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[novel excerpt – draft, experiment in use of the second person singular]

### **Train from China's west to Beijing, March 1975**

*You sit on the top of this hill and look to the sea, alone with this view this early morning. You are alone; it is hard every day to connect with this scene, hard to connect also with your own life so much of which seems so far away. People around you seem to have simple primitive lives they regard as complex, they look at you as nothing, as outsider, some as unwelcome; or, some of them, as foreign trophy. You must be, it seems to them, the refugee who can't really be a refugee because she doesn't seem to have anything wrong with her. Wrong with you? What these days is right. What has been right when? You look back to when you were eighteen, to one of the many hinge points of your existence, etched with acid on you at the other side of the earth. Your mind drifts to sharp recall, most days you can recall that time, on many days spend much of your day back there...*

*You sit in warming sun and drowse and, jerking between moments of sleep, you recall it all: the years of cold and hunger and tiredness on the Qinghai plateau north of Tibet, the comfort of routine in the prison farm and how all that came to an end, replaced by fear in travelling back suddenly to the capital. Life so full. It is ironic to be here ill at ease seemingly in great comfort, but find meaning in drifting back to that time, of all times.*

March 2013

Dust enters the carriage, through every shut crevice and brief opening. The air is different down from the high plateau, more of it, more air, but with it more dust, more than you imagined, than you can recall from any time past. Outside is dark earth ending before it goes anywhere, rising into yellow sky. It seems colder down from the plateau. Up there the sun was sharp in the day, the night killed with cold.

You lean together with your mother; you are both very thin. How old do you look? You have no idea; you had few chances to see yourself back up there. You are old in the head but your body is not grown up, scarcely a period yet, far from womanhood, no strength for that. Just tall and tired; longing and tired; hard and tired. You are hardened, you are hardening while your mother is softer, grows softer, more parchment-like, dust holding to myriad creases and wrinkles on skin that is closer to the air outside than anything else. Still she holds some shining strength. You lean together, you are taller now than she is but you still actually lean to her; she is your strength. With her frayed finger as a brush she writes a note in quick characters in her cupped palm; we are nearly home, she writes. Already four nights gone, you hope this journey is soon done, it goes on and on; but as for home, you do not know... You do not know what home, what home may be.

You asked if your father would be there when you arrive – this is always your question – but she turned her head away. This train is another place not to talk. Later she wrote on her palm that she does not know.

These people in this compartment are people you know, but as you look at

them you see them retreating without knowing how they retreat, shifting into themselves more than ever. We travel through dust away from a long bitterness. All disappearing from each other, as if we have never been together, don't belong to anything or each other any more; minds now away to uncertain destinations. You think their minds must have the apprehension you share, manacled to criticism in all its burning conjugation: you were criticised, you must criticise or be criticised; who next will criticise me; when? Or is there some other situation coming where someone will confront you with what you know already: that you have been wrong to criticise, that you have criticised falsely. And punish for that. Ask you to transform again.

There is no escape from punishment. What you have come to understand, that which is the source of all fear, the shaping of all being and speaking is in the constant question, the great unstable variable: who next will make the rules and be in charge of punishment?

Or is there another world, another history where there is no punishment, no demand for Struggle-Criticism-Transformation, a world where it is possible just to exist and not be ravaged by history? How could that be? How would people define themselves, know themselves, without the force of history to shape their words and thoughts. Without fear.

What will you confess next? Is another day of criticism-transformation coming? Who can you become, if you are to be transformed again. Do you have to start the struggling, be at the centre of outward fear-push, to avoid being the object of attention, criticism, yelling. They are all bruised, you are bruised; your mother is more bruised than most. If you are travelling – and you are certainly travelling – there must be consequences, criticism, punishments, recriminations, responsibilities, labels, right-wrong, propaganda to learn: crap, blah, blah. You drift...

Your mother has taught you some geography; you see now the width of river and farming in the end of winter. The etched ravines chopped from the higher plateau show deep dark fine soil; people work, work. You know work, it is work from which you are made, were remade, you are travelling from. It is at once both your sensation of bodily resilience and your immense tiredness. Now you have had – how many days is it? – days on this train to sit and think, lose condition, ache. No hard physical work; how peculiar. Your brain seems to be unravelling, travelling in new directions, opening, reshaping, still alert to danger.

A tear escapes your eye, hidden behind your hand at the window.

You wipe your eye and dust curls on your finger. Leaving behind. Your mind rattles with the train along the track, you have become part of the train rhythm, you hear the rhythm in your thoughts, it is repetitive and then there are great clattering sounds as tracks are joined or cross laneways, roadways, hoot, hoot. Left behind, left behind, love and enemies; left Bidong, left so many who know your secrets and cannot come away when you cannot stay. The tug of come away and stay, though not now allowed to stay. Follow directions, damn, damn, damn the rules and curse the traitor heart which wanted to leave while Bidong is there still in the high plateau. Brain stilling, rhythm drops, around thought of Bidong. You have left him secrets he alone knows. You carry his secrets away and he is still in your hands, your breath, you feel his pressure against your padded jacket. He has shaped the cadence

of your speech. You gave him the address your mother assures you is your home, but who knows what is there now, who knows if Bidong will ever be away from where he is. You hear his cough, you place your head again on the window frame and through the thrumming body of the train you hear the murk and hurt rattle of his lungs as if your head were on his chest now. The furtive contacts, the passionate rush of the slightest touch, you re-fire this sensation in your skin alive inside your head.

Reverie and love-recall ends with train jerk. You look out the window again. Out there is the physical geography of north China in winter; in here in this compartment we are the applied political geography of China eight years into the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. It is etched in you, in your mother, in all the others and in the infinite combinations between you all. You are no favoured child of worker, peasant or soldier, you have run from but been unable to hide your status among the Stinking Number Nine: you are a child of intellectuals. No, you are no child of landlords, rich peasants, counter-revolutionaries, bad elements, Rightists, renegades, enemy agents or capitalist roaders, none of those eight. You are of the ninth category, though you were guilty when you were nine of pointing your finger at this your mother now beside you and calling her a Bad Element, screaming with your Red Book in hand, even though you had no idea what a Bad Element might be.

You knew when you were nine that your terror was of yourself being the target. You hurt then, you hurt still in recollection; shame does not leave you. You failed to save yourself then, you both were sent away. Labelled intellectuals, Stinking Number Nine. You do not yet understand how to measure all this experience, the way history came like a dragon when you were nine, undoing all the secret silences and tensions of all your years, unleashing all your learned silence and restraint. Shh, you had been told, all your life, there was always a shh to be said to you when you asked about almost anything. And then after the life of shh came the wonderful days of yelling and freedom, finding words, finding how to shout and challenge and reject rules; running with older ones from school to change the world. Then one day, back in the university, your crowd joined a bigger crowd, yelling at your mother and they put the dunce's cap on her and you yelled too and then in a silence they pointed out that you were hers and they all took hold of you, even the ones you had run with and they put you to stand beside your mother while they pushed her head lower and lower and lower and told her hard things, starting with things you had wanted to shout at your mother many times, but then many more things that turned you upside down, confused, nauseous. You still live that day, it comes right into the front of your vision so often, permeating smell of your lost bowel, along with the sight of your mother's shaking and sweating and bashed here and there, and seeing the look in others now from the hurt side.

The wheels of history are running you somewhere else again now...

You can sniff fear in this compartment as the train runs east. Everyone has criticised, been criticised. Anger is in you again, anger at this pain and fear. Why have you been taken from Bidong and from your daily work and a routine life, what is your mother taking you to, where are they taking her, what fault is in her now?

You will live a long time riding this train in your heart, with suspense, apprehension, uncertainty. Daily routine blocked the past horrors in the camp; weariness blocked it. Old tension has returned: in the whole motion, the movement,

the things said and not-said, the looks and not-looks of this compartment, this inescapable uncertain train. Terror is back inside you, but now you are no longer a child, now you are a person with old alert brain, so terror has new dimensions but is no less strong and hurting. The future is coming so quickly and it is so unclear. You do not know whether your life is near sunrise, sunset, cliff or comfort. You may never escape from the mind state of this train, ever.

Will your father be there in Beijing? Your mother has a small photo of him, you have seen it only once or twice; you fear asking, you fear for her, asking about him. It has been a long time knowing that yearning is dangerous; a long time to imagine a father, another way you know you have unfairly been angry with your mother, not having a father, not having an explanation for not having a father when you were small, the gap turning from anger to emptiness in the barracks of the plateau exile prison; where is he, why is he not here? Everything you know of your father is from your mother, everything you know about nearly everything is from your mother; everything in the secret world of knowledge, that is. You know too many things; your mother has taught you quietly things that are not discussed in class or work.

You bring a mug of boiled water from the corridor, your stomach pains you now; your mother takes a small piece of rough cake from her pocket and passes it to you. You try to refuse, she insists. You give her the water. Her eyes are determined, her eyes are tired, eternally tired, as you have always known them. But she is strong and every one of these people around, who now do not look at you, they know you, know her, know her strength. They know that your mother carries so much inside her. Precious and dangerous.

You sleep in the afternoon. You ache and try to sleep in the night, you huddle and in the compartment dark the hidden distancing of the day is replaced by secret closeness, hunting warmth.

Around and beyond the river and over the plains. Stopping, waiting, whoof goes some freight train the other way. Then another train slides to a halt beside this one. Then a deep train whistle; that train is starting silently to move. Or is this train starting. An old dream is back, a nightmare... who is the shadow coming in the door?

Jerked awake again. Cold. Leaving behind half your lifetime in the plateau, hunting to envisage the old Beijing street, a home; all you see-hear in your head is yelling, grabbing, hurting. Struggling with recall of how freedom built you up, then pulled you down back then when you were small; it left impressions, but not reasons. Now fears of the new. Feeling inside your head the hurt of the walls and locks to parts of your brain, the security system against entrapment by divulging your thoughts in words or glances. Up there on the plateau things had had a routine — even when the propaganda changed, the posters went up and down and new campaigns replaced old. You had shared the adulation of little Vice Chairman Lin Biao Chairman Mao's Comrade in Arms and Chosen Successor in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution and sought to understand his account of the leftist, rightist and opportunist errors of others who had to be or had been cut down. Then you learned of Lin Biao's treachery and opened your mouth with everyone else to chorus criticism of Lin Biao first as ultra-leftist and then as ultra-rightist. You hate having in your head last year's new chant of 'Criticise Lin Biao, Criticise Confucius' as

you marched to work. The endless rhythm of it over and over, until it vanished from the loudspeakers this year: Pi Lin, pi Kung, pi Lin, pi Kung. What has changed? What is over?

Now tears jerk from you in the dark, Bidong fills your heart and mind, you live again the sensation of stroking Bidong and giggling, humming that chanting rhythm pi Lin, pi Kung, stroking to the rhythm, together in the dark. You whisper to yourself Ai ni, ai Dong – "I love you, I love Dong"... The big slogan a mystery, a mystery of fear, who is Kung in it, who is the real political target, who is labelled Confucius and why? Against whom is the hate to be spat? Who next is to be pulled down after the mysterious coup, crash and death of Lin Biao? The private slogan so warm. Ai ni, ai Dong. Goodbye Pi Lin, pi Kung. But also, you heave your breath — goodbye Dong.

Where are you tonight, Bidong, do you cry with me? You cry for him: 'I miss you, I miss your cough, your limp, your sad smile; your warmth, your wisdom, your generosity.' You have learned so much from him.

Question, self-examination: This love, is it a retreat below or is it a place above the big slogans? You have filled your life, instead of slogans, with the company, the physical warm, the tired smile, the cough and comforting of Bidong, to give forbidden first place in your mind and heart to that illicit contact, happy conversation, warm trust? Is being you, you and you two together, more real than whatever it is that sends this propaganda round? Oh God, oh Marx, Lenin and Mao, you are your mother's daughter. You get a lot of this questioning from her. How nice it would be sometimes not to be a thinker, to be in the herd of propaganda, driven by the fashion, existing inside it. In the end you seem a humanist, this story in your head is egotistical humanism, a crime.

Once when you were small you tried to be a part of history, to make history, to wave a flag, to belong, to belong to a tide of power. Not now. You do not want to be crushed any more, not by anything or anyone except Bidong, you are so tired of the crush of. But you want the freedom you discovered in 1967, that is very strong in you, it is part of your wanting Bidong, the secret love.

A sudden angry belch of hate rises in you for your mother, whose call has brought you on this train away from routine, away from Bidong, into this fear. And then you weep more and hate yourself for thinking like this, black thoughts that so often come in the weary nights. You lean closer to your mother and you shake and tremble. Her wispy hand reaches and takes hold you through your worn filthy padded jacket. In a while you are not shaking any more and you drift into sleep.

In the dawn, running and running now, hear the wheels spinning, chasing to destination. Lights must be green; this train earlier shunted aside for more important others now shoves east in the spaces of the mighty, hastening to keep up, to keep pace, rock and jolt, straight, straight, bend, hunkerjunk through the bend, cinders fly by, now straight again. Like the city crowd you remember when you were small, surge and push, mob, pressure, shout and raw excitement; when you were nine back there ahead here, in Beijing. Out the window see silver tracks dither beside, stare and lose focus as they run, travelling away and back, back to Bidong, feel the train racing pi-dong pi-dong, pi-dong pi-dong. Yes, you can make slogans too, yes you want to pi dong, to 'criticised east', hate all that is coming towards you, all that you fear because you don't know, you fear discovery, you hate

the necessity of history, the bind of history, the prison of it. 'Free me!' Free me? What do you mean, Free Me? Rest your head on this window; see ice soon form where you breathe on the glass. Stare away in the slow light; see the world now hasten by. Try to breathe now. It's coming. Whatever it is. It's coming.

The light grows. There are just low hills now to the north, plains to the south, then you are running away from the hills; with more and more low houses closed against the dust from the north, people moving in heavy coats and now the open spaces are few. The air has cleared a little but dust is settled everywhere and in the wan yellow light the train is slowing. Buildings close in around the track. Streets are crowded; heads are down, moving in the morning cold, on foot, on bike. Here a truck, there a tricycle.

Where are you to go? Your mother is stiff from the travel, weak from hunger, wrinkled in dehydration, though legs swollen with the old oedema, curse of the camp and its poor food. Your energy is for her now. It is good to be eighteen and able to support her now. You are proud, she is proud. You are arriving; the train creeps into this station platform. Serious faces are out there in the uniform greens or blues in the dull dusty light. Halt; sigh of brakes, wheels stopped. Silence with shuffles, sounds only of quiet humans, alert, awaking, shifting.

At the door, someone is asking for your mother.

Your mother's legs are not working well this morning. You half-carry her off the train, she holds you, there is secret intimacy in practicality, no more hate or anger. Your goodbyes to the compartment and the corridor are mainly silent, nodding; there is space made, priority given, respect; in silence. From compartments of strangers there are looks and not-looks, they do not know what is safe to do.

A man on the platform smiles. Your mother knows him, he knows her. He is near your mother's age perhaps but he is not your father, you know that straight away. He is thin; you can see that in how his open padded coat hangs on him. He puts out his hand, you shake it, it is soft, how strange, why is his hand soft? He has four pens in his frayed jacket pocket under the padded coat. He is gentle but also wary and weary on the inside and you can guess he has been a long time in dark places too. Who has not: anyone? When he smiles he shows crooked teeth but he has nearly all his teeth and his brief smile in his long grooved face is respectful not scornful. He has thin hair. His breath is not bad. He is a bit nervous, you think. Your mother is not nervous, not any nervousness that you can see; maybe he is nervous looking at you being nervous. When he speaks it is the sound of Beijing you knew among your mother's friends as a child: strong and curling and rasping, but with gentle weight and carefully chosen words. Wherever this man has been, his heart is still in Beijing.

He tilts his head a little in deference and tells your mother that she has a meeting in the evening, the time of the meeting is not known nor the place nor in fact whether it will be this night or another. First, he says, she must come and rest. He leads from the station, you both follow him. Your mother now on your arm, you together make your way from the station into the light, through a crowd.

Your mother, despite her legs, stands now taller than you have seen her. Does she know more than you know about being here? You follow her example, walk taller and help her. "If he is free, we are free," she says to you quietly. Jolt. How

come? Now you must, you tell yourself, you must always help her. You have no idea for how long you will be able to help her; you have been separated from her so often. Perhaps soon again. Cherish moments. Learn from her. Gather the shards of wisdom among the thousand words, the flicks of the eye in private communication you have learned to follow. You know your mother has been your great saviour, your head is a silenced chatter of uncertainty about coming here but now you see she has led you from darkness to whatever this is, whatever is going to happen now: please, please, you want to beg, do not make me criticise her ever again, mother forgive me, again. You have too much understanding now; you cannot do that again without breaking. Is this new time true or false, will they crush your mother again, crush you now? How long do you have? Your mouth is dry. Stand tall, walk tall, face this. Try to stay in one piece while your head and heart swing wildly.

A car. A car. You are asked to ride in a car, the softness and luxury are disconcerting, surely to be criticised. The man sits in the front; you sit in the corner in the back, trying not to be too far in the car, too off-guard, too comfortable, not allow to be comforted.

The car takes you to a place of alarming warmth and comfort. You wish you could eat with care, only the gentleness of the food and the warmth of the room save you from violent reaction. It is seducing you, the power of comfort is unlocking the doors in your head, this is dangerous, you think. Also your mother's words about freedom, ringing inside your head; ringing to open those doors.

You are allocated a room with your mother, it has two beds and a desk and two chairs and a cupboard where you are invited to place clothes. You laugh a moment and nervously open your bag, laugh at your clothes. The bag falls, tattered clothes scatter ridiculously.

This is a new planet. What is real, what is safe?

There is a bathroom where you go alone – alone – and you summon courage to open taps and use water. You undress alone, it is very strange to be alone. You get under hot falling water with apprehension but you are melted to awareness of yourself, in your body, in washing and feeling yourself under all this water. Stay here, enjoy, pay penalty later... Just for a minute or two anyway, maybe it's five... Are they waiting? Who? Delay, delay: is this the meaning of freedom?

There is a mirror here on the bathroom wall. It is large; you can see your face and even your shoulders. You check the door is locked; alone in this room you look at yourself, as you dry your face. You climb up close to the mirror and look to see the length of you, thin but now you really see you are you going to be a woman. You have looked sidelong and over shoulders to see yourself in windows furtively, seen yourself padded-clothed and often dirty; you have looked at yourself quickly dressing in the camp, you have seen fleeting glimpses of other bodies. This sight in the mirror that you now have time to see, time to get up close and check, is you, reflected you. You can see yourself as if another person; you see yourself touch your skin, you look closely at the peculiarity of clean skin, unfamiliar although your own. You enjoy touching your skin, open places and closed, under hair, in the open. Time slides. You sigh... is this freedom? Grab it, hold it, stay with it a while.

They have given you clean clothes. You dress slowly. You have clean underwear and socks, clean green jacket, blue trousers. New clothes. You pick up the padded jacket they have given you and smell it. It is clean, stiff and new, you

read its label. It must know nothing of the world. Such strange sensations, of time, of indirection, of ... is this some kind of freedom? You are clean and now not rushing, you are different, who are you, who will you be allowed to be now? Are there rocks and dirt out there, waiting to be shifted? There is a silence, no train shoving along, no shouts, no jostles, just some distant voices.

You head back to your room; on the way you come upon a sitting room where your mother is conversing with three men and a woman. They stand up to greet you when you enter the room. This is so strange, where is your reality? Please no, don't, don't, please sit, please, please: qing zuo, qing, qing.

When the visitors go you rest, your mother rests too but when you wake she is at the desk and it is night. You sleep again. It is some time later when they come and take your mother away; well dressed people. She smiles to you. Then alone you lie in the dark in a ball, rocking and rocking. Then at last she is back. She lies with you and after a long silence in which you hear her breathe and you listen for its every inflection, she begins to stroke your hair and she tells you very quietly of the great man with whom she has met, a man who never sleeps, who has assigned her a place and important tasks. Her legs may not work well; his arm does not.

You dare to ask if she asked about your father, she has not dared to ask. You hang on this fine thread together. You see the faces of those from your hut in the plateau as you left, the emotions expressed and hidden, you see Bidong with his longing and coughing. You are on a thread, a piece of cotton that connects you weakly to safety. You cannot talk to your mother about those people back there now, her mind is preoccupied, she speaks with drowsy gaps of new things she must do.

In the morning there is more cannot in your life; you walk slowly out into the streets with your mother and show nothing. It is still not really safe. This is Beijing, this is 1975, the streets are so quiet and empty of life, there is dust everywhere again in the dawn. Who are you? You are tired of history; now you want to be yourself, to discover yourself, more wicked humanism in your heart. You had another hot shower this morning too, you saw yourself again. But you know no one here in this place and it feels so empty as you walk.

In your pocket you feel the scrap of paper with the address Bidong has given you. Not now, not yet. You have not yet seen your own old home. You will not be living there now.



