

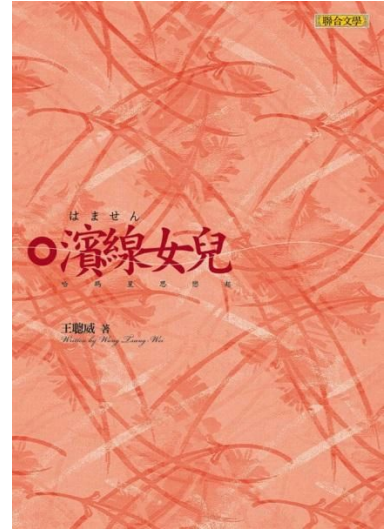
DAUGHTERS OF HAMASEN 濱線女兒

Hamasen: a strip of land wrested from the ocean, the setting for this touching story of a young girl, as well as home to a way of life that is rapidly disappearing.

Together we follow the story of A-Giok, and a host of other interwoven characters, as the region's former glory has long since faded, leaving little for her but a tough childhood. Against the backdrop of a changing Taiwan, yet where the past is never truly gone but always lingering in the present, we become witness to the young A-Giok's dreams and fears, her frailty and her strength. And yet hers is just one story among many, her fate mirrored in the experiences of all the other 'daughters of Hamasen.'

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DAUGHTERS OF HAMASEN

By Wang Tsung-Wei. Translated by David van der Peet.

Clang, clang, clang! Ding, ding, ding! Through the window, A-Giok heard a metallic noise. Instantly, she was wide awake and her eyes open, as round as two little brass bells. The sound reverberated deep inside her skull like the crisp, hard beats of a gong. Even the puffs of air that wafted in through the cracks of the wooden window frame made her head hum with a continuous drone. The noise was close, too. It came from the little alley right outside her window, so it only had to travel a short distance to reach her ears. And now, again, she seemed to hear—no, unlike the last few nights, this time she was *certain* she could hear—something else, above the clanking sound of metal and the whistling of the wind. She heard the voice of a person calling.

She didn't know what time it was, but it must be the middle of the night. So how could someone still be outside, calling out loud? Maybe it was a bunch of sailors just come ashore, now indulging in some drunken brawl. But no—the din, which sounded as if it was sucked in from afar through a straw, was too steady and methodical for that. With the clanking and the clattering came a solitary voice, calling out, '*Xiu dang, xiu tih, xiu in-a... Old copper! Old iron! Ki-i-i-ds...*'

The last syllable was drawn out long and slow.

Coming to her as if sucked through a straw, the sound of the voice wasn't too clear, but that's what she heard: 'Old copper! Old iron! Ki-i-i-ds...'

The voice kept dragging out that last syllable.

Then again, since the sounds were indistinct, the voice might have been shouting, '*Xiu dang, xiu tih, xiu siah... Old copper! Old iron! Ti-i--i-in!*'

Maybe it was precisely because the last syllable was drawn out so long, or maybe it was because the crier had a thick and clumsy mainlander accent, but 'tin' and 'kids' sounded strangely alike.

'Collecting old copper! Old iron! Kids!'

'Sis...' the sound of her little brother's breathing, rapid yet weak, worked its way into her ears, drawing her attention away from all the noise outside.

He was always sleeping under the thickest quilt they had, but he got too hot in the night, and so he was forever kicking it away. In the winter all it took was one draft of cold air to make his asthma flare up.

Now, with half his body exposed to the night air, his face had turned a pallid blue so that in the moonlight he looked like the stereotypical pale-faced scholar from a traditional puppet show. How long had he been lying there, panting and gasping for air? She'd completely failed to notice, leaving him to his lonely struggle.

What on earth was wrong with her today? It was as if her whole heart and mind had been snatched away by that voice outside the window. She knew she should have paid better attention to her little brother. Normally, if he as much as turned over in his sleep, she'd be instantly aware of it, no matter how soundly she might be sleeping herself.

A-Giok got off the bed in a hurry and went to fetch Mother.

Rushing into the room, Mother picked up Little Brother and held him close....

He continued to call, 'Sis, Sis.'

'It's OK,' Mother was rubbing Kimsi Ointment on his chest. 'Be a good boy now, take slow breaths, slow breaths.'

'Sis, Sis...'

'What were you doing, sleeping like a pig? Who knows how long your brother's been wheezing. Quick, go and cook up some snake oil!' Mother was deliberately keeping her voice low even as she scolded her, 'If we wake up your father, you'll really catch it.'

A-Giok went into the living room and took some black sugar and the snake oil dregs down from the shelf. The proper way to prepare this remedy was to put the sugar and the dregs in water and slowly bring it to a boil, but there was no time for that now. There was a thermos flask sitting on the shelf with warm water in it, so she took that, opened it and poured the contents over the sugar and the snake oil dregs, stirring the concoction until the ingredients had more or less dissolved.

First they held the potion under Little Brother's nose and let him breathe in what steam there was. When his breathing had slowed and steadied a bit, they let him drink a small mouthful.

Finally, as Little Brother was breathing regularly again and had closed his eyes, Mother carefully put him down to sleep. A-Giok stood at a respectful distance, not daring to go anywhere near the bed.

'Now keep your mouth shut and be quiet.' Mother came over and pinched her cheek, 'If anything happens to your brother, you'll answer for it! Kneel in front of the bed, and don't you dare to get up anytime soon.'

Mother let go of her and left. She knelt, leaning sideways against the bed, hands on her knees.

She knew she wouldn't have the courage to get up again for the rest of the night.

She could feel the bed shaking slightly. Her little brother had turned around and came crawling towards her.

'Sis,' he asked, 'aren't you coming up to sleep?'

'No,' she said, shaking her head, 'but you should sleep now.'

'But I want Sis to keep me company.'

'Sis has to kneel.'

'Then I'll kneel with you.'

'You have to go to sleep,' she said. 'Or how about this: if you lie down, I'll tell you a story.'

'OK.' Putting his head on the edge of the bed, he leant his face against hers. 'Children who don't sleep at night are taken away by the blackfish.'

'Oh.'

'So, when the story's over you'll have to sleep like a good boy.'

'OK, Sis.'

On winter nights, as they migrate to the sea near Kaohsiung, the blackfish make a special stop at Hamasen. They grow legs and climb ashore, turning into manfish. Their scales become precious garments, pearl-studded drapes of gold and jade, and when they walk you can hear them go *swish, swish, swish* and *ding dang, jingle jangle*.

They come ashore at Hamasen to look for their children.

The people of Hamasen had caught too many blackfish and scooped out too much of their roe. Now the blackfish come looking for the children that they lost. And if they can't find them, they take ours instead. People's children for their children, that sounds only fair, doesn't it?

We eat their children, so they carry off ours and take them for their own. That's only fair, right?

The blackfish walk up and down outside the windows that are bathed in moonlight. And because the sound of their pearls and jade is so pretty, all the children who aren't fast asleep as they should creep to their windows to peek outside. The eyes of the blackfish are big and round

and bright as the morning star. And they will find the curious child's eyes straight away.

As soon as the his eyes are under the spell of the blackfish's gaze, the child's soul is hooked. The blackfish suck out the children's souls, string them together and attach them to their long robes. You know what souls look like, don't you? They're actually very much like roe, little beads that have kind of a fishy smell.

Stringing children's souls onto their robes, the blackfish walk all the way to the torii of the Shinto shrine on Shoushan, going *swish, swish, swish* and *jingle jangle* as they move. There they turn around and walk back the way they came. On a single night, they march back and forth like that many times, collecting countless souls in the process.

Children who have lost their soul don't die. They won't even feel that there's anything wrong with them. But from that point on, they're a different person. They may think that they are just the same as they've always been, but grownups can tell whether a child has a soul or not.

A child without a soul is quickly disliked by everybody, because he'll always be doing things that grownups hate, like breaking dishes, being late for school, telling lies, crying for no good reason, not eating their food, not wiping their butt after going to the toilet, or taking things without asking. The moment grownups find out that a child has lost his soul, they'll kick him out of their house.

The scariest thing is that a child without a soul will go and eat other children's souls, especially those of their own brothers and sisters. That's why they have to be kicked out, no matter what. You see, all those hobos you see on the streets, the beggars and the homeless people, they were all chucked out when they were still little children because their parents discovered that they didn't have a soul anymore. That's why in the future you always have to sleep like a good boy, and not get up in the middle of the night. You must never think crazy thoughts or pay attention to strange dreams. And you must never ever look at or listen to things you shouldn't be seeing or hearing. Remember, if your soul is taken by the blackfish, Ma and Pa will definitely kick you out.

'Sis, I'm sorry,' Little Brother said, 'last night I fell asleep before you finished the story. Can you tell it again tonight, please?'

'OK.' The odds were that Mother and Father would never kick Little Brother out of the house, A-Giok thought.

No, they were more likely to let him eat her soul.

Her brother was holding on tight to her hand as she led him out into the little back alley. The afternoon promised rain, and the alleyway was gradually absorbing the air's moisture, like a parched throat.

The passage was so narrow—and it appeared even narrower today for not being bathed in glaring white sunlight as it usually was—that even a little girl like her was forced to turn sideways as she walked down it.

'Sis, why are we going down here?' 'No special reason. Just having a look.' For some reason, Mother still hadn't returned from the harbor, even though it was already past noon. Must've been quite a haul of prawn if they couldn't finish peeling them in one morning. This meant that she wouldn't be able to go to school in the afternoon, either.

Edging her way forward, she led her brother by the hand, deeper and deeper into the back alley. At first the going was very slow, because she wasn't used to moving in such a narrow space, but soon she began to pick up some speed, and her little brother had trouble keeping up with her. Their arms stretched longer and longer, and eventually he tripped.

'Sis!'

'What is it?'

'Nothing,' he replied. 'My shoe came off.'

She knelt down and helped him put the shoe back on. She had no such problems, being barefoot herself. 'There you go.'

'Thank you, Sis.'

Getting up again, A-Giok saw that they were now at the edge of a large courtyard, where the alley turned a corner. Ahead, it connected with another tiny back lane very similar to the one they had just come through. She kept walking down it, pulling her little brother along by the hand. Before long, this new alley came to an abrupt end where two dilapidated two-storey buildings faced each other, leaning at opposite angles.

She looked both ways. To the right, a six-foot wall of red bricks was barring the way; to the left, across the alleyway, was a door without a panel. Half of its frame was blocked by a protruding corner from the building next door, but it looked as if you could just about squeeze sideways through it.

A strong smell of machine oil came drifting from the door. A-Giok thought that this must lead to the area between Yanping Road and Gupo Street off the Daitian Temple, which was home to a cluster of decrepit buildings: small ironworks, auto parts factories, and workers' dorms, built and run by the Japanese but now fallen out of use.

If she was right, she also knew that all the machines and equipment had been dismantled and taken away by mainland soldiers not long after Taiwan had been returned to China. Father said that the soldiers didn't give a damn that some of the workshops and factories had already been taken over by Taiwanese shareholders. 'They just took everything in sight and carted it off on big army trucks. That's just what they do, those mainlanders, grab whatever they want. No use crying or complaining, either. They're a bunch of bloody bandits, and that's that.'

'Sis,' Little Brother said, 'I'm scared.'

A-Giok reassuringly squeezed his hand, but then she let go of it, leaving him standing there alone.

He tried to seize the corner of her dress, but failed to catch hold. So he just stood there.

It was only one in the afternoon, yet the entire sky was lowering, heavy and dark. Only a few rays of lingering sunlight, as if searching for a tiny tear in the dull fabric of the world, were still playing on the meandering alley, the ramshackle factories and dorm buildings that were eerily reminiscent of some dead animal's skeleton.

She stepped through the narrow door, one hand on the frame and the other on the jutting corner.

A deep shadow seemed to rise slowly from the ground, pulling itself up to a lop-sided height. A-Giok couldn't discern anything clearly, except for a pair of luminous eyes looking straight at her. She felt that her soul was about to be sucked right into them.

Without the slightest hesitation, the dark silhouette came striding in her direction, and she shrank away in fear. Reaching out to grip her brother's sleeves, she turned around and ran. Little brother was hurled against the wall like an old rag.

'Sis, what's wrong?' he exclaimed, 'That hurts!'

And then A-Giok heard the same dinging and clanging sound she'd heard before, in the night, right outside the window.

She stopped in her tracks, pulling Little Brother to her chest and covering his eyes.

Turning her head to look back, she saw him. His whole body was draped with a panoply of scrap metal: old cans, small woks, shovels, bicycle chains, mudguards, wok lids, screws, sawed-off railings and bronze gongs. It was a suit of armor made up of a jumble of constituent pieces, most of them no larger than a playing card. On his head, he wore a steel mesh. In his

hand was an electric generator, red and white cables spilling out like innards. Under all the junk he was wearing nothing but a pair of white boxer shorts that were stained with dirt.

'Sis, Sis!' Little Brother was crying.

Even from behind the steel mesh, those eyes radiated a mesmerizing brightness as the figure continued to move towards them, clanking and rattling with every single step. It was a sound of exceptional crispness and clarity: even as it was partly soaked up by the humidity that permeated the whole alleyway, it reverberated in A-Giok's head like the pealing of a loud bell.

'Don't... be afraid,' she told her little brother with a shaking voice.

The figure took another few steps towards them, then stopped. Turning around, it went back through the door into the room. Suddenly the racket stopped, as if someone had thrown a switch, as if it had been swallowed up into the belly of the workshop upon which only the faintest of light was still playing.

Clang, clang, clang! Ding, ding, ding! Through the window, she could hear that metallic noise again.

By the time they got back, Little Brother's asthma had begun to act up again, after he had cried the whole way home, and breathed in too much cold air.

Mother had already returned.

'Where have you been?' she asked, livid. 'Who told you to take your little brother out for a walk?'

'We didn't go far,' A-Giok replied, 'just outside the house.'

Mother asked Little Brother what was wrong. He had stopped crying by then, but he wouldn't say anything in reply, staring up at her with round, fearful eyes.

'You had a fright, didn't you?' Mother comforted Little Brother in a soft voice, hugging him. She rubbed his chest with Kimsi Ointment. 'It's all right now, Mommy loves you.'

A-Giok was sent to cook snake oil soup with black sugar again. When her little brother's breathing had calmed down and the horror had disappeared from his eyes, Mother gave her a good licking with a strip of wood. From her buttocks to the calves of her legs, red weals soon covered her skin like crisscrossing railroad tracks. She even wet her pants a little. Of course, she didn't eat any supper after that.

'When Father comes home, you're really gonna get it!'

For some reason, Father had gone to Yamakataya that day to buy her a new pair of socks. After he had heard Mother's account of what had happened in the afternoon, he didn't say anything, but he didn't show any intention of giving her a beating. He just asked A-Giok to get a pair of scissors from the cupboard, and he cut up the socks right in front of her. They looked like a pair of gutted milkfish, only much lighter.

She hadn't cried when Mother had spanked her, and she hadn't cried when she couldn't eat supper. But now, as she knelt in front of the bed and rubbed the ruined socks against her knees, she finally started to weep.

Because she was afraid to wake up Little Brother, she could only sob quietly through clenched teeth and lips, eyes staring ahead as tears slowly rolled down her cheeks and chin, gliding along her neck and further down to wet her tiny chest. Some larger drops didn't roll down her face, instead falling straight onto her knees whenever she bent her head to look at the socks. She lifted her socks up as high and far away from her face as possible, because she didn't want to stain them with her tears.

A-Giok felt a deep sorrow as she looked at them, so white and soft and smooth. What a pity she wouldn't be able to wear them to class tomorrow. She would have put them in her satchel and only put them on with her shoes, when she got to school.

'Why didn't Father just give me a whipping?' she thought. 'He wouldn't have cut up the

socks then.'

The places where Mother had beaten her didn't even feel that sore to her anymore.

But why did it have to be today, of all days? Why did Father have to go buy these socks today? Then she remembered. A few days ago, she had told Mother that her socks had big holes in them. That must have been why Father bought them today. Ah, how could she have forgotten all about that!

Again she held the socks up high and away from her, anxious not to wet them. Staring at them, she couldn't help but imagine how pretty she would have looked if she could have worn them tomorrow when playing with the skipping rope. She was good at that. As a matter of fact, she was good at the little sandbag game and at jumping rope. Oh, how smart she'd have looked skipping to the rhythm of the rope, elegantly touching the ground with legs crossed, chin up and chest out, all the while singing rhymes... If she were wearing those new white socks, someone would have certainly come over and said something like, 'Look at that, you're wearing new socks!' And she'd have replied, pleasantly embarrassed and beaming with joy, 'My Pa bought them for me. My Pa went all the way to Yamakataya to get them!'

She had stretched her arms out for so long that they started to tremble. Gradually, she lowered them back onto her knees, and before long the tears that continued to flow from her eyes had wet her torso and the socks in her hands. She looked at Little Brother lying on the bed. It had been an exhausting day for him, and he'd fallen asleep very quickly, not even remembering to ask her again to retell the blackfish story, which he hadn't finished hearing the night before.

Little Brother looked the same as always. Now fast asleep, he was breathing regularly and his face looked peaceful. He was neatly tucked under the covers, well protected against any drafts. It was very unlikely that he would have an asthma attack during the night.

Clang, clang, clang! Ding, ding, ding! Through the window, she could hear the noise of metal pieces clanging against each other.

Soon, she heard that voice again, coming from the far end of the alley as it mingled with all the clanking and rattling, 'Collecting copper, iron, kids!' This time she felt almost certain. It wasn't because of any mainlander accent or the drawn-out last syllable. That voice was really shouting 'collecting kids,' not tin.

As she knelt in front of the bed clinging to her white socks, A-Giok began to think of her elder sister, wondering if she would not be able to come home for the New Year's holiday again.

Ever since her big sister had gone to live and work in Iamdiapo in Kaohsiung more than two years ago, she'd had not been able to come back for the New Year. Mother said that she was working at a big restaurant called Titchiu Lau, and the New Year holidays were the busiest time of the year. There was no way they'd let her go home during that week.

At the time she'd wondered whether Iamdiapo was very far away from Hamasen. Otherwise, why couldn't her sister at least come home for a quick visit and then go back again the same day? After New Year, A-Giok would be nine. A few days ago her father had finally told her, 'All right, all right, next year we'll send you to elementary school.' She wanted nothing more than to tell her sister about it, to tell her that now she'd be able to wear her white school shirt and khaki school skirt. Sister had promised A-Giok that as soon as she was allowed to go to school, she'd let her wear her uniform. The uniform had been Sister's biggest treasure, and in the past she'd never let A-Giok so much as touch it. And now she'd be wearing it! When Sister had first been sent to school, Father had bought that shirt and skirt for her. True, they had

already been worn by a fellow wharf worker's daughter for two years, but they were still as good as new. Sister said that holding them in your hands you could almost still detect that gluey, fresh-from-the-factory smell on them.

After third grade, Sister stopped going to school, because Mother was running a sort of daycare and needed help looking after other people's children. After that, Sister had never worn the uniform again. She had folded the white shirt into the khaki skirt, shoved half a mothball into the skirt's pocket, wrapped it all in oilpaper and put it away at the bottom of the closet. She would often take it out to look at and stroke the fabric. A-Giok still remembered the expression of longing on Sister's face when she did this, as if this would always be her new uniform, and she'd always wait for the day when she could put it on again and wear it proudly.

But after Sister went to lamdiapo, that uniform had lain at the bottom of the closet and never taken out again. What if moths had eaten holes into it? Mother had told her that if children didn't behave, or complained about their clothes, moth worms would crawl out from under the closet partitions and chew away at them until they had nothing left to wear. Of course A-Giok would never complain that the uniform didn't look nice, but she wasn't so sure whether she was always on her best behavior—good enough, that is, to prevent the moth worms from eating that shirt and skirt, which were technically already hers. If they absolutely had to eat some of her clothes, she thought, let it be anything but that uniform.

So, even though it would still be some time before she'd actually be going to school, A-Giok wanted to ask her sister for permission to take the uniform from the closet for a close inspection. She wanted to see whether it was a little bit too big for her, or if moths had indeed nibbled at it. Then she could ask Mother to mend the holes. Mother had a nifty pair of hands, and there was nothing she couldn't fix on that sewing machine that had come as part of her dowry. If only Sister could come back, A-Giok would ask her if she could try on the uniform to see if it fit properly, even if the start of school was still a long while off. Sister had always been slightly plumper than her; maybe Mother would need to take the uniform in a bit. It would really set A-Giok's mind at ease to have these things taken care of.

Father had gone out to gamble at dominoes, and Mother was sitting under the cinnamon tree in the courtyard, shooting the breeze with the neighbours. A-Giok was sitting at the kitchen table, holding the red envelope with a one jiao coin in it that her father had given her. In an hour's time, the clocks would strike midnight, and then all the ships in Kaohsiung Harbour, be they freighters, naval vessels, ferryboats or iron-hulled fishing vessels, would blow their horns together for a full minute. The piercing, continuous ones were the cargo ships, while the naval ships made a deep and booming sound like the mooing of cows. The fishing vessels and ferryboats engaged in a kind of duet, their many different horns answering and echoing each other in a rhythmic display.

The moment the ships began to blow their horns, a cacophony of squibs and firecrackers resounded all over the courtyard and the rest of Hamasen. Mingling with the bellowing echoes reverberating off Shoushan, this magnificent blend of rumbling noise rushed through the streets and alleys like a furious wind, blasting away the thick smoke from the crackers and splitting the very skies that were arched over the entire scene, a remote porcelain tray glimmering bright and clear with finely chiseled stars.

All the noise had only just died down when Sister came charging into the house. She was huffing and cursing, probably because the infernal noise had temporarily rendered her half deaf.

'How can you be so daft? How can you go to school if you're so daft? Aren't you afraid that the other kids will pick on you?' Sister was berating her in a loud voice. 'That uniform is the only one we've got, so of course you're gonna get it. Who's gonna wear it if not you?'

'But you never even let me touch it...'

Father hadn't come home yet, and Mother had already gone to bed. After washing, Sister had come out to sit with A-Giok on the stairs leading up to their front door. She handed her younger sister the school uniform. A-Giok held it pressed to her chest with both hands, too shy at first to unfold the little parcel. Eventually she began to examine the clothes under the faint light from the front door, first inspecting the khaki skirt and then, very slowly and carefully, pulling out the shirt and placing it on her knees. Gently lifting the neatly folded corners and tilting her head this way and that, she scrutinised the white shirt, afraid that a sleeve or hem might drop into the dust and get dirty.

'What are you looking for?' Sister asked impatiently. 'It's not like I hid any money in there.'

'I just wanna see if the moths have bitten any holes in it...'

'But I put a mothball in the pocket, didn't I? Ah, how come you're such a daft little girl? I really don't know how we can send you to school...' Out of nowhere, it seemed, Sister conjured forth a bottle of Namunei soda. 'This is for you, but it's not cold anymore.'

Sister pushed down the marble that sealed the bottle with the handle of a kitchen knife, and a hissing, fizzy sound came from the bubbling liquid.

A-Giok was clutching the bottle in her hands, but didn't dare to take a sip. 'It must have cost a lot...'

'Go ahead and drink it already. Our boss gave each of us a bottle. They were all leftovers, anyway, that guests had ordered but hadn't drunk. I get to drink this stuff all the time.'

'Oh.'

'We also got Calpis there,' Sister said, 'and that's pretty expensive, I think.'

'Cal... pis? What's that?'

'It's a soft drink imported from Japan. The bottle is like a big soy sauce bottle. It looks kind of yellow and milky, and tastes a little bit sour and a little bit sweet, like some sort of fruit flavor,' Sister explained. 'But after a few more sips it doesn't taste all that nice, and the more you drink the thirstier you get.'

'Oh. Was lamdiapo very crowded today?'

'Oh yes! The streets were bursting with people. The stores were open until seven or eight before closing for the New Year, and everyone was doing some last-minute shopping. You know, going to Doagaodeng to buy some rolls of cloth or order a cheongsam. Or visiting a jeweler on Sinlok Street to pick something nice, or buying a pair of leather shoes on Gohok Road, or maybe a watch on Dai-iong Road. After they bought all the gifts and everything else they need for the New Year they came to the restaurant for dinner. Hey, did Pa give you a red envelope?'

'Yes, there's one jiao in it,' A-Giok patted her chest.

'Make sure you save it. When you go to school, you can buy candy,' Sister said. 'Why don't you drink your Namunei? Come on, if you don't drink it quick it'll go flat.'

'They sell candy at school?'

'Yeah, there's a shop that sells candy and sweets and bread.'

'Sounds great. Sister, how come you've time to come home?'

'Our boss said he'd give the girls under fifteen half a day off so we could spend it at home. Tomorrow afternoon I have to go back to help prepare New Year's dinner.'

'So is it a very long walk from lamdiapo?'

'Not really, but before you get to Sigisoe there is a stretch of dirt road and small paths with

no lights, and I was afraid of falling into one of the paddies. So I had to take off my shoes and crawl along in the dark. That's how my feet got so dirty...'

'Sister, thank you so much for letting me wear this uniform...'

Sister turned her head to look at A-Giok. The white shirt and khaki skirt were still on her knees, a bit crumpled now where her elbows had been pressing on them. In her hands she was still holding the bottle of Namunei, from which she hadn't even taken a single sip. Soft as a mochi, her body was leaning against her elder sister's as her head slowly sunk onto the white shirt. She was fast asleep.

When A-Giok opened her eyes, she found that she was all alone on the wide bed. The school uniform had been placed tidily next to her head. She ran her hand over it a couple of times. It must have been her sister who folded it so neatly. She climbed off the bed and asked her mother, who was sweeping the floor, 'Where's Sister?'

'Went to the pier to collect some firewood,' Mother said flatly.

'Oh.' A-Giok turned to look at the kitchen table. Seeing no congee on it, she didn't dare to ask for any breakfast.

She put on a pair of cloth pants and left through the courtyard's main gate. Turning left, she walked along Binhai Second Street. Pier No. 1 was on the other side of the road.

A-Giok could see the solitary figure of her elder sister standing barefooted on the glaringly white quay wall, which ran in a long continuous line—bending away in the slightest of curves from the ferry dock—all the way to the entrance of the Se-a-oan Tunnel.

The harbour was teeming with trawlers. Having returned with the night's catch early in the morning, they now lay moored to the quay in close proximity to each other, their two-fathom-high sterns all facing the quay wall and their masts, antennas, flags, ropes, fishing nets, buoys, derricks and fishing lamps forming a motley canopy of glittering shapes and colours against the blue sky. Gazing at Sister's silhouette, A-Giok realised that her sister wasn't much taller than her anymore. There was a good chance that she'd be able to wear that uniform without too many problems.

Sister, carrying a bamboo basket on her back that was half her own size, and holding in her hand an even longer pair of bamboo tongs, was bending forward to look for driftwood floating on the harbour water. A-Giok climbed up the embankment and went to stand next to her, bending forward like her to see that the seawater was lapping against the quay wall only about a shank's length below them. The flood was still coming in, and on the oily water in the narrow space between the tire-bumpered quay and the bulky ship hulls there floated cracked wooden planks discarded from ships and old jetty posts. They had been rotting in the water for a long time.

'Sister, let me help you.'

'No. Just stand back a bit, will you? You're gonna fall in.' Sister straightened herself and looked at A-Giok, 'Did you even eat any breakfast?'

She shook her head.

'Ah, you're really daft, you know. Why did you sleep so late?' Sister pulled out a half-eaten dried persimmon, 'Here, eat this.'

A-Giok clasped the persimmon in both hands. Without taking a single bite, she stood there and watched her elder sister balancing her naked toes on the edge of the quay wall, one hand grabbing ahold of a ship's gunwale, overgrown as it was with greenish-black crustaceans sharp enough to cut your fingers, the other arm stretched as long as possible to reach the driftwood with the tongs. She'd lift a piece, shake it back and forth a few times, and then put it in the basket on her back. But no matter how much she might try to shake off the water from the timber, some of the oily liquid would still drip onto her clothes, until her whole back and

buttocks were wet.

'How much longer?' A-Giok asked. 'When you're finished, can you help me try on the uniform? If it's too big, I'll have to ask Mother to make it smaller.'

'Well, I tried it on last night, and it still fit me pretty well, so I think it'll definitely be too big for you.' Hearing Sister say that, A-Giok felt a pang of displeasure, 'You put it on when I was asleep, without asking? That's my uniform now, you know, you can't do that... Well, OK, but that was the last time, from now on it's mine, and you can't wear it on the sly anymore.'

Sister reached behind her with one hand to push the bamboo basket up, checking its weight. Then she shook herself a few times, making the pieces of wood settle inside the basket, and declared, 'I'll get another two pieces, then we can go. And hurry up, eat that persimmon already.' Sister walked on a few yards until she came to some concrete steps leading down to the water. Steps like these were placed at regular intervals along the entire length of the quay so people could jump on and off the low sampans. A-Giok lowered her head and began to eat the dried persimmon, with a piqued look still on her face, following her sister with her eyes as she went down the steps. Now only Sister's head and the top of her basket were visible above the edge of the embankment, then they, too, were gone.

Suddenly she heard loud and urgent shouts from the opposite shore. Raising her head, A-Giok could see a grownup standing on the emerald rock rising out of the harbour called Tengau-iam. Another grownup came running down a little path. They were both yelling, 'Quick, quick! Someone's fallen into the water! Hurry up! Someone's fallen from the jetty!'

A-Giok sat on the embankment, her body limp and soft as a mochi, trying to make sense of what had just happened.

What had Sister been thinking? At the quay steps, Sister saw there was a lot more driftwood floating near the end of the pier, and going down the last few steps, she tried to fish out the pieces of wood with her bamboo tongs as before. But this time the wood was simply too far away, and the eddying ripples generated by a motor sailer that had just started its engine only made it drift still further. She strained and stretched her body, with her one hand supporting herself against the quay's rough concrete wall, her fingers searing and her spine seeming to snap with the effort, but she couldn't reach the driftwood.

'I must be dreaming... this can't be real!' Sister was thinking, and for a split second she seemed to feel the seawater under her like agar jelly. If she could only tread lightly enough, it felt as if she would be able to take a couple of steps forward and reach the pieces of wood.

For the briefest of moments, maybe her elder sister had really pondered the possibility of taking one tentative step... Afterwards, Sister floated on the water with her face upwards and her eyes wide open, her gaze seeming to pass right through the chaotic tumble of masts, antennas, flags, ropes, fishing nets, buoys, derricks and fishing lamps to look at the bright sky, clear and cloudless after the storm, at the little trails winding through the verdant hills and ran down to the waterfront. She was thinking that in the afternoon, after lunch, she'd have to go back to work and help prepare dinner at the Titchiu Lau restaurant.

A-Giok thought to herself that all she had done was lower her head to eat the dried persimmon, 'Just as Sister told me to.' She'd only asked, 'How much longer? When you're finished, can you help me try on the uniform?' Was it possible that all this had happened because Sister had tried to gather the firewood more quickly, hurrying so that she could go home with her and try on the uniform together?

'How come you're so daft? Nothing but nonsense in your head, how can you go to school like that?' Sister's body was stuck between two trawlers, a piece of driftwood floating next to her head, slapping against her face now and again. She was only an adult's arm's length away from the quay steps, but every time a grownup tried to pull her in, whether with his hands or

using a hook, she would sink below the surface of the water, disappearing completely. As soon as the hand or hook had been retracted, however, she'd resurface on her own.

They tried everything they could think of to get the body out of the water, but the crowd of neighbours and sailors who had gathered on the ships and the shore eventually had to give up.

'That's called a *chuiliusi*, a water corpse,' declared the Daoist priest from the Daitian Temple, when he arrived on the scene. He sighed, 'When a pretty girl drowns, the water demons will grab her and won't let her go. Poor child...'

Father hadn't come home yet, and Mother's voice was already raw with crying. 'What are we supposed to do then...?' she managed to croak.

'First we have to try to call back her spirit. I need one of you to go to the temple to get a bamboo pole, ink, a writing brush and a large sheet of paper.' To Mother, he added, 'You should go and fetch one of your daughter's dresses, something she's worn very recently.'

'Something she's worn recently...' Mother thought for a moment, then she said, still crying, 'But her clothes aren't here, they're all in *Iamdiapo*...'

'Well, then send somebody to *Iamdiapo*,' someone suggested.

'We absolutely need something she's worn in the past couple of days, something with her smell on it. Otherwise, her spirit won't find its way back... Once we get her out of the water, we have to dress her in those clothes straight away to make sure the spirit stays close,' the priest explained. 'Later, after she's been put in her burial gown, we'll have to burn them.'

'But the return trip to *Iamdiapo* by pedicab, and explaining everything to the people at the *Titchiu Lau*, all that will take more than an hour...'

'And the tide is going out now. There is not enough time.'

'The tide will probably sweep her off into the outer harbor.'

'So what should we do then? What should I do?' Mother exclaimed. Then she thought of something. 'A-Giok! A-Giok, where are you?'

The Daoist priest stood on the quay in his ceremonial robe. Next to him, his acolyte was holding the spirit-calling flag, a six-foot bamboo pole. On it was tied a white paper on which were written Sister's name, day of birth and day of death. 'All that's still missing are the clothes.' From the bottom of the embankment, Mother passed up the school shirt and skirt. The priest took them, shook them out and gave them a quick once-over.

'And the girl has worn these recently?' he asked, handing the clothes, now somewhat creased, to his acolyte.

Mother turned to look at A-Giok, the expression on her face pleading for an affirmative answer, 'Your sister did wear them, right?'

A-Giok nodded, 'Yes, she did.'

'Master, she did. She did wear them,' Mother declared.

'I tried the uniform on last night, and it still fit me pretty well, so I think it'll definitely be too big for you,' Sister had said.

'Good. Be sure to fasten them tightly so they won't fly away,' the priest instructed his assistant. 'If the clothes fly away, the spirit will follow them, and then it'll be hard to call it back again...' His acolyte pulled a strong cotton string through the buttonhole of the white shirt's collar and, with a piercing, heartrending cry, tied it to the pole with such force that the collar, once perfectly straight, was scrunched into a wrinkled mess. Then he fastened the khaki skirt with the same ferocity.

'OK, here we go. You all have to come up now and look at the girl's face as you call her name. First call her name, and then shout 'Come back quickly!'" Once Mother had clambered up the embankment, the priest commanded his assistant to give him the spirit-calling flag. Taking it, he raised it up high and erect.

'A-Giok, get up! You have to come up here, too! How come you're not even crying?' Mother scolded her. 'What's wrong with you? That's your elder sister! So get up here and shout as loud as you can, 'Sister, come back quickly!'" The priest held the flag high against the heavens and muttered incantations. A gust of rising wind came blowing from the outer harbour, filling the fluttering clothes on the bamboo pole with sea air. For an instant, it appeared as if someone was actually wearing the uniform; the puffed up shirt and skirt looked shiny and new, and you could even catch a whiff of that gluey fresh-from-the-factory smell. A-Giok stood at the foot of the embankment, her head thrown back, and looked at the clothes flapping and fluttering in the breeze against the clear blue sky and the emerald Tengau-iam.

'You put it on when I was asleep, without asking? It's my uniform now, you know, you can't do that... Well, OK, but that was the last time, from now on it's mine, and you can't wear it on the sly anymore.' As she was shouting these words in her heart, the wind at last drew tears from her eyes.