

As the river flows

“四时舍我驱驰，今我隐约欲何为？人生居天壤间，忽如飞鸟栖枯枝。我今隐约欲何为？”¹

Left alone by galloping time am I, why is my heart still wrenched by destitution?

Standing alone against the sky, all of a sudden I feel like a soaring bird that rests on a withered branch. Still my heart is wrenched by destitution, why is that?

I.

I was not yet five years old when I first heard of that song. It was one of those blurry afternoons that had already lost its exact position in my memory, when the streets were filled with living people shouting in anger and dead people rotting in silence. Later I learnt that it was the second year since the Way of Supreme Peace had claimed to be the savior of our falling empire², though the strike of another pandemic seemed to have mocked their supposedly sincere attempt. But those endless struggles were too faraway from my little world back then. The only reason why I remember that late-spring afternoon so clearly is that it was the last time I saw my elder brother, Bai.

Or, “clearly” might be too bold a word, since everything had lost its shape before my swollen eyes. Even the last sight of my brother gradually faded into a trembling silhouette that could easily be crushed by the gentle spring breeze. I must have cried for such a long time, screaming and begging my parents not to abandon Bai, that eventually a dreamlike illusion of drowning embraced me. In my vertigo that strange melody crept into my heart, sung by a voice so powerfully soothing, so worryingly loving, as if the whole world had collapsed and been pieced back together at that very instant. I tried to look for the singing lady, yet through the wall of tears both her face and voice seemed to have originated from the bottom of a flowing river.

And a river never stops flowing. Not a word could I understand from that strange song but the melody stays in my heart. Its strange melody might belong to the “barbarians”, stated in disdain by a man we met during our forced migration from Luoyang to Chang’an³. That self-claimed court musician wouldn’t approve of any type of music that’s not elegant enough to be played for the emperor, which caused the laughter of another old man in the crowd:

“You’re expecting too much from a nine-year-old, great musician! I dare say, our new emperor’s taste of music is no different from this singing girl here. You must be younger than ten, aren’t you?”

I nodded, but I hadn’t regain my courage to make another sound after being laughed at by that court musician. So I raised up nine fingers in response. The musician seemed to be greatly humiliated and a fierce argument thus started in the crowd. No detail of the outcome stays in my mind, but in the next day both men were killed by soldiers looking for valuables from us residents of the former royal city. Among the people who lost their lives that day was my father. And that melody emerged uncontrollably from my chest as those angry soldiers set fire to his body. I stared at the smoke that arose from his shrunk body till it merged with the dense smoke at the eastern horizon. There lied the dying city and the rising sun.

¹ Verses from Cao Pi (曹丕)’s poem, 《大墙上蒿行》

² Yellow Turban Rebellion (黄巾起义): the seventh year of Guanghe (184 CE)

³ Dong Zhuo (董卓) burnt Luoyang and forced the new emperor to move the royal capital to Chang’an: the first year of Chuping (190 CE)

Under the same sun did I lose my mother three years later. In fear of Cao Cao's another wave of massacre⁴, my uncle pulled me away from my mother's bleeding yet lifeless body and departed for the city of Shouchun. I didn't even look back, but I knew that her blood will eventually reach the flowing river outside the Province of Xu. And a river never stops flowing.

Years later, that melody has gradually become the only thing that I could still hold onto, a mark I've inscribed on my sinking boat to immortalize the last moment I shared with my brother, the last of my family, and thus the slim hope for reunion. Although a river never stops flowing, I believe that once I jump off from this marked spot, I will eventually be lying by Bai's side.

So I kept singing that song. I grasped it tightly and cried no more. Until this moment.

"Alas, you've grown quite a lot."

Startled, I turn to look at the other side of the street, where a smiling lady in tattered robe is leaning against the wall. Despite the greyish lighting of this winter afternoon, the lines outlining her facial features are so sharply clear that I somehow start to shiver like a drowned person who has just poured the freezing water out of their chest. Is it the shape of her eyes or the curl of her hair? That blurry image, an illusion distorted by the ripples that a drowning person saw underneath all those layers of flowing water, has suddenly cleared up into this figure of a foreign-looking woman standing right in front of me. Her smile deepens and starts humming the very same melody.

It is her, truly it is her! As I run toward her, she reaches out her arms and gently holds my hands, "Qing, that's what your mama calls you, right? I heard you humming that melody and immediately knew that you were the girl I saw outside the city of Luoyang."

"I... it's been so long that I've almost turned to believe that was a mere dream." Carefully perceiving the warmth from her hands, I can hear my voice trembling, "you know, only in a dream might the gods or the Buddha soothe us with a song. But I can't stand the possibility that it's only a dream, I can't stand it!"

"It's indeed been a long time, long time since I last heard of this song, too. Though it's a pity that I'm no god, isn't it?"

She seems to have made an attempt to make me laugh, that's when I feel the tears dripping from my chin. Apologetically, I try to wipe the tears with my sleeve in haste, while her calming voice continues her narration.

"It's alright, little sister. Close enough though, this songs belongs to my father's gods. Oh, actually, I should say that they were his gods."

Perhaps it was the incomprehension on my face that urges her to add, "He's from a seaport city of a faraway empire. Born in a family that's destined to serve a great goddess and her son, he somehow ended up joining the imperial ambassadors and sailed all the way to the southern port of our Han Empire. Which year was it... Ah yes, the ninth year of Yanxi.⁵"

"That was under the Emperor Huan, right?" Over thirty years ago— I find it difficult to keep up with my breath as I calculate the years— that was when my parents were still in their youth.

⁴ Cao Cao attacked the Province of Xu (徐州) twice, in 193 and 194 CE.

⁵ 166 CE, the first Roman Embassy as recorded in the *Book of the Later Han*.

Thanks to that haunting song, I've always known that the world between the heaven and earth is far more enormous than I could ever perceive, and that the river flowing in between is galloping restlessly without a limit. I've always known that, but this is the first time ever that a glimpse of the other world where the river is flowing through becomes more solid than a hallucination. Despite ephemeral, this glimpse is close enough to an eternity that I've always yearned to hold, an eternity that I've cautiously protected by hiding it behind a facade. As the roar of the flowing river intensified at this moment, vaguely I seem to hear a crackling sound.

"Exactly. Despite the turmoil in our society back then⁶, he didn't hesitate a second to bid his companions farewell after a visit to the White Horse Temple⁷." It might be my hallucination, an instant of disappointment or even resentment flashed in her eyes. However, in the next second her eyes have recovered their usual calmness, as if it was only an instantaneous reflection of the pale winter sun. "My father decided to stay here only because of that temple."

Recalling the first time I stepped into the Buddhist temple in Xiapi of the Province of Xu, I can still feel the blazing imprint of awe that the shiny golden statue of the Buddha left in my heart. The renowned White Horse Temple must be even more extraordinary, thought I.

"Your father is also a follower of the Buddha then?" I ask with a slight degree of excitement that I didn't even realize.

"Well, yes, I guess. Are you?"

"I've prayed to the Buddha, I admit. And up to this day, it seems like I've received his blessing." I find her question hard to answer as I struggle to explain my mind clearly, "But now that I've met you again, perhaps I should also thank you before I get the chance to go back to that temple."

She seems surprised, shocked even. It's natural, as no mortal would feel comfortable to be compared to the Buddha, but I meant it sincerely. As I kept singing her song, I've gradually convinced myself that it was the song that blessed me and finally brought me the news that I just received from uncle Zhang before our encounter. Yes, that is correct, a good news, a good news to be announced to her.

So I look around and whisper to her ear, "It's about to snow, why not coming to my place and hear me explain it to you? I've got a good news that shouldn't be announced to my co-workers yet."

That soothing smile appears on her face again. As she walks by my side, I suddenly realize that I haven't asked for her name while she's known mine for over a decade.

"'Bai' would be the Chinese version for my name and that's how people usually call me. It's the cypress tree, probably wishing for longevity... Careful! You wouldn't want to slip and hurt yourself before you've told me about your good news, would you?"

⁶ Disasters of the Partisan Prohibitions (党锢之祸): 166 CE.

⁷ 白马寺: Built in 68 CE, one of the earliest Buddhist temples in China.

II.

By the moment I saw that crying girl, that song came into my mind. She's so little, but her desperate cry was loud enough for the passers-by of the entire street to pause their pace and pity her. So did I.

As I looked toward the direction she was facing, a young boy was held by two beardless men. The boy had the same pretty face that clearly resembles the little girl's, the same eyes that resemble a blossoming petal that got blown away by the spring breeze. So he must be the brother of that heartbroken girl. She cried and cried, shouting "Brother, don't leave me" again and again till her voice became hoarse. Her father was still negotiating with the beardless men, with a grovelling smile on his face. And her mother was trying her best to cherish her last moments with her son, without any spare time to look after her young daughter other than impatiently shouting "Behave, Qing!"

Finally, the boy was taken away, and the parents exchanged a glance of relief. All the onlookers were clear about what was happening, since we all understood the benefits of sending young boys into the court to serve as eunuchs. It was the era when the Ten Attendants were enjoying their highest level of power, bringing privilege to all the once-despised eunuchs. Even with the rebellion that broke out last year, we couldn't see any sign of their status getting affected. After all, what would be the worst fate for a royal servant?

"At least he would keep his life intact." I heard an elderly woman mumbling to her husband, "As for his little sister, that poor girl..." She stopped with a sigh, and her husband only shook his head.

We were all clear about the potential fates awaiting the girl which the elderly woman implied with silence: pandemic, famine, war— all leading to the same end. As her brother disappeared in her sight, the little girl broke into one last cry in panic, "Don't take my brother! Please, mom, dad, please! Don't abandon me!"

Although it was only late spring, the leaves had already adorned the branches along the street. As the wind blew, the sporadic spots of light started to drift on her face, as if refracted by the flowing river. I suddenly felt an immense grief bursting from my heart, and that song came out spontaneously from my mouth.

As I expected, the girl's cry ceased, staring at me blankly while tears were still flowing uncontrollably from her swollen eyes. I knew it would work, as what would better soothe a child than a lullaby? A lullaby that my father used to sing me to sleep every night. I remember asking him to elaborate on the story this lullaby told, and I remember his hesitation.

"Remember papa's hometown? Yes, Berenike, a city far far away from Luoyang. There your grandpa was a priest in a temple— well, he's the servant of gods. Yes yes, a respected position. And the main deity he was serving was Isis the Great. She's a powerful magician, but also a caring mother of Horus-the-child. Without her husband, she raises Horus up all by herself and protects him from all sorts of dangers. And this lullaby, believe it or not, was sung by her to her little baby."

"Then I want my mama sing it to me! Why can't I see my mama? Where is my mama?" That was how I responded to him.

What did he say in turn? For a long time his response was no longer important to me, as I've eventually learnt that my mother had passed away because of giving birth to me. Never had I seen his grief, nor had he told me anything about how he married my mother, a Han woman local to Luoyang. The only reason he mentioned for abandoning his return ticket to the Roman Empire was

the White Horse Temple, where he gradually visited more and more often. Even my name, a name he chose, seems to be ridiculing my poor mother's unnaturally short life.

So I decided to shut myself from him. As he increasingly immersed himself in the temple, I turned to spend more time with my Han neighbors and thus gradually lost my knowledge in Egyptian and Greek. Weirdly though, that lullaby has stayed firmly in my memory after all these years. I even developed the habit to sing it to myself, as if it's my mother who's humming through the narrative of Isis.

Despite fully aware of the mesmerising effect of this song, I'm still surprised to hear it on the street fifteen years later. With a glance at that girl who was completely lost in her thoughts and humming this song, I am certain that she is the same girl I saw in Luoyang. Beautiful youth with a sweet voice, Qing has grown into a charming young lady despite all that happened in the past years. Amazed and somehow relieved, I can't help raising my voice and saying, "Alas, you've grown quite a lot!"

As her gaze meets mine, the same sorrow as that I had experienced when I first met her starts to shiver in my heart. She's smiling yet tears run down from her cheeks. She's talking about a good news yet her hands are freezing— A floating petal in a flowing river at the brink of drowning.

"So you see, your song probably blessed me to stay alive as my loved ones left me one after another. And it helped me to get my musical talent discovered by uncle Zhang, that's how I had the luck to gain musical training and got recruited by the late emperor... oh, perhaps I shouldn't call him an emperor at all."

"Ah, you were one of the court musicians for Yuan Shu? That explains how you've ended up in the territory of Sun Ce." As I mention the name of this gallant young general, I'm sure her face blushes a little.

Moved closer to me, she lowers her voice, "Yes, and that's the good news."

"Uncle Zhang just told me about his plan for tonight's banquet. Since General Sun just avenged his father death by killing Huang Zu in Jiangxia⁸, this year's celebration for the New Year's Eve will be splendid." Her mouth stays in an upward curve, though joy is not the major emotion I can see from her eyes. In an unnoticeably trembling voice she continues, "So uncle Zhang conceived a plan to let him notice me by arranging a show at the night banquet. You know, what else could we destitute women ask for?"

"Wait, so you're going to marry him?" The thought of my mother suddenly emerges, along with that decades-old question that's always haunted me: what made her step into her marriage, her marriage that eventually costed her life? But I refrained from asking Qing, as the desire for staying alive seems the only explanation. As she noted, marrying a renowned man might be the best way for her to survive in this violently chaotic era. But is that really so?

"Well, not entirely... I'm only going to be his concubine. But that's good enough, no? Just as the daughters of Master Qiao, that's fortunate enough. Really, that's enough." She repeats it as if she's trying to convince me into believing in her happiness at this moment, yet her pale face suggests that she's more likely reaffirming that belief to herself. Something must be shattering within her. What is it? Could that crack possibly lead her to another way out?

⁸ the last month of the fourth year of Jian'an (January 200 CE).

“Who even is this uncle Zhang?” After a while of awkward silence, I asked her.

“He’s been under the command of Yuan Shu for decades! A veteran, and now he’s in the army of Sun. You see, gaining his recognition was also a blessing, as he had really helped and sponsored me a lot. He even thought of this plan to secure my future!”

I should feel happy for her, however, what comes out of my mouth is a spiteful remark, “I doubt if he’s really caring about your future or his own future under the command of his former enemy.” Immediately after that I regretted it. Who am I to reveal the possible truth to her and crush her faith in her being the blessed one, probably the only thing that she could still hold onto? Why can’t I act as everyone else in that crowd, just watching in silence as the girl shed tears for her brother, whom her parents clearly cherished more?

To my surprise, she only smiles bitterly, “Even so, this is the best path I can follow.”

“I’ve long known that everything will eventually be drifted away by the flowing river, even the fortune that General Sun might grant me if he happens to pity and want me. But Bai, do you know that when you first met me, my brother was sent away by my parents as they couldn’t afford raising two kids?” For the first time since we entered her room, her voice stops trembling. “I have to be the fortunate one, the one who survives, or how could I ever meet my brother again? He has the same name as yours! He must be alive, and live a long and prosperous life as the cypress tree!”

I open my mouth but can’t make a sound. How can I tell her about my poor mother who died young? About the unclear yet confirmed connection between my name as “cypress” and my mother as admitted by my father in his dying bed? Or even worse, about her brother being sent into the royal palace to be castrated as an eunuch and probably met a fate unexpected by their parents in the massacre of the eunuchs four years after that⁹?

Just as I struggle with words, Qing raises her voice high and all of a sudden grasps my hand, “It was your song that preserves the last moment I shared with him. After all these years, only this song and what it connects to had endured in my ephemeral world.”

With my other hand, I hold her hand tightly. Cold, as cold as my father’s hand as he lay dying. I remember holding his hand as the pandemic of the eighth year of Guanghe slowly sucked out his life. The fever he was having appeared to have affected his language ability, leaving him with only his two native languages. With my downgraded understanding of Greek and Egyptian, I struggled to capture the words he spat out with his withering breath: “Berenike”, “Buddha statue”, “House of Isis” “when I was a little boy”¹⁰, and finally, “your name in Greek” and “your mother”. That was it, the freezing coldness at his hands extended throughout his body, leaving me with only a riddle that I could have solved if only I’d been dragged out of the groundless resentment that almost drowned me. I should have let go of the only thing that endured in my life. Right now, as I hold Qing’s cold hand, a crazy idea started forming in my mind—

I want to take her out of the flowing river that had trapped her at the brink of drowning; or at least, to hold her hand like this as the river flows toward a farther unknown.

⁹ 189 CE: after the Ten Attendants (十常侍) killed the general He Jin (何进), several warlords (including Yuan Shu) led their armies into the royal palace and massacred the eunuchs.

¹⁰ The Berenike Buddha was conjectured to be constructed in the first half of the second century CE.

“This uncle Zhang of yours, he had followed Yuan Shu for over ten years, right?” As I see her nod, I continue with my speculation, “Has he ever asked about your brother?”

As she nods again and seems confused, I finish my bold request with one last question, “Then just go and meet him again. Ask him about your brother. No matter what the answer is, can you promise that you’ll come back and hear my story? It’s a story of my ongoing quest to explore the Buddhist temples in China, and believe it or not, a Buddha statue in my father’s far far away hometown that I yearn to see with my own eyes.”

III.

I knew that she could sing at the instant I first laid eyes on her face. So I picked her from the refugees from the Province of Xu and asked, “Can you sing?” The song she sang for me was very strange, a melody I’d never heard anything alike. But her voice was no doubt a treasure.

After introducing her to the musicians of Lord Yuan, her talent soon gained even more recognition. And so my belief in her potential was even firmer. As long as my gaze could shun from her face, the only thing I had to think about was how to maximise her value for my career. See, it’s an easy deal.

For five years I’d kept an eye on her. It was nothing close to taking care of this girl. However, after telling her to get prepared for the night banquet, she proclaimed to me, “I have my own uncle, but you’re like my father, uncle Zhang.” Why did she say that to me? What was she conceiving underneath that pretty face of her? I’ve always stayed vigilant since I decided to invest in her, but her overly pious attitude made me even more sceptical.

“Don’t you have any siblings who fled the Province of Xu with you and your uncle’s family? You’re speaking as if you’re left all alone.”

“I still have a brother,” she answered with an annoyingly cheerful tone, “but he was taken away when I was little. Perhaps once I’ve won the general’s favour, as you desired, uncle, my search for him would be easier!”

“How old is your brother?”

“Five years older than me, uncle.”

Of course, five years older. I watched her leaving quietly and heard my heart pounding heavily. Of course. By the moment I saw the face of the fourteen-year-old Qing I’ve had that intuition, which was then confirmed by her undeniable talent in music. The same kind of helpless beauty. Of course, I’ve always known that they are siblings, there’s never been another possible explanation to it.

And of course, I was prepared to see her returning to my place right before the banquet started.

“Did you know anything of my brother, uncle?”

Quickly I put my hand on my sword at my waist. But that was all she wanted to say, I sensed no anger nor aggression. The same innocent, pitiful face as her brother, making me want to throw up. It must be out of my hatred and disgust for eunuchs.

“Since you’ve asked, I’ll tell you that I’ve seen him once in the royal palace.” I paused and observed her facial expressions, but only a slight trace of joy emerged from her calmness.

“How was he?!”

How was he, ha. I should just tell her how he begged for my mercy as I stormed into the chamber, how he claimed that he was merely a musician and was never an ally of the eunuchs. But then I remembered when I looked into his petal-shaped eyes, even I hesitated for one second for all I could see was an innocent boy. Innocent— but my father was also innocent, an innocent literati who was framed and tortured by those damn eunuchs. Yes, I should tell her that I pierced my sword into her brother’s body and pulled it out, witnessing his blood spilling on the decorated screen just as how the ink spilled on my father’s writings when he passed away in indignation. I should just tell her! Tell her that no one is innocent, that a crime should always be avenged!

But “I can’t recall” was all that I ended up answering. It was no regret nor guilt, no, no fear, no urge for atonement, no. As I threw my sword on the ground, she looked up at me, with such a solemn face that almost seemed that she was pitying me. Then she turned away, about to leave. No trace of hatred nor blame.

“Do you believe in the Buddha’s teachings, uncle?”

I was startled when she stopped at the threshold, “What do you mean? That Karma nonsense?”

She smiled and shook her head, “I was thinking about how the world is being destroyed and recreated at every single instant.”

IV.

The New Year’s Day of the fifth year of Jian’an was marked by heavy snow. It covered all the footprints and any sort of traces on the ground. Not long after that, Sun Ce was assassinated and died at the age of twenty-five. Another few months past, Yuan Shu’s brother, Yuan Shao, a strong warlord in the north, was defeated by his friend in his teenage years, Cao Cao.

But soon another year would come, with the cypress trees flourishing on top of the hills and the stones lying innately as the river flows past. Standing between the heaven and earth, we are all strangers travelling in a faraway land¹¹. No one could be an exception.

¹¹ adapted from “青青陵上柏，磊磊涧中石。人生天地间，忽如远行客。”: two verses from a Han Dynasty poem; also where the names “青 (Qing)” and “柏 (Bai)” come from.