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Mo Yan
POW!

TRANSLATED BY
HOWARD GOLDBLATT

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Wise Monk, where I come from people call children
who boast and lie a lot 'Powboys', but every word
in what I'm telling you is the unvarnished truth.

Ten years ago, a winter morning; a winter morning ten years ago—what times were those? ‘How old are you?’ asks Wise Monk Lan, who has roamed the four corners of the earth, his whereabouts always a mystery, but who is, for the moment, living in an abandoned little temple. His eyes are open, his voice seems to emerge from a dark hole in the earth. I shudder on that hot, humid day in the seventh lunar month. ‘It was 1990, Wise Monk, and I was ten,’ I reply, muttering in a changed tone of voice. We are in a Wutong Temple located between two bustling mid-size cities, built, as the story goes, with funds supplied by an ancestor of the village head, Lao Lan. Although it nestles up to a well-travelled highway, few people come here to burn incense; visitors are a rarity to this building with its musty, outdated aura. A woman in a green overcoat, her hair pinned behind one ear with a red flower, sprawls through a breach in the temple wall that appears to have been opened up for easy access. All I can see of her are a round, pasty face and the fair hand with which she props up her chin. In the bright sunlight, the rings on her fingers nearly blind me. She calls to mind the big house, with its tiled roof, that once belonged to the large landowners of the Lan clan but which was converted into an elementary school during the Republican era. In many legends and the fantasies evolving out of them, women like her were often seen entering and leaving that increasingly dilapidated house in the middle of the night, their skin-crawling screams enough to make a person’s heart stop. The Wise Monk sits in the lotus position on a rotting rush mat in front of an ugly, crumbling Wutong Spirit idol, as serene as a sleeping horse. Wearing a cassock that looks like it’s made of rain-soaked toilet paper, which will crumble at the slightest touch, he fingers a string of purple prayer beads. Flies have settled on the Wise Monk’s earlobes, but none on his shaved head or oily face. Singing birds perch on the branches of a huge ginkgo tree out in the yard; there are cat yowls in the chorus too—the cries of a pair of feral cats that sleep in a hollow of the

tree and snatch the birds off its limbs. A particularly self-satisfied yowl enters the temple, followed a mere second later by the pitiful screech of a bird, and then the flapping of wings as a panicky flock takes to the sky. I don't so much smell the stench of blood as imagine it; I don't so much see the feathers fly and the blood-stained limbs as conjure up the image. The male cat is pressing its claws into its prey and trying to court favour with the tailless female. That missing tail makes her look three parts cat and seven parts fat rabbit. After answering the Wise Monk's questions, I wait for him to ask more; but before I've finished, his eyes are shut and I wonder if his questions have been figments of my imagination, if I've only imagined him snapping his eyes open and emitting that penetrating gaze. Now his eyes are half shut, and the sheaves of nose hair that clear his nostrils by at least an inch twitch like crickets' tails. The sight calls to mind an image from more than ten years before, of our village head, Lao Lan, manicuring his nose hairs with comically small scissors. Lao Lan is the male descendant of the Lan clan, which has produced many prominent individuals: a Provincial Scholar during the Ming, a Hanlin Scholar during the Qing and a General during the Republic. After the Communists seized power, the clan produced a slew of landlord-counterrevolutionaries. By the time the class-struggle campaigns had ended, very few of them remained but those who did rose from the ashes, slowly, and produced Lao Lan, our village head. As a child, I often heard Lao Lan sigh: 'Each generation is worse than the one before!' And I heard Lao Meng, a villager who could read, say: 'One crab's worse than the last. The Lan clan's feng shui has lost its power.' One of the clan's cowherds, Lao Meng had been witness to the family's lavish lifestyle as a child. Pointing to Lao Lan's retreating back, he'd hiss: 'You're not the damned equal of one of your ancestors' cock hairs!' A cold cinder that has risen from the temple roof floats down, like a piece of early spring poplar fluff, to settle lightly on the Wise Monk's shaved head. Then another, its sister, does the same, settling lightly on his head and emanating a subtle, timeless aura that embodies a hidden flirtation. Scars from twelve burning incense sticks adorn his head in a bright pattern, investing it with extraordinary solemnity. Those are signs of honour for true monks, and in the hope that one day I too will possess twelve identical scars, Wise Monk, please let me continue—

My home, a big house with a tiled roof, was so cold and dank that the walls were covered by a layer of frost and my breath left a film, like fine salt,

atop the blanket as I slept. They'd finished building the house in time for the first day of winter, and we moved in before the plaster on the walls was dry. After Mother got out of bed, I scrunched down under the covers to escape the cold air knifing into the room. Ever since my father ran off with his slut, Mother was determined to be a strong woman and make a living through her own hard work. Five years passed like a single day and, thanks to that hard work and her native intelligence, she'd put aside enough to build the tallest and sturdiest five-room, tiled house in the village. Any mention of my mother gave voice to the respect in which she was held by all the villagers—they called her a fine example of womanhood. And when they praised her they never forgot to criticize my father. When I was a boy of five, he ran off with a woman known in the village as Wild Mule; where they went no one knew.

'Predestined relationships exist everywhere,' the Wise Monk mutters, as if talking in his sleep, an indication that, even though his eyes are shut, he is paying attention to my story. The woman in the green dress and the red flower behind her ear is still sprawled in the breach in the wall. She fascinates me but I cannot tell if she knows that. The powerful feral cat, a pretty green bird in its mouth, glides up to the temple door like a hunter parading a trophy. It stops in the doorway and, cocking its head, tosses a glance at us, its expression like that of a curious schoolboy—

Five years passed and, while we received no reliable news, rumours about Father and Aunt Wild Mule came every now and then, like the beef cattle that arrived at our tiny station on the local freight train, that were then slowly herded into the village by the yellow-eyed beef merchants and then finally sold to the village butchers (our village was in truth a glorified slaughterhouse). Rumours swirled round the village, like grey birds wheeling in the sky. Some had it that Father had taken Aunt Wild Mule into the great forests of the northeast, where they'd built a cabin out of birch logs, complete with a big oven in which they burnt crackling pine kindling. Snow covered the roof, hot chilli peppers were strung on the walls and sparkling icicles hung from the eaves. They hunted game and gathered ginseng by day and cooked venison at night. In my imagination, the faces of Father and Aunt Wild Mule reflected the burning fire, as if coated with a red glaze. Others claimed that Father and Wild Mule, wrapped in bulky Mongolian robes, roamed the remote stretches of Inner Mongolia. During the day, they rode their horses,

sang shepherds' songs and tended herds of cattle and sheep on the vast grassland; at night, they slipped into their yurt and made a fire with cow chips over which they hung a steel pot. The fatty stewing lamb entered their nostrils on the wings of its fragrance, and they washed the meat down with thick milky tea. In my imagination, Aunt Wild Mule's eyes sparkled, like black onyx, in the light of the cow-chip fire. Yet another rumour alleged that they'd secretly crossed the border into North Korea and opened a little restaurant in a little border town. During the day they made meat-filled dumplings and rolled noodles to feed the Koreans; at night, after the restaurant closed, they cooked a pot of dog meat and opened a bowl of strong white liquor. Each of them held a dog's leg—two legs out of the pot, and two more inside—with its bewitching aroma, waiting to be eaten. In my imagination, they both hold a fatty dog's leg in one hand and a glass of strong liquor in the other, and alternate between drinking and eating, their cheeks bulging like oily little balls . . . of course, I also think about what happens after the eating and drinking, how they wrap their arms round each other and do you know what—*The Wise Monk's eyes flash and his mouth twitches just before he laughs out loud. He stops abruptly, the lingering echo sounding like the tinny reverberation from a struck gong. I'm momentarily dazed, unable to determine if that bizarre laugh means I should continue speaking honestly or stop. Honesty is always best, I figure, and speaking honestly in front of the Wise Monk seems appropriate. The woman in green is still sprawled in the same place. Nothing has changed—well, hardly anything. She's playing a little game with her spittle, easing bubbles out between her lips until they burst in the sunlight. I try to imagine what those little bubbles taste like—'Go on'—*

They kissed each other's greasy lips, interrupted by frequent belches that saturated the air in the yurt, saturated the air of the little log cabin, saturated the air of the little Korean restaurant, with the smell of meat. Then they undressed each other. I knew what Father's body looked like—he'd often taken me down to the river in the summer to bathe—but I'd only once caught a fleeting glimpse of Aunt Wild Mule's body. But that one time was more than enough. She had a sleek body with an oily green cast that gleamed, almost fluorescent, in the light. My boyish fingers itched to reach out and touch her, and if I had, and if she didn't hit me because of it, I'd have really felt around. How would she have felt? Icy cold or fiery hot? I'd have liked to

know, but I never did touch her. So I never knew. But my father did. His hands roamed over her body, her buttocks and her breasts. Father's dark hands and Auntie Wild Mule's pale buttocks and breasts. I imagined his hands as wild and savage, like those of a marauder, squeezing her buttocks and breasts dry. She'd moan, her eyes and her mouth expelling light; Father's too. Wrapped in each other's arms, they'd writhe and roll atop a bearskin coverlet, they'd tumble about on the heated *kang*, they'd 'do it' on the wooden floor. Four hands groping and roaming, four lips pressing and crushing, four legs slithering and entwining, every inch of skin rubbed nearly raw . . . creating heat and setting off sparks, until both bodies gave off a luminescent blue glint, like a pair of enormous, scaly, glittery, deadly serpents coiled in an embrace. Father would close his eyes, the only sound his heavy breathing, but screams would tear from the mouth of Auntie Wild Mule. Now I know why she screamed, but at the time I was innocent where relations between the sexes were concerned and didn't understand the drama playing out between Father and his woman. Her screams banged against my eardrums: 'Oh, my dear . . . I'm dying . . . you're killing me . . .' My head pounded as I waited to see what would happen next. I wasn't scared but I was terribly nervous, afraid that my father and Auntie Wild Mule, and I, the sneaky observer, were involved in something sinful and awful. I watched as Father lowered his head and laid his mouth over hers so he could swallow most of her screams, except for a few fragments that slipped out through the sides of his mouth—I *sneak a look at the Wise Monk to see the effect, if any, of my slightly erotic description. I detect only a slight redness in his impassive face, but perhaps that's always been there. I think I'd be well advised to exercise restraint. Since I've seen through the vanity of life and chosen an ascetic future, relating the episodes from the lives of my parents makes me feel as if I'm talking about the ancients—*

I don't know if it was the smell of meat or Auntie Wild Mule's screams that drew, out of the darkness, hordes of small children—they crowded round the yurt or sprawled up against the doorway of the forest cabin, their little bottoms sticking up in the air as they peeped through the cracks in the logs. Then, in my mind, wolves—a whole pack, not just one—came, drawn by the smell of meat. The children ran off, their clumsy, stumpy bodies leaving marks on the snow as they stumbled away. But the wolves remained, squatting

outside the yurt, the teeth grinding in their greedy mouths. I was afraid they'd rip open the yurt or tear down the log cabin, pounce on my father and his woman and have them for dinner. But no, they merely formed a circle round the yurt and then sat on their haunches, waiting, like loyal hunting dogs—

A broad road in front of the dilapidated temple wall connects us to the bustling world beyond. Beyond the weather-beaten bricks of the wall and the breaches caused by casual wall-climbers, beyond the woman in the breach in the wall—she is combing her lush hair, having laid the red flower on the wall beside her. She cocks her head, sending hair cascading over her bosom, and runs a red comb through it, over and over. Each of those jerky movements tugs at my heart. I pity all those strands of hair, I feel sad, I feel an ache in my nose and tears in my eyes. If she'd let me comb her hair, I'm thinking, I'd be gentle, infinitely patient, and not damage a single strand, even if there were tiny insects or spiders between them, even if birds had made their nests to raise fledglings. I think I detect a look of annoyance on her face, an expression common to women who have to deal with a full head of hair. Perhaps smugness is more appropriate. The subdued aroma at the roots of her hair carves its way into my nose and makes me light-headed, as if I am drunk on strong, aged spirits—I see traffic out on the highway. The metal arm of a brick-red truck-mounted crane swings past my field of vision, like a huge oil painting on the move. Twenty-four raised mortars, a ghostly white light glinting off their tubes, their shapes remarkably similar to tortoise-like tanks, pass through my field of vision, like a comic strip. A blue trailer-truck that could be used either for passengers or for freight careens past; a shrill loudspeaker is mounted on the roof, a ring of colourful banners circles the cab, each painted with a woman's fair face that flaps in and out of view, showing off curved brows and bright red lips. A dozen or more people are standing on the trailer bed, dressed in blue T-shirts and baseball caps. They are shouting a slogan in chorus: 'People's Representative Wang Dehou, all work, no play and no show.' But they grow quiet as they pass the temple, the garish trailer now like a glittery coffin on the move. They pass through my line of vision. Off beyond the wall, on one side of the highway, on a lawn directly opposite this crumbling Wutong Temple, an enormous bulldozer chugs along. My gaze passes over the wall; I can see the vehicle's orange canopy, and, every once in a while, its metal arm and hideous scoop.

Wise Monk, I'm telling you everything, holding back nothing. Back then I was a child whose only thought was to eat as much meat as possible. Anyone who gave me a fragrant leg of fatty lamb or a delicious bowl of fatty pork, I didn't care who it was but I'd call him Daddy or go down on my knees and kowtow. Or both. Even today, after all this time, if you visit my hometown and mention my name—it's Luo Xiaotong—you'll see their eyes flash, a strange light, as if you'd mentioned Lao Lan's third uncle Lan Dagan. Why? Because anything associated with me and with meat will scroll through their heads like a comic strip. And that's because of all the tales associated with the third young master of the Lan clan, who was sent overseas after sleeping with more women than you can count, a man of wide experience—those tales will also scroll through their heads like a comic strip. They wouldn't say it but deep down they'd sigh: 'That loveable, pitiful, hateful, respectable, vile . . . but extraordinary meat boy . . . That mysterious, impenetrable Third Young Master . . . that evil son of a bitch . . .'

If I'd been born somewhere else I may not have developed such a strong craving for meat; but fated to be born in Slaughterhouse Village, where everywhere you looked there was meat on the hoof and meat on the slab, bloody hunks of meat and washed-clean chunks of meat, meat that'd been smoked and meat that hadn't, meat that'd been injected with water and meat that hadn't, meat that'd been soaked in formaldehyde and meat that hadn't, pork beef mutton dog donkey horse camel . . . The wild dogs in our village were so fat from eating spoilt meat that grease oozed from their pores, while I was as skinny as a rail because I couldn't have any. For five years I ate no meat, not because we couldn't afford it but because Mother refused to spend. Before Father ran off, there was always a thick layer of grease along the edge of our wok and bones piled up in the corners. Father loved meat, especially pig's head. Every few days he'd bring home a white-cheeked, fatty pig's head with red-tipped ears. He and Mother always argued over it, and eventually the fights turned physical. She was a middle peasant's daughter, brought up to be a hard-working, frugal housewife, to never live beyond her means and to use her money to build a house and own land. After the land-reform period, my obstinate maternal grandfather dug up the family's life savings and bought five acres of land from Sun Gui, a rehabilitated farm labourer. That waste of money unleashed decades of humiliation upon Mother's family. His

attempt to swim against the tide of history made my idiot grandfather a village laughing-stock. My father, on the other hand, was born into a lumpen-proletariat family. He spent his youth with my good-for-nothing grandfather and grew up into a lazy glutton. His philosophy of life was: eat well today and don't worry about tomorrow. Take it easy and enjoy life. The lessons of history coupled with my grandfather's teachings made him the kind of man who would never spend only ninety-nine cents if he had a dollar in his pocket. Unspent money always cost him a night's sleep. He often counselled my mother that life was an illusion, everything but the food you put in your belly. 'If you spend your money on clothes,' he'd say, 'people can rip them off your back. If you use it to build a house, decades later you're the target of a struggle.' The Lan clan had plenty of houses but now they're a school. The Lan Clan Shrine was a splendid building that had been taken over by the production team to turn sweet potatoes into noodles. 'Buy gold and silver with your money and you could lose your life. But spend your money on meat and you'll always have a full belly. You can't go wrong.' 'People who live to eat don't enter Heaven' Mother would reply. 'If there's food in your belly,' Father'd say with a laugh, 'even a pigsty is Heaven. If there's no meat in Heaven, I'm not going there even if the Jade Emperor comes down to escort me.' I was too young to care about their words. I'd eat meat while they argued, then sit in the corner and purr, like that tailless cat that lived such a luxurious life out in the yard. After Father left, in order to build our five-room house, Mother turned into a skinflint; food seldom touched her lips. Once the house was built, I'd hoped she'd change her views on eating and let meat return to our table after its long absence. Imagine my shock when her scrimping grew worse. A grand plan was taking shape in her mind—to buy a truck, like the one that belonged to the Lan clan, the richest in the village. A Liberation truck, manufactured at Changchun No. 1 Automobile Plant, green, with six large tyres, a square cab and a bed as solid as a tank. I'd have preferred living in our old, three-room country shack with the thatched roof if that would have put meat back on the table. I'd have preferred travelling down bumpy rural roads on a walking tractor that nearly shook my bones apart if that would have put meat back on the table. To hell with her big house and its tiled roof, to hell with her Liberation truck and to hell with that frugal life which forbade even the smallest spot of grease! The more I grew to resent Mother, the more I longed

for the happy days when Father was home. For a boy with a greedy mouth—like me—a happy life was defined by an unending supply of meat. If I had meat, what difference did it make if Mother and Father fought, verbally or physically, day in and day out? No fewer than two hundred rumours concerning Father and Aunt Wild Mule reached my ears over a five-year period. But what instilled a recurring longing in me were those three I mentioned, since meat figured in all of them. And every time the image of them eating meat blossomed in my head, as real as if they were right there with me, my nostrils would flare with its aroma, my stomach would growl, my mouth would fill with drool. And my eyes would fill with tears. The villagers often saw me sitting alone and weeping beneath the stately willow tree at the head of the village. ‘The poor boy! they’d sigh. I knew they’d misread the reason for my tears but was I incapable of setting them straight. Even if I’d told them it was the craving for meat that caused the tears, they wouldn’t have believed me. The idea that a boy could yearn for the taste of meat until his tears flowed would never have occurred to them—

Thunder rolls in the distance, like cavalry bearing down on us. Some feathers fly into the dark temple, carrying the stink of blood, like frightened children, bobbing in the air and then sticking to the Wutong Spirit. The feathers remind me of the recent slaughter in the tree outside, and announce that the wind is up. It is, and it carries with it the stench of muddy soil and vegetation. The stuffy temple cools down, and more cinders fall out of the air over our heads, gathering on the Wise Monk’s shiny pate and on his fly-covered ears. The flies remain unmoved. Studying them closely for a few seconds, I see them rub their shiny eyes with their spindly legs. In spite of their bad name, they’re a talented species. I don’t think any other creature can rub its eyes with its legs and be so graceful about it. Out in the yard, the immobile gingko tree whistles in the wind which has grown stronger. As have the smells it carries, which now include the fetid stench of decaying animals and the filth at the bottom of a nearby pond. Rain can’t be far off. It’s the seventh day of the seventh lunar month, the day when the legendary herd-boy and the weaving maid—Altair and Vega—separated for the rest of the year by the Milky Way, get to meet. A loving couple, in the prime of their youth, forced to gaze at each other across a starry river, permitted to meet only once a year for three days—how tortured they must be! The passion of newlyweds cannot compare to that

of the long separated, who want only to embrace for three days—as a boy, I often heard the village women say things like that. Lots of tears are shed over those three days, which are fated to be full of rain. Even after three years of drought, the seventh day of the seventh lunar month cannot be forgotten! A streak of lightning illuminates every detail of the temple interior. The lecherous grin on the face of the Horse Spirit, one of the five Wutong Spirit idols, makes my heart shudder. A man's head on a horse's body, a bit like the label of that famous French liquor. A row of sleeping bats hangs upside down from the beam above its head as the dull rumble of thunder rolls towards us from far away, like millstones turning in unison. Then more streaks of lightning, and deafening thunderclaps. A scorched smell pounds into the temple from the yard. Startled, I nearly jump out of my skin. But the Wise Monk sits there, placid as ever. The thunder grows louder, more violent, an unbroken string of crashes, and a downpour begins, the raindrops slanting in on us. What look like oily green fireballs roll about in the yard. Something like a gigantic claw with razor-sharp tips reaches down from the heavens and waits, suspended above the doorway, eager to force its way inside and grab hold of me—me, naturally—and then hang my corpse from the big tree outside, the tadpole characters etched on my back announcing my crimes to all who can read the cryptic words. As if by instinct, I move behind the Wise Monk, who shields me, and I am reminded of the beautiful woman who lay sprawled in the breach in the wall, combing her hair. Now there is no trace of her. The breach has turned into a cascade, and I think I see strands of hair in the cascading water, infusing a subtle osmanthus fragrance into the torrent . . . Then I hear the Wise Monk say: 'Go on—'

My teeth were chattering. So cold! I buried my head under the covers and curled into a ball. Heat from the dead fire under the *kang* had long since disappeared, and the bedding was too thin to protect me from the icy concrete floor. Not daring to move, I wished I could turn into a cocooned bug. Through the bedding I heard the muffled sounds of Mother lighting the fire in the next room, the cracks of splitting firewood (that's how she vented her ire towards Father and Aunty Wild Mule). Why didn't she hurry and get the fire roaring?—that was the only way to drive the damp chill out of the room. At the same time I didn't want her to hurry because as soon as she had the fire going she'd try and get me out of bed. Her first shout would be relatively gentle; her second louder and higher and more annoyed. The third would be a bestial roar. A fourth had never been necessary, for if I hadn't rocketed out from under the covers on the third shout, she'd flick the covers off and whack my bottom with her broom. When it got that far, I knew I was doomed. For if, after the first painful whack, I jumped out of bed and onto the windowsill or scuttled out of range on the far side of the *kang*, she'd jump up without even taking off her muddy shoes, grab me by the hair or the scruff of my neck, press me down against the *kang* and really pound me with that broom. If I didn't try to get away or to resist, which she always took as a sign of contempt, her anger would boil over and she'd beat me even harder. However things progressed, if I was not on my feet by the third shout, my bottom and the poor broom were both bound to suffer. The beatings were accompanied by heavy breathing and guttural sounds—the growls of a wild animal, filled with emotion but devoid of identifiable words. But after the broom had hit me thirty times or so, the strength in her arms began to flag and the edge in her voice grew dull. The shouting would grow softer and softer and then the curses would begin—'little mongrel', 'bastard turtle', 'rabbit runt'—followed by a verbal assault on my father. Actually, she didn't have to waste time on

him, since she more or less repeated what she'd said to me, with few inventions. It was never a particularly spirited effort and even I could tell it lacked punch. When you went into the city from our village, you had to pass the little train station. When Mother finished cursing me, she made a quick pass through Father on her way to Aunty Wild Mule, her true destination. Spitting on Father's reputation, she'd move down the narrow tracks to Aunty Wild Mule. Her voice would grow louder once again, and the tears that had come to her eyes while she was cursing Father and me would be seared dry by fury. I would have invited anyone who did not subscribe to the saying 'When enemies come face to face, their eyes blaze with loathing' to look at my mother's eyes while she cursed Aunty Wild Mule. With my father, it was always the same few epithets, over and over, but when it was Aunty Wild Mule's turn the richness of the Chinese language was plumbed as never before. 'My man is a stud horse reduced to fucking a jackass!' 'My man is an elephant humping the life out of a little bitch!' And so on. Mother's classic curses were of her own creation but, even with their many variations, they never strayed far from the central theme. My father, truth be known, had become Mother's principal weapon in exacting revenge. Only by imagining him as a large, powerful beast, and only by depicting Aunty Wild Mule as a little frail animal victimized by his power, was she able to release the loathing that filled her heart. As she described the humiliating effect of Father's genitals on Aunty Wild Mule, the tempo of the broom-beating slowed and the force of each whack lessened until she forgot all about me. At that point, I silently got up, dressed and stood off to one side to listen, fascinated, as she continued to curse brilliantly, and a rash of concerns flooded my mind. First, I was disappointed by the curses hurled at me. If I was a 'mongrel', then which illicit canine affair produced me? If I was a 'bastard turtle', then where did I come from? And if I was a 'rabbit runt', who was the mamma bunny? She thought she was cursing me but she was cursing herself. When she thought she was cursing my father, she was also cursing herself. Even the curses she poured on Aunty Wild Mule, when you think about it, were pointless. My father couldn't turn into an elephant or a stud horse in a million years and, even if he did, how was he supposed to mate with a bitch? A domesticated stud horse might mate with a wild mule, but that would only happen if the mule was willing. Of course I'd have never revealed any of this to Mother—I

can't imagine what that would have led to. Nothing to my advantage, that's for sure, and I wasn't stupid enough to go looking for trouble. After she'd tired herself cursing, Mother would cry, buckets of tears. Then, after she'd cried herself out, she'd dry her eyes with her sleeve and walk out into the yard, dragging me along, to begin earning the day's wages. As if to make up for the time wasted beating, cursing and crying, she'd double her speed of activity. At the same time, she'd keep closer watch on me than usual. All this illustrates why a *kang* that was never warm enough held little attraction for me, and all it took to wake me up was the crackling sounds of the stove, whether or not Mother shouted at me. I'd clamber into clothes that were as cold as a suit of armour, roll up the bedding, scurry off to the toilet to pee and then stand in the doorway, hands at my sides, waiting for Mother to tell me what to do. As I've said, she was more than frugal, she was downright mean and not given to casually lighting a fire. But the cold, dank rooms once made us both as sick as dogs: our knees swelled up bright red, our legs grew numb and we had to spend quite a bit on medicines before either of us was back on our feet again. The doctor warned us: If we planned to go on living, we had to warm up the house to burn the chill off the walls. 'Coal is cheaper than medicine,' he said. Mother had no choice but to set up a stove. So she went to the train station and bought a tonne of coal to heat our new house. How I wished the doctor had said: 'Unless you're in a hurry to die, you have to start eating meat.' But he never did; in fact, the quack told us not to eat greasy food, to follow a bland, and if possible vegetarian, diet. It would not only keep us healthy but also help us live longer. Arsehole! He should have known that after Father ran off we were reduced to eating plain food every day, as plain as a funeral procession, as plain as snow on a mountain peak. Five long years and I'll bet the strongest soap in the world couldn't scrape a drop of grease off my intestines.

I've talked so much my mouth is parched. Fortunately, three little hailstones, no bigger than apricot pits, slant into the temple and land at my feet. If it isn't the Wise Monk, whose powers allow him to see into my heart, who has magically commanded those three hailstones to land at my feet, then it must be a happy coincidence. I sneak a look at him as he sits as straight as a rod, his eyes closed, totally relaxed; but the black hairs poking out amid the gathered flies on his ears quiver and I know he's listening. I was a precocious