Dear friend,

As our designer, Chris, was assembling the fall Lit, he asked if there were any themes evident across the works that we wanted embodied in the physical magazine. Initially, we struggled to extract one single encapsulating theme; in many ways, these pieces are so different; their subjects vary widely, from meditations on a streetwear capsule collection launch, to breakups, to the future of suburban lesbianism. But at the core of each piece was a reflection on human connection: what does it mean to be friends, to be lovers? What happens when that love ends? How do we move forward?

The election of Donald Trump this November left us asking similar questions: what has divided us? What can unite us? Where do we go from here, with a nation so divided by hateful rhetoric (and, soon, policy)? How can we help those who are the most vulnerable? Although most of these works were not created as political protest, many of them are nonetheless political by their mere existence—in a nation whose president ran on a platform of hate, self-expression can be a radical statement.

We hope you come away from these works feeling renewed. We believe that creating art is an act of self-care, and that engaging with the artistic output of others is an act of community healing.

We could not be more excited to present this magazine to you. We hope this issue is fun for you to explore, tactilely and intellectually. Reading these works gave us so much joy, and we are passing them on with love.

Ivy & Molly
Editors-in-chief
January 2017
The Yale Lit #1 of 11
Stranger asked if he should throw it against the brick wall, throw it out of its misery, or up against it.

He had shot the broken-legged horse or the rabid dog when he needed to, on the farm where he grew up, somewhere
south of here. Never violent, just
louder. Let this one die quietly, I tell him.
Lying at our feet, the patient

house sparrow listens to us,
scared of my voice and his
voice, all dry with summer ache,

her splintered wing, still
moving against the cement.
Stranger’s train is here—
he won’t leave the sparrow alone
with me; I am too afraid of the harm
I could cause with my hands.

He lifts her up, like nothing at all,
and I watch him place our bird gently
into his pocket, where I cannot see

her swaddled feathers or her small
mouth, tip pressed against
the flat surface of a silver coin.
how i get my protein
is none of your business

this is an old one

white picket fence
lesbians

season:
fall
2016

volume xxx.ii
how i get my protein is none of your business
how i get my protein is none of your business
i put a cat in a blender. my mother knows.
and still loves me! report me
to the fat man. he’ll know how to
punish me. most days, i belong in an
omelette. other days, i belong in a
wedding. i eat my own animal.
everything is like a shark
except you. i am a righteous
hairball. hear me snore.
i put a cat in a blender. no one screamed! (my father yawned.) his mouth is like a steel beam. he seldom melts. i am a diamond in the soft. i am so easy. i take care of myself, and all of my kittens. i put a cat in a blender. i do not eat it. i cover my mouth with a napkin. i am my best self. i saw my mother’s heart. it was covered in leopard print. i put it back.
i put a cat in a blender. no one screamed! (my father yawned.) his mouth is like a steel beam. he seldom melts. i am a diamond in the soft. i am so easy. i take care of myself, and all of my kittens. i put a cat in a blender. i do not eat it. i cover my mouth with a napkin. i am my best self. i saw my mother's heart. it was covered in leopard print. i put it back.
this is an old one
this is an old one
*collapse* is a funny word. Like a joke. 

**knock knock.**

·

whose pear? 

mine!

·

get it? 

*collapse.*
i tell a joke.
it’s like this.
.
everyone dies.
in hot pink.
sweaters.
.
a snail cannot.
have sex.
with a minivan.
.
this is a.
tragedy.
not a joke.
collapse.
.
i’m trying to touch.
your face.
with an airplane.
.
12
the airplane.
kisses you.

you laugh.

it’s your pear.
i get it.

your breath.
is hot.
and good.

you are.
feeling the.
minivan.

quick.
take off.
your shell!
your organs smell.
like wet.
meadows.
.
my rocking chair.
is the punch line.
.
pardon me.
i’m collapsing.
.
my rocking chair.
is the last.
comic standing.
.
my future.
is certain.
.
it rocks.
lesbians
white picket fence lesbians
you sneezed on me. i loved that! do it again! i like some fluids better than others. *wink.* i like making
porn with
you. we
eat cashews
from a
tin can.
we touch
elbows. you
flick your
scabs at
me. you’re
gross. sneeze
on me again.
my mother
watches at
home. she
claps. she
cries. i like to
move my
mother. she is
better in
motion. i
never know if
i should
explode during
a kiss, or wait.
we are porn
stars wearing
matching
overalls. we
unbutton
a brick house. we leave it out in the cold. a triumphant woman plants a tree. i like to provide places where beetles can get to know each other. we smell like fertilizer. good one! we are the last spoonful. when we die, the
lawn will
swallow us. a
balding man will
put a birdbath over
us. it will be
blue and
ugly. oh.
well. someone
will make a TV
show about our
vibrators. my
mother is still
clapping.
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1 poem
1 poem
+
2 poems

2016 fall
season

volume xix

sudderth
anna

the Yale lit #304
the Yale lit #304

fall and
Anna Sudderth

Volume XXIX. II

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Fall
2016

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june
in
Missouri
june in missouri
The goat died sometime
in the early morning
from dehydration and worms.
They told me— I didn’t see
her small and half-grown body
stilled, didn’t know quite
what time it happened, or how,
if she was standing, if her eyes
were open, if she was alone.

The night before,
I had been with her,
cross-legged on the floor
beside her pen, sipping a beer,
going outside for a moment
to call Will in Connecticut,
two months since last
I’d seen him, hanging up
the phone feeling very far
away, and then returning
to the shrill pitch
of her bleating through
the door. Of course

life is precious. After leaving her
for bed, I washed my face
with tea-scented soap, slept
well enough, and woke up

feeling a little uneasy, but then warm
when I read a message Will
had sent me in the night, *I love you*
*and I want you*, I cried
happy tears into my pillow,
all the relief of a new
and living day, and then
I got up and they told me
the truth, that the goat was dead
and had been dying all the time
that I was with her, and then I remembered
the way her skin had puckered
and would not smooth
as I stroked it, the raw white
inside her eyelids, the way her lip
had curled and trembled
against a twig of hay, passed over it
again and again, and still
she would not eat.
farm work
In the small, damp barn
in the still-dark morning,
I milk the cow, teats scabbed
with mud and shit, so we can feed
the baby goats, who murmur with hunger in their pen.
They spill out of their gate in panic towards the bottles we offer, then suck
the milk, warm and fragrant, with wild, open eyes, foam trickling down their smooth, flat faces.
Finished, they stumble then slowly still, stunned by the fullness of their bodies.
The day will be too hot for them, I know it, watching the smallest one nuzzle her nose into the dirt. Already
I can see how they will linger
in the dust, hook their necks
together and lie, tangled,
in a daze, and how I will lift
their damp forms one
by one, carry them to the shade
by the cool pond,
and coax them to drink
water from a bottle, how my thumb
will ache from the pressure
of their stubborn, tiny teeth
against it, and how later,

I will go to sleep
and wake up, in the night,
troubled by the small sighs
of my friend in the bed beside me,
and how my mouth,
when I rise in the morning,
will taste of milk.
From the UK — A stream of consciousness monologue in dialect. After a night of partying, a boy is waiting in line for the early morning drop of a clothing collection at Palace, a luxury streetwear brand. He reflects on his night, his drug use, his feelings for his close friend... Shaye.
farewell to the palace
the yale lit
#4 of 11

ivan kirwan-taylor
farewell
to the
palace
From the UK —

A stream of consciousness monologue in dialect.

After a night of partying, a boy is waiting in line for the early morning drop of a clothing collection at Palace, a luxury street-wear brand. He reflects on his night, his drug use, his feelings for his close friend...
farewell to the palace
I don’t care what they say about Airmax 95s fam, they do not give you support. Man was on man’s feet for like 12 hours and those Airmaxes did fuck all. Like honestly, might just invest in some New Balances. Orthopedic ones, you get me? I couldn’t wear them that day though, dyou know what I mean? Like first of all, man had come straight from Fabric and man was not gonna wear new balances when man was gurning man’s face off in Fabric. Second of all, man was not going to wear New Balances to a Palace drop. There were bare streetwear photographers out – like have you seen how many fucking giant Nikons and Canons and whatever were just hanging off people’s necks? I am telling you, Palace drops are an event. Man was definitely not the only one to come straight from the club. Think about it fam: this shit starts at 5 a.m. 6 a.m. Why would you not go from the club? Like who the fuck wants to get up at 4:30 to go with a fucking lawn chair (if man is lucky) to wait outside a shop in Soho when it’s so cold your balls are going up inside you like airplane wheels at takeoff? Might as well have an excuse to be awake at 6 a.m. Might as well still be pinging; make some friends in the queue, really enjoy it or whatever. Make an experience out of it.
So I was pinging a bit, yeah. This was good MD though, come-down was so gentle. I was gurning, but not horrific scenes. Just chewing the gum a bit keenly.

Anyway, I wasn’t too bothered because there was only 45 minutes or so before Palace opened, and I had a pretty decent spot. Not anywhere near the front, but close enough so I knew I could get what I wanted inside. Not the best pieces cause those go in five minutes. But pretty nice ones, slightly cheaper ones too. So man was hydrated, man was in a good mood, man was in the right place at the right time. Man was with Shaye, but she’s useless on MD after a few hours. In her own world. Properly gurning—I was worried she was going to chew her fucking cheek off. I guess it’s a shame we were mashed because freezing your balls off in a queue is as good a time as any to chat, and me and Shaye don’t chat as much as I’d like. About important shit I mean, family and how’s uni going and shit. There were enough people in the queue that there was this general murmur, but I could still hear the odd conversation. My mum says a crowd like that reminds her of an orchestra tuning up. Never been to see any classical music so I don’t really know what an orchestra sounds like. Violins and shit. Cellos ... that’s a different world. Not sure I’ve ever actually heard a cello, like in real life.

I actually got chatting to the people in front of me, said they were from Shepherd’s Bush. Fuck off mate. With that accent you say you’re from Shepherd’s Bush it means you’re from Notting Hill. You’ve stolen from your mum to get pea for this, but your mum’s so rich she won’t notice. Your little sister gets fucked on Red Stripe and puts her hair in cornrows for carnival every year. Hoop earrings ones, you get me? Like,
you’re gonna have to take your windbreaker off when you go
the opera with your mum this Saturday aren’t you? Let’s
be honest, a Palace windbreaker isn’t part of your boarding
school uniform, is it? Lev Tanju lived above Greggs bakery
for **time**. For six years or something. Have you ever been to
Greggs, fam? Have you ever even had a Greggs sausage roll?
West London people who buy Palace are like Leicester City
fans. There were five of them two years ago, and now they’re
probably half the queue.

Like I said though I wasn’t too bothered. They were
nice people, and I was still pinging so I was chatting a million
words a second. Think we talked about doner mostly. They
knew about Fez Mangal, which I **swear** is the last place in West
London where you can get a cheap doner kebab, which doesn’t
taste like shit or cat meat. So fair enough.

At the end of the day, it was a pretty standard drop.
You’re up early, you’re cold, maybe you chat to some stranger,
maybe not. It’s kind of ridiculous, I’m thinking like, as soon
as I started in this queue my mum was getting up leaving for
the hospital. And I’m waiting to buy clothes. Makes you feel
a bit dumb. At least it’s not her money I’m spending — I can
make my own mistakes as long as I’ve got my own money, she
always says. So I’ve got like 10 minutes ’til I’m in the store,
then this girl pushes past me. To get to her mate or boyfriend
or something. She was cute, but she had a cap on so I didn’t
see her face. Which meant that my imagination like filled it
in or whatever. In my head she was a 10, for sure. I didn’t real-
ly get pissed at all when she pushed past. I was still feeling
the MD, and when she pushed past I felt like it was quite
a sensual push, like there was a lot of arm action. A sort of
stroking motion as the push ended, it was more of a brush. Maybe to smooth out the fact that she pushed right past me. There was still some MD in my veins, so when she touched my arm I swear for three seconds I was like laughing and crying and orgasming at the same time. I was definitely in love with her for those three seconds. That’s how MD works. For those seconds I got to believe there was not a single bad thing in the world. Then I’m back, and I realise I’ve gripped the railing so hard my knuckles have gone white, and my hand is so cold I feel like it’s been dunked in boiling water. Like it’s so cold it’s a hot pain. Sort of stabbing. Weird, that. Also you can’t get mad at the galdem here. I can’t imagine how shit it is to be a girl at a Palace drop. You have to deal with maybe fifty to a hundred adolescent males, acting like absolute wankers, doing their absolute best to look sharp, and rich, and trying to look like they don’t give a fuck.

My hands are so cold I can’t even roll a cig. Wearing thin socks and my feet feel like they could shatter they’re so cold. But I can see man at the door at the end of the queue. So I should probably tell you why I bothered doing this. The thing is, you have to come round my ends to get what streetwear is. I’m really not trying to be a dick, fam, but it’s like ‘if you know, you know.’ In Hackney, garms are so much. Creps are so much. Like I’m not saying this is a new phenomenon — there’s that song by the Game that goes ‘I’ll kill you if you try me for my Air Max 95s.’ What I’m saying is that garms are what we’ve got. Like I can’t have a nice car. I can’t go Cotswolds for a weekend. I can’t have a fucking signet ring. But I can be up at 6 a.m. outside Palace to cop some garms. And I am telling you, that shit matters. Swear down, I went
to a house party in February where this girl took man upstairs and sucked man off literally just because man had that blue goalie Palidas jumper. The one that’s sort of space age vibes, with the patterns under the arms. Says ‘bold aqua’ on the website. Like I can think of no other reason: man had bare acne, man had terrible breath that night, but man had the new garms. It was that simple.

I saw Shepherd’s Bush mandem smoking straights and I thought about asking if I could bum one, but then I got afraid mandem would say no. That’s the other thing about pinging: if man says no to me, like just denies a simple request, I die inside. I get so fucking sensitive. I checked in on Shaye, and if it actually was English she was speaking I’m pretty sure she said ‘extra large cup of tahini and two pita.’ Which I guess meant she was hungry. I’m just standing there hoping she doesn’t bum out too hard on the comedown, ’cause we were meant to just cotch and hang out the day after. Like I said, been too long. But comedowns can fucking lay you out, especially if you’re buying cheap MD. And ever since D went away, we’ve had to buy from a new bredda whose shit is dodgy. I heard D went prison. I bet Notting Hill mandem’s dealers never go prison.

But then I’m in the store, thinking like, does this shit even matter? I’m thinking about my economics textbook and supply and demand. Palace isn’t gonna say no to someone with money and a sick haircut that wants to buy their garms. They’ll take the piss of them — just read the website, it’s jokes — but they’re not gonna tell man to fuck off, you get me? So when I see Chelsea mandem with floppy blond hair literally say ‘Sholto, what do you think of this one?’ I don’t even know if that’s weird.
Or if that’s just how it is. I mean…fucking Sholto. That’s not even a posh boy name. That’s beyond posh boy. That’s just strange, fam. Actually Googled it when I got home. It means ‘sower of the earth.’ So here is this guy buying three of the same Palace hoodie, about to resell that shit no doubt, with his credit card, and his name means ‘sower of the earth.’ It bummed me out a bit.

And then I have to deal with fucking white tracksuit man. So I was going to the rack, and there’s man who works here in his fucking 3M reflective full tracksuit, like he’s white but he’s trying his absolute hardest to be Skepta, and he comes over and asks ‘can I help you?’ But I swear, he sounds like he’s about to burst out laughing. Like he’s just so fucking surprised I’m even in the store, but he’s gonna run with it anyway. Like he is incredulous. And man has long hair. Man has conditioned, well-maintained long hair. Man probably went to Oxford. Man probably goes Cotswolds every weekend. Man probably has toothpaste that costs 50 quid.

Maybe I was wrong about this guy. Maybe I was being ‘mean spirited’ like my mum’s always telling me. He didn’t sound posh, but that shit is easy to hide (in your voice anyway) if you really try. Point is, he was trying to act like a dick. Man’s tone of voice, you know. I wonder if it’s the same in high fashion, fam. Like if you go into the Gucci store or the Prada store, if some skinny oily haired assistant is gonna come up to you, smirking almost, and be like, ‘Excuse me can I help you? Do you need help with anything?’

But anyway I took my shit and brought it to the till. Got the second to last one: large black hoodie with the tri ferg and the chocolate bar on the back. Essential. And a smerk
jacket. Also a neon snap bracelet which is quite wavey, and definitely Fabric approved. Comes to a little over 300 quid. Man had *saved* for this. Whole summer as a fucking vegetarian coffee shop barista. Kind of shop where every customer has braided beards. Fixie bikes. Talk to me about gentrification, bruv. Listen, only reason man was working this job is cause there was fuck all else. It was this or the bike shop down the road, and to be honest the fucking smell of bike tires makes me want to fucking vom. So this is all I've got. No ‘special skills,’ no fucking 15 grand internships cause I'm not done with uni yet and I don't even know where to start or what to do with that shit. So I just made fucking macchiatos for two months. But you would not believe some of the shit I have heard in that coffee shop bruv. Like what's her name. Lena Dunham shit. One tote bag, one green juice and you start thinking you're John Lennon and Jesus's fucking lovechild. Miss me with that please. Thing about these people with money and cool jobs that move to Hackney, they think they can just talk about their sex lives so loudly in public. Like fam, I do *not* want to hear about how hot yoga has upped your tantric sex game. Whatever. Maybe fucking Magnus or whoever with his beard and his spinach beet apple cleanser has lived off Hackney Wick his whole life, and I'm being ‘mean spirited.’ Maybe Magnus is a don. Who fucking knows. And sometimes I brought produce home from the shop which mum was fucking buzzed about. Anything to make it a little easier I guess.

So when I got out the Palace store is when I actually started flexing. Somehow the fact that I've waited a ridiculously long time in a fucking far away borough for clothes that represent *my* culture, somehow I'm not pissed about that
now. 'Cause the bit when I’ve just bought the garms, that’s what fashion photography mandem with the giant cameras have come for, you get me? Like, man puts on man’s new garms, busses that new Palace reflective bag, sits on the curb, whips out the amber leaf, rolls one and just looks fresh. Maybe man gets snapped and ends up on a blog or a wavey Instagram. Big floss. And my hands had returned to a human state in the store, so I could actually roll one.

So I roll a cig, and I’m just cotching on the curb at this point. Take out the mango juice in my backpack and swig some, not much else you can consume when approaching an MD comedown. Happy to just watch the rest get nervous about whether or not the garms will sell out. And people stress. Swear down I have seen tears. I have seen howling. Wailing and gnashing of teeth if you get me. But I’m wearing some fresh creps, actually ironed my jeans last night for the first time in my life, and man has got some self-assurance in himself now. Then I see this girl, and her camera is like comically large. I think it’s fair to say that the bigger your camera the better it is. Like the equation seems pretty simple here. And she points the monster thing at me and snaps. Fucking get in. Of course there’s no certainty that this photo is gonna make it anywhere, but it’s like first hurdle cleared. Obviously my imagination gets going and I’m thinking of a clean gram with thousands of hearts and shit.

So I go back to man’s yard after like an hour of cotching. Given up on Shaye because she’s somehow returned to consciousness and is chirping with this guy who says he’s a DJ at Birthdays. She’d been gurning so hard there was actually a little froth on the side of her mouth, but the guy didn’t
seem to mind, so I left it. To be honest Shaye never looks too rough, like she never looks disgusting, even when she’s in a state. Girl holds it down. I was just listening to this bredda chat absolute shit to her, and I wanted to go and tell her we should go, but I didn’t want to be too imposing. I’m just bored of people being dicks to her. She’s like one of my best mates.

For the next few days after, man was combing the internet to see if that picture turned up anywhere. And believe you me, it turned up. It fucking turned up. On Hypebeast. So I know what you’re thinking. We Made It bruv. We-fucking-Made-It. That’s an extra hundred followers in no time easy.

Yeah, so huge scenes. Except not. Except wait ’til you see the fucking picture in question. First of all, it’s a split—like, it’s a picture of me next to some other people. And it’s not exactly a picture of fucking me. You know what I’ll just show you the fucking picture. Here fam set me your phone. Yeah one sec. Alright yeah. No not that one. One sec. That one.

That’s me on the right. My hoodie fresh out the bag, my clean jeans, my wavey new snap bracelet. Obviously my face isn’t in it, so it’s like no discernible way to see that it’s me. Whatever. My fucking PROBLEM, bruv, is those two on the left. Yeah the ones standing right there. Like just look at them. I imagine you’re not reaching the same levels of absolute fucking outrage as me right now. I will try to assist you, then, in reaching my levels of fucking pissed offness.

First of all, the kid on the left is like 2 years old. Like if you look close enough you can probably see the amniotic fluid still drying on his skin from those wavey times in his mum’s womb. Cheeks so fucking chubby he’s probably storing food in them for the winter like a fucking squirrel. His prep school
is probably ringing his mum cause their third sheep in the nativity play isn’t in school today. That kid on the left, he’s wearing the Supreme Nike Air Max 98 collaboration. 400 quid I’ve seen them go for. Just sneakers. As for his jumper, he’s wearing extra small, and that shit is still baggy on him. Kid on the right looks like a cross between Wallace from *Wallace and Gromit* and Russian sex offender. Sleazy fucking chain doesn’t help. So this em-fucking-barrassment got me thinking why I even want this for myself. And suddenly I’m hearing Skepta in my head in a whole new way. *Nah, that’s not me. Act like a wasteman that’s not me.* And man like Skepta literally fucking says in the song, *true, I used to wear Gucci, put it all in the bin ’cause that’s not me.* And now the MD has got me in one of those spirals, one of those fucking, like, existential spirals. Because I don’t even know what makes me feel good. Not buying these garms, because now I’m thinking it’s all fake and I look like a knob. I’m fucking cringing that mum’s shopping at Iceland and I’m splashing cash on made in China garms that are fucking burgling Hackney more and more each day. I don’t even like going out much. Rather just stay at home and watch *The Wire.* Like, with someone though. And I haven’t said a word to Shaye, which makes me feel like an idiot. Swear down sometimes I just want to wear a bag over my head.

Like, it’s not only what the kids were wearing that got me so vexed. These kids were from Knightsbridge, bruv. I know, cause I remember hearing them talk about what tube stop to get off at. One of them’s probably got a ‘von’ or a ‘de’ in his name, some fading aristocracy shit. And they bought the nicest fucking piece in the collection. I didn’t even try for that jumper, cause I knew it would be sold out by the time I got in
the store. They probably bought three of them each. *These* are the people who are competing with mandem from Hackney, mandem from Peckham, to get Palace garms. To rep our culture. Cause Palace wasn’t about Knightsbridge. Palace was about skating in shit parks, saving up so you could buy fresh creps and do MD in a club where they play Skepta not just for the Snapchat story banter. But it’s not about that anymore. Bruv, I have got to stop buying this shit.
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elias

bartholomew

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to speak

translations
of poems by
ananda devi
away

ananda devi
absence

(en français . . .)
Descendant of Atreus. Or stateless. Or Atlantis. They tell me that I was from here or from there that my ancestors left a place full of nothings to make an island of me

but I became a continent
That moment—Ocean knotted to the Ganges of my veins by an idyllic geography; and out of wise sophistry my thought unfurls

Then in my body a rhythm of sands wakes up or a Merina dance strewn with red laughs

I know, I am that and so much more and you who think I am centered in the frame like a retouched photograph: forget your assumptions

Descendant of Atreus for the cold hopelessness, stateless for my stone etched with lines from another place, Atlantis for my hidden shores, why always ask the question of identity?

I am.
to dream
to speak

ananda devi
to dream to speak
In the gray, threats spread like an oil. Echoes of steps on hopeless little alleys. Ringing of bells like a report: the island vanishes, dissolves, becomes frayed. Its transparent face—graceful folds of mist—fades. I’m no longer the same. I’ve left the present.
Here and there at the same time. Everything that’s unexplored in the unrestraint of our longings. Follow a path made of weaknesses and desperation, exhaust the soul like a hand that’s too tense, that’s turned to a pale ghost, the transparent flesh of a fantasy. The streaks of time on my face resemble nimble fingers of shade that outline the light. A game on the rainy surface, a crest of asphalt lifted up by heat or the sea’s frenzy — this Time which you measure, the countdown begun, you open it like a book to the first page, and there, you see it: there’s nothing written.

◊

I open my mouth to the salt of the sea. It enters with gentle breaths of wind, gulps of heaviness, I swallow it. I am salt. It devours me. It leaves strange cuts in my flesh, like someone cutting notches in a tree. The burn is full. I love the smell and the sound and the taste of salt. Its bitter substance, its insolence. Inside it bleeds me out, then cauterizes the wound.
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volume II

Fall 2016

1 translation piece

qianyi qin

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1 translation piece

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1 translation piece

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I would like to thank Professor Peter Cole & my classmates in LTR 348, The Practice of Literary Translation, for their comments & suggestions.
note from
the translator
Wang Zengqi (1920-1997), a Chinese writer most famous for his essays and short stories, was born in Gaoyou, Jiangsu, a town situated around water. Throughout history, the scenic area around lake Gaoyou has been depicted and praised by poets and essayists. Imagine a pond, a few idle ducklings on the surface, two or three egrets flying over, rows of reed flowers swaying in the breeze, and a little wooden boat emerging at a distance: you can somewhat hear the laughter of the young men and women on the boat. That would be a typical scene in Wang’s hometown.

Wang began writing in 1940 and experimented with stream of consciousness and modernism. He was later designated a “rightist” during the rampant political movements and spent three years working in the fields at an agricultural research institute in the countryside, and later in its art department, drawing varieties of potatoes.

Wang resumed writing and publishing after the Cultural Revolution. In 1980, when “Taking the Precepts” was published, it was considered something radically new and fresh for the Chinese readers who had long been steeped in revolutionary propagandist literature. The memories related to Wang’s hometown are a constant theme in his stories and essays. For him, everything in his hometown—the water, the food and the people—is infused with the simple joy of life.
Wang considered himself a “humanistic vernacular lyric poet.” His writing style breaks the boundary that separates essay, poetry and fiction. His language draws from the lively tradition of folk poetry and various regional dialects, but is at the same time infused with the poetic elegance and culture of literary Chinese.

Talking about his approach to writing, Wang said: “What I strive for is not profundity, but harmony.” For him, “The purpose of language is to make the reader understand it the instant she reads it, and remembers it the instant she hears it. The only criterion for language is accuracy.”

“Taking the Precepts” is a story, a poem, or better, a watercolor sketch of a way of living. It is a story driven not by plot, but by an atmosphere. If I had to make a summary of the plot and main characters, I’d call it a story of the budding love between a seventeen-year old monk, Ming Hai, and a village girl, Ying. Towards the end of the story, Ming Hai takes the Buddhist precepts to become a monk, but there is really no strict way of life for monks or anyone in the village: the monks eat meat, play card games in front of the Buddha statue and have lovers outside their monastic life. It is a ballad of a healthy and joyful way of living in accord with nature and human nature.

In my translation, I try to capture the distinctive poetry of Wang’s language, created by the seamless blend of colloquial and literary Chinese. The simple joy of life flows in the rhythm of the language. Reading Wang’s prose is like sitting comfortably in a boat floating on a rippling stream while enjoying the pleasant breeze of spring. There is no discernable attempt at sophistication, no intentional rhetorical
device. Everything is in the right balance, just like the natural, joyful way of living in the village in the story. Despite the vast differences between the English and the Chinese languages and cultures, I hope the story, with the poetry of the language and the underlying poetic harmony of a natural way of living, can continue to cast its spell.
taking the precepts

wang zengqi
汪曾祺
受戒
taking the precepts
Ming Hai joined the monastery four years ago. He came when he was thirteen.

The name of the place was a bit odd: Village of Nunnery Zhao. Zhao — because most people in the village had that surname Zhao; village — though the houses were scattered far and wide, a few here and a few there — if you went out of the doorway, you could see the houses in the distance, but to walk there would take quite a while, for there was no road, only foot paths winding across the fields; and nunnery, because there was one, called Bodhi Nunnery. But people kept mishearing the name, and started calling it Boat Nunnery. Even the monks in the nunnery called it that. “And where is the master’s temple to be found?” — “Boat Nunnery.” A nunnery is supposed to be where nuns live. After all, a monastery for monks, a nunnery for nuns. But monks lived at Boat Nunn-

In Chinese, the word for Bodhi: “Pu Ti” (菩提) and Water Chestnut: “Bo Ji” (葧荠) sound similar. However if I say that people misheard the name “Bodhi nunnery” and took it to be “Water Chestnut nunnery,” an English reader will probably be confused. Adding a footnote could solve the problem, but it would also break the spell. So I looked for something that sounds like “Bodhi” and settled on “Boat nunnery,” which is apt for the setting of the story: a village with a beautiful water scenery, and has a nice resemblance with the sound of “Bodhi.”

“宝刹何处?” literally would translate into “treasured temple is located where?” “Treasured temple” is a stock phrase that is a polite way to refer to a monastery, regardless of how big or famous it is. Here the author is simulating a dialogic situation, where someone politely asks the monk which temple he is affiliated with. The humor is that the “treasured temple” is called “Boat Nunnery.” In order to get across that this is an imagined dialogic situation, I translated it as “And where is the master’s temple to be found?” The phrase “the master’s temple,” combined with the syntax “where is . . . to be found,” captures the dialogic situation and the politeness of the tone. The contrast with the name “Boat Nunnery” helps to get across the humor and the absence of rigid rules and pretentious manners at the village.
nery. Maybe because Boat Nunnery wasn’t very big. If it’s big, it’s called a temple; if it’s small, a nunnery.

Ming Hai was called Little Ming at home. He knew when he was little that he was going to join the monastery. In his hometown, people didn’t say “join the monastery,” but “become a monk.” His hometown was famous for producing monks. Just as some places were famous for producing pig butchers, some for mat weavers, and some for whores, his hometown was famous for producing monks. If a family had many sons, they would send one of them out to become a monk. To become a monk, one also needed some connections. There were societies for that. Some monks from Ming’s hometown traveled very far. Some traveled to Ling Yin Temple in Hangzhou, some to Jing’An Temple in Shanghai, some to Jin Shan Temple in Zhenjiang, and some to Tian Ning Temple in Yangzhou. But most of them stayed at local temples.

Ming Hai’s family didn’t have many fields. The eldest son, the second son, and the third son were quite enough for the farm work. Ming Hai was the fourth son. When he was seven, his uncle, who was a monk, came home for a visit. His mother and father talked with his uncle, and decided to let Ming Hai become a monk. Ming Hai was there when they were having the discussion, and thought it was quite a sensible decision—there was no reason to object.

Now becoming a monk had its advantages. For one, a monk could eat ready-made rice: monasteries always took care of room and board. Second, a monk would be able to save some money. As long as he learned to perform the Hungry Ghosts ritual and the Repentance ritual, he would get paid for his labor. If he saved money, it would be possible to return home and

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get married; and if he didn’t want to return home, he could buy a few plots of land. It wasn’t that easy to be a monk though. First, a monk had to have a face like a bright moon. Second, he had to have a voice like a resonant bell. And third, he had to be smart and have a good memory.

Ming’s uncle took a look at his face, made him walk a few steps ahead and a few back, and told him to chant a work song for cow herding and rice threshing. “Geh Dang —” Ming sang. His uncle immediately said: “Ming would definitely make a great monk. Leave it to me!” To become a monk, one had to put in some effort—one had to study for a few years. How could a monk not know how to read? So Ming started school. He read The Three Character Classic, Hundred Family Surnames, Four Character Miscellaneous Words, Essential Poems for Children, Confucius, and Mencius. He also copied a piece of
calligraphy everyday. The villagers all praised his characters: they were quite black.

Uncle came home again on the planned date, and brought a short monk shirt that he wore himself. He told Ming’s mother to make it shorter so Ming could wear it. With his short monk shirt on, and still wearing the purple floral-patterned pants that he wore at home, along with a pair of new cloth-shoes without socks, Ming bowed his head to his mother and father, and left with his uncle. He had been given a school name when he started school, Ming Hai. Uncle said: “There’s no need to change it.” So “Ming Hai” became his Buddhist name too.

They passed a lake. Such a huge lake! They walked across a town. Such a bustling town: salt store, tax bureau, slices of pork hanging in a butcher shop. A donkey was milling sesame seeds, and the aroma of sesame oil permeated the entire street. Clothing stores, a small shop selling jasmine powder and hair oil, vendors selling hand-made flowers and silk yarns, poultice vendors performing martial arts, candy blowers, snake charmers… Ming wanted to take a look at everything. Uncle kept pushing him: “Hurry up! Hurry up!”

They arrived at a riverbank. A boat was waiting for them. On the boat was a tall slim man in his fifties. A girl about Ming’s age was squatting at the bow, peeling off lotus seeds for snacks. Ming and his uncle sat down in the middle of the boat, and the boat started moving.

Ming heard someone talking to him. It was that girl.

“Are you the one who’s going to become a monk at Boat Nunnery?”

Ming nodded.
“Monks have to burn scars in their scalps when they get ordained! Aren’t you afraid?”

Ming didn’t know how to answer, so he just shook his head.

“What’s your name?”

“Ming Hai.”

“And when you’re at home?”

“Ming.”

“Ming! My name is little Ying! We are going to be neighbors. My home is right next to Boat Nunnery. This is for you!”

Little Ying threw the half lotus seedpod she had left to Ming Hai. Ming peeled the seedpod and started to snack on the lotus seeds one after another.

The boatman was rowing the boat one oar after another. They could hear only the sound of oars pushing against water:

“Hwooa — shh! Hwooa — shh!”

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Boat Nunnery was well-situated. It was on high land, the highest spot in the area. Those who built the nunnery knew how to pick a location. In front of the gate ran a river. Outside the gate there was a large grain-threshing field. Tall willow trees surrounded the nunnery on three sides. Inside the gate was a passageway. Facing the gate stood the shrine of Mi Le Buddha. Some respected master had written a couplet:

**Belly big enough to bear unbearable things under heaven;**
Mouth open wide
to laugh at laughable men on the earth.

At the back of Mi Le Buddha stood another Buddha, Wei Tuo. Across the passageway a courtyard opened out, planted with two Gingko trees. On each side of the courtyard were three rooms. Beyond the courtyard stood the main hall, where the San-Shi Buddha—the three-bodied Buddha—was enshrined. The height of the statue and the shrine put together amounted to only about fifty inches. To the east of the main hall lived the abbot, to the west was the storage house. On the east side of the hall, there was a small six-sided door, and on the white door someone had carved a couplet in green characters:

A world in a blossom.
Supreme wisdom.

Beyond the door was a long, narrow courtyard, dotted with a few rocks arranged to look like a mountain, and pots of flowers. There were three small rooms.

The little monk’s days were quite relaxed. He would get up, open the main gate and start sweeping the floor. The floor was paved with square tiles and was quite easy to sweep. He would then burn sticks of incense for Mi Le Buddha and Wei Tuo, another for San-Shi Buddha in the main hall, bow three times to the ground, recite three times “nā mó ē mí tuó fó,” in homage to the one with supreme knowledge, and knock three times on the chime stone. Monks in this nunnery didn’t perform morning and evening chanting. Ming’s three knocks on the chime stone would suffice. After that, he would collect
water from the well, feed the pigs and wait for the superintendent monk, his uncle, to get up and teach him the sutras.

Teaching the sutras was similar to teaching reading. One copy of the sutra would be set in front of the master, another in front of the student. The master would sing a verse,

大肚能容容天下难容之事
开颜一笑笑世间可笑之人

Belly big enough

to bear unbearable things under heaven;
Mouth wide open,
to laugh at laughable men on the earth.

一花一世界
三藐三菩提

A world in a blossom,
Supreme wisdom.

A couplet is a pair of poetic lines that follows a set of rules. While in Chinese, it always comes in two lines, here in the first couplet I divided it into four lines to make it easier for the English reader to feel the rhythm and identify the parallelism. While a Chinese reader familiar with the couplet form will probably have little trouble reading a long line and pause at the correct place, it might be harder for an English reader to finish one line with too many stresses and still feel the rhythm and the poetry. As the natural and rhythmic flow of the language is my priority in this translation, I decided to break the lines into a form that would be easier for the English reader to follow.

In the second couplet, the second line in Chinese is “三藐三菩提,” a transliteration of the Pali “samma-sambuddhassa” or the Sanskrit “samyak-sambodhi,” which means “supreme correct wisdom (of the Buddha).” The “Sam” sound is transliterated into “Sam” (pronounced: san),” which means “three,” and forms a fortuitous parallelism with the “一 (one)” in “一花一世界 (literal: one blossom contains a whole world). It would be impossible to make a literal translation of the Chinese transliteration into English. So I chose to use the meaning of the second line instead, and fortunately, “wisdom” rhymes nicely with “blossom.” The sound quality of the couplet creates a serene atmosphere and enhances the profundity of the meaning of the lines.
and the student would follow. It really was singing. Uncle clapped on the table as he sang. He clapped quite loudly, a weak beat following a strong one, as if he were teaching opera. It really was like teaching opera, really the same! Even the technical terms were the same. Uncle said that two things were necessary for a monk to recite sutras properly: first, to be in tempo; second, to be on key. He said: to be a good monk, you must have a good voice. He said: In the twentieth year of the Republic, the dam of the canal broke, and the embankment was finally closed at the Lake of Clear Water. Because many died in the flood, the temples held a big ceremony of the Hungry Ghost Festival. The thirteen masters — thirteen Main Seat monks — and abbots from the major temples all came together, along with more than a hundred monks below them in rank. Who should serve as the Main Seat? After a round of mutual recommendations and humble reservations, they all voted for Shi Qiao — the abbot of Shan Yin Temple! Once Shi Qiao sat on the Main Seat, he looked just like Di Zang Bodhisattva — what dignified bearing! When his sonorous voice announced: “Praise for the incense — ,” almost a thousand onlookers fell silent all at once. Not even the crows made a sound. Uncle said: You must exercise your voice, whether on the hottest days of summer or the coldest days of winter. Practice mastering the Qi in your abdomen! He said: One must endure the most painful of all pains, then he can become the best among the best! He said: among the monks there is also a first place, a second place and a third place! You must concentrate, do not be distracted! Ming Hai was enthralled by Uncle’s profound teachings, and started singing after Uncle, carefully following the tempo:
Incense in the censor burning—
Incense in the censor burning—
And all the realms receive the fragrance—
And all the realms receive the fragrance—
All Buddhas reveal their supreme embodiment…
All Buddhas reveal their supreme embodiment…

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After Ming Hai finished his morning sutra studies—he had more verses to study before going to bed at night, his evening sutra studies—the other monks at Boat Nunnery would start to get up.

The population of the nunnery was quite simple: altogether six people. Five monks in total, including Ming Hai.

There was an old monk in his sixties, a fellow student of Uncle’s teacher. His Buddhist name was Pu Zhao, but not many people knew that. Because few called him by his Buddhist name. They all called him “old monk” or “old teacher.” Ming Hai called him “Grandpa teacher.” He was a very lonely person, locked up all-day long inside his room, in his “world in a blossom.” You wouldn’t see him recite the sutras. He just sat there without making a sound. He didn’t eat meat, except during the New Year.

Below him were three fellow students, all at the rank of “Ren.” Ren Shan, Ren Hai, Ren Du. Inside and outside the nunnery, some people called them Big Master, Second Master; others called them Master Shan, Master Hai. But with Ren Du, nobody called him “Master Du,” because it wouldn’t sound proper (it would mean “salvage master”). Most people simply
called him “Ren Du.” After all, he was still young, only in his twenties.

Ren Shan, Ming’s uncle, was the superintendent monk. Not “abbot,” nor “head monk,” but “superintendent monk.” This was because he really was doing an administrator’s job. In his room there was a desk for keeping accounts. On the desk were account books and an abacus. Altogether there were three account books: one for copies of sutras, one for land rentals, and one for money lending. Monks held rites, and people had to pay for those rites—otherwise, why would anyone become a monk?

The most common ceremony was the one for the Hungry Ghost Festival. A standard ceremony would take ten people. One as the Main Seat, one playing the drums, and four on each side. If there weren’t enough people, eight people with three on each side could also work. Boat Nunnery only had four monks, so they had to collaborate with other temples to perform the full ceremony. There were cases like that, but usually they just performed the ceremonies in a simplified version. One Main Seat, one who played the drums, and one monk on each side. It would take too much effort to find monks from other temples. Besides, there weren’t many families in the area that could afford the entire ceremony. Sometimes, when someone in the family passed away, the family would only ask for two monks, even just one monk to recite the sutras and make a few knocks on the Buddhist musical instruments. Many families wouldn’t pay the sutra money right away, often waiting until after the fall. So account keeping was necessary. Moreover, the monks’ salaries for performing the ceremony varied. As with opera performers, they’d receive their shares.
The Main Seat would get the first share because he needed to lead the singing and perform solo. There was one part of the rite, “Lamenting the Dead,” where everyone else put down their instruments and rested, while the Main Seat had to sing slowly and melodiously on his own. The second share would go to the drum player. What’s so hard about that? Well, just to set the rhythms at the start would require great dexterity. If you didn’t have the skill, you wouldn’t be able to control the speed and the texture of the sound. The other monks would get equal shares. This also needed to be recorded in the account book: which month, which day, half ceremony at which household, who was the Main Seat, who played the drums... so that nobody would start swearing when settling accounts at the end of the year...

The nunnery owned a few acres of land that were rented to others, and the rent needed to be collected when the time came. The nunnery also lent out money. The monastery rarely experienced any deficit, because the renters and debtors were afraid lest the Bodhisattvas get annoyed. Those three account books were quite enough to keep Ren Shan busy. Moreover, the consumption of incense, lamp candles, oil and salt, and the “Blessing Foods” also require accounting. Apart from the account books, on Abbot Shan’s wall also hung a board painted with four red characters: “Write often. Think with diligence.”

Ren Shan talked about the three requirements of a good monk, but he himself actually didn’t fulfill a single one of them. Two words would summarize his appearance: yellow, fat. His voice was not like a bell at all, but like a sow. Smart? Not exactly. He lost card games quite often. He never wore a
Buddhist robe inside the nunnery, or even any formal monk clothes. Usually he just wore a short monk shirt, with his yellow belly showing. For footwear, he dragged his feet in a pair of monk shoes as if he were wearing slippers — even if they were new shoes. Every day he’d wander around, dressed like that, while making noises like a sow: “Mooh — Mooh — ”

The Second master was Ren Hai. He had a wife. His wife would come stay at the nunnery every year during the summer and the fall, because the weather here was cool. She was the sixth person at the nunnery, the only one who wasn’t a monk. She counted as one. Ren Shan and Ren Du called her big sister. Ming Hai called her master’s wife. The couple were both very tidy. They could spend entire days doing washing. At dusk, they liked to sit in the courtyard and enjoy the cool breeze. During the day, they mostly stayed inside.

The third master was a smart and sophisticated person. There were times when the big master would fiddle and fiddle with the abacus but still couldn’t come up with the calculation, and the third master would come up with the result after simply rolling his eyes twice. He often won card games. After twenty to thirty cards were shown, he would have a basic idea of what cards the other players had. When he was playing in a card game, there were always people who liked to stand behind him, tilting their heads to watch him play. Whenever someone asked him to play cards, they would just say: “I’d love to give you a few coins.”

Not only was Ren Du good at both sutra recitation and the repentance ritual, he also had a special skill: he knew how to “fly the cymbals.” In the seventh month of the lunar year, some places would celebrate the Hungry Ghost Festival with
a big ceremony. A large group of monks would wear ornately embroidered cassocks and fly the cymbals—they would make those heavy cymbals fly and spin. At a certain point, the musicians playing all the other Buddhist musical instruments would stop, and all that was left was the intense sound of percussion as the monks rapidly crashed those pairs of cymbals. Then all of a sudden, the monks would fling the cymbals towards the sky: they would spin as they soared upward. Just before they hit the ground, the monks would catch them. They wouldn’t just catch them in an ordinary way. There were different styles, including “Like a rhino gazing at the moon,” “Like a knight carrying a sword on his back,” etc. Was this still a Buddhist recitation? This was more like a circus! Maybe Di Zang Boddhisattva enjoyed watching this. But it was the people who really enjoyed it, especially women and kids. It was a good chance for young and handsome monks to show themselves off. After a big Ceremony for the Hungry Ghost Festival, just like after a good public theater performance, one or two girls and even young married women would go missing: they’d run away with the monks.

Ren Shan also knew how to perform the festive version of the Hungry Ghost Festival. Some families, especially those that had among their relatives many young people who knew how to have a good time, would ask for a more festive version of the Hungry Ghost Ceremony at occasions that were not too sad—for example, at the nether birthday celebration for the dead. The so-called festive ritual meant that after the normal ritual, the hosts could ask the monks to sing some popular tunes, pluck the lutes, blow into the flutes and pipes, and rattle some drums and wooden castanets.
They could even pick particular songs they wanted the monks to perform.

Ren Du could sing for a whole night on his own without repeating a single song. He had been away in previous years, and only started to stay at the nunnery about two years ago. Rumor had it that he had lovers—and not just one. Usually he acted very properly. He looked stern whenever he saw girls and women, without telling a single joke or singing any popular tune. Once when he was taking a rest in the shade on the threshing field, a bunch of people surrounded him and asked him to sing a few tunes. Not able to resist the crowd, he said: “All right. I’ll sing one. Not those from our town—you know those too well. I’ll sing one from An’Hui.”

Threshing with m’ sister ’n the young lad,
Too embarrassing to listen, what he says.
Pretending we don’t understand,
Move on thresh the next pile of wheat.

He finished, but the crowd wanted more. So he sang another one:

M’ Lass is so lovely, such a delight,
Lightly jiggling, her ample breasts.
On them I wish to rub my hands,
Ah, my heart jumps up and down.
There are no rigid precepts in the nunnery. People don’t even mention the word.

Ren Shan smoked a water-pipe. He would bring his portable water-pipe even when he went out to perform rituals.

They played a lot of card games. The monastery was a good place for playing cards. They’d move the square dining table from the main hall to in front of the gate, and it’d turn into a game table. Once the table was set, Ren Shan would bring the chips from his room and pour them out onto the table like a little stream. They played more card games than Mahjong. Besides the three monastic brothers, the usual card players included a duck-feather collector and a hare-hunter who was also a hen-thief—both were decent men. Carrying his basket, the duck-feather collector would walk across town after town, shouting in his hoarse voice: “Sell your duck feathers for some money—!”

The hen-thief had a device: the copper dragonfly. Once he had a hen in his sights, he would throw the copper dragonfly onto the ground, and the hen would immediately peck at it. Once it pecked, the spring in the copper dragonfly would stretch open the hen’s beak, and it wouldn’t be able to make any noise. Just at that moment when it was totally confused, the thief would catch it in one go.

Ming once borrowed the copper dragonfly from this “decent man” to take a look. He tried it out at little Ying’s front yard—it really worked! Little Ying’s mom knew it and scolded Ming: “Oh dear! Son! How come you’ve come to my house to play the copper dragonfly!”

Little Ying came running:

“Give it to me! Give it to me!”
She tried it too: this is magic! The black hen got her mouth stretched open right away, confused and dumbfounded!

On rainy days, the two men would pay a visit to the Boat Nunnery and idle the day away.

Sometimes when there were no guests, the card players would drag out the old master. At the end of the games, it was usually the managing monk who got really cross: “Motherfuckers! I lost again! I’m never going to come again!”

They ate meat without hiding it. Before the New Year, they would also slaughter a pig, right at the main hall. Everything was the same as with lay people: boiled water, wooden bucket, sharpened knife. When they tied up the pig, it too cried without end. What was different from lay people was that they had one more ritual before the slaughter: reciting the rebirth incantation for the pig that was about to rise up to heaven. It was always the old master who recited it, with great solemnity: “All beings, born from a mother’s womb, hatched from eggs or grown from wet corners of the earth: from emptiness you come, to emptiness you go, reborn in the next life. You all shall be content. Nà mó è mí tuó fó, in homage to the one with supreme knowledge…” The third master Ren Du would make a sharp cut, and the pig’s red blood would squirt out with lots of foam.

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Ming often ran to Ying’s house.

Ying’s house was like a small island. It was surrounded by a river on three sides. To the west, a small path led to Boat Nunnery. Ying’s household was the only one on the island.
There were six huge mulberry trees. Every one of them bore huge mulberries in the summer: three with white mulberries, and three with purple. There was also a vegetable garden. All through the year, there were melons, beans and greens. The lower half of the garden wall was made of bricks, the upper half of rammed-earth. The main door had a fine coating of wood oil, and on it was a pair of Spring Festival couplets, written on the type of paper which, as its name implied, would remain red for ten thousand years:

If a household faces the sun, spring will always stay;
If a family does good deeds, wealth won’t go away.

Inside the door was a spacious yard. On one side of the yard was a cowshed and a rice-pounding house; on the other side, a pig sty and a henhouse, and also a fenced area for keeping ducks. A stone mill was placed in the open air. The house was located to the north of the door. It had a brick foundation. The roof was made of half tile, half straw. The house was renovated just three years ago, and white stubble still clung to the wood. In the middle of the house was the central hall. The gold on the portrayal of the household Bodhisattva hadn’t turned black yet. On each side of the main hall were the bedrooms. The windows were made of glass, looking clear and shiny under the sun — they were not very common in the countryside. Under the eaves, on one side was planted a pomegranate tree; on the other side, there was a gardenia. Both were already as tall as the eaves. When they blossomed in the summer, one looked red, and the other was white. It was very beautiful to look at. The scent of the gardenia was so strong that it was
almost hard to take in. When the wind was blowing in the right direction, people could even smell it at Boat Nunnery.

Ying’s was not a particularly large family. Naturally, every member of the family had the family name, Zhao. There were altogether four: Mr. and Mrs. Zhao and the two daughters: big Ying and little Ying. The family did not have a son. Because for several years there hadn’t been any disease for people or cows, no drought, flood, or locusts, they led a pretty good life. They had their own fields, so there was enough to eat. But they rented a few more plots at the nunnery. They planted water chestnuts in one of their own fields — that was mostly little Ying’s idea; she loved eating water chestnuts — and in the other they planted arrowheads. At home, they had a big flock of chickens and ducks. The eggs and duck feathers alone were enough to afford a year’s oil and salt.

Mr. Zhao was a capable person. He was a polymath. Not only was he good at every kind of farm work, he could also catch fish, clean mills, build rice hullers, fix water lifts, repair boats, build walls, bake bricks, assemble barrels, cut bamboo stalks, and twist ropes. He never had a cough or pain in his waist: he was sturdy like an elm tree. Mr. Zhao was a very gentle person. He didn’t talk much. If Mr. Zhao was the breadwinner, then Mrs. Zhao was the bread baker.

Mrs. Zhao looked incredibly energetic. She was over fifty, but her eyes were still bright and sparkling. Whenever you saw her, she always had her hair smooth and shiny, her clothes smart and tidy. Just like her husband, she never had an idle day. Among her daily activities were cooking food for pigs, feeding them, making salted vegetables — she made really good dried salted turnips — pounding rice, grinding soybeans
with a stone mill, and weaving reeds into mats and straw capes. She also knew how to make flower paper cuts.

When families married their daughters off in this area, they liked to make red paper cuts in auspicious patterns and put them on the clay or tin jars for dowry, for the sake of good fortune, and also to make them look beautiful. The patterns included “the red phoenix flying towards the sun,” “growing old together until we are white-haired,” “offspring for thousands of generations,” “longevity and good fortune forever,” and the like. People from ten miles away would come to Mrs. Zhao and invite her to perform paper cutting to decorate the dowry: “Aunt Zhao, the good day is the sixteenth, when can you come?” — “The fifteenth. I’ll come in the early morning!” — “You must come!” — “For sure! For sure!”

The two daughters looked like their mother, as if they were all cast in one mold. Especially their eyes resembled their mother’s: the white of the eye like duck egg white, the black of the eye like Go stones; like clear water when they stay still, like shining stars when they sparkle. Their hair was combed smooth and silky, their clothes always smart and tidy. According to the customs here, girls started to wear their hair in a bun when they were fifteen or sixteen. Those two girls had such good hair: shiny black hair decorated with a hairpin white as snow! When the mother and the girls went to the market, all the people at the market would look at them.

Though the sisters looked like each other, their personalities were different. The elder sister was very gentle and quiet, like her father. Little Ying, on the other hand, was even more talkative than her mom: she could never stop talking! Her sister said: “You keep on babbling from morning
to evening…” “Like a magpie!” “Ha, you said it yourself! — So noisy that you distract me!” “Distracted?” “Distracted!” “How can you blame me for being distracted yourself?” Little Ying was teasing her sister. Big Ying was already engaged. She had secretly taken a look at her fiancée: he was a good-natured man, good-looking, and was from a well-off family. She was satisfied. The two families had already exchanged the first gifts. The wedding day hadn’t been settled yet. Big Ying had rarely gone out of her house for the past two years. She had been working hard to put together her dowry.

Big Ying was a good seamstress. But with embroidery, she wasn’t as good as her mom. However, she didn’t like her mom’s embroidery patterns: she thought they were too old-fashioned. She had been to the city to look at the brides: nowadays lively embroidered flowers and plants were in fashion. This stumped her mother. In the end it was the magpie, little Ying, who suddenly came up with an idea: “I can recommend someone!”

Who was this person? It was Ming. When Ming was studying the Mencius canon, he somehow got a copy of a picture book and liked it a lot. Even after he came to the Boat Nunnery, he still kept reading that book. Sometimes he would even turn over the accounting books to copy the pictures. Little Ying said: “Ming knows how to draw! He can draw flowers as if they are alive!”

Little Ying invited Ming Hai to her home, ground the ink, and spread out sheets of paper for him. The little monk finished a few drawings, and big Ying liked them so much: “Just like that! Exactly! This way we can use random stitching.” The so-called “random stitches” is an embroidery technique:
after finishing the first layer, you’d stitch again with a different color, so that the pale and dark colors would blend together naturally. This was different from the technique of plain stitches that Mrs. Zhao’s generation used, which only had one layer and left the boundary between dark and pale colors very sharp and obvious.

Little Ying was like a scholar’s attendant, and also like a chief advisor: “Draw a pomegranate flower!” “Draw a gardenia!” As long as she could pick up the flower, he could copy it onto the paper. Later, whether it was rose balsam, carnation, water pepper, bamboo, nandina or wintersweet flower, he could draw them all. Mrs. Zhao also liked those drawings. She hugged Ming Hai’s monk head: “You are so smart! Why don’t you be my godson?” Little Ying held his shoulders and said: “Quick, quick, call godmother!” Little Ming made a bow to Ying’s mother and started calling her godmother from then on.

People in the whole area, including those living as far as ten miles away, heard about the three pairs of embroidered shoes that big Ying had made. Many girls walked or took a boat to come see the shoes. After taking a look, they would say: “They’re so pretty! How is this embroidered? This is a real flower!” They would bring sheets of paper and beg aunt Zhao to ask the little monk to come and draw them something. Some people asked for patterns on hanging curtains, some for those on door ribbons for decoration; others wanted floral prints on shoes.

Every time Ming came to draw flowers, little Ying would make him something tasty. She would cook two boiled eggs, steam a bowl of taro, and fry some lotus cakes. Because
her sister was busy working on the dowry, little Ying took care of all the miscellaneous work at the fields. And her helper was Ming. Among the most demanding farm work in this area were planting seedlings, operating the water lift on high fields, and the first round of weed clearing. And then there was rice harvesting and threshing. One family alone couldn’t manage all the work. The custom here was that a few families would arrange the dates, and take turns working on one another’s fields together. They didn’t charge anything for the labor, but the food had to be good. In those busy farming seasons, they would eat six meals a day, with meat and alcohol at every meal. When they were working, they would be singing while playing gongs and drums, and the fields would bustle with energy. During resting times, they would do their own things and didn’t seem to be under pressure at all.

At the third round of weed clearing, the seedlings would be quite tall already. If you looked down, you wouldn’t be able to see your own body. As soon as Ming heard a bright voice singing in the thick ocean of green: “Gardenia ay, blossoming ay, six petals ay . . . In front ay, of my house ay, a bridge ay . . . ,” he would know where little Ying was and run there really fast. Once he arrived, he would bend over and start clearing the weeds.

At dusk, it was Ming’s job to bring the buffalos for a mud bath. Buffalos were mosquito magnets. It was the custom here that, after you had lifted the yoke from the buffalo and let it drink some water, you would bring it to a mud puddle and let it roll around and get mud all over its body, so that mosquitoes couldn’t take their bites. For water lifting on low fields, it only takes a paddle wheel with fourteen paddles, and two
people to step on the pedals for half a day. Ming and little Ying would lean against the handrails of the water lift, stepping on the pedals without any urgency, while quietly humming the folk songs from different regions that Ming learnt from the third Master.

During rice threshing, Ming could take Mr. Zhao’s place for a while, so that he could go home and have a meal. The Zhao family didn’t have a threshing field themselves. Every year they would thresh their rice at the field outside the Boat Nunnery. Ming would cry out the work song as he cracked the whip:

“Geh Dang—”

The work song did not have any lyrics, but the tune had so many twists and turns—it was more pleasant to the ear than any folk song. When Mrs. Zhao heard Ming’s work song at home, she would lean over and listen: “What a good throat this kid has!” Even big Ying would stop knitting and say: “It sounds so beautiful!” Little Ying would proudly say: “Number one in all thirteen provinces!”

In the evening, Ming and Ying would sit together and look at the threshing field. The rice from the rented fields that the nunnery collected would be laid on the field too. They sat on a stone roller, and listened to the frogs play the drums, and the cold snakes singing. People here thought crickets’ chirps were made by earthworms, and they called earthworms “cold snakes.” They listened to the “weaving ladies,” the bush crickets, who kept on spinning yarns: “shah—.” They watched fireflies flying about, like the shooting stars in the sky. “Ah! I forgot to tie a knot on my trouser strap!” little Ying said. People here believed that, if you tie a knot on your trouser
strap when the shooting star was falling down, then whatever you wished for at the moment would come true.

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Digging water chestnuts was little Ying’s favorite farm work. After fall, the fields were all clean and empty. The water chestnut leaves had withered — Ying enjoyed playing with water chestnut leaves: there were protruding lines on the straight scallion-like leaves, when you stroke them, they’d make funny “bi-bi — ” sounds — and the fruits were hidden in the mud. Barefoot, little Ying would step into the cool and slippery mud. Hah — a hard lump! She would reach her hand down and come out with a red-purple water chestnut. She enjoyed doing it herself and also brought Ming to go with her. She would often, deliberately, step on Ming’s feet with her own bare feet.

Ying went back with a basket of water chestnuts, leaving behind on the soft field a row of footprints. Looking at her footprints, Ming was spellbound: five small toes, flat on the sole and slender on the heel, with a blank spot at the arch. Ming felt something in his body that he had never experienced before. He felt something inside was tickling. This beautiful row of footprints muddled up the little monk’s heart.

Ming often took the Zhao family’s boat to go to town, to buy candles, oil and salt for the nunnery. When Mr. Zhao wasn’t too busy, he would row the boat. When it was busy farm season, Ying would go instead, and Ming would be rowing the boat. They would pass a large reed pond on the way from the village to the town. The reeds were very dense. In the middle was the water path: you couldn’t see anyone
around. Every time Ming rowed to this pond, he would some-
how get really nervous, so he would just use all his effort
to row really hard.

Little Ying would cry out: “Ming! Ming! What’s wrong with
you? Are you out of your mind? Why are you rowing so fast?”

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Ming Hai was going to Shan Yin Temple to take
the precepts.

“Are you really going to burn the scar rings?”
“Yes.”
“Won’t it hurt? Why burn twelve holes into your scalp?”
“I have to go through it. Uncle said this is a big turning
point for becoming a monk. I have to do it.”
“Can’t you not take the precepts?”
“Monks who don’t take precepts are not real monks.”
“Is there any advantage in taking the precepts?”
“After taking the precepts, I can travel around and hang
my robe at any temple.”
“What does ‘hanging your robe’ mean?”
“It just means living at the temple and eating the food if
the temple has any.”
“You don’t have to pay?”
“No. You don’t have to pay. And when there are cere-
monies, the temples have to give priority to the visiting monks to
perform them.”
“No wonder they say that ‘monks from far away recite the
sutras better.’ So they’d trust you just for those scar rings on
your scalp?”
“You also need a precept certificate.”

“So after all, taking the precepts just means receiving a qualification certificate for being a monk!”

“Exactly!”

“I’ll row you there.”

“Great!”

Little Ying rowed the boat to the Boat Nunnery really early that day. For some reason, she was very excited. She was filled with curiosity: she wanted to see the huge temple of Shan Yin and see what taking the precepts was like. Shan Yin Temple was the largest temple in the county. It was outside the east gate, facing a very deep moat. Big trees surrounded it on three sides. The temple was in the woods. At a distance you could only vaguely see the tip of its golden rooftop, without any idea how big it really was. There were placards everywhere hanging on the trees, saying “Caution, fierce dogs.” The dogs in this temple were famous for being ferocious. Normally people rarely came into the temple. During the precept taking ceremonies, all the ferocious dogs were locked in and the temple was open to all.

What a huge temple! The threshold at the doorway was taller than little Ying’s knees. Right in front of the gate stood two huge boards, one on each side. On one of them was written three huge words: “Precept Taking Ceremony”; on the other: “Silence.” The atmosphere at the temple was really solemn. No one dared to cough too loudly. Ming went to the registration office, and little Ying just wandered around. The two guardians and four heavenly kings were more than thirty feet tall. All the sculptures looked brand new: everything here had been just recently renovated. The courtyard was about a third of
an acre, laid with blue stone, and planted with pine and cypress trees.

All Buddhist main halls had the name “Grand Hall,” but this one was actually grand. Once Ying went in, the air felt chilly. The shiny gold color was everywhere. Gautama stood on a lotus seat. The seat itself was taller than little Ying. Even when she raised her head, she still couldn’t see his whole face. She could only see a slightly closed mouth and a chubby jaw. The two red candles beside the shrine were as thick as the circle that one could make with the arms. On the altar in front of the Buddha, there were real flowers, cloth flowers, and paper flowers; there was also a coral reef tree, a jade scepter, and an entire ivory tusk. The incense was burning in the censer.

After little Ying went out of the main hall, she could smell the incense on her clothes. There were a lot of banners hanging everywhere. She wondered what those banners were made from. The fabric was so thick and the floral embroidery was so delicate. She saw a singing bowl. It was so huge that it could contain five buckets of water! And here: what a large wooden fish! — as large as a buffalo, and completely painted in red. Ying also walked around the Arhat hall, and climbed to the top of the Hall of Thousand Buddha — there really were a thousand small Buddhas! She also followed a group to look at the Sutra Hall. There wasn’t much to see at the Sutra Hall: nothing but volume after volume of sutras! Her legs were sore after such a tour. Little Ying remembered that she had to get some oil for the family, find some yarns that her sister wanted, buy shoe fabrics for her mom, and get some tobacco for her dad; she also wanted to buy two silver butterflies as decoration for her dress tie. So she left the temple.
When she finished running the errands, it was already noon. She went back to the temple. The monks were having rice soup. The dining hall was huge, big enough for eight hundred monks sitting together. The monks were particular even about the manner of eating soup. In the front, on the main seat, there were two vases, with red cloth flowers inside. Behind the vases sat a monk wearing a red robe with gold embroidery, with a flat wooden stick in his hand. The stick was for hitting people. If a monk made a noise while drinking the soup, he would come down and hit him with the stick. But he wouldn’t really hit people—just make a gesture. How strange it was, thought Ying: so many monks are drinking soup, and they don’t make a single sound!

She saw that Ming was sitting among the monks. She wanted to say hello but it was difficult to do so. She thought for a moment, and regardless of the ban on making noises, she simply shouted out: “I’m leaving!” She saw that Ming slightly nodded his head without turning his eyes. So she walked away with a bit of swagger, not bothered at all by the fact that many people were looking in her direction.

On the fourth day, little Ying went to visit Ming early in the morning. She knew that Ming was taking the precepts at the midnight of the third day—the burning of the scar rings was not open to the public. She knew that the monks would ask skilled barbers to shave their heads—you shouldn’t be able to feel any stubble in whichever direction you feel the head. Otherwise during the burning, the precepts would “slip away”: the incence would burn an entire area instead of just a small round scar ring. She knew that they would apply date paste on the head first, and use the tip of the incense to burn the
scalp. After burning the scar rings, the monks would have a bowl of mushroom soup and let the scars cool down. They couldn’t lie down, and had to keep walking around — that was called “dissipating the precepts.” Ying heard all this from Ming. And Ming heard it from his uncle.

Ying took a look, and the monks were really “dissipating the precepts” at the open field next to the city wall. All the monks had new blue robes on, and on their bare and shiny scalps were twelve black dots — only after the black scabs dropped, would the white and round “precept scars” appear. The monks all had smiles on their faces, and seemed very happy. Ying saw Ming immediately and called his name from across the moat:

“Ming!”
“Little Ying!”
“You’ve taken the precepts?”
“Yes I have.”
“Did it hurt?”
“Yes it did.”
“Is it still hurting now?”
“It’s passed now.”
“When are you going to come back?”
“The day after tomorrow.”
“In the morning? Or in the afternoon?”
“In the afternoon.”
“I’ll come pick you up!”
“Okay!”

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Little Ying welcomed Ming Hai to the boat. That day, little Ying was wearing a white summer shirt in fine fabric, a pair of black trousers in light fabric, and a pair of straw sandals made of alpine rush. She had a gardenia flower on one side of her hair; a pomegranate flower on the other. She saw that Ming was wearing his new blue robe, the white collar of his short shirt was showing from inside. She said: “Take off the one you’re wearing outside. Don’t you feel hot?” They each had an oar. Ying stayed in the middle of the boat, Ming was in charge of steering and stayed at the back of the boat.

Ying asked Ming a lot of things on the way, as if she hadn’t seen him for a whole year. She asked, while the scar rings were burned in, did anyone cry? Did they scream? Ming said, nobody cried. Everyone just kept reciting the sutras. There was a monk from Shandong who cursed: “Fuck your grandma! I’m not burning it!” She asked if it was true that abbot Shi Qiao at the Shan Yin temple was really exceptional in both his appearance and his voice. “Yes,” said Ming. “They say that his room is more exquisite than a lady’s bedroom?”

“It is really exquisite. Everything has embroidery on it.”

“Does his room smell really good?”

“It smells really good. He burns incense made from agarwood. It’s really expensive.”

“I heard he knows how to write poetry, paint and write calligraphy?”

“Yes. His calligraphy is carved on the bricks at each end of the passageway in the temple.”

“Does he really have a wife?”

“He has one.”
“And she’s only nineteen?”
“I heard so.”
“Is she good-looking?”
“They all say she’s good looking.”
“You didn’t see her?”
“How would I have seen her? I was shut in in the temple.”

Ming told Ying that an old monk at the Shan Yin temple told him that the temple wanted to choose him to be a tail monk. But they hadn’t settled it yet and it would need to be discussed by the monks in charge.

“What is a ‘tail monk’?”

“At every precept-taking ceremony, they would choose a head monk and a tail monk. The head monk needs to be mature and capable of reciting lots of sutras. The tail monk needs to be young, smart and good-looking.”

“What’s the difference between a tail monk and other monks?”

“Both head monk and tail monk can become abbots in the future, after the current abbot retires. Shi Qiao used to be a tail monk.”

“Are you going to be a tail monk?”

“It’s not certain yet.”

“You’ll be an abbot and take care of the Shan Yin Temple? In charge of such a huge temple?”

“It’s way too early to tell!”

After rowing headlong for a while, little Ying said:

“You won’t become an abbot!”

“All right. I won’t.”

“And you won’t become a tail monk either!”

“All right. I won’t.”
And she kept on rowing headlong for a while. She saw the reed pond ahead.

Little Ying suddenly put down her oar, walked to the rear and leaned over to Ming’s ear, speaking quietly:

“I could become your wife. Would you like it?”

Ming’s opened his eyes wide.

“Say something!”

Ming said: “Uh.”

“What is ‘uh?’ Would you like it, or not?”

Ming said loudly: “Yes I would!”

“What are you shouting so loud for!”

Ming lowered his voice and said very quietly: “Yes, I would — !”

“Row faster!”

Ying jumped back to the middle of the boat. They started rowing very fast, and the boat entered the reed pond. The reeds had just started to blossom. The purple-grey flowers glowed in silver light. Soft and smooth, they were like a string of silk yarn. In some places there were cattail spikes. They were red and looked like small candles. Water lens, green and purple, water spiders and long-legged mosquitos. Wild water chestnuts were blossoming with four-pedaled little white flowers. A blue-plumed water bird startled and flew away over the ears of reed flowers.

August 12th, 1980, reminiscing about a dream from forty-three years ago.

* 40
nude 01
nude 02
nude 03
nude 04

the yale lit
10 of 11

josh tarplin
I am more than the sum of my parts. 

and...