

SHI TIESHENG

STRINGS
OF LIFE

and Other Selected Writings

图书在版编目(CIP)数据

命若琴弦：史铁生作品选：英文 / 史铁生 著

北京：外文出版社，2009 (熊猫丛书)

ISBN 978-7-119-05898-6

I. 命... II. ①史...②喻... III. 散文—作品集—中国—当代—英文 IV. I267

中国版本图书馆CIP数据核字 (2009) 第123395号

责任编辑：刘芳念 佟 盟

封面设计：周伟伟

印刷监制：韩少乙

命若琴弦 史铁生作品选

史铁生 著

喻藩琴 等 英译

© 2009 外文出版社

出 版 人：呼宝民

总 编 辑：李振国

出版发行：外文出版社

中国北京百万庄大街24号

邮政编码 100037

<http://www.flp.com.cn>

印 制：求是印务中心

开本：850mm × 1168mm 1/32 印张：8.75

2009年第1版 第1次印刷

(英)

ISBN 978-7-119-05898-6

06500 (平)

版权所有 侵权必究



STRINGS OF LIFE

and Other Selected Writings

江苏工业学院图书馆
SHI TIESHENG
藏书章



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS

First Edition 2009

ISBN 978-7-119-05898-6

© Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, China, 2009

Published by Foreign Languages Press

24 Baiwanzhuang Road, Beijing 100037, China

<http://www.flp.com.cn>

Distributed by China International Book Trading Corporation

35 Chegongzhuang Xilu, Beijing 100044, China

P.O. Box 399, Beijing, China

Printed in the People's Republic of China

Preface

Literature may reflect the ethos of a country or a nation, while at the same time it can transcend the limits of time and space to most widely resonate a truly universal humanity. Literary works of art that move hearts may even inspire the compassion of strangers toward a people or country...

This "Panda Series" of books, expertly translated into English, compiles the works of well-known modern and contemporary Chinese authors around themes such as the city and the countryside, love and marriage, minority folk stories and historical legends. These works reflect the true spirit and everyday lives of the Chinese people, while widely resonating with their changing spiritual and social horizons.

Published from the 1980s, through more than 100 titles in English, this series continues to open wider the window for readers worldwide to better understand China through its new literature. Many familiar and fond readers await the latest in this "Panda Series." This publication of the "Panda Series" consolidates and looks back at earlier released literary works to draw new readers, while stirring the fond memories of old friends, to let more people share the experiences and views of the Chinese people in recent decades. We express our sincere appreciation to all authors, translators and editors who have engaged in their dedicated and meticulous work over the years to bring out these works. It is their passion and endeavor that have enabled this series to appear now in luminous distinction.

Contents

In Lieu of a Preface	7
Strings of Life	8
Original Sin	39
Fate	81
One Winter's Evening	104
In the World of Understanding	124
Autumn Remembrance	150
Our Corner	153
My Faraway Qingpingwan	172
Granny's Star	196
Lunch Break	237
Blacky	247

In Lieu of a Preface

FROM birth, people are fated to live among other people in a populous world, yet are mutually unable to communicate properly: this means loneliness.

From birth people have desires, yet the ability to realize their desires forever lags behind their capacity to desire: this means frustration.

From birth people have wished not to die, yet all their life is a march toward death: this means fear.

And so with these three trials does God torment us.

But perhaps we have misunderstood; perhaps God has given us three potential sources of pleasure. If the world had only me, and if I had no desires (for how else could I endure the isolation?), and if I lived forever, could I become anything other than an unchanging heap of apathy and depression? Looked at in this way, I prefer to suffer the trials of loneliness, frustration, and fear. I think what attracts me so to writing novels is that the writing helps me to transform these three trials into sources of pleasure.

The above is taken from an essay written some years ago; may it serve here as a preface to this work.

February 23, 1990

Strings of Life

Two blindmen walked single-file across the vast expanse of the mountain range, one old, the other young, their two blackened straw hats bobbing, the two of them darting forward as if they were drifting with the current of a restless river. It mattered little from where they came or where they were headed. Each of them carried a three-stringed banjo, and told stories to earn their livelihood.

The mountain stretched over several hundred kilometres in circumference, each peak stretching higher than the last; it was criss-crossed by gullies and ravines, and sparsely populated, so that one could walk a whole day and see only a single patch of open terrain dotted by villages. Passing by thickets of brush, at any time one might see pheasants spring up, or a rabbit or fox jump out, or other game. Hawks often circled above the valley floor. The sun beat down fiercely on the bleak, shadeless mountains.

"Keep hold of the banjo," the blind old man called out, and the sounds of his echo rang back from the facing mountain.

"Got it," the blind lad answered.

"Mind you don't let your sweat get on the banjo. If it gets wet we'll have to strum your ribs to make tonight's music."

"It's right here in my hand."

Senior and junior, both half-naked, each carried a

stick to feel his way. Their coarse cloth coats tied up around their waists were soaked through with sweat and their steps stirred up a choking dust. It was peak season for storytelling — days were long, and after dinner the villagers all lounged outdoors; some of them even carried their bowls out to eat by the roadside or on the village common. The elder blindman was eager to get in as much storytelling as possible; during the heat of summer he had dragged the blind lad from village to village performing night after night. The old man grew more nervous and excited by the day. By his reckoning, the day he would play through his thousandth string might yet be this summer, and maybe it would happen right up ahead in Goat Valley.

The shadows lengthened as the day's blistering sun retreated from its attack on the earth. Cicadas everywhere relaxed and quieted their voluminous drone.

"Boy! Can't you walk any faster?" the old man called from ahead without slowing his pace. As the lad ran a few steps forward his satchel banged against his rump with a clatter and he failed to close the gap between him and the old man.

"The wild pigeons are all headed for their nests."

"What?" the lad again quickened his step.

"I said the pigeons have already returned to their nests, and you're still dragging."

"Oh."

"Are you playing with that electric box of mine again?"

"Oh no! The damn thing moved."

"Those headphones are going to break if you tinker with them like that."

"The damn thing moved."

The old man laughed darkly: how many days had this boy been born now? "I can even hear ants fighting," he boasted.

The lad was not going to argue; he quietly slipped the headphones inside his satchel and trailed the old man along the dull, endless road.

After a while the lad heard the sound of a badger gnawing away at some field grain. He growled out his best imitation of a dog's bark; the badger rolled, crawled, and ran to make its escape. Feeling cheered, the lad softly sang a few bars from a love song. Master wouldn't let him keep a dog because he feared it might fight with villagers' dogs and thus affect their business. A little later, the lad heard the slithering of a snake not far off. After leaning over and groping for stones on the ground, he chucked one toward the snake, sending a loud rustle through the sorghum leaves. The old man took pity and stopped to let him catch up.

"If it's not badgers, it's snakes," the lad hastened to explain, fearing his Master would curse him.

"There's a field coming up, not too far." The old man passed a water jug to his apprentice.

"In our trade, a fellow walks his whole lifetime." Then he added, "Tired?" The lad didn't answer; he knew Master hated it when he said he was tired.

"My master never got his due. He played his whole life without going through a thousand strings."

Observing the old man was in a better mood, the lad asked, "What's a green lounge chair?"

"What? Oh, it's most likely a kind of chair, I s'pose."

"What's a twisting corridor?"

"A corridor? What kind of corridor?"

"A twisting corridor."

"I don't know."

"They said it on the radio."

"All you like is listening to that toy. What good does it do you? The world is full of nice things, but what do they have to do with us?"

"I've never heard you say just what does have something to do with us?" The lad drew out the word "does".

"The banjo! Your dad sent you with me so you could learn to play the banjo and tell stories."

The lad gurgled loudly as he drank from the bottle, and when they started off again he walked in front.

Shadows from the mountains spread across the valley. Gradually the terrain levelled off and opened up.

Drawing near the village the old man called the lad to stop by a spring in the shadows of the mountain. A trickle of water spurted from a crack in the rock face and dribbled down into a depression the size of a wash basin. On all sides the weeds flourished, but several metres away the thirsty, barren soil soaked up what little remained of the water flow.

"Come on over and wash the sweat off your back and face."

The lad brushed aside the weeds and squatted down by the pool of water — he was still trying to guess what "corri-door" might mean.

"Give your whole body a scrubbing. You must look like a little beggar."

"Are you anything more than an old beggar?" The lad giggled as he dipped his hands in the

water. The old man, pulling his hands from the pool to splash water on his face, laughed, too. "But we're not beggars; we're artisans."

"It seems like we've been to this place before." The lad cupped his ear to listen to the sounds around him.

"But your mind's not on learning your craft. Your young heart is too full of wild ambitions. You never listen to what your elders tell you."

"I'm sure we've been here before."

"Don't interrupt! You still can't play the banjo worth a hoot. Our life is in these strings. That's what my master once told me."

Feeling the refreshing coolness of the spring, the lad began singing his tune about young lovers again. The old man barked at him, "Did you hear what I said?"

"Our lives are these strings; your master said so. I've heard it eight hundred times. And your master left you a medical prescription which you can't get until you've played through a thousand strings. And once you take the medicine you'll be able to see again. I've heard you say it a thousand times."

"You don't believe it?"

"Why should you have to go through a thousand strings before you can get the medicine?"

"That's what makes the medicine go down. You clever devil, you can't take medicine without it."

"What's so tough about getting a thousand broken strings?" The lad couldn't help but sneer.

"What are you laughing at? What is it that you think you know? It won't work unless you earnestly play through them, one at a time." The lad did not dare

make a sound; he could sense his master's indignation. It always happened this way; the master could not tolerate any questioning of his beliefs.

The old man said nothing more, but he seemed distracted. With his hands resting on his knee-caps and his bonelike eyes facing the sky, he appeared to be ruminating on all those broken strings. Oh, longing for so many years, thought the man. Longing for fifty years! In fifty years how many mountains and miles had he tracked? How much exposure to the sun and cold had he suffered? How many indignities? Night after night he had played, ever mindful that it would not do unless he went through new strings one by one, playing with his whole heart. Now the goal of his hopes would soon come to pass, for he was certain to finish his thousand strings by summer's end. "How much more fortunate I am than my master," he declared. "Right until the very end he didn't have a chance to open his eyes and see even once."

"Hey! I know where we are." burst out the lad.

That prompted the old man to pick up his banjo and give it a shake. A piece of paper scraped against the snakeskin soundboard; that paper in the belly of his banjo was the prescription.

"Master, isn't this Goat Hill?" asked the lad.

The old man made no reply; he could tell the lad was getting excited.

"Master, Goat Valley's just up ahead, isn't it?"

The old man bent his already hunched back still further and called, "Boy, come over here and swab my back."

"Master, is this Goat Valley or not?"

"Yes! What of it? Stop whining like a kitten."

The lad's heart thumped and he obediently scrubbed his master's back. The old man felt vigor in the boy's movements.

"What if it is Goat Valley? Don't you go sniffing around like a donkey again."

The lad timidly kept silent to conceal his elation.

"Now what are you thinking about? Don't think I don't know what's on your mind."

"What did I do?"

"What did you do? Didn't you go crazy enough last time we were here? That girl isn't worth a damn!" Maybe I shouldn't have brought him to Goat Valley again, the old man thought to himself. But this is a big village; year after year the business is good enough to tell stories for half a month. How he wished he could play through the last few strings all at once. Meanwhile, the lad's heart was palpitating with thoughts of the girl with the piercing voice.

"Listen to me a second; it won't hurt you," the old man said. "That one's not dependable."

"What one?"

"Don't get smart with me. You know what I'm talking about."

"It's just that I've never heard you say what is dependable." The lad held back a laugh.

The old man paid him no mind and he again turned his bonelike eyes toward the sky. The sun appeared to him like a circle of blood. One of them was young, the other bony and thin, like the craggy, exposed rocks at the base of a mountain. The old blind man was aged seventy, the blind lad, seventeen. At the age of fourteen the lad's father had entrusted him to the care of the old man, with whom he was to learn the art of

storytelling and thus have a means to support himself.

The old man had been storytelling for over fifty years, and everyone in this remote, desolate, mountain region knew him. Each day his hair grew greyer and his back more hunched. Month after month and year after year he carried his three-stringed banjo everywhere, stopping wherever lonely villagers were willing to pay for the entertainment of his banjo and stories.

His opening lines were often just so:

“Ever since Pan Gu’s division of heaven and earth,

The emperors have ruled through the ages.

When the Way prevailed, they ruled peacefully;

But when the Way was absent, they oppressed the peasants.

Lightly I pluck my three-stringed banjo, slowly I pause to tell a story;

I have three thousand seven hundred stories,

I wonder which one will stir your hearts tonight? ”

Thereupon the audience would call out their choices:

“Dong Yong sells himself to bury his father” for the old; “Wu Erlang’s Midnight Raid of Centipede Mountain” for the young; and tales of the industrious and courageous maiden Qin Xianglian for the girls. That was the moment which gave the old blind man greatest pleasure; when he would forget about the fatigue of his body and the loneliness in his heart, and, cool and composed, take a few sips of water while waiting for the noise of the crowd to build, then suddenly slam his fingers into the strings and bellow: