BRUSH TALKS

Vol. 6 No. 2 Summer/Fall 2021

A Journal of China

Brush Talks publishes compelling nonfiction, along with photographs and occasional poetry, about China. We publish two issues per year and accept unsolicited submissions on a rolling basis. For more information, please visit brushtalks.com.

Cover image: Woodcut by Li Qun (1912–2012)
China National Museum of Arts Collection

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Because I had only my writing brush and ink slab
to converse with, I call it Brush Talks.

Shen Kuo 沈括

(1031–1095)

Contents

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Editor's Note

Welcome to our second issue of volume six of *Brush Talks*, covering late 2021. In this issue, we bid a fond *zai jian* to Jacob Rawson, who has been our guide to China's nine sacred mountains over the past several years. He concludes his travels in this issue with a trip to Mount Emei (峨眉山) in Sichuan Province. I know I speak for many of our readers when I say I will miss these vicarious visits full of both adventure and reflection. His essays have given us a glimpse of Chinese society at a particular point in time as well as a sense of the timelessness of ancient mountains, temples, and philosophies. We wish him well on his future travels, literal and figurative.

This issue also includes a memoir by Zheng Huina (郑惠娜) based on an episode from her childhood that affects her to this day. It's a study of the bond between humans and animals as well as the one between mothers and daughters, presented with tenderness and compassion. For our portfolio of photographs, we dip into the archives again to sample the work of Hedda Morrison, whose portraits of young girls relate to the past but speak, in a sense, to the present. Our poems come from Kathleen Gregg and David Allen Sullivan, both of whom turn a particular vignette into verse based on their respective visits to China. Our contributors make *Brush Talk*s what it is, and once again we are very grateful for the fine work each has shared with our readers.

Just before we went to press, the media reported the death of sinologist Jonathan Spence, professor emeritus at Yale University. It's always a great loss to be deprived of someone able to provide insight into China for Western audiences, especially one as eloquent as Spence. As Acting Chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities Adam Wolfson said in a statement, "He taught us not only about a faraway country, a great feat in its own right, but also how we as Westerners have perceived and sometimes misunderstood China." He will be sorely missed.

Brian Kuhl

Contributors

Kathleen Gregg is the author of *Underground River of Want* (Finishing Line Press, 2021), her first poetry collection. Her next collection of poems will be about China, which she has visited twice in the last ten years. Her son and his Chinese wife reside in Nansha, China. She lives just outside Lexington, Kentucky, where she is active in the Kentucky State Poetry Society, currently serving as treasurer. Her poems have appeared in the *Louisville Review*, *Fly on the Wall Press*, and *Gyroscope Review*, among others.

Hedda Morrison (1908–1991) was a photographer who lived in China from 1933 to 1946. More about her life can be found on page 43.

Jacob Rawson is coauthor of the book *Invisible China: A Journey Through Ethnic Borderlands*. After completing a master's degree in Chinese Linguistics at the University of Washington, he set out to climb the nine sacred peaks of China in 2010. His writings on South Korea have appeared in *Fulbright Korea Infusion*. He lives in Washington State with his wife and daughter.

David Allen Sullivan is the poet laureate of Santa Cruz, California. His poem in this issue was inspired by an incident that took place during the year he spent as a Fulbright scholar in Xi'an. His books include *Black Ice* (Turning Point Books, 2015), *Take Wing* (Casey Shay Press, 2016; winner of the Mary Ballard Chapbook poetry prize), and *Black Butterflies Over Baghdad* (Word Works Books, 2021), among others. He teaches at Cabrillo College, where he edits the *Porter Gulch Review* with his students, and lives in Santa Cruz with his family. His website is https://dasulliv1.wixsite.com/website-1.

Zheng Huina (郑惠娜) holds a B.A. in English from Guangdong University of Foreign Studies and completed the Emory University Creative Writing Certificate in November 2021. She is currently pursuing an M.A. in English online at Arizona State University. She lives in Guangzhou with her husband and daughter, and works for an education agency in Shanghai.

EMEI SHAN BY GUAN SHANYUE (1912–2000)

UNESCO WORKS OF ART COLLECTION

Everything and Nothing

by Jacob Rawson

The moon rises over Emei, illuminating the indigo sea.
It accompanies men for ten thousand li.

—Li Bo (8th century)

The good travelers rarely know where they are going. The best travelers rarely know *that* they are going; their skill is honed to such a fine degree that movement itself becomes a function of the subconscious. I know exactly where I am heading on this sultry morning, which puts me somewhere between a weekend wanderer and a wide-eyed tourist.

It is these grand delusions that occupy my tea-drunk mind as I board a sleeper car in the Shanxi provincial capital of Taiyuan on the day of the Dragon Boat Festival. The ancient holiday commemorates the death of Qu Yuan, a celebrated poet and politician who lived during the third and fourth centuries BCE. The holiday had been officially reinstated by the Communist government in 2008, and now much of the country takes three days off. The train is packed with college students returning to school after passing the holiday at home.

Amid the commotion, a young policeman struts into the sleeper car. "Let's go! National ID cards out for inspection." His bulging gut stretches out the button holes of a steam-pressed but untucked uniform. The glazed expression on his face does not change as he grabs ID cards out of the hands of puzzled passengers and scans them into a small plastic device. Those asleep in the upper bunks are pulled out by the feet and sent to rummage through luggage. Those who sorrowfully admit that they had left their ID cards at home are obliged to write their citizen identification numbers on a pad of paper and listen to a thirty-second lecture on

the importance of always carrying one's national ID card, no matter the distance or purpose of travel.

The policeman glances up toward me and offers the stunned grimace of someone who has just happened upon a (rather unattractive) primate. Then straightening up and regaining his composure, he seems to decide that the communication barrier will not be worth the trouble, and walks past without a word.

We inch across the Yellow River on a high rail trestle, the water below us beige and soupy with loess sediments. Passengers trickle out of their bunks to press their faces against the window for a better view of China's second longest waterway while chatting in excited whispers.

"The Yellow River is actually yellow!" exclaims someone on his first trip south.

"Water's low today," affirms a more experienced traveler, lifting her head only slightly from the folds of a newspaper. As the train rumbles on to the river's south bank, the sun presses flat against the low wide basin shining silver on spaced terraces of nascent corn stalks that trace the gentle contours of the river channel.

A group of college students from both northern and southern provinces sit around the bottom bunk as a makeshift couch and tease each other about their regional pronunciations of the phrase "What's that?" When I appear in the aisle to fill my instant noodle bowl with boiled water, the linguistic focus turns to English. A young woman from Sichuan wearing jogging shorts and a T-shirt that reads "Cute Girl" admits that she detests watching American TV shows in English (because she can make no sense of them) and equally detests watching them dubbed into Chinese (because they lose the original flavor), concluding that watching in English with Chinese subtitles is superior.

Another student, a young man from Shanxi Province, waits to add his piece. "My friends think it's strange, but I watch *Prison Break* only to improve my English." He pauses. "It's no use, though. I can only pick out a few words."

At the next station a swarm of passengers streams out of the packed cars and onto the platform to buy sacks of honey peaches, red plums, sunflower seeds, and chicken feet from a fleet of waiting vendor carts. I settle for a bag of apricots,

a chicken drumstick, two bottles of Laoquan Beer, and a lemon popsicle the vendor calls a "snow cake" in Chinese as she hands it to me through the open train window.

Inside the train car the air is stale and hot, and men begin to take off their shirts and pace the aisles topless while women cool themselves with paper fans in one hand while scrolling through romance novels on their cell phones with the other. Grasping the bag of loot in my teeth like an antsy rodent, I hoist myself up into the top bunk, stretching my feet over the top of the aisleway and resting them on the luggage rack. I survey the commotion below from my elevated perch as I tuck into my feast. The apricots are sour and the drumstick is sweet, but the beer is good and cold.

A student in the top bunk across from me peers down asking a passing vendor to hand a dropped pen up to her, then seeing his rolling cart full of hot stir-fried meals, begins bargaining for a discount price. Her friend in the middle bunk chastises this behavior. "Stupid! You can either ask for help or you can haggle. You can't do both!" They burst into giggles and send the vendor away smiling.

I disembark at the river city of Chongqing to transfer to another train, and my urban perambulations carry me to the central business district where upscale department stores compete for attention with glitzy discotheques and posh designer boutiques. In a quintessential reminder of the times, the iconic central clock tower dubbed People's Liberation Monument, which commemorates the Communist Party's military victories and push for socialism, is now covered in advertisements for gold-plated Rolex watches.

On the train out of the city there are more college students from southern Sichuan Province, and soon enough I find myself in a spirited debate with a young graduate student about traffic woes in Beijing, where I spent my junior year of college. She contends that you can get used to the congestion, and I say the gridlock is always a headache. A young man dressed smartly in a collared white shirt, designer blue jeans, and leather Converse shoes introduces himself as a member of the Yi ethnic minority group from rural south Sichuan Province. He has overheard my enthused convictions about urban congestion and jumps in.

"You should come to my village and ride a donkey cart through the mountains. No traffic jams!"

The train breaks down and stops for two hours, and when the car attendant finally saunters through he is mobbed by angry and restless passengers. They eventually turn their frustrations into a playful banter, and do their best to come up with a fitting compensation for the inconvenience.

"Give us each a free bowl of noodles!"

"And rice," adds another.

"A bowl of noodles for each hour wasted!" They roar with laughter.

I pull out a paperback novel to pass the time and the students around me begin testing themselves on the English words, occasionally looking up to me for help.

"What's a *matt-ress*?" the Yi man says. "I don't know why we have to study English. We study for so long, but it's no use to us. Whatever job I end up finding in Sichuan, I sure won't need to speak English." I find it tough to argue with his point.

The man begins telling the group about the Black Yi, a class of aristocrats within the Yi caste system who owned slaves until the Communist takeover in 1949. He continues on about the festivals in his village, with horse racing and bull fighting. The group oohs in envy. He continues. "If you show up at an Yi house, a pig will be immediately slaughtered and a feast prepared in your honor." This solicits further oohs and aahs. "The men will dine together, then the women will come out and eat after the men finish. This is our custom."

The oohs suddenly turn to shocked gasps, and the graduate student exclaims, "That's gender discrimination!" The women continue their protests while the man smiles, relishing the controversy.

The Yi man tells us he is engaged to a woman of the majority Han ethnic group. I ask whether his future children will be identified as Han or Yi, and he says he will choose Yi identity for the advantages minority ethnic groups are afforded on the college entrance exam as well as for their exemption from the one-child policy.

At my request, he plays a synthesized recording of an Yi folk song on his cell phone, then tells me he likes "Take Me Home, Country Roads," one of the few American folk songs that has found popularity in China. The students ask me what the song means, and I spend the next while doing my best to put John Denver's lyrics into clumsy Chinese. I pause at the phrase "Misty taste of moonshine," and grin as I draw a comparison between the illicit American intoxicant and *baijiu*, an equally potent grain liquor with which the students are all too familiar.

They ask me what kind of Chinese music I like, and I sing a few lines of Cui Jian's "Nothing to My Name," the rock anthem of the 1989 student-led protests in Tiananmen Square. The conversation drifts to a legendary pepper in India so spicy that it can be used as a biological weapon, and the verdant Sichuan treescape fades to a pale dusk.

A man wearing a blue railroad uniform and name tag enters the car and begins reciting a prepared monologue to a disinterested audience of sleepy travelers. "Esteemed passengers, allow me to borrow five minutes of your time. I represent the railroad in telling you that smoking is a detriment to your health." He rattles off a catalog of tobacco-related ailments, then displays a printed poster showing four different photos of lungs, each more grotesque than the last.

"And so we offer this fine product." He holds up a blue box wrapped in plastic. "These filters can fit onto the ends of cigarettes before smoking. They remove eighty percent of the addictive toxins."

The few passengers who had been listening are now looking out the train windows. "It's a hot item in Hong Kong," he offers, setting a box on each compartment's table to be examined.

The students sitting around me had been bored from the beginning of the speech, and one pulls out an IBM ThinkPad to play a movie. We squeeze together around the small table to watch an American summer camp film. Thinking back on my months of climbing sacred mountains and patronizing rural inns with modest facilities, I begin to envy the accommodations of the supposedly rundown cabin in the film that the trouble-making campers are sent to as punishment.

* * * *

THE TRAIN ARRIVES LATE and I find a guesthouse at the base of Mount Emei next to a lot busy with workers erecting a steel flooring frame from hardwood scaffolds. The owner informs me that his brother is responsible for the construction, and that his kinsman plans to open a competing hostel when the building is complete. I wonder aloud if the competition will put a strain on family relations.

"The family relations are fine. It's the business relations that will be bitter."

As I complete the check-in process, a young girl hears me speaking Chinese and exclaims to her mother, "I'm going to test him!" She runs up to me in a fit of giggles. "Why do different people have different colored eyes?" I give up, not knowing whether to expect a punchline or a riddle. "Because of *Da-er-wen*!" She says excitedly, proud that she had stumped me. And just as I am about to promise to review my Darwinian theory, she comes at me with another. "Are great white sharks warm blooded or cold blooded?" I guess cold blooded, confident this time. "Wrong! They're warm blooded!"

As she skips away, her younger brother comes to take his turn. "Do you like *bi-sa*?" I do like pizza. "Do you like computer games?" I do like computer games. "Aww!" He happily skips away after his sister.

In the lobby area of the guesthouse, two affable travelers from Israel tell me they are looking for a co-conspirator to join their requisite Friday kiddush prayer, and wave me over. The men are in their late twenties, and in stammering out the first English I have spoken in many weeks, I learn that they are on a self-discovery mission that has taken them far and wide across the Eurasian supercontinent for the better part of three months. The ritual, they tell me, calls for a sacred bread challah with grape wine and an engraved silver kiddush goblet. Then laughing, they admit that they will use whatever they can find in their local environs. "The scripture does allow for some improvisation."

To demonstrate, one of the men disappears into a neighboring grocer's shop and emerges a moment later with a grand triumphant grin on his face and a bottle of Great Wall brand red wine, a factory-sealed plastic-encased sweet bun, and

a small ceramic tea cup in his outstretched hands. He pours the wine jovially, recites a Hebrew prayer, and we pass around the kiddush tea cup as the men do their best to give me the gist of the meaning of the lines they have recited from the book of Genesis, before giving up and regaling me with the follies of their journey. I would later reflect on this moment of pure impromptu delight; sharing an unexpected kiddush with two lovely strangers in the foothills of a sacred Buddhist mountain far away from home. This type of chance encounter is not merely an ancillary product of travel. It is indeed the very reason I leave home.

Later in the balmy evening I stroll under the glow of streetlights around quiet boulevards and through a small branch campus of Southwest Traffic University. I buy a chicken sandwich at a small family shop run by migrants from Fujian Province, a region home to the Min dialects of Chinese. The family's three-year-old daughter had been drawing a picture of an elephant, but upon my arrival she calls for my attention with a wave and a shriek to show off her writing skills with the Chinese characters for "big" and then "small," each stroke careful and deliberate. Her proud mother beams, then turns back to me.

"Your Mandarin is more standard than ours," she says with a nervous smile that suggests she wishes she were joking. "We can't do anything about this thick accent."

I find a food stand set up in the street outside, and join a raucous group of young workmen using overturned buckets for stools at a pop-up table that has been erected in the first lane of traffic amid clusters of empty beer bottles. As I dig into a bowl of fish soup that has a creamy and deliciously fragrant broth, the ringleader at the end of the table introduces me to the diverse regional origins of our tablemates.

"Sichuan, Yunnan, Anhui, Guangzhou, and . . . *A-me-ri-ca*." He pronounces the last one in slurred English to the delight of his buddies, then raises his beer glass. "At this table, we are all brothers!" His toast becomes the first of many, and each time I take a sip my glass is topped off before I can set it back down.

Between toasts, the man from Anhui Province takes my presence as a challenge to make a show of his patriotism. "Someday China will be stronger

than the United States. I long for that day." He looks off wistfully, and each time there is a lull in the conversation he begins lecturing me on a different point of diplomatic tension. "Obama has no business inviting the Dalai Lama to visit. That is our own internal affair!"

Eventually, his friends scold him for corrupting the hallowed fraternal drinking rites with the pettiness of international relations, and they pour him more beer as a peace offering. Each successive glass reminds me that I still have a mountain to climb, and I finally stumble back to the guesthouse where I become the main course for half a dozen wily mosquitoes.

* * * *

IN THE EARLY MORNING the guesthouse attendant hands me a bamboo walking stick. "You'll want this for the climb," she says in a tone that suggests I will need it for more than walking. At the diner next door I order a bowl of wonton soup, rice noodles, and dumplings. The proprietor laughs at me and the table full of food.

"You'll be eating all that alone?"

"Need energy for mountain," I grunt in monosyllabic Chinese, still groggy from the hangover and scratching mosquito bites.

From the paved streets I begin climbing up a marked trail on stone steps, passing verdant gorges of bamboo and camellia, and strolling under wood-framed monasteries with sprawling verandas that stick out over the steep slopes on hardwood log stilts. The sticky subtropical humidity envelopes my person, and before long I am dripping with perspiration. This is the proper Sichuan steam bath others had warned me about. Indeed, the night before I had hand washed and hung to dry a pair of socks, and by the morning they had become even more damp. There is no dry in Sichuan, I am learning; There are only varying degrees of wet.

Climbing further up a ravine of pantropical wood crops and sauntering past another temple courtyard and its fuming incense burner, I begin to perceive the unique spirit of the mountain settling down around me. This is my final ascent of

the four most revered mountains of Chinese Buddhism, and when including the additional Daoist circuit of five, it marks my last unchecked summit of the nine sacred mountains of China.

Mount Emei's relative proximity to India helped it become one of the earliest centers of Chinese Buddhism, and saw China's oldest Buddhist temple built on its summit during the first century of the Common Era. The two Chinese characters that form the name *E-mei* mean "moth" and "brow" respectively. One common theory as to the name's origin claims that the mountain's summitline resembles the feathery feelers on a moth's forehead. Another speculates that the name was long ago derived from the first two syllables of a common Buddhist prayer that is now pronounced *A-mi-tuo-fo* in modern Mandarin.

Linguistic curiosities aside, however, Emei presents a formidable challenge for any would-be summiters. While climbing the first eight sacred mountains proved strenuous at times, I could at least complete each one in a single day. Here at Mount Emei, I will need to spend two full days marching up a glute-busting nine thousand vertical feet to my highest summit yet.

I buy a large tomato from a woman selling her garden crops out of a woven basket. As I bite into it while consulting a trail map, a monk wearing an amber-colored button-up robe with white leg gaiters emerges from a wooden temple gate and begins to guess at my age. He first has me pegged at forty, then after I reveal that I am his coeval at a mere (and what at this point I can only surmise must be a regally mature) twenty-seven, he calls back to his cohorts. "We're both Year of the Dog!"

The man tells me he has traveled all the way from his home monastery in Hubei Province, and has come here to continue his spiritual cultivation, but also to learn something of the world. "All of you foreigners speak Chinese nowadays," he remarks, and tells me the story of his friend the Dutchman who left a life of salaries and neckties to join the ranks of the Shaolin monks.

I pass through the dazzling Twin Bridges at Clear Sound Pavilion, where two arched stone bridges cross a pair of split igneous ravines so narrow and deep that it appears one could nearly leap from one side to the other of each crevice,

but would certainly not survive a fall into the roaring waterfalls and shallow pools below. Inside the namesake pavilion structure, an enterprising old man has collected a bundle of bamboo walking sticks that were discarded by hikers on the way down and has accompanied them with a sign that reads ANTI-MONKEY SAFETY STICKS – ONE YUAN EACH in handwritten Chinese characters. I look at my own walking stick and wonder at the foreshadowing of his sign.

Further on, as I round a bend in the trail, I notice that a pudgy boy has been trailing me, and is just now beginning to match my stride. "I've been trying to catch you for half an hour." He huffs as he does his best to slow his breath. The boy introduces himself as Frank, the name given to him in an English class, and a sixth grader from a nearby city. He speaks a clear newscaster Mandarin that is uncommon in Sichuan but is becoming more prevalent among children who learn the standardized pronunciation in their school classrooms while still speaking the local dialect at home. This is why I often find it is easiest to communicate with grade schoolers in dialect-rich locales, and I have sometimes sought out the help of willing youngsters to interpret the local dialect for me when the provincial brand of speech presents too much of a barrier.

Frank's short bespectacled friend emerges from behind him and immediately impresses upon me his geographic knowledge, such that I have rarely encountered in China. "From Seattle, huh? That's in the northwest corner of the United States." The miniature geographer then realizes that his English name Jake is the same as mine, and calls back to brag about this revelation to the rest of the group, half a dozen more sixth graders who had until now been too shy to come forward.

Then come the questions. Do we Americans really eat fruit jam for breakfast and drive sports cars? Is it true that we speak English *all the time* and only wear Nike brand T-shirts? As we march up the stone steps, Frank and Jake decide that this being Sichuan, I ought to know how to speak some Sichuanese, and they take it upon themselves to educate me. Frank patiently teaches me to draw out and raise the vowels of the phrase "egg fried rice," which has become the archetypal Chengdu stand-in not unlike the Bostonian "park the car in Harvard Yard."

Once we have established that the country I most want to visit next is Australia, and the country Frank most wants to visit is Outer Space, he begins grilling me on my favorite fighter planes. His is the Russian MiG. Mine is . . . and I stall, not knowing the names of any fighter jets, until revealing that I have piloted a plane before (while leaving out the less important detail that it was merely a one-time half-hour flying lesson in a two-seat Cessna, and that during the landing sequence I had become such a quivering wreck that the instructor politely but emphatically ordered me to give up the control stick). This earns me a muffled gasp from the group, and sends the boys galloping off to regale their parents.

I had been curious about a spot on the trail map labeled "Monkey Zone," but once my curiosity is sated and I finally see the size of the Tibetan macaques, I immediately wish I had picked up a longer walking stick, and perhaps that I had stayed at Mount Song long enough to learn Kung Fu. The sprawling zone is set in a broad gorge with a network of raised boardwalks, rope bridges, and covered pavilions that spreads through a lush grove of magnolia and ring-cupped oak. A sign warns that pregnant women and people with heart conditions should not enter, and another lists a set of guidelines for encounters with the monkeys.

RULE 1 - DO NOT SCREAM.
RULE 2 - DO NOT RUN.

This already seems to be a steep order, as the first two rules are, I would imagine, my only two instinctive reactions to having a monkey jump on me.

In the extensive folklore of Mount Emei, there is one story that stands out as having more recent origin than others. Many in southwest China have heard of an episode from the late 1990s in which a monkey on this mountain pushed a girl over a cliff ledge to her death. The incident seems to have been scrubbed from official news sources, but some still recall from reporting at the time that a park ranger shot the offending monkey in front of its cohorts in a grim public execution. Many have remarked that this incident constituted a bastardization of

the common Chinese idiom "killing the chicken to scare the monkey" into the perversely literal "killing the monkey to scare the monkeys."

It would seem an odd problem that these wild monkeys should have frequent and dangerous encounters with hikers, but I quickly see that this is an issue created solely by the bafflingly reckless park management. At the entrance to the Monkey Zone vendors sell packets of food, and I witness many hikers sprinkle the pellets onto their shoulders and into their hair in order to entice the waiting monkeys to join them for an interspecies photo op. The animals come to rely on this food source to such an extent that once a few people pass by without pellets on their heads, the monkeys can become impatient and climb on to rummage through pockets and backpacks, plunder cameras and cellphones, and eventually bite in frustration.

On the walkway below me two large macaques jump onto a young woman, and as she waves her arms and breaks rules one and two they sink their teeth into her flesh, leaving crimson streaks running down her arm. I creep along the boardwalk with my bamboo staff cocked and ready in the most threatening posture I can muster, which must look to the monkeys a bit like I am preparing to sweep a sidewalk or dust off an old wardrobe. The animals perch on top of the wooden pavilions and peer down as I pass underneath, and I struggle to remember how long it has been since my last rabies shot.

I make my escape across the rope bridge and beyond the ravine a bit unnerved but somehow still unbitten. On a stone bridge overlooking a glassily lucid creek, a mounted speaker plays the melody of Simon & Garfunkel's "The Sound of Silence" performed on a bamboo flute. I stop to eat a bag of steamed buns and hard-boiled eggs, and use my walking stick to fend off a stray magpie looking for an easy meal. The diverse functionality of a simple bamboo pole continues to impress me, and as I chew I begin to wonder why I do not carry such a tool with me every day.

At a bend in the cliffside trail I spot a rack of baskets each containing a different dried mountain herb or fungus and each accompanied by a small sign listing its purported medical benefits. The display sits next to a small building

with a tiled roof and white painted siding and a sign that gives its name in English as "Hard Wok Cafe." In the open-air dining space the soft-spoken owner wears a Mickey Mouse print apron and gives me her name in English as Betty.

She tells me that she speaks no English herself, but that the restaurant has maintained a steady stream of foreign customers since the mid-1980s, when foreign travelers helped her choose the name and taught her how to cook crepes. The interior walls are covered in handwritten comments left by her patrons, and I find proclamations of "Best pancakes in China" recorded in four different languages.

Betty goes about her chores as we make idle conversation. "It used to be only foreigners who came here. But now I get some Chinese hikers too."

I take the opportunity to rest my weary quadriceps and munch through a plate of banana honey pancakes while watching the wall of jungle shrubbery on the far side of the ravine disappear behind the shifting layers of mist.

In the early evening hours the cloud cover splits apart and I catch a glimpse of an azure expanse as listing sun rays glimmer on the waxy fronds of subtropical herbage. In the dappled shade of a camphor tree, a workman rests his load of two woven baskets balanced on each end of a bamboo pole. I continue up the stone steps, and on a cliffside platform a wrinkled old man wearing the blue hat and work shirt of the proletariat class from a bygone era smokes unwrapped tobacco out of a homemade bamboo pipe. When I lean in for a better look he proudly displays his contraption and gives me a joyful toothless grin.

There is a dark opening in the mountainside here, with three characters above that read "Nine Elders Cave." This spot is the subject of a grainy music video that has haunted the local restaurants and karaoke parlors. In the video, a young woman dances through rainbow-lighted caverns of dramatic stalactite formations. Each time the camera cuts to a new angle she seems to be wearing a different plasticky evening gown befitting a cartoon princess or a maid of honor or just about anyone not engaged in the act of speleology. As a synthesized bass line intensifies, she croons her fervent refrain.

Ah ah ah ah,
Ah ah ah ah.
Nine Elders Cave where the mists bend around,
You truly are a lovely maze.
A lo–vely maze.

I peer into the cave mouth where stone tile steps descend into a dark hollow void. I hear chatting behind me, and turn to see a small group of men and women in their sixties wearing matching yellow vests stenciled with red characters that read "Huayang Rider's Club." They make no hesitation, hurrying into the cave armed with flashlights and headlamps. One of the women checks on the group members at the entrance and waves for me to follow.

"Let's go, comrades. Don't dawdle!"

The narrow passageway affords ample headroom, and we spelunk our way downward for what in my deluded subterranean perception feels like miles but it is likely just a few hundred paces. Once we have traveled far enough into the bowels of the mountain that I begin to wonder if my fellow cavers are carrying extra batteries for their headlamps, the walkway opens to a large lighted cavern furnished with padded prayer mats, an incense burner, and an altar to the bodhisattva Samantabhadra, the patron protector of Mount Emei.

"It's a good thing no one has lit any incense here. They would have smoked us clear out!" The woman who had waved me into the entrance asserts, and a communal laugh reverbs through the chamber.

In Sichuanese-accented Mandarin, the group tells me they rode bicycles the one hundred thirty miles from the provincial capital of Chengdu in two days, then left their bikes at a temple at the base of the mountain and hiked up. In Sichuanese, words beginning with "n" turn to "l", as if an entire population has been afflicted with an eternal head cold. Elderly speakers of the dialect enunciate with a tender rolling cadence, and I delight in the dulcet tones of my companions' chatter echoing through the cavern.

I try following a dark passageway that extends from behind the altar display, but my progress is soon stopped by a welded steel gate secured with a large padlock. It is probably for the best that my explorations will end here. Of the many legends and rumors surrounding this cave system, most tales end with those who venture too far in never again seeing the light of day. The stories speak of a labyrinth of twisty little passages all alike, and a series of fabled holes so deep and with sides so slick that their bottoms have become littered with skeletons.

Emerging from the cave and into the gentle lull of twilight, I soon find dormitory accommodations nearby at Immortal Peak Temple, which offers simple common sleeping rooms above the main worship hall. When I check in, the temple caretaker takes one look up and dutifully informs me that by orders of the local police bureau I will not be permitted to stay in the main dorm room with the Chinese guests. The xenophobic segregation protocol puts me alone in a drafty unfinished attic space where the rafters tilt down over my bedding. To the spotty rhythm of monks' footsteps on the wood flooring below, I slip off into a dreamless slumber.

* * * *

WHEN I RISE, the clanking of cooking pots echoes from the dining hall, and beyond the temple enclosure the shrubby granite slopes are slathered in the tender scent of morning. Sleepy throngs emerge from the dormitories and monks' residences and gather in the temple's stone-paved courtyard to make preparations for the day's climb.

As I sit on a stone railing aggressively kneading my tightened calf muscles, a Buddhist nun from Fujian Province delights in practicing her two phrases of English with me. Once we have established four times that she is "Doing well, thank you," she hands me a yellow pear for my troubles before trotting down the mountain and bidding a throaty farewell with her final phrase of English as the muffled sound of footsteps traces her descent.

A group of ten college students from the local branch campus has been milling about nearby. They soon inform me that they have come to a decision by committee (a committee of which I am not a member) that I will be the one to protect them from the monkeys during today's climb. They began their hike the day before in smaller groups of friends, but had joined forces after experiencing the existential horrors of the Monkey Zone. The idea, as they pitch it to me, is to beat the monkeys with sheer numbers, and I am obliged to add my bamboo staff–wielding skills to their already formidable infantry unit.

As we rise in the thin alpine air, the path winds around lush valleys and through narrow gorges shrouded in mist. We parade along single file, following the twisty contours of the narrow trail. Few hikers seem to have reached this portion of the ascent, and the uncanny solitude of the nearly deserted mountainside gives a sense of Tolkienesque grand adventure as we clamber up the challenging route.

Along portions of the trail with a steep drop-off there are lengths of molded stucco safety rail, and the students comment that the structure is so meticulously constructed at waist height that it will surely give the monkeys an ideal platform from which to launch their ambush. For the moment we do not encounter any simian troops, but I note the little piles of black droppings dotting the path, some stamped flat with the tread of hiking boots.

Dense foliage cinches around crooked crevices like tattered green drapes. Each half hour or so we pass hikers heading down and our parties exchange trail reports. "No monkeys up ahead? That's a relief. No monkeys down below either." The students stop at a concession stand and pass around packets of mutton jerky and salted biscuits. In light of their American companion, their discussion turns to cowboys, and they ask if I know how to lasso a bull.

Each time we arrive at the bottom of a particularly steep section of stone stairs, the students murmur what has become a common English utterance used in the colloquial Mandarin conversation of young people. "Oh my god!"

We arrive at the base of the temple complex known as Elephant Washing Pool. The bodhisattva Samantabhadra is often depicted riding a white elephant, and this temple is named for the artificially constructed pool of water built to

commemorate a legend which says he once bathed his animal in a natural pond nearby.

The temple is also the spot where the American missionary Virgil Hart took brief residence during his proselytizing missions in the late 1880s. Hart spent many weeks on the mountain living among the pilgrims and monks in monasteries. He summoned crowds of onlookers at each of his residences and took each opportunity to show off his pictorial depiction of the life of Moses, a transgression the monks were willing to overlook in exchange for a hefty rent.

At one of the monasteries Hart explained to a young monk that the Buddhist form of idolatry was foolish and wicked. The man gravely nodded at Hart's criticisms, then accepted an illustrated copy of the Gospel of Matthew. According to Hart's memoir, the gospel made its rounds among the monks, and one morning the head monk praised Saint Matthew, announcing that the doctrines were indeed true, and "able to perfect the conscience." A critical reading of Hart's account, however, suggests that the monk's enthusiasm may have merely been a ploy to finally be rid of Hart, and a quite successful one at that, as the American left the same day.

When we reach the top of the stairway leading up to the temple complex I hear shouts of the trendiest new phrase in China. "Oh my Lady Gaga!" I know it cannot be good.

Large macaques gallop down through the open temple gates, climb up temple walls, play in the shallow courtyard pool, and perch on the stairway banister awaiting our approach. We hold up our walking sticks and gingerly march forward in tight formation, slowly moving through the complex on the only route that will take us to where the trail continues.

A mother and juvenile pair hiss and bear their teeth at me from a low temple rooftop two feet above my head. The juvenile paces across the roof tiles looking for an opening to pounce, while I keep the end of my staff positioned between the two of us. As our group strides forward, we periodically shift foot posture so as to keep each separate grouping of animals from falling out of our lines of sight, while making a big show of brandishing our weapons. A troop of monkeys

perched higher up on the temple's roof scaffolding lazily watches our graceless choreography. One lone macaque balances on top of a stone elephant on the temple's ornamental roof crest. He is a stark, if not hairy, image of the bodhisattva himself.

Finally, we pass through the temple complex unscathed and continue up the trail through a small grove of pink rhododendron blossoms, and a student asks if I have really been traveling alone. When I answer, she expresses a horrified incredulity at my self-imposed isolation, and switches to Sichuanese to report on my wretched status to her companions. As we continue to rise, sharp chasms carved through the cliff walls by trickling streams reveal expansive views of lower valleys and stony escarpments as they disappear in the cloud cover thousands of feet below us.

The final ascent takes us up steep and wide sections of stone stairs that pass by ornate multi-story temple complexes hugging the mountainside. During our final encounter with the local wildlife, a large macaque grabs the arm of a toddler half its size, sending the boy into a fit of shrieks as he sprints away and into his father's arms.

As we ascend, the wispy strands of mist converge into a dense permacloud, and visibility is reduced to less than fifty paces in all directions. I feel beads of water coat my face, and the cloud vapors become indistinguishable from a light rain as some of the students instinctively open umbrellas. Ornately molded statues of white elephants emerge from the cloud cover and appear on the railings as alluring apparitions.

At the flat summit area, a gilded statue of the bodhisattva riding his elephant towers over the foggy landscape. Its apex at more than one hundred fifty feet off the ground disappears somewhere up in the mist. Near its base there are smaller statues with posted signs that read, FOR YOUR SAFETY, DO NOT RIDE THE ELEPHANTS. There are souvenir shops here that show off porcelain figurines of the Buddha, wood-carved rosaries, and jewel-encrusted incense burners behind shiny display cases. The staggering figures listed on their price tags approach four

digits when converted to U.S. dollars, causing me to do a double take and eliciting awed whispers in hushed Cantonese from a pair of elderly visitors next to me.

Just below the summit area, the name of Abandoning Life Cliff hints at its own infamous history. Over the preceding centuries, the dramatic drop-off of thousands of feet accompanied by miraculous cloud formations have been said to induce many pilgrims into a euphoric mania, and many have tossed themselves into the abyss. When Hart visited in the 1880s, a monk told him that many tens of pilgrims threw themselves to Buddha each year. Posted in a nearby temple he found a proclamation written to address this phenomenon, which he translated in his memoir.

> *Those visiting the mountain to make offerings to Buddha and the Queen of Heaven who sacrifice their bodies are surely exceedingly ignorant. Our bodies are difficult of attainment, and fortunately for us born in the "Middle Land." Riches and honors, poverty and affluence, are wholly under the control of High Heaven. Your bodies, even to hair and skin, are the gifts of your parents. In perfection they were received, and in perfection they should be returned. Do not dishonor your ancestors. In an instant your body is destroyed, and below are wolves and tigers.*

The suicides have continued in recent years, but at a much lower rate than during Hart's time. At the cliff's edge I find a waist-high safety rail on which hangs a small sign that reads, CHERISH YOUR LIFE. PLEASE DO NOT CROSS RAILING. in a short bureaucratic couplet. In the years following my ascent, I would continue to see occasional news stories about jumpers, and nearly a decade after my visit, the park staff would finally erect a six-foot-tall glass wall at the cliff's edge to deter further attempts.

Troubling history aside, the cliff offers one of the most famous views in Buddhism, along with the famous "Buddha's Halo" trick of light. The latter is visible only when specific weather conditions converge and the sun projects the shadow of a person standing on the precipice onto the water vapor of cliff-hung clouds, and refracts its light into a circular rainbow. The Song dynasty poet and

politician Fan Chengda left a record of his experience with this rare phenomenon during the twelfth century.

> *Suddenly a dense fog arose in the four directions, turning everything completely white. A monk said: "This is the Silvery World." A short time later, there was a heavy downpour and the dense fog retreated. The monk said: "This is the rain that cleanses the cliff. The Bodhisattva is about to make a 'Great Manifestation.'" Tūla-clouds again spread out below the cliff, gathered thickly, and mounted upward to within a few yards of the edge, where they abruptly halted. The cloud tops were as smooth as a jade floor. From time to time raindrops flew by. I looked down into the cliff's belly, and there was a great globe of light lying outstretched on a flat cloud. The outer corona was in three rings, each of which had indigo, yellow, red, and green hues. In the very center of the globe was a hollow of concentrated brightness. Each of us onlookers saw our forms in the hollow and bright spot, without the slightest detail hidden, just as if we were looking in a mirror. If you raise a hand or move a foot, the reflection does likewise. And yet you will not see the reflection of the person standing right next to you.*†

Today, however, the dense fog does not lift, and I find cause to reflect on a moment months ago when I had just set out on my journey and reached the first of the nine summits only to have all views obfuscated by whiteout blizzard conditions. As I stand here now on the ninth and final summit, I again see nothing but a vacuous immensity of cloud.

Yet, what I had at first perceived as blankness, I now see to be formed by all colors of the light spectrum scattering in all directions. The sheet of white is a composite of all possible images, apparitions, and ideas. It is at once a manifestation of everything and nothing.

The paradox seems to be a naked display of the sheer futility of things. Perhaps, in its more corporeal form, this is the very futility of huffing up to the top of a mountain just to turn around and stutter-step right back down, and to repeat the charade eight more times before coming to one's senses. Perhaps.

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† Translation by James M. Hargett.

My head swims in the thin air at more than ten thousand feet above sea level, the highest point of all nine of China's sacred peaks. I stare into the great celestial void, meditating on its nonentity bereft of shape and meaning. One of the college students I climbed with has lingered about to burn some incense and check for a cell phone signal. He breaks my trance with a question, asking where I will go next. I have not considered his question, and I have no answer to offer.

Outside the summit temple, a young woman wearing a baggy red raincoat carefully pushes the end of a long incense stick into a large sand receptacle. As she kowtows with hands together, the incense smoke spirals up into the cloud, quickly becoming indistinguishable from the dull soupy void. At the edge of the temple building I slouch down against a granite post, and under the curved roof eaves I unlace my shoes and pull my adventuring cap down over my face. ☯

WOODCUT BY LI QUN (1912–2012). CHINA NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ARTS COLLECTION.

Street Musician, Beijing

by Kathleen Gregg

Here is my spot: the sidewalk
in front of this walled courtyard.

Today, the sun is floating
in a blue porcelain bowl.

The gray brick wall catches
the heat and shares it

with my back. I play my Erhu
the way I was taught. Strings

whine in sorrow or quiver
with undying love. I perform

ballads no longer banned, honor
the voices of my ancestors.

Who treasures these songs now?

Young women, in their short skirts
and high heels, strut by me.

They only hear their cell phones.
No kowtowing, no clink

of coins in my tin bucket. I am
a ghost to them. Young men stride

past me with their full bellies
and eyes that only see the new

China, an auspicious future open
in front of them. My future

lies behind a bamboo curtain,
in a tiny room shared

with my grandsons, a cup of tea
and a plate of nuts, the raw

of winter, cold fingers pressing
two strings. I droop

a cigarette from my lips, let ashes
scatter into my beard.

Nina

by Zheng Huina (郑惠娜)

NINA'S DEATH UPROOTED my love for dogs.

When my seven-year-old daughter begs me to let her keep a dog, I shake my head. She pleads, "But Mom, my piano teacher Miss Yang's puppy is so cute. It licks my hands and wags its tail at me every time I play with it."

I reply, "No. Keeping a dog at home will cause lots of inconveniences." I let her think that I do not like dogs. What she doesn't know is that I love them but want to protect her from heart-breaking pain that continues to haunt me.

§

YEARS AGO, when I was a little girl, my family lived in the remote outskirts between a small village and town in southern China. My father owned a red-brick factory. Most of the residents in that area were factory workers, and only two families with children lived nearby. Yet they kept as far away from the house we lived in as possible.

It was haunted, they said. Something horrible happened, and the previous lodgers took flight in a hurry. When my parents decided to build a factory there a few years later, they found the house and moved in.

My parents are atheists.

When I played with the children nearby, the children often teased my siblings and me as "ghost children," and chanted, "You live with ghosts; they try to grab you to the underworld." When I asked my mom about the ghosts, she stopped me and scolded, "This is a good house. There is no ghost. Don't ask for trouble."

The structure was divided into three rooms. The first one was used as a dining room and kitchen; the second was a living room and bedroom for us all. That is, my parents, my elder sister, me, my younger brother, and my little sister. Although family planning had become a state policy in 1982, in the mid-1990s we still had

a big family. Before we moved into the house, we had been living deep in the mountains. Now when I look back at that period, I realize maybe my parents chose to build a factory in a remote area to escape punishment for violating the one-child policy. The third small room was for my bachelor uncle, my mother's youngest brother who worked for my father. As the building was made of a material like cardboard, an adult man could easily push open a window or the door. Several times when we were fast asleep, someone broke in and took away a few valuable things like the electric cooker. This was a way of life, as we all knew that thieves would only take but not harm. Keeping a dog became necessary to guard the house.

For the six years I lived there, we kept many dogs, one at a time. None of them lasted long. Some dogs lived several months with us, and the others a year or two. Eventually, they disappeared. When I asked my mother where the dogs were going, she told me some people would catch dogs and eat them, and the rest were probably hit and killed in the road by cars.

I was lucky that I did not see my dogs get killed. Lying in bed late at night, when my family was sleeping, I would imagine a happy ending for my dogs — they found their mate and explored the world together, having all kinds of exciting adventures.

Yet my dream was shattered the day a worker took me to see my dog. There it was, lying in the middle of the road. Over the years, the scene has become debris left in my mind — as vivid and incongruous as spilled guts on the dusty cement road.

And the whining of a puppy often rings in my ears. One night a little later, the temperature suddenly dropped. The puppy was chained to a table in the first room with no warm bedding. It had been whining in the depth of night. Somehow no one got up to take care of it. We let it freeze to death.

In my family, when you talked about animals, you were not supposed to feel a thing. Dogs were animals, like the ducks, chickens, or pigs that villagers raised. You should not become attached to them, let alone develop a friendship. So, I

learned to play with my dogs but not showed any reaction when they vanished. I did it well until the day Nina was killed.

§

NINA ONCE LIVED in a farmhouse far down the road. Her owner often beat her and his other dogs. Even though it was far away, I could hear the dogs barking and whining in the background — often a long, agonized wailing, as if from fear. One day Nina wandered to our home. I was eating bread. She looked at me with her big, watery eyes. I threw some bread at her, and she ate it immediately. I gave her the rest of my bread, and then she licked my hands.

Nina stayed with us from then on. My siblings all loved dogs, but Nina would only follow me everywhere. Perhaps it was because I was the one that took her in when she ran away from home.

Dogs did not have names. We just called them "Dog" or "Doggy." Secretly, when I was alone with Nina, I called her "Nina." She seemed to understand that it was her name.

When my siblings and I were playing with Nina several days later, she suddenly barked nervously just before a man arrived. He got furious and hit her in the head, saying, "How dare you bark at me! You stupid dog." He then told us he owned the dog and demanded we give Nina back to him.

We looked at Mom.

"Please, Mom, let us have the dog," my brother pleaded.

At that time, the dog we owned had not returned for weeks, and since my brother was my mom's favorite, my mom nodded. She talked with the man and paid for Nina.

Growing up, I was always an introverted and quiet girl. I always knew my parents wanted sons. When they had my elder sister, they accepted her, for she was their firstborn. But when they had me, my grandma was so furious that she wanted my parents to give me away. My parents wouldn't, and they reminded me

of it all the time so that I learned to be grateful and behaved myself. This always made me feel unworthy.

I was never close to my parents. Ever since I can remember, my mother never hugged me or held my hand. I didn't tell her things, and she doesn't bother to ask. She is mother in name only. I was terrified of my father's rage, as he always threatened to beat us to death and dig a hole to bury us in the mountain if we misbehaved.

I kept to myself. When my brother took away my toy, I let him, or my parents scolded me for not sharing. When I had a toothache, I endured it, for it was me who ate too much candy and didn't carefully brush my teeth. You were supposed to be neither seen nor heard.

Only when I was alone with Nina, I could laugh loudly. When my siblings were taking naps, I took Nina to a deserted field. I would throw a stick, and she would run to get it for me. Or we raced each other.

She also followed me to school every day. By that time, my elder sister was a fourth grader at an elementary school in the town, and my brother and I attended a school in the village, which only had three grades. Every early morning, when I biked to the school with my brother sitting at the back of the bicycle, Nina would follow us. She would only go back home after we got into the school. Every evening when I just entered the road before the factory, Nina came running towards me, happily barking and wagging her tail.

We had lots of wonderful memories.

§

NINA HAD STAYED with us for over a year. Then I finished third grade and attended the school in the town with my elder sister.

When I noticed that Nina's belly bulged, Mom told me that Nina was having babies. Who was the father then? When and where did she meet her mate? There seemed to be so many things that I did not know about Nina.

The day Nina gave birth, she helped herself, under the bed of my bachelor uncle in the third room. Mom warned us not to approach the puppies as the dog mother is overprotective and fierce. Nina was. When my uncle passed by, she growled. But she wagged her tail on seeing my siblings and me.

She was still my Nina, yet she was different. When I saw her licking her babies who could not even open their eyes, she was bathed in the glory of motherhood. Then I knew it. I was no longer the center of her world. She still loved me, but she needed time with her babies. She no longer followed me to school. Instead, she followed me to the road in front of our home and saw me off.

I had mixed feelings. Before I could figure them out, Nina left me.

§

IT WAS AN AUTUMN MORNING. As always, Nina followed us when my sister and I pushed the bicycles along the dirt road. We got on our bicycles when we arrived at the cement road. Nina lay down at the roadside, panting and drooling.

I looked back at Nina, waving. And then I picked up the faint sound of a car in the distance. I stared detachedly into the middle distance. A white vehicle zigzagged towards us. Something was not right.

Nina let out a cry of pain when the wheels ran over her legs. The driver did not even slow down to see what had happened; the car continued to zigzag away.

I rushed towards Nina, tears pouring down my cheeks. What happened after became a blur. I remember certain events, but I cannot tell which happened first. Whenever my thoughts drifted to that memory, I stopped it. I shut it down. If I did not think about it, it would not hurt me. I could stop the pain and suffering.

I remember Nina tried to stand up and walk towards our home, but she fell.

I remember she was still alive.

"Nina, are you all right?" I touched her head. Or did I?

She turned to look at me, and then she looked towards our house, letting out a shrill cry. Her cry still stings my ears even today.

I remember I ran home, screaming, "Mom, Dad, help! Help! Help!" And I remember my scream scared my parents, who thought something horrible had happened to us. When they figured out what happened, they returned to sleep.

And I remember I left Nina behind and bicycled to school, because if I did not go then, I would be late for school and be punished by the teacher.

I remember crying along the way to school, and the tears dried up somehow.

I remember that at noon when we returned home, my parents told me a friend of theirs took Nina away. That friend knew how to cook dog meat.

I also remember that night, that friend brought some cooked dog meat to us to thank my parents. During the dinner, he casually said that the dog was still alive when he butchered it.

§

NINA WAS KILLED before her babies could open their eyes and see their mother. She left behind six puppies. My father bought expired condensed milk at a low price from a friend of his for the puppies. Only two puppies survived. I always suspect that the puppies got sick and died because we fed them expired milk.

Then my father sold the factory, and we moved into a town far away. It was inconvenient to have dogs in an apartment, so my parents gave the remaining two puppies to a friend who lived in their hometown in the countryside. Feeding dogs cost money. That friend sold the female puppy and kept the male puppy.

My father built a new factory in the hometown. After that, we lived with our mother in the town, and my father worked in the countryside. Every winter and summer holiday, we went there to live with our father.

That first summer we went to the countryside, my father took us to visit his friend. The male puppy grew up to be a big dog. Although we hadn't seen it for almost six months, it recognized us immediately. It would put its front legs up on your chest, wagging its tail and lapping your face, while its butt moved back and forth. As the only dog in the village, it could find no mate. It howled at night to

beckon a mate, which caused the owner to beat it. They all said the dog was nuts. Later when school began, we were told that the dog was killed by a car. As for the female puppy, she became a mother and gave birth to several puppies.

That was the end of our dog-raising history.

§

WITH THE DEATH OF Nina's remaining puppies, I stopped loving dogs. In junior high school, when my friend got a dog, I stopped playing at her house. "Because I don't like dogs," I told her when I declined her invitation. I listened when she complained how naughty the dog was and how often the dog howled at night. Then I stopped talking to this friend when she told me they slaughtered the dog and ate it. She talked about how dog meat tasted, and I walked away abruptly. And later, when my roommate asked if she could have a dog in our shared apartment, I said no.

§

YEARS LATER, in college, when I planned to write about our home for a writing class, I called my mom and asked her why the place was believed to be haunted. Was someone killed there? Was it a girl, as most ghost stories were about women?

My mom laughed, "No, it is never about people. It was about dogs."

Then she told me the story. When two stray dogs wandered near the house, the lodgers attacked them. They caught one dog and the other ran away. When they hanged the dog, the other dog came back. It stopped in the road across from the house. Then it crouched forward with its elbows on the ground, with its back curved and its rear end in the air, looking like a man kneeling. And then it barked and sounded like the crying of a human. That "kneeling" and crying frightened the lodgers. They thought that dog was a spirit, and it would take revenge on them. So, they fled.

My mom added, "Those foolish people. Dogs are spiritual. How could they catch dogs and eat them?"

She forgot that when Nina was dying, she let a friend slaughter and eat her.

§

SOMETIMES I WAKE UP in the middle of the night and hear a dog whining in the distance. And I will be wide awake. I try not to think of it. But when I am about to fall asleep, I see Nina. I dredge up memories from the depths of my mind.

What was Nina thinking when my parents gave her away? Did she hate me for not helping her? After the car ran over her legs, when she fell and looked back at me, was she trying to ask me to take good care of her babies? Was that shrill cry her pain for leaving her babies?

I have avoided talking about Nina or dogs, for if I do, I would have to confront the fact that hurts me the most — if we had sent her to the hospital immediately, we could have saved her. She could have survived. Her puppies would have grown up.

I did nothing for her.

I was silent.

I let her down.

I have to stop now. I cannot go on anymore.

§

THE FAMILY THAT LIVES next to our apartment has a big white dog. They always leave the inner wooden door open, and the outer door made of steel bars closed to get fresh air. Each time we leave the apartment or return home, the dog barks at us. And I reply, "Stupid dog." Sometimes we can even see the doggy poop in the living room through the steel door.

"Mom, don't you like dogs?" my daughter asks me.

"No, I don't."

"But I love dogs."

"That's okay. You can love dogs. Everyone has different likes and dislikes."

Another day, I tell my daughter, "The average life span of a dog is about ten to fifteen years. Even if you take really good care of the dog, you will have to watch it suffer from illness and die. Remember the time your turtle died and how you cried? When your dog dies, you would feel the pain tenfold."

One day when my daughter begs me once again to let her have a dog, I tell her, "If you live in an apartment, you'd better not have a pet, especially a dog, for the enclosed space would make the entire apartment reek of dog smell."

"What if I buy a large house? Can I have a dog then?" she asks.

"Well, maybe, if you still want to have a dog then."

While I have never been close to my mother, I am to my daughter. My mom let me take the journey of wind and rain all alone, but I want to shelter my daughter, the way I wish I would have been protected and loved. When she grows up and can handle the pain, she can have a dog. ☯

WOODCUT BY LI QUN (1912–2012). CHINA NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ARTS COLLECTION.

Portfolio

Hedda Morrison

Hedda Morrison was born Hedwig Marie Hammer in Stuttgart, Germany, in 1908. After studying at the State Institute for Photography in Munich and working briefly in Germany, she left for China in 1933 to become manager of Hartung's Photo Shop in Beijing. There she lived until 1946, when she married Alastair Morrison and they moved briefly to Hong Kong and then on to Sarawak, a British crown colony until it became part of Malaysia in 1963. In 1967, the Morrisons moved to Australia, where Hedda died in 1991.

Morrison traveled widely in China during her time there, photographing wherever she went. According to the description of her collection at the website of the Harvard-Yenching Library, "[h]er photographs document lifestyles, trades, handicrafts, landscapes, religious practices and architectural structures, many of which have since changed or been destroyed." As I looked through the online collection, however, what attracted my attention was the large group of portraits, particularly of children. The images bear no names, so they are at once individual and timeless. Morrison was photographing at a time of change and uncertainty in China, and one cannot help but wonder what became of these young lives. Included here are only photographs of girls, as societies the world over have often provided them with fewer opportunities and more barriers to self-actualization. As we go through our own era of change and uncertainty, these photographs remind us of children worldwide in similar situations almost a century later and force us to ask, "What will become of them?" — Ed. Note


1557


1567


1631


1630


1553

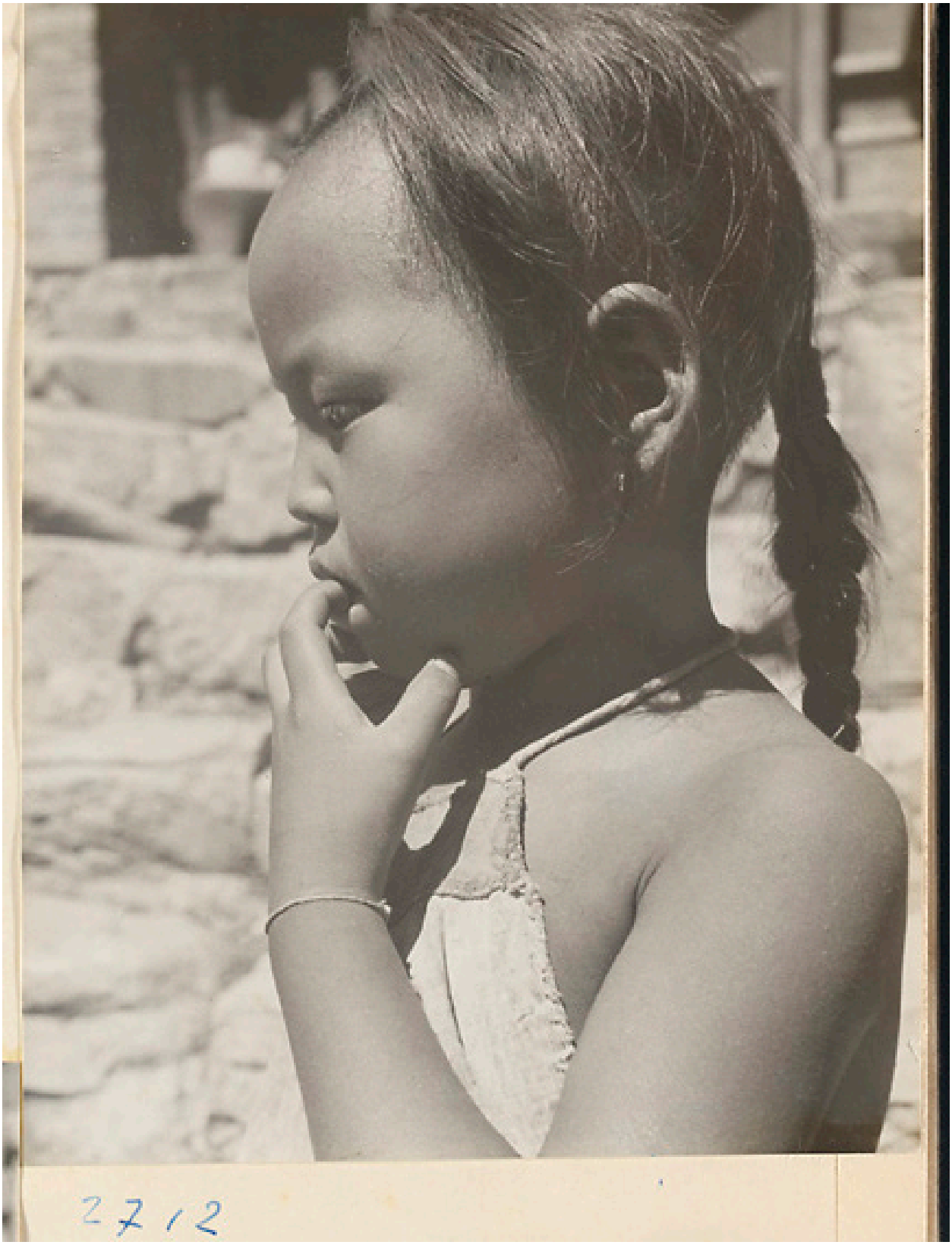

1546


1599


1592


1618


2598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Long Way from My Home

by David Allen Sullivan

Must have been the river
that got me lost, and something
on the railroad track I cut across
that punctured my bike's front tire,
so by the time the stranger mapped
where I was on his phone app
our apartment was miles off.

Made myself push the bike,
but its wheel-light throbbed only
when its gear rubbed against
the flat flop of the front tire
as it groaned through each forced
rotation — dark rising from factories,
chattering workers pedaling past.