

# PATHLIGHT

NEW CHINESE WRITING

No.2 / 2012

*Blessings of Good Fortune*

*Dark Alley*

*Qizhao: Lonely Island*

*Common People*

*Hidden Diseases*

*Golden Fields of Wheat*



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## 王安憶

## Wang Anyi

Wang Anyi was born in Nanjing. In 1980 she attended the Chinese Writers' Association Literature Academy and in 1983 participated in Iowa University's International Writing Program. In 1987 she became a writer at the Shanghai Writers' Association and in 2004 took a professorship in Chinese at Fudan University. Since 1977 she has published over six million Chinese characters of writing, including the novels *Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, *Age of Enlightenment*, *Heaven's Perfume*, *Bao Town*, *San Lian*, *Uncle's Story* and *Tian Xian Pei*, along with essays, scripts and articles. She has won the National Short Story Prize, the Mao Dun Literature Prize, the Lu Xun Prize, the China Times "Kai Juan" Book Prize, and Malaysia's 1<sup>st</sup> World Chinese Literature "Hua Zong" Prize. Her works have been translated into English, German, Dutch, French, Russian, Italian, Spanish, Japanese, Israeli, Korean, and Vietnamese.

# Dark Alley

*by Wang Anyi*

**T**he gloom of the dark alley comes partly from being hidden from the sun, partly from popular embellishment. Everyone who grew up in the alleys has heard the threats from their parents – “Fuss, and I’ll throw you into the dark alley!” – and been scared into silence. When that generation became mothers and fathers, they used the same words to frighten their children. Two generations of rumor were, you might say, the origins of the dark alley.

The dark alley lies just beyond the end of the main alley, with a narrow passage connecting the two. This passage is actually a drainage ditch, running between the shoulders of two apartment buildings. At some point during the city’s renovation of its sewer infrastructure, it ceased to be used as a drainage ditch, and only a dry channel remained. The apartment buildings crowding it on either side keep sunlight out year-round. Shadowy and oppressive, it is the prelude to the dark alley.

So, what’s in the dark alley? Here the rumors begin. One legend has it that the alley was once a cemetery, and even after concrete was laid and buildings raised, ghost lights would dance there from time to time; another describes it as an execution ground, where Japanese soldiers shot patriots during the war; more modern tales say it was where children had been “pig-skun” – that is, stripped of their clothes and stuffed in a dumpster; or that a girl had hanged herself there after all her family’s cloth and grain rations were stolen. These fears and portents seemed to accumulate as society developed, growing more and more intense,

meaning that stories will continue to be told. That is to say, the alley’s malevolence is still active, and could erupt at any time.

That is why the alley excited the local children’s curiosity. It was common to see a knot of exuberant children crowding at the mouth of the passage, daring each other to step inside and walk to the dark alley at the other end. At three or four in the afternoon, the alley seemed less dark, and one could see rays of light shining along it, but at the other end of that cement-colored passage, it seemed all the more unfathomable. One rash child succumbed to the dares and stepped into the passage. The surface of the passage, which was actually once a drainage ditch, was concave, and the child had to straddle the shoulders of the ditch and waddle down it. The first few steps were uneventful, but after a few more, a cloud of insects flew up into the child’s face, then spider webs draped his eyes and a breath of stale, chilly air ran up the legs of his pants. The child twisted around and scrambled back the way he came, without regard for his footing, so that he slid again and again into the ditch and twisted his ankles. Finally he arrived at the mouth of the passage, and saw the light of day, only to find the other children standing in a human wall before him, sealing his exit. The light that shone from his eyes then was in fact the light of terror. That evening, he ran a fever and was taken to the emergency room, and everyone was warned. The dangerous game was put on hold for a while; then the lesson was forgotten, and children once again began crowding around the corridor.

The children of the alleys lived in a man-made



world, and their dangers and pleasures were also man-made. If they couldn't play here, where could they play? Still, no one ever dared go to the far end of the passage again, nor would the group seriously press anyone else to try. The brutal experience did not disappear, but was added to the dark alley's history. The children avoided going near the corridor alone – of course, egging someone on along with the rest of the group was another matter. What was strange was that you never saw anyone come up the corridor from the end where it met the dark alley; that end was always silent. The alleys, in fact, are the ravines of the city, and people are blind creatures, following the cliff walls without the slightest idea of where they're being led.

The children would often come here in the afternoon. Supervision was loosest then, after school let out but before their parents had come home. The children dropped their backpacks at home, then went to hang out on the street. The younger kids, who looked up to the students as participants in the world of adult society, slowly drew close. Sometimes, a middle school student or two would appear among them; then ingratiating smiles would appear on the faces of the elementary school students, too. A middle schooler truly was a full-fledged member of society! He wore leather shoes, pants tucked into his western trousers, and cuffs rolled up to reveal the white lining – called a *kefu*, probably from the English word “cover” – that indicated authentic urban couture. He had his hands in his pockets, occasionally withdrawing one to smooth the hair at his ears. Since his hair was buzzed almost down to the scalp and there wasn't much to smooth, it would go right back in his pocket. In an instant, his stylish air

was established. He had no need to speak; the merest motion of his lips conveyed his attitude, and made him master of the situation. Thus the stratified society of children, ordered according to age. As the elementary school students competed for the middle-schoolers' favor, everyone talked at once, while the pre-school students merely gaped silently, their existence entirely overlooked by everyone else.

Now, however, the dark alley game had all social classes excited. They ganged up and pushed one of their number toward the corridor. He fought to break loose, grabbing hold of the child nearest him and pulling him into his place. The group pressed forward, not caring who went in, while the close-quarters game of “tag” continued on the front line. The elementary students were at the heart of the commotion; the middle-schoolers didn't deign to participate, though their loud laughter effectively spurred the mob on to greater madness. Even the youngest were caught up in the moment, screeching and scampering around the fringes of the crowd, tripping over others' legs. The mouth of the dark alley remained silent. A ray of light swept down the passage; the spider webs glowed briefly, then vanished. The children jammed themselves into the mouth of the passage, their backs colliding with the rough concrete walls, feet already treading the floor of the ditch. The crowd boiled with anxious, frenzied shouts, as if they stood at the edge of an abyss.

The weaker children, lacking the strength and fervor of those on the front line, were thrust to the fringes of the group. Unequal to this brutal, dangerous game, they stood at the margins. Suddenly, one of them felt a blow to his lower back – not hard, but so unexpected he nearly stumbled. Turning his head in



surprise, he discovered it was a girl even younger than he, her face flushed pink. She rushed him again. He reacted slowly, and took another blow. She hopped up and down in excitement, her face growing redder, the fine hair of her bangs plastered to her sweaty forehead. The children had reached a fever pitch of chaos and reason was abandoned. He adjusted his position on the outside to avoid becoming entangled with her, but she mistook his maneuvering for fear and rushed him again. Clearly, she'd chosen him as her playmate.

He gave way to her; she followed him relentlessly. One yielded, the other advanced, and he was forced away from the group, all the way back home. The girl didn't follow him that far – unwilling to leave the excitement, she halted, watching his back regretfully as it receded, farther and farther, turning at last into a side street. The flowery branches of an oleander bush hung over one corner of a courtyard wall. The boy slipped underneath the flowers and disappeared.

It was the season when the oleanders bloom, and the days were growing longer. The children spent more time loitering outside as their parents, deceived by daylight, grew negligent. Even as evening came and the larger gatherings dispersed, a scattering of lost soldiers wandered the alleys, spirits still high, grasping at the hope of another assault though the moment had already passed. The young boy had grown up under stricter discipline, and as he grew older he took part in the supervision of his younger brothers. Every day he returned home before his parents left work to help his grandmother set the table and serve supper. As he passed between the kitchen and the dining room he cast a glance at the back door of the kitchen, which hung slightly ajar. In the crack between the door and

the jamb, he saw one eye, dark and round: the little girl who had pushed him had somehow discovered where he lived. His hands full of bowls, he used his elbow to push the door closed, shutting the eye in the gathering darkness outside.

Later, he began to notice her more frequently. She was one of the pre-school children who followed the older ones around, though for some reason she always kept her distance from the rest. Even though children of her age had their own society, their own alliances – hanging on each others' necks and whispering as they went about – she was often alone, leaning against a wall with her hands behind her back, or one leg cocked up, disdainfully watching her fellow children play. With the bigger kids, her face immediately turned eager. And yet, at these times, she was the one given the disdainful look. Just think: who would pay attention to her? The pack was made up solely of older boys – girls their age were already shut up at home, practicing propriety – and the youngest kids, who were practically genderless.

She looked lonely, leaning by herself against the wall. He shot an unthinking glance in her direction – a glance she caught, alert as a hunting dog. She moved towards him; he pretended not to see her, and circled the perimeter of the group to the other side. He was always on the margins, his character ensured that. He never led the others; leaders need a pioneering instinct and a desire for power. Nor did he display the loyalty bordering on blind faith that was necessary for a follower. All in all, he was suited to be neither a general nor a minister, but an observer. In a way, he resembled an artist, who lacks the ability to act yet who is sensible of the pleasures of action, who finds enjoyment

in nullity. So he was present for all the alley games, including the fights and troublemaking. It was inevitable that from time to time he would be recognized in the crowd and dragged in front of his parents, to be scolded or beaten. His mother and father were models of parental responsibility in the neighborhood, and never covered up for him. The other face of this morality was that the child never protested at unjust treatment. That entire generation of children grew up amid punishment and injustice.

As he sidled a few steps around the group, the girl followed him. He shifted a few steps more, and she advanced again. Thus they made an entire circuit of the crowd, as if they were turning a millstone. Today's game wasn't the dark alley, but rather "Cops and Robbers." It began with two leaders of the gang facing off with rock-paper-scissors over who would be cops and who robbers, and then choosing their troops. The strongest, most agile children were always those first chosen, followed by the popular, sociable ones. He belonged to the second group, and was usually picked by the third or fourth round. The teams in place, a sudden "Go!" scattered the robbers while the cops ran to cut them off. Any robber who was tagged was instantly dead. Were that the end of it, it would be simple enough, but alley games share in the subtlety of the real world, and there was a way out: should a pursued robber stand still before being touched by a cop, that meant surrender, and he would be taken to "jail" instead of being executed. To a robber, of course, if you have your life you have everything – all he had to do was wait until a confederate charged in and touched him to escape from jail and return to his life of crime. The whole alley was in uproar with the pattering of

feet, the sound of bodies hitting bodies, hands slapping hands, the yells of the jail breakers, the scheming of the inmates and the orders being shouted to the cops. The pre-school children stood on tiptoe against the wall, attempting to plaster themselves to its surface as cops and robbers rushed back and forth amid great clamor and disturbance. They were covered in dirt from head to toe, and suffered the occasional punch, yet dangerous as the situation was, none of them thought of leaving. They simply stood and watched, faces pale and eyes filled with admiration and envy.

He found himself in jail early on. A hair's breadth away from the reaching hand of a cop, he was able to plant both feet and escape death. Several attempts to save him were obstructed by the cops; one of his band was even sacrificed. In the middle of all this, someone walked out from the corner of the wall right to him, and smacked him on the shoulder – it was the little girl. He wanted to slip away from her, but was forbidden to move by the rules. She smacked him again, this time exhorting him, "Run!" She believed she could free him, while he, unable to explain, could only wonder why she was so fixated on him. The girl slapped him a third time, beginning to lose her patience. He could only express his irritation by turning on his heel and going home.

Abandoning the game was disrespectful to both cops and robbers, and in their collective anger the boys sent one of their number to knock on his back door. The door was shut tight. After several knocks it opened, but it was his grandmother who came out. They demanded she hand him over; the grandmother replied he was inside doing his homework, and if he didn't do his homework, his mother would scold him.

They had no choice but to turn back in defeat, rearrange teams and begin another round.

The little girl crept up to his house. The back door was now ajar, and a slight push revealed a hallway leading directly to a room opposite, the door wide open and seemingly no one inside. In fact, he had seen her. He was sitting at a table in a far corner of the room, his textbook open in front of him. His vantage point allowed him to see all the way down the corridor and through the back door. The back alley was filled with the colors of sunset, in which a little silhouette stood.

In the two days that followed, he came straight home after school and didn't go out. Regardless of the tumult in the alley he sat at home, and when his homework was done he drew pictures on his notebook paper: tanks, warships and cannons, as well as ancient bows and swords. He once again caught sight of the little silhouette lingering at the back door, cautiously inching its way inside, already inside the hallway. He circled around to the door of his room and, concealed behind the doorjamb, silently pushed it shut. Yet at dinner the child appeared again, right in the doorway. His mother asked her whose kid she was, but she gave no response. She asked who she was looking for – again no response. So they ignored her, and went on with their meal. He lowered his face, almost into his rice bowl, knowing perfectly well who she was looking for. After a moment, a woman in a blue smock with short sleeves and her hair in a bun came and led the child away. Grandma recognized her; she was a maid of one of the families in the side-alley beside theirs. The father and mother were both cadres in the municipal government, too busy to raise their child, which

was why she was so ill mannered.

He stewed at home for a few more days, but couldn't stay there forever. He went out again only to find the alley unnaturally quiet. Clearly some momentous change had taken place during the days he'd stayed indoors – it was like coming out to plow in mid-December. The older kids had disappeared, and the alleys belonged to the young ones. They were so young they didn't really know how to play, nor did they have anything to play with: their broken toys were all hand-me-downs from older brothers and sisters. Snapped jump ropes, knotted up a hundred ways; cracked marbles barely more than shards of glass; decks of playing cards missing heaven knows how many cards – with these they learned the rules of children's games, patiently waiting to grow up. This was the inheritance of the alley society. The poor little creatures lived perpetually under the direction of the bigger kids, keeping out of their way, an interstitial existence. Now they were faced with the full majesty of the alleys, their world had expanded overnight. Still they kept their hands to themselves and bodies to the wall, as if they dared not believe it. There was a certain grandeur to their withdrawal, as if they were holding their breath on the eve of inheriting this world.

As he gazed around in confusion one of the children emerged from the group and ran straight for him. It was the girl, her face showing the excitement of greeting an old friend. Instinctively, he fell back a step, but she was already right in front of him. "I know where they are!" she said. She spoke so directly to his thoughts that he stopped in his tracks. "I'll help you find them," she added. As she spoke she set off in front of him, walking a few paces and then turning her head.

Sure enough he was right behind her; reassured, she walked on, her expression now one of concentration. The children by the wall stopped playing with their broken toys and watched the two proceed, the fox leading the tiger.

The girl led him out of the side alley and down towards the end of the main alley. She set foot into the passage to the dark alley, then drew it back, spun around and giggled, “Tricked you!” He’d been fooled – by a little girl, no less – and his face darkened. He was just about to turn and leave when she ran up and stopped him, saying, “They’re just over there!” Then he became aware of the sound of voices, coming from an intersection at the end of the main alley. There was an iron gate set into the fence there, leading onto a side road, which everyone called simply “the gate.” The people were all gathered there. He hurried toward the noise, leaving the girl behind him.

It turned out that for the past two days, the children his age had been engaged in a full-scale resistance movement, fending off invasion by the children from the next alley over. After school was out in the afternoon, the gangs would gather on either side of the gate. The local kids would close the gate and throw the bolt; the invaders would grab hold of the gate and yank on it, causing the iron fence to clash loudly back and forth. Annoyed residents needing to pass through the gate would push on it in visible impatience, and the defenders were obliged to draw the bolt and let them through. The invading children would try to spill in through the open gate, but the defenders were quick, and forced them back. The gate itself was a single narrow door of iron, and was naturally much easier to defend than to push through. The children from

the next alley launched several offensives, sometimes managing to get the door open and keep it that way, but that was as far as they got. As the local children were struggling at the peak of heroism, one of their small comrades ran to the group to report breathlessly that the enemy had divided their troops, sending a squad to the other end of the alley to attempt a frontal assault. Suddenly it was obvious that the crowd at the gate was significantly diminished, and their taunts had an air of insincerity to them. The treachery of war! The defenders immediately split their own forces and sent one group to the main alley. The boy ran over with them, drenched in the feeling of liberation after days of self-confinement. They burst out of the side alley into the main alley. First they heard the shouts of the enemy, followed by a few silhouettes flickering into view, and then a great flood rushed towards them.

The outsiders clearly had the advantage in terms of numbers, as their ranks included children from the main street as well as those from the next alley over. This alley ran through the center of the biggest residential section on the block, with row after row of regular buildings separated by a dozen side-alleys, linked one to another by a long wrought-iron fence. The defenses were secure, a formidable line which itself provoked the desire to invade. The children on the inside felt themselves to be tragically embattled – after all, the biggest alley was still only a single alley, and even with everyone mobilized they were few. The world outside their alley, on the other hand, was open to society at large. But it was precisely this cloistered nature of their alley community that gave its young residents a sense of tight-knit unity, conducive to strategic coordination. The soul of the group was Ser-

geant, the middle school student, so named because he was the second-oldest child in his family. He was an idea man, and did not take action himself. It was he who posted sentries at the mouth of the alley, while his presence during the enemy's diversion kept the local children collected and ready to defend. When battle was joined at the mouth of the main alley, seeing him jogging beside them like a coach at game time was enough to harden their resolve.

Under the direction of Sergeant they charged to the mouth of the main alley and spread out in a defensive formation, closing the main gate and standing guard over it even as they formed a human wall at the mouth of the main alley. Sergeant caught sight of the boy among the crowd, and yelled, "You've brought your sister at a time like this?!" He looked down: the girl was right behind him, trying to catch hold of his sleeve as she stumbled along. He knocked her hand away and stepped quickly forward, charging right into the oncoming enemy. The first to engage, he slammed up against another child, and the two grappled as behind them innumerable hands tangled together. The local children brought the two halves of the main gate slowly together, first shoving the attackers between them, then driving them outside, and finally yanking their own people back in and standing in a wall at the opening, creating a clear line between attackers and defenders. The old man who volunteered as gatekeeper was hopping with rage, cursing both sides indiscriminately. Still, his duties inclined him to stand with the defenders, and he waded bravely into the mob, yanking open the gate and snapping at the rebels outside, "Rascals! Just try breaking in here

again!" His words were few, but the enemy fell back a step or two before his imposing bearing. The local children were victorious.

On the way back to camp, Sergeant made a point of walking over and asking, "Brought your little lady, huh?" This time it was a taunt, and the others laughed and pretended to look around him for the "little lady." The little lady herself was long gone, vanished into a corner somewhere. He wanted to explain that she wasn't his "little lady," that in fact she had nothing to do with him – but how could he hope to stand up to Sergeant? Theirs was a world of power politics, a world that cared nothing for innocence or guilt. He shut his mouth. Besides, a much greater misfortune still awaited him: a beating from his mother. His brand new yellow-and-khaki jacket had been left an absolute mess by the afternoon's struggles, the seams at the shoulder and sleeve had tore open in places. Once home, he didn't even have time to beg his grandmother's help before his mother walked in the door. This household was the most disciplined in the neighborhood; the children left the house clean and smartly dressed, and behaved themselves. What made his mother furious was not so much the jacket as the failure of self-restraint it signified. The price for that night's education was a snapped wooden clothes hanger.

The following morning, his grandmother, both sympathetic to her grandson's sufferings and proud of her family's standards, passed on the news of his beating to everyone she met on the way to the vegetable market. Soon, the whole alley knew that he had had a clothes hanger broken over his rear. This caused some parents to reflect that their own punishment

the day before had lacked severity, and they thus decided to administer a second round that evening. He would never be able to leave the house again: he bore the marks of fresh punishment – not on his flesh, but on his self-respect. By the age of ten, a boy is nearly a young man. He considers himself older than his age, above suffering the punishments of a child. Yet it was his misfortune to be born into a family with stiff-necked parents and a talkative grandmother. At least it was a Sunday: he wasn't going out, and his playmates, knowing he'd been punished, didn't dare come find him. That evening, his parents took his brothers to their uncle's house to play, while he stayed at home with his grandmother. She worked with her sewing machine, he read through a stack of old comic books, top to bottom, and the time quietly passed. His grandmother told him to put a kettle on the coal stove to boil, so he got up and went into the kitchen. By now it was past three o'clock, and the afternoon sunlight that filled the alley spilled in around the door. Sunday afternoons are always quiet, and today, with the children all chained inside by their parents, the alley was at complete peace. Once in the kitchen, he glanced through the half-opened door and to his surprise saw the girl there – she had been crouched opposite the door, probably for a long time, and now hopped up and ran over to him. Still that same warm look on her face, even a trace of pity, though whether it was sincere or just a mask one couldn't tell. He suddenly felt angry: if it hadn't been for her, he wouldn't have gotten involved in the fight, wouldn't have suffered the humiliation that followed it. In a rage he slammed the door. The sound of it closing was followed by sharp, desolate cry, and he knew he'd hurt her. Yet he wasn't

worried; instead, a feeling of exaltation rose up from his feet, sweeping away the depression that had oppressed him. He'd finally taken back what the world owed him.

Perhaps because she'd been hit, the little girl stopped following him around, and on the rare occasion their gazes met both immediately looked away. Yet Sergeant's teasing had only just begun. He called the little girl over to their group – when Sergeant calls, who dares not heed him? The little girl stood in front of Sergeant, her head tilted all the way back so she could see him. Her young compatriots at the outskirts of the group looked on in silence. Sergeant ordered her to call him "Godfather," she replied, "You're not Godfather. You're Sergeant." Everybody burst out laughing – this kid was really something. The pre-school kids typically craved the attention of the big kids, but this was like seeing a sheep charge into a wolf pack, and they were uneasy. They backed up against the wall and fell silent. Sergeant replied, "If you call me Sergeant, then what'll you call him?" He pointed over at him. The girl looked at him, her expression fell, and she said nothing. Sergeant went on, "You should be calling him 'brother.' Say it!" The laughter intensified. He laughed too, but his face was stiff. "Say it!" Sergeant demanded. The girl shook her head. Sergeant was losing face, and a couple of the big kids next to him helped bully the girl, pressing her to say "brother." Yet she was stubborn, and kept her mouth shut tight. Sergeant gave himself a way out: "Forget it, forget it. Let her go." The girl slid out of their group and back to hers.

Today, the pre-schoolers were gathered at the mouth of the passage leading into the dark alley, peer-



ing toward its other end and hopping in excitement. Their interest was a means of imitating the big kids: another way in which the myth of the dark alley was passed on. It was a sort of rite of passage, something they had to undergo before they grew up. By now, the big kids had lost interest in the dark alley, yet as he passed by a question occurred to him: why hadn't the invading kids come through the passage? It was completely open and unguarded. His gaze lingered on the passage for a moment, then as he looked away his eyes swept over the little girl. He saw her shrink back, and knew she was afraid of him. He quickened his steps to catch up with the group and kept on walking.

Activity in the alley followed its own cyclical rhythms. Periods of excitement were followed by moments of relative calm. During those moments, the alley seemed particularly empty. From time to time a child would come out and walk about the alley, yet even if he happened to run into an old playmate, the other would receive him indifferently, and he would eventually return home in dejection. These solitary wanderers only added to the bleakness of the alley's atmosphere. It was hard to pinpoint a cause. Perhaps the natural leaders were sick, or visiting relatives, leaving the group without guidance; or school exams were getting close; or parents were tightening discipline. In actuality, it was likely there was no reason, it was merely part of a natural process like the rising and falling of the tides. The alley has its own ecology, too, and children are highly primitive animals whose behavior often reflects natural law. During these lulls, the children were scattered in hidden spaces, independently sowing the seeds of the next round of chaos. This they did unthinkingly – you might say blindly –

except that when they came together again a hidden intention would be revealed, as they all began to act in concert. As if it had been prearranged, everyone began playing the same game, using the same new slang or communicating by the same hand signals. This was also an ecological effect, as the common environment forced the development of similar characteristics in individuals. This period of individual seclusion was like hibernation, like caterpillars undergoing metamorphosis or sprouts secreting hormones, as every child in his little nest twisted and labored to lay the next golden egg. Those who didn't, who roamed the alleys looking for games, were like sleepwalkers, peering around with empty and listless eyes, even under the noonday sun. The walls and concrete surfaces were unnaturally clean, and the whole alley turned a pale white.

Today, his grandmother sent him out to buy vegetables – all the children had become good children. He left the apartment, turned out of the side-alley and walked down the main alley. Just as he got to the next side-alley the girl appeared, walking hand-in-hand with her mother. The girl kept her back proudly straight and her gaze fixed forward. He was a good half a head taller than she, so her head only came up to just below his eyes. Her hair was cut in a bob, what people called a "toilet seat" style, and her slender neck appeared between the low curl of shiny black and the white of her collar. He suddenly felt an urge to slap the back of that neck. At the end of the main alley they went their separate ways. He reached the street and crossed over to the grocery store on the other side, bought everything his grandmother had asked for, then crossed back over and cut through into the alley. There was the girl again, walking only a meter



or so in front of him. This time she was alone, her mother nowhere in sight. The stem of a lotus seedpod was grasped in one hand, yet she showed no interest in it, as it hung down to the pleats of her suspender skirt. She walked slowly, shoulders hunched and head down. It was clear that her mother had never planned to take her along, but sent her home with a seedpod to placate her. He could see that she was crying – not in the desperate way she had when he slammed the door on her, but in quiet sobs. As they got close to the side-alley where she lived, he quickened his pace to bring himself up beside her, but she didn't see him. Wholly immersed in her sadness, she was blind to the world around her. He understood she had a world of her own, that no one else could enter.

The next time he saw her was during the next revival of the alley. As if heeding a single call, all the children of the alley came out of doors at once, and like long-separated relatives they sought each other out, greeting and asking after each other, forming into separate cliques. She was among these groups; more gregarious than before, she had her own knot of friends, and they crowded toe-to-toe as they played a cruel game of drown-the-ant-hole. They filled ceramic cups with hose water, which they poured carefully down an ant hole at the base of the wall and waited for the ants to escape. Water came bubbling back up from the hole, soaking their shoes, yet that didn't stop them from pouring cup after cup. Back and forth she ran between the water faucet and the wall, her face pink with excitement; when he passed by and stepped in her way, she even let out an impatient, "What are you doing!" Her expression bore no trace of injury – children really are forgetful creatures – yet he could see in her

a faint shadow of sadness. This was the difference in their ages: he had already begun to think rationally. So he took a step back and let her pass.

The girl had already forgiven him, but Sergeant wasn't about to. In his heart, Sergeant actually liked him. He liked the melancholy quiet he brought to the group. In the years before adolescence one is crowded with innumerable perceptions and emotions, and without the time to sort through them all it's inevitable that some will be misdirected. Thus Sergeant expressed his liking in the form of abuse, by teasing him. His weapon was the girl, which itself reflected another characteristic of his age: his interest in the relationship between boys and girls. She wasn't even old enough to be thought of as a "girl" – all the real "girls" were locked up in their imaginary boudoirs, doing cross-stitch, singing along to movie soundtracks, or whispering private words that not even Sergeant was mature enough to hear. If she had been a real "girl," Sergeant would have been too scared to say anything. Only among this group of boys, where none were able to see his weaknesses, could he be king.

Now, Sergeant made a point of teasing him about her. When the group played "cops and robbers," Sergeant forbade him from being picked by either team, the reason being that he'd wrecked the game by bringing his "little lady" along. Excluded from the game he stood and watched for a while, then turned and went home. But Sergeant hadn't given him permission to go, and he sent a boy over to his house to demand he come back and watch. He didn't dare stay put – he was afraid of Sergeant. All the children were afraid of Sergeant! Might made right in alley society – one line from an old nursery rhyme, "Pick on the little

man, watch it come around again,” did a good job of describing reality in its moralistic language. Sergeant picked a spot for him to stand where he wouldn’t obstruct either the game or Sergeant’s refereeing. He became a prisoner who could never be rescued, standing alone on the margins, an insincere smile on his face as he watched the cops and robbers battle back and forth. Competition was fierce. His misfortune intensified their happiness, and they exaggerated their shouts and laughter, heightening the tension of the game to contrast with his lonely stillness. Sergeant watched the whole scene with satisfaction. He was the director of this drama, and they were only puppets.

Someone smacked him – he turned around and saw the girl, standing by the wall with hands behind her back. He shuffled aside, trying to keep himself separate from her. But Sergeant saw him. “Nobody move!” came the sudden order, and the whole frenzied game froze in an instant. “Get back over there!” Sergeant pointed at his spot. He turned to leave, but Sergeant grabbed him and pushed him back to his place, right beside the girl. As he struggled to free himself she ran over to him, hands still behind her back, and stuck herself between him and Sergeant, whom she glared at with clear provocation in her eyes. He moved again and again she followed, her eyes never leaving Sergeant. Sergeant put a hand on the wall, blocking his way out, leaving him nowhere to go. He didn’t hate Sergeant – he hated the girl and her sense of righteousness. Righteousness had brought him no justice, only endless humiliation. Nor had he ever asked for it; it was being forced upon him. She was doing it for him, but he didn’t owe her anything! Finally, he burst through the lines and ran back home.

He stayed inside over the next few days, and Sergeant for his part sent no one to fetch him. Sergeant was ignoring him on purpose. He had offended Sergeant, and disrespected him. Yet he hadn’t done it intentionally – it was all the girl’s fault. He was filled with resentment. Through the back door he could hear his playmates’ voices, occasionally interspersed with Sergeant’s, which already had the depth and resonance of an adult male. He heard the girl’s voice, one of a chorus of high-pitched shrieks – what was she doing out there? As if she had nothing better to do. He alone was forced to accept public reprimand. The alley in its revival was like springtime, full of growing things and rushing hormones. What a commotion! His brothers were running around in the alley, and all the children were playing except for him: he sat at the table, his eyes fixed on books and paper, calm exterior matched with boiling interior. He had been banished by the world! He couldn’t help but pause in the kitchen and peek out the window. He caught sight of her. She was practicing kicking an old shuttlecock, the kind with feather streamers tied to it. Most of its down was stripped, and one of the feathers had snapped in the middle. Nor was she very good at it: every time the sack went up in the air, it ended up on the ground, and all she could do was pick it up and kick it into the air again. While she played she also had to dodge the legs of the big kids – legs that flew violently in all directions, legs that could grind a kid like her into hamburger. Yet she didn’t seem to care, focusing her attention on her one-woman game. She’s doing pretty well, he thought. Just as the words formed in his mind, the little girl suddenly abandoned her shuttlecock and ran straight for his back door. He hurried to close the