

LU MIN

Song of Parting

Translated from Chinese by Michael Day

I.

RAIN FELL VIOLENTLY through the night. San Ye thought of the gravestones in Dongba, and the flesh and bones beneath, and the clothes and things buried with the bodies. The coffins must be swimming in slimy muck . . . he couldn't sleep.

He tossed and turned until dawn, got up, and looked outside to see the bridge over the river had collapsed. Sodden planks drifted on the current, spinning gleefully before floating away with bits of rope, branches, and sedge grass, never to be seen again. Fortunately, his little age-blackened boat was still there, bumping and tossing on the water.

NO ONE WAS COMING to fix the bridge. These days no one needed it, since San Ye was the only one on this side. When people came to see him, they would call across the water, always in the same low, subdued tone: San Ye, Grandma Wu from the west side has passed. San Ye, Shuanzi got electrocuted. San Ye, Jiang Danian's daughter-in-law drank pesticide and did herself in.

No matter the time of day, he would hurriedly pull on his mourning clothes, step outside, and cross the shaky little bridge, watching the river flowing beneath, reflecting only him. When people caught sight of him making his way across, they would turn to one another and say, San Ye crossed the bridge today. That was the way they let one another know, since they all knew what it meant: another of Dongba's residents had died. Rushing to the scene, he often found both children and adults in a daze—they had been to plenty of neighbors' funerals, they were old hands at this, but it was different when tragedy struck your own family. They would all say, at times like this, you can see how hard San Ye's heart is. He would reach out and wipe the corpse's face with no expression at all.

His first task was to make the body presentable, while it was still soft and warm. He would dress it, put a hat on its head, tidy it up and lay

it straight, with the feet facing into the room, the opposite of the way living people slept; he would hang a mourning curtain in the doorway, place an offering in the hall, light incense and burn paper money; then he would sit down, write up a shopping list, and send someone to buy things: swaths of white, red, and black cloth; safety pins; ink and a brush, yellow and red paper; white candles; big incense sticks; some paper money; a few meters of straw rope. And so on.

Next, he would comb through the friends and loved ones for someone who could read and write, and put them in charge of the visitors' log: a ceaseless stream of mourners would bring cash for the living and paper money for the dead, and a record had to be made of each gift. Distant relatives may have gone years without visiting, but when they heard the news, they would drop what they were doing and come to kowtow and burn paper money. There was a set procedure for everything, a stricter order even than that of a wedding.

Then he would have a tent put up. He would hire a monk to chant sutras. He would have a banquet served, a gravestone carved, and a feng shui reading done. He would hire a band. Once everyone had their instructions, the mood among the family would gradually grow calm. Once every visiting neighbor knew what to do, things would start falling into place. The women would split into teams, rinsing vegetables in the kitchen, cutting white cloth in the courtyard, and folding paper gold bars in the parlor, chatting animatedly among themselves, sharing memories of the departed, who would seem to come alive again with still more outstanding qualities than they had had in life: even tempers, modesty, self-restraint, quick wits . . .

Finally finding a free moment, San Ye would ask the man of the house what kind of paper figures he wanted, then return home across the river and begin putting together the paper people, horses, and carriages. As a young man, San Ye had made a living making paper things, but then there had been so many funerals, and he didn't have a wife, so he had slid slowly into the role of presiding over Dongba's funerals.

2.

SAN YE WAS IN FRONT of the house cleaning out the little black boat—left to sit a long while, it had filled with leaves, cobwebs, and even clusters of mushrooms—when he saw Old Peng on the opposite bank, carrying a small wooden stool. The old man sat and pulled out a snuff bottle, as if preparing for a long talk with San Ye.

Old Peng was seventy-three, ten years older than San Ye, and still spry. His voice boomed from the opposite bank: "How have you been holding up these past couple days?"

"Oh, you know. Have to get this boat fixed up. I need it now."

"So you're not gonna fix the bridge?"

"I'm the only one here to the west of the river . . . just me and the mountains." San Ye turned to look behind him as he babbled.

"West or east, we're all part of Dongba."

"If I could fix it, I reckon I would. But rowing works, too."

"I'll get someone to fix it for you. It's no good leaving it like that." Old Peng's cheeks sucked in, and the pipe gurgled.

San Ye knew Old Peng was no do-gooder, no bleeding heart. His first wife had died young, and his two sons and daughter had moved to the big city, and though they urged their father to join them and live the easy life, the old man stubbornly insisted on lingering alone in Dongba. People respected him for his children's success, but San Ye doubted he would have much luck rounding up a crew to fix the bridge.

In fact, the day after the bridge washed out, all Dongba already knew. In spare moments, old and young alike gathered on the riverbank to gaze at the opposite shore . . . *Aiya*, not a single bridge pier left! All of it washed away by the flood . . . That's right! Washed clean away, not a pier left standing! The crowd buzzed with excitement. Some greeted San Ye, asking, hadn't he heard anything in the night? Then they would turn and walk away. No one said a word about fixing the bridge. Like a great tree struck by lightning, it was down, and could not be put right.

"Forget it. You know as well as I do that people call this the bridge to hell. Even if it's fixed, no one will use it." San Ye didn't want the old man to waste his energy.

Old Peng shook his head and refused to respond, changing the topic.

Scalding June sunlight poured down, blackening the green grass across the river. No one made small talk with San Ye—when people saw him, they would look at his hands and seem to catch a chill, shrinking back a little, at a loss for words—and he would go inside, pull out his paper figures and get to work. Blue house, yellow bridge, red man, white horse . . . it was quite a sight to see, paper figures of all shapes and colors lined up on the ground.

Old Peng liked looking at them, too. His curiosity stirred, he asked all sorts of things. Okay, San Ye thought, I don't mind talking about the paper figures. Gold Mountain, Silver Mountain, Tall Trusty Steed, Grand Sedan Chair, Spacious Courtyard, Wooden Cabinet, Bed and Bedding, Red Lacquered Commode, Emerald Servant Girl, a self-contained world of the senses brimming with life. He would send the figures to the family, line them up in the courtyard, and children and adults would gather around to gawk, oohing and ahing. At times like these, San Ye was so proud.

3.

OLD PENG STARTED SEARCHING for free hands to fix the bridge. San Ye knew who he'd rounded up because they all eventually showed up across the white river from his place. One man squatted on his haunches and pulled nervously at the grass. One man wore a hat. Another carried a leather bag beneath his arm. When there was a job to be done in Dongba, these were the men who stepped in.

"San Ye, about this bridge, you see . . ." Fingers stained green, the grass-puller shoved grass in his mouth, seeming to savor the taste. The hat-wearer wore a traveling cap with a ring of small red characters reading "ABC Tour Group, XYZ County." A tea glass bulged inside the bag. They all seemed to look at San Ye in the same way, and speak in the same tone.

"San Ye, you see . . ."

"Leave it be. I'll cross on the boat." He caught the drift quickly. There was no need to drag things out.

"Well, San Ye, if you insist . . . so sorry. Tell you the truth, we've got wood, but there are no bridge builders here in Dongba. We went to the next village, asked around, and found one, but no matter what we said, he wouldn't lend a hand, saying it would be bad luck . . ." They would sidle away slowly, eyes averted from San Ye. He simply felt sorry to trouble them.

The truth was, it was no big loss. Since the bridge had washed out, he had taken the little black boat out twice. He would work the oars, propelling the boat full of paper figures down the river, the colorful reflections scattering, shattering, swaying. He would fix his eyes on the water as he rowed, seized by a strange sensation, convinced the river beneath him had no bottom. He didn't at all mind rowing the little boat.

4.

A FEW DAYS LATER, Old Peng came to see San Ye again. Like last time, he brought a wooden stool and a water pipe. It was a sunny afternoon.

“You rascal, how dare you turn those men away. Do you know the lengths I went to to round them up?” He shot San Ye a recriminating look. “It’s not like the bridge belongs to you. You’ve got no right to say no.”

San Ye quickly admitted his guilt, offering the old man a graceful out. “It’s all my fault. How about this, I’ll buy you a drink one day to say I’m sorry.”

“If they won’t do it, I will.” Old Peng looked down and packed his pipe with tobacco. He sounded deadly serious. “Did you know, back when I was young, I took a two-day woodworking course?”

This stubborn seventy-three-year-old man was quite a handful. “Ha, ha.” San Ye let out two mirthless chuckles and went back to working on his paper men. He didn’t dare reply.

He had a tough job on his hands. A boy had died yesterday. He had been visiting the county seat for the first time, on business with his uncle, and there had been a car accident. The boy had yet to take a wife, yet to learn the things of the world. His mother had spent the whole night sobbing on San Ye’s shoulder, saying whatever popped into her head: make him a three-story Western-style house, paste it together so it’s nice and sturdy, make him a little paper car, the most expensive kind, put a nice big tub in the bathroom . . . and can you make him a paper wife? A pretty girl like the ones on TV.

Old Peng saw San Ye sulking, sunk deep in thought, and he said nothing, but he made no move to leave, either. He simply sat on the opposite bank, glancing back and forth across the river.

5.

THE NEXT MORNING, San Ye was still in bed when he heard a stir outside.

He went to look, and was horrified by what he saw. A dozen or so tree trunks, some skinny, some thick, were lined up neatly on the opposite shore. The sun was coming up, spilling gentle orange and red light across the trunks, coating them in what looked like gold dust.

Old Peng sat to the side on the wooden stool, taking drags on his

water pipe. Seeing San Ye standing there in shock, he hurriedly waved and began to explain. "Didn't bring them here on my own. Rounded up a few schoolkids. Took about an hour."

San Ye was speechless.

"All you have to do is sit and watch. Might take a while, but I'll get it done."

San Ye lifted his eyes and sized up the river. It wasn't especially wide, but still, there was a distance of fifty or sixty feet to cover. He couldn't understand why the old man had his heart set on fixing the bridge.

"Didn't believe me, did you? But you do now!" Old Peng seemed pleased with himself.

"*Aiyo* . . . Big Brother, this is too much. A bridge like this, it's not the type of thing you can build in a day or two."

The old man said nothing. He dusted himself off, stood up straight, pulled out a set of woodworking tools, and went to work. He picked a tree trunk at random, cleared a patch on the ground around it, and starting sawing. The small hacksaw eased back and forth across the aged trunk. Fresh sawdust fluttered down to dust the grass.

San Ye panicked, breaking out in a sweat. What should he do now? He had promised to send the dead boy's family a set of paper figures today. He went inside, leaving the old man behind, collected the car, the house, the bath, and the beautiful woman he'd made the day before and loaded them into the little boat.

Old Peng stopped what he was doing and watched with a serious look. San Ye rowed to the middle of the river, fragments of yellow, red, blue, and green flitting across the water. Suddenly the old man sighed out a clichéd compliment: They're so beautiful.

6.

FROM THAT DAY ON, Old Peng worked each day by the river. He was slow by nature, and on top of that unfamiliar with the task, or maybe it was to save strength that he spent so long laboring on a single log, taking days to make his way from one end to the other. Sawing the thick trunks was a two-man job, and San Ye, flustered, was on the verge of rowing his boat over to help when Old Peng proudly waved him away: Forget it, we'll leave the branch on, it'll make a perfect bridge pier . . .

Crowds gathered to watch Old Peng work. People searched for any reason to come see the spectacle. Women would arrive with bowls of

rice, and when school let out, kids would stop and play a while. People would finish washing their clothes, sifting their rice, cleaning their commodes, or bathing their oxen and tarry by the river. Even the dogs and cats knew to seek their masters there. Men who spent their days toiling in the fields would lay eyes on the bridge and grow curious, hands itching to help out. Old Peng, all smiles, would pull out two saws he kept at the ready. Once Old Peng showed them the ropes, the men were as good as old hands, gleefully, powerfully pushing and pulling.

It was true what they said, flames leap higher with more men tending the fire. It wasn't long before the row of tree trunks turned to planks, piled up neatly beneath the tree. It was quite a sight to see.

7.

WHEN NO ONE WAS WATCHING, Old Peng would chat with San Ye, asking this and that, strings of questions he seemed to have spent all night thinking up, tucking them away somewhere, waiting until the next day and giving each an airing.

“San Ye, I heard if someone doesn't eat for three days and nights before they die, the body stays smelling like a rose no matter how long it sits.”

“When people die of old age, they definitely don't eat or drink for the last few days. So when I get a look at them, the bodies are sweet-smelling and squeaky clean.” In the middle of the sentence, it occurred to San Ye that the old man was already seventy-three, and he had to be careful what he said.

“I heard when you watch over someone on their deathbed, they spend the last night tossing and turning, because the soul leaves the body and explores every nook and cranny of the person's memory. Does it pick only the most important places to visit? Or does it have time to take a close look at everything?”

“*Erm*. . . who knows, but as long as the family remembers to leave the doors open. . .” San Ye answered without answering.

Funeral parlors had so many doors because, basically, the newly dead had to be treated like newborn babies, given food to eat and clothes to wear and a wide-open way out. San Ye was always talking about this topic with old men who would raise it in a roundabout way, staring straight into his eyes, deadly serious, as if he were an intermediary between this world and the next, knowing each side like the back of his hand. But San Ye didn't enjoy these talks with the old men.

He couldn't stand looking at their still-lively faces or their still-warm bodies. When he did, he would see the eyes sinking in the sockets, the lips shriveling to show the teeth, the beard and hair still growing, though the body had gone to pieces overnight.

Sensing San Ye's discomfort, Old Peng chuckled and changed the topic. "Little Brother, if you don't mind me asking, why don't you have a wife or kids?"

San Ye hesitated. What was he supposed to say? Oh, back when he was studying paper craft with the master, he'd taken a look around, but no woman had caught his eye. New brides died in childbirth, leaving their husbands bereft in the prime of life. They got drunk and fell into latrine pits, they choked on their birthday feasts, they burned to death in the lime pits of homes built days before . . . Grief and joy were intertwined, life and death were next-door neighbors, separated only by a few steps. As he learned of the world, his shock deepened, and his heart turned cold, then warm again, and he gradually came to an awakening: forget it, might as well be a bachelor, nothing lost, nothing gained. Might as well not have kids: no new life, no death. I'll just be alone.

"Look how I make a living. What woman would want me? I've got no choice but to be an old bachelor," San Ye replied. It was what he told everyone. How could he tell the truth? He didn't want to let people down, to seem he was blaming them for living their lives.

"So . . . you've never even liked a girl? Tell me the truth. Then I'll tell you the truth, about this girl I had the hots for way back when . . ." Old Peng seemed about to smile, but didn't. He was getting worked up.

"Leave me be. If you want to talk, I'll listen." He could see that even if he clammed up completely, as if clenching his butt to hold in a fart, Old Peng was determined to talk.

"Never mind, some other day." Seeming to regret having raised the subject, the old man slunk away. He went to work rummaging through planks, picking out the ones of similar length and thickness and arranging them in piles.

8.

SAN YE SHED A FEW TEARS that day with his back turned to the crowd—he would rather be called hard-hearted than show weakness. The woman who had died was fat, so fat her legs bowed out when she walked. Given her weight, it was no surprise when she died suddenly in her sleep.

The fat woman had been an excellent cook. No matter the size of the banquet, no one had ever complained that the dozens of dishes she turned out were salty or bland. It was no simple matter to fill so many tables, striking just the right balance between salt, meat, veggies, and water, so that the food was never tasteless or too salty. When there was a funeral in Dongba, the banquet was the number one thing. It had to be big, and things had to be done right. The occasion would only be a success if every friend, neighbor, and family member left flushed red from liquor. There would be twenty or thirty tables, and guests would seat themselves as they arrived. When a table was full, food would be sent out, followed by drinks. The guests would get rowdy when they had had their fill of liquor, and rowdy was the way a funeral banquet ought to be. The fat woman would bring along a few young female family members to wait tables. She ran a tight ship.

In the evening, the crowded dining hall would empty out, leaving only the monk chanting sutras amid the swirling smoke, casting a long shadow in the light of the altar lamp. The fat woman would put together a few decent-looking plates from the leftovers, then call for San Ye, the monk, and the kitchen help, and they would leisurely eat and drink. A little liquor always eased San Ye's fatigue—the fat woman would pour for him, and he would drink one cup, two cups, however many she poured. Sometimes she would forget to pour more, and he would call it a night.

The fat woman would set aside a little plate of every dish she cooked and place it on the altar table for the departed. Facing the oversized photo, she would urge, *It's piping hot, eat your fill.*

But now the fat woman was dead, too.

9.

THE NEXT DAY, San Ye went to work making paper figures for the fat woman's funeral, adding a refrigerator just for her. San Ye had never in his life laid hands on a refrigerator, and he was pretty sure the fat woman hadn't either. But he did know refrigerators were good. As he worked, he told Old Peng about the woman. Oh, I counted up her age and realized she was only sixty. You can go at any time, you know.

Old Peng was pounding in a tenon. It was a demanding job, and he was working slower than ever—recently, he had begun nailing the little planks together into a big bridge deck. It was wide, wide enough for two people to walk side by side. He said, if I'm going to build a

bridge, it's going to be broad and sturdy and good. San Ye couldn't help laughing to himself. It wasn't as if the bridge was going to be stormed by crowds. Who cared if it was sturdy and broad?

Banging and pounding filled the air, but with the work going at a snail's pace, they began chatting about Dongba's other old folks. One had passed at seventy-seven, another had hung on to eighty-one, while yet another had passed at just fifty. Their looks, their mannerisms, their pet phrases—San Ye recalled all of it clearly. He also recalled that in life they seemed to relish making the rounds of the funerals, paying closer attention as the years passed, seeming to know they would soon be the stars of the show. The looks on their faces made it plain: they knew how the game was played and they had made their peace. In fact, all they really wanted from their final moments was for their children and grandchildren to gather by the bedside, for their bodies to be intact and neatly clothed, to die peacefully in bed at home. They didn't want to be like city folk, sliced to pieces, stuffed full of tubes, dying in a hurry in some hospital—those poor city slickers! When you thought of it that way, the fat woman had been blessed. She had died a decent death.

They went on this way a while, when Old Peng suddenly seemed to think of something, and set down the hammer. He filled the pipe with tobacco, packing it in tight, but didn't light up. Another moment passed, and finally he opened his mouth and said, seeming to draw the words out from deep down inside, "San Ye, I have a favor to ask."

"Let's hear it."

"My kids have been away from Dongba a long time. They don't know how things work here. They don't know how I think. So I'm asking you for help. When my time comes, I want you to put a few things in the coffin with me. . ."

"Whatever you say, but it looks like you've got some fight left in you!"

"San Ye, this isn't about my health. We both know that, don't we?" Old Peng softly stroked his water pipe. The pipe was made of copper, marred by pink tarnish, the ringed decorations worn thin with age. "The first thing is this pipe. I've used it all my life, and I have to take it with me. The second is a pair of soft cloth shoes. Custom says I should be buried in high-heeled longevity shoes, and I have a pair, but I'm afraid I won't like wearing them. Third, without telling anyone, so people don't laugh, harvest my crops, whatever's growing at the time,

wheat ears, corn husks, cotton buds, soybeans . . . whatever it is, grab something vibrant and alive and toss it in with me—those are the things I can't stand to leave behind."

"Don't worry. It's done." What else could San Ye say? He was a reasonable person, and it was a reasonable request.

"Those were the first three things I thought of. . . if anything else comes up, I'll let you know." Suddenly, Old Peng looked lighter. Without a glance at San Ye, he squatted down, scooped up a handful of river water, and washed his hands. The spray sparkled in the light.

THAT EVENING, San Ye was getting ready for bed when he suddenly heard someone calling across the river in a low, subdued tone: "San Ye—" He recognized Old Peng's voice right away. San Ye heaved a sigh of relief. No one had died. All Dongba was safe and sound.

San Ye tossed on some clothes and went out. The moonlight was bright, but from across the river, he couldn't see the old man's face clearly. Old Peng's tone was urgent. "San Ye, sorry to bother you. This thought popped into my head, and I couldn't sleep—when the time comes, and we put those things in with me, should we put them in the way they are, or burn them first? I heard it's like burning paper money, the dead can only use them if they're burned to ashes..."

The people of Dongba took a tolerant, flexible attitude toward the supernatural, not quite believing, but not disbelieving either. They followed the prescribed rites to the letter, but didn't obsess over the outcome. They took the same attitude toward their daily prayers: if they worked, that was great, but if not, they kept their cool.

San Ye thought a moment, then said, "If you ask me, we should put the originals in with you; I'll make another set out of paper and burn it. That way, we can't go wrong."

"Oh yes, how could I have been so foolish? That's exactly what we'll do. So when the time comes, make me three things: a paper pipe, a pair of paper shoes, and some paper crops." Stroking the pile of planks beside him, Old Peng turned a bit bashful. "But that's not the only reason I came. The main thing was, I wanted to see our bridge . . ."

IO.

SUMMER CAME, and the crowd started pitching in here and there. Between their intermittent help and Old Peng's tireless efforts, the parts of the wooden bridge took shape—there were seven pairs of

Y-shaped piers nearly as tall as men, and twenty or thirty sturdy lengths of deck built of broad planks. But they weren't playing with building blocks here. How were they supposed to put the bridge in place with a rushing river beneath? And when they did, who was to say it wouldn't be washed away again?

The women and children ignorantly, haphazardly tossed out ideas. The men were farmers, and it was outside their expertise too. No one knew what to do. Old Peng dropped a few bricks into the river, gauged the size of the plumes of spray, and listened to the bricks hit bottom. He thought for a moment and had a flash of inspiration: we'll wait until winter, when the river dries up, then drive in the piers.

The crowd thought it over. It sounded good to them. Beaming, brimming with optimism, they looked out across the bare river. That was it exactly. The river ran high in the summer, with green leaves floating on top, and weeds and water snails on the bottom.

II.

WITHOUT WAITING FOR AUTUMN, Old Peng slathered the bridge piers in tung oil. It was dry out, and the oil cured quickly. Once in the morning and once again in the afternoon, he slowly rubbed down each pier. The fragrance of tung oil would fill the air, tickling people's noses, until their eyes stung and their heads felt heavy. Droplets of river water dripped down the piers, muffling the pungent stench.

One afternoon, Old Peng came to swab the logs for the second time. San Ye had just lain down amid the oil fumes for a nap beneath a shady tree.

"San Ye, I've got a story that will wake you up." The sight of the oiled piers gleaming in the sun had put Old Peng in a good mood. "The one I promised to tell you last time . . . about that girl I had a thing for . . ."

It had slipped San Ye's mind completely. "Okay, out with it."

"This was back before I was married . . ."

"Mmm-hmm." San Ye rubbed his eyes, still half-asleep.

"She lived across the river, on your side. There were two or three families there back then." Old Peng swept his gaze past San Ye, as if staring at something in the distance.

San Ye, growing suspicious, glanced behind him too. There was nothing there but the mountains.

"She was nineteen, it was summer, and when she went to wash

her clothes by the river, she would ladle water from a wooden bucket to wash her hair . . . I would watch from over here . . . her hair was so black, and so shiny.

“I would talk to her across the river. She would lower her head to listen, but never said a word.

“One time, the bucket slipped from her hand and floated to the middle of the river, and I dove in to fish it out. After that, she would finally speak to me . . .

“Once, I crossed the bridge and visited her home on the opposite shore. She had an older brother with a bum leg. Even as a boy, he hadn’t been able to stand. We talked for a minute or two. She just stood in the doorway, staring at me, and I stared back at her . . .

“Not long after, her brother took a wife and she took a husband, both from the same family. Her brother would never have been able to marry that woman if she hadn’t married the man.

“Two years later, with a matchmaker’s help, I found a different girl to marry. Since then, I’ve never been to your side of the river.

“I thought I’d forgotten all about it . . . but it’s strange, now that I’m old, I remember the one time I crossed the bridge to go to her house, clear as day . . .”

He kept listening, thinking the old man had something left to say, but he was done. What, was that all? San Ye closed his eyes and shook his head. “Some story. I’m sleepier than ever.”

Old Peng didn’t get mad. He lifted a hand and took a whiff of tung oil. “For the last couple days I’ve been oiling down my camphor casket, too. It’s so beautiful and shiny and black. It seems so sturdy, so solid . . . Well, see you later!”

San Ye watched as Old Peng receded into the distance with the little oil bucket in his hand, and realized for the first time that the old man’s back was bent like a camel’s. San Ye had seen plenty of old men, and he had noticed that once they began to hunch over, they grew old quickly—as if pulled in by the force of the earth, on a one-way journey down.

12.

SLOWLY, SUMMER TURNED TO FALL. A sheet of dry leaves, withered branches, and fallen berries settled over the little river. San Ye would pass through on his boat and occasionally fish out a few berries. If you rinsed and bit the berries, into which birds had pecked countless

tiny holes, the flavor that filled your mouth was sour and so sweet. He would stop his little black boat in the middle of the river and do circles, centering his full attention on the sweet flavor fading in his mouth—he liked to enjoy life's little gifts in his own slow, small way, knowing life did not belong to him, but to heaven, that any day could be the last, so he had to make the best of the time he had. . . . He sometimes felt the urge to share this realization with others, but sensed it wouldn't be easy to explain, that it would just make things awkward.

Though he said nothing, between summer and fall, he went out many times: an old herdsman was found dead in a cowshed. Saddled with debt he couldn't settle, the Zhang family's eldest son quietly committed suicide. In the scorching heat of late summer, the aged mother of the village tailor, Master Song, shrieked and dropped dead from the heat.

Still the river remained full. It didn't wither at all.

There was nothing for Old Peng to do, but still he sat there each day across the river with his water pipe. Some question would pop into his head, and with feigned nonchalance he would steer the conversation toward it. First it was the stone material for the grave marker, then it was how much the band charged. Then he hemmed and hawed over whether a portrait or a photograph was better: San Ye, I can't understand it, photos are supposed to be real, but no matter whose photo it is, the more I squint at it, the less it seems to look like them. Paintings are completely phony, but the more I look at them, the realer they seem. . . .

One day, this thought suddenly occurred to him: "That Buddhist monk of yours, is his son going to take over one day?"

He meant the lay monk who worked funerals with San Ye. In Dongba, being a lay monk was just another way to make a living. He was married, he had kids, and he ate meat and drank like everyone else. Only when the need arose did he pull on a silk robe and beat a wood block to placate the souls of the dead. As long as he looked the part, chanting sweetly, no one complained. People flocked to him, excited to hear the master monk's chanting, standing to the side, saying nothing, unselfconsciously spilling tears, though they couldn't have said why they were crying.

"Yeah. Sometimes he tags along with the old monk; other times he takes charge of the ceremony, a cigarette tucked behind his ear, every bit the expert."

This vexed Old Peng. “But I only like the old monk’s chanting. He has a pleasant voice. He draws the notes out nice and long. So when the time comes, what will we do? I’ve got no use for the boy . . .”

San Ye had known immediately what the old man meant, he simply hadn’t wanted to say it out loud. “Don’t worry. I know some other old monks.”

The old man rose abruptly, his expression turning agitated, and said, “San Ye, you’re too good to me . . . I’m so ashamed I could die! Truth is . . . I have selfish reasons for fixing the bridge . . .”

The old man tottered, and San Ye extended a hand to steady him, but couldn’t reach, not with the river between them. “What are you talking about? Big Brother, look at you out here every day banging and pounding away, you call that selfish?”

“San Ye, you see, I’ve been here in Dongba all my life, all seventy-three years, and I’ve never gone anywhere, I’ve never set foot outside the village, all I’ve ever done is work the fields. I can’t stand to leave this place behind, I know every nook and cranny, the gullies and the streams and the trees, I hate that I can’t take it all with me when I go . . . I always think, that final night when my soul flies away, I have to finally have a look around. The other bank especially, I’ve only been there once, I’ve got my heart set to see it again . . . so I’m doing this for my own sake, because on that final night, without a bridge, in the blackness, I won’t be able to cross over . . .” Unable to keep from crying, the old man cupped his hands to catch the tears. The backs of his hands were covered with soybean-sized yellow spots. He was so old.

San Ye looked to the opposite bank, seeing to his surprise that at some point the old man had put the bridge together, arranging the planks and piers in neat rows, so that he turned his head and there it was: a wooden bridge, lying like a living thing in the autumn wind.

13.

THE OLD MAN didn’t make it until the river dried up in winter.

He went to scoop rice from the urn—in Dongba, there was a type of rice urn called a dayangtuan, with a skinny neck and a bulging belly, standing about waist-high—but there was barely any rice left, and on top of that his back was bent, so he stood on a small stool and stuck his head in, but the stool slipped under his feet, and he fell in headfirst.

San Ye hadn’t seen him for several days, so he rowed across the river

to have a look, but it was too late. By the looks of it, the old man had been dead for three days.

I 4.

IN THE EARLY MORNING MIST, San Ye went to the fields and cut down two withered winter squashes. They were red and round, springy tendrils still dripping with dew. When San Ye slipped the squashes in beside him, the old man looked sedate and serene. It worked. San Ye had another funeral that day, so he simply repeated the same set of steps again. The neighbor women gathered round, and of course they gabbed about the bridge. It was as if it had been orphaned. No one seemed to think much of its prospects.

In the evening, when most of the crowd had dispersed, San Ye returned home as always to prepare paper figures for Old Peng. The old man's daughter and two sons and a bunch of kids sat woodenly and wearily beneath the lamp, keeping the night watch. San Ye walked far into the distance, then turned abruptly and said, "Remember, tonight, whatever you do, don't shut any doors." The children had no idea what he meant, but responded in surprise that they wouldn't.

San Ye went to the river and ran his eyes across the broad, sturdy, beautiful bridge. Shining with an oily yellow gleam in the moonlight, it seemed to have come alive.

He sat on the bank for a long while, then got in his boat and rowed very, very slowly—the boat felt a bit heavier than normal, but still floated with extraordinary ease—to his side of the river, where he sat back down and stared at the vague yet forbidding mountain ridge, as if waiting for someone. He waited a while, then rowed slowly back to the other side.

He spent the whole night rowing back and forth.

The river gleamed black in the dark, so clear and pure it seemed to have no bottom.