

TONG Wei-Ger

A story

Hide!

It was toward the end of summer this year that my uncle completed the most important project of his life. On every plot of land in our village that had been left vacant, which had gone wild for lack of hands, or in which ownership was unlikely ever to be clarified due to the plethora of stakeholders, he built a hut, proving that his talk had not just been empty words. According to him, a house, after all, is nothing more than a few walls with a roof on top. It serves only to enclose a piece of perfectly good land so that people cannot see what you are doing there.

According to my uncle, people with lots of money have many secrets, so that wealthy people, who are the hirelings of those in power, namely the government, needed to build huge mansions. But his poverty was there for all to see, and for which he was without shame or guilt, and so the houses he built carried some suggestion that he had seen through mundane affairs. To start with he would find the plot he wanted, would clear and flatten the ground, floor it with gravel, erect four pillars, one at each corner of the vacant lot, then place four lintels on the four pillars. He would give it a shake, and if the structure seemed firm enough, he would stop and smoke a cigarette.

Shrouded in cigarette smoke, my uncle would squint his eyes in the manner of a geomancer, and plan the layout of the walls and roof. If it was low-laying land, there would be a problem with damp, so my uncle would give the house three walls. If the land stood higher, the heat might be oppressive, so my uncle would give the hut just two walls. Having experience over 60 summers, and springs, autumns and winters, the complexity of seasonal changes led my uncle to forgo the installation of doors and windows. For most of the summer, my uncle was to be seen in the fields, his erratic comings and goings a seemingly magical choreography in which we would see him carrying timber into one hut only to emerge from another. Gradually he depleted what little remained in his dilapidated house and what was left of his equally decrepit life. In one of his huts, he would eat, alone, leaning against a table; in another hut, he would sleep, alone, in a bed he fixed up.

Sometimes ignorant youngsters would laugh, asking my uncle what was the purpose of these huts? He would answer that these huts were lookouts to be used for keeping watch over the fields. If bystanders, pushing the question, pointed out that these fields had been abandoned, had no crops and that weeds already threatened to engulf the hut, and that there was nothing to keep watch over in any case, my uncle would sneer and silently

deride the innocence and stupidity of these people. At this time, a broad, brightly lit vista would appear before his mind's eye, at which point my uncle was in the habit of pausing, before arranging his features in the manner of an elder admonishing juniors, and tell them: "It is because the plots are vacant that they needed watching. One can't be too careful. Outsiders are constantly driving trucks back and forth, and the moment you aren't paying attention they'll dump truckloads of dirt into the fields. On the other hand, they might equally dig up the good earth and take it away. It will be too late for tears when that happens."

At this point we realized that my uncle was no longer clear in his own mind. He was mired in memories, but at the same time he was agitated by the current events reported in the news. This made it difficult for him to live a normal existence. In our minds there exists a reality that is neither imminent nor remote from us. These realities are closer to us than the hurts and sorrows of yesterday and more distant than tomorrow's anxieties. We like to believe such realities because they exist at a magical distance from us, often inspiring a feeling of sympathy for others that we are at a loss to explain.

Everyday we watched my uncle work in the fields, never thinking to stop him, for over the decades that my uncle had been away, we had been doing much the same sort of thing—the only difference being that we had brought in bulldozers and a team of construction workers, meticulously surveyed the land, discussed what area would be required, poured concrete to seal the ground, and then built free-standing Western-style homes; or we would go through the complex process of rezoning the farmland for other uses, such as widening the road or building a factory. If you really wanted to make a comparison, then you could say that what my uncle was doing was no more than a harmless practical joke, and you really can't take a practical joker seriously.

And to tell the truth, it has to be admitted, that apart from my grandmother, my uncle's mother, who was no longer able to speak, my uncle was the senior member of our family at this time. We could, therefore, allow him to build a hut with two walls in the place under the banyan tree where we regularly gather to chat. During the heat of the summer, we squeezed onto the bunk inside to enjoy the breeze, our knees self-consciously pressed together. From outside, we looked as if all the members of one family had been packed into a crate that could sink into the ground at any moment. Through the rasping cry of the cicada, we watched my uncle as he shouldered timber, or carried a hammer or a cotton blanket or a table. He would laugh fiercely and walk on quickly.

This went on until one day, in the distance, we saw that what was hanging over my uncle's shoulder was in fact my grandmother's head. He wanted to place her, just like any other piece of furniture, in heaven only knows which one of his huts. It was only then that we realized the situation had become serious.

When my uncle was a young man, he had a huge argument with his father, my grandfather, after which he left to mine coal in the mountains. At this time, my grandmother would get up every morning before sunrise, and with a loud cough or a soft imprecation, give notice to us slugabed junior members of the household, then, with feet hardly touching the ground, would go from our traditional U-shaped family home for a day's work in the fields. Even the day of my grandfather's funeral was no exception. When the old house was demolished and the new house built, my grandmother discontinued the procedure of the cough and the imprecation, and would simply close the steel door firmly behind her when she left. We would all know then that it was time to get up.

After the new house was built, my grandmother would no longer come home for lunch. She would be hunched over in the field all day long, but as evening approached, she kept track of the sun's progress and would be home punctually just before sunset. But, as always, she would say nothing. Her shadow on the concrete floor seemed even more thin and withered than when it fell on the yellow earth outside, and she seemed to grow shorter by the day.

Then one day, my grandmother failed to return at sunset. We left the house to search for her in the fields. Rather than search, it was in silent agreement that we all walked toward the same place, where we found her curled up against an embankment, her eyes open wide and staring at us; but no, she probably wasn't staring at us, because darkness had fallen too quickly and, prone on the ground as she was, we could not see her clearly. If she could see anything at all, it would have been a single, blurry image of us junior members of the household. It was absolutely silent. We didn't feel the least bit uneasy about this, because it had been many years since my grandmother had spoken to any of us.

A few days later we went to the hospital to collect my grandmother. We decided to ensconce her on a reclining chair in the kitchen. Here we could wash her, change her diapers, and even imitate her cough or direct imprecations at each other in her stead. Sometimes she would sleep, but most of the time, she would look at us with fish-like eyes. At meal times, we would say: "Grandma, it's time to eat," before slowly pouring rice water into the hole of her mouth. The shriveled body of my grandmother, started, it seemed, to get fatter.

That was when my uncle returned. He stood at the door looking round, but showed no inclination to enter. It was my father, his brother, who, on seeing him, let out a cry as though he had seen a ghost, swung open the metal door with a whoosh, and thus brought the image of my uncle before us all.

He glanced at his younger brother, then cast his eye more carefully over the unfamiliar faces of the junior members of the family, then, turning his head and looking through a

doorway, he saw, huddled in a chair in the kitchen, his mother, fat and round like a ball. He turned around again to stare at the buzzing television in the living room, as if to check that he had not suddenly found himself in outer space, and that any differences he found were simply the result of his long absence.

My uncle nodded in satisfaction. Then he asked my father: “Was it you who planted that plot of orchards under the canopy in the field out back?” My father cocked his head and nodded fiercely. Although he had recovered his hearing, he still retained the mannerism of turning an ear towards the speaker. Then my uncle asked: “Has the land in front of the house been sold to the factory?” My father again nodded fiercely, then said it was father, meaning my grandfather, who had sold it.

My uncle’s brother’s wife, namely my mother, thought she should introduce herself, so in a soft voice, she addressed him as “elder brother,” but by this time, my uncle already had his baggage over his shoulder and was out the steel door, preventing the scene from degenerating further into chaos.

My uncle stood outside the main door, and peered into the starry spring night that encompassed him. Spring was a time of rains, when the rivers flooded and the fishermen would race before the northeasterly monsoon. It was a time when there were few people working the mines. My uncle sighed deeply; we breathed a sigh of relief. My uncle walked toward what was left of the old house outside. Of the three wings that made up the U-shape of our old house, all that was left was the wing on the left, like a superfluous appendix. But in the end we hadn’t dared to demolish it. The reason we left it abandoned like a forgotten cemetery was, in truth, because, at that time, my grandmother was still conscious of the life around her, and with muttered imprecations she foretold that this day would come to pass.

So, my uncle had returned. He then spent the summer erecting eleven huts to watch over the land. And one day, with my grandmother’s head hanging over his shoulder, he walked past us without a word. Nobody knew how he got into our house to carry my grandmother away. We were under the banyan tree where we usually sat and talked. My father, who was sitting at my side, sprang up like a tiger. He stood in front of my uncle, then with his head cocked, demanded to know where he was carrying their mother off to.

My uncle was stunned for a moment, then was silent for another. He looked down on his brother, two heads shorter than he, even as my grandmother dribbled rice water from the corner of her mouth, rapidly wetting the whole of my uncle’s shoulder. But the rice water dried just as rapidly, building up a scab-like crust on his shoulder, like the sloughed off skin of a snake, stiff and inflexible. My uncle straightened himself, then said: “I am the eldest. Mother should be in my care.” My father still looked ready to spring, a posture that gave him a peculiar kind of dignity. He said: “Don’t do anything rush, my brother.

Just think things through.”

Whatever it was that my father wanted my uncle to think through he didn't say. My uncle once again looked my father up and down, then suddenly turned around and carries my grandmother back toward our house.

We were all standing, watching my uncle carry my grandmother, step by step, back to the house. My father let out a silent, disconsolate sigh, which seemed to exaggerate his slightly hunched posture. His tiger-like majesty seemed to have faded into the cicada call of the afternoon. Nobody else knew what to say.

My uncle walked with his head bent. He gradually realized that my grandmother, hanging over his shoulder, had stopped regurgitating rice water. He heard her make a dejected sound, a sound that did not seem human, and thought she might be about to speak. He turned his head with a start to look, and in that moment, seemed to forget what he was carrying—what he saw was a face of wrinkled flesh with a black hole of a mouth blowing directly at his nostrils. He smelt sour gruel.

My uncle would often smell strange smells. He felt these to be mysterious summons. One winter many years ago, my uncle had stood in our fields and was quite sure he smelt the smell of fresh fish. That year was one in which a bumper harvest was assured, and although it was winter, the work in the fields did not stop even for a moment, so once the rice was harvested, planting began immediately for a second harvest before the lunar New Year. When my uncle smelt the smell of a huge fish, he crouched down. He was unable to see in the distance anything swimming leisurely along the rubble road. By the time he had got his hoe over his shoulder and walked to the side of the road, there were no fish of any description swimming along the road. What he did see was a truck stuffed with people stopped by the roadside. But that smell of fish was so rich and fragrant that even as he looked at this truck full of strangers, his mouth began to water.

The people on the truck were all burned by the sun to a darkness that might never fade. On their necks, backs and cheeks, there seemed to be scales, like those of a fish, skin so burned it had died and hardened, and over this was a coating of grayish salt. Lines the color of dark blood showed through the chinks in their scaly skin. My uncle was convinced that they were the source of the smell. My uncle couldn't speak. He swallowed back his saliva. Not until his mouth became unbearably dry, and not until a young man leaning against the front of the truck asked if this was the right road to go into the mountains, could he answer: “Yes.”

My uncle then asked: “What do you do in the mountains?” The young man said: “Mining for coal.”

“Is there coal there?” my uncle asked.

“There's even gold in the mountains. Do you want to come along?” asked the young man. The people in the truck laughed. The young man's laugh was innocent even the

slightest hint of ridicule. Then he waved his hand, banged the top of the cabin, and with a roar the engine started and they headed into the mountains.

When the truck drove past, my uncle noticed that the young man, who had stood at the front of the truck, was now standing at the back. It was a shock to my uncle, who thought he wasn't seeing right.

At the time, my uncle realized that these must be fishermen from the nearby fishing village. With the arrival of winter, there would be three months in which they could not go to sea. They would leave their boats, and truck by truck, head away from the coast and to the mountains to make a living. My uncle's father, my grandfather, would often point to these seafarers who came to help with the harvest, saying: "Making your living from the sea, four months work to feed yourself for a year. For people without land, that's how tough it gets?"

But at that moment, my uncle knew the young man's wave of the hand was, in fact, a mysterious summons. And when he returned to the house for lunch, he put his hoe against the door and told my grandfather that he wanted to become a miner in the mountains. My grandfather, who was sitting by the table, one foot resting on a wooden bench, was too busy shoveling food into his mouth to understand what my uncle was getting at. Beside him was my father, his face the complexion of mud. He looked up and blinked those eyes of his, their whites so distinctly separate from the black, took one look at my uncle and virtually buried his head in the rice bowl that he held. But his ears seemed elongated with attention. My uncle returned the look with contempt. He then repeated what he had said: "I want to become a miner in the mountains."

"All right," my grandfather said. "Go then, and when it's dark, bring some coal back to burn." Then he burst out laughing with such force that the head between those attentive ears was rocked almost out of the rice bowl. My father's eventual deafness was definitely related to the fact that he always sat next to my grandfather. It was a time when my grandfather was happy, because he had recently renovated the house, and could now say that he had his own land. My uncle said: "What I am saying is, I don't want to be a farmer."

This statement caught my grandfather's attention. He raised his head and looked at my grandmother, who had just entered the room with a bowl of soup. He said to her: "Just listen to the crap he is talking!" My grandmother did not reply. She walked forward slowly, and placed the soup firmly on the table. Then she stood next to the table. My grandfather stood up, pacing the room. After a while, he asked my uncle with great seriousness: "What's wrong with farming?"

But he didn't wait for a reply. My grandfather went on: "Don't you know, we are now farming our own land?" My uncle lowered his head, and said: "When the crops are harvested, they almost all go in payment. Ultimately, life isn't any easier, and in fact, and

in fact...,” and here my uncle fixed his gaze on my grandfather, and hesitated before proceeding, not because he was afraid, but because, for some reason he himself couldn’t understand, he felt he couldn’t be so blunt, so he frowned, and continued, “and in fact, the government can say today that the land is yours, but if tomorrow, if they change their minds, there is really nothing you can do about it.”

At this, my grandfather retreated a step, then turned to look at my grandmother. This action hid his expression from my uncle, who turned his eyes on my father, hoping to read something from that source. My father lowered his head. “You don’t know, you don’t know,” my uncle heard my grandfather mutter, “If you hang around long enough, the place is yours.” In a sudden movement, my grandfather turned to my uncle, and said: “You’re afraid of hardship, that’s what it is, isn’t it? Let me tell you, everything involves hardship. But if you have a piece of land, then at least you know what the hardship is for. Just look at those fishermen. They have no land to call their own, go chasing fish all over the place, and have to make enough in four months to feed themselves for a year. Now that’s hardship.”

My uncle shook his head. He had always hated my grandfather’s habit of attributing thoughts to him. But he wasn’t really very clear what he was thinking, so all he could do was repeat the empty formula that it was all decided, that he didn’t want to be a farmer, that it was year in year out, and never any result.

“You want a result! You want a result! A little whippersnapper like you wants a result!” My grandfather was angry now. “All right, if you want to go, go, but you won’t have any part of this land in future.”

“Just as well,” my uncle couldn’t resist replying. He turned and walked out of the main room, crossed the courtyard and went into his own room.

In his own room, my uncle quickly packed his things. He sat quietly at the edge of his bed for a moment. From there he saw my grandfather stride across the courtyard and into the fields beyond, but he was still unable to see the expression on my grandfather’s face. The room was narrow, and even though the door had been newly repaired, my uncle could still only catch a glimpse of a few blurred strides before my grandfather disappeared behind the door’s frame.

My uncle continued to sit where he was, making no movement to follow my grandfather with his gaze. This was the last time he ever set eyes on my grandfather. With the winter sun shining warmly in the late afternoon, my uncle suddenly felt a spurious sense of comfort that made him slightly lightheaded. He was just about to pick up his luggage when he saw someone snooping about.

It was his brother, my father. There was still rice on his chin. Stuck against his muddy complexion, my uncle felt that these grains had been planted into his face. Rice shoots were planted in earth the same color as his face, whose seedlings would grow ears in this

yellow earth, the grain would be dried on this yellow earth, it would be threshed on this yellow earth, would be cooked on a stove made of this yellow earth, would be eaten by their family, who would then go on to plant rice in the yellow earth. After my uncle thought these thoughts, he invited my father in with a wave of his hand.

“Elder brother,” my father greeted him before falling silent. My uncle waited a moment, but as my father continued to stand silently in front of him, asked: “What is it?” My father turned the left side of his head toward my uncle to indicate that he had not heard. My uncle came a step closer, then said in a loud voice: “What do you want?” Only then did my father take out a bulging package wrapped in a towel. When my uncle saw this, he was deeply afraid that what would emerge would be some cucumbers or a bunch of celery for when he worked in the fields every day, my father was always able to bring home something grown he knew not where. But what my father took out from the bundle was a heap of crumpled notes, so crumpled in fact that he wondered if they could ever be spread flat again.

“This is for you,” my father said. My uncle was surprised. He shouted into my father’s ear: “How did you get this money?” My father thought he was being interrogated, so he lowered his head and said in a small voice: “It’s money I saved.”

“Of course you saved it,” my uncle shouted, “I didn’t say you stole it. What I want to know...” What my uncle wanted to ask was how he had manage to save it, but he suddenly felt his questioning had become so protracted that my father might not be able to gasp it all, so he simply took the pile of bills from my father’s hands, and said: “Thanks, I’ll pay you back.”

My uncle shouldered his baggage and walked out the door of his room. When he looked back, my father still had his head cocked toward him, so he shouted: “I said, I’ll pay you back.”

“I know” my father shouted back. He pointed to his ear, meaning that he had heard in the first place. He looked close to tears.

My uncle walked from his room to the section of gravel road where he had first seen the truck with the fishermen in it. His mother was standing there waiting for him. She told him simply that if he couldn’t take it out there, he should go home. She didn’t want him to worry about what his father had said. He would receive the land that was due to him.

My uncle asked if she was speaking for herself. He said my grandfather wouldn’t say this. My grandmother looked at him with her large determined eyes. “It’s the same thing. What I say is what he says.” She also said: “I’ll wait for you to come back.” My uncle shrugged with indifference, was silent for a moment, then said: “I’m off.” With this, he followed the gravel road, and one step at a time walked into the mountains.

So, many years later, it eventuated that there was such a day that as my now aged

uncle carried my grandmother across his shoulder toward our house he was startled by a suppressed grunt. He thought she might be about to speak. When he was young, her pointed comments had always brought him comfort. But turning his head on this occasion, all he saw was my grandmother's shiny mouth, like a dolphin's blowhole, which he'd seen at sea, blowing air at him. He took another step, only to feel that he had stepped on something. He lifted his foot, lowered his head, and saw my grandmother's false teeth on the ground.

My uncle picked up the false teeth and looked at them for a moment. Then he turned and started to walk back towards us. Then his mouth opened in a flood of laughter, even as he released a long string of words, made incomprehensible by his unrestrained laughter. We looked at him as he held up my grandmother's false teeth, and could vaguely make out something along the line of: "Isn't it funny. Mother has spewed up her breakfast and now there's nothing left, she has spat out her false teeth as well. Ha, ha, ha. Isn't it funny?"

"Isn't it funny?" my uncle shouted into my father's ear. What he didn't know was that since my father no longer sat next to my grandfather at meal times, his hearing had returned. With a twist of his body, my uncle swung my grandfather in his arms. "Let's see what else is false," he said as he reached up to putter with her nose and ears. My father quickly took her from him. My uncle continued to laugh, and with my grandmother's false teeth in his possession, he wandered off, indifferent to those around him, in the same way he did all those years ago when he walked along the gravel road into the mountains. Heaven only knows where he thought he was going to hide my grandmother's teeth.

All those years ago, at the end of the gravel road, my uncle came upon the truck abandoned by the fishermen, like a ship foundered in the shallows. He followed a stream deeper into the mountains, and when he came to the valley, found that the slopes on all sides had been excavated, and that there were tunnels dug into the escarpment. These were the entrances to the mineshafts.

My uncle sought out the foreman, who only asked whether or not he was afraid of the dark. The foreman said this wasn't the kind of dark you find when you get up in the middle of the night to take a piss, the kind of dark where you can still find your dick; it was a kind of dark that is both attenuated and gelatinous, which is hot as fire and cold as ice. That was the darkness he was talking about. My uncle looked at him uncomprehending. The young fisherman appeared behind the foreman and made a face. The fisherman had lost a skein of scales and his face was much paler. My uncle smiled at him. The foreman said: "What are you laughing at. Some people can't deal with this darkness. They go mad down in the mines. It's very dangerous." My uncle said: "I'm not afraid of that kind of dark."

"Very well," said the foreman, "push a trolley and try it out, understand? There are

tracks that run down into the mines. You push a trolley down, then you push the stuff they dig out back up here.” My uncle said he understood. It was simple.

So my uncle worked in the darkness under the earth. The fishermen used their net-casting hands to dig out chunks of coal, loaded them into the trolley that stood before my uncle, who would then push the trolley from deep beneath the earth back to the entrance. There was no gradation to the darkness. The light of the entrance would explode in front of him, and by the time he could see what was around him, what he always saw was the face of the young man who was digging below ground. My uncle eventually realized that this was not the same person, and neither was he seeing things. This was the young man’s sister. My uncle would always tell her that her brother was fine down there, or he would point to his head and say to her, “We haven’t gone mad yet.” She would smile at him. My uncle would dump his coal into her trolley, and with a rattle of wheels, she would be on her way.

Then things started to change. The darkness that the foreman talked of did not cause my uncle any problems. Rather it was the light at the tunnel entrance. It seemed always to be playing tricks on him. Each time he walked out of the tunnel, he felt that the girl who stood there looked somehow different. Gradually, my uncle stopped confusing the girl with her brother. The first time her hair seemed to have grown by an inch, and in the sunlight, would fall in such a way as to hide half her face. The second time her lips would be ten-times redder than before, and her face would be redder than the sun at noon. The third time it would be her hands. The fourth time it would be her feet.

As a change, my uncle asked her: “What’s your name?” “Do you like chicken?” Then he stopped asking such questions, and he would tell her instead: “It is easier to push the trolley this way,” “It’s very hot today, be careful on the stretch of track.” Then he stopped talking to her. At night in the miners’ hut, my uncle would tear sheets from the calendar and draw on them. At the switchover, he would give her the paper, which might have a picture of a flower on it, with her face next to it, or he might draw a picture of the sun, with her face next to it, and sometimes, in a desire to write something down, he would take the paper and copy the exhortations he saw stuck up or painted on the walls. He felt these words could probably better express what he had to say. Sometimes he would write “congratulations on your marriage,” or it might be “maintain secrecy, guard against spies,” and then again it might be “collect your rat poison from the village office.”

With the arrival of spring, the fishermen returned to the coast. They went down the mountain to find their grounded truck, and then they set off. The foreman shook his head and sighed. Even my uncle was depressed for a while. He now took the place of the fishermen digging the coal from under the earth. The light at the tunnel entrance had lost its allure. But at the same time, the darkness of the tunnel started to make him uneasy.

After summer, autumn was followed by winter. The fishermen returned. My uncle insisted that he work the trolley cars again. He gave as his reason that he was afraid of the dark, the only reason the foreman would accept.

One day, as winter approached, the foreman was looking at the production reports. He gritted his teeth and said: "When those fishermen come back, I must find a chance to sneak down to their truck and burn it." Then he sighed, saying there wasn't any point, because if they wanted to go, they could get back even if they crawled. This statement inspired my uncle with a thought. One day, he took all the sheets of paper he had written on through the course of the year, stuffed them in his vast and left the mines, following the gravel road to the sea.

My uncle had no idea how far he traveled along the jagged coast. Sometimes he felt he had come a great distance, but when he looking back, the same headland would remain just a short distance off. Sometimes he felt that it might be quicker to swim, so he'd get into the water and swim a short distance. He discovered that if you put your mind to it, swimming wasn't such a difficult thing. So my uncle's wet clothes dried, became wet and dried again, until he finally found the fishing village.

He walked along the narrow streets of the village, and saw that before the temple a marquee had been erected, beneath which many people were eating. When the young man saw my uncle, he walked over and grabbed him, pulling at his still damp clothing, and said: "You didn't swim over, did you?" My uncle just laughed. "You've come at the right time, as it's the disbandment banquet," said the young man, who had clearly had quite a lot of drink already. My uncle asked him what a disbandment banquet was. The young man answered airily that it was a time when the boat owners put on a feast. It was a time to thank the gods, to give out pay and to send everyone on their way until next year. He added that he would not be coming back next year, because a big boss had invited them to join the crew of a big boat to go out to sea and earn American dollars. The government had appropriated their whole village to build a power plant, so they couldn't go on living here anyway. And his younger sister had married. So they wouldn't be going back to the mines this year.

My uncle looked the young man in the eye, then asked stupidly: "How many sisters do you have?"

"Just one of course," said the young man, before dragging my uncle into the marquee to join the crowd of merrymakers, his companions.

The young man continued to drink heavily, and started to sway as he walked. He dragged my uncle down to the seashore. Along the gentle slope of the shoreline a windbreak extended evenly, along the line of which a few single-story houses, whose residents were now gathered in the yard in front of the temple, were scattered. On various broken paths, men in workmen's clothing held surveyor's poles and surveyed the

ground. My uncle found that standing on the shore, it was difficult to work out the direction of the wind. On the high seas, these were the strong northeasterlies feared by the fishermen, but on land, they became tangled in the windbreak, and spun off like hempen balls that would disappear without a trace.

The young man said that the people surveying the land were the people who would build the power plant. In future, nobody would be able to live on this piece of land. Even the coastal waters would be off limits. "Wouldn't it be possible to swim over?" my uncle asked. The young man laughed. "If you swam you could get over," he said. He pointed to a stretch of coastline in the distance. "The land there is being bought for some kind of seaside resort. It would be impossible to fish," he said, but that didn't matter, because... and here he asked "Do you see that man over there?" My uncle followed the line along which the young man was pointing. He saw a small bay, shallow and almost entirely enclosed. There a tiny man stood on a sampan casting his net. "If fishing like that continues, there won't even be little fish to catch along the coast." That's why, the young man said, he would now fish in deep oceans for big fish.

My uncle was silent. He was thinking about the wind and those balls of hemp threads, and felt a rush of desire to flee, as he had in the past. After a while, he asked the young man: "Do they need any more crew on that boat going out to sea?"

"I suppose so," said the young man, "but you have to know how to swim."

"I've long known how to swim. Don't you believe me?" And with this my uncle rushed down the slope and into the water. In the freezing ocean he used very unconventional movements of his arms and legs but quickly got himself afloat. Standing on the shore, the young man laughed. He also ran down into the water, waist deep, and there with a flip of his body, he sunk into the depths. My uncle realized that this was real swimming.

That day, my uncle became a member of an ocean-going fishing crew. He learned much on the boat, but he also realized, that as with doing almost anything else, if you didn't look into it too deeply, the whole thing became much easier. They swam little, and my uncle spent much of his time cramped in a cabin with members of the crew, who tried all kinds of ploys to make more space for themselves. He watched the young man become a middle-aged man, saw furrow etch themselves deeply into his brow. This was even more frightening than watching himself getting older. He couldn't remember which port it was at that he and the young man went their separate ways, only that it was one of those intermediate ports on the return journey. He was taking an inventory of boxes of digital watches and cigarettes. The watches could be used in exchange for fish from other fishing boats to make up any shortfall in the catch.

Their voyages out become shorter and shorter, largely because the boat owner had realized that engaging in a bit of trade was much more profitable than actually catching fish. It was about this time that my uncle began to have thoughts of home, even though

he wasn't quite sure exactly what he was thinking about. The young man, now no longer young, swayed drunkenly into the cabin. My uncle looked up at him and said: "I have just thought of something." He asked the young man: "Do you remember your sister?"

"What sister? I tell you, I don't have a sister," the young man said. He was unsteady on his legs and looked as if he might throw up at any moment. It wasn't a good sign. The young man said: "I also just realized something. Nobody cares about us." And with that, he swayed out of the cabin again.

My uncle thought on what the young man had said. It sounded like the fleeting passions of any young man. Young men were full of fleeting passions, and as the age gap between my uncle and other members of the crew larger, he got this impression more readily. They would be happy one day, sad the next, one day dejected and inadequate, one day vigorous and resolute. The captains got younger and younger, and their tempers got worse and worse. The most recent captain would often scold him. When loading or unloading cargo, he would shout: "Old man, if you don't pick up the pace, we'll throw you into the sea." My uncle treated these people as nothing more than fleeting passions.

On his last voyage back to port, my uncle's boat was surrounded by a group of small sampans. My uncle, who saw them through his window, thought: "It's them again." The young captain came rushing into the cabin: "Fuck, these communist bandits want to play hardball. Get out the weapons." My uncle told the captain this wasn't the way to do things. The captain asked him if he had any ideas. My uncle walked from the cabin and using sign language to engaged in negotiations. Then he put down the ladder and invited them on board to unload some cargo. As they prepared to depart, their leader offered my uncle a cigarette and gave the captain a crate of almost rotten fish. He warmly shook the captain's hand, and overall gave the impression that this was a meeting of friends long parted.

When they arrived at their home port, my uncle quickly got the cargo distributed and was just about to return to his cabin for a rest, when he saw the captain, one hand on his hip, the other holding my uncle's baggage. The captain said: "You needn't board the ship again."

So, like this, my uncle silently embarked on his road back to my home. At first he was not accustomed to walking on dry land, just as all those years ago he had not been accustomed to swimming. But very quickly, it all was much the same.

The road along the coast was now paved, and as my uncle walked along he saw two huge power plants and numerous seaside resorts. The small fishing village had become a mid-sized fishing port. My uncle thought: "So no one will be fishing along the coast anymore."

When my uncle reached the entrance to our village, he felt a sudden pain in his stomach. He quickly went off the main road. He remembered an old, overgrown burial

ground nearby where he could relieve himself.

The burial ground was still there and hadn't been renovated into something else. This was a relief to my uncle. He recalled that once, when drunk, he had rushed out of the house and stumbled into the fields. Across the ridged fields, he had stridden over the embankments like a giant. "But I am a giant," my uncle thought. "Blood floods my fingertips. I am a huge bird that flies high in the dark sky. Flying high, the bird goes unseen, flying across farming villages flying over dug out mountains, flying over the great ocean, looking down at the fishes hiding in the depths, cherishing their existence. Even if I leave the world of light and conceal myself, do I need to join the company of ants and leeches and worms?" A man living more than a thousand years had written this, using words incomprehensible to my uncle.

With a beating of wings, my uncle saw himself rising into the air. Although he couldn't have flown very far, because, turning to look behind him, he could see his family following him in the middle distance. In the darkness, he could not see their expression. And surely, my uncle would not have known that in many myths, looking back, even if just a glance, can be fatal. My uncle's blood rushed through his veins, but this couldn't help him travel further, though he could hear the pumping of his pulse. My pulse. My throat. My heart. My temples. Then my uncle thought: "I must be sick."

My uncle looked back, so he didn't see my grandfather, buried in front of him. My uncle was thinking: "I must be sick. Otherwise, when I was young, I wouldn't have thought of my family as insects otherwise. I thought my father no more than an ant, my mother also, my younger brother was a leech and I was a worm."

And those smells that remained unchanged through the seasons. The fishy stink of coastal damp, the mutton-like stench of raw coal in that underground mine with its single ray of light, the smell of bodies pressed against bodies, bodies barely clothed with rags, those not quite round, delicate balls below, that flesh, that muck of sweat that invaded every nook and cranny between the mountains and the sea, rubbed dirtily and itchily all over every part of the body. The smell of the invasive dampness of sweat.

But all in a dream. In dreams, there are always things happening, but most of them are forgotten when you wake. My uncle had not wandered all that far, and in the few decades he had been away from home he had assumed the posture of someone seeking some form of solace for himself. When we sought to emulate him in doing things whole-heartedly aimed at providing solace, various things would also seem to pass by in this way. At this moment, my uncle was squatting amid the wild grass of the cemetery taking a shit. When he stood up and pulled on his trousers, he saw, just 50 meters away, a deserted seaside resort. He thought of these people, now passed away, in the darkness of night, joining together by appointment to visit the resort to learn how to swim. These dead people would use charred bills of spirit money to pay the deceased ticket seller,

then pass the ticket on to the attendant, so that they could, in the darkness, wash off the dust in the gentle sea water.

“Is anyone waiting for me? You ghosts of the cemetery, are you willing to be my companions? For I am a lost spirit who cannot even enter the memories of others.” My uncle looked around, and noticed the river on his left heading out to the sea. In front of him, it seemed to make a loop around a sandbar. Then my uncle had another thought. He thought that the mouth of the river was like a gigantic anus, because at any given time, it could pass a healthy man, or a man exhausted, out from the village. For my uncle, who was on his way home, this thought frightened him, so he quietly sat down by the sea, and waited for darkness. Only then did he slowly get up.

Translated from the Chinese by Ian Bartholomew
