FLANDERS LITERATURE

On the Wings of the Dragon

Lieve Joris

An extract

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Introduction

We've all got to find our way in the world, and it took me some time to find mine. Having grown up in a village in the northeastern part of Belgium, under the loving wings of a mother who thought marrying an engineer was a career, and a melancholy father who hoped I'd become a pharmacist's assistant, I wasn't really prepared for an adventurous life. Every now and then my granduncle, who was a missionary in Congo, came to visit. He'd be sitting in an armchair in my grandmother's house, smoking cigars and drinking whisky while we listened to his stories about boys with frizzy hair walking to the mission school barefoot through the red sand of Lower Congo. After his departure, our life would sink back into its usual dullness. Luckily, I was a child of the sixties, when boundaries of class and education were challenged and a young, provincial woman with the ambition to defy her destiny was met with benevolence. I was still at boarding school, wearing a green apron over my clothes, when a friend asked me to join him on a trip around the world. I wonder if he himself ever got as far as Turkey, but to be sitting in my tiny sleeping room at night, doing my homework, dreaming about leaving it all behind, was rather liberating. I wanted to become a writer, but I hadn't started reading yet. Bless the teacher who, after reading my juvenile, self-centered prose, suggested: 'Why don't you go out on the street and listen to what other people have to say?'

At the age of twenty I was living in the United States, a country trembling under the effects of the Watergate scandal, when a few miles from the White House, in an apartment that smelled of incense and Arabic spices, I met Kamal Boullata, a Palestinian artist who'd grown up in Jerusalem. He'd been a gifted young man and sitting out painting on the streets of the old city, he'd been discovered by an American lady who'd given him the chance to study abroad. The war of 1967 had dislocated Kamal's family: one brother was living in England, another in Libya, yet another in Canada. And then there was his mother, an old Jerusalem lady with a good heart and heavy legs, who kept her family together by cooking dishes from their childhood days. At Christmas, the Boullata family would gather in her small apartment in Hartford, Connecticut. When she opened the door of the fridge, I'd wake up on my mattress in the living room to the smell of cardamom, mint, thyme, almonds and rose water. Soon her stiff fingers would try to tune the radio to the Christmas bells of Bethlehem. All morning the women would be in the kitchen, hollowing out eggplants and zucchinis, sewing little pouches of intestines and filling them with rice, vegetables and pine nuts, while the men sat smoking in the living room, telling stories of the days when their late father had been a postman in Jerusalem and their mother had stored watermelons under the bed to keep them cool. There I was, in a family that was a blueprint of mine, and yet, as they talked,

a world of loss, nostalgia and cruelty came gushing in. When Kamal took me to Lebanon, I walked around the Palestinian camps in Beirut, puzzled by the bullet holes in the walls – remains of an attack by the Lebanese army. So Israel was not the only enemy, Arabs were killing each other as well? Up to then, my world had been unbroken. Kamal showed me the cracks. I'd spend the rest of my life trying to draw a map of the multiple bruises I encountered on my journeys.

Kamal and I went our separate ways, but I continued to explore The Middle East. At a conference in Bagdad I befriended Hala, a young Syrian woman. We were both twenty-five, full of dreams and projects. Soon after that – her daughter had just been born – Hala's life took an unexpected turn when the mukhabarat (secret service) brutally entered her house, looking for her husband, who belonged to a communist party. Eleven years later I visited Hala in Damascus. I remember stepping into her small house – a jasmine tree at the entrance, a fig tree in the courtyard – with my big suitcases. I felt like an elephant. Ahmed was still in prison and his disappearance had scarred Hala, curtailed her ambitions and thrown her back into the nucleus of her family. She had been turned into the wife of a prisoner; she had lost her friends, the right to travel. The next half year I would not only make a journey into the complexities of Syria, but also another, inner journey. Hala was like a sister I'd left behind when I fled the future my parents had in store for me. She was the woman I might have become if the regime of my country had punished me for my rebellion, instead of being indulgent. Towards the end of my stay, a Dutch professor of Islamic Studies visited us. He was tall and loud and Hala and I stood there like the parents in that famous Diana Arbus picture, looking up at their giant son. It was a somewhat awkward moment and yet I suddenly realized 9 with joy I'd succeeded in entering Hala's world: I was looking at my Dutch friend from the inside out. Hala will always be a part of me. Her destiny is throbbing in the back of my mind wherever I go. She's a fighter, but what an uneven fight it is. Her husband died of leukemia four months after he was finally released from prison. You would think that was enough suffering for one life – it wasn't. The past two years Hala was a close witness to the war that ravaged Syria. She had to flee the country when the mukhabarat came to her house once again, this time looking for her.

My early heroes were the American novelist Norman Mailer, who'd stepped into reality by writing about a convicted killer, and the journalist Truman Capote, who'd written the crime novel In Cold Blood. But it was only when I started reading V.S. Naipaul and Ryszard Kapuściński that my subject and the way of writing about it started to converge. 'There is a particular beauty in the fact that something is true,' Naipaul once said – although he himself constantly navigates between fiction and nonfiction. Kapuściński was a poet in disguise. He worked as a reporter for a Polish press agency, but in his books he was deliberately vague about dates and numbers. Describing the mood of a place was his motto. In Another 10 day of life, about the independence war in Angola, Kapuściński is standing on the balcony of his sleazy hotel overlooking the port of the capital Luanda, when he smells the crates the fleeing Portuguese are building to store the furniture they're taking with them. 'Inside the Luanda of concrete and bricks a new city began to rise,' he writes. Finally, the wooden city 'sailed out in to the world, in search of its habitants.' I imagine there's a little exaggeration in the buildup to this image, but what an image it is: it takes you way beyond the independence days of Angola into the deceptions, the bitterness and delusions of colonials all through history. It's a writer's image. 'So when are you going to write a novel?' a foreign editor once asked me. 'When are you going to climb that mountain without oxygen?' – meaning my notes. As time goes by, I become fonder of the genre I'm practicing. My characters stick out of my books heads, arms and legs. They are an ever present incentive to leave my comfort zone and discover the world beyond mine.

Following the trail of my granduncle, I went to Congo – another story that would play an important role in my life. In On The Wings of The Dragon, that is about to appear and from which I will read later tonight, I 11 venture from Africa to China and back again, interested in the relationship between people who don't share a colonial past. 'Watch out,' my friends warned me before I started my journey, 'in China you won't find the generosity of the Arabs, nor the

spontaneity you experienced in Africa.' I wrote the beginning of my book in the house of my Chinese friend Li Shudi. One floor below me, Chinese life was unfolding. I'd hear Shudi's mother laughing while watching Chinese serials, I'd feel the tremble of joy that went through the house when Shudi's wife and sister were visiting from South-Africa and other family members were flooding in to see them. I'd hear the excited rattling of stones when they were playing mahjong. Different sounds, different smells – and yet, I was reminded of the time when my granduncle from Congo visited us in my native village, the time when the Boullata family gathered in that cramped apartment in Hartford, the time Hala's brother had come from Qatar and we'd all meet in her mother's house. More than five thousand miles from the place where I grew up, I came home all over again. Lieve Joris, Amsterdam, September 13, 2013

Dubai

As the bus drives into the sleepy street I ask myself what I am looking for, but time and again I am captivated by life in the container park. Most of the traders wear work clothes: tracksuit bottoms, shorts, T-shirts. Women sometimes knot a plastic bag over their curlers. Punjabis drive the forklift trucks and help the traders load their containers. They are from Pakistan and all clothed in the same baggy outfits; some have dyed their hair with henna, others wear crocheted caps, or wrap checkered scarves around their heads. 13 Every container has its own story. There are those that resemble orderly garages with, in the doorway, a trader commanding the Punjabi troops. Others are untidy and the Punjabis just fool around. I am the only Westerner, but in this environment one doesn't remain an outsider for long. Some call me 'the Congolese' because I spend a lot of time with the Congolese; they assume that I am also a trader or that I must at least be responsible for a container. Others suspect me of being an agent for the French goods inspectorate with whom Congo signed a contract a while ago. None of them know what the agents are for, except to make their lives difficult. Jean-Pierre, the tall trader from Bukavu, who rents a container with two friends, stands like a captain on a ship. Loading a container is a special skill, he says – you can save a lot of money by doing it properly. If a space appears between the boxes, JP, as his colleagues call him, shouts in Swahili: "Chomeka!" [Insert!] and the Punjabis hurry over with scarves and T-shirts. As they sit on boxes at the entrance of the container waiting for another consignment, they talk about the uncertain life they lead. It starts the day they leave Congo. They carry all their money with them because they don't trust banks. "Customs know," says JP, "so when we pass, we must leave them something. 14 On our return home, they know we're going to earn money, so they again demand a share. Even though they've already turned up at our shop to collect taxes while we were away." JP has six children. "I tell them to study and leave Congo because being a trader is not a good life." But soon they are back at work, resolutely shifting and piling up boxes, telling each other tall stories to keep their spirits up. JP is a Jehovah's witness and he knows a lot of traders who, in search of excitement, have lost their whole fortune. "There are women who, in bed, ask you to kiss their breasts," he says, "next thing you doze off – turns out they put sedative on their nipples." When the victim wakes up, the woman and the money have both gone. "And what is the moral of this story? Never take a woman to your room if you are carrying a lot of money." At lunchtime we buy boiled rice and chicken and sit together eating. Up to now I have asked the questions, but it seems that JP has been brooding on something. "Why doesn't Belgium invest in Congo any longer?" he asks. "Around Bukavu, we have cement factories and sugar refineries set up by Belgians – why don't you breathe new life into them?" 15 I am surprised. I have flown all the way to Dubai to follow the move eastwards only to stumble across the old Belgium again. "The previous owners of those factories are pensioners by now," I say hesitantly, "they might even be dead." "So what about their children?" "They probably left and went to South Africa, Canada or Australia." Henri, the trader from Kinshasa who taught himself English from a pocket dictionary, sits on a stationary forklift truck in front of his container, listening to our conversation. "Maman Belgique," [Mother Belgium], he says solemnly, "we are happy the Chinese make cheap things that all Congolese can afford. Because of them our children can celebrate Christmas – a tree only costs one dollar. But Asians don't know Congo as well as you do. Belgium

should still take responsibility." "The world has changed," I protest. "Belgium is small – a drop in the European ocean. Nobody has enough money for that kind of investment. Besides, the older generation may remember Congo but young people don't, they are concerned with other things. They probably go to Asia – like you." Henri will not be put off. "Even if your father is poor or leaves you," he continues stubbornly, "he will 16 always be your father. You are our soeur historique [historical sister], you should know that." He sits idly on the forklift truck for hours waiting for the inspector, grumbling at President Kabila for being so eager to close a deal with the French. He gives me a tour of his container where the cosmetics he imports stand neatly arranged, ready for inspection. Last night he had to leave most of his purchased goods out in the rain. He stares downheartedly at a table encased in sodden cardboard packaging that a Punjabi is carrying towards him on his head. "See there – looks just like a coffin, doesn't it?" By the end of the afternoon, the inspector still hasn't arrived. Henri stands in the open door of his container and looks down on me with a mixture of exhaustion and despair. "Maman Belgique," he says, "notre soeur historique – pourquoi vous nous avez abandonnés?" [Mother Belgium, our historical sister – why have you abandoned us?]

Cheikhna

In a shop on the third floor of the Tianxiu Building in the African neighbourhood of Guangzhou, I watch an African sitting at a toy computer. He stares puzzled at the instructions the salesman has given him. When he notices me, he says in French: 'I am looking for a computer for my little girl, but I don't understand how this one works'. He hands me the French manual. He cannot make head or tail of it – he can barely read or write. His voice has a pleasant West-African timbre. Cheikhna is his name; he comes from a Malian village on the river Niger, but lives in Congo-Brazzaville. While he talks to me he carries on bargaining a price for the computer. The seller wants 120 yuan – 13 euros – but Cheikhna does not want to pay more than 75 yuan. 'Give me sample,' he says, 'later I buy twelve'. Then he turns his attention to the dolls wrapped in plastic on the ground. They are dressed in black with a headscarf; when you press their bellies they wail an Arabic song. The seller has to open one up. Cheikhna's daughter is inquisitive, like a boy. She will undress the doll completely; he wants to know if that is possible. 'I have four children,' Cheikhna tells me, 'at least, I had four'. He picks up his mobile and shows me a photograph of a baby with water on the brain. 'That was my last child – a daughter. She had a huge head; liquid went to her brain instead of the rest of her body'. Four months ago, after the umpteenth operation, she died. This is his first trip since her death. He is still mourning, as is his wife. 'If we had taken her to a hospital in France, she might still be alive'. He looks at me. 'Why can't I get a visa for France? I didn't plan on staying there – I just wanted to get an operation for my baby'. Cheikhna and the Chinese seller cannot come to an agreement about the computer nor the dolls and he promises to come back. We walk out together. He strides confidently next to me in his suit and light-blue striped shirt with button-down collar. A cousin brought the suit back for him from Europe. Made in Italy, it says on the lining. 'It's probably from China', he tells me, 'but made for the European market – you don't get this kind of fabric in Congo'. He has brought a sample T-shirt with him and has commissioned a factory outside Guangzhou to make three thousand pieces. In the meantime, he strolls around making small purchases. He has his eye on a Samsung mobile; it's a beautiful phone, he can't stop thinking about it. 'Would you like to see it?' We cross the Huanshi Zhong Road via a wide footbridge draped with bougainvillea. Africans have their pictures taken by Chinese photographers with the Tianxiu building in the background. Hawkers offer cheap jewellery and prayer mats with a built-in compass for Muslim travellers. In the middle of the walkway, a deformed beggar lies rattling a tin; further along I see a woman with a goitre so horribly big that I have to look away. Two boys with shaved heads and a pigtail in the neck tug at Cheikhna's sleeve and won't let go. Annoyed he brushes them away. 'They don't know how to beg here. I am Muslim, I give money to the poor but not under pressure'. In the past, all the Chinese were poor, he says, they had nothing to eat, they were so hungry they ate each other. 'Did you know that our president Modibo Keïta came to China in 1964 and brought gold and fish for Mao? Mao put the fish in a pond – that is why,

nowadays, you can eat fish everywhere. And the mangos – didn't you see the mangos at the market? They originally come from Mali. Only the Chinese ones are much smaller'. Chinese who eat each other – I wonder whether they would be pleased to hear a foreigner say something like this. But I suddenly understand why Cheikhna moves with such confidence; he feels that the socialist Modibo, who was very fond of the Chinese, has contributed to the success of this country. 'The Chinese are hard-working,' he says. 'Especially the old people, who have toiled and made sacrifices to make this country what it is today. Whenever they walk into a bank they get money, no problem, even if they don't have an account'. 'How do you know that?' 'Oh, a Chinese told me'. Since 2000, he's been to Guangzhou three times a year to buy goods for his shops in Brazzaville and Kinshasa, on the other bank of the Congo River. He used to travel to Morocco and Ivory Coast, but it wasn't until he discovered Guangzhou that his business started to go well. 'The eyes of our parents were closed, ours are open – we see everything. I didn't go to school but God still helped me to achieve something'. He hesitates for a moment before adding: 'Just as he gave me a child and then took it away'. It rained earlier, but now the sun has broken through the milk-white sky and Chinese girls with pale faces have put up their parasols. At the African Trade Center, Chinese merchants sit on stools behind glass display counters in a large hall. Cheikhna has already negotiated a price for the Samsung – now he is trying to get it cheaper elsewhere. 'Papa, long time no see. Where you go?' he asks a Chinese seller he frequently buys mobile phones from. The man laughs. 'We here – you not come'. Cheikhna examines the Samsung that the man passes over to him, weighs it in his hand. The phones used to be much lighter, but Africans don't like that so the Chinese make them heavier. 'Papa – this good? Battery how long?' Good battery-life is important because Brazzaville is often without electricity for days. He doesn't make a decision about the phone, but once we are outside he keeps talking about it. The price has gone down from 1300 to 1000 yuan (110 euro) but he'd like to get it for 900. 'I can't get it out of my head,' he says. But first he has to have money transferred from Brazzaville. The pink Tianxiu building turns out to be a cluster of flats. At the back of the main building, a long queue of people shuffles towards the lift. On the eighteenth floor the smell of food greets us. In what was once an apartment, a Malian lady has set up a small restaurant. A photo collage hanging on the azure-blue wall shows Badiallo posed in a splendid boubou and gold earrings with the skyline of Bangkok in the background, but beneath the photograph real Badiallo is on the telephone with an exhausted look, wiping perspiration from her forehead. We settle down at a smeared glass table near the window. Now that I'm facing Cheikhna I notice that he's nervous. He has a twitch next to his left nostril and he sniffs constantly, as if he has a cold. 'I don't know what it is', he says, 'an allergy I think'. A Chinese speaking Malian took him to see a doctor who prescribed medicine for him. Badiallo's phone doesn't stop ringing. Malian traders order food from their hotel rooms in the area. On chairs against the wall, Chinese men sit waiting. Every time Badiallo has an order ready, one of them collects it and disappears. It takes a while before I understand what is going on. 'So Chinese errand boys deliver the food?' 'Of course, they are poor, they are from the sticks, they moved to the city in search of something – they're glad to earn whatever they can'. We have ordered fried rice with fish. Cheikhna pushes the chilli peppers to one side: he has a sensitive stomach. Usually he eats at McDonalds. 'What about Chinese food – you never eat Chinese?' 'No... the Chinese eat everything, even mosquitos. Snake, that is their fish!' He has a wristwatch with three time zones and presses one of the buttons. Almost nine o'clock in Brazzaville, seven hours earlier than here: time to call his nephew Youssoufou, who is looking after the shop while he is away. I hear him speak agitatedly and when he hangs up he sighs. 'What's wrong?' 'My safe – I need money, but yesterday the batteries in my safe ran out. Youssoufou replaced them and now the combination code has been wiped'. 'Why doesn't he take it to a locksmith?' I say soothingly. 'He'll get it open in a flash'. 'But then he'll know what's in there. No, can't do that'. We take the drama outside with us; more and more in a panic, Cheikhna calls Youssoufou. It's not until we are in a Halal restaurant drinking tea that the reassuring message arrives. 'He has wrenched the safe open with a hammer and chisel', says Cheikhna relieved. But then has second thoughts. 'If it is that easy to break into the thing, what's the use? It might as well be made of cardboard!' 'Where did you get that safe?' 'Bought it in China'. It cost him fifty dollars. 'I know for certain that a French safe would be much stronger', he grumbles, furiously stirring his tea. When I offer him a peppermint, he studies the wrapper and savours it carefully, asking where it came from, how much it cost. 'You and I, we could do some good business together. They make powdered milk in Holland don't they? How much does a five-kilo tin cost?' 'No idea'. 'If the two of us import a container of powdered milk to Congo – we could shift it in no time,' he daydreams. 'But I don't know a thing about trading'. 'That doesn't

matter. I'll teach you'. My phone rings and Cheikhna disappears. I assume he has gone to the toilet, but he doesn't return and when I try the mobile phone number he gave me, he doesn't answer. Night falls as quickly here as it does in Africa. Within minutes it's completely dark and lights flicker on everywhere. On the pavement, a beggar without legs trundles by; he lies flat on his stomach on a plank with wheels. From a cassette player lashed to the plank with a rope, sound plaintive Koranic texts. Twenty minutes later, Cheikhna is back again. He went to pray. 'Is there a mosque near then?' 'No, no, I pray... somewhere'. He looks at the notebook I've been writing in during his absence. 'You're going to have a hard time of it with that book of yours because traders have many secrets. Everyone has his own route and tries to keep it away from the others. I can pick up something cheap and sell it in Brazzaville for 15 dollars, but if someone else finds it and decides to sell it for 10 dollars I'm finished'. He fidgets impatiently on his chair – I get the feeling he wants to leave. 'What would you be doing now if I wasn't here?' 'Going to see my friends'. Most of them live in Guangzhou permanently; some have even brought their wives and children over. 'We often stay up until four in the morning. As long as the shops in Brazzaville and Bamako are open, we can not go to bed, because they call us all the time. One wants a computer, the other...' 'Can I come?' He shakes his head. 'Why not?' 'People will talk. Just now someone tried to take a photograph of us to show to my wife'. 'Why don't we just phone her to tell her who I am?' 'No, no, you don't know the Malians...' Did I come by bus? That's not safe. Sometimes it's very busy and everyone is packed together. 'Before you know it, your money has gone, or even your bag'. He takes my hand as we cross the street and helps me hail a taxi. 'You should watch out with taxi drivers, the Chinese can't see in the dark – not like us, who are used to living without electricity'. When I hand the driver the visiting card with my address, he switches the reading light on and squints. Cheikhna laughs: 'What did I tell you? The Chinese are night-blind'. * I stand in the lobby of the Garden Hotel waiting for Cheikhna. He'll drop by Thailand on his way home; this morning he has to pick up his visa from the Thai Consulate, which has an office in the Garden Hotel. We had arranged to meet at eleven o'clock, but at half past eleven he still hasn't arrived. His phone is switched off, a tinny voice tells me in Chinese and English. Is he still asleep? If you don't go to bed until after four, that's perhaps not surprising. Cheikhna's melodious voice, the catchwords with which he ends his sentences, ring in my ear: 'Ou bien? Vrai ou faux?' (What you? True or not?) – a typical Malian way to keep the conversation going. At first I thought that he belonged to the Soninke, a well-travelled trading people from West Africa, but he told me he's a Fulani, the son of a farmer who grew maize, barley and rice. I can imagine him walking through the dusty streets of his native village in a grubby boubou; at five he was already helping his father on the land. Being around Cheikhna was like riding a roller coaster. Anchored firmly in my Malian seat, I hurtled through the streets of Guangzhou – a city much less incomprehensible than I feared. But he'd warned me: Guangzhou is an unsettling place. After checking every nook and cranny of the hotel lobby, I walk out reluctantly.

Cheikhna

The Institute of African Studies at Zhejiang Normal University has one black student, who is wheeled out for me. It is the beginning of November and Joseph is wrapped up as though it is the middle of winter, a scarf tightly wound around his neck and a woollen hat on his head. He is from Ivory Coast and looks somewhat bloated in his leather jacket. I later discover that many African students cultivate a layer of fat in the winter. Joseph has brought along a Chinese acquaintance who studied in France and now teaches at the local art school. When Wei hears why I've come to Jinhua, he tells me I should get to know his older colleague Li Shudi: he lived in South Africa for years. The large burly man, who arrives in the hotel lobby in the evening to fetch me, is dressed in safari clothes, a body warmer and a green cap, and looks like an Afrikaner. But just under the surface lies China: when I greet him I realise that he barely speaks English. We all drive in Shudi's jeep to drink tea with a friend of his who owns an art gallery opposite Jinhua City Park, in a neighbourhood with new houses built in traditional style, antique shops and restaurants. On the front of a restaurant hangs a sign with a white dog on a lead. Earlier that day, on the pavement, I'd seen a dog dragged out of a cage with an iron hook and given a vicious blow to the head. The dog yelped and

shrieked. Its throat was cut, after which it was deftly skinned and thrown into a wok with boiling water. But now the area is shrouded in silence. We sit around the table and listen to Shudi. He has an intense way of speaking and Wei translates in a whisper. Shudi was fourteen when his father, an art history teacher at a secondary school in the northern city of Kaifeng, was so humiliated, taunted and beaten during the Cultural Revolution that he committed suicide. 'It was a dreadful time. I don't want to think about it anymore, I want to live, look around and listen to the birds'. He doesn't say so, but the vehemence of his words tells me that these events played a role in his decision to leave China. In 1992, he gave up his job as an art teacher in Kaifeng to go and work in a Taiwanese carpet factory in South Africa. His wife found a job with a firm a thousand kilometres away. He did not speak a word of English and slept, when the black workers had gone home, on cardboard boxes in an empty depot next to the factory. He felt so lonely that he drank a bottle of cheap vodka every evening. Sometimes he shared his bottle with the black guard who sat outside, wrapped in a blanket, warming himself by a brazier. The guard had a complicated name; Shudi could only remember it by stringing together several Chinese sounds. 'Fandaomeiwa,' he recalls, 'he was my first African friend. Every evening I got drunk and danced like a crazy man around the fire. When I went to work next morning, I had such a menacing look on my face that everyone backed away, but Fandaomeiwa would leap to attention when he saw me appear and greet me unfailingly with: "Morning, boss!"' Months later Shudi and his wife met again, pale with loneliness and a lack of fresh air. He found a job as a designer in a German ceramics factory in the same city as her. As soon as they had put aside enough money, they opened a silk shop in Durban. Eventually Shudi picked up his studies again. The Director of the Art Academy in Jinhua met him while on a tour of South Africa and offered him a job. In 2004, he returned, took up his responsibilities as the eldest child and brought his mother to Jinhua. His wife and daughter moved to Cape Town; they see each other during holidays. 'I have many stories in my heart', he says, 'about China and about Africa. I may speak poor English, but I had a good look round, I missed nothing. The Chinese in South Africa work hard, they think: In China we were poor, but our children won't be poor. You rarely see them on the beach, after work they play games at home or watch TV. Africans are different. The men make babies, but hardly care for them. They go to the river and cast a line. In their heads, they are still nomads'. Even so this is exactly what draws him to Africa: the peace, not having to run around all day, being able to stroll along the beach. The five of us sit around the table, drinking one cup of tea after another and eating from a bowl of sweets. The cold seeps up through the white floor tiles; everyone keeps their coat on. In the south of China, below the Huai River, houses are not heated in the winter. Shudi's candour moves me. He is such a strong man, but his stories reveal an exceptional sensitivity. Like Cheikhna in Guangzhou, who told me about his dead daughter within minutes of our meeting, his spontaneity draws me in. Modern China overwhelms him, he confesses – he prefers the old China. He has a friend in a village about 50 kilometres from Jinhua, where the ancient ways have survived. He is going there this weekend; we're welcome to join him.

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The fledgling morning is still chilly when Shudi, Joseph, Wei and I start out for Zhuge Bagua Cun – or simply Bagua Cun. Shudi has put on a CD by the American pianist George Winston. Crystal clear, poignant music – befitting for a boy who lost his father at fourteen. I sit in the back and stare out the window. The landscape on both sides of the road is dissected by rectangular ponds in which pearls are cultivated. In between, unimaginative, narrow threestory houses rise up. 'Every farmer's dream,' Shudi laughs. As we drive into Bagua Cun, he says: 'Shudi's dream'. This is the China he longs for, that he wants to return to. Bagua Cun was established in the 14th century by descendants of the famous Chinese statesman, Zhuge Liang. The whitewashed houses have fluted tile roofs and carved doors; many are blackened by mildew. In Shudi's friend's house, it is freezing. When I ask if the wooden front door could be closed, Shudi points to an opening in the ceiling near the entrance: rain falling into your house brings prosperity. On a low cupboard against the wall stand jars filled with a dark-red liquid in which fruits float. Alcohol! At lunch, I eagerly drain the glass that our host has filled. 'Tonight we will drink something much better,' promises Shudi enigmatically, 'that isn't on top of the cupboard'. We spend hours wandering through the narrow streets. Shudi in his outlandish Afrikaner outfit leads the way, we follow behind him like baby chicks. I am shivering in my leather jacket. Wei has a cold and is wearing a facemask. 'To protect you against bacteria', he says. As I walk beside Shudi, I notice that his English is slightly better than I thought; in company he

takes refuge behind Wei. He lived in South Africa for twelve years; how did he manage without speaking English? 'My wife used to be an English teacher in Kaifeng, she spoke for both of us', he says, 'and you don't need to know the language to sell silk'. The villages around Bagua Cun all date from the Ming Dynasty, but over the centuries the traditional buildings fell into disrepair and were replaced by new ones. The inhabitants of Bagua Cun preserved their ancient houses and now the village has become a tourist attraction. In one shop biscuits are being baked in a brick oven, in another wine is being squeezed out of fermented rice. Here a man decorates a fan with Chinese characters, there an old man in a silk robe tells fortunes. A calligrapher sits hunched over a roll of paper; as soon as enough people have gathered around him, he stands up and proclaims that he is seventy-eight years old and a 48-generation descendant of Zhuge Liang. At the pond, in the middle of the village, women beat the grime out of soap-soaked clothes, which they then rinse in the water. The soapsuds drift over to where the vegetables are being washed, but nobody seems to mind. Shudi takes us to a little shop where an antique dealer dives under the counter and brings out old coins wrapped in newspaper, which he shows surreptitiously. I see a cricket box with a tiny bedroom for the cricket to rest and a minute bowl for him to drink water. Passers-by gawk unashamedly at Joseph and I suddenly understand why he looks so sullen: he feels embarrassed and is trying to get his bearings. His first months in Jinhua were difficult. People stared at him and kept on staring even though he walked along the same route every day. 'It's as if they never get used to you. They laugh at you, grab the arm of the person with them and say: "Look there, a black!"' They gape at him as if he were a monkey in the zoo, the thought shoots through my mind, every move he makes intrigues them – in the same way that we study bonobos, enraptured because they look like us. Could Joseph be aware of this? It is a painful thought. Then he says: 'Once, a girl in the bus was looking at me so rudely that I told her: "You are a human being and I am an animal" Upon which she apologised'. He finds the Chinese insular. They know nothing about the rest of the world and are not interested in other cultures. Recently, a Senegalese professor gave a lecture at the institute; he said that the Chinese should open up, or else they will encounter problems in Africa. 'It's not war everywhere and not every African is poor', says Joseph aggrieved. 'And in the summer, it's hotter in Jinhua than in Ivory Coast'. He has been here a year now and he speaks Chinese fairly well, but he hates the cold and the culture still mystifies him. He stops next to a building with a carved dragon. 'What is it with the Chinese and dragons,' he says, 'did they live here in the past or what?' We have made our way up a hill to a doctor's house with a plot full of medicinal plants. The doctor moved to the West with his family; his home has been converted into a government hotel. Fascinated, Joseph explores the garden. He was partly raised by his grandmother, a traditional healer; just before she died, she initiated him in her ways. The doctor used to keep snakes, but the walled pit is now overgrown with weeds and hidden from sight. Joseph's grandmother had also told him a thing or two about snakes. You should burn and then pulverize them, she said. If you put a pinch of the ash on your tongue, you would be immune to bites; scattering the ash around your hut, kept snakes at bay. At dinner, our host fetches the jar with fruit steeped in alcohol from the cupboard and fills our glasses. He then disappears into a back room and returns with a glass of clear liquid that he puts down next to Shudi's plate. 'What's that?' Shudi holds the glass of oily liquid up against the light. 'This makes you strong', he says, 'just look at me'. 'What's in it then?' 'It's a snake drink', translates Wei after some hesitation. Joseph pricks up his ears. He doesn't drink alcohol, but he wouldn't mind trying this. Three extra glasses appear, a third full. When I bring the glass to my lips, the nauseating fishy odour of the cod-liver oil of my youth wafts up my nostrils. Wei takes a sip and pulls a face in disgust but bravely continues to drink. After the meal I ask if I may see the bottle with the snake drink. The jar is brought out from the back room and placed on the ground. Curled up on a generous pile of dark-brown herbs, lies a fat snake, his skin so glossy and healthy he seems to be asleep. 'Was he dead when he ended up in the jar?' I ask. 'No, no,' says our host, 'we stick them in alive – that's best'. It's damp in the triple room at the hotel on the hill. I collect all the duvets I can find and crawl in among them. In the middle of the night, I wake up. My tongue is dry as leather and I have a rancid taste in my mouth. I think about the snake, about the poison he secreted in his agony, and how it intermingled with the alcohol. If the jar had not been completely full he might have stayed alive for a while. I imagine his head swaying angrily above the alcohol, his forked tongue flicking in search of prey. How long can a snake survive in a sealed bottle? With that question circling my head, I fall asleep again. At six-thirty in the morning, we sit at a table next to the icy pond, huddled over a bowl of steaming noodles. 'That snake yesterday evening', I say to Shudi, 'so it drowned in the alcohol?' I speak slowly. Snake, yesterday, drowned, alcohol – all words he knows.

‘Eventually, yes. You have to wait for about four years, or else...’ ‘What?’ ‘A while back someone opened the jar after only two years. The snake shot up and bit him in the finger’. I laugh, but Joseph doesn’t flinch; his grandmother probably told him even taller tales. ‘You don’t believe that, do you?’ ‘But of course’, Shudi says. ‘There are all sorts of snakes!’ It sounds as though he got out on the wrong side of bed. He and Wei, who stayed with our host, didn’t have any blankets: they couldn’t get to sleep because of the cold. Wei is not the type to complain but he looks terrible. We intended to stay in Bagua Cun till this evening, but Shudi seems anxious to leave. All of a sudden he is aloof – a man accustomed to taking decisions without consulting anyone else. As readily as he suggested we go with him to Bagua Cun, he now decides to end our trip prematurely. I look at his smooth skin, his almost hairless eyelids – for the first time I notice something cold about them. But as we walk over to the car, he invites us to come to his house that evening for dinner and phones his mother to ask what he should bring. We stop at a shopping centre in Jinhua to buy groceries. Wei is perspiring. Shudi feels his forehead. ‘You are ill – you’d better not come near my mother’. We stop still in the middle of the shop. Shudi and Wei confer, then Wei says: ‘The dinner’s off’. Before I know it I am in my hotel room, alone. Next morning at seven-thirty Shudi phones. He is down at the reception desk – he has something for me. Without make-up, I run downstairs. There he stands, in his safari outfit with the strange green cap, which reminds me both of Mao and an Afrikaner. He has brought a copy of the CD by George Winston that we listened to in the car. Not a word crosses his lips – he seems as imprisoned in his own language as he was the first time we met. How to thank him, how to say goodbye now that Wei isn’t here to translate? ‘I hope to see you again one day’, I say. Big and helpless he stands in front of me. ‘One day?’ he asks. ‘Which day: Monday, Tuesday?’