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are narrated with grace and autumnal beauty.”

TAN TWAN ENG, Man Asian Literary Prize-winning author of *The Garden of Evening Mists*

Gull

Between
Heaven
and
Earth

A
NOVEL

Boey
Kim Cheng



“Subdued and sensitive. The triumphs and sorrows of one of China’s greatest poets are narrated with grace and autumnal beauty.”

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“A book of imagination, love and glowingly recaptured time.”

—Nicholson Baker, author of *The Anthologist*

“Of all the great Chinese poets, Du Fu and Li Bai are the ones most familiar to non-Chinese readers. For a hundred years now, their poems have been translated into English by scores of translators. But as conversant as we have become with their poetry, most people know very little about the lives of these poets or the world of the Tang Dynasty in which they lived. Now we have Boey Kim Cheng’s *Gull Between Heaven and Earth*, a fascinating novel based on the life of Du Fu, his friendship with Li Bai, and the often harrowing conditions he endured in the tumult of shifting political intrigues and the devastating An Lushan Rebellion. At last, we have a vivid context with which to read Du Fu’s writings and to see how they were derived from the events of his life; Boey has also given us some stunning new translations of Du Fu’s poems. This is an essential book for anyone interested in Chinese poetry and the intriguing life of its greatest poet.”

—Joseph Stroud, multi-award-winning author of *Of This World*

**GULL
BETWEEN
HEAVEN
AND
EARTH**

A Novel

BOEY KIM CHENG

**ALSO
BY THE
AUTHOR**

MEMOIR
Between Stations

POETRY
Clear Brightness
After the Fire
Days of No Name
Another Place
Somewhere-Bound



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*For my wife Wah Fong,
without whom the journey would never have been completed,
and my children, Edna and Patrick,
who visited the poet's places with me in winter a lifetime ago*

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天地一沙鸥

THOUGHTS ON A NIGHT PASSAGE

By the bank the slender grass stirs in the breeze,
on the lone boat the mast looms in the dark.

Over the wild level plains stars are falling,
while the moon heaves on mighty river's tides.

How will one's name live in words?

Old and sick, I've quit office for good.

Drifting from place to place, what have I become?

A solitary gull between heaven and earth.

—Du Fu (杜甫)

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

IN TANG DYNASTY China, courtesy names were given to males when they turned twenty, and these were used between friends. Du Fu's courtesy name was Zimei (子美), meaning "Son of Beauty"; while Li Bai's was Taibai (太白), translated as "Great White", one of the Chinese variants for the planet Venus. I have used Du Fu's and Li Bai's courtesy names throughout the book, but not those of their friends, except in the occasional dialogue.

Era names like Kaiyuan and Tianbao are part of a system of numbering the years according to the reigns of emperors, with each new emperor ushering in a new era and the years counted with reference to it. An emperor with a long reign like Xuanzong (玄宗) had three different periods to his reign: 先天 Xiantian (712–713 CE), 开元 Kaiyuan (713–741 CE), and 天宝 Tianbao (742–756 CE).

All translations of the poems that appear in the novel are my own.

PROLOGUE

大历五年 Fifth Year of Dali Era (770 CE)

ON THE GHOSTLY-WHITE shore the lone silhouette of Yueyang Tower looms, its snow-dusted eaves and balconies licked by unearthly light as the moon clears the distant hills and climbs the winter sky, till it is hovering over the flared rooftop, its golden orb like a candle flame.

With a resounding thud their boat slips home alongside the landing. They have come full circle. It was two years ago that they arrived at the tower, having sailed down the Long River in the hope of turning north to Changan. Then, the winter day was utterly bleached of colour, and the tower looked funereal as they sailed into Dongting Lake, but the hope of return still held out its bright flame. Now the lunar incandescence seems to mock their misery and failure.

The jolt as the gunwale hit the pilings must have tipped him out of his dream. Voices echo at the edge of his consciousness. He opens his eyes with effort and feels a sudden wash of pain in his head. And a sense of relief. His mind is still lucid. He isn't dreaming, or dead. Increasingly the two have felt the same, that to be dead is to be trapped forever in a dream.

The moonlight streams through the bamboo screen and lies in slats across his body. He hears the creak of oarlocks, the lapping of the lake water against the hull, and feels the gentle heaving of the boat. There is a grating noise, as the hull rubs against the pilings, a splash and voices. His boys must be tying the boat up, and talking to the fishermen returning with their night catch.

They have been living on this boat for two years now, except for those few weeks in Tanzhou. He is sick of the constant motion, even when they are at anchor, the ceaseless movement that has become his life. He would gladly die, if only he could find rest on firm ground, and be returned to the waiting earth of his ancestral land. To see Changan, Luoyang, his

ancestral home in Gongyi, and then be buried at the Shouyang cemetery, next to his father and grandfather. That seems impossible now. He shifts his weight onto his right elbow to sit up but a wave of nausea hits him, and then a spasm wrenches his chest. He slumps back on the bed and closes his eyes.

Shadows flit across his mind. Then he remembers the dream, its vague shape, and tries to chase the details, and just as he is about to let it go, it comes back in hallucinatory vividness.

Taibai was walking towards him, his feet gliding above the swift currents of the Long River. He had stepped off a single-masted boat that bobbed on the restive, mist-wreathed water, and was moving towards him, his long, wide sleeves fluttering, the skirts of his white robe billowing behind. His face was gaunt, an ashen pallor covered his brow and sunken cheeks. No longer the freewheeling spirit Zimei had known, the devil-may-care gleam that Zimei loved extinguished from the eyes which stared vacantly through him.

Taibai must have mastered the Ermei school of *qinggong*, to walk on water so lightly. He had trained with many masters, and demonstrated his prowess on a few occasions when they were travelling together. No matter how debauched the night before was and where they were, he would be up at dawn to meditate and then practise his moves; first a graceful, seamless *taiji* sequence, languid almost, then the pace quickening, as if some force had been awakened and was driving the body into lightning-quick movements, dazzling flurries of punches and kicks, acrobatic somersaults and backflips that belied his friend's usual relaxed frame. Then Taibai took up his Jade Dragon sword, his strokes controlled and firm, and then he was wielding it like a calligraphy brush, carving silver arcs that sparked and wavered, the blade becoming invisible in swift thrusts and swipes, Taibai's sleeves flapping robustly, fanning the blue air into rippling vibration, the long sword catching the first rays of the sun and his body becoming transfigured into a gilded phantom among the scattering scarves of mist.

Once, walking their horses through a narrow gorge near the Tiantai Peak, enjoying the trill of the jade-green stream beside them, they

were stopped by three masked men armed with sabres. Taibai charged, unsheathing his sword. Zimei stood frozen, mesmerised by his friend's swift response, for they had been drinking on the saddle, and Taibai had just a moment ago been swaying on his feet and spouting poetry and obscenities. There was a flash in the sunlight, a jarring clash of metal on metal. Zimei drew his own weapon and ran to Taibai's aid, but two of the bandits were already taking to their heels, crying and trailing blood. The third was lying still in the long grass, a deep gash across his throat.

It was the first time he had seen a man killed in a fight. As he slowly sheathed his own sword, he noticed Taibai scratching a notch on his blade near the hilt. He once boasted that he had killed a hundred men. Zimei had heard many wild and romantic stories spun around the name of Li Bai, who could recite poems one minute, and kill a man the next. Not for the first time on their adventures together, Zimei realised that man and myth were one.

He envied Taibai the flamboyant aura, his reckless abandon, and his reputation as a wandering poet-swordsman. He admired his pugilistic skills, his daring, the spontaneity of his actions, his ease with men and women alike. Most of all he wanted to write like him, be possessed like him by that ecstatic charge, the ability to be the thing he wrote about: the mountains, the lone pine on the cliff overhang, to be borne aloft on the floating wordless language of mist and wind. He remembers the thrill of reading Taibai's lines on the Lushan waterfall:

Sunlight gilding the urn and purple haze;
in the distant ravine a waterfall hangs,
a three-thousand-foot plunge,
the Silver River plummeting for nine days.

He was one with the elements, the *qi* coursing through his body and poems like an unbridled stream, bearing all before it on its robust flow. Inhabiting the moment fully, never held back or distracted by the past; that is what makes him such a great poet, and such a perfect travelling companion.

Taibai stopped, suspended above the lapping waves, as though he had encountered an invisible barrier. His blanched lips parted, moving almost imperceptibly, and Zimei strained forward to catch the words, but the long furrows of waves heaved up and swallowed the sounds.

He heard himself calling across to Taibai, You never replied to my letters. Now you are here, dear friend, it's good! The poems I wrote for you, did you get them?

He had sent the poems to friends Taibai was said to be staying with in his exile, but had received no reply. True, they both had no fixed abode all those years. Taibai since his expulsion from the Court, he since the Rebellion broke out. But he had left forwarding addresses, and entrusted mutual friends who were travelling to Jiangnan to deliver the poems and letters. He still has the poems Taibai had written for him, one composed the night before they parted at Stone Gate, after two months travelling together in Shandong; the other was sent from Taibai's home in Sand Hill.

He would give anything to understand what his friend was saying. He wanted Taibai to tell him the story of his exile in the wilds of Jiangnan, to recite his poems, and explain the years of silence, why he never replied to his letters. He wanted Taibai to tell him that their friendship would never die, that the few months of intense travelling together had meant something to them both, and had sealed their friendship forever.

Then a heavy swell rose between them, and Taibai's form buckled and receded on the foaming waves, diminishing till his figure was drowned in the murky darkness.

Zimei reaches out his hand. He can see the skeletal fingers, the skin between them a translucent parchment, and hears himself shouting, his voice disembodied, the words trailing off into the dark.

A slow wave of nausea washes over him and he goes into a racking dry retch. Then an acute pain wraps his chest, and his heart feels as if it is about to burst; he wills his body to move, to fight for breath, but can't feel his limbs. He thinks it is the end, but the pain gradually backs off. A hand is touching his forehead; he knows its texture and calluses, and remembers the silken touch of his wife's hands and how graceful her

slender fingers had been, before they became worn and gnarled by years of hardship he had brought her.

Yangzi's face swims into focus, distinct, bright. She looks just like she did on the night of their wedding, the first time he saw her face, as he lifted the crimson silk veil. The perfect oval face cleansed of wrinkles, her brown almond-shaped eyes and long lashes glistening with a fragile light, and her luscious lips slightly parted. Is this another dream, or time undoing its ravages, now that he is at death's door?

"You were dreaming, calling out Taibai's name," his wife says softly.

There was such a vivid sharpness in the dream that it felt as though his friend were still alive. It has been a while since he dreamed of Taibai. It seems like a replay of the dream he had when he was in Qinzhou. It happened after he had learned of Taibai's pardon; his friend had been sent into exile in Jiangnan the year before for his alleged involvement in Prince Li's coup against Emperor Suzong. That night he dreamed of Taibai. But there was no exultation, no joyful return of the exile. His friend looked like he had died. When Zimei woke up he felt the lingering shadow of presentiment. In his head the lines floated and in the morning he wrote them out:

In death we part in silence, in life we part in grief.
 From the disease-ridden South there is no news of your exile.
 Often you appear in my dreams, so constant are you on my mind.
 Ghostly traveller, the road is far and hard to plumb;
 your soul drifts from the dark pine forests, and then back to the murky pass.

Now the poem comes back in his head, its words distant, as if written by someone else, from another age. Was it an omen, a portent of his friend's death? His unease had not been lessened by writing the poem but it was soon forgotten in the hardships in Qinzhou. Later in Chengdu, when he heard that Taibai had died near Wu Mountain on the Long River, Zimei was troubled by the thought that his poem was in a remote way culpable.

That poem is rolled up together with a dozen other poems he has

written for his friend, all stored away in the scuffed wooden chest next to him, filled to the brim with a lifetime's poems. So many years of wandering with these poems. What will happen to them now? Who will read them? His entire life, the lives of his family, the story of his country's descent into chaos, they are there, etched in poems that add up to a long scroll, broken but nonetheless a record, a testament, a story. Hundreds of them, he has lost count. They won't do any good now; they won't restore his old position at court or find favour with the new regime. He is beyond that now. Serving his country. What a foolish dream. How far short he is of the standards his forefathers have set.

Zongwen appears through the haze and he feels the boy's hands tugging up the blanket. "Father, we are back on Dongting Lake," his son says.

Zimei looks at his *zhangzi*, his firstborn. When did he become a grown man? A skinny, sun-darkened, scruffier version of himself as a young man, with worried eyes. Poor boy, no scholar in spite of being named in memory of his scholarly ancestors; for most of his years they have led a nomadic life, begging, improvising. Being the eldest, Zongwen has borne the brunt of helping to care for the family. Forced to grow up so quickly. He has taught his sons and daughters all he could, but without a roof over their heads and uncertain where the next meal is coming from, what chance does any of his children have of literary pursuit? What will they do after his death?

He feels the fingers of a cold breeze through the blanket and shivers. He tries to speak but the words remain in the thick strangling lump at the back of his throat. He wants to tell Zongwen that he is now the head of the family, to take care of his younger brother and sisters, and be filial to his mother. He wants his son to bring the family back to Luoyang, to bring his bones home when the peace comes.

He, Zimei—Du Fu—the son of famous forefathers, has become a wanderer, fleeing the Rebellion and death, seeking in vain justice, home and peace for himself, his family, his country. Now he is going to die far from Changan, Luoyang and his ancestral hearth, far from what he set out to achieve when he went to Changan for the Imperial Examination.

And there is no more wandering, no more strength for another *li*. He has brought his wife and children thus far and here, by the shore of Dongting Lake, Yueyang Tower a dark oblong shadow falling across the boat, it is time to free them from his suffering. Now it is his journey alone, on this dark river that seems to flow to the edge of the known world, to the place where Taibai has gone, the frail streak of light the beginning of dawn or the last light of evening.



WESTERN TURKS

EASTERN TURKS
UIGHURS

Silk Road

TAKLAMAKAN
DESERT

Silk Road

Huang He
(Yellow River)

BOHAI

SILLA

HIMALAYAS

TUFAN
(TIBETANS)

Chang Jiang
(Yangzi River)

Fengxiang

Liangzhou

Chengdu

Kuizhou

Jiangling

Dongting Lake

Tanzhou

Xiang River

Xiangzhou

Suzhou

Changan

Fuzhou

Taiyuan

Weij

Luoyang

Kashgar

Dunhuang

Talas

BOOK ONE

开元十八年 Eighteenth Year of Kaiyuan Era (730 CE) –

乾元二年 Second Year of Qianyuan Era (759 CE)

CITY OF LASTING PEACE

THROUGH THE CLOUDS of feverish delirium, through the fires of the Rebellion, the city walls beckon, their spectral shapes and images of Changan refracted through all the places he has been since the Rebellion, the glimpses of the city at each station of Zimei's exile like splintered reflections in the river echoing endlessly. And behind them the city of his youth still stands, intact, unpillaged, its majestic walls, ramparts and towers rising from the Changan plain like a dream, the vast complex of palaces and temples, the glittering roofs, their elegant finials and eaves, the bustling thoroughfares, sprawling markets and caravanserais, all preserved by some magic that has dissolved the disillusionment and despair of old age, an untarnished ideal hovering behind all these years of unrest when Changan receded as he tramped from one refuge to another, further and further away from it, his body fraying, dragging in tow his suffering but uncomplaining family. It has been a driving urge, to return to the Changan of youth and promise, possess it once and for all so that it would open its arms to him again, and restore the dream that seems to have vanished before it could be fulfilled. The dream of return, to recover that lost city of his longing and perhaps finally discover himself.

How many times in their enforced wanderings has he taken up the brush, prompted by a pained longing, a tug in the mind, that sharp pang in the heart, as though pining for a loved one who is dead? He would lay out the paper and prepare the ink, trembling, not knowing what was causing the pang till the lines were written and Changan appeared out of a ghostly cloud of words. Even the happiest moment in a poem could lead back to the city. He has carried it for so long, the map of memory—the imposing Daming Palace and its inner court, the Imperial City with its sprawling complex of princely residences and gardens,

and avenues wide enough for ten chariots to roll through abreast of one another; the East Market with its expensive emporiums and shops catering to the wealthy, and the West Market, where merchants from Persia and beyond unloaded their caravans of exotic goods, its bazaars and winding alleys alive with distinct colours and flavours, reverberating with foreign faces and voices; the different quarters to the south, packed with temples, monasteries, shrines, mansions, and then further south, humbler residences and local markets that would come alive, once the East and West Markets shut at sundown; Meandering Stream and the extensive parks to the southeast—all rolled up like a long intricate scroll painting. A recurrent dream he has had recently is of himself as a hopeful scholar wandering the West Market, waiting for the successful candidates to be announced, certain his name would top the list. Then he sees a boy, lost in the browsing crowds, bewildered by the press of bodies, the cacophonous medley of voices, strange dialects and foreign words, the thick weave of smells and the astonishing variety of goods. The boy seems to be waiting for someone to claim him, to take him home. He can't recall having been to Changan as a child, and can't understand why he is so sure that boy is him. Where has the memory come from? Is the city trying to tell him something that he has forgotten, now that all hope of return has disappeared, and the only way back is through these dreams that keep whispering to him words he can't understand, like the foreign voices surrounding the boy in the bazaar, and holding him captive till he realises he is lost?

The city drew them like a lodestar to its imperial heart. From all over China they came: merchants, tradesmen, pugilists, swordsmen, musicians, poets, dancers and prostitutes, gamblers, conmen, and farmers escaping the hardships of the country and greedy landlords, all here to find their destiny. The most hopeful were the court-aspirants. Each year hundreds of candidates from the prefectures came for the Imperial Examination and only a lucky few made it through to the forbidding, treacherous maze of court service. Those who failed, like himself, lingered on, unable to free themselves from the city's hold. The famed poet Meng Haoran was one of the few who left after failing the

jinshi examination, retiring to a hermit's existence in the emerald hills of Xiangyang, to write his much admired *shanshui* poems. According to his friend Wang Wei, Meng was in fact relieved at failing, and embraced it as his calling to wander among the mountains, far from worldly affairs.

In the wine shops, bitter failures loitered without hope or purpose. Spending what little they had on getting drunk, then stretching their credit and slipping into debt till they got booted out, eventually to end up back in their ancestral villages or towns far from Changan, drunk, miserable, resigned to menial jobs to the end of their days. In the taverns you could see a few of them who hung on pitifully, loudly composing songs that they hoped would be taken up by the singing girls. When sober, they would seek out patrons, gatecrashing parties of Changan's rich and influential, knocking on the doors of officials known to have literary pretensions but who hadn't read the five classics, some even quite illiterate, begging them for commissions, offering flattering couplets and ingratiating verses. Zimei had been one of those increasingly shameless failed scholars, sending verses to the rich and powerful, people he hardly knew, hoping for his fortune to turn.

Those days of aimlessness and false hopes now seem like a gift of youth, a time of reprieve, as close to happiness as he was allowed. Strange how time changes everything, even the past. True, it was hard, living hand to mouth, making do with one meal a day. But he had plenty of time to explore the city and it was seductive with its manifold pleasures, and the city itself was seduced by a something quite foreign. On the wide avenues paved with sand and lined with persimmon, gingko, laurel and walnut trees, there was a constant parade of people, life in its giddy and enthralling colours. On Zhujia Street and in the markets you could see a riotous mix of faces: the Turks with their hawk-like eyes and sharp noses; the Tibetans with their broad, burnished faces and slanted eyes; the Indians standing out with their dark skin and turbans. And just as prominent were the foreigners from beyond the Tarim Basin and the known limits of his world: tall, pale-skinned, red- or yellow-haired merchants who had travelled years to reach Changan. Some preached a strange faith that promised salvation through a man-god called Jesus

who had suffered, died and come to life again. They invited him to visit their temple. It had been converted from a disused Confucian temple at the western end of Zhujia Street, not far from the pagoda that the monk Xuanzang had built after returning from his thirteen-year pilgrimage to fetch the Buddhist scriptures from India. At the altar, where a statue of Master Kong must have once sat, was a wooden cross with the body of their god nailed on it. Strange that their god should be so helpless and in pain. Zimei had stood in the shadowy entrance and watched their rites, the genuflection, the priest swinging a censer of fragrant smoke, and the chorus of singing voices, the sounds of the words so strange but so beautiful that he stayed for the duration of the worship and afterwards felt dazed stepping into the street; it was like he had travelled briefly to a faraway place, transported on the alien sounds of devotion and the clouds of frankincense.

Then there were the fire-worshippers who called themselves Zoroastrians. They were a secretive lot, and would not allow outsiders into their temple, which stood at the southern end of the West Market, hidden behind a high brick wall. Wang Wei, who had entertained a group of Persian delegates at court, explained that they had kept a fire burning since the beginning of time, to ward off the evil forces of the universe. At the northern end of the market was the temple for the Arabs, who followed a prophet called Mohammad; it had no graven images, only beautifully carved scrollwork and a flowery script painted on the columns and panels of the pagoda. Further down the street was a small unadorned temple for the Jews, who abjured pork, and wore skullcaps, and observed a seven-day instead of ten-day week.

Zimei was curious of these faiths and their rituals, especially those which believed in a single deity promising eternal life to its followers. It was frightening, the idea that a real world and life lay beyond this one. Zimei's own Confucian upbringing did not allow any questioning of the world he was born into. He performed the rites, paid respects to his ancestors, and dimly perceived there to be a ghostly realm where their spirits lingered or roamed, neither happy nor sad; but never could he feel that this entity called God existed. He remembered the debates

with Taibai about the *Dao*: how could you prove that the world of ten thousand things, and this cycle of life and death, was driven by a cosmic energy that transcended good and evil; that you could attain immortality by tapping into eternal currents of the *Dao* using some talismanic formula and elixir? And then there was his friend Wang Wei, who saw the *Dharma* in everything. He had invited Zimei to several Buddhist temples. At the Big Mercy Temple Zimei had sat in on Abbot Zan's sermons and felt a strange sensation, at once light and heavy, peaceful and disturbing, taking hold of his body. In the meditation hall he had listened rapt as the slope-shouldered Abbot discoursed on the Empty Gate *Dharma*, his mind struggling with the precepts and the paradoxes, till he found himself floating on the rhythms of the Abbot's deep and resonant voice, while the lamplight guttered and the quills of incense measured the hours and infused the air with juniper breaths.

And then he had gone with the Abbot to visit Wang Wei's estate in the Zhongnan Mountains. The house sat in the fold of the foothills, large but simple, a whitewashed villa with guest rooms around a beautifully sculpted rock garden. A brief ramble through the pine forest brought the visitors to a bamboo meditation hut Wang Wei had built with his own hands. There the Abbot led them in contemplation of the *Dharma*, as the wrens flitted outside in the camellia bushes and the swallows darted through the eaves. In the mist-covered gorge below, a waterfall murmured. A deep calm stole over Wang Wei's face, washing away the troubled look he wore at court, the eyebags and frown momentarily erased. He had confessed the difficulties of practising Buddhist precepts and serving the court at the same time; here, far from the world of intrigue and strife, there was no such division. He had immersed himself in the faith since the deaths of his wife and his mother, which had occurred within months of each other. Later, Zimei would wonder how much of Wang Wei's Buddhist faith helped him through the darkest days of the Rebellion. He remembered Wang Wei saying, when Zimei asked if the Buddha ever answered his prayers: "The Buddha is not a god, he was a great teacher."

If Changan stirred his spiritual questionings, it also assaulted his

senses with an intoxicating mix of sights, smells and sounds. It was bewitching to wander the maze-like markets, reading the multitude of faces, the river of voices, languages, colours, accents, drifting from stall to stall, wandering around the warehouses, the wine shops, the entertainment halls, savouring the weave of light and shade in the covered bazaars. His steps gravitated towards the West Market, the hundreds of shops jostling for customers, the narrow lanes around it always bustling with a constant stream of goods and people. He loved wandering in and out of the different quarters and guilds, squeezing through the livestock market, the poultry section aflutter with feathers and squawks, past the colourful displays of the flower and vegetable stalls, to the herbalists' where he would linger to study the cornucopia of dried leaves, roots and powders. Then he would saunter through the confectionaries, the perfumeries, past the silver and goldsmiths, to the fashion stalls, where he would eye the colourful bolts of silk, admire the delicate embroidery, and think of Yangzi. At the far end were the printers, safe-deposit shops, moneylenders and pawnshops where he had to sell quite a few things in those lean years. After these came the restaurants, tea-houses and wine shops. It was an endless bazaar where he could lose himself, wandering the labyrinthine weave of alleys, luxuriating in the tapestry of odours and visual displays.

His favourite drinking place was the Flying Horse Tavern, where he watched the Turkish dance. It was popular then, the music of the barbarians. The Turks with their embroidered hats and tunics were plying their strange lutes, vertical flutes and drums, an ensemble with their rousing and hypnotic melodies. He was mesmerised by a nubile Turkish girl who wore a low-cut sequined brocade vest and diaphanous silk skirt. Her body moved languorously to the mournful strains of longing, then whirled around at increasing speed as the music brightened in mood and accelerated in tempo, the dancer's flowing skirts lifting in teasing swirls above translucent pantaloons that were more seductive than nakedness, and he felt a stirring of desire.

Yet, looking back he could see the signs of disease, the seeds of disaster already sown and taking root, like canker or weeds that would run riot and

drown out the glories of the Empire. At the end of the glorious Kaiyuan Era, which had seen unprecedented peace and prosperity, Emperor Xuanzong had started to neglect his responsibilities, entrusting them to the inept but evil Li Linfu who, in order to eliminate his rivals, persuaded the Emperor to hire more mercenaries; Turks and Uighurs swelled the ranks of garrison armies in the west and north. In Luoyang and Changan, it was sometimes hard to find a Han face among the stream of foreign bodies. On the frontiers governorships were given to barbarian generals like Geshu Han and An Lushan. In the west the Imperial army led by Korean General Ko had been crushed at Talas by the Arabs, thousands killed and captured. Xuanzong had begun to stray from his duties, his flirtation with Daoism becoming an obsessive quest for arcane knowledge and the elixir of immortality. Then the unthinkable: the Emperor, whose wise and glorious reign had earned him from the start the title of Brilliant Glory, fell for his son's wife. That was the beginning of the end. Lady Yang became the centre of the Emperor's world; she was promoted to Imperial Consort and her relatives soon occupied key positions at court, including her cousin Yang Guozhong, who was locked in bitter enmity with Li Linfu, and eyeing the post of Chancellor.

Wang Wei told Zimei about all the court intrigues, how all the good men had been sent into exile or killed by Li Linfu and Yang Guozhong. Wang Wei's close friend, Minister Zhang, was one of Li Linfu's victims; Zhang was exiled to Jinzhou as a result of Li Linfu's false accusation of incompetence. Zimei recalled the poem that Wang Wei had written on farewelling Zhang; it was admired and widely circulated among the Changan literati. Even the Emperor loved it and might have recalled Zhang but for Li Linfu's venomous words. Zimei knew the lines by heart and wondered if there was not a lesson in it for him:

Where are you? I think only of you.

Dejected I gaze at the Jingmen mountains.

Now no one recognises you

but I still remember how you helped me.

I too will work as a farmer,

planting crops, growing old in my hilly garden.
 I see wild geese fading in the south.
 Which one can bring you my words?

Wang Wei had often said the Imperial Service was not for him; it was against his reclusive nature and kept him from his Buddhist practice. He wanted to resign like the great recluse poet Tao Qian, and leave the snares of worldly concerns. He warned Zimei about the evil machinery that ran the court, and predicted that between Yang Guozhong and Li Linfu, there was no way the Emperor could be awakened and the ruin ahead averted. Zimei listened, troubled, but the dark thoughts lifted and dispersed as Wang Wei led him and the Abbot to the hilltop pavilion above his residence, to watch the dawn break the scrolls of mist, and light up the Zhongnan peaks with its golden breath.

2

LOOKING AFAR IN FOUR DIRECTIONS

开元十八年 Eighteenth Year of Kaiyuan Era (730 CE) –

天宝三载 Third Year of Tianbao Era (744 CE)

AT THIRTY, HE felt the best years of his life were over.

He stared at the paper on his desk. The page was full of meaningless characters. The words were empty, flat, meant nothing, and captured nothing of what he felt; the lost time, his faded youth, the growing sense of failure and loss that had cast its shadow on his new life with Yangzi. Instead of scoring *zhuangyuan* in the Imperial Examination and being honoured with a high post and living the dream life in Changan, he found himself in his father's residence in Luoyang, a city he found hard to love, its streets cold and indifferent, its markets small and lacking the bustle and colour of Changan's bazaars, its temples and palaces bearing not a whiff of the excitement and adventure he sensed in Changan. He had nothing to give in the way of comfort and assurance to his young wife. He looked at Yangzi sitting on the edge of their *kang* bed, mending his trousers, her beautiful oval face tilted downward, her slender fingers, which had already coarsened with hard work this past year since marrying him, working the needle and thread in a way he loved to watch. So gentle, measured and calm. Not like his writing, so uncertain, undisciplined and aimless.

He peered out of the window across the parched autumn fields, desolate-looking after the sorghum and wheat were harvested, to the hazy eastern hills; beyond them, half a day's ride away, was his ancestral house in Gongyi, from which he had set out years ago, a young man full of hope and daring, filled with desire to visit the historic sites, the ruins and monuments of vanished kingdoms, the wild untamed country where

hermits and sages roamed, and the unruly frontiers, the outer reaches of the vast country forcefully united by the First Emperor.

He had wanted to see the landscapes he had read about in the poems that were appearing from the capital, by poets who were making their name with their exciting fresh styles and voices. On his eighteenth birthday, he had received a scroll from his tutor; it was a painting of a waterfall dangling from a sheer mountain cliff and a traveller pausing to admire it. There was a companion verse by Li Bai, whose works had been avidly read and circulated since he joined the Six Idlers of the Bamboo Brook in Shandong:

The real man must look afar in all four directions,
and with a brave heart and sword
leave home and country for the road.

When he set out, Zimei was ready for adventure, to live life to the hilt, and learn as much as his purse would allow him about the different prefectures and circuits that made up this kingdom, this vast realm that had extended its bounds in the early years of Xuanzong's reign. General Zhang had recently driven the Khitans out from the Ordos region, while to the west the Turks and the Tibetans were held in check. It was a time of plenty—the barns and government granaries were full and you didn't have to carry food on long journeys—every few *li* there was an inn and stables. The road of adventure and promise lay ahead and Zimei felt anything was possible; he had no doubt he would pass the Imperial Examination when the time came, and he would establish his name both as a poet and as a court minister.

He left home a week after his twentieth birthday, like most young men from good families, expectant, curious, starting on the road of learning. He followed the Yiluo River that flowed just north of his home to the Yellow River, but no sooner had he crossed it than the floods started; swift brown torrents of silt-laden water drowned villages on both sides of the river. He changed tack and drifted south on the Grand Canal, arriving in Jiangling on the Yangzi River. In the ancient capital he stayed with

his uncle Du Deng, the local magistrate. He loved walking the narrow streets with their polished cobbles, and admired the fortifications that had lasted from the Three Kingdoms period. At the Wagan Temple he saw the famous portrait of Vimalakirti by Gu Kaizhi, the deity preaching his sutra from a dais, his long white beard tilted as he expounded the doctrine of nothingness. His sutra was one of the many that the pious monk Xuanzang had brought back from India. Zimei felt drawn to the figure, its fine contours flowing in sinuous strokes on the ochre wall. He had read excerpts from the Buddhist sutras, and was mystified by the doctrine of emptiness. How could it all be a void, his senses, this world they perceived, even this wonderful painting that was still so alive after so many years? He couldn't resolve the paradox the Buddha embodied, but was nonetheless drawn to the world of silence and stillness, of liberation from the world of desire and ambition.

Then he travelled to Suzhou, the capital of Wu Kingdom. He was overawed by the august, mysterious mausoleum of the king on Tiger Hill. Next to it was Sword Pond, where Emperor Qin Shihuang had buried the brave assassin who had tried to kill him with the fish intestine sword. He contemplated crossing the Bohai Sea to Woguo but instead drifted further down south of the Long River into the Yue province. From there he explored the vast lakes and winding rivers, wandering the limestone hills whose fantastic shapes reverberated in the mirror sheen of the countless streams that crisscrossed the country. He had long wanted to see the landscape celebrated in the mountain and water poetry of the classical poets, a much more fluid world of the imagination that was antipodean to the dry and dusty north. He hired a boat and sailed through the limestone hills, the bewildering shapes of the peaks a long procession of images that stoked his imagination, haunting his mind with forms that were like words given body and life. He lingered in small towns and villages, and surveyed the Yue women, whom he thought unrivalled in beauty, with their incredibly fair, glowing smooth complexions, the young ones slim and lissome.

A shadow dogged him even in those footloose years. What was he looking for? What did he really want from life? His state of grace and

reprieve was coming to an end. He would have to return to reality soon, to a sedentary life of service and family duties. He wrote desultorily, without passion or belief, but ended up with a hundred or more poems that he would lose in the Qinling Mountains twenty years later.

At the end of his second year wandering in the south, his uncle forwarded him a letter from his father. It was time now, his father said, to sit for the Imperial Examination. The court had moved temporarily to Luoyang, the Eastern Capital, because of heavy floods in Changan, and the examination would be held there. Reluctantly he headed back. He knew he wasn't ready. The three years of travelling had brought him myriad experiences, but had left little time for formal study. When the scroll of successful candidates (twenty-seven out of three thousand) was announced, Zimei felt the inevitable disappointment, but a sense of relief too.

He accepted more money from his father, who was visibly disappointed with him for taking the examination lightly, but didn't seem to doubt that his son would succeed the next time. This time he headed east and northeast to the provinces of Qi and Zhao.

...

Zimei was in a tavern in Handan, the capital of Zhao, watching a performance of the famed "Rainbow and Feathered Dress Dance". The dancing girls, dressed in their colourful gowns, gorgeous feathered headdresses and long, gossamer-light shawls, though they looked like *xiannü*, the flying fairies depicted in cave paintings that inspired the music they danced to, were not as graceful as Zimei expected. He started feeling bored and looked around. He noticed a man about his own age, stout, strong-jowled, with deep piercing eyes set above prominent cheekbones, looking as bored as he felt. Their eyes met and Zimei felt a little disconcerted by the direct gaze, but lifted his wine cup and nodded politely. The other man nodded back, and after a few more minutes, when one of the "fairies" couldn't sustain a difficult pose and broke formation, he gave up watching altogether and walked over to Zimei's table where he sat alone.

"Disgraceful! Absolute travesty! If His Majesty saw that, they would have lost their heads!" the man ranted. The "Rainbow and Feathered Dress Song" was an elegant piece of music arranged by Emperor Xuanzong himself. By all accounts, when played by court musicians, it was magically moving, and when the dance was performed by his favourite, Yang Guifei, her many arrestingly picturesque poses took the breath away. Both song and dance had been taken up eagerly outside the palace, as with many other fads that swept round the country, but here, in this tavern, it fell flat.

"No style, no grace! *Xiannü* indeed!" The stranger shook his head.

He made a few more loudly uncomplimentary though rather amusing remarks, then introduced himself. He was Su Yuanming, a minor official. Zimei could now see past the piercing gaze, to the warm humour beneath. He responded by telling Su about a fabulous Sword Dance he had once watched as a child. After emptying a jug of the tavern's best wine together, dissecting the unfortunate "fairies" of the Handan tavern and capping each other's stories of other famous dances, they found themselves friends.

On Congtai Pavilion, built by the King of Zhao during the time of the Warring States, they drank White Ant Wine and sang till the moon seemed to sway to their melodies. Su was an awful singer, his efforts more a raucous croak than a recognisable tune, but no matter. He was a formidable swordsman, trained in the Wudang School. When they were camped out on Jingnian Lake, a day's ride from Handan, Su would be up as the first rays of sun fingered the dew-veiled morning, and he would rehearse the seamless moves of the Wudang style *taiji quan*, and then, with the sword bequeathed him by his Wudang teacher, the sword sequences. Zimei mimicked the flowing movements, the oneness of the sword with the body that Su had perfected. Later, he would watch Taibai display his Ermei sword skills and wonder who was the better swordsman, Su with his more graceful, sinuous dance-like strokes, or Taibai with his more forceful thrusts and lightning swipes.

Su was also a renowned archer and taught Zimei the art of shooting from a galloping horse. Letting go of the reins, guiding the horse only

with his knees yet keeping it at full gallop, Su could unloose arrows in quick succession, the horn bow steadily tracking the prey, indifferent to the movement of the horse. Partridge, quail, grouse, and even a grey heron in distant flight would be felled by his arrow, usually upon first shot. Once, riding through the gorges of the Taihang Mountains, Su spotted a lone white bird, many feet in the air above their heads, and called out to his friend, "That one is for you!" Challenged, Zimei dug his heels into his black Tartar horse and went after the target, tracking the bird with his long bow for what seemed like a long time before releasing the arrow. The shaft flashed in the afternoon sun and then the bird's flight was arrested. The arrow had, incredibly, impaled a wing. It jerked, flapped its other wing wildly, then veered and dropped to the ground. As he dismounted, he could see a flutter of black wingtips as the bird struggled to get upright. It was a crane; it became still as Zimei approached. Su remained on his horse, smiling congratulatorily at Zimei. Zimei hesitated. He had seen Su wring the necks of wounded birds with his big hands and knew what he had to do. He could feel his heart beating hard as he held the bird and seized its warm pulsing neck. He avoided its eyes, the yellow irises, and looked up into the cloudless sky, where a formation of herons was sailing across to the lake further south, and then he snapped the tender neck. Years later, Zimei would recall the uplift of that moment, proving his marksmanship to one of the best archers in the country, and would also relive the sorrow that he had killed a beautiful living creature not from necessity, but for sport.

They climbed the seven thousand steps to the peak of Taishan, Su challenging Zimei to reach Southern Sky Gate from the start of the Eighteen Bends, the vermilion-painted threshold visible at the top of flights of dizzyingly steep steps laid by order of the First Emperor. Zimei was awed by the sacred mountain, which so many emperors had come to venerate. The two friends saw the cypresses planted by Emperor Wu Di a thousand years ago, and found the Fifth Rank Pine, which stood alone on an overhang leaning into a gorge; it was said to have greeted the First Emperor when he ascended Taishan to perform sacrificial rites. Not far from the summit, Zimei's feet trembled and turned leaden; he paused,

gasping for breath, looking at Su's teasing figure already at the summit gate, hands waving madly. The mist flowed over the mountain as they read rock inscriptions of poems by earlier visitors, and stood rapt before Emperor Xuanzong's gold-painted account of his visit at the beginning of his reign.

They spent the night at Jade Emperor Temple, keeping the night chill at bay by drinking plum wine. Then what a glorious daybreak, birdsong filling the valley below as they stood on Sunrise Watching Platform, and watched the sun emerge from the ocean of clouds, its long beams striking the canyon walls. They each composed a poem while legions of clouds broke up and scudded across the leagues of green plains towards the Eastern Sea, and Zimei thought he glimpsed its glittering presence, and floating on it the faint shape of Woguo, which he hoped to visit one day.

Then they parted, Su proceeding to take up a minor post in Suzhou, while Zimei returned to Luoyang. They were both young, full of ambition and hope. Zimei's parting gift to Su was the poem he had composed as the sun rose above the cloud ocean, turning everything into molten gold around the peaks of Taishan. Looking back now, he envied the young man who could write:

What to say of the great Taishan?
 Around it the green expanses of Qi and Lu stretch.
 Here Creation wielded its divine power
 dividing shadow from sun, dawn from dusk.
 My heaving chest bare to the tiers of clouds,
 my eyes track the returning birds.
 I shall certainly ascend the topmost peak,
 and hold the mountains around in a single glance.

He was a young dreamer, naïve, pitiable, but full of ardour. The future lay bright and glorious like the sunrise on Taishan. He and Su, they felt invincible, immortal, surveying the world around them, as they reached the peak and stood panting, triumphant. Who was to know that twenty-five years later in Zizhou, Zimei would receive the news of Su's

death from starvation during a siege of Changan by the Tibetans? He would feel a deep pain and loss, and as he mourned his first friend of the road, he would feel his own death wasn't far off.

...

The summer after he parted from Su, Zimei was restless, but knew he had to quell his thirst for travel and settle down. He returned to his ancestral village and started digging out a cave house in Shouyang; it faced his home village, and the cemetery on a hill beyond it, where his forefathers were buried. He attacked the loess soil with energy, as if in gouging it out and digging deeply he would find the answer to the restlessness in his heart. Each day he gazed at his ancestors' tombs, the cluster of sward-covered mounds and carved headstones staring back accusingly at him. He was not likely to come anywhere near the fame that Du Yu had achieved thirteen generations ago. His formidable ancestor was a famous polymath and minister during the Western Jin Dynasty and as a general had led spectacular victories against the Eastern Wu. Nor would he match the literary fame of his grandfather Du Shenyang, considered by all to be the best poet of his generation.

Not long after he put the finishing touches to his cave house, his father decided it was time Zimei got married. A buxomy matchmaker with a motherly air soon arrived with news of a suitable match. The family was known to the Dus; the father was Yang Yi, an officer of the Agriculture Bureau. The girl was nineteen, educated, good at embroidery, and pretty; and their Eight Characters matched.

"A match made in heaven!" the matchmaker gushed. An auspicious date was picked, and very soon, all was ready for the wedding, except the groom. Zimei felt uncomfortable with this family responsibility, but he was already thirty; many men his age had been married for years, and already presented their parents with grandchildren to gladden their old age. It was filial duty to marry, to beget offspring who would perpetuate the family name, to honour the ancestors. How could he, who had been raised on the teachings of the Great Sage, refuse to play his part? Zimei staved off his doubts, fears, and his longing to be on the road again.

...

After the ceremony, the unreal festive clamour still ringing in his ears, he stood at the window of the bridal chamber and gazed at the new moon. He tugged uneasily at his wedding robe, its silken softness suddenly constricting. His bride was perched on the bed, her red headdress and veil making her look mysterious in the candlelight. He could feel her tensing as he walked over to her, and heard her breath catch, then quicken as he lifted the silk veil. He tilted her face up gently, and saw how beautiful she was. Her brown almond eyes had a moist innocent gaze beneath finely-arched brows; a suggestion of tears glistened on her long lashes. Her oval face felt cool, smooth and demure. He felt a surge of love, and strangely, pity too. He fumbled with the heavy headdress, managed to remove it and set it aside. As he loosened the jade hairpins and her lustrous hair spilled over her shoulders and gently heaving bosom, he felt the stir in his groin, no, an aching surge in his entire body that he had never experienced before. He doused the light and eased her back onto their bridal bed.

...

A year after his wedding, his beloved Gumu, his father's sister, fell ill and died. When he was a sickly infant, his mother had died, and it was Gumu who had taken him and cared for him lovingly, and in the few years he was with her, he never once thought she wasn't his mother. When he and her own son both contracted pneumonia, and doctors shook their heads and said to prepare for the worst, she consulted a medium who told her that whoever lay in the southeast corner of the house would get well. Without hesitation, she moved Zimei's bed there and true enough, he recovered quickly, but her son died. Zimei had no memory of this. It wasn't till years later, before he left home on his first trip, that his father told him about this as he reminded Zimei to visit her. He had tried to express his gratitude when he saw his aunt, but the only response he got was a sigh; she brushed it aside and busied herself with preparing a farewell meal for him.

As he inscribed the funerary tablet, Zimei felt a wrenching grief, a sorrow greater than what he would feel when his stepmother and father died. Of his birth mother, he remembered nothing. Not the face, smell or touch, just a very vague, remote shadow. No one mentioned her; once, when he asked about her, his father sighed and walked out of the room. His stepmother was friendly, but distant, and became rather cold towards him once his step-siblings arrived, though she never raised a hand against him.

Gumu was the woman of his childhood. It all came back as he wrote the memorial verse: her soft comforting skin, its delicate rose scent he loved when she held him, the powder she wore, the ditties she sang to soothe him to sleep, and the repertoire of dishes she fed the family. She had died lonely; if her son had lived he would have been the one writing the verse. Zimei had not visited her once after he got married. Guilt and too-late love tore at his heart as he wrote, and for the first time he thought about what could have been if Gumu hadn't sacrificed her own flesh and blood. The thought sent a shiver through his being, and for a moment he thought he knew what it was like to not exist.

...

Yangzi watched as he swept his brushes aside and started to crumple up the poems, throwing them on the floor.

What was the use of pining for the past, wishing he were back on his favourite horse, riding and hunting with Su? They were only memories, of escape, flight and fantasy, which kept him from real life, from living here in the present and giving himself totally to his married life and its responsibilities.

His self-directed rage unabated, he picked up the crumpled sheets and started tearing them up, but soon felt his young wife's cool hands on his, stilling their frenzy.

Yangzi took the sheets from him and smoothed them out.

"They are no good. They should be torn up and forgotten," he said.

"Don't say that. You are too harsh on yourself. At least let *me* keep them. One day you will think about them differently and be grateful I

have saved them," she said firmly.

It was impossible to deny her in anything; her beguiling smile and lovely eyes looked deep into a place inside him that was trembling, afraid and that needed only her love. She rolled up the papers and put them away in the drawer of the bureau. She closed the window, then came to him and held his face against her breasts, her hands caressing his brow and face. He could hear the murmur of her heart, her quickening breath as his hands circled her waist and undid the sash belt. He kissed the smooth skin of her slender neck, and her pear-shaped breasts as the robe slipped off her shoulders.

On the warm *kang* bed, her eyes gazing into his, her hands holding his shoulders lightly, her legs wrapped loosely around his, he was certain that love, more than poetry, more than travelling and seeking out hermits and sages, would save him, would finally bring him to that place he could not even begin to name.

3

BANISHED IMMORTAL

天宝三载 Third Year of Tianbao Era (744 CE) –

天宝四载 Fourth Year of Tianbao Era (745 CE)

HE HAD JUST sat down to a flagon of wine in the Phoenix Inn in Luoyang when he heard the words that he instantly recognised as a drinking poem by Tao Qian. There was an inebriated lilt to it, but the voice was strong and deep, the tone rousing, melodious almost. He turned and looked at the man; he had a bronze complexion, well-chiselled features, a full sensuous mouth and angular jaw beneath the smooth trim beard. From under the thick arches of his eyebrows his hooded eyes looked out at the world with a dreamy yet penetrating gaze. On the table lay a long sword in its jade-green scabbard with a dragon tooled in gold along its length. An expectant crowd had gathered around, the younger ones leaning forward in reverent attention:

Among the flowers floats a jug of wine
 which I drink alone, no friends or family near.
 I raise my cup to the bright moon
 that together with my shadow make three.
 The moon can't understand the joy of drunkenness
 and my shadow stays mutely by my side.
 For now they are my companions,
 and we'll take our pleasure till the end of spring.
 I sing and the moon wavers,
 I dance and the shadows around whirl.
 When I am awake we carouse as one,
 when drunk we go our separate ways.
 Friends forever, we'll wander free from the world's cares,
 and meet somewhere beyond the Milky Way.

There was rapt silence, then someone at the front exclaimed, “*Hao, hao!* Wonderful! Simply wonderful! No wonder He Zhizhang calls him the Banished Immortal. Truly inspired! Sublime! One more song, Mr Li!” There was a chorus of praise, and wine cups were held aloft in toast of the poet.

So this was the great, infamous Li Bai, courtesy name, Li Taibai, famed for composing splendid poems while drunk. The poet who until last year was the Emperor's favourite courtier, whose outlandish and unruly behaviour the Emperor had tolerated and indeed found amusing, until in one of his drunken moods, Taibai insulted Eunuch Gao by asking the mirthless, conniving eunuch to take off his muddied boots. The affronted Gao then convinced Consort Yang that Taibai's verses in praise of her beauty were insincere and indeed concealed a satirical note about her vanity. That was the end of Taibai's court career. The Emperor sent him off, though reluctantly, with a compensatory bag of silver taels.

This man, who had become a legend in his own time, with a growing cult of followers and imitators, was here in the flesh. Zimei had read whatever he could lay his hands on. Taibai's poems breathed spontaneity and fearlessness; they dared one to step across the threshold into the unknown. It overthrew all trappings of orthodoxy and celebrated a world where the only law was the *Dao*. Zimei felt a rush of awe and disbelief, and also a thrilling whiff of danger and fear.

Taibai was already quite drunk, his voice starting to slur thickly, his heavy-lidded eyes drooping. He growled and started banging on the table; his audience dispersed quickly, fearful of his famous drunken rage.

“Waiter, more wine!”

“But sir, we are closing...”

“More wine!”

“Sorry sir, but you haven't paid...”

“What do you think I am, a freeloader?” the poet roared, rising from his chair. He was about Zimei's height, but with his broad shoulders and striking face he seemed to tower above everyone else as he glowered.

“Mr Li, let's not soil our palate with this low-grade wine. I know a tavern close by where we can have wine fit for the immortals,” Zimei

dared to suggest, with an apologetic look at the harassed waiter. He braced himself for another outburst.

Taibai swivelled around, turning his drunken and angry eyes on Zimei. His glare melted, then he leaned back heavily on the table, making the empty wine jug and cup rattle.

Without thinking Zimei recited the lines of a poem that Taibai had just published:

The living haven't seen the moon from the ancient days,
and today's moon used to shine on those who are now dead.
The living and the dead are so much like flowing water;
together they will watch a moon bright as this.
Who will sing and drink with me,
while the moonbeams float in the gold goblet?

Taibai looked at Zimei as if to add to the lines, then his eyes glazed over and his head dipped forward. Zimei caught him and held him up.

Nobody in the tavern knew where Taibai was staying. Zimei couldn't get a coherent word out of him. Nothing to do but to take him home.

Yangzi was woken up by the noise in the moonlit courtyard as he dragged Taibai to the guest room. A fleeting disapproval crossed her face, as though she already knew that the famous poet would take Zimei away from her, that he would find a place in her husband's heart that she could never touch.

In the months after their marriage, she had sensed unrest in him, and as he told of his travels in the south, she knew his journey was unfinished, that somehow he had to make a final trip to resolve the restlessness in his soul.

Her fears were confirmed; after a few days with them Taibai asked Zimei to join him on a tour of Liangzhou and Songzhou. Zimei agreed readily, and the two sat drinking in the garden for another hour, while Yangzi watched from her bedroom window. Later, as they lay in bed after he had made love to her half-inebriated, he told her of their travel plans, and promised that it would be his last trip, that he would thereafter seek

out a position in Changan and settle down.

Yangzi knew there was no stopping him, that he had to somehow satisfy the still burning urge to travel. If he had refused Taibai, it would be one big regret they would have to live with.

"Go, but keep me in your heart, and come back safely," she said, disentangling her limbs from him, and faced the window, its paper screen translucent with the glow of the almost full moon. She had fallen in love with him at first sight, as he lifted her bridal veil and looked at her with his tender, sensitive eyes, the passion growing in them. Then, in the months after, she came to know his soul as well as his body, the restlessness, the tug of elsewhere, his weaknesses and contradictions. She glimpsed the uncertainties in him, the unresolved questions, and she loved him better for them, but she was also filled with unease. She sensed the dangers ahead, the hardships she would have to undergo with him, but she knew she would find the strength to support him, as long as he still needed and loved her as time went by.

"I will write to you, and it will be as if you are travelling with me," Zimei said, wrapping his arms around her. She didn't respond. She was retreating into her own world, something she did when he said something that hurt her, and sometimes for no reason that he could see, and it was always painful to see her so aloof, so unconsolably distant.

Strange, though she enjoyed this moment of intimacy, and the tide of love that melted her limbs and swept over her as they came together, sometimes she wanted nothing more than to be back in her family home, to sit in the garden, and listen to the songbirds that her father kept, their melodies giving their home a happy and peaceful feel, or play chess and even hide-and-seek with her siblings. She loved to embroider and had dreamed of setting up a sewing school. That dream died when her parents told her it was time to get married. Her family, her two brothers and sister, and her dear parents, how far away they were, and how like strangers they had become, now that her life was wedded to another, her name erased and bonded to another family name that she had to honour and perpetuate. She loved this man with her body, heart and soul, but there was something she could never explain or share with him, this pain

of losing herself, of perhaps never finding her own life again.

He kissed her neck, trailed his tongue over the curve of her shoulder, and felt her body relenting. She turned and they looked deep into each other's eyes, wordless, in the moonlight, then his mouth sought hers and his body rose over her, almost eclipsing the moon.

...

The next day, they set out for the Yellow River, Taibai on his black stallion, and Zimei on his chestnut-brown mare, which could cover a hundred *lis* a day. The sight of Yangzi as she stood at the gate, a disconsolate figure waving a reluctant farewell, pricked him with guilt. In the footloose months ahead with Taibai, sometimes during bouts of drinking and in moments of sheer joy and abandon, Zimei would see his young wife's face, the tears barely restrained, and a quiet shadow would fall across the sunlit moment.

But Taibai had set something free in him, a recklessness that immersed him fully in the present, free from any shadow of worry about the future. Never had Zimei felt so much in unison with anyone. They saw themselves as roving poet-swordsmen, seeking out sages and the elixir of immortality. They hunted on the plains, their aim true and inspired as the arrows connected with the flesh of wild pigeons, moorhens and hares.

The conversation flowed, spontaneous, relaxed, enlivened by mirth and deepened by silences that reflected the harmony, the sense of being in tune with each other.

One night, as they lay stretched out under the full autumn moon, sated from roasted moorhen and slightly tipsy from the Tianshan grape wine that Taibai always carried, Zimei asked, "Do you ever regret leaving Court?"

Taibai laughed. "Not at all. Only too happy to abandon politics. It wasn't for me, wasn't worth selling my soul just to stay in that den of mediocre, talentless, petty men who got to where they are through backstabbing and conniving. The Emperor kept me because I was a clown who wrote flattering and amusing verses for the pleasure of his precious concubine." In the bright moonlight Taibai's proud face

gleamed, his mocking laugh ringing in the silence of the Shandong plain.

"But you served in the Hanlin Academy, didn't you? Everybody thought highly of your work."

"They didn't have a clue what I was trying to do. Those greybeards could only mouth the classics and write clichéd verse to sound respectable. I couldn't bear to be with them. No, no regrets at all. Tao Qian, when he resigned from his post, said 'I've nothing, but I am free!' I too am free!"

"But he had no money for wine or to feed his family soon after."

"He always felt that he left too late. Fretted away the best years of his life in trifles. Life is always a struggle, if you let it get to you. The wine will flow, the stomach will be filled somehow. If you can let go and float on the current of life, of the *Dao*, that is the supreme achievement. Trust nothing else."

Zimei asked the question that had been on his mind. "Who or what has been the greatest influence on your work?"

"Nature. The world around me, in me. The mountains, the rivers, the seasons, they bring me to this place that is no place, where the words flow endlessly, out of the deep spring of silence. But you know what made me write besides nature?" Taibai turned on his side to look at Zimei. His large round eyes glinted.

"Because nobody had written what I wanted to read. I want poetry that sings the song of the world, dances with the wind, makes the moon drunk, poetry that takes me out to the edge of known things. Not hollow verse that bows to tradition and gets you a respectable position at court."

A skylark's outpouring rang across the mist-draped valley below; an owl hooted, then broke from its perch on an oak tree, swooping for a shadowy prey scurrying on the pale-lit plain, its wings scything across the bright wheel of the moon.

"Hear that? That is pure poetry. It sings with its soul, writing in the sky. Pure expression, transcendence, free from all sorrow and suffering, no thoughts of before and after. That's what we poets should strive to attain."

"Isn't it the poet's responsibility to this world, to serve the world as best as he can?"

“Dear Zimei, you must rid yourself of these old-fashioned ideas of service and self-sacrifice. The only duty is to find the truth, the *Dao*, and then you will discover who you are. To yourself be true.” He added, “What are wisdom and folly but two sides of the same coin? To be really wise, you must be mad, really burning, roaring mad.” Taibai tilted his gaze up to the moon, as though looking to it for affirmation.

Zimei handed his friend the calabash with the last of the wine. Taibai raised himself, bringing the wine gourd to his lips and draining it, then lay down again, a practised, smooth movement. The gleam in his eyes was fiery as he looked at Zimei and said, “Everything good I have done is thanks to the power of wine. Be eternally drunk! That is the taste of immortality that we mortals can have in this life. The art of loafing, being idle, that is the hardest thing to master. The only responsibility man has is to himself. To live his dreams, realise his true nature.” Taibai raised his hand to the moon, which was now directly overhead. In the distance wild dogs barked, and something screeched in the bushes ahead. Overhead, the owl flapped past, a field mouse twitching in its claws.

In Kaifeng, after stabling their horses, Taibai led him through the dusky alleys to a lane of seedy taverns and two-storey residences at the end. They filled their stomachs and then, instead of drinking themselves senseless, this time Taibai steered him out to the street towards the houses that were attracting crowds of men. Red lanterns hung from the balconies. Zimei understood immediately Taibai’s intention. In Jiangning, on his twentieth birthday, his cousin had brought him to a brothel. He recalled the woman he had picked, in her thirties, fair and beautiful despite the lines around her mouth and a tired look in her eyes, her warm and lovely body slipping out of her red robe and sliding over him as he lay tense on the bed, her gentle, knowing touches instantly dispelling his anxiety.

“The second last house, the best ladies are there. The dearest too. They are courtesans, not whores, the most skilful and pretty in the prefecture,” Taibai said enthusiastically, coaxing him across the threshold into the dimly-lit courtyard that rang with strains of *pipa* and peals of laughter. In the hall were rows of ladies, all draped in loose translucent gowns. His

heart was beating but he felt the tug of guilt and duty. What hypocrisy. He felt desire stirring in him as his eyes settled on one of them, a woman in her early twenties, who looked at him without coquetry, but with serious and beautiful eyes, her full sensuous lips and slender figure beckoning to his lust. His mind was already surrendering, undressing and caressing her, then he thought of Yangzi and killed the fantasy. He held back and turned to look at Taibai, who had already picked a girl with milk-white skin and perky breasts that peeked boldly through the plunging neckline of her flimsy blouse.

“Go on, have fun, Zimei. I’ll see you back at the inn.” Taibai was already leaving the room.

He just couldn’t shut Yangzi out of his mind. The girl had stood up and was moving towards him, her languorous steps revealing well-shaped calves and firm thighs. He felt the twitch in his groin and was about to move towards her, but somehow tore himself away, turning rapidly and walking into the street, regret, shame, desire and relief mixed in his pounding heart. Teasing laughter and cooing voices echoed in his wake: “Come back, Mister. Let us please you. Don’t be frightened, don’t run away...”

There was no sign of Taibai for the next two days; then on the third day he re-appeared and announced they should depart for Songzhou.

Taibai wasn’t his ebullient self. For the next few days he was in a pensive abstract mood. They walked the horses for long stretches, mostly without speaking.

Zimei decided it was time to break the silence. “You are not still thinking of the Kaifeng ladies, are you? We can turn back if you like.”

“No, not at all.”

“What is troubling you, elder brother?”

Taibai looked at him, then gazed into the distance.

“My daughter Pingyang, she is ten today. My son Bai Qin turned six last week.”

Taibai seemed a different man now. Zimei had never seen him as a husband and father. He had never talked about his family and home.

“I’ve been away three years now. When I left I planted a peach tree. It

must be three, four times taller than Pingyang now.”

“Maybe it’s time to go home,” Zimei ventured.

“Home! Strange place. Strange word. Where is our home? When I get home I will be longing to come back here, to be among the mountains, talk to mountain spirits, to bathe under the waterfalls, drink the moonlight, and dance with the pine trees, to be free with the spirit of *Dao*, free from the trammels of family and worldly ties. Yet, right now I wouldn’t mind getting on the horse and riding home as fast as I can and hug my children and make love to my wife.” Taibai flung himself onto his horse and galloped off, but by the time Zimei caught up with him round the next bend, he was in a jovial mood again, and seemed to have forgotten his outburst.

They crossed the Yellow River to Wang Wu Shan, the land marked with ridges, gorges and cloud-capped peaks. There were Daoist hermitages and temples on each crest and peak. At a rest house near the foot of the mountain they asked for directions to the hermitage of Master Hua. They were told he lived in a cave just below the Temple of Heaven, the highest peak in the area. They left their horses at the inn and walked through a thick grove of gingkoes and scholar trees, and started the climb into the mist-wreathed pines and firs. The path snaked up and down, the steps moss-covered and wet. Soon their clothes were damp from the mist, drizzle and sweat. Below a cascade they paused for a drink, relishing the light spray on their faces, and the sound of water laced with birdcalls. Then they heard a rousing song, the words reverberating across the valley. On their climb up they met the woodcutter, who was still singing. He showed them the path to the hermitage. As they started climbing, the woodcutter called after them, “Master Hua passed on last month.”

Taibai was disappointed but said, “Let’s push on. We’ve come too far to turn back.”

The trail climbed up to a craggy ridge before winding down a moss-covered stone path to a hut that stood above a stream. Above the entrance Hua had daubed in red the words “The Hall of Listening Emptiness.”

Taibai sat on a bench below a gnarled old pine and closed his eyes.

A dog barked in the distance, answered by another further down the

valley, then a chorus, the echoes soon swallowed up by the rising mist. A chill breeze stirred the clump of bamboo, rustling the dark green leaves, dislodging pink blossoms from the peach trees. Taibai sighed, then said, “This is his last lesson. Emptiness. Being here and not being here. That is the way of the *Dao*.”

They sat without speaking, letting the benign autumn light and the sounds of the water and birdcalls wash over them. Taibai’s words came, hesitant at first, as if testing the stillness; then his voice steadied, its intonation ringing and lifting clear above the stream of natural sounds:

A dog’s barks heard above the gurgling water,
 peach blossoms drenched in heavy dew.
 Deep in the forest glimpses of a deer,
 and at the stream no noon peals of the temple bell.
 Wild bamboo parts the blue mist,
 a flying cascade hangs from the jasper peak.
 No one knows where he has gone.
 Troubled, we rest against two or three pines.

Taibai’s eyes remained closed as he uttered the last line, and the still, silent moment stretched; Zimei felt that his friend had stepped into the other world, where time and death were dissolved, where he could not follow. When Taibai opened his eyes, Zimei was startled to see the glistening tears.

...

They arrived in Songzhou, where Taibai introduced him to Gao Shi, who had just returned from frontier duty in the north, and had written frontier poems that had gone down well with the Changan circles.

The three poets formed a formidable adventuring trio, and in their first week together there was not a single day when their spirits did not feel in tune with one another and the world around them. Gao Shi emanated calm and a subtle power with his erect, muscular carriage, which seemed at odds with his gentle, honest face. His narrow eyes were watchful, keen,

but softened and gleamed when reciting poetry and drinking wine.

They rode from Songzhou to Shanfu, watching the landscape put on its cloak of autumnal tones, the forests washed over by waves of rust-browns, reds and yellows, and the summer grass losing its hazy green. They hired hawks for their hunts, scaring hares and foxes out of their grassy lairs, and raced to see who was the best shot. Not a night passed without them drinking themselves slowly into a state of quiet ecstasy, the verses, jokes and stories subsiding into a state of silent fraternal communion and sleep. On Shanfu Tower, located on a hill just outside the city, they celebrated the Mid-Autumn Festival; under the harvest moon, the rolling plains glittered, stretching on to the northern and eastern horizons like a boundless sea.

“Where does it end, this land, our country? I think I can see the sea, the Bohai, right over there, and the Eight Immortals flying over the waves.” Taibai pointed vaguely to the east and then drained his cup.

“Our glorious land. Surrounded by barbarians. North of us are the Khitans, to the west the Turks and Tibetans, and to the south dark-skinned savages and pestilence. The frontiers, they are like the shoreline. Here today, there tomorrow, changing like the tide, ebbing, advancing, retreating,” Gao Shi said, refilling their cups.

“Our armies are strong, the frontiers are safer than they have ever been. News just came the other day of a victory on the western front,” Zimei said.

“Don’t let the show of military might deceive you. Look at our generals, they are all barbarians. And our armies, all mercenaries. The Emperor has been fed lies, nothing but lies! Who advised him to appoint these barbarian generals as frontier governors? Idiots and scoundrels like Li Linfu and Yang Guozhong. Mark my words, one day we will pay a very heavy price for this!” Zimei was taken aback by the vehemence in Gao Shi’s words; he noticed a fleeting grimace marring his friend’s normally composed visage, and detected a sadness in his eyes that would settle into a profound melancholy in later years.

“And what can we poets do to save the country? Who would listen? What can poems about the moon, about drinking, about seeking wisdom,

what can all that do to stop the country from falling into the hands of corrupt, greedy eunuchs and ministers? The Emperor would sooner listen to another poem praising his precious Guifei than a *yuefu* listing the ills of his people,” Gao Shi continued.

Taibai looked at Gao Shi, bemused, surprised as much as Zimei by the emotional force of his words. He drained his cup, refilled it, then quoted Master Lu Ji:

The function of literature is
to express the nature of nature.
Nothing can hold it back, as it flows and sings
across the million kalpas.

“But the Sage says, ‘If one should desire to know whether a kingdom is well governed, if its morals are good or bad, the quality of its music will furnish the answer.’ The poet should not shut himself off from his fellow men and live like a recluse. Tao Qian was wrong to turn his back on the court,” Gao Shi responded, his face tensing a little with the riposte.

“Enough of politics! Leave it to the politicians. We poets are made for higher things,” Taibai responded lightly. “Now let’s toast the moon.” He raised his cup to the moon with his long fingers, a gesture that would be etched forever in Zimei’s mind. They drank slowly, savouring the ethereal taste of the wine, bathing in the generous tide of moonlight, its clarity dispelling the dark thoughts in their minds.

Zimei felt a tinge of unease creep into their companionship in their last few days together, a shadow that muted their revelry and dimmed their conversations. Then Gao Shi had to leave for Chu County.

After watching Gao Shi’s proud figure disappear into autumn mist, they made for Qizhou, where Taibai would undergo Daoist training at the Purple Incense Temple with a Master Chen. Zimei sought out Li Yong, the famous calligrapher, who was his father’s friend and was known to be a benefactor to struggling artists and scholars.

Through winter and early spring he was a guest at Li Yong’s residence. He studied the wild grass style of this silver-haired master, learning to

synchronise his breath and harness his *qi* to the flowing brush. He wrote out poems that he had been carrying in his head: the moment on Taishan with Su Yuanming, and the lines he had secretly composed for Taibai but which he hadn't had the courage to write out for his friend. They fell short of what he had felt: the ecstasy, the peace and moments of self-forgetfulness he had experienced with Taibai.

On the summer solstice he travelled to Songzhou to meet Taibai. On the ancient arched stone bridge his friend was waiting, his face shaded by a straw hat. Zimei was startled when Taibai took his hat off; he looked subdued, his features honed, winnowed of any sensual echoes. His body was ascetically lean. He had just completed the Dragon Phoenix stage and attained the eighth level of the Daoist attainments. He had fasted and subjected his body to travails and tests that Zimei thought excessive. At dawn he had stood balanced in the crane posture on the dragon eave of the temple that stretched out over the precipice into a vaporous gorge. For a whole month he had meditated in a cave, practising *neidan*, deepening his *qi* through breathing exercises, tuning to the energy in the heart of the mountain. With Master Chen he had studied alchemy, distilling elixirs from cinnabar and quicksilver.

"No wine, no women the last few months...nearly went mad, in the cave with only a candle, my sword and the manual for company. Now, back to worldly delights!" Taibai said as he drank his first cup of wine since they had parted.

Their friendship deepened further that late summer and early autumn. There was now a sombre note that underlay the talks, the wine-fuelled musings and verse-making tempered by silent spells, as if the youthful and carefree adventuring spirit that had attended their friendship the year before had matured into a darker wisdom. They would be drinking and singing as they wandered the birch and maple forests and then the conversation would fade and they would walk without a word through a hush broken only by whistles of cuckoos and larks, and the gentle drift of yellow leaves.

They visited the Daoist Master Kong, who lived in a thatched hut at the foot of Phoenix Hill, a hundred *li* outside Songzhou. He was wiry

and lean, his spry movement belying his eighty years. Zimei was amazed to find the legendary hermit to be down-to-earth and plainspoken. He cooked them the most delicate-tasting vegetarian dishes, including one he called "Laozi Riding His Ox", a hotpot of Shandong mushroom, fried yam and lotus root. Zimei practised the art of breathing, sitting with Kong and Taibai at dawn, learning to tune his breath to the voice of silence, and to the flow of the ten thousand things around him. Then they would go herb-picking and Kong would impart his medicinal knowledge to the two friends as they combed the hills and precipitous cliffs for the magical mushroom *lingzhi*, and *dongchongcao*, the caterpillar fungus, and other rare herbs.

Next they went to call on Master Yuan, another legendary Daoist master who lived in a cave house downstream from the Dragon Gate Grottoes, where Taibai and Zimei spent a day wandering among the enormous images of Buddha and his disciples, admiring the skill and devotion of the sculptors who had spent their lives, a few hundred years ago, hewing out of the limestone these inspiring figures many times taller than a man. They even came across a team of stonemasons putting finishing touches to new statues, and watched them in respectful silence, impressed by their intense focus and fervour. It was hypnotic, watching the artisans at their work, and for a second, Zimei had a glimpse of the future, when tens of thousands of visitors would travel from distant lands every year to see these perfect devotional artworks.

When they arrived at the hermitage, Yuan was meditating on a ledge above the cave. Zimei and Taibai rested under a bent cypress and observed his still figure bathed in the morning light. His face was stern, forbidding, his gaze piercing under furry white eyebrows. Taibai had talked about the Master's famed *qinggong* prowess, that he was said to be able to leap up cliffs and across chasms and rivers. Zimei wished he could have witnessed such amazing *gongfu*.

"One day I will quit everything. Find a cave house and meditate on the *Dao* all day," Taibai said. Zimei listened, and wondered.

Yuan finally looked at them, his face relaxing into a graceful gentleness. Later, as he brewed peony tea, he told them that he was in intensive

training, preparing himself to take up a position as Daoist Master at the temple on Tiantai Peak.

“There is only so much solitude you can take. It is good up to a point but after that you have to start giving it back, spreading and sharing the gifts that nature has given, or you shrivel up like unpicked fruit,” Yuan said.

The two poets spent a week meditating with Yuan and listening to his discourse on the *Dao*, and then farewelled him as he began his journey south to Tiantai. Zimei and Taibai spent a few more days touring the temples and monasteries scattered through the region, and then it was time to part.

At Stone Gate, they exchanged farewell poems. Zimei was hesitant about giving Taibai the poem he had written at Li Yong’s residence. Into it he had poured his feelings for his friend, angel, demon, messenger from the other world, who had spirited him away to realms he had never thought existed. He realised, when struggling to frame his thoughts, that Taibai was the companion he’d been missing on his travels in Wu and Yue, that in those solitary youthful years he had sought a friend who could take him out of his shell, break out of the bonds of Confucian propriety, even for a fleeting moment, and experience the wildness and sense of freedom that had lifted his spirit since meeting Taibai, being one with a friend whose love was ineffable, something other than a woman’s love.

He unrolled Taibai’s poem, his hands trembling slightly. A deep warm feeling flooded his heart as the lines took hold, and the tears started. He wiped them away and looked at Taibai. His friend’s face was solemn as he read Zimei’s poem, a mist filming his eyes, then he placed the scroll in his satchel. They looked at each other in silence. An oriole piped up, its liquid notes hanging in the morning light.

“Let’s meet next year, on Double Ninth. Let’s go south. We’ll visit Lu Mountain, and then ride up the Long River, up to Ermei Shan. Zimei, let’s do it, we’ll seek out old masters, immortals, we’ll find the elixir and never come back to this world again.” Taibai’s eyes gleamed. He meant it. He always meant what he said in the instant when he said it. Zimei nodded. He knew it wouldn’t be easy to travel again as they did, without a care.

He waited till Taibai rode away on his black horse, his blue-robed figure diminishing till it vanished over the rise of the hill. Then he took Taibai’s poem out and read it again, the certainty setting in that he would never see his friend again:

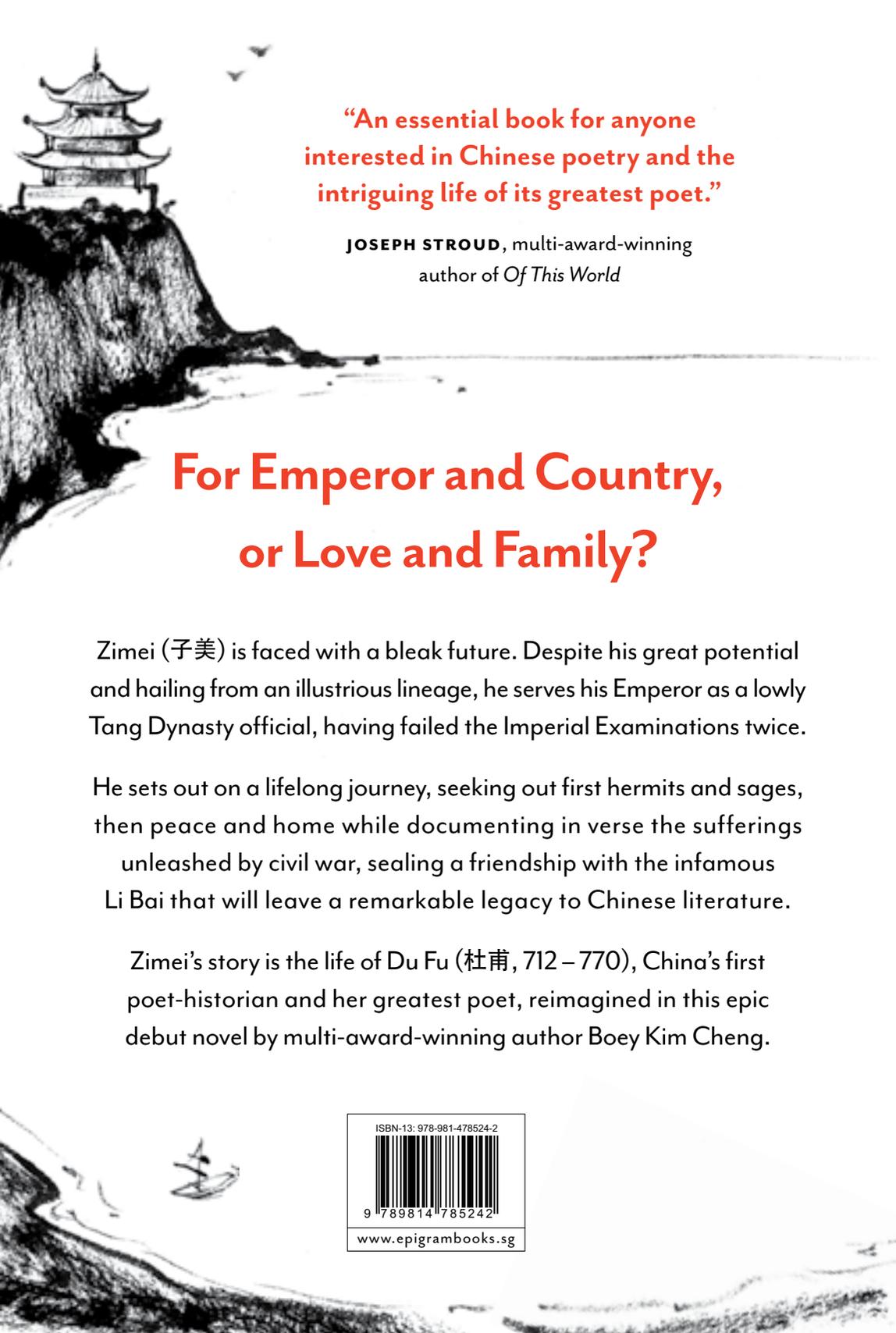
On Look Far Pavilion we drain our last cup
as the trees around the lake shed their last leaves.
After this drunken parting when will we return
and break open a jug of White Ant Wine?
The rivers flow where they must, east or south
makes no difference, they will find their course.
Over the darkening mirror a lone egret is flying home;
in its wake the silence comes suddenly upon us.

It read like a dirge, a farewell to the happiest, most unencumbered period of his life. When, years later in Kuizhou, he dug up the poem to read, he could see them in the last days of autumn, walking under trees that were letting go of their leaves, the last flush of yellow almost incandescent, and almost hear the crunch of their feet on the brittle carpet of leaves, the only sound in the austere silence. It was peace, a peace like he had never known. Perhaps it was what they both had been searching for, climbing sacred peaks and conversing with hermits and monks. That still, quiet music, when they forgot themselves, forgot the burning desire within, and walked in silence, the knowledge that they were never to meet again holding them close, so that neither life nor death held any fear for them.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BOEY KIM CHENG is an award-winning Singapore-born poet who emigrated to Australia in 1997, but returned in 2016 as Associate Professor in English at Nanyang Technological University. Boey has published five collections of poetry, including *Clear Brightness* (selected by *The Straits Times* as one of the Best Books of 2012), as well as *Between Stations*, a celebrated travel memoir reissued by Epigram Books in 2017. His writing is frequently studied in tertiary institutions in Singapore and abroad.



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