

ADDRESS UNKNOWN

BY GAO ERTAI

Dissident artist and writer Gao Ertai fled China in 1992, leaving behind his 25-year-old daughter, Gao Lin. Three months later, Gao learned that his daughter had killed herself. Gao Ertai wrote the following tribute to Gao Lin, which was recently posted on the Internet.

My child, I'm talking to you, can you hear me?

I hope you can, but I'm afraid you cannot.

Do you remember? The day after we buried your mother, late at night, I gathered you in my arms and took you to her grave at the edge of the desert.

We waited for a long time, but she didn't return.

I understood her. I believed that as long as her soul remained, she would definitely return to us. The fact that she didn't prove that human life is extinguished like a candle. There is no soul, there is no reincarnation; physical movement and the ebb and flow of nature are all there is.

For that reason, I'm afraid.

At that time you were only three years old. Your eyes bore a solemnity and melancholy beyond your years. I remember your expression even now. I believe that you also definitely remember that silvery moonlight and its boundless desolation.

At that time I had rushed home from staging an exhibition in Jiuquan, and after everything was taken care of I had to go back. We hitched a ride from Dunhuang, passing through Anxi, Yumen and the Jiayuguan Pass back to Jiuquan, the bleakness of the Gobi and Chuanyuan stretching before us. The bus jolted terribly, shaking you until your head ached. You became carsick, you vomited, you couldn't eat or drink and you slept badly. You woke up in the middle of the night and wept.

We spent a period of time in the noise and chaos of the exhibition, then arrived at the No. 57 Cadre School. The No. 57 Cadre School was where adults went to have their thinking reformed. Everything was done in groups. There was no one to play with you, there were no toys or picture books, there were no nice things to eat and no fun places to go to. All you could do was follow me around all day long. When we were sent out

to work, you went along and sat at the edge of the field playing with sand and stones, so covered in dirt that you looked as if you were made of clay. When we had our meetings you spun around in the meeting room, inhaling the second-hand smoke of our cigarettes . . . You were like a tiny blade of grass sprouting from a tin roof.

At meal times you went with us to the canteen. If you were lucky you got a bite of meat and vegetables once or twice a month. Sometimes I gave you a piece of meat from my bowl, but you always said, "Don't, Papa, you eat it." People sitting nearby praised your good attitude.

There was always a strong wind there in the northwest, the sunlight dimmed by yellow dust. When you couldn't go with us to the fields, you wandered around by yourself in the barren courtyard. When night fell you would wait for me by the roadside. On the way home I could always see you searching for me among the groups of workers, your little frame motionless in the impenetrable darkness. When I drew near, you would run over to me and raise your face and lift your arms for me to pick you up.

Once when I picked you up I discovered a piece of meat in your mouth. I thought you had stolen it, and without asking for an explanation I immediately lost my temper. I said, "Aren't you afraid of getting sick? Aren't you ashamed?" After yelling at you for a while, I told you to spit it out immediately. You watched me quietly all the while, then you said that the meat was some I had given you at lunch time, and you had kept the last piece to enjoy the flavor a little longer.

I apologized to you and asked for your forgiveness, and you cried. You cried so hard and so bitterly that your lips turned blue. I carried you in one arm and with the other pounded myself on the head and said, "Papa was bad. You should hit Papa." Still weeping, you said over and over again, "I won't hit you."

I felt I was a total bastard.

Eventually the leaders of the cadre school were good enough to give me a simple room with a table, bench and a stove. In your words, this was now our home. Although it was very basic, we could make toys, tell stories, draw comics and enjoy some happiness. Unfortunately our walls were made of clay, so we had no place to pin up our pictures. Unfortunately we had

to go out early and came back late, so our time at home was too limited.

One autumn day, as we were walking home, we caught a little hedgehog, only the size of a fist. Its face and legs were pink, its eyes bright and shiny, and its nose twitched. It would eat whatever we fed it, an adorable creature. After growing rapidly for about two months, it suddenly disappeared. Our window hadn't been broken, and there were no holes in the walls or floor, and we couldn't understand what had happened to it. You thought some invisible creature in the house must have eaten it, and from then on you were afraid to be at home alone.

At the end of that year, the cadre school arranged a song and dance performance, putting up posters and decorating the halls to celebrate the New Year. No one else knew how to draw, so I had to help out, sometimes until very late at night. You wouldn't sleep without me, but the scene was chaotic. One night, when it got too late, I brought you home, and you refused to go to bed unless I promised not to go back. Still dressed, I lay down and patted you, and you asked me, "Why don't you get undressed? Are you waiting for me to fall asleep so you can go out again?" I said I wouldn't do that, I was just waiting for you to go to sleep and then I would sleep, too. You believed me, and after a while you fell asleep. I quietly got up, quietly closed the stove and put out the lamp, and made my way through the two courtyards to the meeting room.

The windows of the meeting room were webbed with frost. Although the lamp was bright and voices babbled noisily, and two coal stoves burned red and the chimney howled, we still felt the night wind piercing the cracks in the door like the blade of a knife. Suddenly the door burst open, and you charged in through the mist, crying and completely naked, without even shoes. Everyone in the room gasped in astonishment. I was shocked, then burst into a fury, grabbing you and thrashing your bottom and yelling, "Are you trying to kill yourself?" You wept until your lips swelled, and it was a long time before you could get your breath back.

Several women who were there came over and complained that my temper was too fierce. I said nothing, but wrapped you in my coat and held you by the stove. You insisted on pushing your hand out and grasped one of my fingers. I could feel you shivering through the thick sheepskin. Finally you fell asleep, your little hand still grasping my finger. Looking at your face, still blue with cold, and your tiny, trembling fingers, I felt I was really a bastard. It occurred to me that for a little girl to come running out into the icy weather in the middle of the night, her body naked beneath the stars, she must have been terribly afraid.

Fortunately you didn't get sick after that episode.

When you awoke the next day, you were chattering and smiling as if you remembered nothing. I still felt repentant and pained, and said I was a bad father. You replied, "No, that's not true. Papa is good. Papa is wonderful."

At that time I was a bit emotionally overwrought. For some reason my eyes filled with tears.

Your mother and I married in March 1966 at the Dunhuang Cultural Relics Research Center. When the horrors of the Cul-

tural Revolution began that June, I was one of the first affected. She took the articles I wrote and went to stay at your grandmother's house. Your grandfather was a well-known physician, and headed up the Dunhuang Hospital. Soon after your mother returned he was labeled a counterrevolutionary. The door to his home was broken open, and Red Guards streamed in and out, ransacking the house and beating its occupants day and night. There was no way to escape, only to endure.

You were born in January of 1967. It was at the height of the turmoil. At that time I believed the turmoil could not last for long. I believed the tyrannical government had already reached its extreme and couldn't continue much longer this way. So even though I could not yet see light, I felt we were approaching the end of the tunnel. We named you Gao Lin, from a stanza of "Harsh Winter," a poem by Lu You¹ that reads, "I see a green glimpse of forest" (*yi jian wei lu sheng gao lin*). I believed we would soon see buds pushing out of the bare tree branches in the spring breeze. History results from the convergence of many coincidental factors, making it impossible to predict. Subjective wishes affect objective judgment, and self-deception is inevitable.

I wonder if you felt your mother's depression and terror while you were still in her womb. Did you hear the screaming and shouting outside? Newly descended into this chaos, did you retain an impression of the nightmarish scenes, the maniacal laughter, the gleeful beatings, the scarlet streaks of blood caught in the beam of a flashlight at night, the vision of faces in gas masks whenever atomic bombs were tested, the anti-chemical warfare corps spraying foam in the streets? When I think back on these scenes, I recall the expression in your eyes, not that of a child, so serious and so melancholy. I don't know if this is merely a reconstruction of my own memories.

Our original intention was to send you back to my home village in Jiangnan,² where my mother and sister could look after you, and you would have cousins to play with and could live more comfortably. But as soon as you arrived there, you became ill. Scabies, kidney infection, sinusitis, headaches, one after another. Your grandmother and aunt rushed you by long-distance bus to a hospital in Nanjing. They took you there every day and prepared nourishing food for you to eat. Because of your illness, you received more attention than your cousins. And because you were sick, you couldn't be as happy as they were. Whenever the time came for our annual family visits, I returned to Gaochun and took you all to the countryside to play. When I saw your cousins running and shouting, and you following slowly behind, I felt very sad.

My second marriage brought a huge amount of confusion and conflict. We thought this was just an adult tragedy, and never guessed it was yours as well. I was away for eleven months of the year, and didn't have to listen to any of the arguing; when I returned to Gaochun I couldn't tolerate it for a month. You had to put up with it all year round. In a small town there is no privacy, and rumors run rampant through the streets and alleyways. No one thinks about protecting a child. I couldn't stand listening to a word of it, but you had to listen to it countless times over the course of a year. I remember when I went back that year, your grandmother and aunt, in order to

avoid trouble, told you to call me Uncle, but you refused and insisted on calling me Papa. I was greatly moved. But it never occurred to me to consider how much all this was hurting you.

Finding it impossible to deal with so many difficulties, your grandmother and aunt took you and your cousins away from Gaochun to the countryside. It was a time of hardship and confusion. Fortunately, by the time you reached school age you had recovered from most of your illnesses apart from an occasional headache. Like your cousins, you were able to pack your lunch and head to the city every day for school. It was a long trip, forcing you to rise before dawn. Jiangnan is a rainy region; the roads were always slippery with mud, making the trip all the more difficult.

For our family visit that year, we rented two bicycles in the city and rode them to the countryside. You and your cousins had just started your winter break and clamored to be taught to ride the bicycles. The bicycles were too large for young children to ride. When you sat on the seat your feet dangled in the air – you couldn't reach the pedals. You took the bicycles to the yard every day and practiced with some neighbor children. When you came back, the others were all fine, but you were always covered with bruises and scrapes from head to toe. I told you not to go, but you wouldn't listen and went anyway. An old scrape would just be healing when a new one replaced it; with scabs all over, you looked like a calico cat. Your New Year's clothes were in tatters.

After five or six days you had learned to ride. I went to the yard and saw you grasp the handlebars and stand on one pedal, then raise your other foot and swing it over to the other pedal, and wildly pumping spin around the yard. The other children hadn't learned to ride, and could only stand along the perimeter and watch. I felt this was the result of not being afraid of pain or falling. One day you came home looking like a drowned rat; it turned out that you had ridden further and further away from the yard, and ran off the path between two fields into a small pond. After I wheeled the bicycle home I insisted that you couldn't ride it any more, and in that way avoided a great deal of potential trouble.

Your grandmother and I, as well as your two aunts, really admired your pluck and determination, but your grandmother warned us not to praise you, or you might lose all your inhibitions. So I said nothing, but in my heart I was glad.

What made me even happier was that in spite of your headaches, you did very well in school, and always came out at the top of your class.

At the end of the 1970s your second aunt and I were both "rehabilitated," and had our reputations and employment restored. Just at this happy turn of fate, your grandmother passed away. You accompanied me wherever I went, constantly changing schools and getting used to new cities and people.

Beijing No. 11 School, Lanzhou University Attached School, Gansu University Attached School, Sichuan University Attached School, these were all top secondary schools, but you always gained admission to them. I was really proud of you.

At that time you often said that you always dreamed of fly-

ing, that you dreamed you were flying like a bird in the sky. You were always watching the birds, your little arms spread like wings. When I was a young boy I never had this kind of experience. While I was a young man, the most beautiful vision I had was of the light at the end of the tunnel. I'm sure you never knew how much your innocent words and spontaneous movements transported me to the realm of lyric poetry.

You were still suffering from headaches, and we looked everywhere for treatment, but we could never determine the cause. Beijing Tianqiao Hospital was said to be the best in all of China for neurological studies, and Dr. X the best neurologist. They could find no organic illness and believed it was psychosomatic. But the lengthy treatment without results raised doubts. When you finally broke down with schizophrenia, your headaches got better. I wonder if the two were related.

One sultry evening in the summer of 1985, Guoguo came over to repair our electric stove. You stood alongside watching the whole time, chatting and joking with him. After he left, you called me to our third floor window and pointed to his tall, broad-shouldered form and said you thought he was handsome. It gave me a shock to realize suddenly that you had grown up.

That year you were eighteen, and were a senior at the Sichuan Normal University Attached Secondary School. Guoguo's father, Professor Su Heng, was a friend of mine. I knew that their family liked you very much. I asked if you liked Guoguo and wanted me to drop some hints on your behalf. You said, "No, no, no! I don't like him! If I liked him I would tell him myself." I said I also thought he was handsome, and you said a man's value was not in his looks but in his brain. This gave me another start: it had never occurred to me that you would know how to speak of a man's value.

You liked *Jean-Christophe* and *Jane Eyre*. I recommended an article discussing these books. It was an excellent article written by a friend of mine who was studying Abraham Maslow³ at the Beijing Academy of Social Sciences. He was over forty, with a balding head, short and plump. When he came to visit I paid no particular notice. It never occurred to me that you would fall in love with him because of this article.

I told you that he had a girlfriend in Beijing. I said, "Even if he didn't, and even if he loved you, a good essay doesn't make a good man.⁴ That's not to say he's a bad man, but just that you have no way of knowing that he's not." You paid me no mind, but continued to write letters to him right up until he married someone else, at which time you broke down in heartbroken despair. I felt very bad, but there was nothing I could do to help. Fortunately you were just graduating from secondary school at that time, and were preparing to go to Nankai University in Tianjin to study, and the shadow of your sorrow faded in the brightness of your prospects. As the time for your departure approached, and you washed and mended your clothes and packed your personal belongings, a smile gradually returned to your face. I was very happy.

I had no way of knowing that during the "anti-liberalism" movement, someone had gathered up information on me and

reported it to the State Education Board. Just before the school term began, the Nankai committee head, Wang Kun, and the head of the Chinese Studies office, Liu Fuyou, both contacted me and said that Nankai had come under criticism for admitting you, and that they had been forced to rescind your enrollment. You refused to accept the truth and insisted on attending classes. A few days later you disappeared. When I found you at the bus station, your eyes were dull and expressionless and your speech was abnormal. I took you to the hospital for examination and they diagnosed you with schizophrenia.

The first time I went to visit you at the psychiatric hospital, you were conscious. Your face was a bit swollen, and the expression in your eyes was melancholy, your reactions delayed. Both of your heels were injured, the flesh mangled.

I asked you how your feet had come to be injured, and you said you didn't know.

I asked the doctor, and he said you had tried to rush out of the hospital, and they had caught you and given you an injection and pulled you back into your room, and that your heels had scraped against the floor and stairs.

I gritted my teeth and said nothing.

I remember that year when your mother died in the countryside, and I took you away from the village at Dunhuang, the local officials wouldn't transfer your meal ration or household registration, because they said a child eventually became a pair of working hands. I had to fight hard to finally manage the transfer. On the "residential transfer card," where the reason for transfer had to be filled in, scrawled in faded ink are the words, "joining father." Even though it's just a bureaucratic document, it still moves me to read it.

I never guessed that the result of joining your father would be this.

From the time you joined me, I never properly took care of you. Even though I was able to keep you with me after I was rehabilitated, you were at school and I was writing or teaching, each of us busy with our own activities. Having just emerged from the abyss, I was under pressure from all sides. On top of that was a belly full of rage and sorrow that made me constantly want to cry out, to argue, to stir up other people's rebellious mentality; I spent my days and nights in a frenzy of writing. This brought on another string of persecution that disrupted our lives. The divorce proceedings took years, and you were dragged into the unpleasantness.

You were a good girl; you bore up well under hardship and made outstanding accomplishments, and I was proud of you. But I had no idea what might be bothering or worrying you, and it never occurred to me that I should know. Our home life was substandard. I never learned how to cook, and when you came home from school we'd simply have our meal in the school canteen. I never asked if you liked eating that food. I remember once you told me you were tired of eating *mantou*, but I paid no real attention.

I remember when I was at Lanzhou University, we learned that Lanzhou Normal's attached secondary school had a higher rate of college admission than the attached secondary school

of Lanzhou University, and you insisted that I find a way to transfer you. The Normal University was far away. The night before you left, you examined my clothing piece by piece. You darned all the holes and replaced all the missing buttons. You mended frayed spots in the elbows, knees, collars and cuffs with matching thread. Watching you sewing away in your chair by the window, I was deeply moved. But it never occurred to me to thank you.

So many years have passed since then.

Even when you came back from the hospital, to my deepest regret, I often forgot to ensure that you took your medication on time.

The doctor advised that it would not be good for you to stay at home, and that you needed to be distracted by some occupation. The work quota that the Sichuan Normal University personnel department had obtained for you from the Labor Bureau was given to someone else. I didn't learn of this until I went to Nanjing University. At Nanjing University they agreed to arrange work for you, but because I was detained and imprisoned they didn't make good on their promise. I learned about this after I left prison.

Even after I learned of it, there was nothing I could do but blame my own impotence. I could only come before you with true repentance and say, "My child, I'm sorry."

At one point there seemed to be some hope that you could be completely cured.

In the summer of 1987, after a delay of seven years, the court passed judgment and granted my divorce. At the end of that year, your Auntie Bao and I married in Chengdu, and she obtained a transfer to live there. Seventeen years after your mother's death we were a complete family once again.

Your intuition was extremely good; in spite of your short life experience, you very accurately assessed my friends. The first time you met Auntie Bao in Beijing, you said to me, "This is someone you can trust." At that time she and I were only ordinary friends. You were attending school at the No. 11 School in Baoquan Lu, I was working in the philosophy department of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences at Jianguomen Avenue, and she worked at the Beijing Capital Museum in Guozijian Street. The three locations were rather widely dispersed. When you had a problem you sometimes telephoned her rather than me. I was glad to see you getting along.

When you became ill, she was in Beijing, and all along she wanted to find a good psychiatrist for you. At the Huaxia Research Institute there was someone named Guo Hua who presented herself as a professional psychiatrist and agreed to come to Chengdu to treat you. Just before she left, Guo said she didn't have a winter coat, and Auntie Bao loaned her her own leather overcoat, felt coat and wool sweater and pants to take with her. In the cold weather Auntie Bao herself was left with nothing but her mother's clothes. But that person never came to Chengdu, and we never heard anything more from her. When we inquired at the Institute, the director said Guo had disappeared, and that they were also looking for her.

After you left the hospital, you required medication to control your condition and help you stay alert. The medication included antidepressants and tranquilizers, and they had side-effects. Extended use could cause liver damage and a drop in intellectual ability. You were afraid, and kept lowering the dosage on your own, so it was hard to keep your condition stable. I was also afraid that you would become stupid and didn't know which way to turn, so I left it to you to decide your dosage; there were times when there was too much going on at home and the confusion overwhelmed us all, and I would criticize you for this and that, forgetting that you were ill.

When you knew that Auntie Bao was coming, you were very happy. When I brought her home that day, as soon as we came in the door we saw taped on the white wall the words, "A Warm Welcome to Auntie Bao." Each word was a different color and tacked up at different angles, creating a crazy, merry effect. I was completely surprised, and Auntie Bao was so pleased that she leaped into your arms.

Three times each day she made sure you took your medication on time. Your emotions became more stable. Our home returned to a semblance of order and tidiness. When I came home there was warm food to eat, and you had someone to talk to. You loved pouring your heart out, and after she finished teaching her art classes she would come home and talk with you while doing her housework. It seemed that for the first time in many years you had someone to whom you could express feelings you'd kept bottled up inside. Those memories striking like a bolt of lightning in the darkness; the solidification of your stream of consciousness; the disembodied voices; the psychic torment; the spiritual hell of your suppressed dreams and abyss of despair; all these, with exposure, faded and lost their profundity.

Gradually you became willing to start studying again. You were still very smart. English, computer, drawing, the piano, you learned them all very quickly. Although you were fidgety and had to change classes often, you didn't forget what you had already learned. If you had to drop a subject for a while, you could pick it up again later. Gradually you were able to continue for longer periods of time and with shorter interruptions, and showed an increasing interest in your subjects; we were very happy.

Once we talked about what you would do in the future, and your answer astonished me. You said that once you had recovered, you wished to study medicine and become a psychiatrist who treated schizophrenia. You said that it was only after you became ill that you understood how painful and frightening this illness was, and only after recovering that you knew how to escape it. You said you were determined to help other sick people so they would experience less pain and recover more quickly. You said Freud, Jung and Adler were all brilliant, but that they lacked direct personal experience and sometimes contradicted themselves. You said you wanted to write a book to fill in the gaps they left.

This was the second time I felt proud of you.

These were happy days. We would go out for a walk every evening. In the wooded paths outside the university the three of us would march along to the rhythm of the songs we sung.

Some of the songs we made up as we went along, and if we liked them we kept singing them for days afterward.

Unfortunately, after we moved to Nanjing University, there were no such wooded paths outside the campus.

In 1989 there was an arrest campaign nationwide, and everyone on campus was in constant fear. In order to spare you the anxiety, I sent you to your aunt's home in Gaochun for a while.

After I was detained, police searched our home at Nanjing University. I was sent first to Nanjing's Wawaqiao Prison, and subsequently escorted to a detention center in Chengdu. In order to be near me in prison, Auntie Bao had to hurry from Nanjing to Chengdu.

The crime with which I was charged was "counterrevolutionary propaganda and subversion." In spite of the articles I'd written, my remarks in private conversation and speeches in public forums, the authorities were ultimately unable to convict me, and in the spring of the second year of my detention I was released. But it wasn't "release on acquittal," but rather "completion of investigation." Without a proper conclusion, I was liable to be arrested at any false step. Auntie Bao was in poor health and found it hard to bear up under this tumult; as soon as I was released from prison, she fell ill. After three months in the hospital she was reduced to skin and bones. During this period, under pressure from the State Education Commission, Nanjing University no longer wanted me around and took back our apartment, which was still in chaos from the police search. When we returned to Nanjing we had no home, and all we could do was sell off our books and furniture and return to Sichuan Normal University to stay temporarily.

My personnel file was at Nanjing University, but my food ration, household registration and personal connections were at Sichuan Normal University. I wasn't allowed to lift a finger; I couldn't teach or publish articles or books. My book *Selected Essays of Gao Ertai*, published by Bashu Publishing House, was withdrawn after both attempts to distribute it. Fortunately I also knew how to draw, so I still had outlets for expression. By the time Auntie Bao's health improved I had already found work teaching in the Fine Arts faculty. With our life resuming some measure of stability, I brought you back to Chengdu from Gaochun so you could return to your old life and studies, and to our evening walks.

We never guessed that fate would knock at our door again.

Two dissidents on the wanted list, Bei Ming and Zheng Yi,⁵ turned up unexpectedly. They were being pursued by police and had exhausted all their resources and all their routes of escape. Zheng was ill and needed an operation. We had to help them.

This matter should have been kept secret, but in order to raise some money for them and find safe shelter and medical treatment, it was necessary for me to ride around the city on my bicycle approaching people for help, and I was rebuffed many times. So once this situation was arranged, and they were sent safely on their way, we lost our own sense of security.

It's not that we didn't trust our friends. But I remember very clearly that when the police questioned me in prison,

they had a lot of information that only our friends would have known. If I were sent back to prison, there was no way of knowing when I would be released. And this time Auntie Bao was implicated along with me. When I thought of her health situation, and recalled what Xiao Xuehui⁶ had told us about the women's prison after her release, fear chilled me to the bone. I decided we had to escape.

Attempting to escape would be dangerous, but waiting was even more dangerous. Casting ourselves to an unknown fate seemed preferable to the thought of spending aimless, tenuous days at the mercy of the carelessness of our enemies and the loyalty of our friends.

Auntie Bao was afraid, and kept delaying our departure. Bei Ming and Zheng Yi eventually escaped to Hong Kong and told people there of our situation. People came over to help us, and that gave us the courage to set out.

Although we'd been thinking of it constantly, the moment of our departure seemed to arrive very suddenly.

I asked your third aunt to look after you. She was my youngest sister, and I knew you were safe with her. The main problem was that both she and her husband had to work, and there was no one home to keep you company during the day. So I also sent a telegram to your second aunt in Gaochun, and she came to Chengdu to stay with you. During this vital juncture, your only thought was for our safety, and you repeatedly urged us to be careful on the trip, and repeatedly told us to write to you as soon as we got out so you could stop worrying. I regretted deeply my inability to look after you, and hearing your entreaties I felt even more deeply saddened. Facing the perils ahead, I could only urge you to take care of yourself, and hope that once we were out and settled we could arrange for you to join us, and start a new life together.

Our route of escape was entirely in the hands of our rescuers. When your aunt received the telegraph, she set off immediately, but she wouldn't arrive for three days, and we couldn't wait that long. Our future was already in progress; our tickets had been purchased. Without even time to put our home in order, we hurriedly embarked on our journey, led by someone we'd never met.

On the day of our departure, Auntie Bao prepared our belongings and I took you to your third aunt's home. On the way there I was afraid you would keep looking around and display your nervousness. On the bus we ran into several people we knew, and you laughed and chatted with them as if everything were normal. When we got off the bus you criticized me for my unnatural smile and tense manner, and worried that I'd run into trouble while in flight. When I saw how serious you were, I was less worried.

We disembarked at the terminus on 38th Road and changed to another bus, after which we had to walk the rest of the way to Niushikau. You were carrying a bag of your belongings, and I said, "I'm stronger, let me carry it." You refused, so we carried it together.

There were no shops on that street, and the houses presented a wall of dreary and unrelenting gray; passing cars

sprayed muddy water all around, making it difficult for pedestrians.

As we walked along you suddenly said, "Papa, if you live through this, the rest of your life will be very happy."

I said I hoped you were right.

You said, "Your greatest happiness is Auntie Bao."

I said that was true.

I said you could put your mind entirely at rest. As soon as I said it, I was suddenly overcome with a sense of foreboding that cast a pall over me.

I hoisted your bag onto my shoulder and said, "As soon as we get out, I'll write to you."

You said, "I'll be waiting."

Those three words, "I'll be waiting," continue to echo in my ears even now.

The walk on that out-of-the-way road always revisits me in my dreams. I had ventured to that place only occasionally before, and felt extremely alien there. But since that day it has become deeply familiar; even that soul-piercing grayness has instilled in me an unfathomable nostalgia, as if the essence of the word "home" was concentrated in that small place.

That day was June 28, 1992.

Late at night on July 11 we arrived in Hong Kong. The boat came to rest along a beach, not at a pier. The man in charge of the rescue mission, Pastor X, a devout Christian, drove his car to meet us and arranged for us to stay at the home of Legislative Councilor Cheung Man-kwong. We met with an extremely warm reception. Cheung and his wife gave up their own bedroom for us and slept on a sofa in their living room for two weeks. To find such warm friendship among total strangers filled us with boundless wonder and gratitude.

We didn't write to you or to anyone else. Our hosts instructed us not to leave the apartment or to have any contact with the outside world. The rescue mission had to be kept secret, because it hadn't been approved by the Hong Kong British authorities; we were illegal immigrants, and could not expose ourselves.

In order to change our identities, we had to first surrender ourselves to the authorities and undergo investigation. This was part of the legal process, and Pastor X told us not to worry. He said, "The law enforcement officials are aware of the circumstances and they'll process your applications quickly. Just rest for a few days first, and once we've collected all the necessary materials I'll send someone to take you over."

In that way, Auntie Bao and I were sent to a prison in Hong Kong's northern suburbs.

It seemed it was my fate to be imprisoned again, to escape from one prison only to enter another. It was the first time for Auntie Bao, and the third time for me. Each of my three imprisonments was different. There were great differences between the first times and the last, and many interesting experiences.

We were released after a couple of weeks with official identification cards in our hands.

Pastor X picked us up and took us to a resort village near the

water. He said that because Hong Kong was near the mainland, the situation remained complicated, and we wouldn't be genuinely safe until we obtained political asylum in the United States. Even though we were now legal residents of Hong Kong, we should still keep a low profile. We should have no contact with anyone but him and his assistant, and in particular we should not contact anyone on the mainland.

We wanted to send a brief letter home, but he said, "You can't do that. It's for the sake of your own safety and that of your family members." Our quarters were far from the city, so we spent most of the time walking along the beach, and we talked constantly about you. Auntie Bao felt especially moved and emotional when I told her of our conversation on the way from Xiangqiaozi to Niushikou. She felt we had wronged you, and said, "I keep thinking, if she had been my own child, would I have been willing to leave her behind and go so far away?"

We gazed out onto a ridge of green hills, silently wishing that everything would work out, and that we would soon be reunited.

In early October we went into town to do some shopping and ran into Wang Chengyi, whom we'd met previously on the mainland. He was the son of a teacher I'd deeply respected. I asked him to telephone you using his own name. A few days later he arrived at our secret home and told us you were no longer among the living.

For three months you had stayed at home, waiting every day for a letter from us, becoming more agitated as each day passed. You relapsed into your old illness, and before you could be taken to the hospital, you suddenly disappeared. The next day in a wooded area outside of town they found the mortal shell that you had given back to nature.

That year you were twenty-five years old, the same age as your mother when she died.

You had no flowers at your funeral, no music, no parents and no grave.

Your aunt placed your memorial tablet beside the Buddha on Jiuhuashan.⁷

Time passed. It's now been five years since we arrived in America. During these five years we have moved several times. But every place we live, we place your photo on the table. Auntie Bao regularly polishes the glass and frame so they shine. There are always fresh flowers in the vase beside your photo. Every year at the Qing Ming festival she lights incense for you to express our gratitude for all the love you gave us, our guilt over our failure to properly care for you, our deep regret and our fathomless longing.

In accordance with the ancient customs of our country, on Qing Ming we also light incense for your mother, Auntie Bao's mother and my father and mother. Directly and indirectly, all of them were also victims of the tyrannical regime. We remember their kindness, but have no way to repay it; we remember their suffering, but have no way to avenge it. "The past was foreordained, the future will pass like a dream."⁸ It is the impotence of the ordinary individual in the face of historic events.

When I was still in China, I wanted to alter the course of history. That heedless enthusiasm was a search for meaning. Since leaving China I have lost that meaning.

In order to maintain independent political thought, in order to truthfully face life, we retreated to the hills and cut ourselves off from social life, purchasing an old village house, a computer, books and some paintings, accompanied only by a boundless expanse of forest and the ocean's long horizon. Seagulls swoop in the lower stratosphere, while higher up eagles soar. Looking at them, I think of you, recalling your thin arms like wings spread in flight. Sometimes I suddenly have a feeling that you are at my side, or perhaps among them.

Modern physics states that in the chaos of the universe, the direction of time's arrow is dependant on fluctuations in entropy, and is therefore reversible. I believe that if time is reversible, it is possible to conceive of reincarnation. The rise and fall of the solar system and human culture is the result of a combination of random and unpredictable factors. I wonder if reincarnated beings maintain a resemblance. I wonder if in the world beyond our senses there is some kind of order. I wonder if there is a so-called "underworld." I believe that if there is, there must be some passage to another world from which one can return to this world. Perhaps someday we will encounter each other again.

Strolling in the shade of the trees, singing the songs we made up.

At least we can cherish that hope.

Translated by Stacy Mosher

The original Chinese article can be accessed on the Internet at: <http://www.blogbus.com/blogbus/blog/diary.php?diaryid=397502>.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTES:

1. Lu You, also spelled Lu Yu (1125–1210), was a famous poet of the Song Dynasty.
2. Jiangnan is the region south of the Yangtze River, known for its scenic beauty, which encompasses Shanghai, Nanjing and Suzhou among other cities.
3. Abraham H. Maslow (1908–1970) was an American psychologist and philosopher best known for his self-actualization theory of psychology that argues that the primary goal of psychotherapy should be the integration of the self.
4. Gao Ertai here quotes a poem (untranslated) by Yuan Haowen (1190–1257), a Jin Dynasty poet, writer and historian who opposed the view of Confucian scholar Yang Xiong that a man's essays revealed much about his character.
5. Zheng Yi, author of the famous novel *The Old Well*, fled China because of his involvement in the 1989 Democracy Movement. Bei Ming is Zheng Yi's wife. The couple now lives in the United States.
6. Xiao Xuehui is a Chengdu-based philosopher and social and political commentator.
7. Mt. Jiuhua, in Anhui Province, is a sacred place for Buddhist pilgrims.
8. This line comes from the poem "Farewell to a Japanese Buddhist Priest Bound Homeward" by the Tang Dynasty poet Qian Qi (722–780).