courtyard. A morning glory vine from the vegetable patch had climbed up the brownish yellow side of the box. It was like a faint trace from a life long perished. It was like a proverb—the finest part preserved from among the sayings of the people.

5

On the ninth day of the ninth month by the lunar calendar, I found Young Green, Chang's daughter. She was squatting by the side of a round pond and looked to be about fifty years old. The pretty face had vanished like a song, like a bird flown away forever from its nest. Age was like a black screen, separating her from the past years.

Squatting on a dry spot sheltered from the wind, she was putting creases in a stack of yellow paper on her lap and then lighting the crumpled papers.²

"I saw you a few days ago," she said to me.

I said I would like to talk to her about something. She raised her head and gave me a look. "Do you want to buy rabbits from me?"

I shook my head.

She smiled. "If you want to buy a bed or a few chairs, you better talk to my husband." I knew her husband was a carpenter.

"Whom are you burning the papers for?" I asked.

2. A traditional way of remembering the dead, burning the yellow papers symbolizes sending money to the dead.

No answer.

"Why don't you take this paper over to your father's grave to burn?" No answer.

I handed her a cigarette. She took it and put it in her mouth expertly. The pile of yellow paper had finished burning. Dusting off a flat rock, she sat down. This kind-looking woman was not as hard to approach as I had first thought. Perhaps she was used to letting her memories die and the roots of misery grew only in the deep, arid part in her heart. In silence she drew on the cigarette deeply again and again. To me, her manner, her black silk clothes, her heavy breasts, all sank in the mist of the past. After finishing her third cigarette, she started to tell me about an incident that had occurred the previous winter.

It was a snowy morning. As usual, she was cooking in the kitchen. Her husband was sitting in a room filled with timber and wood shavings. His ink liner was frozen in the chill, so he was waiting to thaw it once his wife had lit the fire for cooking. It was the heaviest snow they had had in a long time. Through the half-closed door, she saw her only son playing in the deep snow in the yard. Because snow seeping in from the cracks of the roof tiles had dampened the straw for the fire, the fire was very hard to light, and thick smoke billowed, filling the kitchen.

Through the smoke, she saw her son, covered with snow, push open the door and come in. He seemed to whisper something to his father, but the father, who had tears in his eyes from the smoke, just pushed the boy away. When Young Green finished cooking and came out of the kitchen, the boy pulled at her clothes and said a thin old man was outside their gate, walking back and forth. Young Green went out with the son, but in the snow and wind, they saw nothing, not even the shadow of a bird. She thought it must have been an old beggar and let it go. At lunch the boy again talked about it and said the old man was very strange. Then he described in detail how the old man looked.

"What my son described was exactly like my father, even to the clothes he was wearing. My father has been dead for many years." She continued, "Though I felt something was strange about it, I didn't give it much thought. Yet I was uneasy all day. That day at dusk my son was drowned in the pond in front of our house. He fell in while

he was playing on the ice. There must be something in this. When I told the villagers, nobody believed me."

The strong wind rustled the leaves in the woods and blew the ashes of the burned yellow paper in all directions. She looked at me seriously, but numbly, as though she had left this world. I remembered a book titled Totem and Fire, which dealt with incidents of dead people's spirits reappearing in some of China's southern provinces. In rural areas, people often blame "heaven" for disasters, I thought. I did not know how much of this woman's account was reliable, but clearly her confusion and misfortune immediately affected me. All the things that happened in this isolated hilly village were like icicles hanging from the eaves—they were changing silently every second.

"When your father brought you to this village, where was your mother?" I asked.

"She probably died a long time before that. I've never seen her. Anyway, my father might not be my real father—that's what the villagers thought."

"Your father never got used to the village."

"That's right. The day I came to Mai Village with my father, it was the rainy season. Every door in the village was shut in our face. We were left out in the rain. Then an old boatman let us stay in his house, and he went to stay on his boat. At first we were not used to anything here. When I slept in his room at night, in my dreams the bed felt like it was still rocking on water. There are very few girls in this village, and at sixty the boatman still hadn't gotten a wife . . . On the second day after we came on shore, he called me to his boat . . . He bit me until I was bloody all over. I ran a high fever as soon as I got back. Father loosened my clothing and washed my wounds with salt water . . . Later on, the old guy's boat overturned."

6

I stayed that night in the flour mill, and sitting on the cold weighing scales, staring out through the window at the fast-moving dark clouds and the gleaming shapes of trees, I didn't sleep at all. I had lost interest in the term "green yellow," which I now felt might even have been a fabrication by Professor Tan. By contrast, bits of the stories that had been told to me—a thin row of run-down houses, a stand of willow, a stretch of empty land—these mixed with my child-hood memories and invaded my dreams.

The next day at midday, on a street corner in the village, I came across a man whose job had been to act as watchman in the orchards. I found him crouched in the doorway of a shabby store, selling tea. His saliva dripped on to his sleeves as he kept his eyes set on the yellow clouds pressing down from the sky, but his ears seemed to remain alert to the various sounds around him.

"Things last longer than people," said the watchman. Scenes from forty years ago were still very clear to him, for he could remember "the look of every medicinal tree in the village and the shape of pebbles on the riverbed." It was the seventeenth day of the first lunar month, the watchman remembered, that Chang, the outsider, had set for his wedding. Early that morning, people had seen him squatting on the shore of the Suzi River, where he had opened a hole in the frozen surface. He was shaving himself with the icy water. At that time, the orchard watchman and his mother were at work on the other side of the river, spreading topsoil in a loquat orchard. About noon, he saw a sedan chair coming from the foothills, swaying and going slowly toward the village. The sedan chair must have come quite a distance, for the carriers, all wearing leg wrappings, showed fatigue in their steps. The watchman's mother shaded her eyes against the sun and looked toward the village. "Somebody in the village must be taking a wife," she said.

A little later, they saw the sedan chair stop in front of the shack by the river's edge. The village matchmaker, with her bound feet and gesturing hands, talked with the sedan chair carriers. Behind her, Chang's daughter, Young Green, was pasting a piece of red paper onto the frame of the muddy window. The sedan curtain lifted, and a tall woman came out. Across the foggy Suzi River, the watchman could not get a clear look at the woman's face. How had this outsider gotten this woman to marry him? The watchman put down his spade and prepared to go back to the village to watch the excitement. His mother muttered behind him, "Poor man, making the wedding look like a funeral."

The people of Mai Village were not the kind to dwell on the past. In the few years since Chang had moved there, people's attitude toward this quiet newcomer had gradually become more friendly. Now on this day, some women brought him mountain-grown dates and grains. Old people went to his hut and helped him get things ready. Chang himself also began to look more pleasant and softer.

The manager of the village ancestral temple even suggested adding a tablet for Chang's ancestors so that "the young couple" could have a formal wedding ceremony in the temple hall. But Chang silently refused the offers. He stubbornly thought his ancestors were not in the temple but in the water. Pulling the tall woman to the shore of the Suzi River, he knelt down facing the broad surface of the river and kissed the muddy riverbank.

The bride was very pretty.

That evening, the door of the watchman's log cabin in the orchard was torn loose by strong winds. The watchman decided to go into the village to get some nails for it. Carrying a lamp, he walked on the hard, frozen dirt road toward the village. As he crossed the narrow wooden bridge over the Suzi River, he saw that the light in the shack was still on. In the quiet night, the light turned the trees an orange yellow. His heart began to pound fiercely. "Whenever I remember the moonlight that evening, I get a feeling of uneasiness I can't explain," the watchman said. The woman's appearance flashed again and again across his eyes, and then, he said, "a wild idea" came into his mind. He walked toward the lighted shack, treading more and more lightly until he reached the adobe window. He squatted down and, moistening a finger, poked a hole in one of the paper windowpanes.

It was the first lunar month, already more than twenty days into the spring, but the temperature was as harsh as in midwinter. A bone-cutting wind blew through the bare treetops and whistled through the eaves and tile cracks. Peeping in, the watchman saw the woman sitting on the edge of the bed and the man staring at her from the other side. A little later, he heard the noise of the woman using a toilet in an inner room. Then the watchman saw her lift the curtain and come out from the inner room. While she was tying the drawstring on her pants, the man dashed to her and grabbed her hands—her loose black pants slipped down to the floor.

"I've seen a woman's body only once in my life. My heart jumped into my throat," the watchman said. "The way I see it now, woman is something one can live with or without." He took up the teacup in front of him and sipped a mouthful, then wiped the thin white beard that covered the corners of his mouth and repeated his words, "Yes, it's true, with or without—maybe you'll understand when you get old."

That night, the young watchman squatting outside the window watched as, in the wavering lamplight, the man stripped off all the woman's clothes and kissed her from her toes upward, slowly. She was trembling and looked as though something was wrong. Her pitiful eyes, like those of a mouse, seemed afraid of what might happen next. The man began to act more and more rough, and the woman began to tremble more and more. Then he lifted her up and laid her on the bed. The shabby bed squeaked noisily, and the woman's body shook like a cup of water. The watchman heard Young Green coughing just then from the next room; it must have been in her sleep. The man hesitated a moment, then he began to take off his own clothes, baring his skinny and snakelike back.

"Then I saw something puzzling," the watchman continued. "The man climbed behind the bed curtain, but then soon after that, he came out. He looked beaten. He put on his clothes and went to sit at the table near the wall. I never saw a face as terrible as that. He lit his pipe and puffed slowly. The woman was sobbing softly in the bed. I wondered what had happened. At first I thought probably the man didn't know how to do it. Later on, I heard from people that that woman Emerald had something wrong with the way she was made."

The man, Chang, sat on in the room till daybreak. Sometime in the night, the wind died down; the oil in the lamp dwindled. Outside the window, the watchman fell asleep and was only woken by the warmth of the morning sun.

7

The cotton in the fields was ripe for harvest, and the autumn colors deepened. One morning I went to the round pond again. There were withering yellow leaves and a thin layer of frost on the grass. Some birds had not yet left for the south, and amidst their lonely cries, the air seemed to have become drier.

In a dark room, Young Green was skinning a dead rabbit; her black cotton shirt was stained with rabbit blood.

"Last night two rabbits were killed by wolves. In late autumn, more wolves come to the village."

A little later she asked me whether I would light the stove for her. I said yes.

"I know you've been going around the village asking about my

father. He's been gone more than forty years. I don't understand what his life has to do with you."

I just gave a smile.

"Where are you from?" she asked.

"From the city."

"There must be many people who do that in the city too."

"Do what?"

"I mean prostitutes."

"In the past, yes."

"On our boats it wasn't a big deal, but on land it was, a very big deal. I've been here more than forty years, but very few villagers are willing to talk to me. I hear that people even try to avoid passing our place. In the beginning, the families on the boats were decent fishing people. Our ancestors helped some bandits led by a man named Chen Youliang, and so when Emperor Zhu came to the throne, he banned us from going ashore. One year there was a very bad famine, and some women on the boats began to do that. And so gradually some of the boats got to be the way they were."

"After your father died, where did that woman Emerald go?" I asked.

"She died."

"Died?"

Young Green remained silent for quite a while. She washed the skinned rabbit in a pan and then put it in an iron pot on the stove. She returned to her earlier place and sat down.

"Emerald was a kind-hearted woman. She died for me. After my father died, her own family took her back to their home, which was in the foothills about twenty li away. One summer, she came to visit me and brought me a few pieces of clothing. She stayed for a few days, and that was when it happened. That evening, she and I were sitting at a table cutting shoe patterns. We heard dogs barking at the edge of the village. Emerald said that some stranger must have come to the village. After a while, the dogs quieted down, and we thought that probably everything was all right. Then the lamp that was in the shrine on the wall suddenly went out. At first I thought the wind had blown it out, but as I was trying to relight it, a black shadow came in. In the dark we couldn't see the shadow clearly. I felt a pointed

thing sticking against my waist. That shadow forced me to a corner against the wall. Finally I realized what he wanted. He put his hands on my clothes and tore a hole in the shoulder. I could smell liquor. He pressed his mouth to my breast..."

The old woman crossed her arms in front of her chest as though she felt cold or remembered that terrible moment in the past. She looked frightened. I stared at the guts of the rabbit laid on the ground and felt a chill sweep through me.

"Emerald seemed frozen in shock for a long time," Young Green continued. "When she came to life again, she ran over and knelt down on the floor, holding tight to the man's leg, and begged him, 'Let the girl go. She is just a little girl, not married yet. If you want a woman, take me . . .' The man sounded like he was laughing, and he turned his body a little. I could feel him taking away the knife and waving it in the air, and Emerald's hands loosed her grip."

"Thinking back now," Young Green continued, "how I regret that Emerald tried to stop him. She didn't need to. Actually I had seen that kind of thing on the boats. Every evening officers and merchants came to the boats. Sometimes, even before dark, they would spread out the mats in the cabins and clutch the prostitutes and roll about on them. When that man pushed me down on the floor, I was not very scared. In the beginning I just felt pain. I heard the chirping of crickets, and I heard Emerald's breath becoming shorter and shorter. When the man left, her body had already turned stiff. After that, a village matchmaker came to me and asked me whether I would like to get married. I said yes. A few days later I married this carpenter. He is an honest man."

"Everything passes, but once a person dies she can't come back," she added.

Young Green went to the stove and fanned the fire through the stove opening. The flames grew bigger, and the room was filled with the tasty smell of rabbit meat. By now, the sun was higher in the sky, lighting up the room. I saw a few village women picking cotton on the far side of the field.

"Did your father ever write a book?" I asked.

"No, he couldn't read or write."

"Did your ancestors have any books, such as books of family trees?"

"I don't know. Even if they had them, they must have been buried

^{3.} In 1368.

with my father," she said. "Maybe my father knew, but he died so early. No one expected it. If he were still alive, he would be over eighty. I can never forget his face. In those years I often went to a market that was quite far from here to sell flowers—chrysanthemums in autumn and cape jasmines in spring. Every time I came back, he was waiting for me, sitting under the mountain elm in front of our door."

She wiped her eyes with the back of one hand and stared at the thin smoke rising from the stove.

"Even now I still miss him." She continued, "Once I was taking a bath—"

Her husband came in. She stood up and helped him take his tools off his shoulder, a plane and a saw, and put them on the chicken coop. The carpenter went to the water vat, scooped up a ladle of cold water, and drank it all in one draught.

Then he said, "The cotton in the field is ready to pick."

8

Time passed swiftly, one dusk after another, without leaving any trace in the flat and slanting sky above the village or on the expanses of mountains and wilderness stretching beyond the fences and windows. Day and night, I puzzled myself with the poor man's riddlelike life. Then, when I decided to leave the village, I suddenly felt a sense of unreality. This village—its quiet river, the red sand on the riverside, the people rushing around and their shadows—seemed to have been created from nothing. Or they were like scenes and characters often seen in sketches.

The day I returned to the city from Mai Village, a letter was waiting for me on the front porch. It was from a girl, the girl I saw in Heng Tang in the winter of 1967 when I went there to visit the old man Li Gui. She was the one washing Li Gui's bedding in the pond in front of his house. In the letter she told me Li Gui was seriously ill and probably would not live much longer. He hoped, for the sake of our friendship formed when we met years ago, to see me once more before he left this world. That evening I reread the letter under a lamp. I saw that the postmark on the envelope, though not clear any more, was still readable. It showed that the letter had been mailed a month earlier. The high cheekbones of the old rags-and-malt-sugar man and the dimples of the girl simultaneously flashed across my mind. The next morning I was on the northbound train.

When I found the hut behind the bamboo wood, it was noon, three days later. The old man was sitting against a wall, dozing in the warm sunshine. He immediately saw me, and supporting himself with a hand on the wall, he stood up and moved forward a few steps.

"I knew you'd come," he said. "A few days ago, the death god played a joke on me. I lay on top of my coffin for a whole day and in the evening I woke up."

We sat down at the foot of the wall. When the old man talked he seemed to me to be a perfect machine: internally, every part was rusty, but it was still functioning slowly out of habit. He did not look sick. It was only the natural process of aging that was bringing him to the final edge of life.

"My niece was talking about you all day long. She said you might not come because of being too busy. I thought you would come for sure."

The girl was hanging laundry on a wire; she turned our way and smiled to me.

"I was on a trip to Mai Village, so I didn't see your letter until I came back," I replied.

"Mai Village?"

"That's where I met you."

He nodded. His gray eyes, dull and deep in their sockets, were set on a few birds swooping down in the sky, as though he was trying to focus his sight.

"There is something I've been wanting to ask you ever since," I said.

"What is it?"

"Do you remember that night in Mai Village?"

"Yes, I do. We stayed somewhere like the house of a doctor."

"Later that night, it rained heavily."

"That's right."

"It seems that you went out that night."

The old man was a little startled and then began to cough violently. The girl came over to him and pounded his back for a little while. He turned to one side and spit some phlegm into the grass at the foot of the wall. He curled up the corners of his mouth and said with a smile, "I've had sleepwalking trouble ever since I was a child. I don't know anything about what you say. I thought I slept very well that night."

"You did go out once."

"That's possible. Once I got up and walked out in the fields all night. The next morning my niece found me in the wheat field."

That afternoon, I lay down to rest for a while. The girl opened the door and came in. She asked whether I could help her do some roofing work. With the weather getting cold, the dark and thin hay of the roof needed to be replaced by new thatching. I promised I would help her do the rethatching, even though I had never been on a roof.

I was very slow at the job. When evening came, the old man, with an extra shirt thrown over his shoulders, held a lamp in one hand and stood under the eaves. His appearance reminded me of a walnut shell hollowed inside by worms. A trace of sadness crossed my heart.

I stayed there for three days. As I was leaving, the old man insisted on walking me part of the way through the bamboo wood. A dog followed us. The old man stopped when we came to a dry tributary of a stream.

"There are very few people in this part of the woods. I come here for a walk every evening before dark," he said. "Green Yellow always keeps me company."

"Green Yellow?"

"The dog. It's a very good breed. The hair color is very unusual. The back is greenish blue and one side of its stomach shows a yellow dotted circle, a bit like a plaster."

I looked up and saw the dog sniffing the dirt in the field and going farther, its tail wagging.

9

A few years later, on the second floor of the city library, I happened to come across the term "green yellow" as I was turning the pages of the Dictionary of Terms. The dictionary was compiled in the Tianqi reign of the Ming dynasty, and on page 971, I saw the following entry:

Green yellow. Perennial herb of the figwort family; plant is entirely covered with fine gray hair; stemlike root is yellow in color; flowers in summer.

Translated by Eva Shan Chou

WHISTLING SE Ge Fei

Everything lay in tranquillity.

Day after day, Sun Deng slumped in the misshapen rattan chair, keeping watch over the passage of time. Dilatory May evoked in him an ineffable feeling. After all, an old man who expected nothing and who faced the shadows cast by the corner of the wall and the soaring eaves in the enchantingly radiant sunlight of high noon could think of something or could think of nothing whatsoever.

One really couldn't find fault with the weather.

It is a common occurrence for a hoary-headed old man who is

The term hushao (whistle) refers to a type of shrill whistle produced by placing a couple of fingers in one's mouth and expelling the breath with great force. The sound can carry enormous distances, and hence such whistling is often mentioned in traditional Chinese short stories and novels of the Ming and Qing periods as a kind of remote signaling or calling. From a still earlier period, however, whistling of this sort functioned as a yogic, transcendental exercise or expression. It is best described in the "Rhapsody on Whistling" of Chenggong Sui (231-273). The two main characters in the present story, Sun Deng and Ruan Ji, are based on historical figures who were contemporaries of Chenggong Sui and who were presumably proficient in this kind of whistling. The former (fl. 260-265), famous for his taciturnity, was a recluse who for a long time lived in a cave perched high among the hills. The latter (210-263), one of the eccentric Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Grove, was a noted introspective poet and talented musician. Both men are featured in A New Account of Tales from the World (Shishuo xin yu), compiled in about the year 430.

An old legend of the celebrated encounter between the two men has Ruan Ji visiting Sun Deng in his hermitage but not receiving any responses to his questions. Thereupon, he withdraws and, halfway up a distant mountain, lets out a loud, piercing whistle. This is followed by Sun Deng's magnificent whistled reply, which inspires Ruan Ji to write the "Biography of Master Great Man," an encomium in praise of the Taoist "true man" that also satirizes the conventional Confucian "gentleman."