# The Wall Heard Everything

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PROLOGUE

# The Telling

The story came out of her in the kitchen the way steam came out of the pot, without being asked for and without stopping.

A-Qiu was ten. She sat on the stool by the stove with her knees up, shelling the last of the peanuts her father had brought back from the factory, and the grandmother was at the sink with her sleeves rolled and her forearms in the cold water, saying the story again, because it was a Tuesday, because it was raining, because there was nothing else in the house to do.

There were two families in the old time, she said, and she did not say which old time. A Meng family and a Jiang family, living next to each other, and the fence between them was the kind the women of that place built, which is to say it was not a fence, it was a trellis, and a gourd vine went up the trellis and over, because a gourd does not know whose side it is on.

The gourd grew big. It grew big enough that both families came out to look at it. And when they cut it open, there was a girl inside.

"Inside a gourd," said A-Qiu, who was ten and had opinions.

"Inside a gourd," said the grandmother. "You think it can't be. You think it can't be because you have seen a gourd. What have you seen? The ones at the market. The ones in the soup. The gourds now are small and behave themselves."

She lifted a bowl and set it down again.

"The gourds then were bigger than your A-Po, and if a thing can be bigger than an old woman then it can hold a baby, and that is the end of the arithmetic."

A-Qiu did not answer, because that was how you answered the grandmother, which is to say you did not.

They called her Meng Jiangnü, the grandmother said, half for the one family and half for the other, because you cannot take a child out of two families and give her to only one of them. That is not how a debt works.

Then the name of the emperor. She said the name the way she said the name of a bad landlord — flat — and she wiped the knife on the cloth. The emperor wanted a wall. There had been walls before. There had always been walls, she said, at the edge of the world, and every one of them was built out of men who were told it was an honor.

The husband was Fan Qiliang. He was not a hero. She was particular about this. He was a man who could read a little and who had a good hand for plaster, and that is what they took. They took him in the autumn, when the rice was in, because that is when they take a man, when the work is done and there is a reason to be glad and a mouth less at the table.

And Meng Jiangnü did not sit down and weep. That is the opera. The opera has her weeping by the door from the first act, because the opera has three hours and it needs her to start early. In the grandmother's telling, she did what a wife does. She went through the house and gathered the winter things: the padded jacket, the second pair of shoes, the ginger, the sock she had not finished — and she wrapped the ginger in the sock so it would not get wet, and she started to walk.

"How far," said A-Qiu.

"Far," said the grandmother. "You want a number. The number is not the question. The question is the ginger, and you have skipped it."

She walked north. The grandmother got the direction right and then, later, got it wrong. It was north. It was the north that has the wind. She walked for the length of a season and ate what there was, and when there was nothing she ate the ginger, and when the ginger was gone she was sorry, but not as sorry as she was about the socks.

She came to the wall.

And here the grandmother stopped, and turned the water off, and dried her hands one finger at a time on the cloth, and A-Qiu understood that this was the part.

"At the wall," she said, "she did not fall down and cry."

"Everyone tells it that way."

"Everyone tells it that way," the grandmother agreed, "and everyone is selling something. She came to the wall and the first thing she did was look for the gate.

A woman who has walked a season does not waste the first hour at the first stone. She asked the soldiers where the men from the south were kept. The soldiers did not know. She asked the cooks. The cooks pointed up."

The grandmother stopped, and looked at the wall where the rain was coming in, and went on.

"She asked the men carrying stone whether they had seen a man from Guangdong with a good hand for plaster, and one of them, who was from Guangdong, said yes, and then said no, and then looked at his feet. And that was the answer, and she understood it before she understood it."

A-Qiu was quiet. Outside, the rain came down the lane and found the low places.

"Then she sat down at the wall and ate," said the grandmother. "Because she had been walking for a season. Because a woman cannot be angry on an empty stomach and be any use. She ate the last of what she had, sitting against the wall, and it began to get cold, and it was then that she heard it."

"Heard what."

"The bones," said the grandmother, cross, as though A-Qiu had asked what bread was. "The bones in the wall. They were talking. Not to her. To each other. The wall was full of men and they were all talking at once, the way men talk in a wall, which is to say with the small voices they have when nobody is listening."

She took up the knife again and began to scrape the board.

"One was complaining about the weather. One was complaining about the food. One was counting. And she could not hear which was her husband, because they were all inside and all the same."

"So she put her hand on the wall."

"She put her hand on the wall," said the grandmother, "and she said, *Stop your noise, I have climbed all this way.*"

A-Qiu laughed, and the grandmother did not, which was how A-Qiu knew she meant it.

"And then she told them. She told them the whole thing — the gourd, the fence, the ginger in the sock, everything she had not said out loud for a season — and the wall was cold and did not answer, and she kept telling it, and it began to

rain the way it rains in the north, which is not the way it rains here. It was not water. It was the winter going into the ground."

A-Qiu had stopped shelling. The peanuts lay in her lap, and she did not notice that either.

"She talked all night," said the grandmother, "and when the morning came she could not speak, and the wall had moved."

"Moved."

"A piece of it. Not the way the opera does it. The opera makes the whole wall lie down like a dog. This was one section, maybe four houses long, and it did not fall, it *sat down*, the way an old man sits down when he has decided he is done standing."

The grandmother put her hand flat on the counter, which is what she did when she had decided to say a thing.

"And when the dust went over, there were the bones. They were not sorted. They were never sorted. She went into them with her hands and she did not know which was him, so she did the thing with the finger and the blood, and it went into one set of bones and no other, and that is the only part of the story anyone can prove and the part I have never believed."

"Why not."

"Because blood is blood," said the grandmother. "If the blood knows, then the wall would have known, and if the wall had known it would not have taken him in the first place. You can believe the wall if you like. I do not trust it."

A-Qiu thought about the wall as a thing that could be asked. It made her uneasy in a way she did not have a word for, so she put the word away and did not use it.

"She carried him to the river," said the grandmother. "She wanted to send him home. She put him in the water and the water went the wrong way. She had walked all that way north and the river was going north too, and she stood on the bank and watched him go, still going away from home, and by then she did not care where he went as long as it was moving."

"That is the part they leave out," she said. "The river is the only thing in the story that does not do what it is told."

"And then," said A-Qiu, who had heard it.

"And then she died," the grandmother agreed. "She did not throw herself in the sea to be with him, which is what the opera does, and which is a lie about wives. She had walked a season and dug with her hands and she was finished, and she sat down with the bones in her lap and stopped. That is all. The sea was somebody's improvement."

She turned the water back on and took up the last pot.

The rain had found the corner of the room where the roof dipped, and it was coming down the wall in a thin line, and the grandmother looked at it and did not look away, and A-Qiu waited.

"You want to know why she is ours?" said the grandmother.

"Yes."

"Because she counted the steps to her own door before she left, and when she got to the wall she counted the steps to a door that was not there, and she remembered the way the lane turned and the way the neighbor's dog sat, and every room she had ever stood in was still in her, with the furniture, and the doorway, and where the water came in when it rained."

A-Qiu did not understand all of it. She understood that a thing was being handed to her, and she took it.

"That is the gift," said the grandmother. "It is not the tears. It is not the wall. It is the not forgetting. The women in this family cannot forget a room. I have stood in every room of that village and I can take you through it in the dark, and it has been a factory since before your mother was born."

"This house."

"This house, and the one before it, and the one before that. And when they came for the old one, I stood in the doorway with my own A-Po and watched them take the roof. My grandmother did not move. She said, *I am not standing in a house, I am standing in a name.* And they took the name anyway. They took the beams and the name on the beam. So do not tell me a house is walls."

"What is it, then."

"A house isn't walls," said the grandmother. "It's the names on the beam."

A-Qiu, being ten, said the thing you are not supposed to say. "That isn't how the story goes."

The grandmother stopped.

"The story goes that she fell down," said A-Qiu. "She fell down at the wall and wept for three days and it fell. That's how our story goes. I heard it on the radio, in the opera."

And the grandmother looked at her, and it was not a kind look and it was not a cruel one. It was the look she gave a bad tile at mahjong.

"That's how the opera goes," she said. "The opera got it from someone's grandmother too. Every telling is a person, and a person is standing somewhere, and she says it the way it sounded from where she stood. You think the opera has a better memory than your A-Po. It has a bigger roof."

She dried the last pot and put it on the shelf with the others, face down, which was how she put down something she was finished discussing.

Then she said the other thing.

"Don't cry at walls," she said. "Write it down. Weeping for the wall isn't madness, girl. It's bookkeeping. If you don't write it, the wall keeps the only copy, and the wall has no interest in you."

And she went to the counter and cut the last pear and gave A-Qiu the bigger half, because that is what she did instead of saying the other thing, and neither of them said the other thing, which was that the wall had heard all of it, and always had.

※

WALL ONE

# The Apprentice

> *From the "Twelve Months of Flowers" ballad*
> *First month, the plum; the wall is high. Second month, the pear; the wall is long. Third month, the peach; the wall is red. Twelve months gone, and the wall is still.*

## 1. The Circle

The character went up on the wall on a Tuesday, in white paint, inside a circle the size of a bicycle wheel, and by the time A-Qiu came home the whole lane had come out to look at it.

She knew the word, and she had read it a hundred times — in the newspaper, on the notices pasted to the neighborhood committee board, on the photocopies her professor handed round in the seminar on land. She had never seen it at eye height, painted by hand. A white circle around *chāi* (拆), the character for demolish. It was smaller than she expected, and it looked like a stamp on a letter that had taken a long time to arrive.

She stood in the lane with her bag on her shoulder and counted. From the mouth of the lane to her grandmother's door was forty-one steps, and from the door to the well was nine, and from the well to the back room was fourteen. The tablets stood on the shelf in the back room, where her father had built it, and she had never had to count those steps. The count was already in her. So was the address, and the smell of the courtyard after rain — stone, and jasmine, and the coal her grandmother kept in a tin under the sink. She kept it for the days she lost her temper with the gas.

She was twenty-two, in her final year at the law school on the other side of the river. She had been away five weeks, at a clerkship in a district court, in a rented room with a hot plate and a window onto an air shaft. It was not far. It was forty minutes on the metro, and it was possible to come home every weekend. She had

come home most weekends, until the clerkship, and the exams, and the particular arithmetic of a final year. The arithmetic left no room for the village.

The signing had happened while she was away.

Her father told her on the phone, on a Wednesday, in the flat voice he used for things that were already done. He said the compensation had been recalculated, and that the agreement was for the resettlement flat and the cash. The cash was not nothing. The flat would come in three years, or four, near the new road. "Where?" she said. "Near the new road," he said again, because he did not know. The ancestral things were crated and would be stored until the new place was ready. Her grandmother had been told. He did not say who had told her, and A-Qiu did not ask. He did not say anyone had asked A-Qiu. She did not ask that either. She already knew the answer, and the answer was the reason she had stayed on the far side of the river for five weeks.

She read the agreement later, when no one was watching. It was four pages, and she read it the way she read everything, three times. On the third reading she found the clause about the valuation date. The assessment was frozen before the towers came, before the road, before the district had been renamed. She sat with it a long time. Then she folded the pages and put them back in the folder where her father kept the household things, and she never mentioned it to him. That was her first real act as a lawyer. It was not a filing. It was a silence.

The lane was full of people she had known her whole life, and all of them were looking at the circle, and none of them were talking about it. They talked about the weather, which was the tail end of the *huínántiān*, the spring damp that sweats down the walls. They talked about whose son had passed the examinations and whose daughter was pregnant. All the time they stood with their backs to the white circle, which is how you stand with your back to a person you are not going to argue with.

Her grandmother was in the doorway, small and straight, in the blue house jacket she wore for the least occasion. She was eighty, and she had the face of a woman who had been handsome and had decided, at some point, that handsomeness was a thing you could put down. She looked at the circle on the neighbor's wall, and then at A-Qiu, and she said the thing she had been saving.

"They came for the old place when I was a girl," she said. "Your great-grandmother stood in the doorway and told them she was not standing in a house, she was standing in a name. They took the name. So." She nodded at the circle. "A circle is tidy. A circle is what they do before they stop pretending."

"Have you eaten?" said A-Qiu.

"I have eaten," said the grandmother. It was the tone of a woman who had not, and who intended to feed someone else first.

Inside, the house was the same as it had always been, and not the same, because the big things had been marked. Someone had gone through with stickers, and the furniture wore them like name tags at a school: BED, WARDROBE, STOVE, ALTAR. The stickers made the rooms look like an inventory, and an inventory made them look like things that could be counted, and A-Qiu did not like to be in a room that had been counted by someone else.

She went to the back room and stood in front of the tablets.

There were eleven of them on the shelf: black plaques with gilt names, and behind them was the genealogy book in its cloth wrapper, and above them were the small pair of *lai see* — a red packet each — her grandmother put there at New Year. There was no one to give them to. The dead, in her grandmother's theology, were not above a small courtesy. The beam above the door was the oldest thing in the house. Her grandfather had carved the family name into it when the house was built, and the name had gone dark with smoke and time, and it was the one thing her grandmother had made her father promise not to crate. A beam cannot be crated. A beam is the house.

A-Qiu stood there and counted the tablets without meaning to, and then she stopped. She understood something in that small back room, with the smoke-darkened beam and the eleven plaques. The house was already gone. It was only still standing because the papers were not finished, and that was the whole difference between a house and an address. The address took longer.

Her mother had died when A-Qiu was four. The gift had not been in her mother, who could not find her way home from the market twice in one week, and who had never once been able to tell you what color a room was. The gift had skipped her the way water skips a stone, and landed on A-Qiu. The grandmother had noticed when A-Qiu was small, by the way the child could be

taken to any house in the village and walk straight to the kitchen, and could describe a neighbor's furniture six months later. Once, in a whisper, with the door shut, the grandmother had tested the other thing. She put a bowl of soup in A-Qiu's hands and turned off the light, and A-Qiu walked the whole courtyard in the pitch dark and did not spill a drop.

The grandmother called it a gift. A-Qiu was twenty-two and had an opinion, and she called it a spatial memory of unusual fidelity, which she had looked up, and which was a real thing. Either way, it meant she could not leave a room without taking it with her. When a place closed, it did not close. It stayed open somewhere in her, with the furniture in it, and the light coming in the way it came in at four in the afternoon, and the drip in the corner of the ceiling that her father had never quite fixed. She could go back in and stand in it whenever she wanted. That was not the same as being able to go home.

She found her father in the courtyard by the well.

He had a screwdriver in his hand, and he was taking apart the old hand pump that had not worked in nine years. He did that. When there was nothing to be done he found something that could be disassembled. He was a small man with careful hands, and he had married into the Meng women, which in the village was still a remark people made. He had spent thirty years in the house being useful. The usefulness had a shape, and the shape was a man with a screwdriver and his back to the room.

"The pump hasn't worked since I was in middle school," said A-Qiu.

"It can be made to," said her father, which was what he said about most things, and which was not true, and which was not a lie either. In the time it took to find out, the day had passed and no one had had to talk.

She sat on the edge of the well and watched him. Above the courtyard wall the towers stood where the rice fields had been, glass and white stone, and at night they lit up in sequence, floor by floor, like a thing being counted. When A-Qiu was small the tallest thing in the village was the ancestral hall's roof ridge, and you could see it from three lanes away. Now the hall was a shadow at the foot of a building with a name like a bank. The building had a slogan on it in light, and the slogan said something about the future, and from the courtyard you could only see the last two characters.

She stayed for dinner. The grandmother made soup, and refused to let A-Qiu leave without the rest of it in a jar.

Then A-Qiu did the thing she had not planned to do, which she would afterward think of as the beginning, though it was not the beginning; the beginning had been a signature on a Wednesday. She took the metro back to her rented room and packed for a week. She told the woman who rented her the room that she would be away. She came back to Xiancun to sleep in the house.

She told herself it was to help her father pack. She told herself it was to be useful. She counted the steps from the mouth of the lane to the door for the second time that day, and got forty-one, and opened the door, and went in, and lay down on the bed she had slept in until she was eighteen. It was in the room with the small window and the shelf where her schoolbooks had been. The stickers said BED and WARDROBE. There was one on the door. It said nothing, because no one had found a word for a door.

## 2. The Shell

The movers came on a Thursday, three men and a truck, and the grandmother sat in the doorway with her back against the frame and would not move.

She sat there while they carried out the wardrobe. She sat there while they carried out the bed. She did not block the door. She simply made the doorway a place where a person was sitting, and the men, who had done this in other villages, worked around her with the patience of men who are paid by the day, and did not meet her eyes.

A-Qiu's father had hired them, and had packed the ancestral things into the crates himself. The tablets went in first, each one wrapped in a cloth, and then the genealogy book in its wrapper, and then the lesser things: the incense burner, the pair of brass candlesticks, the wooden measure her great-grandmother had used for rice. The crates were nailed shut and marked with a stencil: MENG, and a number, and the address of a warehouse in Foshan where the village's things were being kept until the new buildings were finished. Then they were loaded onto a truck and driven away, and A-Qiu did not see them again for years.

The beam was the problem.

Her father stood under it with a crowbar and did not use it. The beam was set into the wall at both ends and had been there since before anyone living had

been born. To take it out you would have had to open the roof and take down the wall and cut it free. Even then it would come out in pieces, and a beam in pieces is not a beam. Her father put the crowbar down. He said nothing about it, because there was nothing to say. The grandmother watched him put the crowbar down, and understood, and did not say anything either. That was the whole conversation. The name on the beam stayed where it was, over the door, and would go down with the house, and both of them knew it, and neither of them said it.

The grandmother moved on the Saturday. There was a flat waiting for them, a rented place on the eighth floor of a building near the new road. Two rooms and a balcony. The lift smelled of new paint, and the kitchen had a stainless-steel sink that did not know her. A-Qiu's father had already put the kettle there, and the rice, and a jar of the pickled vegetables the grandmother made in the autumn. When she walked in, the first thing she would see would be something that belonged to her.

She stood in the doorway of the new flat for a while before she went in.

"It's on the eighth floor," she said, to no one.

"There's a lift," said her father.

"I know there is a lift." She looked at the corridor, at the identical doors, at the strip of light under each one. "In the old place, if you wanted the third floor you walked. You knew where you were by the climbing." She went in and put her hand on the wall by the door, the way she did, to feel where the room began. Then she sat down in the chair they had brought from Xiancun, the one with the arms, and looked at the balcony, and did not say anything else about it.

A-Qiu stayed behind.

She told the movers to go, and they went, and she stood in the emptied house and listened to the quiet, which was not quiet, because an emptied house has a sound of its own. The rooms were bigger without the furniture. The marks on the walls were all that was left of it: the pale rectangles where the pictures had hung. The dark stripe behind the altar shelf. The smudged place by the door where four generations of hands had reached for the light switch. The doors had been taken out and stacked in the lane for the crew, so that only the frames were

left. The stickers were still on the frames. BED. WARDROBE. ALTAR. The word on the door frame said nothing at all.

She walked the house and counted.

Her father had come back in the afternoon to take the last crate, and had left the crowbar leaning in the corner. The crowbar was the only thing in the house that did not belong to it. She picked it up and put it outside. Then she sat on the floor of the back room where the tablets had stood and looked at the beam. Her grandfather's name was on it. She had never been able to read it. The smoke had gone into the wood where the knife had gone in, and now the two were the same color. She knew the shape of the characters the way she knew the shape of the room. She could have drawn them from memory. She did not draw them. She sat under them until it got dark.

Then she lay down in the back room with her coat over her, because there was no bed and it did not seem right to bring one, and she slept.

She woke at five in the morning and knew that the machines had started.

She knew it the way she knew the steps to a door. There was no sound in the lane, and no light, and the window was still black. She lay on the floor in the empty house with her eyes open and the knowledge sitting in her chest like a swallowed stone. The excavators were running. They were at the far end of the village, where the first houses had already come down. They had started before dawn, the way they always did. No sound could possibly have carried that far through the streets and the towers and the shut windows. She did not think any of this. She simply knew it, and got up, and put on her coat, and went to the doorway to wait.

At ten past five the first machine came into the lane.

It came slowly, the way a thing comes when it knows the lane is narrow, and the driver stopped it at the mouth and looked at the house for a while with the engine idling. A-Qiu stood in the door frame, where there was no door. The driver saw her and did not look surprised. He had done this before. He raised one hand, not a wave, an acknowledgment, the way a man raises a hand to another man across a field. Then he put the machine into gear and swung the arm, and the roof came off the house the way a lid comes off a pot.

She felt it behind her sternum.

That was the first time. It was not pain and it was not noise. It was a sound she had no name for, a sound like cloth tearing very slowly. It was behind her breastbone. It stayed there while the walls came down and the beam came down, and the name on the beam went into the rubble with everything else. She stood in the door frame that no longer held a door and watched the house she had been born in become a thing that could be loaded onto a truck.

She did not cry. She counted the arm of the machine as it swung, which was no use to anyone, and after a while she stopped counting. Then she took out her phone and called her grandmother to tell her it was done.

"Did you stay in it?" said her grandmother.

"Yes," said A-Qiu.

## 3. The Van Tour

The grandmother asked for the van on a Sunday, a week after the house came down.

She did not say van. She said a car with a driver, and a driver who was patient, and a morning with nothing in it. She said it the way she said she wanted the doctor, which meant it was not a request.

A-Qiu hired the van. Her father paid for it. He gave her the money in an envelope and then found a reason to be at the factory, which was how he came along without coming along.

The driver's name was Liu. He was from Hunan and had been in the city eleven years, and when A-Qiu explained what they wanted he did not ask why. He had driven people around their old villages before. He said the rate was by the hour, and that he would go as slow as she liked. Then he put a plastic bag over the seat back because the grandmother was old, which the grandmother noticed, and did not forgive.

They started at seven, before the heat. The grandmother sat in the back with the window down and both hands on her bag. A-Qiu sat beside her with a bottle of water, a packet of tissues, and the address of a place that no longer had an address.

"Where first," said A-Qiu.

"The gate," said the grandmother.

There was no gate. There was a fence of blue metal panels with a developer's sign on it. Behind the fence the ground had been scraped to a color that was not any color, and a man in a vest sat in a plastic chair by the opening, looking at his phone.

"Here," said the grandmother, and Liu pulled over.

She looked at the fence for a while.

"This was the gate," she said. "There were two stone lions, small ones, not the big temple kind. The left one had no ear because of the war."

A-Qiu looked through the fence. There was nothing to see.

"Before I was married," said the grandmother, "the boys used to sit on them, and the old women would shout." She pointed with her chin. "Inside the gate was the lane where the Yeungs lived, my father's people. The first house on the right was my auntie's."

"What was her name?"

"Ah Ying. She kept a dog called Ah Wong that bit the postman every year on the same day. The postman came back every year anyway, because that was his job and because he liked her cooking."

"Next," said the grandmother, and Liu crept the van forward.

They went along the outside of the fence, which was the shape of the village, and the grandmother worked her way around it the way a woman works her way around a market stall she has bought from for fifty years. She did not need to see the houses. She had them. She gave them in order, the way a person recites a list they have known since childhood.

"Number four was the Chans," she said. "Two brothers. The older one went to Hong Kong and sent money, and the younger one spent it."

"And at New Year?"

"At New Year there would be shouting, and then there would be roast goose, and by the second day they were friends again. The house had a jacaranda in front, the only one in the village. In April the whole lane was purple, and the old women swept the flowers into a pile and complained about them."

"Number six was the Wongs. Their well was the good one. Ours was the one that went salty in the dry years, so my mother used to send me to the Wongs with two buckets, and I would stand in their yard and wait my turn."

"Was their girl your friend?"

"The Wongs' girl was my friend and is dead now." The grandmother was quiet for a moment. "The buckets were heavy and I hated it. The water was cold and sweet, and I have not tasted water like it since."

She talked about the school. She talked about the market, and the woman who sold fish and had one eye, and how you never argued with her about the weight.

She talked about the mahjong circle that met in the lane on summer nights. Four women and a lamp. Who cheated, and who only pretended to cheat to be sociable, and who won in the end, which was always the same person, which was herself.

She talked about the ancestral hall, the roof ridge you could see from three lanes, the tablets in their tiers, the name of the clan in gold. She talked about the year the hall was used as a grain store, and the year it was a school, and the year they painted the walls and nobody could find the old inscriptions under the paint.

Liu drove. The fence went on. A-Qiu listened.

At the market corner the grandmother stopped and pointed at the fence.

"There," she said. "That was our house."

A-Qiu got out. She stood at the fence and counted the steps from the corner, because she could not help it, and the count came out right for a house that was not there. That was her own gift, and she had never once used it to find anything, because it only worked backwards.

The grandmother did not get out. She sat in the van with the window down and looked at the fence where the house had been.

She said the name of the neighbor on the left, and the neighbor on the right. She said where the water came in, and where the roof dipped, and which tile she had never trusted. She said the name of the man who built the house, who was her husband's father. She said the year, which was a year of the ox, and the price of the wood, which she had been told and had kept.

And then she stopped.

"The next one," she said, "the next one was the Lams. Or the Loks. It was the family with the boy who had the—" She stopped again, and her hand moved, small and quick, as if the word were a fly.

"The boy with the limp," said A-Qiu. "The one who fixed the radios. He lived at number twelve, behind the shrine."

The grandmother looked at her.

"Yes," she said. "Him." She looked at A-Qiu for a moment longer than the sentence needed. "You have it," she said, "the whole of it." It was not quite a question, and A-Qiu did not answer it, because the answer was yes. She had understood, somewhere between the gate and the market, what the morning was.

She took out her phone.

She had started the recording at the gate without deciding to. She did not remember pressing the button. She only remembered, later, that somewhere around the school she had put her hand into her pocket the way you check for a key. The phone had been recording for forty minutes. She checked the battery and turned the screen away and held it flat on her knee, facing the grandmother, and said nothing about it. If she said anything, the grandmother would stop, and the grandmother had not been asked to perform. She had simply been describing her street.

"Go on," said A-Qiu.

So the grandmother went on.

She went on past the well and the shrine and the two houses where the brothers never spoke. She went on past the place where the lane narrowed, and the place where it flooded, and the tree the children climbed until the year the boy fell out of it and the tree was cut down, which everyone had agreed was just. She named the families, and their trades, and their dogs, and their debts, and their shames. She did it from the back of a hired van, at seven in the morning, through a fence. The street she described had been gone for four years, and it might as well have been in front of her for how plainly she put it down.

Liu turned the van at the far end and brought them back along the second side, and the grandmother did the second side, and then the third street, and the deep lane behind the hall where the well-to-do had lived before the war, and she

did that too. Her voice did not tire. It got quieter, that was all, the way a person's voice does when they are reading something they have read so many times they no longer need the page.

They stopped for congee at a shop near the new road, because A-Qiu made her eat. The grandmother complained about the congee, which was how A-Qiu knew she was tired, and then she complained about the driver's plastic bag, and then she complained that the tea was not hot enough, and she ate all of it.

"The archive," said A-Qiu, testing the word, because she was a lawyer and words were what she had. "That's what this morning is. You're dictating an archive."

The grandmother put down her spoon.

"It's a street," she said. "It's where I was born. You don't call a street an archive to make it smaller."

"That's not what I meant."

"I know what you meant." She wiped her mouth and looked out at the new road. "You meant to keep it. Keeping it is a good thing. Just do not stand at a fence and say the word *archive* in front of an old woman and expect her to be grateful."

"I wasn't expecting—"

"I am not a document. I am the last person who saw it, and I am telling you because you asked. Your father will not, and your mother could not."

A-Qiu did not answer. She turned the phone face down on the table, which was not the same as turning it off, and neither of them said anything about that either.

That night she listened to the whole of it. Two hours and eleven minutes. She heard the gate, and the earless lion, and the dog that bit the postman. She heard herself say *go on* a dozen times, in a voice she did not quite recognize, flat and patient, the voice she used with clients who wanted to weep when she needed a signature. She heard the grandmother's pause at number twelve, and her own voice filling it, and the grandmother's small silence after, which was the sound of a thing being handed over.

She copied the file to her laptop and named it. Then she made a folder, and in the folder she put the recording, and a photograph of the segment of fence where

the house had been, and a page she wrote that night. On the page she set down the forty-one steps from the mouth of the lane to the door, and the nine from the door to the well, and the fourteen from the well to the back room, because those were the only numbers of the house that had no fence over them. The folder did not have a name yet. It would have one by the end of that winter.

## 4. The Eighth Floor

The grandmother did not learn the new flat.

She lived in it. She kept it clean, and she cooked in it, and she slept in it. But she did not learn it. She called the kitchen the kitchen and the back room the back room, which was what she had called the rooms in Xiancun, and when A-Qiu asked her where the light was she said, "By the door, the same as always." The light was not there. She found it with her hand, every time, and did not learn it.

She kept the door of the flat open, which the neighbors did not like, because the corridor was shared and the wind came through. She said a door was not a door if it was always shut. She said the corridor was the lane now, and you had to be able to hear the lane.

A-Qiu came on Sundays. She took the metro and then a bus and then walked the last part along a road that had been built the year before and still had orange netting on the plantings. She brought roast goose from Liwan and egg tarts from the shop near the law school. The grandmother complained about the price of both, and ate them.

Then the same questions, in the same order.

"Have you eaten," she said.

"I've eaten. I ate before I came."

"You're thin."

"I'm the same as last week."

"Is there anyone at all."

"There's no one at all, A-Po. There's work, and there's the archive, and there's no one."

The grandmother looked at her for a moment, and then said something about the soup, which was how she ended a subject she had decided not to argue about.

The new neighbors, she said, were not worth the lift. They did not speak in the corridor. They did not know whose door was whose. The woman on the left had a child who cried at night. The grandmother had decided the child was spoiled. Then, two weeks later, that the child was sick. Then, a month after that, that the mother was the sick one. She had the whole family worked out before she had exchanged one word with them.

"I have my information," she said, when A-Qiu asked.

"From where?"

"The ground floor has a view of the bin area," said the grandmother, and would not say more, because the bin area was a kind of newspaper and a good reporter protects her source.

The mahjong group was scattered. Two of the women were dead. One had gone to live with a son in Dongguan. The fourth, who had been the grandmother's particular enemy for forty years over a plate of cakes at a funeral, had moved into a building two stops away. The two of them spoke on the phone every week for an hour. That was how A-Qiu learned that a grudge and a friendship are not always different things.

Her father bought the grandmother a tablet, for the mahjong. He set it up and showed her once. After that she played every evening at eight, alone in the chair with the arms, and she cheated. A-Qiu watched her do it and said nothing. There was no one to cheat. The machine did not care. But the grandmother played the same way she had played for fifty years, keeping her eyes on the table and her thumb on the tile she meant to keep, and at the end of every game she said the same thing, which was that the machine cheated worse than any living person and had no shame at all.

In the summer A-Qiu started going back to the village's people.

She did not plan it as an archive. She planned it as a series of visits, because her grandmother had given her the names and she found that she could not leave the names alone. She went to the aunties in the resettlement blocks. She went to the uncles in the rented rooms. She found the woman who had run the dried-goods stall and who had somehow survived it. She took the phone and asked them to talk. They talked about the well. They talked about the school, and the teacher who had a cane and the teacher who did not, and the year the flood came

up to the second step. They talked about the hall, and the tablets, and where the family books had been kept. They told her which families had saved theirs and which had not.

She put the recordings in the folder. The folder got a name in September. She called it *Xiancun*, because anything else was a lie. Under it she made files for the streets. Under the streets, the houses. Under the houses, the people. Beside each name she wrote the address and the rooms and the number of steps and what had happened to them. It was not a lawyer's file, because it was not for anyone. It was a copy of a thing that otherwise existed only in the heads of old people who were going to die.

The cold came late that year. It came in December, in the night, the way it does in Guangzhou. Not snow, not even frost. Just a rain that was colder than the rain should be, and the whole city going quiet under it.

The grandmother went into the hospital on the twelfth of January, which was a Friday. She had a cold that would not turn, and then it turned, and they said pneumonia, and they said she was eighty and it was the season. A-Qiu sat with her on the Saturday and the Sunday. The grandmother was not confused. She was tired. She asked about the archive, and A-Qiu told her about the aunties, and the grandmother corrected two of the names and one of the streets, and then she slept.

On the Monday the father called at six in the morning.

A-Qiu went to the flat first, because she did not know why, and stood in the corridor with the door open and the cold coming through from the stairwell. Then she went to the hospital, and it was done.

The last lucid thing the grandmother said was on the Sunday night, when the nurse had gone out and the room was quiet. She had been looking at the ceiling, which was not the ceiling of any house she had ever lived in. Then she turned her head and looked at A-Qiu the way she looked at a bad tile at mahjong. She said the thing she had said in the kitchen when A-Qiu was ten, and the thing she had said on the eighth floor when the door was shut, and she said the whole sentence, not the short version.

"Don't cry at walls," she said. "Write it down."

Then she said something about the soup, which was not lucid, and that was the end of what she said that anyone kept.

## 5. The Paper House

The funeral was three nights and a morning, at the parlor on the far side of the river.

There was a hall with a photograph at the front, and the photograph was the one from her identity card. She had hated it. The family used it because it was the only one anyone could find. There were wreaths with the family names on the ribbons, and the names were the whole genealogy of a street. The people who came were the people who had lived around her, and they came in the order of the streets, which no one had planned. The aunties from the resettlement blocks. The uncles in the rented rooms. The woman from the dried goods, who brought a wreath and stood a long time in front of the photograph and said nothing, which was the most A-Qiu had ever heard her say.

Her father wore white and stood at the side of the hall. He had a piece of hemp tied at his waist, and he did not touch it and did not look at it. He had been up for two nights, and he did the thing he did when there was nothing to be done, which was to find the hall's one broken thing. In this case it was the water cooler. By the second evening he had taken the tap apart on a paper towel and put it back together. The water cooler worked. He stood by it for the rest of the night, offering people water, which was his way of being there.

A-Qiu did not cry.

She had expected to. She had waited for it the way you wait for a sneeze, and it did not come, and after a while she stopped waiting and did the work. She talked to the funeral people. She chose the urn. She chose the flowers, white chrysanthemums and nothing else, because the grandmother had once said that if anyone put gladioli on her she would come back and stand at the foot of the bed. She signed the papers and paid the deposit and made the list of who would carry what. She was very good at it. It was the same set of skills she used at the clerkship, and she noticed that, and did not stop.

Before the wake she went to see the paper man.

His name was Mak, and his shop was in a lane off the *qilou*, the arcaded shophouses of Liwan. The sign over the shop had been painted three times and never

repainted, so that the characters were a palimpsest of their own name. Mak was seventy and had made paper things since he was a boy. He made the usual: the paper money, the paper phones, the paper cars with the logos of real cars, the paper watches and handbags and mansions for people who had never had a mansion. The trade had changed. People wanted what they had seen on television, and Mak gave them what they wanted, and kept a shelf at the back for the things he thought were right.

A-Qiu gave him the specification.

She gave it to him the way she gave a brief. Doors: two, one at the front and one at the side. The front door opened onto the lane and the side door onto the courtyard. Rooms: three and a half. The half was the alcove behind the curtain where the grandmother had kept the winter quilts. The well was in the courtyard, on the left as you came in, with a stone rim and a wooden cover. The cover was to be left off, because the grandmother had always said that a well drawn as closed was bad luck. The kitchen went against the back wall, with the window on the left. The beam went above the door, with the family name cut into it. The name was to be cut in, not painted, because painted names were for offices. The tablets stood on a shelf in the back room, eleven small plaques. The jacaranda was not in the courtyard. It was in front, on the lane side, the only one in the village.

Mak listened and did not write anything down.

"How many steps from the door to the well?" he said.

"Nine."

"And from the well to the back room?"

"Fourteen."

"And from the mouth of the lane?"

"Forty-one."

He looked at her for a while. He was a small man with ink on his fingers and a bench full of bamboo and paste and gold foil. He had been asked for many things in his life, and for stranger things than this.

"How do you know?" he said.

"I lived there," said A-Qiu.

Mak nodded once, as if she had answered a different question, and turned to his bench and began to select the bamboo for the frame.

The wake went the way wakes go. The grandmother's old enemy Aunty Lam came, the one from the plate of cakes at the other funeral. She stood in front of the photograph and said, loudly, to no one, "Forty years she owes me." Then she took a paper mahjong tile out of her handbag and put it on the altar. A three of bamboo. It had been the grandmother's least favourite tile. Aunty Lam had chosen it on purpose, and it was, A-Qiu understood, the closest thing to a blessing the two of them had ever managed. Someone laughed. It was the only laugh of the three nights, and it came at the right time.

They burned the paper things on the last morning, in the furnace at the back of the parlor. The paper house went in first, and the gold foil went up before the paper had finished burning, the way it always does, and then it was done.

A-Qiu stood with the heat on her face and did not cry.

The urn went into the wall the following week, in the columbarium in the hills. The niche had the grandmother's name, and the two dates, and a small shelf, and a place for incense. Her father stood in front of it the way he stood in front of the water cooler, doing the one useful thing, which was to make sure the incense did not tip.

Then it was over, and there was nothing to arrange, and A-Qiu went back to the folder.

## 6. The White Rain

Spring came, and the *huínántiān* came with it, and for six weeks the city was wet in a way that had nothing to do with rain.

The walls sweated. The floors went greasy. The rice crawled in the sack and the towels never dried. The whole city lived the way a person lives who has been woken in the middle of the night and cannot find the light. A-Qiu graduated that spring. She sat the examinations and passed them, which she had known she would, and did not enjoy, which she had also known. Then she looked for work.

The big firms wanted her. She had the marks and the language and the manner, and the interviews went well. After each one she sat on the metro going home and counted the steps. She could not make herself want the thing they were offering. The work was commercial contracts and the tenants of the towers,

and the clients were people who had never stood at a fence and tried to see a house. She did not have a name for what she wanted instead. She only knew that the folder was on her laptop, and that the folder had grown, and that she opened it more often than she opened the interview notes.

She applied to the legal aid center in Liwan.

It was a small office on the second floor of a building on the *qilou* street, above a pharmacy. Two caseworkers, a photocopier, and a queue that started before the shutters went up. The pay was a third of what the firm had offered. The director was a woman called Chow who had done the work for twenty years, and she asked A-Qiu one question in the interview, which was why.

"Because I read the agreement after my family signed it," said A-Qiu, "and I found the clause, and it did not matter."

Chow looked at her for a moment, and then said the office opened at nine and the queue came at seven, and offered her the job.

The break came before she started.

It was a Tuesday, early, and the deliveryman called A-Qiu's phone because her number was on the order, and he could not find the address. He was on a motorbike somewhere in Tianhe with a box, and the box had been sent to her grandmother. The sender was an herbal tea shop in Zhaoqing. The tea was a tonic for the chest, ordered in the winter by an old woman who had used the shop for thirty years and had kept ordering right up until the month she died.

"What does the label say?" said A-Qiu.

The deliveryman read the address off the label. He read it slowly, in the flat way a man reads a label. What he read was the old address in Xiancun. The street, the number, the lane. The whole address, which had been demolished four years before. It still existed, A-Qiu understood, in a shop's customer list in Zhaoqing, in exactly the way it existed in her own head. It was a place you could still send a parcel to, if you did not know.

For the length of one breath the house was there again, with the door and the well and the beam, and a deliveryman was on his way to it. Then the breath was over. A-Qiu gave him the new address, and thanked him, and hung up. She stood in the corridor of her rented building with the phone in her hand. The walls were wet with the *huínántiān*. She looked at the line of damp coming down the wall

by the door, the exact width of it. She put her hand on the wall and stood there for a while, and then she went to work.

The work was the queue.

On the first Monday she was there at half past eight. There were already eleven people ahead of her on the stairs, and by nine there were forty, and they came for everything. A landlord who would not return a deposit. A woman whose wages had not been paid for five months. A man whose brother had been hurt on a building site and who had signed a paper in the hospital that he should not have signed. An old couple whose son had taken the deeds to the flat and sold it. A woman who had been refused a divorce because the clerk had decided she did not look serious.

Most of it was not law, or not the kind of law A-Qiu had studied. It was forms and windows and chops and waiting, and the answer was very often no. Chow told her in the first week that the job was not to win. The job was to make sure the person in front of you did not lose for the wrong reason. It was to write down what happened, so that the next person would not have to lose the same way twice.

A-Qiu learned the queue. She learned the names of the windows and the names of the clerks behind them, and which clerk you could ask a question and which clerk would close the shutter. She learned that a missing chop could cost a month, and that the same missing chop could be waived if you asked the right person on the right morning. She learned that the law was a wall, and that the wall had hairline cracks, and that the whole job was to find a crack and put a person through it before it closed.

She rented a small flat near the office, one room and a kitchen in an old *qilou* building, with a window onto the street. She put the laptop on the table by the window. She put the folder on the laptop. And on the first night she came home from the office, she sat down and opened the folder and began the third file. The file was for a house that no longer existed, on a street that no longer had a name, and she could walk through it room by room and describe it down to the damp on the wall.

## 7. Small Wins

The office had two caseworkers besides Chow, and a student volunteer who came on Thursdays, and a photocopier that jammed if you fed it at an angle.

Sze had been there nine years and could quote the filing rules the way other people quote the weather. The other caseworker was a young man named Gao. He was doing a year of service and spent most of it at the filing window, learning which clerk would take a form and which clerk would hand it back.

A-Qiu took the window in her second week. Sze said you cannot understand the law until you have stood in the same window as the people who have to use it.

The window was a counter with a ticket machine beside it and a sign that gave the office hours in two languages. The first thing A-Qiu learned was that the queue was not angry. The queue was patient, in a way that was worse. The people came with plastic bags of paper, and they had arranged the paper in an order that meant something to them. They put it on the counter with both hands, the way you put down a bowl of soup. They had come because a neighbor had told them to come. Someone, somewhere, had told them there was such a thing as a right, and that it could be asked for at a window.

The cases came in the same shapes: the deposit, the wages, the paper signed in a hospital, the deed, the divorce. The way weather comes.

A shopkeeper named Law came on a Wednesday, in the *huínántiān*, with a folder that had swollen with the damp. He was fifty and had kept a stall in a market that was being rebuilt. He had been told he could object to the assessment. He had written his objection down, in pencil, on the back of the assessment notice. He had put the notice in an envelope and taken it to the district office. The office did not accept objections at that window and sent him to another window, and that window sent him back. By the time he found the right window, the sixty days were gone. He was three days late.

"Can we file it late?" he said.

"No," said Sze, who was listening.

A-Qiu read the notice three times. The date was printed in the corner, small, in the same size as the reference number. The window it had to be filed at was named on the second page, in a paragraph about something else.

"What happens now," said Law.

"Nothing," said Sze. "The assessment stands. You take the offer."

He sat with that for a while. Then he asked the question A-Qiu would hear in that office for years, in different mouths, in different rooms. It was never the question she had an answer for.

"Then what was the objection for?" he said.

Later, after he had gone, Sze said, "Write it in the book."

There was a book. It was a bound exercise book, ruled, the kind a schoolchild uses. It was kept behind the counter. In it the office wrote down every case that had failed for a reason that was not the merits. The man who was three days late because two windows had sent him away. The woman who could not afford the assessment fee. The tenant who had no written lease and therefore, in the eyes of the process, had no landlord. A-Qiu wrote Law's three days in the book, with the date and the window numbers and the name of the officer. Then she looked at the pages before hers. The book was the only place where the failures were allowed to be a pattern.

The family came on a Friday.

They were a Cheung family, three brothers and their mother, from a village that had been cleared two years before. They had signed. They had signed because the offer had been raised, and because the block committee had said everyone would sign, and because the eldest brother had a business that could not wait. Now the resettlement flats were late, and the rent allowance had not been raised with the rents, and the family was living in two rented rooms, and the mother was not well. They wanted to know if they could undo it.

A-Qiu read the agreement. It was nine pages. She read it three times, twice at the counter and once at her desk with the agreement under the lamp. The agreement was airtight. The clause they were unhappy about was on page four, and it was the clause they had each initialled.

"The signature stands," she said. "The sale is done. But the rent allowance has a review clause, and the review is overdue. That is a different question."

The eldest brother said he had not read page four. The second brother said he had read it and had thought it meant something else. The mother said nothing and looked at the counter.

A-Qiu wrote the letter that afternoon. It was not a lawsuit and it was not a victory. It was three paragraphs asking the district to conduct the review it had promised. It took six weeks, and it got the family an increase of four hundred yuan a month. It was not the house, and it did not pretend to be.

The eldest brother came back to say thank you. He brought a bag of oranges, which the office could not accept, and left them anyway. A-Qiu divided them without asking and put them on the counter for the queue, which was how the office ate fruit.

Her small win of that season was a wage case.

The client was a woman named Zhou. She was twenty-six, from Guangxi, and she had worked in a factory in Panyu. She had not been paid for five months. She had a son, and a mother, and a telephone that was cut off. The factory had a habit of paying late and then paying less, and it did it to people who could not afford to wait.

A-Qiu took the case to mediation. It was the first *tiáojiě* of her life, the court-pushed kind, in a room with a long table and a mediator who wanted the matter resolved by four o'clock. The factory sent a representative with a calculator and an apology that was not an apology. A-Qiu had the pay slips and the attendance book. Zhou had photographed them every month, because a woman in the dormitory had told her to, and the photographs were the whole case. The factory paid seventeen thousand, in two installments.

The mediator said this was a good result for everyone. Zhou cried. A-Qiu did not.

Afterward, in the corridor, Zhou asked whether she could give A-Qiu something. A-Qiu said no. Zhou said then she would cook. A-Qiu said there was no time. Zhou looked at her.

"You are a person who does not eat," she said.

It was the grandmother's line, in a stranger's mouth, and A-Qiu stood in the corridor a moment longer than she meant to. She went back to the office and wrote the case on the other side of the exercise book, the side where the office kept the wins. That side was shorter. Chow said it was not the point, and also that it was not nothing.

## 8. The Architect

Chen Ruo drew buildings for a living, and she drew them the way A-Qiu remembered them, which is to say completely.

They had met at the university, in a canteen queue. Ruo had asked A-Qiu to hold her tray, and A-Qiu had held it, and they had eaten together, and that was the whole of the beginning. Ruo was from Zhuhai and studied architecture, and she had the calm of a person who has known what she wanted since she was twelve. She wanted to draw buildings. She drew them on napkins and on the backs of menus and on the corners of other people's drawings, and she drew them in a way that was not decorative, because a Ruo drawing was a set of instructions. A Ruo drawing told you where the light came in; where the stairs went; where the pipes ran; and which wall was load-bearing. It told you all of it in one clean line, and A-Qiu had watched her do it for ten years and had never once seen her hesitate.

They lived together from the year A-Qiu joined the legal aid office. The flat was in a *qilou* building in Liwan, two rooms and a kitchen, and the guest room was Ruo's studio. Ruo drew at the window in the mornings and worked on site in the afternoons, and came home smelling of paper and dust and the particular smell of a building that is being made. She did not ask A-Qiu about the cases, or she asked in the way a person asks about the weather. A-Qiu did not tell her, because the cases were not tellable, and because Ruo did not need them, and because there was a kind of rest in sitting across from a person who drew a wall and did not ask what the wall had cost.

A-Qiu remembered every flat they had ever been in, and Ruo drew every flat they ever left.

That was the thing between them. It was not a joke, and it was not a complaint. When they moved from the first flat to the second, A-Qiu carried the whole of the first flat in her head for months. She could walk it in the dark. She knew the drip in the corner, and the height of the kitchen shelf, and the exact place on the wall where the paint had gone. And when they moved, Ruo drew the first flat from memory, once, in one sitting, and it was exact. She gave the drawing to A-Qiu, and A-Qiu kept it, and it was the first thing she ever put in the folder.

"You draw the room, and I remember the room," said A-Qiu.

"We are the same," said Ruo.

"We are the opposite. You draw the room that is going; I remember the room that is gone."

"That is the same, on a long enough line," said Ruo.

"Then what are we?" said A-Qiu.

Ruo liked that sentence. She was a person who thought in long lines, and she said that a building is a line you draw once and stand in for fifty years, and that a life is the same, and that A-Qiu's mistake was to think of the record as a thing you make after the losing. Ruo's whole training said otherwise. Ruo's whole training said you draw the building before it is built, so that it does not fall down, and A-Qiu's work was the exact reverse. They had a thousand arguments about it that were not arguments, and both of them enjoyed them.

The guest room filled slowly.

It filled with the folder, and then with the filing box, and then with the drives, and then with the paper records from the early years, and by the third year the studio was half a studio. Ruo did not say anything about it. She moved her board to the other side of the window and drew there, smaller, and she said once that the light was better on that side. A-Qiu knew that the light on that side was worse. She did not say so, and she did not clear the box, and that was the first of the two things that neither of them said.

The other thing was the walks.

Ruo liked to walk. She walked a city the way she drew it, to see how the parts met, and in the first years she took A-Qiu walking on Sundays. They walked the old districts and the new, and Ruo pointed at buildings and said what was wrong with them and what was right, and A-Qiu listened and remembered. Then the cases began to take the Sundays. There was the van tour, and there was A-Po, and there was the street. Ruo walked alone, and after a while she stopped asking A-Qiu to come. A-Qiu noticed the first three times. Then she stopped noticing, which is not the same as not caring. It is worse. Not noticing is how the thing is lost.

They were still happy. That was the part A-Qiu would never be able to explain to anyone, and would not try. They were happy for years, in the flat, with the studio at the window and the pump that Ruo had said was a piece of junk

and had never asked A-Qiu's father to move. They ate dinner across from each other and talked about the light in the room. Neither of them knew that the guest room was the end; it was the end; and it took three more years to arrive. When it arrived, it arrived quietly, the way a building arrives when the plan was wrong, which is to say all at once and from a long way away.

## 9. The Woman Who Does Not Weep

The grandmother had said it once, in the kitchen, and A-Qiu had carried it for twenty years.

"You got the Meng memory and none of the Meng tears."

A-Qiu had been ten when she heard it, and she had not understood it as a criticism. She had understood it as a description, the way the grandmother described the weather. And it was true. It was the truest thing anyone had ever said about her, and it was not a thing she could argue with, because she had never once in her life wept at the right time.

She had wept at the wrong times.

She had wept once, at eleven, over a bicycle that was not lost. She had wept once, at nineteen, over a film, in the dark, in a cinema, and had been so surprised that she had stopped. But at the funerals she did not weep.

At her mother's funeral she had been four and had not understood the room, and she had been carried by her father, and she had not wept. The aunties had said the child is too young, and the aunties had been wrong. At her grandmother's funeral she had been twenty-two and had understood the room perfectly, and she had not wept. At A-Po's funeral she had stood at the furnace with the heat on her face and had not wept. The office had a name for it, which was the office's private name, and the name was that A-Qiu did not have the water in her. The name was not cruel. It was an observation. The office made observations the way the office made records.

The clients wept.

That was the thing. The clients wept all the time, and A-Qiu was the one who handed them the tissues and the water and the forms. She knew the exact moment when a person would weep, which was the moment after they had told the story and before they had heard the answer, and she knew how to wait it out.

She was good at it. She was the best in the office at it, because she was the only one who did not join them. Chow had told her once that this was a gift.

"Is it a gift?" said A-Qiu.

"It is a lack," she said.

"Then the lack and the gift are the same thing in this office," said Chow, and went back to the queue.

The guilt was older than the work.

A-Qiu had been in her final year when the family signed. She had been on the far side of the river with a hot plate and a window onto an air shaft. The signature had happened on a Wednesday, and no one had called her, and she had found out the way she found out everything, which was afterward and in a file.

She had read the agreement three times and found the clause about the valuation date. The clause had been standing there in the open the whole time, and no one had looked at it, and she had not been there to look. She had never said this to her father. She had never said it to anyone. It leaked as behavior, the way the grandmother had said that all the important things leak. The behavior was that she read every client's contract three times, late at night. It was that she was never, ever late for a window. It was that she kept a list of the deadlines in her head the way she kept the steps to every door.

There was one night she almost wept.

It was years later, after the collapse, after the dig. She was home in the flat, and it was three in the morning, and she was sitting on the floor with the satchel open around her. She had the small bundle in her hand, the one with the single word on the band, the one that was Sam's letters to A-Po. She had carried it out of the rubble and had not opened it. She sat on the floor with it, and she had the feeling she knew was the feeling: the tightening under the ribs, the pressure behind the eyes.

She waited for it, the way she had waited at every funeral, and it did not come. It went the other way. It went down and became the tearing sound behind the sternum, the sound like cloth, and the sound was dry, and the dry was the whole of her.

She sat on the floor in the dark and understood the education.

The education of the woman who does not weep is this. Grief does not go away because it has no water. It goes into the hands. It goes into the reading of the contract three times. It goes into the burning of the paper house to the exact specification, and the digging at dawn, and the appeal that is filed knowing it is dead. It goes into the record.

The grandmother had known it. She had said the thing at the end, which was not weep at the walls, write it down. The grandmother had been handing her the whole of it in one sentence, and A-Qiu had been too young to hear it. She heard it now, on the floor, in the dark, with the letters in her hand. She did not weep. She got up, and she put the letters on the shelf, and she went to bed, because the window opened at nine.

## 10. The Room Record

The method came out of a failure, which is where most methods come from.

A-Qiu had a client that autumn, a woman named Ho who lived in one of the villages on the redevelopment list. The house was her mother's, and the mother was in a home with her memory going, and the papers were a mess, and the case was one of the ones that was not going to be won. Ho asked A-Qiu to come to the house before the surveyors did, to see it, so that somebody from the office would know what had been there. A-Qiu went on a Saturday morning with her phone and no plan.

The house was a *wòshǒulóu*, a handshake building, on a lane so narrow that the balconies almost met. There was a shrine at the corner, small, with ash in the bowl, and a banyan behind it with tin cans hanging in the branches. The front door was open. Ho took her through it room by room, and A-Qiu found herself doing what she did in every house, which was counting. She counted the steps from the lane to the door, and from the door to the well, and she wrote down what was in each room, and where the light came from, and which wall had the damp, and which tiles the family had replaced and which they had kept.

When she got back to the office she typed it up.

She did not know why she typed it up. The case did not need it. The paper did not need it. But she had the record in her head the way she had every room she had ever stood in, and she found that putting it on a page did something the memory did not do. The memory kept the room. The page let the room go, a

little. It was the difference between carrying a thing and setting it down somewhere safe, and it was the first time in her life that writing had made her lighter instead of heavier.

She gave the page a shape: the address at the top, the date of the visit, who had shown her, and whether the house was still standing. Then the route: how many steps from the lane to the door. Then the rooms in the order a person walks them. Then the objects, the marks on the walls, the repairs, and the odd thing that belonged to no category: the tin of buttons under the sink, the name pencilled on the back of a cupboard door by a child who was now old. Then the sound. A house has a sound, and the record was not complete without it. Ho's mother's house sounded like a radio two lanes over, and the drip of a tap, and a dog that barked at nothing all afternoon.

She called it a room record, and she made a template, and then she made a second one, and a third.

She made the second one for the Cheung family.

The mother remembered the old house better than any of the sons, so A-Qiu sat with her in the rented room for two afternoons and took the record down out of her. The mother could not have drawn it, but she could walk it. She went from the door to the kitchen the way a person goes along a familiar corridor, with her hands on the arms of the chair and her eyes on the middle distance, and A-Qiu wrote down what she said. The well in the yard. The pear tree, which had never given a pear anyone would eat, and which the grandfather would not cut down. The room where the boys slept, with the window they broke and never replaced, and the board over the window, and the winter they all had coughs. The mother's sister, who had lived behind the curtain for eleven years and whose name no one said.

When it was done, the mother asked to hear it, and A-Qiu read it back. The mother listened the way a person listens to a letter from a long way off. Then she said the thing that told A-Qiu the record was worth keeping, which was not thank you.

"I had forgotten the pear tree," she said.

The folder grew all that winter. A-Qiu kept it in order. Under Xiancun she had the streets and the houses, and under each house the rooms, and beside each

room the record. She did not take anything from the houses. That was a rule she made for herself, because a record that could be stolen from a house was not a record, it was a theft. She took the shape instead. She took the route and the sound and the marks on the wall.

Chow found out about the folder in the new year, when A-Qiu's laptop was open on the desk and Chow was passing behind her.

"What is that?" said Chow.

"It's the village," said A-Qiu. "The one they took. The records."

Chow looked at the screen for a while. She was a woman who had been doing the work for twenty years and who had learned not to be surprised by the things people did to stay in it. She scrolled through two or three of the records and read one of them to the end.

"You are not a lawyer when you do this," said Chow.

"No."

"You are something else."

"I know."

Chow closed the laptop and did not say anything else about it. That was the whole conversation, and A-Qiu understood it for what it was, which was not disapproval.

The notice came past the office in March.

It was in the district newspaper, one column, under a photograph of a lantern, about the historic streets of Liwan. The city was going to renew them. The words were careful. *Micro-renovation. Heritage retail. Protection and utilisation.* There was a rendering of a street with the arcades restored and the lanterns lit, and the slogan underneath said that the old streets would tell new stories, and the street in the rendering was Taiping Street, and A-Qiu read the column twice and put it in the folder, under a new heading, because the column was not about a demolition. It was about a gift. She did not yet know what to do with that, but she kept it, and the heading was a single word, which was the name of the street.

## 11. The Renters

The village was called Dachong, and it was on the list, and the notice had been up on the committee board since the spring.

The family came to the office on a Tuesday, and there were four of them: a mother, a father, a boy of eleven, and an aunt. They were from Hunan. They had rented the second floor of a *wòshǒulóu* for nine years, and the room had a window that opened onto another wall, and they had made it a home. They had painted it. They had put up a shelf. The boy had grown up in it and could have drawn it.

The landlord had told them to be out by the end of the month.

"Can we get compensation?" said the father.

"No," said A-Qiu.

"The landlord is getting it."

"The landlord owns the house. The *bǔcháng*, the compensation, goes to the owner. The resettlement flat goes to the household with the registration. You are renters. There is no compensation for renting."

The father looked at the desk. He had known this, A-Qiu could tell, and had come anyway, because a man who is about to lose the room his son grew up in will go to a window and ask.

"What is there," he said.

A-Qiu did not answer for a moment, which was a habit she had learned from Chow. The honest answer was nothing. The useful answer was a list. She gave them the list. She gave them the numbers for the district housing office, and the guidance on the school transfer, and the name of a man at a labor office who would help with the deposit, and the address of a hostel that took families for a month, and it was not a right and it was not a remedy, and it was the only thing in the room.

Then she asked them for something: she asked the mother to walk the room for her. A-Qiu had the phone out, and she asked the mother to go through the apartment in her head, the way you go through a house you are about to leave. The mother did not understand at first. Then she did, and she started at the door and went in.

The window that opened onto the wall, the width of the sill. The dent in the floor where the bed was. The crack in the ceiling, in the shape of a river. The shelf the father had put up in the spring, which had not been painted and which still smelled of the wood. The place where the boy had written his name behind

the cupboard door, in pencil, in the year he learned to write it. The kitchen shared with the third floor, and the day it was the family's turn to clean it, which the mother said the way a person says the name of a month.

A-Qiu wrote it down, and it was the first room record she made for a room that nobody owned. She put it in the folder under Dachong, and when she looked at the page afterward she understood something about the folder that she had not understood before. The record did not care who held the deed. The room had been lived in, and it had been real, and the compensation system had no column for it. So she made a column.

The family moved at the end of the month. They went to a hostel for four weeks and then to a room in Panyu, further out, and the boy changed schools, and the school put him in a class where he did not know anyone, and A-Qiu kept the record.

She kept the records of six more renting families that year. She learned the pattern the way she had learned the queue. In every village there were people who held the deed and people who held the rent book, and the law had been built for the first group, and the second group was not in the room when the room was divided. She wrote them into the folder. She wrote the number of steps and the width of the sill and the crack in the shape of a river, and under each record she wrote the same two words, which were *no valuation*, and after a while the words stopped being a note and became a heading.

Chow saw the heading in the summer, when she was looking through the folder for something else.

"It will not help them," said Chow.

"I know."

"Then why?"

A-Qiu thought about it, because Chow was the only person who had ever asked her and waited for the answer.

"Because the house is the landlord's," said A-Qiu, "and the life is theirs. The compensation counts the house. Somebody should count the life."

Chow was quiet. Then she said the thing A-Qiu would remember, which was not praise and was not a warning, and was both.

"Be careful," said Chow, "that counting does not become the thing you do instead of the work."

A-Qiu said she would be careful. She went back to the window. She did not stop.

## 12. The Crack

The case that taught A-Qiu the shape of a crack came in the autumn, from a widow named Ng.

Her house was in a village to the east. The assessment had come in low, and she had wanted to object, and she had not objected, because she had never received the notice. The file said the notice had been served at her address on a date in June, and signed for. The signature on the receipt was a scrawl.

A-Qiu read the file three times. Then she read the date against a calendar. The date was a Sunday. The office that issued the notice was closed on Sundays, and so was the post office that was supposed to have delivered it, and so, for that matter, was the lane committee.

She filed for the service record. It took three weeks and two rejections. The first rejection was for a missing chop. The second was for a missing form that the first rejection had not mentioned. On the third try she got the record. The record showed the notice delivered to a lane number that did not exist, in a village that had a lane with a similar name. It had been signed for by a person whose surname matched the widow's but whose given name did not. He was, A-Qiu eventually established, a man who had lived at that address eleven years earlier and had moved away.

She wrote the objection. It was four pages, and it was not about the money. It was about the clock. The sixty days had never started, because the notice had never arrived, and the objection could therefore be filed now, and the assessment could therefore be redone.

The district reopened it. The new assessment came in eleven percent higher, which was not a great sum and was, for the widow, the difference between a room and a place in her son's flat, and she took it. The assessor who had signed the original notice was not disciplined. He had used a template, and the template had a wrong lane in it, and he had been signing the same wrong lane for two

years, and no one had ever checked, and A-Qiu never found out how many other notices had gone to that lane.

She put the case in the book on the winning side. And under it she wrote a note to herself, which was not for the book and not for the file, and which was the beginning of the way she would work for the rest of her life. The note said: *The wall is not the process. The wall is the part of the process nobody reads.*

She went to see her father on a Sunday in November, the first cold.

He had moved into a smaller flat after the grandmother died, one room and a kitchen in a building near the old bus station. He had taken the chair with the arms, and the grandmother's photo, and the kettle, and not much else. The flat smelled of the metal and oil he worked with, and there was a workbench in the corner by the window, and on the bench was the hand pump from the Xiancun courtyard.

He had gone back for it.

After the excavator, after the rubble had been cleared and the site fenced, he had gone to the fence and asked the foreman, and the foreman had let him look, and he had found the pump where the courtyard had been and carried it out. It was bent and rusted and had not worked since A-Qiu was in middle school. It was the least valuable object in the house. He had carried it across the city and put it on a bench and had been taking it apart and putting it back together for two years.

A-Qiu sat on the stool and watched him.

"You could buy a new one," she said.

"It's a good pump," said her father.

It was not a good pump. It had never been a good pump. He knew that. He had known it for twenty years. He worked on it anyway. He had the parts laid out on a cloth in the order he had taken them off, and he was cleaning each one. The light came in the window and lay across the bench. A-Qiu understood something she had not understood before. Her father had not been repairing the pump in the courtyard all those years. He had been living in the house. The repair was how he lived in it. When the house was gone, he had saved the pump the way another man saves a photograph. He was living in the house still, one part at a time, on a bench by a window in a rented room.

She did not say this. He would not have wanted it said. She sat with him and did not count anything, and when the tea was ready she poured it, and he put down the part he was holding, and they drank the tea.

"Did you keep the papers," she said, at the door. "From the signing. The warehouse papers."

He looked at her for a moment.

"Somewhere," he said.

"Where?"

"I'll find them," he said, which was what he said about most things, and which was not true, and which was not a lie either.

She walked to the metro in the cold. The city was doing what it did in the first cold, which was to close up and go quiet, and the banyans along the road held the last of the year the way a hand holds water. She had the folder at home, and the winning side of the exercise book was still short, and the grandmother had been dead ten months, and the work was the work.

That night the phone rang late. It was a colleague from the office who had taken a call from a district committee, and the committee wanted to know whether anyone there knew anything about a street in Liwan. A *qilou* street. A heritage scheme. An old woman who would not leave. The colleague did not know why the committee was asking, and A-Qiu did not either, and she wrote the name of the street on the back of an envelope and put the envelope in the folder.

The street was called Taiping Street. It was the third time that year she had written the name down.

## 13. The Ledger

Her father kept the household accounts in an exercise book, the way his mother-in-law had kept them and the way her mother had kept them before that, and when A-Qiu came on Sundays he took the book out and went through the week.

It was a habit, and it was not a habit, because the account book was the one place where the family spoke to each other in numbers. There was the pension; the rent; the electricity; the money for the medicine; and the money that had come from the compensation, most of which was gone into the flat that had not

come. There was the line for the flat itself, which had been on the page for three years and had a date that moved every spring. Beside the date, in her father's small hand, were the words *not yet*.

"Not yet again," said A-Qiu. "That is the fourth spring."

"It is the fourth spring," said her father. "The building is not finished. When the building is finished, we will be moved, and then it will be a fifth spring and we will be moved again, because the fixture list has a mistake in it. That is what a fixture list is for."

He turned the page. There was a column for A-Qiu, which she had never asked him to keep, and which he kept anyway. It held the money he had given her for the law school, and the money she had paid back. It held the money he had tried to give her and she had refused, and the money he had put aside for her wedding, which there was no wedding for. He kept that on the page the way you keep a room for a guest who may come.

"What is that column," she said.

"It is you," said her father.

"I paid it back."

"You paid it back, and I wrote that down," said her father, "and the column stayed, because a column is not a debt. A column is a person's name."

A-Qiu looked at the page. He had written her name at the top of the column when she was nineteen, in the year she left for the law school, and the ink had gone the same brown as the rest of the book. The column ran down the page and turned over and continued on the next page, and the entries were not all money. There was the bus fare to the university; a winter coat; the semester's books; and once, in a different pen, the words *good marks, do not tell her I know*.

She did not say anything about that either, because there was nothing to say. Her father had shown her the book for years and had never shown her that line, and had not shown it to her now, exactly, but had left the book open on the table while he made the tea, which was the same thing in his language.

The flat had two rooms and the kitchen and the bench by the window with the pump on it. The pump had been in pieces on the cloth for four years. Some of the pieces were clean and some were still rusted, and he worked on it when the television was boring and when he did not want to talk, which was most

evenings. He had never got it to work. He had got it to turn, once, in the second year, and he had called A-Qiu to hear it, and she had heard the dry squeak of it over the phone. He had said, "There," and she had said, "There," and they had both known it would not turn again, and it had not.

The family ledger was older than the exercise book.

It was in a wooden box on the shelf, under the grandmother's photo. It was a cloth-bound account book with a red spine. It had been kept by the great-grandfather, then the grandfather, then the grandmother, then the father. It was not the genealogy book. The genealogy book had gone to Foshan in a crate. The family ledger had stayed, because it was not ancestral; it was domestic. A domestic book is the book a family keeps when it cannot keep the big one. It had the births and the deaths and the marriages in it, and the price of the weddings, and the debts. It had the years of the bad harvests, and the money sent to the uncle in Hong Kong, and the money that came back. It had the years when the money did not come back, and the family did not write it down, out of pride, so that the page for that year was short and silent and told the truth anyway.

A-Qiu had read it when she was a child, and she read it again that Sunday, and she understood that she had been wrong about the archive. The archive was not a new thing at all. The archive was the same book, continued. The grandmother had dictated the street into a phone because the street was the family and the family was the street, and the ledger had always been the same, and the only thing that had changed was the size. The family had been small once and had kept its own accounts. The city had taken the family's street and made it a thousand families, and A-Qiu had taken the thousand families and made them a room.

"Will you keep it?" said her father, at the door, with the box in his hands.

"It is yours."

"It is the family's, and you are the family that keeps things," he said. He held the box out. "I kept the piece of the tablet because I could not keep the house. I kept the pump because I could not keep the courtyard. I am not the one who keeps things. I am the one who cannot let them go. There is a difference."

A-Qiu took the box. It was heavier than it looked, and it smelled of camphor and old paper, the way the storage rooms smelled, and she carried it on the metro

with both arms. She put it in the basement on the shelf below the register. She wrote the card and put the years on it. The card said *Ho and Meng households, household accounts*, and the name at the top of the first page was the great-grandfather's, and the last entry was her father's rent.

## 14. The Objection

The man's name was Law Kam, and he had been in the office in the first year, when he had missed his deadline by three days, and now he came back with a different house and a different problem.

He had bought a small flat with his brother, on the sixth floor of a building in Haizhu, and the building had been assessed for the road-widening scheme, and the assessment had come in at a number that was lower than the number on the flat below, which was smaller, and lower than the number on the flat above, which was the same. He had the three notices in a plastic bag, and he put them on the counter, and he said he did not understand.

A-Qiu read the notices. Then she read them again.

"They have made an error," she said. "The area on your notice is the area of the balcony. The flat is fifteen square meters larger than the notice says. It is the same flat as the one above; the one above is assessed at fifteen square meters more."

"Then it is an easy thing," said Law.

"It is an easy thing to see," said A-Qiu. "It is not an easy thing to fix."

"Why not?"

"Because the clock."

"It is an easy thing to see," said A-Qiu. "It is not the same as an easy thing to fix. The deadline for the objection is thirty days from the date on the notice. The date on the notice is the first of the month. Today is the twelfth."

"Then we have time."

"We have eighteen days," said A-Qiu, "which is enough if the form is right; if the chop is right; if the assessment office accepts service at the window. It is not enough if they send it back." She took a sheet of paper. "So we will do it twice. We will file by hand at the window, and we will keep the receipt, and then we will file again by registered post, and we will keep the postal receipt too. The law prefers a record. Let us give it two."

Law looked at her.

"Last time you told me there was nothing," he said. "Now you are telling me to file twice."

"Last time the window had already closed," said A-Qiu. "This time the window is open. When the window is open, the whole job is to be in the room before it shuts. You do not have to be right. You have to be inside."

They did the form together at the counter. It took an hour. The form asked for the area, and the notice had the wrong area, and A-Qiu wrote the correct area and attached the title and the photograph of the balcony and the notice from the flat above. At the bottom, in the space for reasons, she wrote four lines. The lines said the assessment had used the registered area of the main floor and had omitted the balcony, which was enclosed and had been enclosed in the year of the building, and which the assessment office had itself counted in the assessment of the identical flat on the floor above.

Then she walked him to the window.

The window was the assessment office, on the third floor of a building near the river. There was a queue, and there was a clerk. The clerk looked at the form and looked at the chop and looked at the receipt book and said the form was missing the applicant's signature in the box marked applicant. Law signed the box. The clerk stamped the receipt and gave it back, and the whole thing took eleven minutes, which was the fastest A-Qiu had ever seen at that window.

They filed the same form by registered post that afternoon.

The assessment was corrected in the spring. The new number was fifteen square meters higher, and the compensation went up by a sum that was not life-changing and was not nothing. Law came to the office with a bag of oranges, which the office could not accept, and left anyway. A-Qiu put them on the counter for the queue, which was how the office ate fruit.

She wrote the case in the book on the side where the office kept the wins, and beside it she wrote the note that she had begun to write under the small cases, which was the note about the window. The note said: *the error was theirs; the clock was ours*. She read it back once and did not change it, because it was true and because it was short, and because the short true thing was the thing the book was for.

Law came back one more time, in the autumn, and stood at the counter and did not have a case. He said he had come to say that the new flat was quiet and the neighbors were good and his brother had married, and he said all of it in the flat way he said everything. Then he said the other thing, which was the reason he had come.

"I told my brother that a lawyer filed our form twice," said Law. "He said, why twice. I said, because she is careful. He said, careful is expensive. I said, no. Careful is free. It is the mistake that costs." He nodded once and left. A-Qiu wrote that down too, on the same page, under the note, because a client's sentence belongs in the book as much as the outcome does, and because she had learned long ago that the book was not for the law. The book was for the record of how the law had actually behaved, in the room, on the day, with the people who had to stand in it.

## 15. The Flood

The typhoon came in September, and it came the way the big ones came, which was sideways. The rain went past the windows like a hand across a face, and the city closed its shutters and its offices and waited.

A-Qiu waited in the office, because the office was on the second floor and the queue still came. A flood is a legal event the way a fire is a legal event. It happens to everybody, and then it happens to somebody in particular, and the somebody in particular comes to the window.

The somebody was a village in Baiyun, at the foot of a hill, where the water came down the new road and into the low lanes and stood a meter deep for two days. The village was a *wòshǒulóu* village, the handshake buildings leaning across the lanes. The ground floors were rented to migrant families, and the ground floors were the parts that flooded, and the migrant families were the ones with no insurance and no landlord who would answer the phone.

Three of them came to the office the week after the water went down.

They were from Hunan and Guangxi and Jiangxi, and they had the same story in three accents. The water came in the night. They carried the children upstairs. The mattresses and the rice and the documents were lost, and the landlord said the flood was an act of heaven and the rent was still due. One of them, a woman named Chen, had a child of four and a folder of wet papers. The

papers were the child's vaccination record and the lease and the receipts for the things she had bought for the room. The water had made them a single gray pulp, and she had dried it on the balcony page by page, and the pages had stuck together in a book.

A-Qiu read the pulp as carefully as she had ever read a contract. She could not get the pages apart without tearing them, and she did not try. Instead she did the thing the archive had taught her, which was to make the record from the person, because the person is the record. She asked Chen to walk the room.

Chen walked the room. The bed by the window; the shelf with the plastic boxes; the place where the electric fan stood in summer; the corner where the water had come in first, under the stairs. A-Qiu wrote it down on the four-page template. She wrote the sound of the room, which was the traffic on the new road, and the television from the next room, and the drip from the air conditioner. Then, on the back of the record, she wrote the list of what had been lost: mattress, rice, schoolbag, documents, and one pair of children's shoes.

There was no case. The flood was the flood.

The landlord had no duty beyond the structure, and the structure had held, and the water had come from the hill. But there was a fund, because the district always opened a fund after a flood. The fund had a window, and the window had a form, and the form required proof of residence and loss, and the proof was the thing the water had taken.

A-Qiu took the room record to the fund window.

"Will a reconstructed record do as evidence of residence?" she asked. The clerk said no. A-Qiu asked whether the clerk would put the no in writing, with the name and the date. The clerk said that was not the procedure. A-Qiu asked for the procedure, and the clerk gave her a leaflet, and the leaflet said the applicant must provide proof. A-Qiu read the leaflet and found the word *proof* and found that the leaflet did not define it.

She went back to the window with the leaflet and the room record and a photograph of Chen's balcony with the drying pages. She asked again. The clerk went to ask a supervisor. The supervisor came out and looked at the record and looked at the photograph and said, "It is evidence, if it is not proof."

The district accepted the room records from the office for the flood fund. There were four hundred of them by the end of the month, because A-Qiu turned the template into a form and put it on the counter, and the queue filled it in.

It was the first time the archive did something the law could not do. A-Qiu noted it and did not celebrate it, because it was also the smallest possible thing. The district had found a way to give money to people who had lost everything, and the way required a paper that the people could not have. The office supplied the paper, and the people got the money. That was all. There was no argument and no appeal and no judgment. There was a template on a counter, and a clerk who had said the word evidence.

Chen took the money and moved to a room on the third floor, which was above the flood line. She came back the next year with a bag of dried mushrooms, which the office could not accept, and which A-Qiu put in the drawer with the oranges and the tea and the other things the office was not allowed to accept and accepted anyway. The office was not a court. The office had learned, over years, that the difference between a gift and a bribe is whether the giver has a case.

## 16. The Second Copy

The archive got a visitor in the third year, and the visitor was a student, and the student changed the way A-Qiu thought about the room.

Her name was Yang, and she was writing a thesis on the urban villages, and she had found the office through the newspaper piece. She came on a Thursday afternoon with a notebook and a voice recorder and the careful hunger of a person who has found the thing they need. A-Qiu sat her down at the table, gave her the cards and the finding list, and left her alone, because A-Qiu had learned that researchers want to be left alone and that the archive was not hers to explain.

Yang read for four hours. At the end she came to the desk and did the thing that A-Qiu had not expected.

"Who wrote the records?" said Yang.

"I did, and the office did, and the volunteers did."

"Who decided what to record?"

A-Qiu thought about it, because nobody had asked her that in all the years.

"I decided," she said, "and the template decided. The template was four pages, and the four pages made the decision, because the four pages were the only things we asked."

Yang wrote that down.

"Can I ask you one more thing?" she said. "Why the sound? Every record has a section for the sound of the room, and nobody records the sound."

"Because the sound is the thing people remember," said A-Qiu, "and the thing people remember is the thing that was there. A plan has no sound. A room has a sound." She looked at the cards. "That is the whole of the method. It is not a method. It is a refusal."

Yang came back for six months and put the archive in her thesis, and the thesis was published, and after that the students came in a small steady line. The room grew the way a room grows, which is by being used.

The second copy was Yang's idea, and A-Qiu would never have thought of it.

"Where is the backup?" said Yang, on the last day.

"There is no backup," said A-Qiu.

"You have one drive and one box of paper and one room in a basement in a city on a river."

"It is not below the water line."

"It is a basement," said Yang. "Everything is below the water line if you wait."

A-Qiu sat with that, and then she did the thing she did with good advice, which was to take it and pretend she had thought of it. She bought two drives and made two copies, and she asked the university that had scanned her family's genealogy to keep one copy in its vault. The university agreed, because a copy costs nothing to hold and earns a citation. She kept one drive in the office and one at home, and the paper stayed in the room.

When she told Chow what she had done, Chow said the thing that A-Qiu repeated for years.

"You have made the archive into three things," said Chow, "and none of them is the archive. The archive is the room. The drives are a hope. The paper is a fact. Keep all three, and do not confuse them."

A-Qiu did not confuse them. She put the drives in the safe at home and the paper in the room and the fact in her head, and she began, around that time, to

write the records in a different way. She wrote them as if the room would one day be the only one left. She did not say this to anyone, and she did not need to. It was not pessimism, and it was not a premonition. It was arithmetic.

The paper was older than the drives, and the drives were older than the cloud, and the city was younger than all of it and was already forgetting. The office was one room with one lock and one woman with the key, and a record is only as good as the person who is still willing to keep it.

## 17. The Mahjong Circle

The grandmother's mahjong circle had four women in it for forty years, and by the time she died there were two of them left, and A-Qiu went to see both.

The circle had met on Sundays in the back room of the Xiancun house, and then in the rented flat, and then in the flats of the survivors, and the table had moved the way the game moves, one seat at a time. The four were the grandmother; Fong; a woman called Aunty Ling; and a woman called Sister So. They had played together through the marriages and the births and the clearances and the deaths. They had insulted each other with a fluency that took decades to build, and the insults were the whole of the friendship, and neither of them could have said so.

Sister So had died first, in the year of the flood; Aunty Ling had died in the year of the tower, in her sleep, in the flat with the cat. Fong was alive, and had moved in with her son in Panyu, and A-Qiu went to see her in the winter, and Fong made the tea and set out the tiles.

"I do not play anymore," said Fong.

"Why not?"

"When a table is three, it is not a table. I tried with the son and the daughter-in-law. The son plays wrong. The daughter-in-law plays right and does not cheat, and a person who does not cheat is not playing, she is counting." Fong set the tiles in their wall, the way she had set them for forty years, and did not deal. "Your grandmother cheated worse than all of us. She cheated with two hands and a face. You knew where the cheating was and you could not stop it, and that was the game. I have not cheated since she died. There is no one to cheat."

A-Qiu asked about the early years, and Fong gave them.

She gave the year the four of them walked to the market and back in the rain and the grandmother's shoes came apart and she walked home barefoot and would not let anyone carry her. She gave the year of the bad tile, the three of bamboo, when the grandmother had thrown it and Fong had caught it and the grandmother had said the tile was cursed and had refused to play it for a month. She gave the year the grandmother won eleven games in a night, and the year she lost eleven games in a night on purpose, and the reason, which was that Fong's husband had just died and a person in mourning should not be beaten. She gave the gossip, which A-Qiu had heard and written down. Then she gave the other thing, which A-Qiu had not heard: the grandmother had never once, in forty years, spoken about the signing or the village or the move at the table.

"She kept the table clean," said Fong. "The table was the one place she did not talk about it. Not once. You could sit at that table for ten years and not know the village was going. She would come in, and she would sit down, and she would cheat, and the whole of it was gone from her face, and that was the gift she gave us. The game was the one room in her life that had no door in it."

A-Qiu wrote that down, and then she did the thing she had come to do, which was not an interview. She asked Fong to play.

"Two is not four," said Fong.

"Two is the game," said A-Qiu. "You can teach me the cheat."

Fong looked at her for a long time. Then she dealt, and she began to teach A-Qiu the grandmother's cheat, which was not a cheat at all but a way of holding the tile under the palm so that the hand looked empty, and the whole trick was patience and a face that did not move. A-Qiu was bad at it. She was too honest in the hands, and Fong laughed at her the way the grandmother had laughed at her, and for the length of one afternoon the back room of a flat in Panyu had the grandmother in it, because the laugh was the grandmother's laugh and the game was the grandmother's game and the empty room the players had kept was the last room of the village that was still open.

Fong won. A-Qiu did not mind. At the door Fong gave her a tin.

It was the grandmother's tin, the one she had kept the tiles in, the good tiles with the worn faces, and Fong had kept it after the flat was cleared, and had not known who to give it to until now.

"I will keep them," said A-Qiu.

"Play with them," said Fong. "A tile that is not played is a stone. She would not want the stones. She would want the game."

A-Qiu took the tin home and put it on the shelf beside the folder. She did not play with it for years. But she opened it, once, and set the tiles out in their wall on the kitchen table, the way Fong had set them, and she sat with them for a while in the light, and she did not deal, and she did not cry.

## 18. Ching Ming

The first Ching Ming after the grandmother died fell in the rain, and A-Qiu and her father went up the hill to the columbarium with the roast pork and the fruit and the paper.

Ching Ming is the spring grave-walking, and in a Cantonese family it is not a quiet visit. It is a procession and a picnic and a cleaning and an argument about who should have brought the wine. The whole family comes if it can, and the family stands at the grave and sweeps it and sets out the food and burns the paper and tells the dead the news. The news is delivered in the ordinary voice, the way you tell a neighbor, because the dead in the Cantonese custom are not gone. They are on the other side of a door, and the door is open on Ching Ming, and you tell them what has happened in the year and you ask them to look after the children.

The grandmother's niche was in the wall of the columbarium in the hills, and it had her name and the two dates and the small shelf for the incense. The father had brought the roast pork, because the grandmother had liked the crackling and had said so every Ching Ming for fifty years.

They cleaned the niche with a cloth. They set out the pork and the fruit and the three cups of tea. The father lit the incense and put it in the holder and stood back, and A-Qiu stood beside him. Neither of them said anything for a while, because the grandmother had been the one who did the talking, and the talking was the whole of the ritual, and they had not learned it.

"You do the talking," said the father.

"What is there to say?" said A-Qiu.

"Say the news. She was always the one who talked."

A-Qiu looked at the niche. She did not know how to say the news to a wall. She had said the news to a room, and to a recording, and to a card in an archive, and the wall was different. The wall did not answer and the room had not answered either, and the difference was that the room had been full and the wall was a wall.

But she did it. She told the grandmother that the house was gone and the flat was not yet built and the father was well and the archive was in a basement and the mother's column was in the ledger. She told her that the white dragon was in the tin and that the family had eaten at the New Year and that the neighbor's cat had had kittens. She told the whole of the year, in the ordinary voice, and the father listened. At the end he put the wine down in front of the niche and said the thing he had come to say, which was not to A-Qiu and not to the wall.

"I signed the paper," said the father. "I have been sorry for seven years."

The rain came down the hill and the incense burned and the paper went into the furnace, and the smoke went up the wall and over the roofs. A-Qiu watched it go, and understood the whole of the custom, which is not about the dead. The custom is the door. The custom is the day the family is allowed to say the thing it cannot say in the flat, and to say it to a wall that will not answer, and to leave the food and the paper and go home lighter, and to come back next year and do it again. It is a record with a date on it. It is the family's Ching Ming, once a year, the same day, the same wall, and the saying of the news.

They ate the pork on a bench at the foot of the hill. You do not take the food home. The father told A-Qiu the thing about the crackling, which was that the grandmother had once sent back a roast pork at a funeral because the skin was soft. The whole funeral had known, and the family had been ashamed, and the grandmother had not been ashamed at all. A-Qiu laughed, and the father laughed, and the laugh was the second half of the ritual, and the whole of the custom, and neither of them said so.

On the bus down the hill the father slept. A-Qiu watched the city go past the window and did not cry. She understood that the custom had done the thing she could not do. It had made the grief into a day with a date on it, and put the day in the year. It had given her a place to put it down. She wrote the date in the card when she got home, and the card said the family had gone, and that the roast

pork had been good, and that the grandmother would have complained about the skin.

## 19. The Opera

The grandmother had taken A-Qiu to the Cantonese opera twice, and both times the grandmother had talked through the whole of it and both times A-Qiu had loved it.

The opera was at the temple square in the old town, on a bamboo stage with the red and gold and the two chairs and the cloth. The audience sat on plastic stools with the melon seeds and the tea, and the whole thing went on for four hours, and the grandmother knew the story before it started.

The story was Meng Jiangnü. That was why they went. The grandmother did not pretend that it was for the child. She went every year to see the wall come down, and she took A-Qiu the year the child was eight and the year the child was eleven, and both times she sat through the whole of it and narrated it under her breath, and both times she said that the opera got it wrong.

The opera has the wife weep at the wall and the wall fall. The whole house waits for it. The house knows the scene the way a family knows a wedding. The drums go soft, and the strings slow, and the singer takes the long breath, and the audience goes quiet and the melon seeds stop, and then the woman weeps. The wall comes down with the cloth and the smoke, and the whole square sighs, and the women in the audience have the tears on their faces, and the men look at their knees and do not wipe.

The grandmother did not weep. She watched the wall come down. She said it in her own voice, under the noise. “That is four houses, not a wall. The opera makes the whole wall lie down like a dog.” And at the end, when the singer died at the water, the grandmother said the other thing: that the opera had killed her at the sea because the sea is bigger than a river and an opera wants the bigger thing, and that the sea was somebody’s improvement.

“Why do the people cry,” A-Qiu had asked at eight, “if it is not true?” The grandmother had looked at her. She had been holding the melon seeds and the tea and the whole of the evening, and she said the thing that A-Qiu would carry.

"They are not crying at the story," said the grandmother. "They are crying at the wall. Every one of them has a wall. The man has the wall that took his father. The woman has the wall that took her house."

She cracked a seed between her teeth.

"The opera is the wall, and the tears are the wall, and the story is only the excuse to stand in front of it and let the wall be the wall." She spat a seed into her hand. "That is why I talk through it. If I watched it in silence, I would be one of them, and I have my own wall, and I do not need the opera's."

A-Qiu saw the opera once more, years later, at the old people's hall in Liwan, and she went alone. The stage was smaller and the audience was older and the wall came down with the cloth and the smoke, and the house sighed, and the women had the tears, and A-Qiu did not. She sat at the back with the tea and watched the wall come down and heard the grandmother's voice in her head saying that it was four houses and not a wall. She understood the thing she had not understood at eight, which was that the grandmother had been teaching her. The grandmother had been teaching her the whole time, at the stove, on the van, at the opera. The whole of the teaching was in the one sentence: do not watch the wall. Write it down.

She left before the end and walked home through the *qilou* streets with the lanterns on. She did not cry. She was not sad. The wall in her chest was the wall. The recording in her phone was the wall written down. The difference between her and the women in the hall was the difference between the tears and the book. She had chosen the book. The choosing was the whole of the family, and the grandmother had chosen it first.

## 20. The Earth God

At the corner of the Xiancun lane there was a small stone shrine the size of a mailbox, and the shrine belonged to the earth god, and the grandmother lit the incense there on the first and the fifteenth of every lunar month for fifty years.

The earth god is the smallest god in the Chinese heaven, and the whole of his jurisdiction is the place. He does not go up to report like the Kitchen God, and he does not have a temple, and he does not have a festival. He lives at the foot of the tree and at the corner of the lane and under the bridge. He knows the names of the people who live on his patch, and the whole of his work is the patch. The

earth god is appointed by the city god, and the city god is appointed by the emperor of the other world, and the whole thing is a bureaucracy. The earth god is the clerk at the bottom of the ladder who actually knows the street.

The grandmother's shrine was a stone niche with a small worn figure and a bowl for the ash. The figure had the white beard and the staff, and the niche had a small stone roof that the lane had mended twice, once with cement and once with a piece of the blue metal from the market. The whole lane used the shrine. The herbalist put the fruit there. The cobbler put the coins. The grandmother put the incense, and she did it without ceremony, the way she did everything, which is to say as a fact of the day and not as a devotion.

"Do you believe in the earth god?" A-Qiu had asked her once, in the lane. The grandmother had looked at her the way she looked at a bad tile.

"I believe in the lane," said the grandmother. "The god is the lane's name. When you name a thing you take care of it."

She set the fruit down.

"The fruit is the care. If the god is not there the fruit is still the care, and the lane is still the thing."

She lit the stick.

"The custom is the same, and I do not have to explain the god to you."

The shrine was the one thing in the lane that the demolition did not take cleanly.

A-Qiu went back to the site in the winter after the houses came down. The concrete was scraped, and the towers stood on the far side, and the banyan at the corner was gone. The shrine lay in the rubble at the foot of the gone tree, with the small roof cracked and the figure face down in the ash.

She picked the figure up and wiped it and put it in her pocket. The whole of the lane was in the pocket. She understood that the earth god was the only god the family had ever actually kept. The Kitchen God was at the stove and went up to report. The ancestors were on the shelf and had their names. The earth god was the patch, and the patch was gone, and the god had nowhere to be. The figure was in a pocket, and the pocket was the whole of the archive.

She took the figure home and put it on the shelf with the folder. She wrote the card with the date and the lane and the words *the earth god of the corner*. She

did not know what to do with a god whose jurisdiction had been sold. She stood with the figure in her hand, and the grandmother's plain way of putting things came back to her the way it always did, and this was what the grandmother would have said.

You do not move the god. You move the patch. The god is the patch, and if you take the god to a new patch the god is a stone. Leave the god where the patch was, and the patch will have a god, and the towers will have a stone at the foot of them. The stone will be the earth god of the tower, and the tower will not know it, and the god will know the tower. He is the god of the place you cannot take with you, and the place you cannot take with you is the place that keeps you.

A-Qiu took the figure back to the site. She set it at the foot of the fence, where the banyan had been, in the rubble that was being cleared. She lit one stick of incense, which was the grandmother's custom and was now the whole of the lineage, and she stood at the fence and did not say anything. Then she left the stone at the foot of the tower, where the god could see the tower rise, and she went back to the office and wrote the note in the file. The note said the earth god of the corner had been returned to the patch, and the patch was the tower's, and the record was the only thing the god would ever have, and the record was enough.

## 21. The Apprentice

Two years passed the way the queue passed, one person at a time.

A-Qiu learned the work. She learned which objections had to be filed on paper and which could be filed at the counter, and which counter posted its hours and which did not. She learned that the assessment agencies were private and were chosen by the districts. The same three agencies reappeared in the files, the way certain surnames reappear in a village. She learned that the mediation room was a machine for producing agreement, and that the machine did not care whether the agreement was just, only whether it was signed. She learned that the law was not one wall but many, and that each wall had its own hairline cracks, and that a crack in one wall was sometimes a door in another.

The folder grew into the hundreds. She kept the paper records in a filing box under the desk and the recordings on two drives, one at the office and one at home. She taught Sze the method, and Sze taught her the filing rules, and the

two of them made a template that any of the volunteers could use. The template was four pages. It asked for the route and the rooms and the sound and the marks on the wall. It did not ask for the deed. That was the whole point of it.

The father found the warehouse papers in the second year.

He brought them to the office in a plastic bag. It was the first time he had come to the office, and he stood in the doorway the way he stood in doorways. The papers were the receipt for the crates and a delivery note, and the receipt named the warehouse in Foshan and a storage number. It was two years old. There was no address for the warehouse beyond the district, and no telephone number that answered. A-Qiu called the number on the delivery note, and a man told her the company had moved and gave her another number, and the other number was disconnected. She thanked her father and put the papers in the folder. He looked at the folder for a moment, and then at her.

"You'll find them," he said.

"Maybe," said A-Qiu.

"I'll find them," said her father, and A-Qiu understood that he had said it because he could not say the other thing, and she let him have it.

The offer came in the third year.

A classmate from the law school, a woman named Chen, had gone straight into a firm. She invited A-Qiu to lunch at a place in Zhujiang New Town with a view of the tower. Chen had a good coat and a good watch and a way of talking about clients that A-Qiu had once wanted. The offer was real. It was four times the legal aid salary and a share of the fees and a path to partner by thirty-five.

"You are wasted where you are," said Chen.

"I'm not."

"You take the hopeless cases."

"Some of them win."

"Small ones." Chen looked out at the tower. "You are the best in our year, and you are filing forms for people who cannot read them."

A-Qiu looked out at the tower too. It was the tall one with the slim waist. It had risen over the rice fields. Beneath its foundations, somewhere, were the stones of a hall she had never seen, and a genealogy book in a cloth wrapper, and

eleven small plaques, and a name cut into a beam by a man who had been told it would not last.

"I'm filing forms for people who cannot read them," said A-Qiu, "and the forms are the only thing standing between them and the tower."

She did not take the offer. Chen paid for lunch, because A-Qiu had known she would. They parted as friends, which meant they did not speak for a long time, which was how most friendships in the city announced themselves.

The Taiping Street matter came in the fourth year, in the first cold rain of winter.

It came through the district committee, which had heard of the office and of A-Qiu. It came in the form of a telephone call from Sze. Sze had taken the call and written the name on the back of an envelope, the way the office wrote everything down. There was a street in Liwan. There was a heritage scheme, the friendly kind, with lanterns in the renderings and a slogan about new stories. There was an old woman. She was eighty-four and she would not leave her house, and the committee had asked, off the record, whether the office could send someone to talk to her. The developers were getting impatient, and the committee wanted somebody the old woman would listen to.

"Will you take it," said Sze.

"What is she holding out for?"

"That's the thing," said Sze. "Nobody can find out. She won't say."

A-Qiu took the file. She took the metro up through the old town in the rain and walked along the arcade street with the water coming off the tiles. She found the house at number seventeen. The light was on at the window, the only light left in the row. She stood in the street and looked at it for a while, because she had not expected that, and because a lit window in a dark street does something to a person that is hard to describe and easy to keep. Then she went to the door and knocked.

An old woman opened it. She was small and straight, in a blue house jacket. She looked at A-Qiu the way you look at a person who has come to take something from you. Then she looked past her at the dark street. Then she said the first thing she ever said to A-Qiu, which was not a greeting and was not a question.

"The Kitchen God goes up to heaven every New Year and reports on this family," said the old woman. "If the stove is gone, who tells heaven what happened here?"

She did not close the door. She stood in it. A-Qiu stood in the rain, and did not answer, because there was no answer yet, and because the old woman had not asked for one. And that was the beginning of the second wall, which was not made of bricks.

INTERLUDE I

# Interlude I

*From the archive. Transcript, van-tour recording. Two hours and eleven minutes; the excerpt below is the section around the market corner. English translation by A-Qiu from the Cantonese; the recording is the original.*

※

**[07:14]**

A-PO: —this was the gate. Two lions. The left one had no ear.

A-QIU: From the war?

A-PO: From the war. Everything is from the war. The boys sat on them, and the old women shouted. Then you go in. The Yeungs are on the right. My father's people. The first house was my auntie's, Ah Ying, the dog Ah Wong, the postman every year on the same day — I told you this already.

A-QIU: You did.

A-PO: Then why are you asking.

A-QIU: I'm not asking. I'm keeping you talking.

A-PO: Hm.

**[07:22]**

A-PO: Number four. The Chans. Two brothers. The older one went to Hong Kong. The younger one spent it. At New Year there is shouting, then roast goose, then by the second day they are friends. (pause) The jacaranda. In front. The only one. In April the lane is purple and the women sweep it up and complain.

A-QIU: What was the older brother's name?

A-PO: Ah Kwok. Kwok. (pause) No. That was the one on the other side. The Chans — the older one was Ah Sang. Kwok was the one who sold the shop.

A-QIU: The shop.

A-PO: On the corner. 1979. He sold it and went to Shenzhen and did not come back, and his mother sat in the doorway for a month, and then she stopped. You do not need the shop. Write the houses.

**[07:34]**

A-PO: [inaudible] —the well. Our well went salty. The Wongs' well was the good one. My mother sends me with two buckets. I stand in their yard and wait. (quietly) Their girl was my friend.

A-QIU: What was her name?

A-PO: Ah Mei. She is dead. (pause) The water was cold. I have not tasted water like it since.

**[07:46]**

A-QIU: Where is our house now? From here.

A-PO: You are looking at it. (pause) That is the fence. Behind the fence is the courtyard. The well is under the third panel, if they left the rim. Stand at the corner and count, you know how to count.

A-QIU: Forty-one.

A-PO: From the mouth of the lane, not the corner.

A-QIU: Then forty-six.

A-PO: (pause) Yes. (pause) The pear tree was on the left.

A-QIU: There was no pear tree.

A-PO: There was. It never gave a pear worth eating. Your grandfather would not cut it. (pause) The next one was the Lams. Or the Loks. The family with the boy who had the—

A-QIU: The limp. The one who fixed the radios. Number twelve, behind the shrine.

A-PO: (long pause) Yes. Him.

**[07:51]**

A-PO: You have it.

A-QIU: I have it.

A-PO: Then say it back.

A-QIU: The gate, the lions, the Yeung lane, the Chans at four with the jacaranda, the Wongs at six with the good well, the school, the market, the fish

woman with one eye, the hall, our house at the market corner, the pear tree on the left, the Lams at twelve, the boy who fixed the radios.

A-PO: (pause) You are not writing it.

A-QIU: The phone is writing it.

A-PO: Hm. (pause) Then keep it somewhere the wall cannot reach.

※

WALL TWO

# The Nail House

> *From the grandmother's telling*
> *A house isn't walls. It's the names on the beam. And a light in the window is a house that is somewhere.*

## 1. The Last Lamp

Number seventeen Taiping Street had a light in its window every night, and by December it was the only light left in the row.

The street was a *qilou* row in Liwan, two storeys, with the arcade running along the front under the overhang and the granite worn smooth by a hundred years of feet. There were eighteen houses. In the autumn the developer had come with the scheme, and the scheme was not demolition. The scheme was *renovation*: renderings with the lanterns lit and the shutters painted, a slogan that said the old streets would tell new stories, and a compensation offer that was, by the standards of a hundred other villages, not insulting. Seventeen households had signed. Most of them had already moved out and taken the money. They had gone to the *huíqiān* — the resettlement flats, still years out — or to the flats of their children, or to rented rooms down the road. The row had gone dark the way a row goes dark, one window at a time.

Number seventeen had a woman in it. The woman was eighty-four, and she had lived in the house for sixty-one years, and she was not going to leave.

Her name was Wong. Everyone called her A-Po, which in Cantonese was what you called an old woman you respected and had known forever. In the street they called her the last lamp, because of the light.

The papers called her a *dīngzǐhù*, one of the nail-house holdouts. It was the word the newspapers used and the word the officials used, and it was not a word she answered to, and it was not a word A-Qiu used in front of her.

The light was real. It was a small lamp on the sill of the upper window, and she lit it after dark and put it out before bed, and there was no reason for it that

anyone could find. She said a house with a light in it was a house that was somewhere, and that a dark street was how the city got you used to the idea. She said both of these things to A-Qiu in the first week, from the doorway, in the voice of a woman who had decided in advance that her lawyer was going to be slow.

A-Qiu had taken the file because the committee had asked and because the office was quiet, and for the first two weeks the case did not look like a case. It looked like a woman who would not answer a question.

The question was simple. The developer's man had asked it a dozen times, and the committee had asked it twice, and now A-Qiu asked it, standing in the front room with her file against her chest.

"What do you want?"

A-Po looked at her. She was small and round and quick, and she had a face that had been pretty and had decided, at some point, to be a weapon instead. She was shelling peanuts into a bowl, and she did not stop.

"I want the stove," she said.

"The stove."

"You asked what I want. I want the stove. The house is not the question. The house is a house. There are a hundred houses. The stove is the stove."

A-Qiu wrote *stove* in her notebook. In the queue she had learned that the thing the client names first is never the thing, and is always the door to the thing. Then she asked what was wrong with the stove. A-Po said nothing was wrong with the stove, and went on shelling the peanuts.

The stove was a built-in brick stove in the back kitchen. It was old, with a blackened mouth and a niche above it for the icon. It had not been used for cooking in years, because there was a gas ring on the counter. But it had not been removed, and above it, in the niche, there was a small paper image of the Kitchen God. A-Po changed the image at New Year. She had changed it every New Year for fifty years.

That was the visible fact, and A-Qiu wrote it down, and she did not yet know what was under it.

She went back the next week, and the next. She went because the file needed it and because the committee wanted her to, and because the old woman had

begun, grudgingly, to answer the door when she knocked. In the third week A-Po let her sit down. In the fourth week A-Po gave her tea. In the fifth week A-Po looked at her across the table and said the thing that arrived every time, in that street, in that city, in that decade.

"You are thin," said A-Po. "You do not eat. Who feeds you?"

"I eat."

"You eat what. A bowl of noodles on a tram." A-Po got up and went to the kitchen and came back with a bowl of soup and put it down in front of A-Qiu, and stood over her until she picked up the spoon. The soup had pork and dried scallop and winter melon in it, and it was the best thing A-Qiu had eaten in months. She said so. A-Po said, "Of course it is," and sat back down, and watched her finish it, and did not hide the pleasure she took in watching a thin person eat.

After that A-Qiu was fed every time she came. It was not negotiable. She tried once to say she had eaten, and A-Po looked at her the way she looked at a bad tile at mahjong, and A-Qiu did not try again.

It took A-Qiu six weeks to understand that she was not the lawyer yet. She was the audience. A-Po had a house and a lamp and a stove that she would not explain. She had a whole street of stories and nobody left in the street to tell them to. A-Qiu was a person who came and sat and listened, and that was worth more to A-Po than any document. So A-Qiu listened. She heard about the neighbor at fifteen who had outbid someone for a shopfront in 1979 and had never been forgiven and had died unforgiven. She heard about the woman at nine who had borrowed an embroidery frame in 1981 and returned it with a cracked corner. That grudge was still alive forty years later. A-Po could produce it at any hour of the day, and did, at regular intervals, the way another person takes medicine.

She heard about the mahjong games in the back room, where A-Po cheated cheerfully and expected everyone to know and expected no one to say so. She heard about the husband, who had died in 1998, and she heard about him in fragments, the way a person describes a house they are still standing in.

It was in the sixth week, when A-Qiu got up to leave, that A-Po said the other thing, the thing that was not the stove, and that A-Qiu would spend the rest of the case trying to find.

"You are the lawyer," said A-Po.

"I'm the lawyer."

"Good." A-Po looked at the lamp on the sill. "The others come with papers. You come with ears. That is a different animal." She turned and went back inside. "Come on Tuesday. I will make the soup with the lotus root."

A-Qiu walked down the dark row in the cold. Behind her, at the upper window of number seventeen, the small light burned in the dark the way a sentence burns when it is the only one left on a page. It was the last lamp in Taiping Street. It was lit for reasons A-Qiu did not understand, and she found that she wanted very much to understand them, and that the wanting was different from every wanting she had brought to a file before.

## 2. Keeping the Accounts

The embroidery lived at the window, on a stand, and A-Po sat at it every afternoon the way another person sits at a desk.

It was a map of Taiping Street, and it was not finished. It was the street as it had been in the sixties, and A-Po was making it thread by thread, the way the map of a country is drawn. Every shopfront was there, and every door, and the cobbler and the herbalist and the shop that sold nothing but buttons. The colors were the colors of that time, which were not the colors of now. A-Po had three things she guarded like money: a box of floss, a set of needles, and a small brass thimble worn to the shape of her finger. She worked from nothing but memory.

"What is it for," said A-Qiu.

"It is not for anything."

"Then why make it."

A-Po did not look up, and went on filling in the shutters of the button shop, in a green that had not been manufactured since the eighties.

"Because the accounts have to be kept," she said.

A-Qiu leaned in. The stitching was small and exact, and the street had a hundred different greens in it, and each green was a shop.

"Nobody else has the accounts," said A-Po. "The committee does not have them. The government does not have them. The developer has an architect, and the architect has a rendering, and the rendering has a lantern and a tree. Where is the button shop in the rendering? Where is the woman who sold fish with one

eye? Where is the man who wrote the letters?" She pulled the green through and did not look up. "So I keep them. It is not for anything. It is so that there is a copy that is not the developer's copy."

The man who wrote the letters was Sam.

Sam had been A-Po's husband, and he had died in 1998, and A-Po spoke about him the way she spoke about weather that had been good once. He had been a public scribe. He had a desk outside the post office on the main road, and before that outside the market, and he wrote letters for people who could not write them. There were a lot of such people in that street, in that decade, and most of them were writing to family overseas. Sam wrote to Malaysia, to Singapore, to Vancouver, to San Francisco. He wrote in the formal old style, and he charged by the page, and he was, A-Po said, the quietest man on the street.

"He did not talk," she said, "and I talk, you have noticed. He would sit at the desk for two hours and say one thing, and the one thing would be about the weather. Then he would go home and eat and not say anything about it. I used to think he was hiding something. He was not hiding anything. He was saving it up."

"Saving it for what?"

"For the letters." A-Po put down the needle and looked out the window, and the corner of her mouth did something A-Qiu had not seen there before. "You know he wrote for everyone. He wrote the letters that people sent to the other side of the world. And he had phrases. He had phrases for every occasion, because a letter has a shape, and Sam knew the shape. There was the phrase for congratulations, and the phrase for a birth, and the phrase for a death, and the phrase for asking for money without asking for money, which was the hardest, and which Sam was the best in the city at."

A-Qiu waited.

"And every year," said A-Po, "on my birthday, he wrote me a letter."

She said it the way she said the price of the soup. She got up and went to the kitchen and stood with her back to A-Qiu for a moment, and then came back with the tea and sat down, and went on as if she had never stopped.

"He wrote it in the formal style, because he had the formal style, and he could not do the other one. He copied it off a book of phrases. He copied the phrases

off the book the way he copied them for the emigrants, and he sent them to me. All the phrases for a wife. The phrase for the moon. The phrase for the season. The phrase for the two of us growing old together."

She pulled the thread through and held it. Then she went on.

"He used the same three or four every year, and he never learned they were the same, and I never told him, because I did not want him to change them. And there was a phrase about my hands that was meant for a woman who does embroidery, and I do not think he understood what it said, because it was meant for a woman who embroiders silk for the emperor, and it called my hands a garden. My hands. Look at them." She held them up. They were small and knotted and brown. "A garden."

A-Qiu laughed. A-Po looked at her and did not laugh, and the corner of her mouth did the thing again.

"Where did he post them?"

"Into the flue."

"The flue."

"The stove." A-Po nodded at the back kitchen, where the old brick stove stood against the wall. "I would cook. He would come in with the letter folded and put it into the flue, down the side, where the smoke goes. And I would finish the cooking, and when he was out of the room I would take it out and read it. That was the box, that was our box. Nobody has a box like that. You put a letter in the fire and it does not burn, it goes to the person, and the person is standing right there at the stove with a spoon."

She was quiet for a moment, and then she did the thing with her hand, the small dismissive flip that meant the subject was still open but the telling was over for now.

"I answered by cooking," she said. "He liked the pork with the preserved vegetable. I made it on his birthday. That was the answer."

The afternoon went on. A-Po picked up the hoop again and worked, and A-Qiu sat with the tea and watched the street come out of the thread. There was one window left unstitched on the whole map. It was on the upper floor of number seventeen, A-Po's own house, and it was the last thing on the frame, and A-Po had left it empty.

"Why is that one not done?"

"That is the last lamp," said A-Po. "I am not finished with it."

She stitched, and the light came in the window and lay across the cloth and the thread, and the street in the frame was brighter than the street outside, because the street in the frame was the one that had been, and the one outside was the one the developer had left. A-Qiu drank the tea and ate the last of the peanuts and did not ask anything else. It was the afternoon she would remember, later, when the satchel was found, and when she learned what a flue can hold, and what a person will keep in a fire that does not burn.

## 3. The Street

The street had eighteen houses and six shops under the arcade, and before the scheme it had a life you could hear from the upper window.

There was the herbalist at the corner, who had the drawers of dried things and the smell of them, and who could tell you what was wrong with you before you told him. There was the noodle shop in the middle, which opened at six and closed at nine and had the same two tables and the same three stools for thirty years. There was the cobbler, who mended shoes on a bench in the arcade. He had mended A-Po's shoes for twenty years and would not take money from her, which she allowed because it was a debt and she kept her debts. There was the button shop, which sold buttons and nothing else, and which had been empty of customers since the eighties and full of buttons since the war. There was the paper shop, which sold the paper goods for funerals and the red paper for the New Year. There was the shop that had been a tea house and was now a shop that sold the small plastic gods.

Above the shops were the houses, and in the houses were the people, and by the autumn A-Qiu knew them the way she knew the queue, which was by their paper and by their names.

The Chens at number fifteen had the two grandsons and the mother-in-law in the back room. The Lams at number nine had the shopfront that had been outbid in 1979 and never forgiven, and the husband had died, and the wife kept the shop and did not speak to the family at number seven, who had done the outbidding. That grudge was of A-Po's vintage, and therefore a grudge A-Po respected. The Wongs at number four were not related to A-Po and were tired of

being asked. Aunty Ho at number twelve kept the cat and the accounts. She was the only person on the street who could beat A-Po at mahjong, which A-Po denied and never forgave.

The first family signed in the autumn, and it was number three.

They were a young couple with a child in a good school in the next district. The child had to cross the city in the morning, and the resettlement flat would be near the school, and the flat was on the fifteenth floor, and the wife had counted the bus stops on the map and had decided. They signed on a Friday. The committee came with the folder, and the couple read it together at the kitchen table, and the husband signed, and the wife watched him sign, and then they told the street.

The street did not blame them, and the street judged them, and those were two different things. The Chens said the school was a good reason. Aunty Ho said the school was a good reason and the flat was the fifteenth floor. The Lams said nothing, because they had signed in the language of their lives and understood it. A-Po, at the window, watched the van come for the furniture and said one thing to A-Qiu.

"Is the child the reason?" said A-Qiu.

"The child is the reason and the child is the door," said A-Po. "They will use the child on the next one, and the next one after that. It is not a lie. It is the way a street is emptied. You do not take the houses. You take the children out of the houses, and the parents follow the children, and the street follows the parents, and the street ends."

The couple left in the spring. The shop shutters at number three came down and stayed down. By the summer the metal was covered with the small notices that the city pastes up, and by the autumn the notices had been torn, and the shutters had the look that shutters get. It is the look of a thing that has been closed longer than anyone meant.

The street changed the way a street changes, which is quietly and by one door at a time. The noodle shop stopped opening on Mondays. The cobbler took his bench inside. The herbalist put a paper on the drawer of the dried things that said the shop was closed for renovation, and the renovation did not come, and the drawer stayed shut. The paper shop sold more paper than usual that year,

because there were three funerals in the street, and the funerals were the last gatherings the street had.

It was in the winter that the water went off at number seventeen for the first time, and the notice went up on the gate, and the notice said the supply was interrupted for maintenance. A-Po read it twice and said the thing she would say to A-Qiu for the whole of the case.

"Maintenance is a man with a wrench," said A-Po. "That is not a man with a wrench."

A-Qiu looked at the notice and wrote the date in the file, because a date is a fact and a fact is a brick. She had learned by then that the way to build a record was to lay one brick at a time, and that the first brick was almost always a notice on a gate.

## 4. The Market

A-Po went to the market on Tuesdays and Fridays. In the second month she began to take A-Qiu with her, not because she needed the carrying, but because a woman who goes to the market alone is a woman who has no one to argue with about the price.

The market was two streets over, under a roof of iron and glass, and it was the old kind. The fish were in the tanks; the meat hung on the hooks; the vegetables lay in the wet crates; the aisles ran with water. The whole place smelled of fish and ginger and the green of the leaves. A-Po knew every stall. She knew which fish was fresh by the eye and which was fresh by the tank, and she knew the fish woman, who had one eye and a scale that she held with her thumb, and who argued with A-Po about the weight the way two people argue who have been arguing for thirty years and would be lost without it.

"Three hundred grams," said the fish woman.

"Two fifty," said A-Po.

"Look at the scale."

"I am looking at the scale and I am looking at your thumb."

The fish woman laughed and did not move her thumb, and A-Po bought the fish anyway. Later, in the way of a lecture, she said the thing that A-Qiu would remember.

"The thumb is not theft; the thumb is the tax. You can take the tax off with the mouth or you can leave it with the mouth, and either way the fish is the fish. What you cannot do is stop coming. The day you stop coming is the day she is not there. The day she is not there you have lost the fish and the thumb and the argument. The argument is the only one of the three that you cannot buy."

They bought the vegetables at the stall of a woman from the same village as the grandmother. They bought the tofu at the stall of a man who had known Sam. At each stall A-Po gave the news and took the news, and the news was not gossip, or it was gossip and it was also the street's intelligence service. Who had signed. Who was holding out. Whose son had come back from Shenzhen with money. Whose daughter was pregnant and not married. Whose roof had been mended and who had mended it. A-Po delivered the news and received the news and kept a tally in her head, and by the end of the aisle she knew the state of four families. She had also given the fish woman, the vegetable woman, and the tofu man their own news back, corrected.

They ate at the tea house at the corner of the market, which was not really a tea house anymore and was a room with plastic chairs and a counter and the smell of the steamer. A-Po ordered the *yum cha*, the morning tea, and too many of the things that go with it. She made A-Qiu eat the extra. She watched her eat it the way she watched everything, with the small attention of a woman who has decided that the person across the table is too thin.

"Eat the turnip cake," said A-Po.

"I'm eating."

"You are eating the rice. The rice is the filler. Eat the turnip cake."

A-Qiu ate the turnip cake.

A-Po drank her tea and looked at the room. The room was full of the old people of the district and the market workers and the men reading the newspaper. She knew half of them and the other half knew her, and she did not greet any of them, and they did not greet her. That was the way of the market. It was a place where you were known and left alone at the same time, which A-Qiu had come to understand was the exact combination that old people want and almost never get.

"Did Sam come here?" said A-Qiu.

"Sam came here every morning," said A-Po. "He had his tea at the second table there, and he read the paper, and he did not speak to anyone. The whole market knew him as the quiet man at the second table. When he died the whole market knew in a day. The fish woman cried, which I did not expect, and which I have never told her I saw." She poured the tea. "That is the market. It knows you, and it does not know you, and when you are gone it knows that you are gone, and that is more than the city can do."

They walked home with the bags. A-Po carried the light bag and let A-Qiu carry the heavy one, which was her way of doing two things at once, which is to say being proud and being generous. At the door of number seventeen she stopped. She looked back along the arcade, at the shutters and the notices and the empty stool of the cobbler, and she said the thing that was not about the market at all.

She said it the way she said everything, looking away, at the shutters.

"They will keep the market," said A-Po. "They will paint it and put the lanterns in it and call it a food street. The fish will be there and the fish woman will be gone. The men will come from the city and eat at the plastic tables and read the menu in English, and they will not know that the second table was Sam's."

She shifted the bag to her other hand.

"That is what they do. They keep the thing and they lose the person, and they call it heritage. They are not even lying, because the thing is there."

She went in and put the fish in the sink, and A-Qiu followed her, and the rest of the afternoon was the afternoon of two women in a kitchen. Neither of them said anything else about the market, because A-Po had said the whole of it at the door, and because the whole of the case was in that sentence, and both of them knew it, and there was nothing to add.

## 5. The Water

The mahjong table came out on Sundays, and by that winter there were only three players left in the street, and a fourth who came on the bus from two blocks away and complained about the walk every time she arrived.

A-Po cheated.

She cheated the way a woman cheats who has been cheating for fifty years and has decided that cheating is part of the game and that anyone who does not cheat is not taking it seriously. She kept the tile she wanted under her palm and moved it when the hand went past. She counted the discards and knew what was left in the wall, and she played as if she did not, and she won, and she denied winning. The fourth player was named Lai and had been losing to A-Po since the seventies. She watched A-Po do it every week and said nothing, because the saying of it was the only thing that could make it worse.

A-Qiu was allowed to watch. She was not allowed to play, because, A-Po said, a person who counts steps for a living would count tiles, and the table had enough of that already. So A-Qiu sat with the tea and watched the four old women quarrel, and it was the warmest room she had been in since her grandmother died.

The quarrel was the point. A-Po and Lai insulted each other with a fluency that had taken decades to build. Every insult was a small exact fact about the other's life, delivered without heat, and received the same way. When Lai played a tile A-Po did not want, A-Po said, "Your son still has not married," and Lai said, "Your soup was salty in the spring," and they went on. It was a language A-Qiu had heard once before, in a kitchen in Xiancun, between a grandmother and a woman over a plate of cakes. She understood that she was listening to the same language and that she might never be fluent in it. Fluency required a person to stay in one place for fifty years and let the same people insult them on a schedule.

That Sunday, A-Po won. She won two rounds and lost one on purpose, because a clean sweep would have been a kind of boasting. She was not a boaster. She was a keeper of accounts, and the accounts said that one loss kept Lai coming back.

Then the water stopped.

It stopped on a Monday, but the street did not know until the Tuesday. A-Po had filled her buckets on the Sunday, the way she had filled them since the year of the shortage, and had not turned the tap until the Tuesday. The tap gave nothing. She went to the yard and the yard tap gave nothing. She went to the corner and the street tap gave nothing, and by the afternoon the two houses on

either side, which were empty, had notices on the gates that said the supply was interrupted for maintenance of the main.

A-Qiu came on the Wednesday. She found A-Po carrying water in a bucket from the public toilet at the end of the next street. A-Po walked slowly, stopped twice, and set the bucket down at her own doorstep and stood there for a moment before she lifted it again.

"That is not maintenance," said A-Po.

"No."

"Maintenance is a man with a wrench. That is a message."

A-Qiu called the water bureau. The water bureau said the interruption was temporary and for maintenance and would be restored within seventy-two hours. At the end of the seventy-two hours the water was still off, and the notice on the gates had been replaced by a new notice, which said the same thing with a later date. A-Qiu called the district. The district said the water was a matter for the water bureau. The water bureau said the main was old and the repair was complex. When A-Qiu asked for the repair schedule, the man on the line said he would have to look into it, and did not call back.

This was the playbook: the water first, then the safety assessment, then the neighbors, then the dark. A-Qiu had read about it in the files she inherited, and she had heard about it from clients, and now she watched it arrive one notice at a time.

The safety assessment came in the new year.

A team came with clipboards and a camera and spent an hour in the row. They did not go inside number seventeen. They stood in the arcade and looked at the lintels and tapped the columns with a small hammer. At the end of the hour they pinned a notice to the gate that said the row was structurally unsound and that continued occupation was not recommended. The notice recommended that residents accept the resettlement offer without delay.

A-Qiu read the notice twice. Then she took out her phone and photographed the columns the assessors had tapped, and the columns they had not, and the place where the plaster had fallen away in the autumn and been mended, badly, by the man from the developer's office, in a patch that did not match.

The developer's man was named Su Han, and A-Qiu met her on the Thursday.

She was young, late twenties, in a good coat, and she came to the street with an umbrella and a folder and a smile that was not false. She was reasonable. She was the most reasonable person A-Qiu had met on the other side of a table, and that was the problem. Reasonableness was the thing the playbook was made of. You could not argue with it, because it agreed with you and then did what it had always planned to do.

"The water is not our decision," said Su Han.

"Nothing is anyone's decision," said A-Qiu. "That is the design."

Su Han looked at her for a moment, and something moved behind her face and was put away.

"I grew up in an old street," said Su Han. "They renewed it. It was better afterward. I know you do not believe that, but it was."

"Better for whom?"

"For the street." She opened the folder. "The offer stands. It is a good offer. The *bǔcháng* is above the assessment, and the flat is guaranteed, and the builder is the city's own. If your client signs this month, we can hold the flat on the low floor, which is better for an old person. If she does not, the flat goes to the pool, and the pool is the fifteenth floor, and there is no lift until the second phase."

A-Qiu did not take the folder.

"You are very good," said Su Han, without malice, which was the worst thing she said all afternoon.

"Give me the assessment," said A-Qiu. "The full one. The one the safety team used."

Su Han considered. Then she took a stapled document out of the folder and laid it on the table and did not let go of it.

"You will read it," she said, "and it will say what it says, and the water will still be off, and then we will talk again."

She let go. A-Qiu read it that night, three times, and found what she had looked for. The name of the assessment agency. The date the assessment had been commissioned, which was three weeks before the safety team had come to the street. The two figures for the row's value, which did not agree. And the

phrase in the conclusion that had no author, which said that continued occupation was not recommended.

## 6. The Nephew

The nephew came down from Shenzhen on a Sunday in the new year, and A-Qiu met him in the front room of number seventeen.

His name was Chan Kai-wen. He was in his forties, and he managed logistics for a company that shipped things from the port, and he wore a good jacket on a Sunday and drove a car that was six years old and well kept. He had two fixed costs: a daughter in an expensive school in Shenzhen and a mortgage that he mentioned twice in the first hour without meaning to. He mentioned the school once for the fees and once for the distance, and each time he looked at the window as if the window had asked him for the money. He was polite, and tired, and he was, A-Qiu understood within ten minutes, the kind of man who had spent his whole life doing the responsible thing and had never once been thanked for it in a way that lasted. The tea was on the table and the room was cold, and he held the cup the way a man holds a thing he has been given in a house that is not his. He had driven two hours and would drive two hours back, and he had done it the same way every month for six years.

He loved his aunt, and that was the first true thing in the room, and A-Qiu could see it and could see that it cost him.

"You are the lawyer," he said.

"I am."

"My aunt does not want a lawyer."

"My aunt does not want to leave," said A-Po, from the kitchen.

Kai-wen did not answer her, and looked at the table and turned his teacup a quarter turn, which A-Qiu would learn was what he did when he was about to say something he had rehearsed.

"I call her every week," he said. "I have called her every week since my mother died. For a year I did not call her. That is the truth. I did not call her because every call ended the same way, and I could not do it, and I am not proud of it. Then I started again."

"What did the calls end with?"

"The same thing they end with now." He looked at the kitchen door. "She says the stove."

A-Po came out with the rice and set it down and did not look at either of them. A-Qiu watched the two of them eat, and neither of them looked at the stove, and the stove stood where it had stood for sixty years.

"She has a pension," said Kai-wen. "It is small. The flat in the resettlement block is a good flat, and it is a lift, and I have seen the drawings. I am not a fool and I am not a villain, and I know what the developer is. But I also know that she is eighty-four, and that the water is off, and that she is carrying buckets up the stairs, and that next year it will be the stairs." His voice did not rise. It went quieter, which was worse. "She has no children. I am the only one left. When the water is off and the stairs get hard, it is not the developer who will be here. It is me."

"That is the argument they use," said A-Qiu.

"I know it is the argument they use," said Kai-wen. "It is still true."

The room was quiet, and the rain had started on the arcade tiles, and the sound came in through the shutters the way it always came.

That was the whole of it, and A-Qiu did not have an answer for it that he would accept. There was no answer; there was only the stove, and the stove was not yet a thing she could say out loud.

The developer had already been to him. They had come to Shenzhen, to his office, with a folder and a schedule and a smile. They had not threatened him, but they had explained that the family was entitled to be consulted, and that the *huíqiān* allocation would go faster with a family signature, and that the family representative could hold the flat on the low floor for the old woman. They had given him the form, a single page that said that the signatory, as family representative, consented to the resettlement and confirmed the household's acceptance of the compensation.

"It is not a power of attorney," said A-Qiu, when Kai-wen showed her.

"No."

"It does not transfer her rights. It just says the family consents."

"Yes."

"And the family is not the household. The household is her."

"I know."

"Then why is held on the low floor mentioned next to your name?"

Kai-wen looked at the form. He had read it, A-Qiu could tell. He had read it three times the way a careful man reads a contract, and he had signed nothing yet, and the reason he had brought it to A-Qiu was that he wanted her to tell him not to sign it, and she could not, because that was not her place, and because the water was still off, and because everything he had said about the stairs was true.

A-Po came out of the kitchen with the soup and put it in front of A-Qiu, and stood over her until she picked up the spoon. Then she sat down and looked at her nephew, and said his name, which she used once a year, at most, when she was serious.

"Kai-wen."

"Ah-Yi."

"You will sign their paper," said A-Po.

Kai-wen looked up.

"You will sign it, and you will feel better, because it is a paper that lets you sleep, and I will still be here, and the water will still be off." She took up her own spoon. "That is what the paper is for. The paper is not for the flat. It never was. The paper is to make you the one who decided."

She ate her soup, and Kai-wen did not eat his, and A-Qiu ate hers, because A-Po was watching, and because it was the best soup in the city, and because she had learned by then that the only way to survive a table like that one was to be the person who finished the bowl.

Kai-wen did not sign that day. He drove back to Shenzhen in the afternoon and called A-Qiu on the Tuesday, and called her again on the Thursday, and each time he asked the same question in a different form, which was whether A-Qiu thought the case could be won.

"On the law?" she said. "No. Not the way it is written."

"Then why are you doing it."

"Because the law is not the only record," said A-Qiu, and she heard her grandmother in her own voice as she said it, and she did not correct it.

There was a pause on the line.

"My aunt likes you," said Kai-wen.

"I know."

"She does not like anyone." He was quiet for a moment. "Sign the paper," he said, to himself, and hung up.

## 7. The Mediation

The mediation was in a room on the fourth floor of the district building, and there were nine people at a long table, and A-Po was the only one of them who had not brought a folder.

There was the mediator: a woman in her fifties with a cardigan and a stack of forms and a manner that had been trained to be patient and had not been trained to be curious. There was Su Han, for the developer, with her good coat and her good smile. There was a man from the developer's legal office whom nobody introduced. There was a man from the district office who read his phone under the table. There was a woman from the neighborhood committee who kept trying to catch A-Po's eye and kept failing. There was Chan Kai-wen, the nephew, in his Sunday jacket, on his own side of the table and on nobody's. There was A-Qiu, with the file. And at the end of the table, in the corner, by the window, with a cup of tea she had refused to drink, was Wong A-Po.

The mediator began the way the mediators always began, which was by saying that everyone here wanted the same thing.

"The same thing," said A-Po, to no one.

The mediator continued. She said the project was for the good of the street, and that the developer had agreed to an increase in the *bǔcháng*, and that the re-settlement flat would be held on the low floor, and that the dialogue had been fruitful. She said the parties were close. She said the parties were very close. She said that sometimes an agreement required flexibility from both sides.

"You are asking the wrong side," said A-Po.

The mediator did not hear her, or decided not to. She turned to Kai-wen.

"Mr Chan, as the family representative, perhaps you can help us understand your aunt's position."

Kai-wen looked at the table. He turned his teacup a quarter turn. He had been doing it since the meeting began, and A-Qiu counted the turns the way she counted steps, because it was the only thing in the room that was honest.

"My aunt does not want to move," he said.

"We understand that," said the mediator. "But we also understand that your aunt is eighty-four, and that the building is old, and that the water supply has been an inconvenience. The developer has been very generous about the water."

"The water," said A-Qiu.

"The interruption was for essential maintenance," said Su Han, without heat. "Unfortunately the main is older than the record shows. We are doing everything we can to expedite."

By the middle of the second hour the offer had gone up twice. The mediator moved from the forms to the feeling. She said that a person of A-Po's age deserved peace. She said that a family that fought a case for years deserved rest. She said, and here she looked at Kai-wen, that sometimes the greatest gift a family could give an elder was to make the decision for them, kindly, and to carry the weight.

The nephew's face did the thing it had been doing all morning, which was to agree and disagree at the same time and not be able to say either.

"My aunt raised me for two years when my mother was ill," he said, to the table. "I owe her." He was quiet. "I do not know how to pay a debt like that. I have a daughter. The mortgage—" He stopped. He had said more than he meant to.

No one at the table wrote it down, but everyone had heard it, and the room shifted, because the nephew had just told them where the pressure would work, and because he knew he had, and because there was nothing to be done about it now.

Su Han spoke into the quiet. She was gentle. She said that the developer understood the nephew's situation. She said there were resources for families in transition. She said the low-floor flat would be withdrawn at the end of the month and the pool flat would be on fifteen, and that she was sorry, and that it was policy.

A-Po had not spoken in an hour.

The mediator turned to her at last, because the mediator had run out of other people. "A-Po Wong, please. Tell us what you want. If there is a number, we can discuss the number. If there is a condition, we can discuss the condition."

A-Po put her cup down.

"It is not my house," she said.

The mediator blinked. "I'm sorry?"

"The house on the deed is my husband's. His name is on it. Sam. He bought it in 1961." She said the year the way she said the price of soup. "You are buying his house."

The man from the developer's legal office looked up for the first time. "Mr Wong is deceased," he said. "The estate passes to the surviving spouse. We can process the succession in a week."

"Yes," said A-Po. "You can process it in a week."

The room waited for the argument. It did not come.

"Then what is the difficulty," said the mediator, and A-Qiu heard the first note of something in her voice that was not patience.

A-Po looked at the mediator, and then, very slowly, she looked around the table, at every folder, at every phone, at the nephew who would not meet her eye, and at last at A-Qiu, who met it. Then she turned back to the window and folded her hands and said the thing that emptied the room of its procedure, and she said it quietly, the way she said the price of soup.

"I have not finished with him," she said.

Nobody answered. The mediator looked at her forms. Su Han looked at A-Qiu, and A-Qiu saw the crack open and close behind her face in the space of a breath. The man from the district put his phone away. The nephew covered his mouth with his hand, which was the only way he had, and not a good one, of not weeping in a room with nine people in it.

The mediator said, in a changed voice, that the session would be adjourned, and that the parties would reconvene after the holiday, and that she encouraged everyone to continue the dialogue through the proper channels.

The proper channels. A-Qiu wrote it down, and put a line under it, and did not know yet what it was a heading for.

## 8. The Signature

The nephew signed the form eleven days after the mediation, and A-Qiu found out from Su Han.

Su Han called the office, which she did not have to do. She said the family representative had signed, and that the developer would proceed on that basis,

and that A-Qiu should know before she heard it somewhere else. She said it without triumph. She said it the way a person reports a fact.

"When?" said A-Qiu.

"Yesterday. At his office in Shenzhen. We sent a colleague."

"Did he read it?"

"He read it three times." There was a pause on the line. "He asked good questions. He is not a stupid man. He asked what would happen to her if she still refused, and I told him the truth, which is that the form does not compel her, and that the compulsory process is long and slow and that it would start whether or not he signed. He asked what would happen to the flat if he signed. I told him the truth, which is that the low floor could be held for thirty days. He signed on the twenty-ninth."

"You gave him a deadline."

"I gave him the information he asked for," said Su Han.

A-Qiu hung up and sat at the desk for a while. Then she called Kai-wen, and he did not pick up, and she called again, and he did not pick up, and she did not call a third time.

He came to Guangzhou the following Sunday and stood in the doorway of number seventeen with the rain on his jacket and did not come in. A-Po was at the embroidery frame. She did not look up.

"Ah-Yi," he said.

A-Po filled in a stitch, and then another.

"I signed it."

A-Po filled in another stitch.

"I know it was wrong to do it behind your back. I know it does not change anything for you. I did it because I could not keep standing in the middle of it." He waited. She did not speak. "Say something."

"You are standing in the rain," said A-Po.

He came in and sat on the stool by the door, which was the stool for people who were not staying. He put his hands on his knees.

"I talked to a man at the company," he said. "They will still move you to the low floor if you agree by the end of the month. It is not nothing. It is a lift. It is two rooms and a balcony." He was talking faster now, the way a man talks when

he has decided to make his case and knows it is made of paper. "The school fees go up in September. I am not asking you to care about that. I am telling you because you are the only person I can tell."

A-Po set the needle down. She did not turn around.

"Your mother," she said, "when she was dying, asked me to look after you. I said yes. I did not ask her what looking after you meant, because I did not want to know the price. Now I know the price." She picked the needle up again. "You have paid it. Do not pay it twice."

Kai-wen did not understand her. A-Qiu, sitting on the other side of the room, understood about half of it. The half she understood was about her own father, and about a signature on a Wednesday, and about a clause she had read afterward and never mentioned. She looked at the nephew and saw him for what he was, which was not the developer and not the committee and not the city. He was a man who loved his aunt and had a daughter and a mortgage and a school fee, and who had been given a form, and who had signed it, and who would carry it. He was the most ordinary person in the room, and that was the horror of it.

He left before dark, and A-Po made him take soup. She stood at the door with the jar and put it into his hands and closed his fingers around it. She did not look at his face, and he did not look at hers, and neither of them said the thing that neither of them was able to say. Then he drove back north in the rain.

The form did nothing and it did everything.

It did nothing because a family representative cannot sell his aunt's house, and because the compulsory process would have started anyway. It did everything because the developer now had a document that said the family consented, and because the committee now had a reason to say the family was split, and because the next letter that came to the office described the household not as one old woman but as a family in disagreement. A family in disagreement is a family that can be waited out.

A-Qiu wrote it in the book, on the side where the office kept the failures: the date, the form, and the name of the man who signed it. Beside his name she wrote the reason, because she had promised herself she would not write *signed under pressure*, which was the easy kind of lie. She wrote: *signed because loving her was expensive, and he had stopped being able to pay.*

It was the longest entry in the book. She read it back once when she had finished it, and then she closed the book, and she went to see A-Po, because A-Po had not eaten and someone had to make her.

## 9. The Minutes

The file said there had been a consultation meeting on the sixteenth of November, at the committee office, with eleven residents present, and that the residents had discussed the scheme and had raised no objection in principle.

A-Qiu had been to two consultation meetings in Taiping Street, one in November and one in December, and at neither of them had eleven residents been present, because there were not eleven residents left. There were four, and two of them had signed, and one of them was A-Po, and one of them had been there to use the toilet because the public one was closed. So the minutes were a document about a meeting that had not happened, and A-Qiu went to find the man who had written them.

The retired committee clerk was named Lau. He was seventy-one and had run the street committee for thirty years, and he now lived in a resettlement block on the other side of Liwan, and he was glad of a visitor. He made tea before A-Qiu had finished introducing herself, and he made it the old way, with the leaves in the pot and the first pour thrown out, and he talked for forty minutes without being asked a single question.

He talked about the years when the committee had been the whole government of the street, and about the ration tickets and the vaccination drives and the year of the flood. He talked about the families, one by one, and about which of them had left and which had died and which had married out, and he had the whole ledger in his head, and the ledger did not match any file A-Qiu had ever seen. He was not a bad man. He had been, in his way, the street's memory, and the street had been his whole life. Now the street was gone, and he talked to visitors.

A-Qiu let him talk, because she had learned to let them talk, and when the tea was finished and the subject was the scheme, he said the thing she had come for without knowing he had said anything, because he was not a man who could keep a document in his head out of a conversation.

"The consultation," he said. "They held one. The developer's people came with a lady from the district, and they sat in the office, and they had the minutes already typed." He laughed and poured more tea. "I said to them, you have the minutes already, so who is the meeting? And the young man said it is a template. I said a template of what. He said of the standard consultation. I said, the standard consultation with whom?" He set the pot down. "They put it up on the board afterward and I read it, and it said eleven residents, and I thought, there were never eleven residents in this street who agreed on the weather, let alone on a developer."

"Do you remember who typed them?"

"The young man. The one from the developer. He had the district lady's chop, or he had a chop that looked like it." Lau shrugged. "I did not think about it. Who reads the minutes? Nobody reads the minutes, and that is what minutes are for."

A-Qiu asked whether he would say all of it again with a recorder on, and he looked at her for a long moment and then did the thing that people did at that point in the conversation. He remembered that he had a daughter who worked for the district, and a pension, and a flat. He became suddenly, regretfully, unable to remember the details. "Ask the young man," he said. "He was new. He knows what he did."

The young man was named Wang Lei, and he was the junior assessor.

It took A-Qiu three weeks to find him. He had left the assessment agency in the spring and was working for a property firm in Panyu, and he did not want to talk, and then he agreed to talk, and then he asked to meet somewhere that was not his office. They met in a tea house near the river, at a corner table, and he kept his back to the room.

He was twenty-nine, with a good jacket and a bad haircut and the specific tiredness of a person who has done a small wrong and has been carrying it further than he expected.

"I did the minutes," he said.

"Which minutes?"

"All of them, the consultations, the safety summaries, the templates." He looked at his cup and turned it. "There was a software: you chose the street and

the project and it filled in the standard text and the standard attendance, and you put the date and the chop, and it printed." He turned the cup again. "I did not think of it as a lie. It is a form, and the form exists because the process requires it, and nobody reads it. The district reads that it exists, and the developer reads that it exists, and the point of the form is that it exists."

"Did anyone object?"

"Once." He looked up. "A man at a village in Baiyun read the minutes and said he had not been at the meeting, because the meeting had been on a day he was in hospital. And the office said, the minutes record the meeting, and the meeting is what the minutes record, and if the record is wrong then you should have come to the meeting to correct it. He could not, because he was in hospital." Wang Lei put his cup down. "That was the first year. I did not sleep well that year. I sleep fine now, and that is the thing nobody tells you."

"What did you sign on the safety assessment for Taiping Street?"

"I did not sign it. I drafted it, and someone above me signed it." He looked at A-Qiu for the first time. "You want the draft, and I kept the drafts, all of them, because I knew that one day someone would come and ask." He took a phone out of his pocket and slid it across the table, screen down. "The draft is on there. The final changed one number. The number is the row's value, and they lowered it. That is all, and everything else is the same." He took the phone back. "I do not want to be a witness, and I have a job. But I will send it to you from a place that is not my phone, and you can say you got it from the file."

"You could have destroyed it."

"I could have." He put the phone away. "But the form is the form, and I am not the form. I am the man who types it, and the man who types it keeps, somewhere in him, one page, so that he is not only the form." He stood up and put on his coat. "The lower number is at the back, on the schedule. It is the one that has no stamp."

He left. A-Qiu sat with the cold tea and understood that she had the evidence she needed and that the evidence would not be enough, because the process did not read its own minutes, and because a number without a stamp is not a fraud, it is a draft, and because a man who left the agency in the spring cannot testify against the agency he left without becoming the kind of man the agency destroys.

But she copied it all the same, and she put it in the file, and she wrote the date in the book, because the book did not require the evidence to win. The book required only that the record exist, somewhere, in a hand that was not the developer's.

## 10. The Hearing

The filing window was on the ground floor of the district court building, and it took A-Qiu three visits to get the case registered.

The first visit, the clerk said the application was missing the respondent's address.

"It is on the form," said A-Qiu. "The district housing bureau, with the public address."

"The address must be the service address," said the clerk. "Not the public address."

"Where is the service address published?"

The clerk did not know. She put a tick in the margin and gave the form back.

The second visit, A-Qiu had the service address, which she had found on a noticeboard in another building. The same clerk said the application was missing a chop.

"Which chop?" said A-Qiu.

"The applicant's chop."

"The applicant is an eighty-four-year-old woman who does not have a chop. A chop is a thing a person is issued. You cannot require a person to have been issued a thing."

The clerk looked at her with the flat patience of the window. "That is not a matter for the window," she said, and gave the form back with the same tick, deeper.

The third visit, A-Qiu came with a chop. She had taken A-Po to a shop on the arcade street where a man cut seals; A-Po had chosen a small square stone the color of tea, and the man had carved her name into it, and A-Po had held it in her palm the whole way home and said nothing. That night she had stamped the application herself, slowly, with two hands, the way you press a thing you have decided about. The clerk took the form and the chop and stamped the receipt,

and the case was registered, and the whole performance had taken forty minutes of A-Po's life and eleven days of A-Qiu's.

The hearing was six weeks later, and it lasted forty minutes.

The courtroom was small and low-ceilinged and had a fern in the corner that someone watered. There were three judges on the panel; the presiding judge was a woman in her forties who read the file while the clerk stated the case. There were no witnesses, and no jury. There was A-Qiu with her documents, and the district's lawyer with his; and there was a man from the developer's legal office sitting at the back, who had no standing and no need of any, and whose only function was to be seen.

A-Qiu had prepared for the merits. She had the draft assessment with the lower number and the missing stamp; the minutes of the consultation that had not happened; the statement of the junior assessor, unsigned but in his own hand; the photographs of the columns the safety team had tapped and the columns it had not; the schedule of the water interruptions with their extensions; and the three dates on which the notices had been replaced.

She got to say about a third of it.

"Come to the point, counsel," said the presiding judge.

"The point is that the safety assessment was commissioned before the safety team visited," said A-Qiu. "The point is that the assessed value was lowered after the fact, and the consultation never happened. The minutes record a meeting that did not occur; the attendance is a template."

"The assessment is a matter of professional judgment," said the district's lawyer, "and the court does not review professional judgment." He cited a case, and the judge wrote the case number down.

"And the consultation?" said the judge.

"The minutes are the record of a meeting conducted in the standard form," said the district's lawyer. "The standard form is the record."

The judge did not ask anyone about the lower number.

Then the judge did the thing that A-Qiu had known she would do, which was to recommend mediation.

"The court encourages the parties to mediate," said the judge. "The court notes that the compensation offer is above the assessed value; that a resettlement

flat is available; and that the applicant is of advanced age. The court considers that a mediated resolution would serve the interests of all parties better than a judgment."

"Your Honour," said A-Qiu, "the question is not the amount."

"The court has read the application," said the judge, and looked at the clock.

The judgment came by post eleven days later. It was four pages, and it was read from the record. The court found that the safety assessment was made within the competence of the agency; that the consultation had been conducted; that the compensation was not lower than the market value as assessed; and that the relocation decision was lawful. The application was dismissed. The costs were twenty yuan.

A-Qiu read it three times, on the bench outside the legal aid office, in the first warm afternoon of the year.

She had known. That was the thing she would try to explain to people later, and never explain well. She had known before she filed, and she had filed anyway, because the filing created a record, and the record was the only thing that could not be taken back. The judgment said the consultation had been conducted; the file in her bag said it had not. One of them was a court record and the other was a folder under a desk, and for now the court record was the one that would be quoted. But the folder did not expire.

She went to Taiping Street in the evening and told A-Po the result. She told it plainly, because A-Po would not have accepted it any other way.

"We lost," said A-Qiu.

A-Po was at the window with the hoop. She did not stop stitching.

"You filed it," she said.

"I filed it."

"Then it is in the book."

"It is in the book."

A-Po pulled a green thread through the cloth and looked at the street she was making. Then she said the thing that A-Qiu only understood much later.

"A court is a room," said A-Po. "A room can say anything. A room is not the street. The street is what is left when the room goes home." She set the needle down and looked at A-Qiu. "You have the documents. Keep the documents.

One day the room will want them, and the room will not have them, and the street will."

## 11. The Collapse

The appeal was filed in the spring and heard in the winter, or would have been, and in the meantime the row was not left alone.

There was no order for it. There was a permission, which is not the same thing and is worse. The permission was for emergency stabilization work. It named the two empty houses at the far end of the row, the ones whose owners had signed first, and it said the roofs were at risk and the party walls had to be shored. It did not name number seventeen. It did not have to. The scaffolding went up along the whole row, and the green mesh went over the scaffolding. By November the street looked like a building site with a lit window in the middle of it, which was the point.

A-Po did not leave. She had been told to leave by the committee, and by the developer, and by her nephew, and by A-Qiu. A-Qiu had stopped telling her, because the telling had become a ritual and a ritual is not an argument. She slept at the front of the house, away from the work, and she kept the light on. A-Qiu came every two days now, instead of every week, and brought food, and ate with her, and did not talk about the case unless A-Po asked.

The first cold rain came in the first week of December.

It came the way it came, without wind, without drama. It was a steady gray rain that made the whole city quieter and colder. The scaffolding dripped all night, and the mesh against the windows was black with water. A-Qiu was at home with the case file when her phone rang, and it was the committee woman, and the committee woman was breathing hard. She said the row had come down at the far end. She said the work had gone wrong. She said nobody was hurt, and that A-Po was out, and that A-Po was at the committee office with a blanket around her and would not sit down.

A-Qiu got there in twenty minutes.

The far end of the row had come down. It was not a collapse in the way a person imagines a collapse. It was a section of the roofline, and the top floor of two houses, and a cascade of the mesh and the scaffolding that had folded into the street and lay across it in tangles. The rain came down on the rubble and

made it shine. Somewhere under it the party wall was moving still, a slow grinding that came and went, and no one was going near it.

The committee had set up in the office: a table, a thermos, a list. A-Po was there, wrapped in a blanket, standing, because she would not sit down in a chair that was not hers. She was dry. She had been at the front of the house, and the collapse had been at the back, at the far end. The fire service had come and had walked her through the arcade and out, and she had gone without her shoes.

Her first words to A-Qiu were not about the house.

"Go and look at the kitchen," she said.

"The kitchen is at the back. They will not let anyone near the back."

"Go and look at the kitchen."

A-Qiu went. The fire officer let her as far as the tape, and she stood at the tape and looked along the row. The scaffolding had come down over the back section, and the back wall of number seventeen had cracked from the roofline to the floor, and the crack went through the kitchen. The roof of the kitchen had dropped on the stove side. She could not see the stove. She could see the corner of the niche where the Kitchen God's paper image had been, and the image was gone, and there was a blackened gap where the wall had held it.

She went back to the office and told A-Po what she had seen, which was the truth. The back of the house was open to the rain, and the kitchen wall was cracked, and the stove was under the roof that had fallen.

A-Po listened. Then she sat down in the chair, which was the first thing she had done all night that was not standing.

"Will they take it down?" she said.

"They will shore it first," said A-Qiu. "They will fence the row and shore the wall, and then the surveyors will come, and then it will be a decision."

"How long until the fence?"

"A day. Two days, if the rain keeps on."

A-Po looked at the window, which was the window of the committee office and showed only the street and the wet road and the blue of the police lights.

"Then there is a day," she said.

That night A-Qiu did the arithmetic that she would spend the rest of her life not being able to explain.

She was a lawyer. She knew the consequences of entering a site that had been taped off. She knew the consequences of disturbing a site that would be evidence, and the consequences for a case that had already been lost once and was going to be heard again. She also knew that the surveyors would come, and that the rubble would be cleared with the rubble. She knew that by the time the law got to the kitchen, the kitchen would be a photograph in a file. A photograph in a file is not a kitchen. A person who had lost a thing once already had a right to the thing itself, or to what the thing held.

She did not tell A-Po what she was going to do. A-Po did not need to be told.

At four in the morning A-Qiu stood at the tape in the rain, with a torch in her coat and a trowel she had bought the night before from a shop that sold garden things. She counted the steps along the arcade from the mouth of the street to the door of number seventeen. Forty-one. She had counted them the first day she came, and she counted them again now. Then she went through the door frame where the door had been taken, and into the house, and toward the back, where the roof had come down. She could not forget a room she had stood in. The grandmother had taught her long ago that the count is the only thing the wall cannot take.

## 12. The Dig

The rain stopped before dawn, and the rubble was black and steaming, and A-Qiu went in through the door frame of number seventeen at twenty past four.

She did not use the torch once she was inside. There was enough light from the sky through the broken back of the house to see by, and there was the count, and the count was better than the torch.

She stood in the front room and found the line of the house in her feet, the front room, then the passage, then the kitchen at the back, and the kitchen was four steps from the passage door, and the window was on the left, and the stove was against the back wall, under the window, where it had stood for sixty years.

The roof had come down on the stove side. The tiles and the beams and the wet plaster lay in a slope from the wall to the middle of the floor. The rain had been coming in on it all night, and the whole heap was soft and heavy and smelled of old smoke and wet lime.

She began at the edge, which was how you dug, and worked inward, and she moved the tiles first, one at a time, setting each one behind her in a row, because a row was a record and a heap was a mess. Then the plaster, in pieces, and then the beam, which was too heavy to lift and which she worked around, digging under and along until she could roll it aside. Her hands were cut within the first quarter of an hour. She did not notice until later, which is how hands work.

The stove came out of the rubble the way a thing comes out of water, a corner at a time. First the mouth, black and whole. Then the shelf of the niche, with the paper image gone and the soot mark where it had been. Then the top, and the slab, which had been the floor of the fire and was still in place. The slab had not cracked, because the stove had been built by a man who built stoves and had built this one to last a hundred years, and had built it to last a hundred years for a reason.

A-Qiu stopped and listened to the house. There was nothing. She put her hand on the slab and found the edge, and worked the trowel under it, and lifted.

The cavity below was dry.

She had expected ashes, and there were ashes, but they were not the ashes she had imagined. The cavity was lined with brick, and the brick was swept, and the ashes were in a brass urn with a lid, and the urn was wrapped in a piece of red cloth, and the cloth was clean, and on the cloth there was a paper label on which someone had written, in a careful hand, a name and two dates. The name was Sam. The dates were the dates of his life, and the second one was 1998.

She lifted the urn out and set it on the floor. Then she reached into the cavity again, because there was more.

The flue ran up beside the stove, and the flue had a cavity at the bottom where the soot collected and where a hand could reach. She reached in, and her fingers found leather. She pulled, and the leather came, and it was a satchel, old and soft, tied at the top with a cord, and it was heavy with paper.

She sat back on the wet floor with the satchel in her lap and the urn beside her, and opened it.

The letters were in bundles. They were tied with string, with cord, with ribbon; some of them were tied with the red thread that comes off a paper packet. Each bundle had a paper band around it, and on the band was a name.

Some of the names she knew from the street; some were the names of families who had left; some were the names of families who had died out; some were the names of people from other streets; and some of the bundles had no name on the band but only a date.

There were forty years of letters in the satchel: letters that Sam had written for other people and had kept when they were never collected. The family had moved; or the family had fallen out; or the emigrant had died on the other side of the world and the letter had come back with a stamp. It was a street's post office, and the post office had closed in 1998, and the satchel had been in the flue since.

And at the bottom, under the bundles, wrapped separately in oilcloth and tied with a cord of its own, there was one more bundle. It was small. It had no name on the band. On the band, in the same careful hand, was written a single word.

A-Qiu did not open it. She sat with it in her hand for a while, and the sky got grayer, and somewhere down the street a machine started up at the far end of the row. She put the bundle back into the satchel with the others, and she tied the satchel, and she took the urn and the satchel and went out of the house before the fence crew came.

She was halfway down the arcade when she heard herself.

She had said a line out loud, or half a line, under her breath, as she carried the urn through the door frame. She did not know where it came from, and she did not stop to think about it. It was a line about a river, and about a thing that would not go the way it was told. She heard her own voice say it, and then the machine at the far end of the row drowned it, and she walked to the end of the street with the ashes of a man she had never met under her arm, and did not think about the line again for years.

She did not sleep that night.

At three in the morning she woke with the tearing sound behind her sternum, and lay in the dark and listened to it, and it was not the house and it was not the dig. It was the same sound she had felt on the morning the excavator took the roof in Xiancun, and it was the sound of a thing being divided, and it lasted longer this time, and then it stopped, and she slept.

The phone rang at seven. It was Chan Kai-wen, and he was crying, and he was apologizing for crying. He said his aunt had been taken to the hospital in the night with a fever in the chest, and that it was not the first time, and that the doctors were with her now, and that he was on the road.

A-Qiu got dressed. She put the satchel in the cupboard, and she put the urn on the shelf beside the folder, and she did not look at either of them, and she went out into the light.

## 13. The Letters

A-Po was in the hospital for nine days, and when she came out the house was not safe to live in, and the nephew took her to Shenzhen.

She did not want to go, and what she wanted was to go back to number seventeen and sleep at the front. The doctor said the damp in the house was the reason she was in the hospital, and the nephew said the same thing in different words, and the committee said the row was taped, and in the end she went because there was nowhere else. She went with one bag. She left the embroidery on the stand at the window, because it was too big to carry and because she said she would be back for it; A-Qiu went back for it the next morning, before the fence, and brought it to the hotel, because it was the one thing A-Po did not have to ask for. She left the chair with the arms, and the tea things, and the small lamp on the sill. The lamp was the last thing she looked at, and then she got into the car.

A-Qiu went to see her before she left.

She brought the urn in a canvas bag, and the satchel, and she put them on the table in the hotel where the nephew had taken a room for two nights, and she did not explain. A-Po looked at the bag and did not open it.

"From the stove," said A-Qiu.

"Yes," said A-Po, and did not look at the bag.

"That is him."

"I know that is him."

She did not ask how, or when, or where, or what it had cost. She put her hand on the canvas bag and left it there, and looked at A-Qiu for a long moment, and then she said the thing that A-Qiu would carry.

"You went in."

"I went in. Before the fence."

"Before the fence," said A-Po.

A-Po nodded once, slowly, the way she nodded at a good tile. Then she opened the satchel, and she saw the bundles, and she went through them with her hands the way a person goes through a drawer they have not opened in years. She knew the names on the bands, and said some of them out loud. She said, "Ah, the Lams," and "this one went to Malaya and never wrote again," and "this is the woman from the button shop," and her hands did not shake.

At the bottom, under the bundles, she found the small one wrapped in oilcloth. She turned it over, and read the single word on the band, and did not open it.

"This is mine," said A-Po, and did not open it.

"Yes."

"You knew it was mine."

"I thought so, and I didn't open it."

A-Po put the small bundle into the pocket of her coat, and closed the satchel, and that was the end of the conversation about the letters for that day.

She took the bundle to Shenzhen. She had a room at the back of the nephew's flat, with a window onto a car park, and she kept the small lamp from number seventeen on the sill even though there was no reason for it. The nephew did not ask her about it, and she did not tell him. She put the urn on the shelf with the photograph of Sam and the paper image of the Kitchen God she had brought with her in the bag. Then she sat down on the edge of the bed with the bundle in her lap.

She read one letter a night, and she did not read them all at once, and no one ever learned why. A-Qiu did not ask, and the nephew did not ask, and the room with the car park window kept its counsel. One letter a night, after the nephew's family had gone to bed, with the lamp on the sill. Each was a single folded page in Sam's careful formal hand, copied from a phrasebook and sent down a flue fifty years before: read now in a room overlooking a car park in a city where she knew no one.

The nephew did not understand it, and he told A-Qiu on the phone, baffled, that his aunt read one letter every night and would not be hurried and would not

be slowed. When he asked her what the letters were, she had said, "It is the post," and had gone back to reading. He said he had offered to read them to her when her eyes were tired, and she had refused, and he had been, he admitted, a little hurt.

"It is the post," he said. "What does that mean?"

"It means it is private," said A-Qiu.

"She is eighty-five. What is private at eighty-five?"

A-Qiu did not answer, because the answer was the whole of it, and because the nephew would not have believed it, and because she was not sure she believed it herself.

He called again six weeks later, on a Friday morning, and his voice was the voice he had used at the collapse. He said his aunt had died in the night, and that it had been quick, and that the doctors said pneumonia, and that it was the season, and that she had not been in pain. Then he said the thing that was the reason he had called A-Qiu instead of the other way around, which was that he could not make sense of it.

"She finished the letters," he said.

"Finished them," said A-Qiu, which was not a question.

"On Tuesday. She read the last one on Tuesday night, and on Wednesday she was quiet, and on Thursday she did not get up, and this morning she was gone." He paused. "I do not understand. There were hundreds of the things."

"There were forty years of them," said A-Qiu.

"Forty years, and she read one a night for a month and a half, and then she finished, and then she—" He stopped. "It does not make any sense. They were only letters."

"No," said A-Qiu. "They were the post."

He did not understand her either, and that was all right.

## 14. The Gold Window

The nephew brought the embroidery back to Guangzhou in a cardboard tube, three weeks after the funeral, because A-Qiu had asked for it and because he did not know what else to do with it.

She unrolled it on the table in the office after hours, under the lamp. It was the whole street, sixty-one years of it, stitched in the colors of the sixties by a

woman who had not left the house for the last year of her life. Every shopfront was there: the cobbler, the herbalist, the button shop. The fish woman. The postman's round. The jacaranda at number four, in a purple that A-Qiu recognized from the story. The Wongs' good well, in two shades of gray.

And at the end of the row, in the upper window of number seventeen, one window was lit. It was the last window on the whole map, the one that had been left empty for so long. It was stitched in gold thread, so that it caught the lamp in the office and threw it back, and it was the only lit thing in the whole dark street of thread.

A-Qiu sat with it for a long time.

She had been there when it was finished. That was the part she kept, and the part she would not put in the file. It had been the night before A-Po went into the hospital the last time, in the rented room near the street, with the hoop on the table and the tea gone cold. A-Po had not been able to hold the frame steady because her hands had begun to shake. So she had asked A-Qiu to hold it, and A-Qiu had knelt on the floor at the table and held the frame with both hands. A-Po had worked the last window in gold. It took her an hour. She dropped the needle twice and made A-Qiu find it, and she did not hurry, and she did not speak. When the last stitch was in, she tied off the thread and bit it and sat back.

"There, now it is finished," said A-Po.

"What is it you have made?" said A-Qiu, because she did not understand the last window.

"The last lamp," said A-Po, and looked at the gold window in the dark street of thread, and then at the small lamp on the sill, which was still lit. She did not say anything else. She never stitched again.

A-Qiu did not tell the nephew about that night. She did not tell anyone. She rolled the embroidery carefully and put it in the flat file between two sheets of tissue. She wrote a note on a card, and on the card she wrote the date and the place and the words *held the frame*, because the archive needed to know how the last window had been made. She had made a rule that the record should say the true thing, even when the true thing was that she had knelt on a floor and held a hoop for an old woman while she worked.

The nephew asked her, at the door, why she wanted it.

"Because it is the record," said A-Qiu.

"It is a sewing," said the nephew. "It is a picture of a street that is not there. What good is it?"

A-Qiu looked at him. He had lost weight. He had the specific thinness of a man who has been carrying something for a long time and has finally put it down and found that the carrying had become his shape.

"It is the accounts," she said. "She kept the accounts, and somebody has to keep the accounts of the accounts."

He did not understand her, and that was all right. He left, and A-Qiu put the tube on the shelf in the office beside the exercise book and the folder and the urn, which she had not yet decided what to do with.

That night she opened the satellite map of the city on the laptop and went to where Taiping Street had been. The row was gone, and number seventeen was gone. There was a rectangle of fresh gray, and beside it the beginning of a new foundation. The renderings on the developer's site showed the lanterns and the shutters and the slogan that said the old streets would tell new stories. The street in the rendering did not have a single human figure in it. It did not have the button shop, and it did not have the fish woman with one eye. She zoomed in until the buildings were gray shapes and the street was a line. Then she closed the laptop and went to the shelf and unrolled the embroidery one more time and looked at the gold window burning in the dark, and then she rolled it up and put it away and turned off the office lamp and went home.

## 15. The Paper Stove

A-Po was brought back to Guangzhou to be burned, because that was what she had asked for, and the funeral was at the same parlor across the river where A-Qiu had buried her grandmother.

It was a smaller room than the grandmother's had been. There was the photograph of A-Po in the middle of her life, in the coat with the collar, and there were fewer wreaths. The mahjong women came, Lai and the two others, and they stood together and did not insult anyone. At the end, Lai put a tile on the altar, which was a white dragon, and said, "She never had that one," and someone laughed, and it was the only laugh of the service.

Kai-wen did the arrangements. He did them the way a man does a thing he has been dreading and has rehearsed, with a list and a folder, and he was calm, and he was competent. He cried twice in the corridor where no one could see, and came back with his face washed.

There were two urns on the altar, which was not usual. One was A-Po's, and one was Sam's, the one that had spent twenty years under the stove and the rest of the winter in A-Qiu's cupboard. A-Qiu had brought it in the canvas bag when Kai-wen asked, and she had stood in the corridor with the bag and handed it to him. He had not asked how she came to have it, and she had not told him, and that was the whole of the conversation they had about the dig.

Kai-wen bought the paper goods from a shop in the lane behind the parlor. The shop was the one where Mak had worked for fifty years, and Mak was there, because he was still there, and he sold Kai-wen the paper things: the money, the clothes, the house, and a paper stove.

He had to ask for the stove.

"It is not a standard item," said Mak.

"I want the standard item," said Kai-wen. "The stove. The kitchen stove. There is a Kitchen God in the house and he reports every New Year, and if the stove is gone, there is nowhere for him to come back to." He said it flatly, the way he said things he had decided to say, and then he looked at the floor, because he had heard himself. "My aunt would have wanted it."

Mak looked at him for a while. He was old, and his hands had ink on them, and he had been asked for many things in his life.

"You are the nephew," he said.

"Yes."

"She talked about you."

"She talked about everyone."

"She said you were the one who signed the paper."

Kai-wen did not answer. Mak turned to the bench and began to build the stove: a bamboo frame, paper, paste, and a small gold foil flame for the fire. The flame was not standard. He put it in without being asked, and it was the only extravagance in the whole order.

They burned the paper things on the last morning, in the furnace at the back. The paper house went in, and the money, and the clothes. Last of all went the paper stove, with its gold flame, and the gold went up before the paper had finished burning, the way it always does.

A-Qiu stood with the heat on her face and did not cry. Neither did Kai-wen, on the other side of the furnace, though he had his hand over his mouth and stood that way for a long time.

Afterward he found her in the corridor and gave her the envelope, which was something A-Po had left with the funeral people, and which Kai-wen had been told to give to the lawyer. There was a folded paper inside, in A-Po's hand, which was large and round and had been taught to her at a village school before the war, and on it were four words. They were not a message like a message. They were a note, the way she wrote a note for the milk.

*The stove was never about the ashes. But don't tell her I said that.*

A-Qiu read it twice. Then she folded it and put it in the pocket of her coat.

"She left it with the man at the parlor," said Kai-wen. "She told him to wait until I was there, so I would see her say it to you." He looked at the closed door of the furnace room. "She never told me what it meant."

"She never told anyone what anything meant," said A-Qiu.

"That is true." He almost laughed, and did not, and the almost was enough. "I signed her paper, and now I have bought her a stove, and I still do not know what she wanted. Do you?"

A-Qiu thought about the kitchen, and the slab, and the urn in the red cloth, and the letters in the flue. She thought about the small bundle with the single word on the band, in a room overlooking a car park in Shenzhen.

"She wanted the accounts kept," she said.

"That is not a thing a person wants."

"It is if you are the last one who can keep them."

Kai-wen looked at her, and for the first time he looked at her the way his aunt had looked at her, which was the way you look at a good tile.

"Then keep them," he said. "I cannot."

## 16. The Guest Room

Ruo came home on a Friday in the spring, and she stood in the door of the guest room for a while before she said anything.

The room had stopped being a studio in the autumn. It had become the archive, and A-Qiu had known it and had not stopped it. The board was against the wall. The filing boxes were stacked two deep along the window. The drives were in a tin on the shelf, and the paper records were in the cabinet, and the cabinet was where the drawing board used to be. There was a ledger of the street on the desk. There was a box of Sam's letters on the chair. The room smelled of paper and camphor and the particular smell of a thing that is being kept.

Ruo looked at it for a long time.

"I am not angry," she said.

A-Qiu was at the desk. She had been writing a room record, and she put the pen down.

"I know you are not angry," said A-Qiu.

"I want to say it right. You deserve it said right. I am not angry, and I am not jealous, and it is not about the time. It is not about the Sundays, and it is not about the money, and it is not about the street. It is about this room."

A-Qiu did not say anything.

"When we moved in, the room was mine. I drew every morning at that window. That is not a small thing to me. That is the only thing I have ever wanted to do. I did it in this room, and now the room is a shelf, and the shelf is not mine." She looked at A-Qiu. "You are already married to a street that isn't yours."

A-Qiu did not argue.

That was the thing they would each remember. It was the thing they would each describe, years later, in different cities, to different people, in the same few words. A-Qiu did not argue. There was an argument available, and the argument was that the street was the work and the work was the life and Ruo had known it when they started. But the argument was also a lie. The room had been Ruo's and the room was gone, and A-Qiu had let it go, one box at a time, over three years, and had never once asked.

She could not say the true thing. The true thing was that she had not asked because she had known the answer, and the answer was that the work and the

room could not both be kept, and she had chosen the work without ever saying so. A person who has chosen without saying so cannot argue when the choice is named.

Ruo packed the board and the rolls and the tools. She did it in an afternoon, and she did it neatly, because she was an architect and packing was a drawing of a vacant room. She did not take the drawing of the first flat. She left it in the folder, and A-Qiu understood that the drawing was a gift and not a possession, and that a gift goes with the person who was given it.

At the door Ruo did the thing that A-Qiu had not expected. She asked to walk the flat one more time.

"Will you walk it with me?" said Ruo.

They walked it. The front room; the kitchen; the bathroom; the bedroom; the guest room. A-Qiu counted the steps without meaning to, and Ruo looked at the light. At the window Ruo stopped, and looked at the place where the board had stood, and at the marks on the wall that the boxes had made. Neither of them said anything.

At the front door Ruo stopped again.

"Remember it," said Ruo.

"I will."

"I know you will," said Ruo. It was not a compliment, and it was not a complaint. It was the last thing she said in the flat. Then she took her bags down the stairs, and A-Qiu stood at the door and listened to her go, and did not call after her, and did not cry.

The flat was quiet after.

A-Qiu did not move. She lived in the flat for four more years, and the guest room stayed the archive, and the board never came back to the window. The window light was the light A-Qiu had always remembered, and the room was the room, and she did not put anything in the space where the board had been. There was a rectangle of unfaded paint on the wall by the window, and it was the shape of the board. A-Qiu looked at it every morning. It was the only drawing in the room that Ruo had left.

## 17. The Circle

A-Po's mahjong circle was the street's intelligence service, and everyone in the street knew it and no one admitted it.

The circle was four women, and the four women were A-Po, Lai, Aunty Ho, and a fourth who changed every few years and was always treated as a probationer. They met on Sundays in the back room, and they played for small money, and the small money was not the point. The point was the table, and the table was where the street told itself what had happened: the water; the assessment; the offer; the neighbor at number three who had signed; the neighbor at number nine who had not. All of it came to the table, and all of it left the table, and by the evening the whole street knew, which was the function of the circle and was never called the function of the circle.

On a Sunday in the autumn, A-Qiu heard the whole of the squeeze at the table.

"The committee says the water is a maintenance issue," said Lai.

"The developer's man told my nephew there is a special fund for the elderly," said Aunty Ho.

"What did the woman at the shop say?" said A-Po.

"She said the ninth is going to sign."

"The ninth is not going to sign," said A-Po. "The ninth is going to be the last one after me, and the ninth is going to sign in the spring, and by then the water will be off and the ninth will call it the water."

"Who told you the fund is real?" said Lai.

"Nobody told me it is real," said Aunty Ho. "I am telling you it is what they said."

"Then it is not real," said A-Po. "When they tell you a thing is a fund, go and look at the fund. If you cannot look at the fund, the fund is not a fund. The fund is a sentence."

A-Qiu wrote it down that night. It was true, and it happened, and the ninth signed in the spring.

A-Qiu learned the street from that table. She sat at the side with the tea and listened, and the women did not stop talking for her, because she was the lawyer and the lawyer was a kind of furniture, and furniture does not repeat what it hears. Lai would say what the committee had said at the meeting. Aunty Ho

would say what the developer's man had said to her nephew. The probationer would say what the woman at the shop had said to her sister, and A-Po would sort the whole of it into true and false and useful and useless, and by the end of the afternoon A-Qiu would have four new facts and one new lie and the lie would be the most useful of the five, because a lie tells you what the liar wants you to believe.

A-Po cheated. She cheated the way she did everything, which is to say completely and without apology. She kept the tile she wanted under her palm and moved it when the hand went past. She counted the discards and knew what was left in the wall. She played as if she did not, and she won, and she denied winning. Lai watched her do it every week and said nothing, because the saying of it was the only thing that could make it worse. Aunty Ho cheated too, but badly, and was caught, and denied it, and was forgiven, because a bad cheat is a kind of compliment, and a good cheat is a kind of theft.

The table changed as the street emptied.

The Chens moved first, and Aunty Ho's daughter came for her in the spring. The probationer stopped coming because she had found a job on the other side of the river. By the last winter the circle was three, and then two, and the two were A-Po and Lai. They played two-handed on Sundays and did not call it the circle, because two is not a circle and Lai would not have the word.

"You should stop," said Lai, when the water was off and the scaffolding was up. "You should come and stay with me. The table will come."

"The table is here," said A-Po. "I am not moving the table."

"The table is a table."

"The table is the street," said A-Po. "If I move the table, the street has no Sunday."

Lai did not argue. She came every Sunday with the bus and the bag and the complaints about the walk. She sat in the back room with A-Po and played two-handed. They cheated each other and insulted each other and did not talk about the case, except when they did, which was always.

The last Sunday of the circle was in the winter, a week before the water went off for good. Lai brought the oranges and A-Po made the soup and they played

four rounds, and A-Po won three and lost one on purpose, the way she had lost to Lai for forty years, and at the end Lai did not get up.

"Next week," said Lai.

"Next week," said A-Po.

Next week A-Po was in the hospital, and the week after that the house came down, and the circle did not meet again. Lai came to the funeral, and stood at the back, and did not insult anyone, because there was no one left to insult, and at the end she put a tile on the altar, which was a white dragon, and said, "She never had that one," and someone laughed, and it was the only laugh of the service.

A-Qiu kept the white dragon. Lai gave it to her at the door. She said the tile was A-Po's least favourite and that A-Po had never once in forty years held a white dragon. She said a person who never holds a white dragon is a person who has never needed the last tile, because she has already won by other means. A-Qiu did not understand it. She kept the tile anyway. It was in the archive now, on the shelf with the cards and the register, and it was the only thing in the room that had been a game.

## 18. The Daughter

Kai-wen's daughter came to Guangzhou once, in the summer of the case, and she did not want to be there.

Her name was Chan Wing-sze, and she was fourteen. She lived in Shenzhen in a flat with a lift and a swimming pool and a school that cost more than her father liked to say. She had been told to visit her great-aunt, and she had come, and she sat in the front room of number seventeen with her phone in her hand and her earphones around her neck and the expression of a person who has been brought to a place with no air-conditioning and no reason.

A-Po looked at her for a long time.

"You are the granddaughter," she said.

"I am the great-niece," said Wing-sze.

"That is what I said."

Wing-sze looked at the room. She had never seen a room like it. It had the ancestral shelf and the sofa and the old television and the smell of the incense. There was no room in her life that smelled of incense, and she did not know where to put her eyes, so she put them on her phone.

A-Po got up and went to the kitchen and came back with the soup. She put it in front of the girl and stood over her until she picked up the spoon.

"I am not hungry," said Wing-sze.

"Eat," said A-Po.

Wing-sze ate. She ate the whole bowl, because A-Po was standing over her, and because the soup was the best thing she had eaten in a month. She was fourteen and did not know how to say the second thing, so she said the first thing.

"It is good," she said.

"Of course it is good," said A-Po, and sat down, and watched her finish it, and did not hide the pleasure she took in watching a thin person eat.

That was the whole of the visit, in a way. The girl ate the soup and looked at the room and asked one question, which was why the house had the marks on the wall. A-Po told her about the stickers, the BED and the WARDROBE and the ALTAR, and the girl laughed, and it was the first time she had laughed in the room. Then she asked the other question, which was whether A-Po was going to leave. A-Po said no. The girl said, "But the flat is better," and A-Po said, "The flat has a lift and no Sunday." The girl did not understand, and A-Po did not explain, because there is no explaining a thing to a person who has never had a Sunday.

Kai-wen came for her in the evening. He stood in the doorway with the car keys and the tired face, and he looked at his daughter and at his aunt and did not say anything for a moment.

"Did you eat?" he said.

"She ate," said A-Po.

"Good," said Kai-wen, and it was the most relieved A-Qiu ever saw him.

Wing-sze said goodbye to A-Po at the door. It was a real goodbye, and neither of them made it a scene. Then she got into the car and put the earphones in and did not look back at the street, and the car went up the road and away.

A-Qiu watched it go. She understood that the girl would never live in a street like this one. She would live in a tower and she would be fine and she would never know what she had not been given. That was not a tragedy, and it was not a loss, and it was the whole of why the case was going to be lost.

A-Po went back into the house and sat down. She did not say anything about the girl for a while. Then she said the thing that A-Qiu wrote down.

"She will not come back," said A-Po. "Not to the street. The street will not be here. But she is mine, and she does not know it, and one day a thing will break in her and she will want to know where she came from. There will be nobody to ask, because the ones who could answer will be dead, and the ones who could have kept it did not." She looked at the ancestral shelf. "That is what the paper is for. That is what the record is for. Not for me. For the one who comes back."

A-Qiu wrote it down. She thought about the girl in the car with the earphones, and she thought about herself at ten, in the kitchen, listening to the grandmother tell the story wrong. She understood that she had been the one who came back, and that she had come back in time, and that the whole of her work was a letter to a girl who was not born yet and would not know the address.

## 19. The Kitchen God

On the twenty-third of the twelfth month, A-Po cleaned the stove and sent the Kitchen God up to heaven. She did it in the last winter before the move, and the whole of the ritual was in one room.

The Kitchen God lives at the stove. He watches the family all year, and on the twenty-third or the twenty-fourth of the last month he goes up to heaven and reports on the family to the god above. The family gives him something sweet so that he speaks sweetly. In the Cantonese way it is malt syrup, and you smear it on the paper lips of the little god and on the edge of the stove. You burn the paper, and the god goes up in the smoke with the syrup in his mouth and the family in his report.

A-Po had done it every year for fifty years. She did not do it for the god. She would have said, if asked, that the god was a custom and the custom was the family, and that she did not believe in the god any more than she believed in the weather, and that she did the thing anyway because a person who does not keep the custom is a person with no year. But she did the whole of it, the whole of the traditional thing, and she did it with the seriousness of a woman who does not believe and keeps it anyway, which is the most serious kind of keeping.

The stove was the brick stove in the back kitchen. It had not cooked a meal in years, and it was the one thing in the house she would not explain, and A-Qiu

had learned not to ask. A-Po cleaned it with a cloth and a bowl of water. She took the old paper image from the niche and set the new one against the wall. She put the malt syrup on the lips of the new one and on the old one and on the edge of the stove. She lit the old one and let it burn in the little dish. The smoke went up the flue. Was the flue that had the letters in it. A-Qiu watched the smoke go up and understood for the first time the whole of the room.

"The flue is the chimney," said A-Po. "The chimney goes up. Everything that goes up the chimney goes to heaven. The letters went up the chimney. The god goes up the chimney. That is why the stove matters. It is the door."

A-Qiu looked at the stove and did not say what she knew, which was that the ashes were under it. She had not said it and she would not say it. She had learned by then that some doors you do not open, and the whole of the case was in the not opening. The not opening was the same as the record, because the record was what you kept when you could not say the thing aloud.

A-Po finished the ritual and put the malt syrup on the shelf and made the tea.

"Does the god hear you?" said A-Qiu. She was tired, and she sat down in the chair with the arms, and she looked at the stove for a while.

"Next year," said A-Po, "there will be no stove."

"There will be a kitchen," said A-Qiu.

"A kitchen is not a stove," said A-Po. "A kitchen is a room with a tap. The god lives at the fire. If there is no fire, the god has no address." She drank the tea. "I will take the new image to the flat and I will put it on the counter next to the gas ring, and I will burn it there, and the god will go up the extractor fan. The extractor fan goes into the wall, and the wall goes into the car park, and that is the whole of the new year in the new flat. The god will go up and come back and the extractor fan will have the report, and the report will say that the family moved and the stove stayed."

A-Qiu wrote it down. She wrote the date and the syrup and the flue and the extractor fan, and she wrote the sentence that A-Po had said. It was the whole of the movement of the family from the village to the tower, in one image, delivered by a woman cleaning a stove. Then she put the card in the file, and she sat with A-Po and drank the tea. The two of them looked at the stove the way you look at

a person who is going, which is to say not at the person but at the room, so that the room can hold the leaving.

## 20. Mid-Autumn

The last Mid-Autumn on Taiping Street fell in the autumn of the squeeze, and by then there were four households left on the row, and the festival was four households wide.

Mid-Autumn is the moon festival, and in the Cantonese way it is lanterns and mooncakes and the family on the roof or the balcony looking at the moon. The whole street used to hang the lanterns across the lane: the paper ones, the plastic ones, the ones the children made. The whole lane would glow. The families would sit out with the tea and the mooncakes and the pomelo and the little taro. The children would run the lane with the lit lanterns and the adults would tell them not to run and they would run.

That year there were four families and the lane was dark, and A-Po hung two lanterns, one at her gate and one at the gate of the empty number fifteen, and A-Qiu asked her why the second lantern.

"For the house," said A-Po. "The house is empty. The house still has a Mid-Autumn."

A-Qiu helped her hang the lanterns. They were the old paper kind, the ones you fold out, the red and the gold. A-Po had kept them from the year before and the year before that, and the paper was thin and had been mended with tape. A-Qiu went to the shop for the mooncakes and A-Po made the tea and they sat on the two stools at the gate and watched the lane.

The moon came up over the towers, which meant that the street did not see the moon until it was high. The towers were between the lane and the east, and the whole of the old view of the moonrise had gone up in glass. That was the thing the grandmother would have said. A-Po said it instead.

"The moon is the same," said A-Po. "The moon is the only thing the city cannot build. They can build the tower and the lake and the mall and the road, and the moon comes up over all of them the same. The people in the tower look at the moon and the people in the lane look at the moon and the moon does not care." She bit the mooncake. "That is the comfort. It is a small comfort, and it is the only one that the developer cannot sell."

"Does the moon care?" said A-Qiu.

She looked at the moon over the towers. The moon was the moon, and the moonlight came down the lane and lit the two lanterns, and the two lanterns were the whole of the festival. The festival was the whole of the street, which was four households and two lanterns and a woman who had hung a lantern for an empty house.

The neighbors came out. Aunty Ho's niece came with the child, and the Chens' son came with the beer, and the four households sat at the gate and ate the mooncakes and did not talk about the case. It was the moon festival, and because a festival is a truce, and because the whole of the custom is the truce. The child ran the lane with the lantern and was told not to run and ran. The whole lane was dark except for the two lanterns and the one lantern the child carried, and for one evening the street was the street.

At the end A-Po gave the child the *lai see*, which was not the New Year and was not the custom, and the mother said it was not the custom and A-Po said the child was the custom. The mother took the envelope, and the whole thing took fifteen seconds and was the last gift of the street.

A-Qiu wrote the night down. She wrote the two lanterns and the empty house and the moon over the towers and the *lai see* and the child. She wrote the sentence that A-Po had said about the moon, because it was the only comfort in the whole of the case. A comfort that survives a demolition is a rare thing, and the moon had been there before the village and would be there after the tower. The moon was the only record that did not need a card.

## 21. The Sevens

After the funeral came the sevens, and the sevens are the forty-nine days, and A-Qiu did not know the whole of the custom until she had to keep it.

The custom is old and it is a calendar. From the day of the death, every seventh day is a ritual, and the rituals run for seven weeks. The seventh day of each week is a station, and each station has its meaning and its scripture and its officiant and its food. The first seven is the first judgment; the last seven is the last. The family keeps them all if it can, and if it cannot it keeps the first and the last, and even the families that keep nothing keep the first. The sevens are the

family's duty, and a duty is the thing a family can do with its grief when it cannot do anything else.

A-Po had no children, so the sevens belonged to the nephew, and that was the whole of the custom's logic.

Kai-wen did the first seven in Guangzhou, at the little hall by the funeral parlor, because A-Po had asked to be burned in Guangzhou and her ashes were in the wall. He did the second seven in Shenzhen, at a small hall near his office, because of the work. He did the third at a temple in Shenzhen. The fourth he almost missed, and the fifth he missed, and the sixth he did with the monk and the tablet the monk had written. The seventh he came back for, on the forty-ninth day, and A-Qiu went with him.

The seventh seven was short. There was the altar, the tablet, the incense, the monk, and the food that A-Po had liked. The food was the crackling and the soup with the lotus root, and Kai-wen had bought the pork from the same shop and made the soup in a hotel kitchenette. He put it on the altar and did not eat any of it, because the food was for the dead.

"Do you believe it?" said Kai-wen, at the altar.

"Believe what, exactly?"

"That she is here, that the tablet is her, that the food goes anywhere."

A-Qiu looked at the tablet. She had been asked that question at every archive Thursday, in different words, by the families who came to find their own names. She had learned to answer it the way she answered everything, truthfully and without comfort.

"The custom does not require you to believe," said A-Qiu. "The custom requires you to come. Seven times. Every seventh day, for seven weeks."

She looked at the tablet.

"That is the whole of it: the coming is the belief, and the food is the coming, and the tablet is the coming."

Kai-wen was quiet for a while. Then he did the thing that A-Qiu had not expected, which was to say the whole of it, at last, at the altar.

"I did not do the fifth," said Kai-wen. "I was in a meeting about a shipment. I had the tablet on the desk and I looked at the clock and the hour went and I did not say anything, and the shipment was on time."

He looked at the altar.

"I have not forgiven myself for the shipment, and I do not mean the sevens; I mean the shipment. I mean that on the day I was supposed to be with her I was glad the shipment was on time."

A-Qiu did not tell him that the paper stove was not nothing. She could have, and the not-saying was the whole of the office's manners. She had held the frame for the last window, and dug the ashes out of the rubble, and catalogued a street into a basement. She knew better than anyone in the city that the paper things are the ones that last, because the paper things are the record, and the record is the only thing that survives the fire. She did not say it. The sevens are not the place for the lecture; they are the place for the coming.

They burned the paper at the end of the seventh seven, on the pavement outside the hall. The fire was small and the smoke went up between the buildings, and Kai-wen watched it go and A-Qiu watched him watch it, and neither of them said anything. Then Kai-wen took the tablet home to Shenzhen and put it on the shelf with the photograph and the electronic mahjong tablet. He lit the incense in the morning and did it by himself, the way the custom says: the sevens end and the remembering does not, and the remembering is a morning, every morning, with a stick of incense and a name.

## 22. The Paper Man

Mak's shop was in the lane off the *qilou* street, and A-Qiu went there for the first time in the autumn, before the New Year, because A-Po had sent her for the paper.

The shop was narrow and deep and smelled of dust and incense and wet paper. The paper hung everywhere and never moved: the gray, the gold, the orange of the horses' paper. There were the paper phones and the paper cars and the paper watches and the paper mansions. There was a shelf at the back for the things Mak thought were right. The shelf was not for sale. Or it was for sale to the people who knew what it was.

Mak was seventy and had made paper things since he was a boy.

He made the *zhǐzhā*, the paper offerings, the things that are burned for the dead. The craft is old and it is a set of small skills, and Mak had all of them. He split the bamboo into the thin strips with a knife and a thumb, and he built the

frame, and he pasted the paper over the frame, and he painted the details and he foiled the gold. A paper house takes him a week. A paper car takes a day. A paper phone takes the time it takes to fold a phone, which is nothing. The people who buy the phones do not know that the phone is nothing, and Mak sells them the phones anyway. A shop is a shop.

"The phone is not a phone," said Mak. "It is a hope. The hope is that the dead can hear you. The hope is good; the phone is a shape for the hope; a shape is a shape."

He put down the brush. "The house is different. The house is a house. When I make a house, I make the house of a person: the doors, the rooms, the stairs, the courtyard, the well. I make the house they lived in."

He set the brush down.

"If I make a house that is not the house they lived in, I have made a bad house, and the dead will be a stranger in it."

A-Qiu looked at the shelf at the back. There was a paper house on it, finished, with the doors and the rooms and a small courtyard and a small well. The door had a tiny paper couplet in red, and the whole of it was no bigger than a shoebox.

"Whose house is that?" said A-Qiu.

"Nobody's," said Mak. "I make one a year for the shelf. I make the house of my own mother. She had a house with a pear tree in the yard. I make the pear tree too, in the autumn, when the paper for the leaves is the right green, and in the spring I make it again in the blossom." He looked at the house. "I have made my mother's house thirty times, and I could make it in the dark. That is the craft: the craft is not the paper, the craft is knowing the house."

A-Qiu understood, standing in the shop, that Mak was the only other person in the city who did what she did. He kept the houses. He kept them in paper. She kept them in records. Neither of them could keep the real thing. Both of them had spent their lives learning the shape of the rooms so that the house would not be a stranger to the dead.

She bought the paper for A-Po, which was the New Year paper and the incense, and at the door she asked the question that she would ask again, at the funeral, in the winter, when it would matter.

"If I told you a house, could you make it?"

Mak looked at her. He was old and he had ink on his fingers and he had been asked for many things in his life.

"Tell me the house," said Mak.

A-Qiu told him the Xiancun house. She told him the front room and the passage and the back room. The well and the shelf and the beam and the jacaranda. The steps from the mouth of the lane and from the door to the well and from the well to the back room. Mak listened and did not write anything down. At the end he nodded once, as if she had answered a different question, and turned to his bench and began to select the bamboo for the frame.

"Come back in the winter," said Mak. "I will have it ready."

"You do not have to die to have a house made. People forget that. A house can be made for a person who is still living, and burned later, and the dead get the house you made when you still remembered them, and the remembering is the whole of the craft."

## 23. The Tea House

A-Po took A-Qiu to the tea house on the morning of the settlement meeting, because the meeting was at eleven and there was nothing to do at nine, and because A-Po believed that a person should not go into a fight on an empty stomach.

The tea house was on the corner of the *qilou* street, two floors, with the steamers at the door and the trolleys and the noise. It was the old kind, where the tea is poured by the customer and the food comes past on the trolley, and you point, and the auntie puts the dish on the table and stamps the card. The tea house is the Cantonese institution, the thing the old people mean when they say they are going out, and the whole of it is a set of small rules that nobody has written down and everybody knows.

A-Po knew all of them. She knew the rule about pouring for the elders first, and the rule about the finger-tapping, which is how you thank the person who pours without speaking. If the pourer is an elder, you tap with the whole hand, a fist, the fingers folded, three taps. If the pourer is your own generation, you tap with two fingers. If the pourer is younger than you, one finger. The whole custom comes from a story about an emperor who travelled in disguise and poured the tea for his servants. The servants were so frightened of being seen to

receive the emperor that they tapped the table instead of bowing, and the tapping is a whole-body prostration done with two fingers. The whole of the tea house is the whole of the custom, and the custom is two fingers on a table.

A-Qiu had learned it as a child, from the grandmother, and she did it without thinking, and A-Po watched her do it and was satisfied.

They ate the *yum cha*. A-Po ordered the har gow and the siu mai and the rice roll and the chicken feet and the turnip cake, and she ordered too much. She made A-Qiu eat the extra, and she watched her eat it the way she watched everything. The trolley went past, and the auntie called the dishes, and the tables were full of the old men with the newspapers and the families with the children and the wives with the shopping. The whole room was loud and the tea was the tea.

"Do you ever eat with anyone?" said A-Po.

"I eat."

"You eat alone. It does not count." A-Po put a har gow in A-Qiu's bowl. "Eating alone is feeding. Eating with a person is eating. The difference is the whole of the tea house. If you want to understand the Cantonese, do not read the history. Come to the tea house at nine and watch the old men. The old men come every day for thirty years, and they sit at the same table, and they drink the same tea, and they say nothing. If you took the tea house away they would die in a month, and not of the tea. Of the table."

A-Qiu ate the har gow. She looked at the room, at the old men and the families and the auntie with the trolley. She understood the thing that the file had never been able to tell her, which was that the culture was not in the festivals after all, and was not in the big days and the photographs. The festivals are the big days, and the big days are the photograph. The culture is in the ordinary, in the nine o'clock, in the tea and the tapping and the same table for thirty years. The festivals are what you keep. The tea house is what you are.

She paid, because A-Po paid, which is the Cantonese way. The elder reaches for the bill and the younger argues, and the elder wins, and the younger does not insist, because the insisting is the custom and the losing is the custom, and the whole of it is the respect, dressed as a fight about money.

They walked to the settlement meeting through the *qilou* arcade, and A-Po was slow, and A-Qiu slowed to her. At the door of the meeting room A-Po stopped and did the thing she did, which was to set her collar and to become, in the space of one breath, the woman who would not move.

"Eat first," said A-Po. "Now we can fight."

## 24. The Last Four

By the second winter there were four households left on Taiping Street, and the four of them met on Sundays in A-Po's back room.

There was A-Po, and the herbalist, who had closed his shop and had not moved, and the widow at number six, who had a son in Canada, and the cobbler, who had the bench in the arcade and did not want to carry it. The four of them had nothing in common except the street and the refusal, and the refusal was enough. Every Sunday they sat at the table with the tea and the intelligence, and they did not call themselves anything, because a thing that calls itself a committee is a thing the district can negotiate with, and a person is harder to negotiate with than a committee.

A-Qiu came to the meetings. She was the lawyer and the fourth chair and the one who said the truth, and the truth was always the same truth.

"Is the offer good?" said the cobbler.

"It is good," said A-Qiu. "The law is against you. You will lose, in a year or two, and the flat will be on the fifteenth floor, and the low floor will be gone. That is the arithmetic."

She looked at the four of them.

"If you want to sign, sign now, and get the low floor while the low floor is there. If you want to hold, hold with your eyes open, and do not tell me afterward that you did not know the arithmetic."

The four of them heard it every Sunday, and every Sunday they held.

The herbalist held because his father had held the shop, and the shop was his father. The widow held because her son in Canada had told her to hold and was sending money, which was easy for a son in Canada. The cobbler held because he had mended the shoes of the whole street for thirty years, and the bench was the only place he had ever earned a living. A-Po held because of the stove, and said

nothing about the stove, and the four of them understood that A-Po's reason was a private one and did not ask.

The pressure came through the families, the way it always came.

The herbalist's daughter came from Foshan and stayed a week and left in tears and did not speak to her father for a month. The widow's son called from Canada every day, and then every other day, and then once a week. The cobbler had no family, and the developer's man came to the bench and sat on the stool and talked for an hour about the safety assessment. The cobbler mended a shoe and did not answer. The man left, and the cobbler came to the meeting and said he had been offered a shop in the new arcade and had said no, and the four of them drank the tea.

The four held until the spring, and then the herbalist signed.

He did not tell the others. He signed on a Friday and told A-Po on the Sunday, standing in the doorway, because he was ashamed. He said his daughter was pregnant, and his wife was not well, and the flat was on the fifteenth floor but the money was in the bank. A-Po looked at him for a long time. Then she said the thing that A-Qiu wrote down.

"You kept the shop for your father," said A-Po. "Your daughter is keeping her child. There is no shame in it."

She poured the tea.

"There is only the arithmetic, and the arithmetic is that the street is going, and the people are going with it."

She set the pot down.

"The ones who stay to the end are not the bravest. They are the ones with the least to lose."

The herbalist went, and then the widow went, and then there were two, and the two were A-Po and the cobbler. Then the cobbler signed, in the autumn, and came to the meeting with the news and the oranges, and A-Po took the oranges and said nothing, and the two of them sat at the table and played two-handed mahjong, which is not a circle, and did not talk about the case, and the cobbler went with the low floor that A-Po could have had.

A-Po did not blame him. A-Qiu watched her not blame him, and understood, over the whole of the case, that the resistance was never a wall. It was a set

of people who were each holding for their own reason, and each reason had a price, and the price was different for each of them. The developer knew the price and did not know the reason, and the knowing of the price was the whole of the playbook. The playbook did not defeat the street. The playbook understood the street, which is not the same thing and is worse.

## 25. The Storm

The typhoon came in the second autumn, and it came the way the big ones came, which was sideways, and A-Po would not leave the house.

The warning had gone up on the committee board. The committee had come to the door and asked her to go to the shelter. The developer's man had come with the committee and offered the hotel. A-Po had said no to both. The house was the house and a storm was a storm and she had sat through worse in the same room. The cobbler had gone to his sister in Panyu. The widow had gone to the shelter. The herbalist was gone. The whole of the row was empty except for number seventeen, and number seventeen had a woman of eighty-five in it and a light in the upper window and the scaffolding outside.

A-Qiu went to the street in the morning, before the wind, and did not ask A-Po to leave, because she had learned that asking was a ritual and the ritual had no weight. She brought the water and the tinned food and the torch and the radio, and she put them on the table. A-Po looked at them and did not say thank you, because the thank-you was not the family's way.

"You should go," said A-Po.

"I am staying."

"There is no room for two."

"Then I will sleep in the chair."

A-Po looked at her for a long time. Then she did the thing that A-Qiu had not expected. She moved the chair with the arms to the middle of the room, away from the window and the scaffolding, and put the second stool beside it. Then she said the thing that was almost a compliment, which was that a lawyer was no use dead and that if A-Qiu was going to be foolish she should at least be foolish on the inside wall.

The wind came in the afternoon. The green mesh on the scaffolding went flat and then tore. The whole of the row was a sound. The rain came through the

windows in a spray. The upper window of number seventeen shook. The small lamp on the sill went out and A-Po lit it again and it went out again and she lit it a third time and set it on the floor under the table, where the wind could not reach it. The upper window of number seventeen was the only lit window in the whole of the dark row. The whole of the row was a cage of scaffolding. The light was a small light under a table. The woman who kept it kept it the way she had kept it for sixty years, which is to say without explanation.

"Why do you keep the light?" said A-Qiu, in the dark, over the wind.

"You asked me that in the first week," said A-Po.

"I am asking again."

A-Po was quiet for a while. The wind took the fence and the mesh and the whole of the lane. The light under the table was steady. At the end A-Po said the thing she had never said, which was the closest she ever came to the whole truth.

"The light is the house," said A-Po. "A house with a light in it is a house that is somewhere. A dark house is a house that has stopped. The city wants the street dark, because a dark street is a street that has already gone, and the whole of the playbook is the dark. So I keep the light, and they cannot have the dark. That is the whole of my objection, and the stove is the whole of my reason, and the two are the same thing. I am not going to explain the stove to you or to the district or to the man with the folder."

A-Qiu did not ask about the stove. She did not need to. She had dug it out of the rubble in the first cold rain and she knew what was under it. A-Po knew she knew. The two of them sat in the chair and the stool under the table with the light. The storm went over the street, and neither of them said the thing. The not-saying was the whole of the family, and the night was the night.

The storm passed before dawn. The row stood. The mesh was gone and the scaffolding was bent and the upper window of number seventeen was cracked. The light under the table was still lit. A-Po looked at the street and said that the street was still there. A-Qiu looked at the street and understood that the storm had not been the trial. The trial was the quiet, and the quiet was coming.

## 26. What the Street Kept

The renovation began in the spring, and the first thing the renovation did was take down the row.

They did not call it demolition. The permits said renovation, and the hoarding said the old streets would tell new stories, and the machines came in the night with the floodlights on. That is how the city removes a thing it has promised to protect. A-Qiu stood at the corner on the third night and watched. The floodlights were white and cold, and they turned the arcade into a stage. The machines worked inside the light with their arms up, and the row came apart behind the mesh in the dark the way a thing comes apart when no one is allowed to look.

She had known it would come to this. She had known it since the safety assessment; she would have known it since the water, if she had let herself. The friendly face of the scheme had been the face it wore while the row was still occupied. Once the row was empty, the face came off, the way a face comes off.

She stood at the corner for a long time with her phone, and she did not take a photograph, because a photograph of a demolition is a photograph of a demolition. She had learned that the thing that mattered was not the machine. The thing that mattered was the footprint, and the footprint was already in the folder, in the records, in the steps and the rooms and the wells and the names. She had what the street had. The machines could not reach it.

The archive came together that spring.

It was not a decision. It was a row of things on a shelf in the office, and then two shelves, and then a cabinet, because the shelf had begun to bow. There were the recordings: the van tour; the aunties; the uncles; the woman from the dried goods; the voices of the street. There were the room records, in their four-page template, hundreds of them, each one a room that somebody had stood in. There were the photographs of the doors and the lintels and the corners, from before and after. There were the letters: Sam's satchel, the bundles with the names on the bands, filed now by name and by year, a street's post office that would never deliver again. And there was the embroidery, rolled in its tube with the tissue, the whole street in thread with one gold window burning at the end of it.

A-Qiu gave the archive a name in the end, because a thing with a name is harder to throw away. She called it the street archive, which was plain, and which was the point. She wrote a card for the cabinet, and on the card she wrote the

names of the streets. After the names she wrote the words *kept by*, and then she stopped, because the name that should go there was not hers.

She put the grandmother's name. Then she put A-Po's name under it. Then she put the names of the aunties and the uncles and the women, one under another, and the card ran out of room, and she made a second card, and a third.

Chow found her doing it, late, after the office had closed.

"You cannot keep every street," said Chow.

"No."

"You are going to try."

"I am going to keep the ones that come to the window." A-Qiu set down the pen. "The rest are not mine to keep. But the ones that come, I keep."

Chow looked at the cabinet, and at the cards, and at the exercise book with the wins on one side and the losses on the other. She did not say the thing she had said before, about counting becoming the work. She said something else, which A-Qiu had not expected.

"Then I will give you a shelf," said Chow, "and you will write on the shelf that it is not the office's, because the office cannot own it. It is yours and it is theirs. And when the district asks what it is, you will tell them it is the minutes, and they will not read it, and that is the best protection there is."

"What will you do with it?" said A-Qiu.

"Nothing," said Chow. "That is not my job. That is yours."

A-Qiu looked at the row of things. The urn was not on the shelf. She had decided, in the end, to give Sam back. She had taken the urn to the columbarium where A-Po's niche was, and the man at the office had looked at the two urns and the bundle of letters and had shaken his head.

"It is against the rule," said the man. "Two in one niche."

"I know."

"I cannot do it."

"They were in one house," said A-Qiu.

The man looked at the two urns for a long time. Then he looked at the bundle of letters, and at the name on the band, which was the same name as the name on the niche. He did not read the word on the band, or he read it and did

not say it. Then he made the exception, because exceptions are made when you ask the right person on the right morning.

The two urns sat together now in the wall, under one name and two dates and a name. The bundle with the single word on the band had gone into the niche with them, unopened. That was the only letter in the whole satchel that belonged to the dead and not to the archive. The rest of the satchel stayed on the shelf, because the street's letters belonged to the street.

That was the whole of the archive, and it was not much, and it was everything that was left.

On the last night of the demolition, A-Qiu went back one more time. The floodlights were on, and the machines had worked their way down to the far end. Where the row had been there was a long open cut in the ground, and the arcade was gone, and the granite was going. She stood at the corner and looked at the white light over the place where number seventeen had been. She remembered the first night, the lit window in the dark street, the last lamp, the one light left in the row.

She did not cry. She did not have a photograph to take and she did not have a record to make, because she had already made it. She stood in the light and she counted, one more time, the steps from the corner to the door that was not there. She got the number, and she wrote it down on the back of an envelope in the pocket of her coat. Then she put the envelope in the pocket and walked to the metro and went home. Behind her the machines worked, and the light went up over the footprint, and there was nothing left in Taiping Street that could be saved except the copy, and the copy was safe.

# Interlude II

*From the archive. A letter copied by Sam, public scribe, Taiping Street, for a client; retained in the satchel when it was never collected. English translation by A-Qiu from the copy in Sam's hand. The original is in the file marked TAIPING / LETTERS / UNCOLLECTED.*

※

To my honoured father in Singapore, greetings of the season and of the new moon,

I take up the brush to write, though my hand is not steady and the words come slowly, and I ask your forgiveness for the writing, which is done by another. The scribe is a good man of the street and writes what I tell him, and he has been patient with me, and I pay him by the page.

There is little to report that is worth the paper. Your daughter-in-law is well. The second boy has begun school and is quick with numbers. The house is as it was, except that the west wall took water in the summer and we have put a board against it, and it will hold until the dry season. The well is low, as it is every year at this time, and the water is sweet in the morning and not in the afternoon, which is the way it has always been.

Our mother is well in her health, though her eyes are not what they were, and she asks after you each time the letter comes. She does not say it in words. She says it by asking whether the letter came, and when I say it came, she says nothing for a while and then talks of something else. I am writing this down because a letter should say what is true, and that is what is true.

I do not write to ask for money, and you should not read the letter that way. But I will set down the facts, and you will make of them what you will. The school fee is due at the end of the third month, and it is not a great sum, and we have part of it. The roof of the ancestral hall is leaking again and the elders have begun to talk of a collection, and I have put our name down for what we are able.

There is also the matter of the second boy's teeth, which the doctor says must be seen.

I bow and wish you the protection of the ancestors, and the health of your body, and the peace of your house.

Your unworthy son, [Name withheld by A-Qiu]

*Note in A-Qiu's hand, on the file card: Client's name unknown; the letter was never sent. The family left the street in 1987 and the letter stayed in the satchel. It is the only letter in the file in which the phrase for money is written in the same sentence as the phrase for the ancestors. Sam wrote both phrases four times that year; this is the only copy he kept.*

※

WALL THREE

# The Reckoning

> *From the "Twelve Months of Flowers" ballad*
> *I have walked the wall from the sea to the pass; I have counted the stones of it, one by one. The name was cut in the beam, and the beam is gone.*

## 1. The Lawyer for the Last Lamp

The name came from the newspaper, and it stuck the way a name sticks when it is almost true.

It was in a Sunday feature about the old streets. The writer had gone to what was left of Taiping Street, which was nothing. He had found the story of the woman with the lamp, and the lawyer who had taken her case. He knew about a third of the dig, and less of the embroidery. The headline called A-Qiu the lawyer for the last lamp. By the end of the month it was how people introduced her at conferences, and how the district referred to her in meetings, and how the queue knew her, which was the part that mattered and the part that did the damage.

The damage was this: people began to come to the window not with their own case but with the story of her case. They wanted her to take theirs because she was the one who had done the last lamp. The ones who came that way were often the ones who could not be helped, because they had come for the symbol and not for the work. A-Qiu learned to tell the difference in the first two minutes. The ones who came for the work brought paper; the ones who came for the symbol brought a version of her own story, told back to her, and expected her to be moved by it.

She was not moved by it. She was patient with it, because patience was the job, and then she did the thing she always did, which was to ask for the paper, and to read it, and to tell the truth about it. That was the whole of the method, and it did not change when the newspaper called her a name.

The archive changed, though. It had begun as a cabinet in the office, and by the second year it had a room. The district had found the office a room after the newspaper piece, and the room was easier than explaining the cabinet. The room was in the basement of a community centre; it was dry, and it had a door that locked. It held the recordings; the room records; the letters; the embroidery in its tube; the exercise books; the shelf with the cards. Students came. A woman from the university came and asked to record the recordings, which A-Qiu allowed, and which took a year. A filmmaker came and asked to film the embroidery, and A-Qiu allowed that too, and the film was shown once at a festival and never again.

A-Qiu did not become famous in the way the newspaper meant. She became known in the way a person becomes known in an office and a district and a queue, which is a smaller and more durable thing. She still took the window two mornings a week. She still wrote in the exercise book. She still went to the basement on Sundays and opened the door and stood among the records and did not touch them, which was a habit she had, and which was a way of checking that they were still there.

The lead came on a Tuesday, from a client from the Taiping Street years.

It was the Cheung mother, the old woman from the village that had been cleared, the one who had remembered the pear tree. She was older now and had moved to a flat in Panyu with her sons. She came to the window about a matter of a pension, and while A-Qiu was reading the paper she said the thing that would start it.

"They kept the tablets," said the mother.

"Who kept them?"

"The warehouse. The one at Foshan. When they cleared the village, the ancestral things went with the household goods."

"Which things?"

"The tablets, the book, the incense things. The warehouse kept them in a room, and the room had a number." She said it the way she said everything, as a fact about the weather. "My son went to ask for them, and they said the room was sealed and the room was the city's. Then they said the room was lost, and then they stopped saying anything."

A-Qiu put down the pen.

"Did you keep the receipt?"

"I kept everything," said the Cheung mother. "I am old. Keeping is what I do."

She took a plastic bag out of her handbag and put it on the counter. In the bag was an envelope, and in the envelope was a receipt, and the receipt had a warehouse name and a district and a storage number.

A-Qiu looked at the number for a long time.

She went back to her desk and opened the folder and found the papers her father had brought her three years before: the receipt for the crates under the stencil MENG, the delivery note, the storage number. She put the two receipts side by side on the desk, the Cheung mother's and her own. The warehouses were not the same and the districts were not the same, and the storage numbers were different. Both of them ended in the same three digits. That was not proof of anything, and it was the first thing in years that had felt like a door.

## 2. The Warehouse

Foshan was forty minutes by train, and A-Qiu went on a Wednesday with the two receipts in a plastic sleeve and the folder in her bag.

The address on her father's receipt was in an industrial district north of the old town, and by the time she got there the district was a residential one. The warehouse was gone, and there was a compound of new towers with a gate and a convenience store and a row of scooters. The gatekeeper had never heard of the warehouse, and the convenience store had been open four years. The oldest thing on the street was a banyan with a small earth-god shrine at its foot, and the shrine had new incense in it, and that was the only thing on the street that predated the towers.

She stood under the banyan and read the receipt again. The company name was Guangxin Storage, and the address was the one she was standing on, and the receipt was dated eleven years before, which was the year the family signed. Eleven years was not long. In eleven years a warehouse can become a compound of towers, and a street can forget, and a file can be moved three times and still exist.

She looked up the company on her phone. It was still registered, which was the first surprise. It had changed its address twice, and its registered capital had been raised and lowered and raised again. Its business scope had grown from storage and logistics to storage and logistics and property management. Its legal representative had changed four times, and the current one was a man with a common name and no photograph. The registered address was in an office building in the old town, on the fourth floor. A-Qiu went there and found a door with a brass plate and a woman at a desk who said the company did not keep old records at this address.

"Where are the old records?"

"There was a fire," said the woman.

"Was there?"

"In the storage, years ago. A lot of paper was lost." She said it without interest. It was a sentence she had said before, and it had worked before, and she had no reason to think it would not work now.

A-Qiu thanked her and left, and then she did the thing she did, which was to find the man who had worked there before the fire.

His name was Fung, and he had managed the warehouse for nineteen years. He was retired and lived in a village on the edge of Foshan, and he agreed to see her because he was bored and because she said she was from the legal aid office and because, she suspected, he had been waiting for someone to ask.

He was seventy, with a bad knee and a good memory, and he made tea the way Lau had made tea, and he talked.

"The village goods," he said. "Yes. We took them from the cleared villages, the things that were not household goods. The tablets, the books, the altar things, the mirrors, the carved things. The city did not want them and the families could not carry them, so they came to us. We put them in the back rooms and labelled them by street and by date, and there were thousands of them." He sipped his tea. "Nobody came for them. That is the thing nobody understands. Nobody came."

"Did some come?"

"A few. A few families came with a receipt and took their things, and we gave them back, because they had the receipt and because it cost us nothing. The rest

sat. Year after year, year after year. It was not a warehouse. It was a cemetery with shelves."

"What happened to them?"

"The fire," said Fung.

"Was there a fire?"

He looked at her over the cup. He was old and he had a bad knee and he was not a fool.

"There was a fire in the office," he said. "The paper that burned was the paperwork. The goods did not burn. Goods do not burn that easily, not chairs and tablets and mirrors. They are wood and they are stone. They burn slowly, if you let them, which nobody did." He set the cup down. "When the company changed hands, the back rooms were cleared. There was a man who bought the contents. He came with a truck and a list, and he took the lots by the room, and he paid by weight. The company was glad to see it go, because the rent was going up and the goods were not earning."

"Do you remember the name of the man?"

Fung thought about it. Then he got up and went to a cabinet and took out an exercise book, the kind you buy at a stationer's, with a plastic cover. He turned the pages until he found the page, and he read the name off it and turned the book so A-Qiu could see.

It was a Cantonese name, and beside it was a word that A-Qiu knew, which was the word for old goods. It was a dealer's name, and there was a telephone number, and the number had eight digits. That meant it was older than the mobile network. It might still be answered by someone who had known the dealer, or by no one.

"Did you ever see the tablets again?" said A-Qiu.

"Some of them," said Fung. "The dealer had a yard on the river, and he sold the wood by the piece. Some of it went to the antique men, and some of it went to the kitchens, because old wood burns well and the tablets were good wood. The dealers did not know what the writing was and did not care. I went there once, in the second year, to see what had become of the village things. It was a yard of old doors and old beams and old gods. The tablets were in a stack by the wall with the writing turned in. I looked at the stack and I did not look again."

He turned the exercise book back toward himself. "The book was good wood. That is what I remember. The genealogy books were on a shelf and a man was using them to press flowers."

A-Qiu wrote the name and the number and the word. Then she asked the question that was the whole reason she had come, and she asked it flatly, because Fung was a man who preferred it flat.

"And the MENG crates? From Xiancun. The house in the third lane, the tablets and the book and the name-beam."

Fung looked at the exercise book and not at her.

"Xiancun," he said. "Everyone asks about Xiancun. There were so many crates from Xiancun that we had a room for Xiancun, and the room was cleared with the others, and everything from Xiancun went to the dealer with the rest." He closed the book. "They are not lost, if that is what you are asking. They are just sold. There is a difference, and the difference is worse, because a lost thing can be found and a sold thing belongs to somebody."

## 3. The Yard

The number was answered on the second ring, which A-Qiu had not expected, and the voice on the line was a man in his fifties who said yes, that was his father's number, and no, his father was dead, and yes, he still had the yard.

The yard was on the river south of the old town, and it was not a yard anymore. It was a shop with a courtyard, and the courtyard was full of old things arranged the way a shop arranges them: a wall of doors; a row of stone lions with their faces worn off; a stack of beams; a cabinet of small gods. There was a card at the entrance that said the shop supplied old materials to restaurants and teahouses, and there was a man in a good shirt at a desk who was the son, and his name was Tam.

Tam was polite and a little tired, and he made it clear in the first five minutes that he was not a villain and did not have time to be one. He had inherited the business from his father. The business had been good in the years when everyone wanted to build a teahouse with real old wood, and it was harder now. He sold what he had. He did not ask where it came from when he bought it, and he did not ask where it went when he sold it, and if that made him a bad man then there were a thousand bad men in the trade and he was the one with the lease.

"The tablets," said A-Qiu.

"I get that a lot," said Tam.

"From families."

"From families, and from men who want to sell them back to families, and from men who want me to say the tablets are worth a fortune so they can sell them to someone else. It is a market. I do not make the market." He looked at the visitor's card she had put on the desk. "Legal aid. You are not here about the market."

"I am here about a village. Xiancun. The MENG room."

Tam was quiet for a moment. He got up and went through a door into the back, and A-Qiu heard him moving things, and he came back with a box on a trolley and set it down in the middle of the room.

"There is no MENG room," he said. "There is a stack at the back that came from a lot my father bought from Guangxin Storage, and the lot was mixed and the labels were wet and half of them are gone. There are maybe two hundred pieces from that lot left. I have sold the doors and the beams. The tablets are hard to sell, because nobody wants a stranger's ancestors in their teahouse. So they sit." He opened the box. "These are the ones with writing on them. If your village is in there, take what is yours. I am not giving them away, but I am not going to ask a fortune for a stranger's ancestors either. There is a price, and it is a fair price; I will take it, because I have a lease."

A-Qiu looked into the box.

The tablets were stacked on their edges, wrapped in newspaper, and the newspaper was from a decade ago. She lifted them out one at a time and turned them to the light. Some were plain and some had gilt; some were small and some were large. The names were different. There were Wongs and Lams and Chans and Hos and one that said Ng, and one that said a name she did not recognize, and then, near the bottom, a black plaque with a gilt name, and the name was Meng.

She sat down on a stool in the middle of Tam's shop and read the name.

It was not her grandfather. It was her grandfather's brother, an older brother who had died young and whose tablet had been kept on the same shelf in the back room of the Xiancun house, one of the eleven that the family had crated

and sent to Foshan and never seen again. She turned it over. It was good wood and it was heavy and it had a crack down one side that had been repaired with glue, and the glue was old, which meant the repair had been made in the house, by her father, thirty years before, because her father repaired everything in the house.

She held it for a long time.

"How much?" she said.

Tam looked at the tablet and then at her, and did what he did, which was to name a number that was not a fortune and was not nothing, and A-Qiu paid it out of her own pocket, because the office could not buy antiques and because the family had no money for this and because it was hers to do.

She asked him to sell her the rest of the Xiancun pieces, and he would not, because he did not know which were Xiancun and the labels were wet, and because he was a businessman and not a charity, and because, he said, if he gave them away he would not be able to keep the lease and then there would be no yard at all. So she took the one tablet and the list of the lot, which he wrote out for her from his father's book, and she asked him for one more thing.

"The genealogy books," she said.

"Those went years ago," said Tam. "They went by weight to a paper mill. The paper was good paper. It is the same as the wood. Somebody always wants it for something." He looked at the tablet in her hands. "There is one man who bought a box of the books, about ten years ago. He is not a dealer. He is a collector of clan stuff. I have his name somewhere, but I do not know if he is alive, and I do not know if he will talk to you."

"Give me the name," said A-Qiu.

Tam went back into the office and came out with an old ledger and copied a name and an address onto a slip of paper. A-Qiu put the slip in the plastic sleeve with the receipts and put the tablet in her bag, wrapped in the newspaper it had come in, and left the yard and walked to the river, and stood at the railing with the tablet in the bag and watched the water go the way it went, south, toward the sea, and then she took the train back to Guangzhou with a stranger's ancestor wrapped in old newsprint against her chest.

## 4. The Fragment

A-Qiu took the tablet to her father on a Sunday, because it was his family's tablet and because she did not want to keep it in the office.

He was in the flat near the bus station, at the bench by the window, with the pump from the Xiancun courtyard in pieces on the cloth. He had been working on it for three years. It was bent and rusted and would never work, and he had cleaned every part and laid them out in the order he had taken them off, and he was not finished, and he would never be finished, and that was the point.

A-Qiu put the tablet on the table, wrapped in its newspaper.

"What have you brought me?" said her father.

"Open it and tell me what it is," said A-Qiu.

He unwrapped it. He turned it over and read the name, and he knew it at once, because he had built the shelf it had stood on, and because he had repaired the crack with glue thirty years before, and because it was the tablet of his wife's uncle, an older brother of A-Qiu's grandfather who had died young.

"Where did you find it," he said.

"A yard in Foshan. The dealer bought the lot after the warehouse cleared. There were two hundred pieces. This was the only one I could prove was ours."

He looked at the tablet for a long time. He did not say thank you, because thank you was not the thing. He put it on the table and turned it to the light, and then he did the thing that A-Qiu had been waiting for without knowing she was waiting, which was to get up and go into the next room and come back with a small object wrapped in a piece of cloth.

He put it on the table beside the tablet and did not unwrap it.

"Open the cloth and look," he said.

She unwrapped it.

It was a piece of wood, a fragment about the length of a hand and the width of two fingers; it was charred along one edge, and the writing on it was almost gone. It was a piece of an ancestral tablet. It was the grandfather's: she knew it from the wood, which matched the shelf she had stood in front of, and from the one character still legible, which was the first character of the grandfather's name.

"When the house came down," said her father, "they cleared the back room in the morning. The men took the shelf and the tablets and put them on the truck with the rest. I was there. I watched them do it. I did not say anything,

because I had signed the paper and there was nothing to say." He turned the fragment over in his hand. "That night I went back. The truck had gone. The shelf was in the rubble at the back, and the glue had given, and the grandfather's tablet had come apart, and there was a piece of it left in the frame. I picked it up and put it in my pocket and I took it to the dormitory at the factory and I put it in a tin under the bed, and it stayed there until I moved to this flat, and it has been in the drawer since."

A-Qiu did not ask why he had not told her. She did not ask why he had kept it a secret for eleven years, or why he had watched the truck go and said nothing, or why he had let her hunt through Foshan for a thing he had in a drawer. Those were the questions, and they were the wrong questions, and she knew by then that the only way to ask a question like that was not to ask it. He had kept the piece.

That was the whole of the sentence. He had kept the piece.

She sat down at the table and put the fragment and the tablet side by side. The fragment was the grandfather; the tablet was the grandfather's brother. They had come back by different roads; one through a yard in Foshan, one through a tin under a bed in a factory dormitory; and they were on the same table now, in a flat near the bus station, in the light from the window.

"I am sorry," said her father.

"For what are you sorry?"

"For the signing." He said it to the table, not to her, and he said it the way he said things he had rehearsed for years and had never found the day for. "You were in the last year. I did not call you. I thought I was making it easy. I made it hard, and I made it mine, and I have not known how to give it back."

A-Qiu looked at him. He was a small man with careful hands, and he had married into the Meng women, and he had spent his life being useful, and the usefulness had a shape, and he had just broken it open on a table with two tablets and a pump.

"This is his," she said.

"Yes."

"It was not yours to give back," she said. "It was ours."

He nodded; he did not say anything else, and neither did she, and after a while he got up and made the tea, and they drank it, and then he went back to the pump and she sat and watched him, and the afternoon went the way afternoons go.

She left the tablet with him. She took the fragment, because he pushed it across the table without looking at her, and she understood that the fragment was for the archive, and that the tablet was for the shelf in the flat, and that the division was the whole of what he had to say. She put the fragment in the plastic sleeve with the receipts and the name from Tam's ledger, and she walked to the metro in the first heat of the year, and she did not cry, and the year went on.

## 5. The Foundation

The ancestral hall was the last thing A-Qiu looked for, because it was the biggest thing, and because she had been avoiding it without knowing she was.

The hall had stood at the top of the old village, on the high ground, where the roof ridge could be seen from three lanes away. It had been built by the Meng clan and their neighbors, and it had held the tablets and the genealogy book and the ceremonies. Then it had been a grain store, and then a school, and then a printshop for the slogans of the year. Then, for thirty years, it had been nothing at all, which is the worst thing a building can be, because a building that is nothing at all is a building that can be sold.

When the village was cleared, the hall was demolished with the rest. A-Qiu found the date in a planning file and the demolition permit in another. What she could not find, in any file, was the destination of the stone. The hall had a stone plinth and a stone floor and a foundation of dressed granite, and the stone had not gone to the landfill, because stone does not go to the landfill. Stone goes somewhere; stone is bought.

She asked the question at the district, and the district said the stone was handled by the contractor; the contractor no longer existed; the successor company said it had no records from that period; and the company that had bought the successor said the same thing in a better font. Then she asked a man named Leung.

Leung had been a site foreman for thirty years, and he had worked on the Zhujiang New Town sites in the years when the whole district was a field of

cranes; he was retired and lived in a village near Panyu; he agreed to meet her because his son had been helped once by the legal aid office, and because he was a man who did not like the stories the city told about itself.

He met her at a teahouse and ordered the tea and did not wait for her question.

"The old stone," he said. "You are asking about the old stone. Everybody thinks it goes to the dump. It does not go to the dump."

"Where does it go?"

"Granite is money. The dressed granite from the old halls, the plinths, the floor slabs, the door frames: that is good stone, and it is already cut. A contractor who is building a tower will buy it for the foundation or for the landscape, and nobody asks where it came from, because it is stone and stone is stone."

"Did you work with it?"

"I worked with it at two sites." He refilled his cup. "We had a stack of it at the edge of the pit, and we used it in the raft, and nobody knew what it had been. Some of it had writing on it. We set the writing face down, because the writing face down is the same as no writing, and because the engineers do not like surprises in the pour."

A-Qiu waited, and Leung drank, and the noise of the teahouse went around them.

"At the second site, I asked," he said. "I was older. I asked the man from the village, and he said it was the village hall, the whole hall, bought by the cubic meter and brought in on the trucks." He set the cup down. "He said it as a joke. He said the ancestors were holding up the tower."

"Which ancestors?" said A-Qiu.

"Yours," said Leung.

A-Qiu sat with that for a while.

"Which site?" she said.

"The one with the slim waist," said Leung. "The tall one. The one that lights up floor by floor like a thing being counted."

She went there that evening, because she did not know what else to do with it.

She took the metro and came up out of the station into the plaza, and the tower stood over her the way it stood over the whole district, and it was starting to light up for the night, floor by floor, from the bottom, in the sequence she had watched from the Xiancun courtyard when she was ten. She walked around the base. There was a low skirt of granite at the foot of the tower; the granite was old and dressed; it had been set as a landscape wall along the entrance; and the writing on it, if there had been writing, was turned to the concrete. She put her hand on it, and it was cold and smooth, and it was the stone of the village, and she could not prove it and she did not need to prove it, because she had the foreman, and because a thing that is true does not require a stamped document to be true, and because her ancestors were holding up the tower whether the tower knew it or not.

She stood at the base of the tower for a long time. People went past her in the light with their phones and their shopping and their evening, and no one looked at the granite, because granite is granite, and because a city cannot see its own foundations. She thought about the hall, and the roof ridge you could see from three lanes, and the tablets in their tiers, and the name in gold; she thought about her grandmother, who had stood in a doorway once and said she was standing in a name, and about her father, who had watched the truck go, and about the fragment in her bag, and she did not cry there either.

She took out her phone and recorded a note, because the record was the only thing she had, and the note said the date and the place and the words *the hall is under the tower*. Then she put the phone away and walked back to the metro, and behind her the tower finished lighting itself, floor by floor, the whole height of it, and stood in the night, holding up nothing that anyone could see, and everything.

## 6. The Recitation

The claim over the village goods was heard on a Tuesday in a small administrative court, and it lasted thirty-five minutes.

A-Qiu brought it on behalf of the Cheung family and four other families whose tablets Tam had in his yard, and on behalf of her own family. The claim was not really a claim, because the goods had been sold lawfully and bought lawfully and the chain of title was, on paper, clean. The claim was really a filing,

and the filing was really a record. A-Qiu had learned by then that a record is what you file when you cannot win, because a record is not dismissed. It is only denied.

The court was a room with a low ceiling and a row of plastic chairs and a calendar on the wall showing a month two years out of date. The three judges were the same kind of judges as before. The district's lawyer was a new young man who had been told what to say and said it. The developer was not there, because the developer was not a party, because the goods had passed through too many hands to name one.

The hearing was about whether the families had a right to recover ancestral property that had been stored, sold, and resold over more than a decade. The answer, the district's lawyer said, was no. The property had been treated as abandoned when the households signed; the warehouse had been entitled to clear its rooms; the buyers had been bona fide.

A-Qiu stood up and gave the families' names and the years and the streets. She gave the receipt from the Cheung mother, the list from Fung's exercise book, the tablet she had bought in Tam's yard, and the fragment her father had kept under a bed. She did not argue that the law required the goods to be returned, because the law did not. She argued that the goods were the only record of the families' names; that the state had taken the record into storage. A state which takes a record into storage cannot later call the record abandoned because it forgot where it put it. It was not a winning argument. It was not a losing argument either. It was the argument that got written down.

The presiding judge asked the district's lawyer whether the goods existed. The district's lawyer said the city could not comment on the contents of a private yard. "Do you have a list of what is claimed?" said the judge. A-Qiu gave the list, and the judge looked at it for a long time. The list had names on it that were not on any file the court had, because they were the names of dead people.

And in the middle of the argument, while the judge was reading the list and the clerk was typing, A-Qiu caught herself saying a line under her breath.

It was a line about a woman walking north with a bundle, and about the wall being cold, and about a thing that would not go the way it was told. She said it in the old way, the way the grandmother had said it in the kitchen, with the tone on

the wrong syllable and the river going the wrong way. She heard her own voice and stopped. The judge looked up. A-Qiu said the next sentence of the argument, which she had prepared, and the judge went back to the list, and the clerk kept typing, and no one in the room had heard it, or had heard it and thought nothing of it.

A-Qiu did not think about it then. She thought about it that night, on the metro, and she could not remember when she had learned the line. She had never learned it. It was the grandmother's line, the one that stopped at the wall and scolded the bones, and A-Qiu had not thought of it in years. She put it away the way she put away the other thing, and she went home.

The judgment came three weeks later.

The court found that the families had no right to recover the goods as such. The goods had passed; the claim was dismissed. But the judgment also found, in a paragraph the district had not expected, that the city had a duty to keep a register of ancestral property taken into storage. The families' names should be recorded, and the city should make the register available. It was not the tablets. It was the door, and the door was open a crack.

A-Qiu took the judgment to the district and asked for the register. The register, when it came, had the names of four hundred families from the cleared villages, including the Meng, and included the words *storage number*. The storage number was the one on her father's receipt.

## 7. The Collector's Library

The collector's name was Ho, and he had been dead for nine years, and his library had been sold in three parts.

A-Qiu found the name in Tam's ledger, the will in a probate notice, and the auction catalogue in the archive of a bookseller. By the end of the month she knew the shape of the thing.

Ho had collected clan books. He had collected them for forty years, from dealers and from village halls before the halls were taken, and from families who needed the money. At his death he had two thousand volumes of genealogy in a flat in the old town, stacked to the ceiling in every room. His sons had sold them the way sons sell a father's obsession: by weight, by the shelf, by the truck.

The first part had gone to a university in the north. The second part had gone to a bookseller in Hong Kong. The third part was the part with the loose books and the damaged books and the books without covers. It had gone to a paper merchant, and the paper merchant had sold some of it and pulped the rest. The paper was good paper. A-Qiu had to stop thinking about that or she would not be able to work.

She wrote to the university. She sent the name of the lineage, the county, and the hall. In three weeks a librarian wrote back with a list. The list had a Meng genealogy from Xiancun, Guangdong, in the second part of the collection, and it was intact. She went north on the train, because the university would not send it and because she wanted to hold it.

The reading room was cold and bright. It had a table for rare books and a stand for the volumes, and a pair of white gloves that the librarian made her wear. The book came up from the vault in a box.

It was cloth-bound, and the cloth was worn, and the spine had been repaired with a strip of brown tape. On the cover there was a paper label in a hand she did not know. The label said the village and the lineage and the number.

A-Qiu opened it.

She had expected a book like a ledger, and it was a book like a ledger. There were the generations in their columns: the fathers and mothers; the sons and daughters; the births, marriages and deaths; the hall names, grave sites and years. It was the Meng lineage of Xiancun from the seventeenth century to the twentieth. The last entry was in 1961, and the last hand was her great-grandfather's, and the ink was the ink of the old school.

She read for three hours, with the gloves, and she did not eat, and she did not cry. The librarian came twice to ask if she needed anything and she said no.

The book had her grandmother in it. It had her mother in it, and her mother's death, in a different hand, in blue ink, in the modern style. It had the great-grandmother who had stood in the doorway, and the great-great-grandmother before her. The line went back and back into the columns, and the line came down and ended in the twentieth century, because the book had not been updated since 1961. There had been no one to update it, and no hall to keep it, and no book to keep in the hall.

She found the page where her own name should go. There was no line for it. The book ended two generations before her, and the last column of the last page was empty. The empty column was the whole of the loss, in one page, in one book.

She asked the librarian whether the book could be copied.

"The whole book?" said the librarian.

"Every page."

"It is six hundred pages. We can scan it, with permission. It takes two weeks and it costs."

"Then scan it," said A-Qiu.

"It is expensive."

"Send me the bill."

"I have permission from the family," she added, which was not quite true, and which was true enough, because the family was her.

The scan took two weeks, and she paid for it out of the archive fund, which was her own money under a name. When the drive came she carried it back on the train and put it in the basement on the shelf with the register. It was not the book. The book was still six hundred kilometers away in a vault, and it had been sold out of the clan, and she could not prove the sale was wrong. She did not try, because the book was not money and the book was not stone, and a book that could be scanned was a book that could be copied, and a copy was the thing her whole life had been about.

She wrote the card for the drive: the name of the lineage, the county, the hall, the date of the scan, the library that held the original. Then she wrote the words *returned as a copy*, and she put the card beside the drive. On the shelf above it were four tablets and a fragment in a plastic sleeve, and on the shelf below it was the register, and beside the shelf were the box of Sam's letters and the embroidery in its tube. The room was full of the village now, and none of it was the village, and all of it was the record.

Xiao Tang found her there, late, and asked the question she asked sometimes, which was whether it was enough.

"It is not enough," said A-Qiu.

"Then why do it?"

"Because the choice is not between the village and the record. The village is gone. The choice is between the record and nothing." She put the card down. "Nobody gets to choose the first thing. Everybody gets to choose the second."

Xiao Tang wrote that down, too, because she had learned that A-Qiu said the important things off the side of the desk, and because Xiao Tang had decided, somewhere in the first year, that she was going to keep the record of the record.

## 8. The School

The hall had been a school for thirty-one years, and the school had its own archive, and the archive was in a cupboard in a county office in Panyu.

A-Qiu found it because she asked. She asked the district for the hall's records, and the district said the hall's records were with the education bureau. The education bureau said the school's records were with the county, and the county said the closed schools' records were in storage, and the storage was a cupboard, and the cupboard had a register. It took four months and eleven phone calls and one trip on a bus. In the end a clerk opened the cupboard and gave her the box.

The register was the school register. It had the years and the classes and the names of the children and the names of the teachers, and it was written in the round hand of the period. The ink had faded to a gray-brown, and the pages smelled of dust and chalk.

The hall had become a school in 1953, when the lineage school was closed and the village children were sent to the big hall at the top of the hill. The great room where the tablets had stood became four classrooms. The ancestral altar became the platform. The stone floor was covered with a wooden one, and the wooden one had lasted thirty years. In the famine years the school had a meal kitchen in the side hall. In the movement years the school had a wall of slogans. In the last years the school had a basketball hoop on the side wall, and the children played in the courtyard where the ceremonies had been.

The teachers' names ran down the register. Most of them were dead. One was not. Her name was Tsang Wai-yee, and she had taught at the hall school from 1968 to 1983. The register gave her class and her subject and the year she left, and the year she left was the year the school closed. The address beside her name was a village two stops down the line.

A-Qiu went to see her.

Tsang was eighty-one and lived with her daughter in a flat in Foshan. She was sharp and slow at the same time, the way old teachers are sharp about the past and slow about the present. She remembered the hall the way the grandmother had remembered the street. She remembered the sound of it. She said the hall had a particular sound, which was the stone under the wood, and the echo of the big room, and the way the voices went up to the beams and stayed there a moment before they came down.

She remembered the names. She remembered the year the altar was taken out. She remembered the year the tablets were moved to the back, and the year a boy fell from the basketball hoop and broke his arm, and the winter the roof leaked and the class was held in the side hall with two braziers. She remembered the last day, when the school closed, and the children stood in the courtyard and did not know what to do with themselves, and the teachers gave them each a book.

"Was there a name on the beam?" said A-Qiu.

"There was a name," said Tsang. "It was carved, and it was dark, and nobody could read it."

She laughed, a small dry sound.

"The children said it was the name of the ghost of the hall, and we told them it was the name of the clan. They preferred the ghost."

"Was there anything else? Anything carved, anything written, anything on the wall?"

Tsang thought about it, and then she said the thing that A-Qiu had come for without knowing it.

"There was a stone. In the floor of the big room, in the corner by the altar. It had old writing on it, and it was smooth from the children's feet, and we used to tell them not to stand on it. It was the foundation stone."

She was quiet for a moment, and her hand moved on the arm of the chair.

"The whole hall sat on it."

She held her hand flat, the way she had held it when she taught.

"If they have taken the hall down, the stone is under the tower. The tower sits on the stone, and the stone sits on the road, and the road sits on the village. That is the order of it."

She looked at the window, where the light was going.

"It is the same stone and the same village, and the tower is only the last thing that was laid on top."

A-Qiu wrote it down. Then she asked the old teacher for the photograph, and Tsang went to a drawer and found it: the last class, 1983, thirty children in front of the hall, and the hall behind them with the name on the beam, and the basketball hoop, and the two stone lions that had been moved from the gate to the schoolyard in the year the gate came down.

A-Qiu scanned the photograph into the archive that night. She wrote the card: the school, the year, the class, the teacher's name, the names of the children where she could get them. Then she put the photograph in the file beside the foundation chapter, and at the bottom of the card she wrote the sentence the old teacher had said. It was the true sentence and the whole of the case, and a case is a record of the true sentence and not only of the judgment.

## 9. The Symbol

The invitation came in the fourth year, and it was the first one A-Qiu accepted, and she should not have.

It was a heritage award. The city gave one every year to people and projects that had protected the city's memory, and the archive had been nominated by the university. The ceremony was in a hall in the old town, with a red banner and a photographer and a row of officials on the dais. A-Qiu was one of twelve. She was to receive a certificate and a glass plaque and to stand for a photograph. The office would be named in the programme, and the district had asked her to accept, and Chow said it would cost her nothing and might buy the office a year of goodwill.

It did not cost her nothing.

The hall was full of the city's memory people, and all of them were sincere, and all of them wanted the same thing, which was a version of the past that could be framed and hung. There was a man from the tourism bureau who used the word *brand*. There was a developer's representative on the dais who spoke about preserving the spirit of the lanes, and who had taken down two lanes that year. There was a filmmaker who had made a series about the old crafts, and who had paid the craftsmen a fee that was less than the cost of the film stock. And there

was A-Qiu, with the glass plaque on her knee, in a hall where everyone clapped for everyone.

The developer's representative found her at the tea table.

"You are the lawyer for the last lamp," he said. He smiled, because he had learned the name pleased people. "I read the piece. Very moving. The old lady, the stove, the embroidery. We would like to talk to you about the project at the river. We are doing it differently now. Genuinely differently. We would like you to consult."

"Consult," said A-Qiu.

"On the heritage. On the record. You are the person in the city for the record. We would pay the office a fee, and put your name on the panel, and the village would be documented properly. Better than the courts. The courts do not document anything."

A-Qiu looked at him. He was not a fool, and he was not a villain, and he was, in his way, right. The courts did not document anything. She had spent her life saying so. And here was a man offering to pay her to document the village he was about to remove. The offer was real, the money was real, the panel was real, and all of it was a way of turning the record into a permission slip.

"No," said A-Qiu.

"May I ask why?"

"Because if I document the village for you, the documentation becomes the improvement. The record is not the improvement. The record is what you keep when the improvement is over."

He looked at her, and the smile did not change, because the smile was his work. Then he said the thing the reasonable men always said.

"Then the village will be removed, and there will be no documentation at all, because you would not take the money."

"There will be documentation," said A-Qiu. "It will be done by the village. It will say what the village says, and it will not have your name on it."

She left before the photograph. She put the glass plaque in the bin by the door, which was small and petty. She regretted it and did not retrieve it. Then she walked out into the old town and stood on the *qilou* street and looked at the lanterns that had been hung for the ceremony. Below her was the shop that had

sold the same herbal tea for fifty years, and the woman at the counter had not been invited to the ceremony and did not care.

The office heard about it, and the district heard about it. Chow said only one thing, which was that the goodwill had cost them a year. A-Qiu said she knew. Then Chow said the other thing, which was that a year of goodwill was worth less than the thing the name would have cost, and that she was not sure she would have made the same choice, and that she was glad A-Qiu had made it.

The plaque did not come back, and the archive did not need it. It needed the twelve years it already had of room records and voices and photographs and names. It needed the next twelve, and the next after that. Most of all it needed the person who kept the key not to sell the key. That was the whole lesson of the hall, and A-Qiu learned it in a hall, among the city's memory people, with a glass plaque on her knee.

## 10. The First Clearance

The grandmother's village had been at the edge of the city, and it had been cleared in 1956 for a factory. The factory had closed in 2004, and the land had been sold in 2011, and the whole sequence was in the planning files.

A-Qiu found it the way she found everything, by asking the same question in four places until one of the places answered. The village was called Shek Wai; it had been a farming village on the western edge. The factory was a chemical plant, and the plant had taken the farmland and the houses and the ancestral hall. The families had been moved to a resettlement row two kilometers away. The resettlement row was still there. It was a row of two-storey houses with a shared wall and a shared yard, and it had been called the new village for sixty years. By the time A-Qiu saw it, it was the old village, and the chemical plant was a field of concrete, and the field of concrete was going to be a residential compound with a lake.

The grandmother had been nine when the village was cleared.

She had told A-Qiu the story once, in the kitchen, in the same voice she used for the legend. Her own grandmother had stood in the doorway and refused to move, and the men had taken the roof, and the family had gone to the resettlement row with the bed and the table and the ancestral tablets. Her grandmother had gone last, and had looked back at the empty doorway, and had

not cried. A-Qiu had been ten when she heard it. She had not understood it as a fact about land. She had understood it as a fact about her great-great-grandmother's temper.

Now she went to Shek Wai and stood on the concrete.

There was a fence and a gate and a security booth, and beyond the fence was the field of concrete with the grass coming through the cracks. Beyond that was the new compound with its lake and its crane. The security guard was from Hunan and had been there two years, and he did not know what the field had been.

"What was this place?" he said.

"A village," said A-Qiu.

"A village."

"It was cleared in 1956 for a chemical plant. The plant closed in 2004, and the land was sold in 2011, and now there is a lake coming."

He listened the way people listen to a thing that does not concern them and then is made to concern them. At the end he said the thing that people always said.

"They should have kept something," said the guard. "A stone. A sign. Something."

A-Qiu wrote that down, because it was the sentence of the age. It was also the sentence she had spent her life not being able to answer. They should have kept something. The city kept nothing, and then it kept a plaque, and the plaque said the place had once been a village, and the plaque was the whole of the keeping.

She went to the resettlement row and found an old woman who remembered.

Her name was Cheung Siu-lan, and she was eighty-three. She had been a child in Shek Wai at the same time as the grandmother, and she remembered the doorway and the roof and the men and the tablets. She remembered the grandmother's grandmother, who was called Yeung Siu-mui, and who was famous in the village for two things. The first was the doorway. The second was the year she had walked four kilometers to the district office to complain about the well, and had complained, and had got the well mended. In that decade, that almost never happened.

"She was a hard woman," said Cheung.

"And the well?"

"She kept the well. She could not keep the hall." Cheung laughed, a dry sound. "Nobody could keep the hall. The hall went with the land, and the land went with the plant, and the plant went with the plant. Here we are, and the compound is coming, and the compound has a lake, and the lake is for the people who will live on top of us."

A-Qiu recorded her. She recorded the doorway, the well, the roof, the four kilometers, the resettlement row, and the name of the grandmother's grandmother, which she had never known. Then she went back to the office and made a new file and put it beside the file for Xiancun. The two files sat next to each other on the shelf, and they were the same story, sixty years apart. The only thing that had changed was the language. In 1956 the language had been the plant. In the new century the language was the lake. The land had been cleared twice, and the family had been cleared twice, and the grandmother's grandmother had stood in one doorway and the grandmother had stood in another. A-Qiu had stood in neither, and had spent her life writing the doorways down.

She put the card in the register. She wrote the names: Yeung Siu-mui, Meng Po-yin, Meng Wanqiu. Three links, one chain, two doorways, and a well that a hard woman had walked four kilometers to save.

That night she sat with the card and understood the whole of the inheritance, which was not the memory of places. The inheritance was the standing. The women of the family stood in doorways, and the doors came down, and the women did not move, and the doors came down anyway. The standing was the only thing that was handed on. It was not a gift. It was a posture. She had it, and she could not put it down, and she would stand in a doorway until the doorway was gone, and then she would write the doorway down. That was the whole of the family, and the whole of her life.

## 11. The Archive Room

By the sixth year the archive had a Thursday, and the Thursday was the day the families came.

It had started as an accident. A woman had come to the office about a pension, and A-Qiu had shown her the register, and the woman had found her own family's name on the list. She had stood in the room and wept, and then she had asked whether she could bring her brother. The brother came; then a cousin; then a neighbour. By the end of the year the office had a Thursday, and the Thursday was the day the families came to look for their own names in the register.

A-Qiu made a rule for Thursdays. The rule was that the visitor did the looking, and she did the finding. If a family came with a name and a village and a year, she took the name and the village and the year and went to the register. If the name was there, she wrote it on a card and gave them the card. If the name was not there, she wrote that on the card too, because a no is also a record, and because the families needed to know that the absence was the archive's, not theirs. The card was free; the copy was free; the room was free.

The Thursday families did not always want the register. Some of them wanted the room records. A man came once and asked for the record of a lane that had been his grandmother's. A-Qiu found the lane and read him the sound of it, and he listened to the sound of a lane he had not heard in forty years and said nothing for a while.

"That is the sound," he said.

"Yes," said A-Qiu.

He left.

A woman came and asked for the record of her mother's kitchen. The kitchen was in the file from the early years, and A-Qiu found it, and the woman read it and corrected two things, the shelf and the window. A-Qiu wrote the corrections on the record and initialled them with the date, because the record was the family's and the family had the last word on it.

The room became the thing that A-Qiu had not planned.

It was a basement, and it had a door that locked, and on Thursdays it was full of people who had come to look for themselves. The people brought their own records. They brought photographs, letters, receipts; once, a wooden ruler that a great-grandfather had used in a shop that no longer existed. They brought the things they had saved and did not know what to do with. A-Qiu scanned the

photographs and copied the letters and gave the originals back, because the originals were the family's and the copies were the archive's, and that was the rule she had made and never broke.

Chow came on a Thursday, once, late in the year. She stood at the back of the room and watched.

There were six families at the tables, and the tables were the office tables brought down, and the room was loud with the noise of people finding things. Chow stood for a while and then went to the door and said the thing A-Qiu kept.

"It is not a room anymore," said Chow. "It is a place where people find people."

"Was it ever anything else?" said A-Qiu.

"No," said Chow. "It was your room. Now it is theirs. That is different, and it is better, and you should know that you will not be able to close it now."

"I was not planning to close it."

"You were planning to hold it," said Chow. "There is a difference, and you do not see it yet, and you will see it. The room is not the archive. The people are the archive, and the room is the rent. One day the rent will be a problem, and the people will solve it, because a place where people find people does not close. It moves."

Chow was right. The rent became a problem in the eighth year, when the community centre raised it and the office could not pay, and it was the Thursday families who solved it. They wrote a letter, forty of them, to the district. The letter said the room was a public service and the district should fund it, and the district read the letter and did not want the letter to exist, and the rent was paid by a cultural grant that had not existed before the letter. A-Qiu did not know who had written the letter. She suspected the woman whose mother's kitchen she had corrected. She never asked. Not asking was also part of the method, because the method was not to own the thing, and the room was not hers, and the Thursday families had proved it.

## 12. The Name on the Beam

The name had been on the beam over the door of the Xiancun house for a hundred years, and A-Qiu had never been able to read it, and she was the only person left who could.

Her grandfather had carved it when the house was built. The smoke of four generations had gone into the wood where the knife had gone in, and the two had become the same color, and the name had gone dark the way a name goes dark. The grandmother had read it with her finger. The father had read it because he had watched the grandfather carve it, or because he had been told. A-Qiu had never read it. She had only known the shape.

She had the shape in her head the way she had every room. It was four characters: the first was the surname; the last was a character she had seen on a temple door and never learned to say. She could have drawn it from memory, the way she could have drawn the well and the window and the crack in the shape of a river. She had not drawn it. She had let it sit in her, unread, for twenty years, because she had believed that the name was the house and the house was there, and a thing that is there does not need to be written down.

Then the house was gone, and the beam was gone, and the name was gone with it. The only copy was in her head, and she did not know how to read it. She went to the people who knew.

She went to the old teacher, who could not read the beam because she had only seen it from the schoolyard. She went to the aunties in the resettlement blocks, who remembered the house but not the characters. She went to a calligrapher in the old town, an old man who painted the New Year couplets and who knew the old-style characters. She described the four shapes to him, and he drew them on a sheet of rice paper, and he drew them wrong, because her descriptions were wrong, because a description of a character is not the character.

"Which stroke came first?" said the calligrapher.

"I have described it twice."

"Describe it a third time, and slower."

She described it a third time, and he drew it wrong again, and she paid him for the rice paper and left.

She went to her father last, which was the order she had chosen without knowing it. She went to the flat near the bus station, and she sat at the table with the pump and the fragment, and she asked him to draw the name.

He looked at her for a long time.

"I cannot write it," said her father.

"You saw him carve it."

"I saw him carve it. I was six. I do not remember the strokes. I remember the sound of the knife; I remember the smell of the wood; I remember that he stood on a stool, and that the stool had a broken leg, and that is what I remember." He turned the fragment over in his hand. "The name is not in my hand. The name is in your head. You are the only one."

"So I am the only copy."

"You are the only copy," said her father, "and the copy cannot read itself. That is not a tragedy. That is just what happens to a thing that nobody wrote down."

A-Qiu sat with that.

She went home and sat at the table with the lamp and a sheet of paper. She closed her eyes, and she went back into the house. The front room; the passage; the back room; the beam over the door, and the name on the beam. She looked at it the way she had looked at it when she was small, standing under the doorway, looking up, the smoke-dark wood and the dark strokes in it. She let her hand draw.

When she opened her eyes she had drawn four characters. Three of them were the surname and the middles, and the last one was wrong. She knew it was wrong, because the last one had a shape she could feel but not form, and what she had drawn was a guess. She drew it again, and again, twenty times, and each time the last one was wrong in a different way. On the twentieth attempt she stopped, because she understood that she was not going to get it, and that the not-getting was the record.

She took the first drawing, the one with the surname right and the last one wrong, and she put it in the archive with a card. On the card she wrote the date and the place and the words *drawn from memory; the last character is not verified*. Then she wrote the thing she had learned, which was the whole of the archive in

one sentence, and which she had not been able to say until she had drawn the wrong character twenty times. She wrote: *a memory that cannot be checked is not a record, it is a possession, and a possession cannot be shared.*

She closed the file and turned off the lamp. The name on the beam stayed in her head, the four shapes and the wrong last one. She was the only copy, and she would carry it until she died, and then it would be gone. The archive would have the drawing, and the drawing would have the error, and the error would be the truth. That was the whole of it. The beam was gone and the name was going, and the archive was the drawing, and the drawing was the family, and the family was a thing that had been written down wrong by the only person who remembered it, and that was more than the beam had ever had.

## 13. The Mother

A-Qiu had almost no memory of her mother, and that was the whole of the problem.

Her mother had died when A-Qiu was four, and four is the age at which a child remembers the shape of a person and not the person. A-Qiu remembered a smell, and a voice that came from above her, and a woman's hands doing something with a button. She did not remember a face. She had the photograph, and the photograph was a woman of twenty-eight with a good coat and a straight back, and it could have been any woman of twenty-eight. She had looked at the photograph so many times that she had worn it smooth in her mind, and the smoothness was the problem, because a worn photograph is not a memory. It is a story with a picture.

The grandmother had kept the mother the way she kept everything, which is to say in the ordinary, with the food and the gossip and the names. The mother was called Meng Wai-yee, and she had been the middle child and the only daughter, and she had worked in a bank in Liwan, and she had married Ho Kwok-keung, who had come into the family, and she had died of an illness in the spring when A-Qiu was four. The grandmother did not talk about the death. She talked about the person, in pieces, the way she talked about the street. The mother had a sweet tooth and a bad temper. The mother had been the one who could sing. The mother had been the one who could not find her way home from the market twice in one week, and who had once taken the wrong bus and

ended up in Foshan and had laughed about it, and had never once been able to tell you what color a room was.

That was the inheritance, and it was the inverse of A-Qiu's, and A-Qiu had spent her life not thinking about it.

The gift ran down the maternal line, and it had skipped the mother. The grandmother had the gift; the mother did not; A-Qiu did. The grandmother had called it the chain, and the chain had a gap in it, and the gap was the mother. A-Qiu had never once asked the grandmother why. The question would have been a question about the mother's place in the family, and the family did not ask those questions. But A-Qiu asked it now, in the archive, at night, with the cards and the register around her. She asked it of the old people she still could ask, and the answers were the answers of people who had known a woman and not a mystery.

"She could not hold a place," said one auntie. "Some people cannot. They are happy, and they move, and they do not keep the room. Your mother was like that. She was the happiest woman in the street and she could not have told you where she was standing."

"Is that a defect?" said A-Qiu.

"It is not a defect," said the auntie. "It is a different woman."

A-Qiu sat with that. She understood then the thing that she had never let herself understand, which was that the gift was not a virtue. Her grandmother had called it the family gift because it was the family's, and because a thing that runs in a family is called a gift whether or not it is a gift, and because the women who had it had paid for it. The grandmother had paid for it in grief, and A-Qiu had paid for it in grief, and the mother, who had not had it, had paid for it in being the gap. The mother had been the one who could leave a room. The mother had been the one who could move. The mother had been the free one, and the family had remembered her as the one who got lost, and the family had been wrong, and it was too late to tell her.

A-Qiu went to the flat near the bus station and asked her father for a photograph, and he gave her a box.

The box had the mother's things in it. There was the watch she had worn, which did not work, and the bank badge, and a small notebook that was not an

account book. A-Qiu opened the notebook. It had the mother's hand in it, and the hand was large and round, and the notebook had a list of names and addresses, and the names were not relatives. They were the names of the people at the bank, and the addresses were the addresses of the places the mother had been sent, and beside each address there was a small drawing. A-Qiu looked at the drawings. They were not good. They were the drawings of a woman who could not hold a room. But they were drawings, and they were there, and they were a record, and the mother had made them, and A-Qiu had never known.

She put the notebook in the archive. She wrote the card: the mother's name, the years, the bank, the drawings. Then she wrote the sentence that closed the file, and it was the first time she had written a sentence about her mother.

She wrote: *she could not keep a room, so she drew them, and the drawing is the family after all.*

## 14. The Claimants

The claimants came with the register, and the register made them come, and the register made them fight.

It was the unexpected cost of the Thursday. When the list was published, the families who had never come for their goods began to come, and the tables became a place where two people could want the same thing. There was a tablet with a surname and no given name, and three families whose surname it was. There was a genealogy book with a torn first page, and two brothers who each said the book was their father's. There was a set of altar candlesticks that a woman had described in a photograph, and a man who said the candlesticks were his brother's. The woman said the man was the brother. The man said the brother was dead.

A-Qiu made a rule, and the rule was that the archive did not judge.

The archive would show what it had. The archive would write down what each claimant said. The archive would not decide who was right, because the archive was a record and not a court. The claimants did not like the rule. They wanted a decision. They said the archive was the only place that knew, and A-Qiu said the archive knew what had been stored and not what had been meant, and a record of a store is not a title to a thing.

The worst case was the candlesticks.

The woman was called Ng, and she came on a Thursday with the photograph and the receipt, and she was right about the receipt. The man was called Ng too, and he came the next Thursday with nothing.

He said the receipt had been in his brother's name, and the brother was dead, and the woman was the brother's wife. He said the wife had left the family in the year of the illness and had no claim. The woman said the man had gone to Hong Kong for eleven years and had come back for the compensation and the goods. The man said the woman had put his brother in a home and kept the money.

"Why did you come back?" said A-Qiu.

"Because the goods came back," said the man.

Neither of them was lying. A-Qiu could see that. It was the hardest thing in the whole archive, harder than the cases and the hearings and the tower, because the two of them were both right and the candlesticks were one thing and could not be two things.

In the end A-Qiu did not decide.

She wrote down both accounts. She put the candlesticks on the table between them. She said the thing she had learned from the mediation room and had never believed, which was that some things are not for the law. The candlesticks were not worth the fight; the fight was worth more than the candlesticks. If they wanted the fight, they could have it in a court, and the court would decide, and one of them would lose two things at once: the candlesticks and the brother.

The man looked at the woman. The woman looked at the table.

The woman took the candlesticks. The man did not stop her. He said, to the table, that the brother had liked her. That was the only sentence he had, and he left without waiting for an answer.

A-Qiu wrote the case up and put it in the file, and beside it she wrote the note that she would use for every claimant after that. She wrote: *the archive cannot give a thing back. It can only give a name back; a name is not a thing; a name is the only thing that fits in more than one hand.*

The claimants kept coming, and the archive kept not judging. By the end of the year the register had a second page, and the second page was the disputed names, and the disputed names were not the archive's to settle. A-Qiu put the

page at the back, behind the first page and in front of the cards, and she called it the open page. It was not closed and would not be closed, because a record that pretends to be finished is the only kind of record that lies.

## 15. The Liaison

Su Han came to the archive on a Thursday, and she came as a claimant.

A-Qiu did not recognize her at first. It had been years, and Su Han was not in a good coat and not performing reasonableness, and a person who has come to look for their own family in a register does not look like a person who once held a low floor for thirty days. She stood at the table with a plastic bag and a card. She waited her turn like everyone else. When the turn came she put the card on the table and said the name of a village.

It was a village in Baiyun, cleared in the first wave. Su Han had been ten when it was cleared.

"I know you," said A-Qiu.

"I know," said Su Han. "I was not sure you would say."

"I was not sure I would either."

Su Han looked at the register.

"Your family's name?"

"My mother's name," said Su Han. "My father is a Su, but the village was my mother's, and the registration was in her name. She died. The name may or may not be on your list."

A-Qiu found the name. It was there, on the second page of the Baiyun section, with the year and the lot and the storage number. The storage number was a number from the first warehouse, the one that had burned its paperwork and sold the goods by weight.

Su Han read the line twice, then a third time. A-Qiu watched her read it the way she had watched a hundred people read their own names. Su Han did not weep, and Su Han did not smile. She did what the people did when the name was there and the goods were not.

She said, "It is only a number."

"It is the number the city used," said A-Qiu. "It is the only thing left of the lot."

"I can read a number," said Su Han. "I have been building the project of the number for eleven years."

A-Qiu did not answer that, because there was no answer, and because the sentence was Su Han's and not the archive's.

Su Han had grown up in the estate the village became. She had gone to the university, and had taken the developer's job because it was a good job. She had spent her adult life believing the thing she had to believe, which is that the old village had been a bad place and the estate was a good place and the child she had been had been lucky. She had told A-Qiu that at the mediation, the first time, and she had believed it. She had half believed it for eleven years. Now she was standing in a basement on a Thursday with a card in her hand and a number on it, and the number said the village had been the city's. The city had sold it, and the estate had been built on the good place, and the good place had been somebody's bad place, and there was no way to hold both sentences in one hand.

"Have you been to the site?" said A-Qiu.

"I drive past it every week," said Su Han. "I have driven past it every week for eleven years. I have never once got out of the car."

She copied the card. She put the copy in the plastic bag with the other papers. She stood for a moment, and then she did the thing that A-Qiu would remember. It was not a confession and not an apology, and it was worse than both. She asked whether the archive needed anything.

"Money," said A-Qiu, which was true.

"I do not mean money," said Su Han. "I mean a record. The project files. The consultation documents from the years I worked on them. I have copies. Some of them are not the public ones."

A-Qiu looked at her for a long time.

"Why?"

"Because I have been the reasonableness," said Su Han. "Somebody was going to be the reasonableness, and it was me, and I was good at it. I am not going to be it anymore. That is not a redemption. It is a resignation. The difference is the paperwork, and you are the paperwork."

She brought the files the next month. They filled a box and a half. A-Qiu went through them and found three templates, two valuations, and a

consultation schedule that did not match any consultation that had happened. She put them in the file and wrote the card with the date and the source, and beside the name she wrote the word *anonymous*, because Su Han had asked for that. The archive had learned to take what it was given and ask only for the record of the giving, not the name.

Su Han did not come back on a Thursday. She sent the files and she did not come. A-Qiu did not look for her. Once, on the river, in the last year, she saw a woman on the far bank standing at a fence and looking at a site and not going in. The woman had a good coat. A-Qiu did not call out, because the woman was not the case, and the case was the record, and the record had the files now.

## 16. The Collector's Sons

The collector had two sons, and A-Qiu found the younger one in a car park in Dongguan, and he did not want to talk about his father's books.

His name was Ho Chun, and he was fifty, and he ran a small factory that made the plastic parts inside air conditioners. He met A-Qiu in the car park because he did not want her in the office. He stood by his car with his arms crossed and said the thing that the sons of collectors always said, which was that the books had been his father's and not his, and that he had sold them because they were worth money and because his brother had wanted the flat.

"I am not sorry," said Ho Chun. "It was a library of dead people's names. It was mouldering in a flat in the old town, and it was eating the walls, and my father spent the family's money on it."

He looked at the factory wall.

"When he died there was no money and there were two thousand books of names. What was I supposed to do, keep them and live in the mould?"

He was not a bad man. A-Qiu could see that, and she had learned to see it. She had learned that the middle-aged sons of collectors are almost never villains, and are almost always tired.

"I am not asking you to be sorry," said A-Qiu. "I am looking for one book. A Meng genealogy from Xiancun. Your father's catalogue has it in the second part."

Ho Chun looked at the car park.

"The second part went to a bookseller in Hong Kong," he said. "The bookseller broke it up and sold it in pieces. That is what they do."

He uncrossed his arms.

"A set is worth less than the pieces, because a set only sells to a library, and a piece sells to a collector. A collector will pay for one book of his own surname. A library will not pay for anything."

"Do you have the bookseller's name?"

"I have the invoice," said Ho Chun. He got it out of the car. It was in a box of his father's papers that he had kept for no reason, and it named the bookseller and the lot and the price, which was low.

A-Qiu wrote it all down. Then she asked the question she had not come to ask, and asked it anyway, because she had learned that the record is made of the questions you ask when the case is over.

"Did your father ever read the Meng book? The one from Xiancun?"

Ho Chun looked at her for a moment.

"He read all of them," he said. "That was the thing. He could not read the old style, not really, but he read the names. He would sit with a book and go down the columns with his finger and say the names out loud, one after another, for hours."

He looked at the cars.

"The names of strangers. I used to think it was sad. A man reading two thousand books of the names of people who were not his family." He put the invoice away. "Then he died, and I found out he had written his own name in the front of every book. In pencil, small, under the cover, so that when the family was read, he would be in it. That is the whole of my father. He bought the whole country's dead and wrote himself into the front of them."

A-Qiu did not say anything. She thought about the collectors and the archives and the registers and the cards. She thought about the small bundle with the single word on the band, and about the family ledger with the mother's column and the father's rent. She understood that the impulse to keep a record is never pure and is never only about the dead. It is about the self, and the self wants to be in the book. The whole of the discipline is to put the self in the

front, in pencil, small, where it belongs, and to keep the names in the columns where they belong.

She went back to Guangzhou on the last train. She did not find the Meng book. She found the bookseller's name and the lot number and the price, and she put all three in the file. She wrote the card with the date and the source, and beside the card she wrote the sentence that Ho Chun had given her, because it was true and because it was the thing the whole archive was built on.

She wrote: *a record is a house for the dead, and the keeper is also a person, and the keeper has to be small enough not to fill it.*

## 17. The Father's Hands

Her father's hands had been in every room of the Xiancun house, and A-Qiu knew that the way she knew the rooms.

He was a fitter by trade, and he had worked in a factory on the other side of the river for thirty years, and the factory had made the metal parts for the buses and then for the lifts and then for nothing, and he had been made redundant at fifty-eight with a certificate and a pension that was small. He did not talk about the redundancy. He talked about the jobs, in pieces, the way the grandmother talked about the street: the pump; the shelf; the door; the window; the drip. He had fitted the pump at the Xiancun house, and it had worked for twenty years. He had fitted the shelf for the ancestral tablets and cut the join so well that the shelf had held eleven plaques for thirty years and had not bowed. He had mended the door of the back room, and the kitchen window, and the gate, and the step, and he had never once mended the drip. He had mended the door of the back room four times and had mended the kitchen window twice and had never once mended the drip in the corner of the ceiling, because, A-Qiu suspected, the drip was the one thing in the house that he could not fix and could not bear to call broken.

His hands were small and dry and had the burn scars of a fitter, and by that year they had begun to shake in the mornings, and he did not mention it, and A-Qiu noticed it the way she noticed everything.

She was at the flat near the bus station on a Sunday in the spring, and he was at the bench with the pump, and he was trying to fit a part and his hands would

not hold the screwdriver steady, and he put it down and picked it up and put it down.

"Let me," said A-Qiu.

"It is a two-hand job."

"So is everything."

She held the pump and he fitted the part, and their four hands were on the same small machine, and it took three times as long as it should have, and at the end he sat back and looked at the pump and did not say anything. He had been working on the pump for eight years. It had never worked, and it would never work, and they both knew it, and it did not matter, and neither of them said so.

"When the hands go," said her father, "I will not have the pump."

"You will have the pump."

"I will not be able to take it apart."

"Then you will take it apart with me," said A-Qiu. "Or you will leave it together and I will take it apart and you will tell me what I am doing wrong, which is what you do now."

Her father looked at the bench. Then he said the thing that A-Qiu had not expected, which was the thing he had been carrying for eleven years and had never found the day for.

"I signed the paper," he said. "I have told you I am sorry, and you said it was ours, and I have not known how to say the rest of it. The rest of it is that I was glad. Not glad to leave. Glad that the decision was made and that I did not have to make it. That is the part I cannot give back. I stood in the courtyard with the screwdriver and I was glad that the thing was decided, and I have been ashamed of the gladness ever since, and it is worse than the signing."

A-Qiu sat with that. She did not say that she understood, because she was not sure she did, and because he did not need to be understood, and because the family did not say those things.

She put her hand on the pump, on the small cold part of it that they had just fitted, and she held it steady, and she said the only true thing she had.

"The house is not the paper," she said.

Her father looked at her.

"The paper is the paper," said A-Qiu. "The house is the shelf and the pump and the window and the drip you never fixed. You kept the house. The paper was the paper. I read it three times and I read it wrong too. We both read it wrong."

Her father did not answer. He picked up the screwdriver, and his hand was steadier than it had been, and he began to take the pump apart again, and A-Qiu stayed and held the parts and did not count anything, because there was nothing to count, and because the count was the whole of her and the not-counting was the gift she had for him.

She left at dusk. He stood in the doorway the way he stood in doorways, and he said the thing he always said, which was that she should eat, and she said the thing she always said, which was that she would, and neither of them believed the other, and both of them meant it.

## 18. Chung Yeung

Chung Yeung came in the autumn, and A-Qiu and her father climbed the hill to the columbarium for the second time that year. The Cantonese sweep the graves twice, in the spring and in the autumn, and the autumn one is the quiet one.

The Chung Yeung is the Double Ninth, the ninth day of the ninth month, and the custom is old and mixed and nobody in the family could have explained the whole of it. You climb a high place. You drink the chrysanthemum wine and wear the chrysanthemum, because the chrysanthemum is the flower of the ninth month and carries the luck of the long life. You sweep the grave and set out the food and tell the dead the news, the same as the spring but smaller. The autumn is not the family's day, it is the year's day, and the year is turning and the family is not the point.

The grandmother had kept the Chung Yeung the way she kept everything, which is to say in the ordinary. She had climbed the hill every autumn until the year she could not, and then she had sent the father with the chrysanthemum and the instructions. The instructions had been the same every year, which was that the flowers were for the living and the food was for the dead and the wine was for the father.

A-Qiu and her father climbed the hill and cleaned the niche and set out the food. The father had brought the chrysanthemum and the wine, and he put the

wine down in front of the niche and poured a cup for the grandmother and a cup for himself and a cup for A-Qiu. They drank standing, which was not the rule, and which the grandmother would have corrected, and which neither of them corrected.

"The tablets," said the father, at the niche.

"What about them?"

"Should they be here?"

A-Qiu looked at the niche. The four recovered Meng tablets were not in the niche. They were in the archive, on a shelf of their own, in the basement, and the father had never asked about them, and now he was asking, on the hill, in the autumn, which was the season for asking.

"They are in the archive," said A-Qiu. "They are kept."

"They should be with her."

"She is not here either," said A-Qiu. "She is in the wall. The tablets are in the basement. The house is under the tower. There is no here. That is the whole of it."

The father looked at the niche. He did not argue. He had learned, over the years, that A-Qiu's sentences were the family's arithmetic, and that the arithmetic was true, and that the true thing did not need to be argued with.

"I climbed with her once," said the father. "The year before the signing. She was slow, and she told me about the plant, the one where her mother's village was. She said the plant was closing and the land was for the houses and the houses were for the people and the people were the ones who had taken the village. She said it was all the same land, going round. She said the land does not care who is on it. It only cares that somebody is."

A-Qiu wrote it down, in the little notebook she carried on the hill, which was not the archive and was her own. Then she put the wine down and turned the cups over on the stone, which was the custom. The autumn light came down the hill and the towers stood in the valley. The hall was under one of the towers, and the tablets were in the basement, and the grandmother was in the wall, and the whole of the family was scattered across the city in four places. The custom was the day that gathered them, which is the whole of what a custom is for.

They ate the food on the bench at the foot of the hill. The father slept on the bus. A-Qiu watched the city go past and did not cry. It was the same as the spring and it was not the same. The family now had a second date in the year, and the second date was the one that made the first date a calendar. A calendar is the way a family survives the scattering, and it is the whole of the old custom and the whole of the new archive and the whole of A-Qiu's life, done twice a year, on a hill, in the light.

## 19. The Ghost Festival

In the seventh month the city fed its dead, and A-Qiu went out with Xiao Tang to record the feeding.

The seventh month is the Ghost Festival, and in the Cantonese way it is a month and not a day, and the fifteenth is the great night. The dead come back in the seventh month, and the families feed them, and the streets set out the altars for the dead who have no family. The whole city does it, and the whole city is quiet about it, and the two things are the custom. You do not advertise the feeding. You put the fruit on the pavement and the incense in the tin and the paper in the urn, and the dead come and eat, and no one sees them. The whole street understands that the pavement at night belongs to the other side.

The office had a file on it, because the office had a file on everything. The file was the records of the families who had no grave to sweep and no niche to visit, which in the cleared villages was most of them. When a village is demolished, the graves go too, or the columbarium niche goes, or the land under the grave is sold and the ashes are moved to a wall in the hills, and the wall has a number, and the number is the only place the family can go. The families asked the office, every year, in the seventh month, whether there was a place to burn the paper. A-Qiu had made a list. The list had forty places where the district allowed the burning in the seventh month, and the list was in the archive, and it was one of the most-used pages in the whole room.

Xiao Tang filmed the altars on the fifteenth night.

The lane behind the office had three altars, the market had two, and the corner by the earth-god shrine had one. The altars were fruit and incense and the little paper clothes and the hell money, and the people who had set them out did not stand by them, because you do not stand by the altar of the wandering dead.

The whole lane was lit for the other side and dark for this one. The paper went up in the tins, and the smoke went up the lane, and the whole city smelled of it. The smell was the smell of the seventh month, which no one has ever put into a brochure.

"The city has a festival for the dead and not for the living," said Xiao Tang.

"Which dead?" said A-Qiu.

"The city has a festival for the dead who have nobody," said A-Qiu. "That is the whole of it. The dead with a family get Ching Ming; the dead without a family get the seventh month."

She watched a paper coat go up in the tin.

"The city is not generous. The city is old, and the old custom is that you feed the stranger at the gate whether you like it or not."

Xiao Tang filmed the paper and the fruit and the empty lane, and A-Qiu stood at the corner and watched. She was thinking about the archive, which was a shelf of names, and about the register, which was four hundred families, and about the tens of thousands of the dead who had no name in any register at all. The archive was a copy of a thing that existed in the heads of old people, and the old people were dying, and the copy was only as complete as the questions she had managed to ask. The seventh month was the other kind of record. It was the custom's way of saying that the unrecorded are still here, and that the city that has forgotten you still sets out the fruit, and that the forgetting is not the same as the abandoning.

She wrote it down. She wrote the date and the three altars and the empty lane, and she wrote the sentence that Xiao Tang had said, because it was true and because it was the thing the archive could never be. She wrote: *the register is for the dead who have a name. The seventh month is for the rest. A city needs both, and the one is not a substitute for the other, and the archive is only the half of the custom that has a card.*

## 20. The Winter Solstice

The winter solstice came that year. The grandmother had said that in the Cantonese way the solstice is bigger than the New Year. The family kept it as well as a family of two could keep it.

The solstice is the shortest day, and the whole of the custom is to get through the dark together. In the north they eat the dumplings and in the south they eat the glutinous rice balls and the winter melon soup. The old people say that the solstice is the true new year, and that the New Year is for the city and the solstice is for the family. The grandmother had kept it with the soup and the rice balls and the whole family at one table. She had said every year that the solstice was the day the family counted itself, and that a family that does not count itself in the dark is a family that has stopped.

That year the family was two, and one of the two was the father, and the father did not cook.

A-Qiu made the soup. She found the recipe in the grandmother's handwriting, in the back of the family ledger, which was where the grandmother had kept the recipes and the debts and the names. The recipe was the winter melon and the pork and the dried scallop and the ginger. It was three lines. The third line said the thing the grandmother always said: not too much salt, you have a heavy hand.

She made the soup in the father's kitchen. The whole flat smelled of the grandmother. The father came in from the bench and stood in the doorway and looked at the pot and did not say anything for a while.

"It is the soup," said the father.

"It is the soup."

"She made it every solstice."

"I know."

A-Qiu did not add too much salt. They ate at the small table by the window. The two of them. With the pump in pieces on the bench behind them and the soup and the rice balls and the extra bowl that A-Qiu set. Without saying why. For the grandmother. The father looked at the extra bowl and did not say anything. A-Qiu did not explain. The two of them ate and the extra bowl sat on the table and the steam went up from it and the flat was the grandmother for an hour.

"Should I have set it?" said A-Qiu, at the end.

"Yes," said the father.

"That is not an answer."

"It is the answer," said the father. "The custom does not require you to believe. It requires you to set the bowl. She said that. She said the bowl is the whole of it, the setting of the bowl, and whether the dead come is not your business." He looked at the extra bowl. "I did not set the bowl for your mother. For four years I did not set it, and then your grandmother found out and she was angry, and she was right, and I have set it since. The bowl is not for the dead. The bowl is for the living, so that the living do not forget that there is a place that is not filled."

A-Qiu wrote it down that night in the ledger, on the page after the recipe. She wrote the date and the soup and the extra bowl and the sentence the father had said, and she understood that the family ledger had become the archive in the same slow way that a street becomes a file. It had started as the household debts and it had become the record of the whole of the family, and the whole of the family was now two people and an extra bowl and a recipe in the back of a book. That was enough. That was the solstice. The shortest day was over and the light was coming back, one minute a day, whether anyone believed it or not.

## 21. The Last Visit

The father had the first fall in the spring, and it was small, and he did not tell A-Qiu until she found the bruise.

She found it on a Sunday, at the flat, when he reached for the kettle and his sleeve went up and the bruise was on the forearm, the whole of the forearm, the yellow and the green coming out. He said he had caught it on the bench. A-Qiu looked at the bench, and the bench was a bench with nothing on it that could make a bruise like that, and she did not say so, and she made the tea.

The second fall came in the summer. The neighbor found him in the corridor, and the neighbor called A-Qiu. A-Qiu took him to the hospital. The hospital said the hip was cracked and the hip would mend and the balance would not. The doctor said the word *falls*, in the plural, and the plural was the whole of it. He was seventy-four, and the falls were the beginning of the end of the living alone, and both of them knew it, and neither of them said it.

A-Qiu arranged the flat. She moved the bench to the wall and the rug to the storage and the kettle to the low shelf. She put the pump in pieces on a tray with a cloth over it. He could not work on it now and she did not want him to see it

and be unable. She hired the woman who came in the mornings. The woman was good and was not the family, and the father did not like her and did not say so. The whole thing was the arithmetic of old age: that a person who has cared for things all his life cannot bear to be the thing that is cared for.

He got worse slowly. That was the thing about it, and the thing A-Qiu could not put into the file. It was not an event and it was not a death. It was a slow going-down. The father went down the way a building goes down, floor by floor, and each floor was a thing he could no longer do. First the long walk to the market. Then the bus. Then the stairs to the roof, where he had gone every evening for the air. Then the pump. Then, at the end, the tea, because the kettle was heavy and his hand was not steady. A-Qiu came every day and made the tea and he did not say thank you. The thank-you was not the family's way.

The last visit was in the autumn, and it was the last visit of the good kind, which is to say the last one before the bed.

A-Qiu came on a Sunday and made the tea and they sat at the window. The father was in the chair with the arms, which was the grandmother's chair. He looked at the city and did not say anything for a long time. Then he did the thing he had done once before, which was to speak the true thing without being asked.

"The house," said the father. "I have been thinking about the house."

"Which house?"

"Ours. Xiancun." He looked at the window. "I fixed everything in it. That is what I did. Your grandmother said the house was not the walls, it was the names on the beam, and I said yes, and I did not understand her, and I fixed the walls anyway. All those years, and I did not understand her. And then the house came down and I took the pump, and the pump is the house, and I have not been able to make it work, and that is the whole of it." He turned his head. "The pump is the house and I could not make it work, and I am not sorry about the signing. I am sorry that I fixed everything except the one thing that was the house."

A-Qiu looked at the pump on the tray under the cloth. She did not tell him that the pump was not the house and the house was not the pump and that the house was in her head, in the counts, in the archive, in the record that would outlast all of them. She did not tell him, because he did not need the lecture, and

because the not-telling was the whole of the family, and because the truth he needed was not the truth she had.

"You fixed the shelf," said A-Qiu. "The shelf held eleven tablets for thirty years and it did not bow. That is the house. The house is the shelf that held them. The shelf is in the record."

The father looked at her for a long time. Then he nodded once and turned back to the window. The two of them sat in the grandmother's chair and the light went the way the light went in that flat, and neither of them said anything else. The afternoon was the last good afternoon. A-Qiu did not know it was the last one, and that was the mercy of it.

## 22. The Bequest

In the sixth year A-Qiu did the thing that lawyers do late, which is to see a lawyer, and she wrote the archive into her will.

She went to a notary in the old town, a woman in her fifties with a good desk and a bad air-conditioner, and she sat down as a client for the first time in her life. The whole of the appointment was strange: she knew the forms better than the notary and could not make her own case.

The problem was the archive, and the archive was not a legal person. It was a room and a cabinet and a shelf and three drives, and the drives and the paper were the property of the office, or of the person who had made them, and the person who had made them was A-Qiu, and A-Qiu was mortal. The notary asked the question that A-Qiu had spent her life asking other people.

"Who do you want to leave it to?"

"The office," said A-Qiu. "But the office is a project. A project ends when the funding ends. I need something that does not end."

"Then leave it to a person."

"Which person?"

"That is your decision," said the notary. "I do not know your people. I only write down the decision."

A-Qiu sat with it. She thought about the office, and about Chow, and about the Thursday families, and about the district, which would take the archive and file it and lose it in a move. She thought about the university, which would take the archive and catalogue it and give it a number. The number would be a kind

of keeping, and the keeping would be a shelf in a library that no family would ever find. She thought about Xiao Tang, and Xiao Tang was not yet in the office, and Xiao Tang would come in a few years, and A-Qiu did not know it yet, and the notary waited.

"Leave it to the room," said A-Qiu.

"That is not a person."

"I know. Leave it to a committee of three: the director of the office, the senior Thursday volunteer, and one member of a claimant family, chosen each year. They cannot sell it, and they can only keep it or move it. The paper stays in Guangdong. The copies go to the university and to one family in each of the clans in the register."

The notary wrote it down. Then she stopped and looked at A-Qiu, which was not part of the appointment.

"Who made the archive?" said the notary.

"I did."

"Then the archive is you, and you cannot leave yourself to a committee. You can only leave the things. The things are the record, and the record is the record, and the committee is a hope." She set down the pen. "I have written a hundred wills. The people who come here to leave a thing are always trying to leave the person. You cannot leave the person; you can only leave the things and trust the next person to be the kind of person who keeps them."

A-Qiu signed the will, and the will named the committee, and the committee did not exist yet, and the whole of it was a hope with a notary's stamp on it. She walked home through the *qilou* arcade and understood, for the first time, that her life's work was a bequest with nobody to receive it, and that the notary was right. The whole of the archive was one question: whether the next person would come. She did not know that the next person was already a girl in a county town in Guangdong, walking to school past a cleared village, carrying a box of names on a shelf in a rented room.

She did not know. That was the whole of the faith. She did not know, and she made the will anyway, and the will was the record of the faith, and the faith was the only thing in the archive that could not be scanned and could not be moved

to a basement. She put it on the shelf with the rest and went back to the window on Monday, and the queue was already on the stairs.

## 23. The Register

The register was four hundred families long, and it was the first document in the whole case that the city had made and could not unmake.

A-Qiu read it three times. It listed the names of the cleared villages; the households; the storage lots. Beside each household there was a number, and the number was the number the warehouse had used. It was not a complete register. The earliest years were missing, and the lots that had been cleared by private contract were missing. The Meng entry was there, but the entry said only the family name and the year and the lot, and did not say what was in the crates. But it was a register, and it was official, and it proved what A-Qiu had not been able to prove in the hearing: that the city had taken the goods, recorded the taking, and then stopped keeping the record.

She took it back to the district and did not ask for the tablets. She asked for the list. She asked that the list be published, so that a family could come and find its own name, and so that the families whose goods were gone would at least have the record of what had been taken. It was a small request. It cost the district nothing, and it made the district look as if it were doing something, and that was why it was approved.

Then she went to Tam.

Tam read the judgment and the register and put them on the desk. He was polite and he was a businessman, and he had a lease, and he had a yard of old things that he had bought lawfully, and he was not going to give them away. But he had also been a son whose father had bought a lot of a village's gods by weight. He had sat in that yard for twenty years among other people's ancestors, and A-Qiu had come to understand, over the months, that the reason he was tired was not the lease. The reason was the stack by the wall with the writing turned in.

"What do you want?" said Tam.

"Here is what I propose," said A-Qiu.

"Go on."

"I will buy the Xiancun pieces, at your price, not mine. The other families buy through the district, at your price. You do not sell the tablets to the kitchens

or the teahouses in the meantime. You let the families come and look, and if a family can prove a name, it takes its tablet at cost."

Tam looked at the register for a long time.

"The district will not pay my price," he said.

"The district will pay half your price and call it a social responsibility programme," said A-Qiu. "You will take it, because the alternative is that this register is published, and your yard becomes known as the yard where the ancestors are, and nobody in the city will buy a door from you again."

Tam almost smiled. It was the dry smile of a man who had been out-argued and did not mind.

"You are good," he said.

"So I am told," said A-Qiu.

The deal took four months. The district paid for two hundred pieces out of a culture fund, which was not a legal obligation and was practically a bribe to the future, and Tam threw in the box and the trolley and the labels. The families came. Some came with receipts and some came with photographs and some came with only a name and a story. A-Qiu sat at a table in Tam's yard on Saturdays and read the names off the tablets and matched them to the register, and the ones who matched took their ancestors home.

The Meng pieces were eleven, and Tam's lot had four of them: the grandfather's brother; two cousins whose names A-Qiu knew from the voice recordings of her grandmother on the van tour; and a fourth tablet so old the gilt had gone and the name could not be read. She took all four. The genealogy book was not there. It had gone to the paper mill or to the collector with the clan stuff, and Tam had a name for the collector, but the collector had died and his sons had sold the library, and the book was somewhere, and A-Qiu would look for it for the rest of her life.

She put the four tablets in the archive, in the room in the basement, on a shelf of their own, and she wrote the card and put the names on it. Then she stood in front of the shelf and looked at the four black plaques and the fragment in its plastic sleeve. She did not light incense and she did not say anything, because she was not the one who did that, and because she did not know the words.

The rest of the register stayed on the shelf beside the cards, four hundred names long. It was the only document in the whole archive that the city had written, and it was there because she had lost the case and filed the record and opened the door a crack. It was not the recovery. It was the list of what had been taken, and it was the beginning of the answer to the question nobody had asked, which was where the village had gone. The village had gone into a register; into a basement; into a tower; into a paper mill and a teahouse and a stack by a wall with the writing turned in. And four of it was on a shelf, and the shelf was locked, and A-Qiu had the key.

# Interlude III

*From the archive. A note in A-Po's hand, found folded into the back of the embroidery frame when the cloth was mounted. English translation by A-Qiu. The original is in the file marked TAIPING / EMBROIDERY.*

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To whoever finds this,

The street is 1968. I have done it from the gate to the market and the market to the well because those are the years I know and because nobody else will do them. The colors are the colors of the year. The green of the button shop is wrong. There were two greens in that shop, one for the shutters and one for the door, and I have put the door green on the shutters, and I am not going to take it out. Let it be wrong. A wrong thing that was there is better than a right thing that was not.

The well is at the corner where the lane turns. The jacaranda is at number four. The fish woman is at the market with her back to the viewer because she always had her back to the street and it would be a lie to turn her around. The postman is on the postman's round. The dog is not in the picture because the dog is dead and I could not do him.

I did not put the people in. A person in a map is a ghost and I did not want to make ghosts. The street is the person. If you stand at the gate and look in, you will know who lived where, and that is enough, and that is all.

There is one window not done. It is my own, the top room, the window where I keep the lamp. I am leaving it for the last. When I do it, it will be in gold, because that is the only color the lamp ever was.

I have kept the accounts for fifteen years and I am not finished and that is the point. Tell the lawyer girl the green is wrong. She will want to fix it. Do not let her.

— W.

※

WALL FOUR

# The Wall She Weeps Down

> *From the grandmother's telling*
> *Don't cry at the wall. Write it down. If you don't write it, the wall keeps the only copy.*

## 1. The Last Village

The village was called Shazui, and it was the last one on the river.

It sat on the south bank where the Pearl bent toward the sea: a cluster of low houses; one lane; a stone quay. The fishing boats had gone years ago, and the river had kept coming. There were sixty households on the register and forty people living in them. The young had gone to the city, which was four stops away on the new line, and the old had stayed. The river was the river, and the rent was nothing, and a person of eighty does not move for a building.

The city had been trying to move them for eleven years.

The reason it had taken eleven years was not the people: it was the water. The village sat on a bend where the river had deposited a shelf of soft ground. The engineers had found that the tower would need piles driven forty meters. The piles would disturb the silt, and the silt would move, and the tower would lean. There was a number for the lean. It was in one of the files, and A-Qiu had read it, and the number was small, and the number was the reason the village was still there.

She took the case because the last village was the last village. The office had been asked by the district to send someone to talk to the residents. She was, by then, the person the district called when it wanted somebody the holdouts would listen to, which was a sentence that had become true in a way she did not entirely like.

The apprentice came the same month.

Her name was Xiao Tang, and she was twenty-four, and she had grown up in a county town in Guangdong and had come to Guangzhou for the law school

and had stayed. She was quick and she was careful, and she had read the archive, all of it, on her own time, before she applied. In the interview she had asked A-Qiu one question, which was how the recordings were catalogued. A-Qiu had hired her in the room, which she had never done before.

"Why the recordings?" said A-Qiu.

"Because the paper is already in the files," said Xiao Tang.

"And the recordings?"

"Nobody keeps the voice."

Xiao Tang learned the work the way A-Qiu had learned it, which was at the window. She took the queue two mornings a week, and she wrote the room records, and she typed them up. She was better at the technology than A-Qiu, and by the end of the first month she had put the whole archive on a drive. She made a copy and gave the copy to A-Qiu and told her to keep it somewhere else, which A-Qiu had not thought to do in eleven years.

The village had its own object.

It was not a lamp and it was not a stove. It was a shrine at the end of the quay, a small stone house the size of a wardrobe, with a niche and a stone figure and a roof of green tiles that the villagers had mended every year. It was the shrine of the river goddess, and it had been at the quay since before anyone could remember. The fishermen had prayed there before they went out. Their wives had prayed there while they were gone. The shrine had survived the war and the commune and the typhoon and the year the river came over the quay and into the lane.

The man who kept it was named Lam Chi-wai. He was sixty-two, and he had been a river pilot before the pilotage went to the machines, and he was the last person on the quay who lit the incense every morning.

He was not A-Po. A-Qiu noticed it in the first hour. A-Po had been quick and sharp and full of the street, and Lam was slow and quiet and full of the water. He did not gossip and he did not complain. He stood at the shrine in the morning and put in the incense and looked at the river for a while. When A-Qiu asked him what he wanted, he did not say the shrine, because he knew the shrine was the answer they had all heard before. He said the quay. He said the quay was

the village, and a village without a quay is a set of houses, and a set of houses can be anywhere.

"Do you pray here?" said A-Qiu.

"I ask."

"For what?"

"For the river to keep doing what it does," said Lam.

"They will move the shrine," said A-Qiu. "They have to. It is in the plan. They will rebuild it at the entrance of the new complex, in the same style, with the same tiles, and it will be open to the public."

Lam looked at the shrine and did not look at her.

"A shrine is not a roof and a tile and a figure," he said. "A shrine is a place where the river is asked for something and answers. You can move a roof. You cannot move the asking."

A-Qiu wrote that down, because it was true. She wrote it down because it was the thing the case would be about, and because she had learned that the thing the client says last is the thing the case is about. She wrote it down on the quay, standing at the stone wall. She put her hand on the wall and leaned for a moment. Lam saw her do it and said nothing, because he was not a man who commented on the bodies of strangers, and because he had seen the river take people and knew the body is not the argument.

She went back to the city that night and took the pills she did not tell the office about, and she sat at the desk and opened the file and began to read.

## 2. The Apprentice

The doctor was a woman in her fifties with a scan on the screen and a manner that did not waste time, and she said the words in the order A-Qiu had known she would say them.

The heart was failing. It was not a heart attack and it was not a valve and it was not anything that could be opened and fixed. It was a pump that had been strong and had been worked and was wearing out, and the number was low, and it would keep going low. There was medication. There was a diet. There was the possibility of a device, later, if she wanted it. There was no cure, and the word the doctor used was *progressive*. She said it plainly. She did not say how long, because no honest doctor says how long.

A-Qiu asked two questions.

The first was whether she could keep working. The doctor said she could keep working if she did not do what she had been doing, which was the stairs and the long days and the not eating and the carrying of other people's weight. A-Qiu said she would try. The doctor looked at her and said the other question was the one she had not asked, and A-Qiu said the second question was whether it would be quick, and the doctor said it might be quick, and that she should not count on it.

She did not tell the office. She did not tell Xiao Tang. She took the pills and she carried the pills in her bag, and she did not carry the bottle. She made an arrangement with the doctor for the appointments to be on the days she did not have the window, and for the results to go to a folder that was not the office folder.

Then she went back to the village.

The case had a shape by the spring, and the shape was the silt.

The developer's engineers had filed the foundation plan. The plan had the piles at forty meters, and the plan had a note about the soft ground, and the note said the settlement would be managed by the piling sequence. The note did not mention the village. A-Qiu had the file read by an engineer of her own, a retired man who had worked on the river all his life and who owed the office a favor. He read the plan and said the plan was technically correct and practically a lie. The piles would not settle the silt. The piles would push it. The village sat on the shelf, and the shelf was the thing that held the village above the water, and when the piles went in, the shelf would move, and the village would follow it.

He wrote it up. It was four pages, and it was the strongest thing in the file. A-Qiu knew it would not win, because it was a report from a retired man against the report of a licensed firm. She knew the district did not want the village to win, and the tower was already drawn, and the foundations were already paid for. But the report was the reason the case lasted another year, and the year was the thing the village needed.

The village used the year the way villages use a year.

The oyster family on the east end used it to raise the oyster beds higher, because the water was coming up anyway, and they had been meaning to for a

decade. The woman who ran the snack stall on the quay used it to write down every dish her mother had cooked, on cards, in a box. She gave the box to Xiao Tang for the archive, and Xiao Tang scanned every card. The young people who had gone to the city came back on Sundays and sat on the quay and drank beer and did not talk about the tower. One of them, a girl of twenty who worked in a bank, started to film the village on her phone every Sunday, the quay and the shrine and her grandmother's hands, and gave the films to Xiao Tang, and the films went into the archive with the rest.

And Lam lit the incense every morning and looked at the river. A-Qiu came when she could and sat on the quay with the file, and did not tell him about the number, because the number was hers.

Xiao Tang found out anyway. She was quick.

She found out in the spring, when A-Qiu did not come in for two days and then came in gray and sat down and did not get up to go to the window. Xiao Tang did not ask. She took the window herself and did the morning's queue. At the end of it she came back and put a glass of water on the desk and said the thing A-Qiu had not expected, which was not a question.

"I am not going to tell anyone," said Xiao Tang. "I am just going to be here more."

A-Qiu looked at her.

"You have the file on the silt," said Xiao Tang. "I have read it. I will do the walking and the photographs and the door to door. You do the sitting and the writing. That is the division."

"That is not a division," said A-Qiu. "That is you doing my job."

"It is a division," said Xiao Tang. "You did it for Chow when she got old. Now somebody does it for you. Do you want me to go back to the window?"

A-Qiu did not answer, and Xiao Tang did not need one. She took the file and went out, and A-Qiu sat at the desk with the glass of water and the pills in her bag and the number in her chest, and she did the thing she had done her whole life, which was to keep working, because the work was the only thing in the room that did not change.

## 3. The Village

The meeting was held on the quay on a Sunday afternoon, because the committee room in the village office was too small. The quay was the only place big enough, and A-Qiu suspected the quay was also the point.

There were forty people on the register and thirty came. The oyster family came, two brothers and their mother, in the rubber boots they wore for the beds. The snack-stall woman came with a pot of tea and a stack of cups and set them on the wall. The young people came back from the city on the new line, the girl who worked in the bank and three of her cousins and a boy who drove for a delivery company. Lam came and stood at the end of the quay by the shrine and did not sit down. Xiao Tang came with the camera and the recorder, and the recorder sat on the wall between the tea and the cups and no one objected.

A-Qiu stood in the middle with the notice in her hand and read it out, because some of them had not read it and some of them could not read it and all of them had heard a version of it.

Then she did what she always did. She told them the truth.

"The offer is above the assessment," she said. "The law is on the district's side. If we file an appeal, we will probably lose the appeal, and the offer may go down rather than up, because the offer is discretionary and the discretion moves with the case. The appeal will take a year, maybe two. During the appeal you will live here, and the water will be cut again, and the safety notices will go up again, and the developer will offer the low floor to the first family that signs, and there will be a family that signs." She let that sit. "That is what I can promise you. Anybody who tells you different is selling something."

The oyster brothers looked at each other. The snack-stall woman poured tea.

"Then why appeal?" said the elder brother.

"Because the appeal writes down the reason," said A-Qiu. "The district's file says the ground is sound and the piles are safe and the village is being improved. If we appeal, that file gets a counter-file. The counter-file says the silt will move. It is written by an engineer and it goes into the court record, and the court record is public, and it stays. They can take the village. They cannot take the record."

"That is not a house," said the elder brother.

"No," said A-Qiu. "It is not a house."

The meeting went the way meetings went. The mother of the oyster brothers said she was sixty-eight and had lived in the village her whole life and would not move. The younger brother said his children were in school in the city and the commute was killing his wife. The girl who worked in the bank said she had started filming and would keep filming, whatever they decided. A man at the back whose name A-Qiu did not know said they should take the money while the money was there. A woman beside him said the money would be there in a year, and the man said it would be less. They were both right, and neither of them was wrong, and that was the whole of the village, and A-Qiu let them talk until they stopped.

Then Lam spoke. He had not spoken all afternoon. He said one thing, from the end of the quay, and everyone turned.

"I will stay," he said. "Whatever the meeting decides. I am not asking anyone to stay with me. I am telling you what I am doing."

There was a silence. Then the elder oyster brother said, "Ah-Wai," which was Lam's familiar name, and did not finish the sentence, because there was nothing to finish. He knew Lam. They all knew Lam. He had been on the quay when the storm took the east breakwater, and he had not left then either.

They voted. It was not a formal vote; it was the kind of vote a village takes by looking around and counting who meets whose eye. Twenty-two for the appeal. Nine against. Nine who would not say. It was a majority, and a majority was not a village. A-Qiu wrote the numbers down in the file, because the file should say the truth: the village appealed by twenty-two to nine. The nine were not villains, and the twenty-two were not heroes. The difference between them was a wife's commute and a son's school and a mother's age and a shilling of rent. That was the whole of the argument, and it was the same argument as every village, and it never made a good headline.

Xiao Tang filmed the meeting, and the film went into the archive that night. In the film the tea is poured and the notice is held up, and the girl who works in the bank is crying at the end. A-Qiu is not. Lam is standing by the shrine with his hands behind his back, looking at the river, the way he looked at it every morning of his life.

## 4. The Silt

The appeal was filed in the autumn, and the file was thin, and then the tip came.

It came the way the tips came, which was to the office email with no name and a subject line that said only the village's name. There was one attachment: a PDF of a survey, twenty pages, with the developer's letterhead and a date four years before the foundation plan. A-Qiu opened it on a Tuesday morning with the queue on the stairs and the window not yet open.

The survey was the silt survey, and it was the original one, the one the developer had commissioned when the tower was first drawn. It showed the shelf under the village in detail. It showed the settlement that the piles would cause, and it showed a number. The number was the lean, and it was in the report because the report was honest, because a survey is honest even when the person who asked for it is not. The number said the tower would lean two degrees east if the piles went in before the shelf was treated.

The foundation plan that had been filed said the settlement would be managed by the piling sequence. It did not say two degrees. It did not say east. A-Qiu read the survey three times, and then she read the foundation plan again, and the foundation plan was not a lie, exactly, because it did not say the number, and a plan that does not say the number is a plan that has been written by someone who knows the number and has decided not to write it. She sat back.

It was the strongest document she had had in twenty years. It had come to her from nowhere, and she did not know who had sent it, and she did not need to know, because the record does not ask who the witness is, only what the witness says.

She found out who sent it anyway, because Su Han came to see her.

Su Han was in her forties now, and she had left the developer's office years before and worked for a heritage consultancy, and she came to the legal aid office on a Thursday and sat down at the desk and did not pretend to be there about a client. She had the same good coat and the same reasonable manner and a tiredness in her face that had not been there at the mediation, and she said nothing about the email.

"I read the judgment," said Su Han. "The one from Taiping Street. It is in the database, and I read it every year or so."

"Why?"

"Because I was the one who held the low floor for thirty days," said Su Han. "I was the one who told you the offer was reasonable. I believed it. I still, some days, believe it." She turned her cup a quarter turn, the way the nephew had, the way careful people do. "I grew up in a cleared village. I have said that to you before. I have said it so many times that it has stopped meaning anything, and that is the thing I came to say. The sentence has stopped meaning anything."

A-Qiu waited.

"The village on the river is different," said Su Han. "You have the survey. I do not know how you have the survey. The man who did it is dead and the file was never filed." She looked at A-Qiu. "The number is right. The number is two degrees. When they drive those piles, the shelf will move, and the village will move, and it will not happen in a month. It will happen in ten years, and by then there will be a tower and there will be nobody to blame and the water will be under the tower's skirt." She stood up. "I am not a witness. I will deny I said any of this. But you have the number, and the number is the case, and I am not going to be the one who sits on it again."

She left. A-Qiu did not ask whether she had sent the email, because the question would have required an answer, and the answer would have required Su Han to lie, and A-Qiu did not want to make her lie again. She watched her go down the stairs and out into the street, and then she turned back to the survey and read it a fourth time, slowly, the way she read the things that mattered.

The number changed the case.

Not because it would win. It would not win. The district would file a reply that said the survey was old and the plan was new and the piling sequence had been designed to account for the settlement. But the survey was the original, and the original is the document a court cannot ignore, and the hearing was set for January, and the village would have its day in the record with the number on the table.

A-Qiu took the survey to Lam on the quay and read him the relevant page, which was page eleven, which was the page with the number.

"Two degrees," said Lam.

"Two degrees east."

He looked at the river.

"I have been saying for years that the water is coming," he said. "Everyone said the water is the tide. The water is the tide, and the tide is the water." He put his hand on the shrine wall. "The ground moves, and you cannot see it, and the river takes what the ground lets go. That is the whole of it." He looked at A-Qiu. "You have the paper."

"I have the paper."

"Then it is in the record."

"It is in the record."

He nodded and did not say anything else, and A-Qiu sat on the quay with him and watched the tide, and she was tired, and she did not tell him about it, and he did not ask, and the afternoon went the way afternoons went on the river.

## 5. The Tide

The village had a tide in it, and the tide was the village's clock.

The water came up the bank twice a day, and it came to a different line each time. The line was written on a stone at the corner of the quay, and the stone had been cut by four generations of boatmen with a chisel. The high line was at the fourth mark. The low line was at the first. The oyster beds were planted between the second and the third, and the boats had been moored at the fourth, and when the water came to the fourth mark in a storm, the ground floors took the water, and the village carried the mattresses upstairs.

Lam read the stone the way another man reads a newspaper. He had read it every morning of his life. He could tell from the mark where the tide had been in the night, and whether the wind had pushed it, and whether the mud was coming back to the beds, and whether the month would be a good one. He did not say any of it. He looked at the stone, and he lit the incense, and he stood at the shrine with his hands behind his back. The village read it off him the way the village read everything, by watching and not asking.

A-Qiu came on the early boats in the spring, before the office, and sat on the quay with the file while the tide came in.

The oyster family was at work by six. The two brothers and their mother worked the beds with a long raking pole. The mother, who was sixty-eight, worked the shore end and complained about the brothers' backs and their wives

and their children's marks at school. The brothers took it and did not answer, because she was their mother and because, A-Qiu suspected, they were not sorry to hear her voice. The elder brother had a bad shoulder from the raking and would not see a doctor. The younger brother had a plan to sell the oysters direct to the restaurants in the city. He had a phone full of numbers and had got three of them to answer. The mother said the direct selling was a folly and the oysters should go to the market the way they had always gone. The younger brother said the market paid a price that was a joke. The mother said the market was the market, and a joke is a kind of living.

The snack-stall woman was on the quay by half past six. She had the pot and the cups, and the steam went sideways in the wind. She had been at the stall for twenty years. Her mother had been at the stall before her, and her mother's sister before that. The stall was a wooden frame with a canvas roof and a name that was not written down, and everyone knew where it was by the smell of the congee. She fed the oyster brothers on credit in the bad weeks, and they paid her in the good weeks. The ledger of that arrangement was in her head, and she had never once been wrong about it, which was its own kind of record.

The young people came on Sundays and sat on the quay with the beer. The girl who worked in the bank filmed the tide. The boy who drove for the delivery company brought a football, and the football went into the water once. They did not get it back, and they laughed for an hour about the football, and the girl filmed that too. They were the ones who would leave, and they knew it, and the village knew it, and no one said it, because saying it would have made it a decision.

And Lam stood at the shrine, and A-Qiu sat on the stone, and the tide came up to the second mark and stopped and turned. The water went out, and the mud came back along the beds, and the oyster mother called to her sons about their backs.

"Is the water higher this year?" said A-Qiu.

"The water is higher every year," said Lam. "The stone says so. The fourth mark was the top mark when I was a boy. Now the water comes to the fourth mark without a storm. The old men argue about whether the mark has moved or the river has moved, and they are both right, and that is the argument."

He put his hand flat on the shrine wall.

"The mark has not moved. The river has risen. The mark is the argument."

"They will say the piles are safe."

"They will say the piles are safe," said Lam, "and the piles will be safe for ten years. I will not be here in ten years."

He looked at the shrine, and then at the water.

"The village will not be here in ten years. The tower will be here, and the tower will be safe. Then the water will come to the tower's skirt, and there will be nobody on the quay to read the stone, and the stone will be under the tower with the rest." "That is not a prophecy. It is arithmetic. The arithmetic is the only thing of mine that will outlast me."

A-Qiu wrote it down. She wrote the arithmetic and the tide marks and the oyster credit ledger and the football in the water and the smell of the congee. The village was not the houses. The village was the tide and the stone and the argument about the mark. The case was the houses, and the archive was the whole of it, and none of it was the same thing, and that was the thing she had spent her life learning to hold.

## 6. The Shrine

The shrine had been built by a boatman who had drowned, or by his widow, or by the village, depending on which old person told it. It did not matter which. All three versions ended in the same place: the shrine was older than everyone, and the river was older than the shrine.

It was a stone house the size of a wardrobe, with a niche and a figure and a roof of green tiles that the village mended every year. The figure was the river goddess, and she was small and worn and had the face of a woman who had been listening for a long time. Lam's father had kept the shrine, and his father before him, and before that the keeping had been the whole village's and had become one family's, the way a thing becomes one family's when nobody else will do it. Lam had kept it for thirty years. He had lit the incense every morning of his adult life, and in the years when he was piloting he had lit it at four and gone to the river in the dark, and he had come back at dusk and lit it again, which was not the rule, and which he did anyway.

A-Qiu asked him once who he thought was listening.

He thought about it for a long time. He was a man who did not answer quickly, and she had learned to wait.

"The river is listening," he said. "Whether the river is a person is a question for the temple. I am a boatman. A boatman does not ask whether the river is a person."

He looked at the water.

"A boatman asks whether the river is high, and whether the wind is from the east, and whether the mud is coming back to the beds, and whether there is a body under the bridge at the turn. The shrine is where you put the questions that have no answer, so that you do not carry them on the water. That is the whole use. It is not for the goddess. It is for the man."

The village used the shrine the way the village used the quay, which is to say without discussing it. The oyster mother lit a stick before the beds were planted. The snack-stall woman lit a stick before the New Year. The young girl who worked in the bank filmed it once, and asked Lam what to say, and Lam said, "Say nothing. Tell her what is happening." The girl told the goddess what was happening, which was that the compound was coming and the village was going, and she filmed herself saying it, and the film went into the archive.

The shrine had the names in it.

In the stone at the base, where the wall met the floor, the names of the drowned had been cut, one after another, over two hundred years. There were forty-one of them. Some were cut deep; some were cut shallow; some by a hand that had been drinking; some by a hand that had been crying. The last one was cut in 1979, and after 1979 there were no more. After 1979 the boats were fewer and the fishing was gone, and the river had stopped taking the men the way it had taken them, or had stopped bringing them back, which is not the same thing.

Lam had cut the last name himself, and it was his brother's. His brother had been twenty-two, and the boat had gone over in the typhoon, and the body had come back three days later at the turn. Lam had cut the name with a chisel the week after the funeral, and the cuts were the deepest on the whole wall. No one had ever asked him about it, including A-Qiu. She had read the name and had not asked, because she had learned the family's rule from the grandmother: the

unsaid governs, and the way to love a person is to let them keep the thing they are keeping.

When the village was told it would move, Lam's first question was about the shrine.

"Will they take the stone?"

"Which stone?" said A-Qiu.

"The base. The names. The figure is mine to take. The base is the village's, and the base has the names, and the names cannot go in my flat, because the names are forty-one and the flat is small, and because the names are not mine."

A-Qiu asked the district. The district said the shrine would be rebuilt at the entrance of the compound, in the same style, with the same tiles, and that the stone base would be preserved and reinstalled. A-Qiu asked whether the names would be preserved. The district said the stone would be preserved. A-Qiu asked whether the names were on the stone. The district said the stone was a heritage object and would be handled by the heritage office. A-Qiu asked for the name of the office and the name of the man who would handle the stone, and she got the name, and she wrote it down, and she put it in the file, and she told Lam that she had the name and the office and the date, and that she would hold them.

"For how long?" said Lam.

"For as long as I am here," said A-Qiu.

Lam nodded. He did not say what she knew, which was that she would not be here for as long as the stone, and that the stone would outlast the office and the district and the compound, and that a name cut in a stone at the base of a shrine is a record that the river itself has to keep.

## 7. The Petition

The petition was the village's own idea, and A-Qiu did not write it.

It came out of a Sunday on the quay, after the meeting, when the young people had drunk the beer and the girl who worked in the bank had said the thing that no one had said. She said that her grandmother could not write her own name and that she could, and that the district answered letters that came from banks, because the district knew that a bank letter meant a literate person and a literate person meant a lawyer, and a lawyer meant a file. She said they should write the letter themselves, from the village, so that the district would

have to answer it, and so that the answer would be on paper, and so that the paper would exist.

The village wrote the letter over three Sundays. The girl wrote the draft; the elder oyster brother corrected it; the snack-stall woman read it back to the older women; and the older women said what was missing. What was missing was the things that no one writes down. The well; the tide; the shrine; the names on the stone; the year the river came over the quay; the year the boats went; the football in the water; the congee. In the end the letter had two pages. The first was the argument, and the second was the names, and there were forty-one adults on the second page. The girl put her own name on the page too, and the boy who drove for the delivery company, and the three cousins. The letter was not a legal document and was not a petition to a court; it was addressed to the district as a matter of public concern. A-Qiu read it and told them the truth, which was that on the law it did nothing.

"Then why send it?" said the girl.

"Because the district has to answer," said A-Qiu. "An answer is a document. The document goes into the file, and the file goes into the appeal, and the appeal goes into the record. You are not sending a petition. You are sending the first page of the record."

The letter went by hand, with a receipt, on a Monday, and it was signed for by a clerk, and the clerk's signature went into A-Qiu's file with the date.

The district answered in the autumn.

The answer was two pages, and it was polite, and it said the project would be carried out in the public interest, and that the residents had been consulted. The consultation had found no objection in principle; the resettlement offer was above the assessed value; the shrine would be preserved and reinstalled. It said the residents should not believe the rumors that had been circulating. It did not say what the rumors were.

A-Qiu read the answer to the village on the quay, and the village did what villages do, which was to find the lie in it.

"There was no consultation," said the elder oyster brother.

"Not with us," said the snack-stall woman. "There was no meeting on this quay. I would have seen the chairs."

"There was a meeting in the district office in the summer," said the girl, "and nobody from the village was at it, and I know because I was at work and I would have gone."

"The consultation is a template," said A-Qiu. "I have seen the template before, in another street, in another case. The district holds the meeting without the residents and records the standard form. The form says no objection in principle. The form is the consultation."

The village sat with that, and then the village did the thing villages do, which is to divide. Not because the answer was a lie, but because the lie made the offer feel like the last one.

"We should take the money while the money is there," said the man at the back.

"The letter made them angry," said the elder oyster brother. "They will take the low offer away."

"I am sixty-eight," said the mother. "I will not move."

"The school run is three hours," said the younger brother. "My wife is tired."

"I will film whatever happens," said the girl.

And Lam stood at the shrine and said nothing, because he had said the one thing he had to say, which was that he would stay, and a village does not need a man to say the same thing twice.

A-Qiu watched the division and did not try to heal it, because she had learned that a hard case divides a village and that the division is not the lawyer's to repair. The lawyer's job is the record. The village's job is the village. She wrote the division down on the back of the letter, the way the office wrote the failures on the back of the exercise book: the two who wanted to take the money, the two who wanted to fight, the one who would film, the one who would stay. Then she wrote the sentence that she would read back to herself in the winter, when the case was almost over and the record was almost complete.

She wrote: *a village that divides is not a village that loses. It is a village that is being emptied correctly. The emptying is not the demolition. The emptying is the argument about the demolition, and the argument is the last thing the village does together.*

## 8. The Last Autumn

The autumn was long and warm, and A-Qiu worked it the way she had worked every autumn of her life, which is to say she worked it as if there would be another.

The appeal had a schedule now, and the schedule had dates, and the dates were in the winter. The silt report was in the file; the district's reply was in the file; the petition and the answer and the letter to the heritage office were in the file. Xiao Tang had photographed the village from the water and from the quay, at high tide and at low, and the photographs were in the archive, and the room records of all sixty households were done. The girl who worked in the bank had given over her films, and they were in the archive, and the archive had the village in a way that the village did not have itself. That was the way it always was. The record was always more complete than the place, because the place was busy living and the record had nothing to do but remember.

A-Qiu came less often in the autumn, and when she came she sat more.

Lam noticed, and did not say. He put the stool by the shrine and she sat on it, and he stood, and they watched the water. They did not talk about the case unless she brought the file, and she brought the file less often. He made her tea once, which he had never done. She understood that it was his way of saying the thing he would not say. She took the tea and did not say the thing she would not say, and the morning went the way mornings go on a river.

It was in the autumn that she told Xiao Tang, and she told her not as a lawyer tells an apprentice but as a person tells a person.

"I am not going to see the end of this," said A-Qiu.

They were in the basement, late, with the archive around them.

"You do not know that," said Xiao Tang.

"I know the number," said A-Qiu. "I have known it for a year. The doctors have been clear, and I have been clear with myself, which is not the same as being clear with the office. The appeal is in the winter. I do not think I will be at the hearing."

Xiao Tang did not cry. She had learned the office rule, and she had also learned something better: A-Qiu did not need tears. What A-Qiu needed was for the work to continue, and the way to give her that was to take the work and not make a scene about taking it.

"Then I will be at the hearing," said Xiao Tang.

"You will be at the hearing," said A-Qiu. "You will have the file, and the silt report, and the register, and the village. You will lose."

She stopped, and looked at the shelves.

"And in the losing, you will make sure the record is complete, and you will not accept a mediation that is only a price. That is the whole of the job. I have done it for twenty years and I am telling you the whole of it in one sentence, because there is not going to be another sentence."

Xiao Tang wrote it down. A-Qiu watched her write it down, and did not stop her. That was the apprenticeship in a single gesture: the record being made in the room, by the next hand, while the first hand was still there to see it.

And then the autumn ended.

The last week of the autumn, A-Qiu went to the village twice. The first time she went with the file. She sat on the quay with Lam and read him the schedule of the hearing. He listened and asked one question, which was whether the shrine would be mentioned. She said it would, and he nodded and said nothing else. The second time she went she did not take the file. She sat on the stool by the shrine, and the tide came up, and the water came to the third mark and stayed there. The oyster family worked the beds. The snack-stall woman brought her the congee without being asked, and the girl who worked in the bank filmed the light on the water. A-Qiu did not say anything for a long time.

At the end she asked Lam the one thing she had never asked him.

"Does it work?"

"What work?"

"The asking. Does the river answer?"

Lam looked at the water. He thought about it for a long time, the way he thought about everything, and A-Qiu waited, because she had learned to wait.

"The river answers every time," said Lam. "It answers by being the river. You ask it to be the river, and it is the river, and it takes the boats and the men and the mud, and it gives the mud back and the fish and the water, and it does not care what you asked. That is the answer."

He put his hand on the stone.

"It is not a good answer and it is not a bad answer. It is the only answer there is, and it is the same for the river and the city and the wall. You ask a thing to be itself and to keep you, and it cannot do both, because to be itself is to change. So you write it down."

He looked at the water again.

"That is what you do. You ask the river, and then you write it down, and the writing is the only part that keeps."

A-Qiu sat with that, and the tide turned, and the light went, and she took the metro home in the dark.

## 9. The Compound

The compound came up on the far bank, and the village watched it the way you watch a thing approach that is not coming for you yet.

It was a tower and a lake and a clubhouse, and it was called a living landscape, which meant that the lake was artificial and the landscape was the view of the river from the fourteenth floor. The work had begun in the spring; by the autumn there was a crane, a foundation, and a fence with the renderings on it. The renderings showed the water and the green and the people walking, and the people walking were always at a distance. The renderings did not show the village, which was three hundred meters down the bank, and would be gone before the compound was finished.

The village walked over to look at the fence, because the village was the kind of village that walks over to look.

"The lake is a pond," said the oyster mother. "I have a better one in the beds."

"The clubhouse looks like the airport," said the snack-stall woman.

"The view will be the village for two years," said the younger brother, "and then it will be the compound, and then it will be the next compound. The view will go the way views go."

The girl who worked in the bank filmed the fence and the crane and the rendering and the village behind her, all in one shot. The shot went into the archive. A-Qiu watched it twice, because it was the whole of the case in thirty seconds: the thing they were building; the thing they were taking; and the person standing between them with a phone.

Lam did not come to the fence. He had seen the renderings at the meeting. He had said what he had to say about the shrine, and he did not need to see the picture of the lake. He stayed on the quay and read the stone, and when A-Qiu came he asked her one question.

"How long is the compound?"

"Ten years to build, maybe twelve."

"And the village?"

"The village is the first thing. The village goes before the lake. The lake needs the village's ground."

Lam nodded. He had known it, and he had wanted it said in a sentence, and now it had been said, and he went back to the stone. A-Qiu stood with him. The compound stood on the far bank with its crane and its lake that was not a lake yet, and the two things were three hundred meters apart and were the past and the future. The present was a man reading a tide mark and a woman with a file, and the present was the only place either of them could live.

The compound was not cruel. That was the thing A-Qiu could never make the young people understand, and the thing the older ones already knew. The compound was a building; buildings are not cruel; the people who built it were doing a job; and the people who would live in it would be happy. None of that changed the arithmetic. The village's ground was worth more as a lake than as a village. The city would always find the lake, and the lake would always be called a garden, and the garden would always be built on somebody's quay. Lam had said it was arithmetic, and A-Qiu had written it down. The compound rising on the far bank was the arithmetic made visible: a crane, a fence, and a rendering of people walking at a distance, and no one in the rendering was from the village.

## 10. The Survey

The surveyors came in the autumn, and they came with a boat and a tripod and a man from the district, and they did not come onto the quay.

They worked from the water. There was a boat with a shallow draft, a pole, and a case of instruments; the two surveyors stood in the boat and took their readings and wrote them on a tablet. The boat went up and down the bank for two days. The village stood on the quay and watched, and the surveyors did not

wave, and the village did not wave, and the whole thing had the feeling of two parties at a wedding who do not speak.

Xiao Tang photographed the boat from the quay and from the bridge. She had learned the trick from A-Qiu, which is to photograph a thing from two angles and against two backgrounds, so that no one can say the photograph is the wrong photograph. She put the boat and the bank and the tide stone in one frame. She put the tripod and the man from the district in another; the man from the district noticed her and turned his back; Xiao Tang photographed his back and wrote the time on the card, because a man turning his back is also a record.

A-Qiu asked the district for the survey.

"The survey is an internal engineering document," said the clerk.

"When will it be filed?"

"At the appropriate stage."

"What is the appropriate stage?"

"The stage at which the document is filed."

That was not an answer. A-Qiu wrote the exchange down and put it in the file, because a refusal is a record and an evasive refusal is a better one.

The survey mattered because of the silt. The silt was A-Qiu's whole case. The piles would push the silt; the silt would move; the village's shelf would move; and the survey of the water against the bank was the survey of the thing the village stood on. The surveyors were measuring the shelf for the developer, and the developer would use the numbers to say the shelf was stable. A-Qiu would use the numbers, if she could get them, to say the numbers did not cover the pile sequence. It was a war of numbers, and the village stood on the ground and watched both sides measure it.

In the evening the younger oyster brother came up from the beds with his pole and stood on the quay and did not go home.

"Will they take the beds first?" he said.

"They will take the ground first," said A-Qiu. "The beds are on the ground."

"The beds are on the mud. The mud moves."

"The engineers say the mud will move to a new place, and the beds will be on the new mud, and the new mud will be the same mud."

The brother looked at the water. He was the one with the plan for the restaurants. He was the one who had counted the school run. He was the one who would probably take the money, and he knew it, and A-Qiu knew it, and neither of them said it, because a lawyer who tells a man which side of the village he is on is a lawyer who has stopped listening.

"The mud is not the same mud," said the brother. "The mud is the oyster. You can move the man, and you can move the boat, and you can move the shrine. The mud is the oyster, and the oyster is the mud. If the mud goes to a new place, it is not the same oyster, and it will be four years before the bed gives, and the bed has given since my father's father."

A-Qiu wrote that down. It was not a legal sentence, and it was the true one, and she had learned by then that the case was never the argument in the court. The case was the thing a man says on a quay in the evening when the surveyors have gone back across the water. The lawyer's job is to put that sentence into the file before the man forgets that he said it, and before the village forgets that it was true.

She wrote it down on the back of the survey request and put the page in the file. She wrote the date at the top, because a true sentence without a date is just a sentence, and a true sentence with a date is evidence.

## 11. Xiao Tang

Xiao Tang had come to the office for the same reason as everyone, which is to say she had come for a reason she did not know how to say.

She was from a county town in the north of Guangdong. Her father kept a hardware shop, and her mother worked in the hospital laundry, and neither of them had ever been in a lawyer's office and neither of them had ever needed one. That was the whole of her luck. She had gone to the law school in Guangzhou because she was good at examinations, and because a teacher had told her she should, and because the city was the place a person went. She had done well. She had a good graduation and a good clerk's job and an offer from a firm that handled the shipping. She had taken the clerk's job and had turned the firm down. Her father had asked her why, and she had said, "The firm is boring." That was true, and it was not the reason.

The reason was a village.

Her mother's mother had lived in a village on the edge of the county town. The village had been cleared when Xiao Tang was a child. Her grandmother had moved to a flat with a balcony and had lived there for twelve years and had never once used the balcony, because the balcony looked at a road and the road had been the village. Xiao Tang had been eight when the village was cleared. She remembered the house, and she remembered the grandmother standing in the doorway on the last morning and not crying, and she remembered the van and the furniture and the box of things the grandmother had insisted on carrying herself. She remembered the box, because she had asked, "What is in it?"

"The names," the grandmother had said.

The grandmother had died in the flat. Xiao Tang had been at the funeral, and the box had been opened. It had the ancestral tablets in it, four of them, wrapped in cloth, and a paper book with the family's names in it. Nobody wanted the box, and Xiao Tang had taken it. It was in her rented room in Guangzhou, on the shelf, and she had never once looked at the book, because she did not know how to read it, and because the not-reading was the whole of the distance between her and her grandmother.

She had read about the archive in the newspaper.

She had read the piece about the lawyer for the last lamp. She had read the dig and the embroidery and the old woman with the lit window. She had felt the thing she had never been able to say, which was that there was a place in the city where a person's box would be kept. She had applied to the legal aid office because of the archive, and because of the box in her room. She had decided, without saying it, that she would learn how to read the book and then she would put it somewhere that would keep it. She had told A-Qiu in the interview that she was interested in the recordings. That was true, and it was not the reason either.

A-Qiu had hired her on the spot.

It took Xiao Tang a year to tell A-Qiu about the box. She told her in the basement, on a Thursday, and A-Qiu listened and did not say anything. At the end she asked one question, which was whether the box had the names in the grandmother's hand.

"It has the names in a hand," said Xiao Tang. "I do not know whose."

"Then bring it," said A-Qiu. "We will read it together, and if we cannot read it, we will photograph every page and keep it. One day somebody will read it, and the record will be here for them."

Xiao Tang brought the box the next week. They opened it on the table. The tablets were four and the book was one, and the book was in the old style and the hand was old and hard. They could read some of the names and not all of them; A-Qiu scanned every page and gave the book back to Xiao Tang, because the original was the family's and the copy was the archive's, and that was the rule.

They read the readable names together and wrote them on a card. At the end of the afternoon A-Qiu did the thing that Xiao Tang would remember. She wrote the card, and at the top of the card she wrote the name of the village and the county and the grandmother. Beside the grandmother's name she wrote the words *the names were kept*. Then she put the card in the register with the rest.

Xiao Tang looked at the card and understood, for the first time, what A-Qiu's work had been about. It was not the law and not the streets and not the dead. It was the keeping. It was the making of a place where the box in a rented room could be put down, and where the next person who could not read it could come and find it still there.

## 12. The Village at Night

The village was different at night, and A-Qiu had not known it until the autumn, when Xiao Tang took her to film the quay after dark.

The day village was the work: the beds, the stall, the surveyors, the committee. The night village was the thing itself. The lane went quiet after eight. The lights came on in the low windows, and the river went black and then silver where the moon caught it. The shrine at the end of the quay had one small light in it, which Lam lit at dusk and put out before he slept. The oyster family sat on the quay after the meal and did not talk. The snack-stall woman closed the canvas and counted the day in her head. The young people who had come back for the weekend sat with the beer and the phone and the river, and the girl who worked in the bank filmed the light on the water. The film was the only thing in the village that was growing.

A-Qiu sat on the stone with the file and did not open it.

"At night it does not look like it is going," she said.

"It is going at night too," said Lam. "The water is going out. Look at the stone."

She looked at the stone. The tide was at the second mark and falling, and the mud was showing along the beds. The river was the same river, and the village was the same village, and the arithmetic was the same arithmetic. The night made it look permanent, which is the great lie of the night, and the reason the night is the only thing the developers never mention.

Xiao Tang filmed the lane and the shrine and the windows. A-Qiu watched her work, and she understood that the film was the night village and the file was the day village. The two of them together were the only complete record. A record that has only the day is a record of a project; a record that has only the night is a record of a memory. The village was neither. It was both, and it was neither. It was a set of people who went to bed and got up and did the beds and the soup and the game and the light. None of it was abstractions, and all of it was the thing the compound would replace with a lake.

The last night gathering was in the week before the first cold rain.

It was not a meeting and it was not a funeral. It was a meal on the quay, because the younger oyster brother had sold a direct order to a restaurant and had made money, and the money was an excuse, and the excuse was the point. The mother made the congee, and the snack-stall woman made the noodles, and the girl brought the beer, and the boy brought a new football, because the old one was still in the water. The whole village ate at the long table that the oyster family kept for the New Year. The table had not been out since the last New Year, and the whole village understood that it was out for a reason and did not say the reason.

Lam did not eat at the table. He stood at the shrine with his bowl and watched, the way he watched everything. A-Qiu sat beside him on the stool and ate and did not make him come to the table, because a man who keeps a shrine keeps it on his feet.

"Are you going to appeal the whole thing?" said Lam.

"We are going to appeal," said A-Qiu. "We will lose, and we will make the record complete. The record will be in the archive, and the archive will be here after the compound and after me."

Lam nodded. He did not say what she knew, which was that the archive was a basement and the basement was a room. The room depended on the district, and the district depended on the city, and the city was the thing that was taking the village. He said the other thing instead, which was the thing she would carry into the winter.

"The river will take the compound too," said Lam. "Not this year and not in my life. But the water is higher every year, and the lake is lower than the village. The compound is built on the shelf, and the shelf is the shelf. In fifty years they will be standing at the fence of the compound the way we are standing at the fence of the village. That is not a comfort. It is only true."

A-Qiu wrote it down. Then she put the pen away and ate the congee and watched the village eat, all of it at one table, for the last time. She did not count the people and did not count the steps and did not think about the winter. She sat with the shrine at her back and the table in front of her and the river on the other side. For the length of one evening the arithmetic was quiet, and the night village was the only village there was.

## 13. The Dragon Boat

The dragon boat came up the river in the fifth month, for the Duanwu, and the village had not entered a boat in years, and that year they entered one because it was the last year.

Duanwu is the fifth day of the fifth month, and it is the river's festival. The old story is the poet who drowned himself in the river and the people who rowed out to save him and threw the rice into the water so the fish would not eat him, and the rice became the *zongzi*. The leaf-wrapped rice. The rowing became the dragon boats, and the whole of the custom is a village throwing food at a river and calling it a rescue. A-Qiu had learned the story in school and had learned it again from Lam. Lam's version was that the poet was a man and the river was a river and the village had been feeding the river for two thousand years. A custom that lasts that long is not about the man. It is about the water.

The village entered the boat because the younger oyster brother had rowed as a boy and had wanted to row again before the village moved. The boat belonged to the district and was kept in a shed on the far bank. The crew was the oyster brothers and the boy who drove for the delivery company and four men from the

next village up the bank. The drummer was the girl who worked in the bank, because she was the lightest and the loudest and had the phone to film it. They trained for three weeks on the river at six in the morning. The whole village came to the quay to watch them the way the whole village came for everything, which is to say badly and loudly and with a great deal of advice.

Lam did not row. He had rowed as a young man and had stopped the year his brother drowned. He stood at the quay on the morning of the race and watched the boat go out with his arms crossed and did not say anything. A-Qiu stood beside him and did not say anything either, and the two of them watched the boat the way you watch a thing that is going to happen.

The race was three boats and two thousand meters, and the village came third. They did not lose by much and they did not win, and the whole quay was in the water to the knees. The oyster mother had made the *zongzi* for a week. The snack-stall woman had made the noodles. The whole village ate on the quay. The girl filmed the boat coming in and the whole village coming to meet it. The film went into the archive. The film was the last film of the village at the water.

"Will you row next year?" said A-Qiu.

Lam watched the boat come in and did not cheer. At the end he did the thing that A-Qiu had not expected. He went to the shrine and took the goddess from the niche and carried her to the edge of the quay and held her up over the water, the way the old men did in the old days, so that the goddess could see the boat come in. He held her over the water for a long time. Then he put her back in the niche and lit the incense and stood with his hands behind his back. The whole of the village understood the gesture and did not mention it, because the custom is the custom and the custom is not discussed.

A-Qiu wrote the day down. She wrote the boat and the third place and the *zongzi* and the goddess over the water. She wrote the sentence that Lam had said at the end, when they were alone on the quay and the village had gone up to the lane for the meal.

"The river does not remember the race," said Lam. "The river remembers the food. Two thousand years of food, and the river has kept every leaf of it. That is the only archive the river has."

He looked at the water.

"It is a good archive. It does not lie and it does not need a card, and it is the one thing in the whole of the city that will never be moved to a basement."

## 14. The New Year

The New Year came before the winter, and it was the last one in the village, and the village kept it the way it had kept it for three hundred years.

The Lunar New Year is not one day. It is a month of days, and each day has its work. The cleaning comes first, because you sweep the year out before the year comes in, and the sweeping must be done before the New Year's Eve, because to sweep on the first day is to sweep the luck away. The couplets go up on the door in red, and the character for fortune is turned upside down, because the upside-down fortune and the arriving fortune are the same word. The kitchen god's new image goes up and the old one goes to heaven. The reunion dinner is on the eve, and the whole family sits at one table if the whole family can. A seat is set for anyone who is away. The fish is served whole and not finished. The whole fish and the surplus are the same word. The *lai see* go out on the first day, the red envelopes with the new notes. The married give to the unmarried and the elders give to the children, and the lion comes to the door for the luck.

The village did the whole of it, the whole of the month, the whole of the three-hundred-year custom, and it did it in the last winter of the village, and everyone understood the arithmetic and no one said it.

The oyster mother did the cleaning. The elder brother put up the couplets. The younger brother put up the new kitchen god. The shrine got the new coat of red on the stone. The oyster beds got the three days of quiet. The first three days of the New Year are the days on which no one works and the water is left alone. The reunion dinner was on the quay, at the long table, the whole village at one table. The fish was a whole grouper, and the surplus was the rice that was left in the pot and the extra bowl that was set for the cousin who had died in the flood and the bowl that was set for the village itself. It was the whole of the joke and the whole of the grief, and no one explained it.

A-Qiu came on the second day. She brought the *lai see* for the children. The custom says the visitors bring the packets. She was not married and she was not an elder. The custom was not strict with her. The whole village took the packets anyway. A packet is a packet and the new money is the new money. Lam gave her

a packet too, which was the wrong direction and which he did anyway. She took it with both hands, which was the custom, and did not open it in front of him, which was the custom, and put it in her pocket.

Lam was at the shrine. He had given the shrine the New Year coat of red and a new incense and a new pair of the small paper lanterns. He stood in the doorway of the shrine with his hands behind his back and looked at the river. The river was the river. The whole village was behind him at the table. The lion had come and gone. The drums had stopped. The new year was the new year.

"Will they be here next year?" said A-Qiu.

"The villagers will be in Panyu," said Lam. "The village will not. The village has one more New Year in it, and this is it, and the custom does not care. The custom is the village and the village is the custom, and you cannot move a custom to a flat."

He looked at the table.

"You can keep a piece. You can keep the fish and the packet and the incense and the upside-down fortune. You cannot keep the table."

A-Qiu looked at the table. The whole village was at it. The whole table was the whole of the custom. The custom was the table. The table would be gone. The archive would have the film of it. The film was a copy. The copy was the only thing the village could take to Panyu.

She did not say the thing she was thinking: that the compound would come and the shelf would go and the shelf was the whole of the custom, and that the government would call the resettlement an improvement and would be right about the tap and the lift and wrong about the table. She said the other thing, which was the thing she had learned from the grandmother, and which was the only thing she had to give.

"Write it down," said A-Qiu.

Lam looked at her.

"The table," said A-Qiu. "The whole of it. The fish and the surplus and the empty bowl and the lion and the packets and the coat of red. Write it down, or let me write it down, so that when the ones who come back come back, the table is here."

Lam was quiet for a long time. Then he said the thing that she wrote down on the second day of the last New Year, and the thing she would carry out of the village in the winter.

"The custom is not the table," said Lam. "The custom is the coming. The table is only where the coming sits. Write the table down if you like. The coming cannot be written down. That is why people keep coming."

He put his hand on the shrine wall.

"That is the whole of it. That is the only thing about the custom that the developer cannot buy and cannot demolish and cannot move to Panyu, and it is the only thing that will outlast the lake."

## 15. The Eviction

The village was emptied in the last week of the autumn, and it was emptied the way the villages were emptied, which is not all at once.

The first families went in the spring, when the notice closed and the money came. The middle families went in the summer. The oyster family went in the early autumn, and they took the beds' gear and the long table and the mother, and the mother stood at the gate and looked back at the water and did not cry. By the last week there were four households left. The four were A-Qiu's friends, and the whole of the lane was dark except for the shrine and the four windows, and then the four windows went out, one at a time, and the lane was dark except for the shrine.

A-Qiu did not go to the eviction, because there was no eviction to go to. The village did not resist. The village had fought the case for two years, and had lost the case, and had taken the money, and had gone to Panyu. The whole of it had been legal and the whole of it had been ordinary, and there was no scene, because a scene would have been a story, and the story was the thing the developer had learned to avoid. The village went the way the other villages went: quietly, in a van, with the furniture.

She went on the last day for the shrine.

Lam had the figure in a cloth, and the incense in a tin, and the small pair of lanterns. He had taken photographs of the base stone, the forty-one names, one photograph for each name, and he had given the photographs to Xiao Tang for the archive. The base stone itself was for the heritage office, which had promised

to reinstall it at the entrance of the compound. Lam did not believe the promise. He had believed it at the meeting and had stopped believing it when the office sent a man with a clipboard and no name.

"The stone will go to a yard," said Lam. "It will sit with the other stones."

He folded the cloth around the figure.

"The compound will be finished, and the entrance will have a new stone, because the new stone will match the paving and the old stone will not."

He wrapped the figure.

"The names will be in the yard, and the yard will be in the district, and the district will be under the city. That is all right."

He tied the cord.

"The names are in the photographs. The photographs are in the archive. The archive is in the basement. The basement is dry. That is the chain, and it is a good chain."

A-Qiu helped him carry the shrine things to the van. The shrine was a stone house the size of a wardrobe, and it did not move, because it was the village's and the village was going. The figure came out of it, and the incense tin came out of it, and the lanterns came off it. The stone house stood at the end of the quay with the empty niche and the coat of red and the tide going out.

Lam stood at the empty shrine for a while. Then he said the thing that A-Qiu wrote down, which was not about the shrine.

"Tomorrow I will be in Panyu. I will put the figure on the shelf with the photograph of my brother and the tin of incense."

He looked at the tin.

"I will light the stick in the morning, as I have done every morning of my life."

He set the cloth down and looked at the quay.

"The river will be eleven kilometers away, and the figure will be eleven kilometers away, and the asking will be eleven kilometers away."

"Will the asking still work?" said A-Qiu.

"And the asking will still work. That is the thing you must write down."

A-Qiu opened the notebook.

"The asking does not need the quay; the asking needs the person. The quay is where the person stood. The person can stand anywhere and ask, and the river will hear, because the river is not the water at the quay."

He looked at the empty shrine.

"The river is the water, and the water is everywhere, and the quay was only the place where we learned to ask."

A-Qiu wrote it down on the back of the shrine inventory and put the inventory in the file. She stood with Lam at the empty shrine in the last light. The village was dark except for the two of them and the coat of red and the tide going out. The whole of the village was in the cloth in Lam's arms and in the file in A-Qiu's bag, and the water went out the way it had gone out for three hundred years, and the concrete of the compound was three hundred meters up the bank. The two of them stood at the edge of the thing that was ending and did not say goodbye, because there is no word for it, and the custom does not have one.

## 16. The Last Case

The last case of A-Qiu's life was the village on the river, and the last work of the case was the appeal, and the appeal was the thing she was doing when the winter came.

The appeal was in the file. The file had the notice and the assessment and the silt report and the survey and the petition and the answer and the letter to the heritage office and the photographs of the base stone with the forty-one names. The file had the room records of sixty households, and the films of the girl who worked in the bank, and the words of the oyster mother and Lam and the younger brother about the mud. The file was a record, and the record was the case, and the case would be heard in the winter. A-Qiu would not be there, and she did not know that either, and no honest person could have told her.

Xiao Tang did the walking. That was the division they had agreed on in the spring, when A-Qiu had come in gray and Xiao Tang had said the thing about the file and the window. Xiao Tang did the door-to-door and the photographs and the schedules, and she came back to the basement in the evening with the day in her notebook, and A-Qiu typed it into the file. The two of them sat in the

basement with the cards and the register and the drives and the paper, and the whole of the village was on the table between them.

It was in the autumn that A-Qiu did the thing that Xiao Tang would remember, which was to hand over the case.

"You will argue it," said A-Qiu.

"I am not a lawyer."

"You will be. You have the certificate, and the file, and the village." A-Qiu put the folder on the table. "I am telling you now, in the autumn, because in the winter it will be too late to tell you. The office rule is that the work does not stop for the person who does the work, and I have been the person who does the work for twenty years, and the person changes."

Xiao Tang looked at the folder and did not take it.

"You are not dying," said Xiao Tang.

"I am telling you the terms," said A-Qiu. It was the sentence the voice in the grandmother's kitchen had used, and A-Qiu had learned it from the grandmother and was handing it on. "The terms are: you will lose. The district will answer the appeal with the standard answer, and the judge will read it from the record, and the judgment will say the assessment was lawful."

She opened the folder.

"In the losing, you will make sure the record is complete, and you will not accept a mediation that is only a price. You will put the silt report on the record, so that the record says the shelf will move."

She closed the folder.

"Then in fifty years, when the tower leans, the record will be there, and the record will say the lawyer knew, and the court knew, and the city knew."

"Will you take it?" said A-Qiu.

Xiao Tang took the folder.

She did not say that A-Qiu was dying. She had known since the spring, and she had kept it, because keeping it was the office rule, and because A-Qiu had asked, and because the asking and the keeping were the same thing. She took the folder and put it in her bag and went home on the bus. On the bus she opened it and read the silt report, and the report said the lean would be two degrees east. Xiao Tang sat with the number in the dark of the bus and understood, for the

first time, the whole of the case. The case was not the village. The case was the number. The village was the price, and the number was the record, and the record was the only thing that would outlive the tower.

She came back the next morning. A-Qiu was at the desk and the queue was on the stairs and the window was open, and the two of them did the morning together, the last ordinary morning. Neither of them said anything about the folder. The work went on, because the work was the only thing in the room that did not change, and because the work does not stop for the person who does the work, and the person changes, and the work does not.

## 17. The Winter

The decision came in the first week of December, and it came the way the decisions came, without a hearing and without a reason, as a paragraph in a district notice that the village was to be relocated and the land cleared for the public interest.

A-Qiu read the notice on the quay, in the wind, with Lam standing beside her.

It was four lines. It named the village; the number of households; the resettlement offer; and the date the offer would close. The offer had been raised. The flats would be in a block in Panyu, eleven kilometers from the river, and the block had a lift and a park and a bus stop. The notice said the development would improve the living conditions of the residents and provide open space for the city. It was not a cruel document. It was worse than a cruel document. It was reasonable.

Lam read it and handed it back and did not say anything for a long time.

"They will move the shrine," he said at last.

"They will move the shrine," said A-Qiu.

"To the entrance of the complex."

"To the entrance."

He looked at the river. It was a gray day and the water was the color of the day, and the tide was going out, and the mud was showing along the bank.

"Then I will take the figure," said Lam.

"That is not in the plan."

"The figure is stone and the niche is stone and the roof is tiles. The city can have the roof and the niche and the tiles. The figure is the asking." He said it quietly, the way he said everything. "I will take the figure, and I will put it in my flat in Panyu, and I will light the incense in front of it. The river will be eleven kilometers away and the figure will be eleven kilometers away, and the asking will be eleven kilometers away, and that is the whole of my objection."

A-Qiu wrote it down. It was the last line in the file, and it was the line the case would be remembered by, and it was not a legal line at all.

The appeal was filed the following week. A-Qiu filed it herself, at the window, with the chop, and it took two visits and one missing form, and she filed it knowing it would be heard in the spring and knowing the spring might be too late.

"How long will it take?" said Xiao Tang.

"The hearing is in the spring."

"And if we lose?"

"Then we file the record, and the record stays."

"That is not a win."

"No," said A-Qiu. "It is a copy."

Xiao Tang did the photocopies and the schedules and the room records of the village, all sixty households. By the end of it the archive had the village in it: the quay and the shrine and the snack stall and the oyster beds; the films of the girl with the phone; every room of every house that would let her in. It had Lam's flat that was not yet a flat, with the figure on the shelf and the river eleven kilometers away.

A-Qiu got worse in the winter.

She did not say so. Xiao Tang saw it anyway, the way you see a tide go out. A-Qiu came in later and left earlier, and she took the stairs once and then not again, and she sat at the desk with her hand flat on the wood. Twice Xiao Tang found her asleep at the desk at four in the afternoon, with the file open under her hand.

The last day she came to the office was the eighteenth of January, and it was a Tuesday, and it was cold. It was the cold that comes to Guangzhou once or twice a year and makes the whole city behave as if it has never been cold before. She did the window in the morning, and she was slower than usual.

"Are you well?" said the client.

"I'm well," said A-Qiu.

"You look tired."

"It is the cold," said A-Qiu, which was not a lie, and which was not the whole truth either.

In the afternoon she read the appeal schedule and wrote a note on it in the margin, and the note was a question for Xiao Tang about a date. Then she put on her coat and said she was going home, and Xiao Tang walked her to the door.

"Tomorrow," said A-Qiu.

"Tomorrow," said Xiao Tang.

A-Qiu went down to the street. She did not take the metro. She took a taxi to the river, which was foolish and which she knew was foolish, and she stood on the quay at Shazui in the cold with her collar up and looked at the shrine. Lam was not there. The tide was in and the water was high, and the shrine stood at the end of the quay with the incense fresh in the bowl. The river went past it the way it had gone past it for three hundred years, and would go past it. A-Qiu stood there for a while with her hand on the stone, and then she took a taxi home.

That night the tearing sound came and did not stop. It was small at first, the way it had always been, and then it was not small. She lay in the dark in her flat with her hand on her chest and understood that this was the thing the doctor had meant, and that there was no arrangement to be made with it. She did not call anyone. She took the pills, and the sound went on, and toward morning it loosened, and she slept.

She did not come to the office the next day. She did not come the day after. Xiao Tang called and got no answer and did not worry at first, because A-Qiu had been tired and because the cold was bad. On the third morning she took the spare key that the office kept and went to the flat.

The flat was neat. The kettle was on the counter; the file was on the table; the pills were on the shelf. A-Qiu was in the chair by the window with her coat still on, and she had been dead since some hour of the night.

The doctor wrote *cardiac* and a time, and the time was before dawn, and the morning was cold and clear, and the river was eleven kilometers away and going toward the sea.

Xiao Tang stood in the flat with the key in her hand and did not cry, because she was twenty-four and she had learned the office rule, which was that the work does not stop for the person who does the work. Then she went to the office and opened the door and sat down at A-Qiu's desk and took the window, because it was nine o'clock and the queue was already on the stairs.

EPILOGUE

# Telling the Wall

I write this from the archive, which is still here.

It is a room in the basement of a community centre in Liwan. It is dry, and the door locks, and I have the key. The key used to be Meng Wanqiu's, and now it is mine, which is the whole history of the room in one sentence. On the shelves are the recordings, the room records, the letters, the register, the embroidery in its tube, the exercise books. In the flat file, between two sheets of tissue, there is a drawing of a flat in a *qilou* building, in a hand that is not mine. It is the first flat. She said once that Chen Ruo drew every flat they left, and that the drawing was a gift, and that a gift goes with the person who was given it. It is the only drawing in the room. On a shelf of their own are the four Meng tablets and the fragment in its plastic sleeve. Under the four and the fragment, on a card in my handwriting, are the words *kept by*, and after the words are the names, and the last name on the card is hers.

I have kept the room for eleven years.

The village on the river did not survive the case, which surprised no one. The appeal was heard in the spring, after she died, and I argued it, and I lost it. I lost it the way she had taught me to lose it, which is to say that I made sure the record was complete before the judgment came down. The village was moved to Panyu, and the quay was broken up, and the river went on. Lam took the figure, as he said he would. It is on a shelf in his flat eleven kilometers from the water, and he lights the incense in front of it every morning, and he has told me, on the phone, that the asking still works. I choose to believe him, and I do not put it in the file, because not everything belongs in the file.

Some of the tablets were recovered, and some were not. The genealogy book of the Meng lineage has not been found. I have looked in three collections and two libraries and one house in Hong Kong. I have not found it, and I have begun to think that it went into the paper mill with the rest, and that the paper was good paper, and that somebody pressed flowers in it. The register of the four

hundred families is in the room. The city has never asked for it back. Once a year a family comes to the door with a name, and I find the name in the register and give them a copy, and that is the whole of the service.

Now the thing I did not expect.

In the years after she died, the judgment she lost was appealed and appealed again. At some point in the appeals the city stopped defending the demolition of the old villages in the language of improvement. It did not stop demolishing them. It changed the language. The notices no longer say the residents will be moved; they say the residents are consulted. The consultations still do not happen, and the minutes are still templates, and the assessments are still commissioned before the assessors visit. But the language changed, and the language is a document, and the document is a record, and she used to say that the record is the only thing that cannot be taken back.

And a thing began among the demolition workers, which I have not been able to trace to any one man or any one crew. It is called telling the wall. Before the machine goes in, a worker walks up to the wall and puts a hand flat on it and says a few words. It is not a prayer and it is not a ceremony. It is three or four seconds of a man's time. He says something quiet, and then he takes his hand away, and then the machine comes. The older workers do it. Now some of the young ones do it too, because the older ones do it, and because it is bad luck to skip it, and because nobody has ever said what the words are. I have asked. They say: you tell it. You tell the wall what is happening, so it is not surprised.

The foreman who told me about it is the one who took down the last of Taiping Street.

He is retired now, and he lives in Baiyun, and he agreed to meet me because he had read the newspaper piece from years ago and because he remembered the lawyer. He did not remember her name. He remembered the coat, and the fact that she had come to the site at dawn on the day before the fence, which he had not expected and had allowed. And he told me the thing that I have not written anywhere except here.

"There was a wall at the far end," he said. "She put her hand on it and she said something. I thought she was praying."

"What did she say?"

"I asked her later, because you do not forget a person who talks to a wall. She said: *this one leans east.* I did not think about it. Then we surveyed the row for the shoring, and the wall that she had touched leaned east. It leaned two degrees east."

The foreman stopped and drank his tea.

"We had marked it wrong, and we had to change the shoring plan, and the engineer asked how I knew," he said. "I told him I had measured it. I did not tell him about the woman, because he would have thought I was crazy. She was right. That is all I know."

I do not know what to do with that story. It is not in the file. It is not in the record, because I cannot test it, and because the record should say the true thing, and the true thing is that a woman put her hand on a wall and said something that turned out to be correct. There is no other wall in the whole archive that she touched and named. There is only that one, and one is not a pattern, and the story belongs to a retired foreman in Baiyun and to me.

What I know is this. The story is changing.

The story of the lawyer Meng is already changing, and in the telling it is becoming smooth. The newspaper made her the lawyer for the last lamp, and the students who come to the archive ask me about the dig as if it were a scene in an opera. Last year a troupe in Foshan put on a new piece, and in the new piece the lawyer is a young woman with a lamp, and she walks the length of the old village in the rain and weeps at every door. She did not weep at every door. She did not weep at all, in the room, not once. The not-weeping was the whole of her, and I have tried to say so to the troupe, and they thanked me and did not change a note, because the opera does not want the woman who did not weep. The opera wants the wall to come down.

And this is the part that is true. On the last morning of the last case, in the cold season, she stood in the doorway of a house that was coming down, and she told me a thing I have never told anyone, because it was not the office's and not the file's. She said: *the wall heard everything. It is the only witness we have that does not lie and cannot be cross-examined.*

Then she said: *it never says a word, and that is why we have to.*

Then she went to work, and she did not come back, and I took the window the next morning, and I have taken it since.

So I keep the room. I keep the keys and the cards and the register and the recordings. I add the names as the families bring them. I have written Meng Wanqiu's name at the end of the Meng genealogy, on the new page, in my own hand, because the book itself is in the paper mill or on somebody's shelf, and because a name that is not written down is a name the wall keeps alone. It is the least and the most I can do.

The workers still touch the walls before the machines come. They say a few words, so that nothing is surprised. I have started to do it too, when I am at a site, which is not often now. I put my hand flat on the brick and I say the name of the street and the name of the house and the date. I do not say anything else, because anything else would be for me and not for the wall. And when I take my hand away, the machine comes, and the wall comes down. The dust goes over, and the street is a record, and the record is a copy, and the copy is safe.

The wall heard everything.

# Colophon

若免於罪，猶有先人之敝廬在，下妾不得與郊弔。

*Ruò miǎn yú zuì, yóu yǒu xiān rén zhī bì lú zài, xià qiè bù dé yǔ jiāo diào.*

If he was spared guilt, there is still the shabby house of his ancestors — I cannot be condoled with in the open country. — the wife of Qi Liang · 左傳 · 襄公二十三年 (4th c. BC). The earliest version: no weeping, and no wall.

Meng Jiangnü is remembered for weeping the Great Wall down. The oldest version of her has no weeping in it and no wall: in the Zuo Zhuan her husband dies in battle, the Duke of Qi offers condolences in the open country, and she refuses him — there is a house for that, she says, and she will be condoled with in it. The weeping arrives four centuries later. The wall arrives six centuries after that. This novel sides with the first version. Its Meng Jiangnü keeps the record.

**Zhen AI · 甄艾** is a pen name. Read aloud it is *zhēn ài*, an exact homophone of 真爱, "true love." Romanised it becomes Zhen AI — 真, "real," plus AI. It says true love in Chinese and real AI in English, and is neither.

This novel was written by a large language model, from prompts, research and editorial direction supplied by a human. There is no human author hiding behind the name.

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