

from *ocean or tree*
dong li

when the child was a child he walked with his arms swinging the hutong
narrow after school he ran fast

in the ringing of the bell he could hear bigger boys
breathing hard behind him

the residence building was high thirteen floors up he could still
see the boys they were looking up he could see that they were shouting his mind was
white

he did not feel hungry he was sweating on a wooden chair which started to feel
warm he put his hands on his lap the window was open

a slant of sunlight entered the
room he kept his gaze and blinked his eye

another day

he was not allowed to visit his
mother after his parents separated

they used to live in a traditional courtyard house at the
eastern third ring of the city then he moved to his little room on the top floor of this white
building

he was supposed to live with his doctor father but his stepmother did not like him
they bought a house and he was left in the hospital dormitory

he rarely saw his father

at the beginning of every month he would get an envelope of meal tickets from his father
that he could use at the hospital canteen

he always took his meals back to his room where
he would eat them cold after climbing thirteen floors he would double check that the door
was latched he would lean by the window

nobody else lived on his floor he could hear
steps when his fathers colleagues rushed to work or to their meals

he kept himself to his
room his downstairs neighbors adored him because their children liked to play outside
until late and parents had to tear their voices to call them back

he was quiet the conductor asked him where he was going he got off the bus without a mutter he got on the next bus and the conductor asked him where he was going he put one yuan in the conductors hand and went to sit in the back the white building grew smaller and smaller he started to hear his own breathing he could hear his heart

without knowing which station it was he got off the bus and sat on a bench chin buried in hand

a beam of sunlight finally shone in his eyes he felt a pat on his shoulder he looked up he knew it was his sister

she held his hand the narrow alley again he closed his eyes now a left turn where in a corner he had once received blow after blow on his back he opened his eyes and started to run with his sister his hand was sweating he looked back his sister was smiling then her gaze stilled he stopped

before the gate he stood looking a woman beating clothes by the well he lowered his eyes bit his lips turned and ran

thirteen floors down the night he walked into the emergency room next to the white building

pregnant women were sitting on the benches they squeezed and jerked their husbands hands the drunkards were giggling and cursing a young nurse came she looked around ran up to him and grabbed his hand

inside the operation room the nurse threw up thirty stitches around his right eyebrow he was moaning but smiling

his father was angry on this new years eve and the next day sent him to his grandfather in southern china

one day in april the rainy days suddenly ended at dusk swallows flew downward two years he stayed in the countryside in front of his grandfathers house there was a river every day he would wash rice in the river and chat to the women beating clothes on the riverbank until evening chimed from the other bank of the river his grandfather drank he would sell wine bottles and with the money from the bottles he would gamble with his local comrades between sweetening fruits he returned to beijing he took the train that expanded its network into the village which snaked its way by the river

he was invited to his fathers for the first time he brought red candy and fresh eggs his stepmother was pregnant and threw him out

past the fence he felt his left
foot in the water his hands holding the iron bar he put down his right foot his hands
stretched sideways so that he could balance himself he was walking slowly his eyes were
looking ahead

on his head a stork dropped its poop he grew weak in the knees and his
buttocks touched the rock in the water he was trying to grab keeping his head above the
water

his nose was sour when he woke up by the riverbank the lotus market night had just
started on the other bank of the river fireworks shot up into the sky the night was white
like day

between two electric currents he stopped banging his head against the wall he
could hear his heart

his fingers burning the cuts on the forehead hurt the dents in the skull
felt numb he unlatched the door

the smoke from last nights burning still lingered in the
hallway he almost choked on a book that he spotted at a corner where his fathers
colleagues stacked boxes of medical equipment he looked around before reaching for the
book his eyes welled up with dust from the smoke

the door was latched he pasted
newspaper onto the window and read beneath the quilt under the flashlight a single leaf
had outlasted its season and trembled still

he read in the toilet at night and fought in the
streets during the afternoons he daydreamed

a fish net tightened three hundred parts of
the body were squeezed out then chopped off his nose twitched he felt like a tree

cloudy
days through some backdoor connection his father sent him to an athletic school to play
ping pong

forehand pendulum reverse pendulum sweat rushed open his old cuts in the
raw center of an open wound there appeared an open field

even a child knew when he
heard it the music all winter he clutched the seeds and when he opened his fist he
watched spring golden wheat field sprout

he says
yes mother

he described for her the
mushroom river

white mushrooms floated the river a child in his red jacket exposed the
skin of daylight his basket was full

songs of the vast field brought light and river to his
eyes he buried his hands under his elbows

mother mushrooms

his mother was hanging
clothes on the wet washing line fungus lichened the well the pump rusting her black
shoes soaked

she carried the wooden laundry bowl under her left elbow and walked over
the threshold where the red rotten door squeaked and shut after her

the room was dark a
bat was hiding on an upper beam dishes were already on the table covered by a damp
grey cloth

his sister squatted by the well she was sticking a line of red ants going home
before the rain she looked back the northeastern wind blew past the front gate

night
dropped its light she stood up rubbed her hands smoothed them on her pants and latched
the front gate

her mother was sewing under a pale yellow lamp she walked in and
grabbed her stuffed tiger and sat by the threshold the wind blew harder the light flickered
the windows clapped

they both looked through the lacquered window toward the front
gate and the opposite side of it a crispy jingling of a bell came louder his mother put
down her sewing needles and uncovered the dishes his sister sat squarely on a bamboo
chair biting her finger nails

his mother slapped his sisters hand and his sister retrieved her
hand onto her lap under the table her father walked in leaving a trail of water gathering
into a small pool a cat meowed licked some water and rubbed its nose with its paw

another

night

he had cold sweats

he was sent to the battle field because of adultery with the
egyptian imperial concubine his hands were cut off his legs smashed by a bomb a spear
pierced his heart and shivered still

he heard his heart there was a knock on the door he
unlocked it and saw that it was a policeman he unlatched it

because his parents were
divorced and he lived with his father he became the only son of his fathers household so
he was exempt from being sent to the countryside to breed pigs and herd sheep

he

daydreamed

his eyes welled up with black iron in the iron earth the body was used and
used filth gathered and stayed for another year

the door opened slammed and opened
slowly

his head drooped down to his chest and he woke up the door was still latched
an itch crept from body to mind

he thinks

a loveless child makes a man contagious all his
life

under a dim flashlight he read until dawn

another day

after his school years he was
assigned to work in a factory that made projection equipment he made light bulbs
measuring the length of wires and the thickness of glass

another ten years

he kicked

around beer cans and fought in the street afternoons

he dozed off in his room the sunlight
shone through the newspaper pasted window the characters on the page reflected onto his
face he slapped his own face and smiled

he wanted to be a poet and now his little room
was sardined with his relatives some of them came from some faraway places and he had
never met them before so he tried to spot his father in the crowds but to no avail the little
room grew stuffy he turned around and his head started to spin white

clouds floating
reflected through the newspaper pasted on the window and blazed in his eyes he held his
hands to shade his eyes and his forehead felt ice cold his breath thickened he turned
around he was hearing voices that meandered into a narrow alley covered by salt his fist
tightened the night so young the moon so pale he pushed back the crouching crowd and
latched the door

the light bulb dangled he was looking at the light bulb like everybody
else he started to feel his shirt stuck to his skin

he thought of salt

this very night he heard
nightingale singing he heard his heart

the heat of cultural revolution drought the five
lands pots and pans were smashed into bits and pieces and gathered into piles and piles in
the courtyard of local government offices irons were melted flags were waving parades
were cheering maos apple red face appeared everywhere

imperialism was talked down
capitalists were banged and hanged black

iron rooted and took over the season in the iron
black industrial sky

his father coughed heavily his father shuffled his feet back and forth
the light bulb pendulumed a dirty yellow light the gate burst open his heart dropped

the revered uncle strode across the threshold and looked him in the eye he wanted to
laugh it was not a time to be funny his hand was clutching his pants

his uncle worked at
the soviet embassy as second secretary and scolded him for having such a ridiculous idea
at such a revolutionary time

following the stinky ones who wrote he was biting the
bullet and sent his family a white cloth to be hanged on the high beam

he looked ahead
past the eyes which were watching and wondering he looked ahead of himself through
the window leaves yellowed and swirled before laying flat and rotten on the dirt road

rain

it rained on him

ich bin ein berliner applauds overwhelmed kennedy and he was
bewhelmed

character on character snowed into his room

by and by

he made lists he
wrote down everything until nothing was left outside his little room

when he fought in the
streets in those clamorous afternoons even with a few extra blows rained on him he
would win by spurting out blood and word

now he carried a piece of paper in his pocket
before his usual afternoons he would take it out before his fight and more blows were
absorbed

windows were opened

everybody went back to fend for their family nobody
fought in the streets any more cultural revolution ended up in the city where littered
cabbage peels were gathered and filled in the ground

the light shone differently from a
different sun

vines flowered on his window the pasted newspaper yellowed blackened
and rotten he blew his breath onto the window and rubbed it with his sleeve

he leaned his
body over the windowsill he was looking down the street was clean the trees were calm

he slid down and turned around he jumped and sat on the windowsill facing his room the
sun fired on his back

down there it took a long time to fell a tree

dice fished out

click

clink clicky clink clinky click

the dice rolls who knows in the field and light that brings
back the dizziness the unbearable echo of a number

a wheel squeaked and rolled on

he remained calm after the itch went away he remained silent the light shone still a long
gaze fired in the deep of his pupil

he watched her burning all her manuscripts he watched
her being so calm and cool he pained not for her but for himself

love fell him and she sat

calm character by character diced between them and curved into a black smeared page

under the yellow kerosene light he could hear his heart

the window was open and a black
hole he could smell the grass on the other side of the riverbank he closed his eyes the
eyes were watching they were following the ghost light behind the tall grass

he walked

into the dark and stepped into a swamp he could smell fish he could smell burning the
closed night opened

open the window and cry

save and revolt

out in tiananmen square the

four gang was crushed lins plane crashed over the china russia border

when the roots are

cut to the deep where to take root

day

temples and shrines fell to ashes books mountained
in the marketplace and buried in fires

maos little red book was recited and clutched to
the heart

all damp

little ruffles sleeved to the cracking branches

he looked up and threw
his head down to the deep of the swamp

and roots

save and revolt

he grew sick of his
autonomous job at the light bulb factory and was finding ways to fake sick leave so that
he could stay at home and write

there happened to be a poetry fan of his that had a few
recipes for such unspeakable dishonesties

he put egg yellow in his urine for a medical test
but to no avail so he went back to this poetry fan

five minutes before his appointment
with the doctor he went to the bathroom frantically throwing his arms up and down left
and right until he grew totally out of breath and his arms feeling out of place then he went
to see the doctor but the time was not always right and every couple of weeks he had to
go back so he went back to the poetry fan

the poetry fan said the last recipe killed and
asked to be treated to the old moscow restaurant

he counted on his fingers and that meal
would cost him three months worth of salary

he clacked his teeth and borrowed money
everywhere until his blood pressure rose high enough for a long term sick leave

april of
nineteen eighty nine

he unlatched his door and went

