SHAO-PIN LUO

PARTITION

"We read the letters of the dead like helpless gods...."

—Wisława Szymborska

"HELLO? HELLO?" My soft-spoken mother was shouting into the phone, although her voice still sounded far away.

"Mother? Is anything wrong? How are you and dad?"

"Your uncle is coming to visit!"

"Uncle? What uncle? When, from where, how?"

As far back as I could remember, I never had uncles, aunts, cousins, or any relatives for that matter, since neither of my parents had any siblings. There had always been just me, my parents, and my paternal grandmother, who was widowed long ago.

"We could never tell you about him, but he has been living in Taiwan with his wife and two children. Now that it is possible for the Taiwanese to visit the mainland, he can hardly wait to come and see his father."

His father—my maternal grandfather. I never got to know him well. I remembered vaguely, when I was a child, mother coming home one day with a package containing a few carefully folded shirts, a raincoat, and packets of medicine. Sitting down by the table, without a word, she began to weep.

"What is it?" startled, I anxiously reached for her hand.

"They would not permit me to send anything to your grandfather—not even a raincoat. He's got bad arthritis, and I wanted to send some medicine, but no, not possible."

Watching tears welling up in mother's eyes and streaming down her face, I started to cry with her, never having met my grandfather, uncomprehending why he was not with us or who the "they" were that made mother cry.

By the time grandfather was released from twenty years in a labour camp as the result of an amnesty, I was just leaving for university. I would

see him on visits home during summer vacations: a stooped and shrunken figure, varicose veins crawling like earthworms on his calves. He suffered ill health ranging from hypertensive heart disease and rheumatism to edema due to prolonged malnutrition. Living in a tiny, spartan room separate from his daughter's apartment with her family, he spoke very little—in fact, hardly at all. Instead, he seemed to put all his energy, or what was left of it, into cleaning the residential compound of the hospital where my parents worked. There was so much to sweep clean: dirt and debris, fallen leaves, broken shards of glass. Every morning, shuffling on his feet, he swept and swept, thoroughly, ritualistically, like a monk keeping vigil for his temple.

I called mother from Canada everyday to inquire about the plans for uncle's visit. Mother reported that grandfather was uncharacteristically excited, talking incessantly about wanting to return to his hometown with the son he had not seen for thirty-eight years.

"That's nearly forty years!" I exclaimed, hardly believing what I was hearing.

"Yes," Mother paused, "and of course he asks about the grandchildren—a boy and a girl, all grown up now—one a scientist at Tsinghua University, the other a lab researcher."

"An uncle," I mused, "and you never spoke to me about him. All these years, not even one word?" I was incredulous.

"At first, I couldn't. The consequences would have been unthinkable. Then I decided not to burden you with this family history. I wanted you to be unencumbered and free, without bitterness and heartache. But it is different now, and you should know."

After so many years of willed silence words began to pour out of her like a monsoon on parched land. She wrote to me in a foreign land, describing her memories of her hometown and childhood, her mother and father, her years alone at boarding school, her husband and work at the hospital, and the tumultuous years of the Cultural Revolution, when having a father in a labour camp and a brother in Taiwan was not only unmentionable but brought disaster on a family.

Mother's family came from Taohuayuan—Peach Blossom Spring—a town in Hunan Province famed for its pretty girls and for an account by the fourth-century poet Tao Yuanming, who was perhaps the most famous poet before the Tang Dynasty. The poet resigned from public posts in order to "dwell in gardens and fields," and Taohuayuan was for him that idyllic

pastoral place away from the care and chaos of the outside world: “All of a sudden, he came upon forests of blossoming peach trees on both shores. The flowers were fresh and lovely, and the falling petals drifted everywhere in profusion. There, going back and forth to their work planting, were men and women who all looked contented and perfectly happy.”

There were more than peach trees in mother’s prosperous village of Log Pond. By the river Yuan, the land was flat for miles on end with rice paddies and fields of sesame, soybean, broad bean, canola, and cotton. In the autumn, when the cotton was in full bloom, it was a silvery world as far as the eye could see, so the village was also known as “Silver Log Pond.” There were about twenty households in the village with two prominent family names: Wu and Zou. Most were farmers and tradespeople, such as carpenters, weavers, and butchers. The houses were mainly wooden structures with grey roof tiles, spacious courtyards in the front, and bamboo groves and vegetable gardens in the back, all enclosed with tidy bamboo fences. Almost every household kept pet cats and dogs. A creek wound through the middle of the village with wild shrubs and bushes on both sides. Boys and girls enjoyed playing in the shallow water, trying to catch fish and shrimp. They described in their school compositions how “the water was so clear one could count the fishes swimming among the pebbles at the bottom of the creek.”

In the centre of the village was a temple with a bronze statue of a kindly-looking local deity set on a wooden table and incence burning constantly all year round. Next to the shrine was a great willow tree, its gnarly roots spread wide and its sturdy trunk, instead of growing upward, arched over to the other side of the creek so that even timid girls ran across it in large steps from one end of the creek to the other. Mother would often sit by the tree and read, the creek flowing gently by her side. At the end of the village was the ancestral temple hall for both the Wu and Zou families, containing their genealogical records and a shrine for Guanyin (goddess of mercy). The temple was always crowded with worshippers seeking divination into their daily travails. Behind it was a thousand-year-old camphor tree with masses of small white flowers in the spring, its trunk so massive that it would take six people to link arms around it. The villagers loved to gather under the shade of its expansive, umbrella-like branches, but no one dared to approach the tree at night, as a *hama* (toad spirit) was often seen jumping out.

Walking along the road that extended from the village for about a mile

and half, one would come to the town market, where there were more than thirty shops: a satin cloth shop, a pawn shop, variety shops, noodle houses, a snack bar, a butcher's shop that one of grandmother's relatives owned, and a shop that sold southern delicacies like dried bamboo shoots. People came from all over to sell and exchange their goods and produce: tobacco, sweet potatoes, vegetables, chickens, ducks, geese, eggs, sticky rice buns wrapped in lotus or mugwort leaves, green bean cakes, sweet cakes with goji berries, and fried dough twists. One could eat stewed spare ribs with lotus root or sticky rice dumplings with pork filling, but mother's favourite was the mouth-watering steamed sponge cakes made with brown sugar in oval, square, and triangular shapes and white, yellow, and red colours. Vendors carried these cakes in wooden buckets, hawking their goods with bamboo clappers that made a loud "bang bang" sound; due to this custom they were also known as "bang bang cakes."

Grandmother came from a wealthy family, as her father owned shops, orchards, and farmland. She had two brothers—one a well-known doctor, the other a local school teacher. Grandmother wore her long black hair in a high bun and was considered a classic beauty with an oval face, thin eyebrows over almond eyes, and porcelain skin. She was also very clever, having been to a school for girls, where she learned to read, write poetry, and play the bamboo flute. Especially good at needlework, she embroidered everything in the house—from silk bedspreads and pillowcases to tablecloths and window dressings. After her marriage she also learned to weave and make clothes and shoes, and she always made her own beautiful silk *qipao* dresses. She even had a keen interest in architecture and designed the three-storey house adjacent to the old family home. The house had a guest-receiving hall on the ground floor, three bedrooms on the second floor, and an attic warehouse for grain, cotton, and oranges on the top floor. The kitchen was still in the larger family home, where everyone ate together. There was a circular balcony on the upper floors carved in the patterns of plum flowers, and from there one could see hills in the distance, the creek nearby, and in the spring a dazzling world of colour: red grass flowers, purple broad bean flowers, and yellow rape flowers. Mother's bedroom was at the back of the house next to her brother's room and behind her parents' room. The floor was painted red, the wardrobe purple, and she slept in a large bed that came with her mother's dowry, which was also painted red and carved with figures of maidens. Other furniture in the room included a bookcase, a desk, a

cabinet for snacks, and a door that led to a small back garden full of bamboo, chrysanthemums, roses, orchids, and jewelweeds, which were also known as "nail-polish flowers." In the summer girls would put a little salt on the petals, soak them in rice wine, and paint them on their nails, which were then wrapped in tree leaves tied with strings. The next morning the nails would turn shades of pink or red.

Born at the dawn of the twentieth century, grandfather studied at the distinguished Yuelu Academy of Classical Learning in the provincial capital of Changsha. Founded in 976 AD during the Song Dynasty, it was one of the four most prestigious academies of higher learning in the last one thousand years in China. A cousin, who was then a regimental commander in the Nationalist army of the Kuomintang, thought him bright and hard-working, so he recruited him as his secretary. Soon after, when the cousin was promoted to division commander, grandfather became a regiment commander himself at the youthful age of twenty-nine. When he married grandmother their wedding was the talk of town, and the red carpet for the bride extended from the town gate to the grand hall of the house. Grandfather looked gallant and handsome in his brown army uniform, white gloves, and long riding boots. On his frequent travels after their marriage he would send home various presents of gold ornaments, silver brooches, silk *qipao* dresses, precious porcelain, soft wool, delicious candy and biscuits, and, most marvellous of all, a phonograph. Grandmother would spend hours singing along with the many recordings of Peking opera arias by famous singers, such as Mei Lanfang's "The Drunken Concubine," Ma Lianliang's "East Wind," and Jin Shaoshan's "The Temple of the Law Gate," as well as popular songs of the time, such as "Huahao Yueyuan" (Blooming Flowers and Full Moon) and "Yuguang Qu" (Song of the Fishermen). Sometimes she would travel with grandfather to various garrisons in Guilin in Guangxi Province and Luxi in Hunan Province. During those times grandmother learned to ride horses, although she fell countless times—even with an orderly by her side. Uncle, who was a small boy then, would go climbing in a nearby mountain cave with stalactites and naturally-formed stone tables and chairs. One day he was skipping along the river and twirling the house key tied on a string. When it accidentally flew out of his hand into the river, the servant boy dove in after it. Although the key was eventually found, uncle was scolded; as a punishment he was not allowed out that afternoon and made to write out pages of calligraphy.

This bucolic time did not last long. Soon mother was born, and uncle was sent to school. Grandmother was busy supervising the construction of the new house, while grandfather was fighting in the Sino-Japanese War, which lasted eight long years. They would occasionally receive letters and packages from him, and grandmother cried when she saw a photograph of him in a hospital gown after he was wounded towards the end of the war. She would write poems to her husband, play her flute for long hours in the back garden under a pale moon, and sing to her little daughter a sorrowful song of the sparrow: "Mother sparrow, mother sparrow, why are you flying in such a hurry; why are you singing such a sad tune? I have lost my little daughter; I do not know where she has flown!" When the war was finally over grandfather came back for a little while before leaving again to fight in the Chinese Civil War between the Nationalists and the Communists. By then he was chief division commander, and he took his young son with him to join the youth branch of the army.

During his sojourn at home grandfather tended a field of sugar cane, a vegetable garden, and an orchard of various citrus trees: lemons, oranges, kumquats, tangerines, and pomelos. In the evenings he read and wrote poetry, watched his children do their homework, and told them stories from *The Classic of Filial Piety*. One story told of a man who disguised himself as a deer in order to secure milk from a herd of deer, which was needed to cure his elderly parents' blindness. In an encounter with a hunter in the woods he had to reveal himself and explain the reason for his disguise. Moved by his devotion to his parents, the hunter helped him to procure the milk and escorted him out of the woods. Grandfather also read cautionary sayings to mother from *The Ladies' Book of Virtuous Conduct*, such as "do not laugh loudly," "do not show teeth when smiling or chewing food," and "do not move skirt while walking." The story of Mencius' mother also came from this book. It told how the mother of the ancient sage moved three times in order to find the ideal location to bring up her son: first near a cemetery, then near a market, and finally near a school. This was how Mencius became a scholar and how his mother became an exemplary role model for Chinese women. Grandfather considered women equal and had high expectations for mother. He promised her that if she studied hard he would send her abroad for further schooling when she was older. Both children had to get up at six every morning to go running with him and practice boxing, and he told them to "sit like a clock, stand like a pine, and walk like the wind!"

He particularly enjoyed reciting classical poems to them. A favourite was "Homecoming" by the Tang poet He Zhizhang: "Bowed down with age I seek my native place, / Unchanged my speech, my hair is silver now; / My very own children do not know my face, / But smiling, ask, 'Oh stranger, whence art thou?'" The bookshelves in the study on the second floor were lined with thread-bound classics, such as *Dream of the Red Chamber, Romance of the Three Kingdoms, Journey to the West, Outlaws of the Marsh, Strange Tales from a Scholar's Studio,* and *The Peony Pavilion*, as well as Feng Menglong's vernacular works *Illustrious Words to Instruct the World* and *Slapping the Table in Amazement*. There were also books like *The Legend of Yung Ching,* which was considered a pioneering work in the genre of the martial arts novel. Uncle was particularly impressed with a character from this novel who could fly about, hanging from his long queue tied to a beam. His *kung fu* was so amazing that a glance from him was fatal and his clutch could crush an opponent's skull!

During the Spring Festival beautiful red lanterns would be hung along the eaves of the houses to scare away evil spirits and welcome the New Year. A pig would be slaughtered for the feast, and grandmother would smoke the meat and make sausages. She would also make *tanzirou* with sticky rice, a delicacy that involved cooking pork in a pot for five or six hours with green onions, ginger, cinnamon bark, bamboo shoots, dried mushrooms, cuttlefish, eggs, chicken, crystal sugar, and various spices. There were also glutinous rice cakes and sesame and peanut brittle for the children.

The Civil War lasted for four tumultuous years. In defeat, the Nationalists retreated with the remaining troops to Taiwan. Grandfather's cousin, who was now a general, urged him to come along, but grandfather was hesitant. He sympathized with the Communist cause and the idea of justice for the common man, as his most admired heroes were historical figures like Wen Tianxiang and Yue Fei, who were known for their loyalty, patriotism, and righteousness. He also desperately wanted to go home or at least fetch his wife and daughter so that they could come with him. In the end he reluctantly decided to let his cousin take his son to Taiwan, while he returned to his hometown. On the eve of his departure he held his nineteen-year old son's hand and told him to be good and brave; his parents and little sister would soon join him on the island. He also gave him some money and a packet of family photographs to take with him. This was the last time father and son ever saw each other, as grandfather was captured en route and sent

home to be prosecuted. Then the Communists took over, and the country was plunged into the ruthless “land reform movement.” Our land and home were confiscated and expropriated, and my grandparents laboured in the fields, having scarcely anything to eat and nowhere to live but a small room in the family temple. Mother was at a girls’ boarding school in the city and was told not to return. Not long after, a distant relative came to see her. The man stared at her, his eyes red and swollen, and then murmured only a brief “how are you?” before abruptly leaving. Bewildered, she looked to her kindly teacher, who, with a heavy sigh, slowly said to her: “Your mother is dead, and your father has been taken away.” Overwhelmed with terror, grief, and helplessness, mother’s mind was full of images of the last time she saw her parents, when grandmother filled her bag with clean clothes for school and grandfather walked with her a long way until she boarded the bus to the city. Now she was alone, and she was only thirteen years old.

For six long years no one from the village cared about her or came near her until her father appeared one especially cold and rainy winter evening. Rushing into his arms, she could not stop crying: “Father! Where have you been? What happened to mother?” Grandfather, his voice breaking, told her that grandmother’s whole family had been executed, including her father and two brothers. The men were beaten so severely that every bone in their bodies was broken, and they had to be carried to the execution grounds on the day they were shot. None of grandfather’s recantation and repentance mattered, as my grandparents were still publicly and relentlessly humiliated and tortured every day. Under the great camphor tree, in the frenzy and violence of the times, grandmother was hung by her fingers and forced to confess where she had hidden the family gold. But by then they had nothing left: grandfather had offered all they had to the head of the village, and they had watched in silence as a mob of villagers took everything away—every piece of furniture, every stitch of embroidery, every jar of food. One dark night, unable to endure it any longer, they both jumped into the Yuan River. In a cruel twist of fate, grandmother drowned, but grandfather was pulled out and sent to prison. He had just been released into a labour camp and had only this brief moment to come and see his daughter one last time. Father and daughter talked and cried and held each other through a sleepless night. In the morning he left for the camp, which was where he stayed for the next twenty years.

“The rest you know,” mother wrote. “I can hardly imagine what it will be

like to see your uncle after all this time."

The day of uncle's arrival finally came. Grandfather got up particularly early to sweep clean the entire compound. Then he washed and put on a clean shirt, his sparse grey hair tidily combed. Suddenly he felt a shortness of breath and a tightness in his chest. He called urgently for mother, who came running to his little room. "What's the matter, father? Are you not feeling well?" He feebly hung on to the desk, pointing to an envelope, and slumped into his chair. Mother screamed for help, and paramedics rushed grandfather to the emergency room, but it was too late; grandfather was dead on arrival of a massive heart attack. He was eighty years old.

Uncle and his wife came straight from the airport to the hospital. Brother and sister, unrecognizable after nearly forty years of separation, held each other in front of their father, stunned with a blind fury at the devastating cruelty of fate. "At last," my inconsolable mother cried. "At least you can help me bury him!" How could they have imagined that his life would end this way, with his old heart breaking right before he could reunite with the son whom he had missed every day of the last thirty-eight years?

The envelope contained a letter from grandmother to her son, written in calligraphy: "I do not know where you are or if and when you will ever read this letter. I want you and your sister to know that I love you both, but I cannot go on. Forgive me, my children. May the heavens above protect you!" The letter was the only thing grandfather had left of grandmother, mother told me on the phone after uncle and his wife returned to Taiwan. "It is still impossible for mainlanders to visit Taiwan," she sighed. "I hope someday this separation will end and families will be reunited." I could hear the sorrow and longing in her trembling voice.

"But mother, I have a Canadian passport! I will pay uncle a visit," I said, trying to comfort her.

I booked a plane ticket to Taiwan—a tropical island only one hundred and eighty kilometres off the southeastern coast of the mainland—yet even as I embarked on my long journey, still grieving my grandfather's death, I wondered if it was possible for me to bridge the vast gulf of time and history that separated mother and uncle.

Before visiting uncle's family in Taipei I was to attend a conference on art, travel, and literature in the southern port city of Kaohsiung, which directly faced the Taiwan Strait that separated the island from the mainland.

My paper was on literary travel writing across time and space: a twelfth-century medieval merchant traversing the Mediterranean and Indian Oceans, a miniature painting from seventeenth-century Mughal India that ended up in an obscure maritime museum in Massachusetts, and a Victorian leather trunk full of old photographs and papers in English, French, and Arabic that traveled from London to Cairo, New York, and then back to Cairo again. My suitcase was also full of papers—pages of reminiscence from mother that I planned to share with uncle.

The conference lasted three days. In addition to presentations and discussions, the delegates were taken on a tour of the city's bustling harbour, which had been developed with the Dutch East India Company in the seventeenth-century, and grand Foguangshan (Buddha's Light Mountain), which was the largest Mahayana Buddhist monastery in Taiwan and was said to contain a tooth relic of the Buddha himself. I watched with curiosity a long line of young women with shaved heads wearing black and brown robes who were chanting as they streamed through the long corridors of a temple. I was told that they were novices preparing to become Buddhist nuns and that several of them would accompany us to a vegetarian meal. The nuns were friendly, cheerful, and talkative, explaining to the guests the various vegetables and the vivid meat imitations made of soy tofu and wheat gluten. The meal was a surprisingly flavourful feast, and I was full of admiration for the sisters who seemed so full of purpose, care, and compassion. How did one attain such enlightenment and equanimity?

On the train that took me from the southern tip of the island to Taipei, the northern capital where uncle lived, I sat next to a young woman who told me that she was studying at Tsinghua University, where my own cousin, whom I had yet to meet, also worked. The girl was curious about me: "What was it like growing up on the mainland? Did you ever have enough food to eat or nice clothes to wear?" I explained that under a socialist system no one was particularly rich, but no one starved either, for the most part anyway. Housing, education, and health care were also provided for free. "Really?" Her eyes widened, and then she said, "I would still like to see Taiwan independent. I am a Taiwanese highland tribe aborigine. We've lived on this island for eight thousand years before the Han people and other colonists settled here. What's more, we young people simply can't imagine living under a socialist dictatorship. We want our own island, culture, and identity, although most of the older generation and the mainlanders, as we call them,

long for their homeland and dream of reunification."

As the train slowly pulled into Taipei Station I searched intently through the crowds on the platform. Then I saw him. Even though I had only seen blurry images of him in photographs, I could tell without hesitation that it was uncle: he had the same oblong face as grandfather, a high forehead, one eye slightly larger than the other, and full lips. Getting off the train, I went forward, dropped my luggage on the ground, and extended my hands to grasp his, tears brimming over my eyes. We took a taxi to uncle's house at the edge of the city—a two-storey building in a small lane lined with shrubs and flowers. Aunt prepared a feast of tropical fruit piled high in an enormous bowl: pearl-like lychees and longans, bananas and pineapples, guavas and papayas, carambolas and persimmons, and foul-smelling but delicious durians, which I tasted for the first time. That night my cousins arrived from work to take me to the city's famed night market, which was full of Taiwanese-style snacks like seafood congee, mullet roe, eel noodles, stinky tofu, oyster omelets, papaya milk, freshly squeezed sugar cane juice, and coffin cakes. My cousins bought me bubble tea and insisted that I try iron eggs—flavourful and chewy small eggs that, having been repeatedly stewed in spices and air-dried, looked dark brown on the outside.

Uncle and I talked deep into the night and held hands the whole time, unwilling to ever let go or let anything sever again this precious family bond that had been so brutally torn apart. Uncle brought out the package of family photographs that grandfather had given him before they parted. Since everything from my mother's family had been destroyed, this was the first time I ever saw photographs of my maternal grandmother. Staring at her beautiful face I could not imagine what it must have been like that night and what unbearable trauma must have driven her and grandfather to walk into the darkness of the water, leaving their children alone.

In the morning, after a sleepless night, I took a walk around the neighbourhood. The streets were lined with houses and balconies full of blooming flowers. I saw women hanging laundry on clotheslines as their cheerful and carefree children headed off to school in clean, bright uniforms. Not far from uncle's house I came upon what looked like a funeral procession of mourners in hooded white robes holding long white banners. A Taoist priest was chanting scriptures to the increasingly intense beating of wooden instruments. As he circled a fire burning in a large container, the mourners fed the flames with offerings of joss paper folded into various shapes:

miniature houses, pieces of furniture, cars, melons, and other food items. A small crowd gathered to watch. I had never seen anything like it before and was surprised that this was taking place right in the open street in broad daylight, as if there were hardly any distinction between the living and the dead. It seemed like a solemn occasion, but it was not sad. There was only chanting and singing, which went on and on and became more and more urgent. I was fascinated by this ritual. Would it console the living? Would there be peace for the soul of the deceased? On the Communist mainland all temples had been destroyed and traditional funeral rites forbidden. How could people mourn the dead and comfort their souls without rituals, faith, and hope? How could I grieve for the loss of my own grandmother when there was not even a grave?

It was June and the ponds and lakes were full of blooming lotus flowers, which were known for retaining their purity despite growing in mud. At the T'ai-chi Park I watched a dance troop perform, combining t'ai-chi moves with contemporary dance gestures, flowing from contorted and agonizing body movements to a state of fluid elegance. How could they move so gracefully and serenely? Was there no limit to human resilience and imagination? I thought about the cruelty and brutality that resulted from the idealism of revolution. Was violence the price for the illusion of liberty? Could this suffering ever be justified? Did the personal even matter in the face of the collective and the relentless course of history?

It seemed that on every street corner there was a small but ornate temple dedicated to Mazu (goddess of the sea). Fishermen prayed to her for protection, while others prayed to her for everyday concerns with offerings of fruit and incence. I walked in, carefully lit an incence stick, knelt down, and bowed deeply to the goddess. Would this gesture provide any consolation for my family or my own grief-stricken heart? Could anything ever provide consolation for the tragedies caused by all the partitions in the world?

The evening before my departure my cousins took me to Jiufen—a small town nestled in the mountains facing the sea. Standing on high ground, I could see row upon row of traditional wooden houses built along the narrow steep lanes that zigzagged up the mountain. The town was particularly enchanting at night when red lanterns lit up the Ah Mei tea houses. My cousins and I sat together in silent contemplation, sharing the sadness of our lost grandparents as well as the happiness of our reunion, drinking mountain oolong tea, sampling honeycomb cakes, and listening to the sound of a distant ocarina in the tropical rainy night.