

# THE MOUNTAIN I'D SHARE, WITH YOU

## 我所告訴你關於那座山的一切

- \* 2019 Openbook Award
- \* 2019 Mirror Weekly Book of the Year
- \* 2020 Taiwan Literature Award

*Stories, poems, and the final travelogue of author Liu Chen-Chun, completed while the author was trapped on a mountainside in Nepal for forty-seven days, a catastrophe that would finally claim his life.*

In 2017, author Liu Chen-Chun and his partner set out on what was supposed to be a grand adventure: a mountaineering trip to Nepal. Yet a sudden blizzard overtook them near the Narchet Khola Valley, trapping them in a mountain cave. During the 47 days it took for a rescue team to reach the pair, Liu battled the elements by putting pen to paper, writing poems and extending his travelogue as far as he could before exposure took his life.

The stories and poems within this collection bring us close to the emotional core of their many speakers, as they explore powerful themes of love, solitude, and pain. They invent and invoke memories that bring us back to images of home and family that cannot be recovered. Through the travelogue, Liu explores the meaning of writing and of literature as he understands it, as well as the nature and purpose of journeying into the wild.

*The Mountain I'd Share, With You* is a truly unique offering of a writing life abruptly cut short. It is more than the first-hand record of a disaster; it is a work of multiple, fragmented enlightenments through pain, recollection, and introspection.

Liu Chen-Chun 劉宸君

Born in Miaoli, Taiwan in 1998, Liu Chen-Chun set off for the Indian-



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Nepalese border on a mountaineering trip in the spring of 2017. While hiking near the Narchet Khola Valley, Liu and his partner were trapped in a cave by a blizzard. Liu died of exposure on their forty-fourth day of captivity, three days before the rescue team arrived.

# THE MOUNTAIN I'D SHARE, WITH YOU

By Liu Chen-Chun

Translated by Jim Weldon

## Chapter 1 On the Road

### The Living are All on Their Way to the Same Place

January 22, 2017.

*By Train: Sealdah → Budge Budge → Tollygunge → Kalighat (Kolkata People's Film Festival) → Tollygunge → B.B.D Bag → Kolkata → Lenin Sarani/Nirmal Chandra Dey Street*

Notes:

1. Public transport on India's roads can almost all be hailed anywhere, and if it's going slowly enough you can just hop on.
2. The trains are in fact quite punctual.

Death; codes; bribery (exchange); poetry and gods (invisibility); returning.

Death: Arriving at the youth hostel, we found that the ground floor operated as a space for holding funerals, and one was just finishing. An old lady was being carried out, wrapped in a white shroud, her feet marked all over with white dots. I had not yet come to understand death in this city; what I had been feeling was its life. Automobiles, tuk-tuks, rickshaws, and bicycles dodge and weave with an exceptional unspoken dexterity, squeezing into each other's space all at the same time. People make a solemn attempt to cross the road with some enormous thing balanced on their head. Children play with a kite made out of a thin plastic bag amongst the traffic of vehicles and pedestrians, or are given a bath outside the shacks that line the roadside. Do they know that there are people dying in the city right at this very moment? The answer is in the negative; death is a secret intrigue the whole city colludes in. This allows us to offer the following interpretation: these living people are all on their way to the one and the same place.

Bribery: *Police*, onlookers.

Poetry and gods: The invisibility of the burden-bearer, frozen time, Sisyphus...

Codes: Yueh can understand the city's codes and how they operate / the gauge of the tracks, the vintage of the trolleybuses, the gap in height between platform and train, where the tracks might lead.

January 23, 2017.

*Local train: Sealdah → Bongoan*

Onboard the train it's another marketplace – an extension of the street but also a little world of its own formed by the narrow confines of the carriage.

They loudly praise their wares to us on the train, as if they were sharing some happy news they'd heard that morning, of victory in battle or a win at the cricket. They sometimes test out the hardness of their tires, sometimes hit the horn, sometimes the brakes; and the further they can spread the story of such brand-new discoveries the better. Sometimes we spot someone coming from a way off and it makes us imagine we have the ability to control distance. There is another type of person I tend to appreciate even more: they never speak, stood nearby but at a distance, the calm solemnity of their demeanor making it impossible to guess how they appraise this thing called "distance"; distance is far too precious, and not a thing to be taken lightly.

***The Mayor's Eyes***

January 24, 2017.

*Baikola stay*

On first arriving in Baikola, we became intensely aware of the stares directed at us, especially because the people there all had big eyes with long lashes. It's exhausting to be stared at continually, so much so that it made us forget that we were also staring at them.

The eyes of the village mayor served as our camera lens. He showed us the things that made him proud, and at the same time showed us off to the other villagers. The most important thing as he saw it was the village shrine, then it was the national flag, then a portrait of "Netaji" Subhas Chandra Bose; often he would ask us to photograph what we were being shown. Our tour took us right round the whole village and we were asked to take full-length family portraits of every household. Some people casually showed us the things that made them proud, such as the man who insisted on being photographed together with his goats. There were moments when, as I pressed the shutter, I had the sudden sense of being engaged in serious business. The village mayor projected his pride onto the villagers; our appearance made the villagers respond to his aspirations.

Sometimes it felt to me like I was somehow doing harm. We visited schools and went to weddings. Could the alarm we caused everyone be considered a kind of harm?

## **On National Highway 12**

January 25, 2017

*Baikola → Duttapulia → Krishnanagar → Bahadurpur Dhubulia → near Singhati*

All you can do is keep moving. When you sling your kit over your shoulder, it's as if you're carrying yourself on your back too. Take a deep breath; hold it; go from this village on to that village.

January 26, 2017

*Singhati → Palsanda*

Although NH12 (India's National Highway Number Twelve) is not in the best of conditions, as you ride along you can still get a sense of the straightness and flatness of the open wilderness. After you put on your sunglasses, the plains of India take on a translucent amber hue; it was only now I was able to take a good long look at everything as it kept on slowing down.

It seems to me that I've not yet truly achieved a mode of living where the only way is forward, with no turning back. My vision is not yet honed to sufficient sharpness; I need to live on my bicycle for a few more days yet. When I reach the point where I can barely keep on pedaling, I imagine myself as a plaster idol that's not been painted yet, fixed in a single posture and cracking all over as I dry.

...

1. Guesswork and estimating: there are no locational signals along NH12, and when signs telling you distances or destinations do appear somewhere tucked away, you find you've lost the will to go read them. I own a cycling computer that can tell me my current speed, how far I've traveled on the day, and a total of all the distances I've ridden to date, but I've not got round to installing it on my bike, and even if I did, I don't imagine I'd ever look at it. All I can do is guess; I've given up making estimates of how far in kilometers or how long it will take until the next village. I've started wondering when I'll next see another tree like this one I'm just looking at now. Is there some connection between that old man who just went by on an old iron bike and this laden truck bearing down so heavy on the road? Humboldt experienced something similar on his travels through South America: the southern stars and the cactuses made him realize he was a long way from home, but all it took was the sound of a cowbell or cattle lowing for him to imagine himself

back on the greensward at Schloss Tegel. I am forced to reappraise my conception of time and space; when you're traveling by bicycle you can draw connections between the various things you encounter and make from them a whole, but each of those things will pull you to a particular place, perhaps somewhere quite profound.

2. The wheel on Yueh's trailer finally died, the hub shattering completely, a loss of the center around which it turned. He was riding up ahead of me as usual that day; from behind I had a clear view of how his trailer was doing: the left wheel began leaning heavily, so it threw up even more dust, then shortly after it came to a dead halt, like some person who's simply given up on life. Yueh was squatting down trying to stick the hub back on when two local Indian men appeared as if from nowhere and, without ado or polite inquiry as to whether their assistance was required, set to work with tools helping Yueh fix the hub. After you've been in India a while, you often feel the locals can be extremely peremptory when it comes to "deciding" on your behalf. They will often "decide" whether or not you need help. This can sometimes be a very warm experience; after all, there are times when you won't even admit to yourself that you do in fact need help (like when Dahu opens the car door for Hafay in *The Man with the Compound Eyes*).

The great cloud of dust made by a herd of elephants on the move.

January 27, 2017

*Umagur → Malda luggage*

*13141 Malda → NJP*

The cities and countryside of the Indian plains are full of charm, the small towns along the highway make you nauseous.

The doors on either side of the baggage car can be slid open and left that way even when the train is going forwards. In motion, it is like being in a gigantic box with picture windows.

As I recall it, Yueh went right over and tugged open the big heavy door and the wind came pouring in; the black line of the horizon had become very low now and seemed to shimmer. As darkness fell, many households would light small charcoal fires by their door and the little shops would turn on a small lightbulb hung in their front window (*details*: snacks hung up in strings, sweet treats in a variety of shapes and colors in the shop windows). These miniscule light sources seemed able to link together some larger thing they all shared a part in. What made this linking up important was not the way it turned the plain into one enormous network, but the pulling effect it had on all the faces.

If you've ever walked along a mountain path at night with a companion, there's bound to have been moments when you believed that wherever you could see light there must be smoke, and usually those are moments when all you can do is believe.

After Yueh opened the carriage door, he stayed stood there not changing posture....

January 28, 2017

On National Highway Twelve through the wilderness: A Bengali man on a heavy old pushbike; an old man singing as he propels himself along in his wheelchair like rowing a boat; slow-plodding cattle kicking up the dust; young folk crammed together on the roof of a bus; all encounter my bicycle at different times. They appear not because that is where they are; things are scattered piecemeal and just signaling their existence to each other.

Every morning in the early hours, my bicycle and I head out into the haze together. The dust settles on the places I can see and those I can't. Horton tells me that Whoville is in great danger: We need to get the whole town to float down onto this flower, then climb to the highest mountaintop and put the town there. It will be a journey that requires more than courage and determination; there is a world in miniature in your hands and it needs handling with great care. During this time I ride my bicycle across the Indian plains, the animated movie version of *Horton Hears a Who* I watched back in elementary school keeps coming to mind. One day, an elephant called Horton happens to hear a tiny voice coming from a speck of dust that's floating by. He picks a dandelion with his trunk, catches the dust speck on it and tries talking to the world that apparently exists within. There is indeed a town on the speck of dust, called Whoville. The mayor, who has ninety-six daughters, hears Horton and starts attempting to announce his existence to this voice from beyond.

A few days back, the mayor of Baikola invited us to stay an extra day in the village. When we met with the village mayor, I remembered that I'd learned the English word *mayor* from *Horton Hears a Who*. The mayor made a point of signaling to us to bring our phones (my phone has a "*Legalize Gay Marriage*" sticker on the back which I had not thought to remove, even though we were coming to India where same-sex sexual activity is not yet legal) before taking us for a walk around the whole village. My lens was the line of sight along which the mayor looked upon his village. Our movements followed his gaze as we stopped at the places he indicated and photographed each of the various things he was showing to us. At the same time, he was showing us off to the villagers. The subjects we were most often asked to photograph were the shrines, the portraits of Subhas Chandra Bose, and the national flag. The first time we took a picture of a Bose portrait we were asked to offer flowers. The second time, in a scene pointed out for us by the mayor, a primary school employee can be seen at the bottom left working away with his head down, and the portrait hanging behind him, looking as if it might stretch on out forever. The mayor even took us to a kiln where they were baking bricks. He asked the workers to hold still for a moment while I lifted up my phone and took the picture quick as I could. Hard, hard work, carrying bricks.

The feeling when I took photographs for each household was very different. I secretly copied W's method, first pressing the shutter and then counting to three. Because we had pretty much no language in common (most of the villagers couldn't speak any English), we could only understand each other through looks and gestures. There were times when I found this highly restricted form of communication very appealing. Horton and the mayor of Whoville were not able to see each other, Sour Kangaroo (her character is like an animal world representative of the Family Guardian

Coalition) thinks Horton spending the whole day talking to a flower is a bad influence on the children and orders the dandelion destroyed. The mayor of Whoville realizes they are in imminent danger, so he gathers together the townsfolk and has them fetch anything that can make a noise that comes to hand. They drum, stamp and shout; the public address system in the town square amplifies the tiny sounds a thousand-fold and more – try imagining it becoming a sound like a swarm of bees.

When you communicate with the people of Baikola, you must use every ounce of energy in your nerve endings. I use the word “nerve endings” to mean the most fragile yet also most sensitive part of the body, which can detect the vibrations of sound, a convergence of light, the clash of ice crystal and flame; just as pretty much every language has a vocabulary to express profound longing, intense desire for the faraway, romance, and the dispelling of romance.

## 2. Death of a Traveler

**Ridgeline** (originally untitled; written on a scrap of paper)

The ridgeline is

The grief welling like streaked blood

From the stillness a mountain accumulates across a thousand centuries.

There are sometimes moments when it cuts sharp.

**Backpack** (a love letter)

If you are going to make me understand

An island

It will be the rise of your spine

A river system spreading like the branches of a tree,

Clouds of mist crawling across the trace marks.

If a man's name is written in his eyes

Then a traveler's is carved into his nape

Let me press up against the glass and guess

Today, the wind that destroyed you we shall call the sea

The dusk that destroyed you

We will know it as wine.

Yet perhaps it is the everyday destroying time

There is a place where the air is thin and clean

Oh sandglass, biting your tongue,  
When something slips away  
There will be something that remains behind.

The question ought to be, what kind of traveler will I become?  
There are, after all, places I cannot go.  
When I found, to my surprise, you were growing on my back  
I just stepped light and easy into time.

### **Disaster** (a love letter)

The kind of disaster you are is the collapse  
Of a mountain  
Homogenous and warm

Take sand and draw a circle on the ground  
Then pray  
The rain god will dance in it on tiptoe  
And so the disaster  
Will slither between cobbles  
In a place unknown to tears.

They flowed together before the fire  
The mountains of those times extinguished their ridgelines  
The abandoned things of summer sit by a stream  
Announcing to all  
There is a lode in the mountain  
They keep on, until the sunlight and their skin are sunned all through.

...

Sometimes you are no traveler, even if that very second you leave, you become a distant and isolated existence. Between the air and the dust, between being stared at and not stared at, between sickness and beauty, you melt and at the same time cool a physical form with the temperature of your being, and now it will walk on no more, it will collide with things or be shattered utterly at similar borderlines, only it is capable of bearing itself up or setting itself free.

### **Named Travelling Companion**

(submission for publication)

Why make the glowworms rise up from the rubble  
Instead of bathing the woodlands with their silent song?  
How is it the fault-line can catch itself on the surface of the ocean  
To let time slough off crystals of nakedness?  
Reheating the dull trivialities of high summer on a cold winter's day,  
Casting coinage out of knowledge  
Yet unable to bear the cost of the cosmos  
How we submit, quietly  
But brutally  
Hustling in the hopes of winning more days.

"That's just how life is."  
You say to me, helplessly  
What kind of you should I keep on loving?  
I can't bear to watch the fluorescent tube  
Shine like stripes of a mask on your face  
That slowly dry up  
Will they hurt if the wind blows?  
Are you laughing? I  
Went alone to the sands to gather up your eyes  
Sapphire blue up close, the  
Destroying tone that does not dry up  
Steeped in purity  
Oh, my ageing knuckle-bones, now  
I call to mind a young boy  
Falling over  
In a wide ocean of open country and laughing.

"Hey, can I come and play with you?"  
"Come on, then."  
We turned around  
Took a narrow path thick-strewn with silvergrass and broken rock  
You were always out front  
We soon grew familiar with each other's breathing  
There really was a place like this so cold  
It can make it lonely.  
It is time that appears to have paused  
Defining silence, a cry of alarm  
Like the Milky Way in winter still wheeling,  
Wheeling.

We can't keep onward side by side  
Just as a journey has its returning  
We're forever scraping past each other  
Stiffly and quick.  
In the dust cloud life kicks up  
A season not folded away right darts past  
Smiling arcanelly  
At my withered and  
Always trembling finger joints.

### **3. Some Letters**

#### **To Be More Complete and Pure**

You probably think it's a bit strange, me suddenly writing to you like this, but there are some things I'm feeling that I have to let you know about. Think of it like my own internal dialogue with you; on the surface, I'm still just that loser who loves to bug you.

Ever since I first met you I've experienced life as something complete and pure. Life for you doesn't seem like it is for most people, who run around frantically pursuing an illusory "success" until they end up falling into the abyss with no way back out. You let life just be as it is, getting up close to the barest and most desolate core of it with your own physical body, like that time when the evening sun had bruised the whole sky and I was drunk after just the one and I stood there by the vegetable patch with my head fuzzy watching you with a thirty-five kilo tank of fertilizer on your back walking away from me, spraying as you went. I couldn't see the look on your face but I knew you were focused and working your way forward. There was a sudden gust of wind and I started crying, though when you started coming back round I at once pretended as if nothing had happened. It is the purest and most beautiful picture I have ever seen; it was art, it was poetry.

I've been some places with you and met some people, and in that I've been able to feel the sort of warmth and emotion one should expect of humanity. I learned for the first time what it means to give yourself over to a group of people or to certain surroundings with no concerns, none of that mutual suspicion and jealousy because of how we've been socialized. People can set aside any relationships based on capital or profit and give and receive feedback in all sincerity. This is your special quality and it is a precious thing. I've always been warmed by your voice with this special quality, made so warm, a sound like water dripping far away.

Just you keep on keeping on. Not that I ever asked, but you never told me plain where you found the courage to not go to university, but after spending time with you things don't need expressing in words now. Worrying about your "future" is after all a sorry business, it's a fear you

only have after you've been tamed and forced to lock step with the rest of society. No one should lose their belief in themselves and no one ought to get hurt. There have probably been times when you've been forced to look at society's dark side too; all I can do is keep the faith that everything you do is to make your life more complete and pure.

I want to tell you in all seriousness, "You really are very important to me!"

I will use every broken scrap of my life to show my gratitude and belief.

My brother, I thank you, truly, I like you so much.

You are so brave.

Count me in for the world tour, I will do my best to make myself tougher.

### **The Girl Who Wants to Become a Boy**

Actually, the girl who wants to become a boy doesn't know why the boy is always travelling, just as she has never really understood why she is hurting. A deep sorrow cuts between them. The girl uses it to nurture the boy and, at the same time, to forget herself.

"Will we come out of a love like this unscathed?"

One day, an earthquake shattered the sorrow between them, turning it to shards of transparent brightness. For a while the girl was unable to react. It had been, after all, such a pure and monumental thing, and now it lay scattered at their feet without so much as a word spoken; apparently sorrow itself can be wounded too. It was the first time. The girl inspected the boy's body and to her surprise found he was not in fact the intact whole she had imagined. Her sorrow partly overlapped the desolate land within him. He hoed the soil and opened the wastelands there under the sun, breaking up silence inside silence, beating until the air came out, lightly covering over the girl's sorrow, something the boy does that comes closest to gentleness.

"But you are broken all to pieces." This is what the girl and the boy say before the boy smiles and carries on digging the wasteland. The girl cries. She understands – but then again, she doesn't understand – this honesty of his that is too destructive. She recalls how, before the earthquake, when the sadness spread it would rub up against her breast. She was in pain so she hurt him, used her presumptions, what she imagined completeness to be, to force him to be complete, believing that to be the only way to stop the sadness. Nor did he know why the sadness was growing, he just let her trample him down. He would be calm, steady, let her make her mistake at her ease, dissect herself at her ease, and then start to heal. At that moment he seemed like a man, but in the end he was just a boy.

The girl's sadness is probably that most ridiculous sort, she's like Chopper the blue-nosed reindeer-man in *One Piece*, forever getting stabbed but unable to resist sneakily going back to look at the man who hurt her. If anyone gets close, she tries to duck away but dodges comically in the wrong direction and leaves her whole body exposed. She lowers her head and says to the boy,

“Don’t leave...” The boy says, “You will hold me here.” We’ll never, never be apart again. At this moment, they both take off their clothes.

“I have decided I will write for you for the rest of my life,” the girl says.

“And I will take you places all our lives, as long as you want to come with me,” the boy says.

A singer the girl likes wrote, “That joy that comes from having, seems lighter than a feather, but no-one has ever yet, known how to take the weight.”

In fact, the girl still doesn’t know why the boy travels; what she does know, is that now she is going to take on love. That’s right, the girl doesn’t want to become a man, she only wants to become a boy – and, if possible, someone like him.

...

Breaking free and being bound; attachment, separation in life and in death; you try everything you can to embed yourself in a place that seems unchanging yet it is also so rough-edged; the four seasons, daylight, the running waters, and the very earth are brutalities extending from its core, all touched by the shadow of pain. I know you will find somewhere to put them safe and permit yourself to go completely to pieces. It is the only way we will be able to understand your life.

### **Can We Draw a Map of Suffering?**

*I think people like them might burden others with their stuff at a moment’s carelessness. No matter what choice your father ended up making, I think he was choosing to let some other things come to an end with him, to make a clean break.*

Wu Ming-Yi *The Stolen Bicycle* [tr. Darryl Sterk]

Actually, I didn’t even know how he died, or why it was at this particular point in time that his life had to end. But in fact right back when I first got to know him I had a dim inkling that no matter how heavily we later became involved, or even if we came to some agreement, in the end he could only die alone in circumstances where no-one was watching.

His eye preferred maps to the written word. Maps could tell him names given by time and people close by to the island’s undulations, levels, and depressions formed by split-second random effects and what square each had been assigned to. And he was someone who could really read maps; what such people see is the information the map can’t tell them. They mark out the world based on “bearings”; once they have ascertained the spot on which they stand, the world will spread out from them like radiating lines, extending on frighteningly to places far, far away. Not that they ever claim to “believe” in bearings, they can only be said to “rely” on them. Unlike your run-of-the-mill person, even if they can connect to the place they want to go this quickly in their head, they will still get there by humbly walking on their own two feet, slowly turning what

appears distant into something close and circuitous while at the same time turning the close and circuitous into something distant. Unlike the writer, it has never crossed their minds to incorporate this world into what they are doing.

People like this will sometimes cause the writer pain. The writer's gift, which is also a destiny, requires them to simultaneously feel attached to the world and to merely watch it; they must both endure and resist the pain of passing away and watch ruthlessly as things happen and they cannot help. These people take away part of something inside the writer, make the writer endure that agony more enormous than death of vacillating between where we have come from and where we are going. Can we draw a map of suffering? If we can, it will not extend out to such far-flung corners of the world, it will seem like a tangled mass of tree roots wrapped tight around every inch of our bodily organs. When the world comes encroaching, every kind of suffering will have its location. The writer will mark out this world through suffering. They will come to understand that the only way to get away from suffering is to take a route that leads through it.

Because of this, I think that, in the end, each of us will die alone, but whether life has passed or not, I am doomed to weep a lifetime of tears for him.

We cannot become people with compound eyes. The man with the compound eyes says, "We exist only to watch, not to take part." In the end, even though he's dead, he with his love of looking at maps still takes part in this world to some degree, and has the capacity to hurt others. But the chrysalis wriggling hard in the hands of the man with the compound eyes like a galaxy of pain taking form should be able to offer a clue.

#### **4. The Youths of Summer**

##### **Everything I Told You About That Mountain**

Everything I told you about that mountain is actually true. That mountain is not a product fashioned in the mind; it exists out in the world. I have not made up any stories. All you have heard are excerpts I have selected from my experiences on actual visits to the mountain. I have neither the intention nor the ability to manufacture anything.

In which case, let me tell you that story I've always kept from you. You can take it as a beginning, or as an ending.

It must have been when I was about six years old that the mountain appeared in front of me in a concrete way, and I felt very lost. The bare forest trails weren't exactly wide but they were at least clear, stretching on ahead with no apparent destination. After you'd walked them for a certain length of time, you even got the false impression their two sides were pulling wider apart. The weather could be called cloudy, but not to the point where it was going to rain. The mist grew thicker as time went on; I didn't really understand the significance of this at the time, I just felt something like drowsiness making my eyelids droop. In no time, everything became completely enveloped in mist, the shapes of the trees fading from view. I rubbed my eyes, then my face, and

found that if I strained really hard to open my eyes wide, the shapes of trees became clear and fully visible again.

To stop the more real world fading from sight, I strained to keep my eyes wide open, but in the end could not withstand the force of that drowsy sensation. I lay face down on the ground and slipped from consciousness.

It was only after that that I became the me you know now. I wasted everything, I wasn't able to hold on to a single thing, and that made things precious. But I didn't do it deliberately, truly I didn't.

When I was lost, you kept asking me to close my eyes and imagine a mountain.

Why a mountain? I put aside the breaking of my heart for a moment, cocked my head to one side and felt perplexed.

"I still can't tell you now, so just close your eyes and start to imagine. You look to be bursting with excitement, a kind of bright aura coming off you all over."

I closed my eyes like you said to and the first thing that came into my mind was those forest trails when I was six, only I avoided them just now and gave a description of the forest itself instead.

"The plants that make up the forest are a complex mix. They invade each other, squeezing each other's living space until it is very small, so it's like living in some lopsided checkerboard." I swallow back a mouthful of saliva. "The tree trunks are low and twisted, and look like they're all piled together on the forest floor with overgrowth all over the top like fur. The ground is covered by a thin layer of lichen making it almost impossible to pass through."

He nods, then carries on describing his mountain, "I am walking along the ridge line. Once I'm over it, I can reach the far side of the mountain, and a valley will appear before my eyes clear and plain to see. I can tell you the names of all the ridges as well as everything related to them: settlements, alluvial fans, immovable mountain chains. Everything is formed by the transformation of straight lines and curves and their extension."

We open our eyes at the same time. Sweat runs down the line of my cheekbones. It is as if we really have been on a trip to another place.

## **What the Mountain Told Me**

I remembered at last.

This must have been when I was around seven years old. The whole family drove up by car into the nearby hills. I was wearing a yellow t-shirt with a design from some cartoon and green long camo pants, a little water bottle on a strap over my shoulder and a gray sunhat that, looking back now, must have seemed pretty stupid. When we got out the car, there wasn't anything disagreeable about what I saw before my eyes but I did find it puzzling and unfathomable, not like the solid blocks of things you could see clearly in normal life.

To be honest, the trail was over-developed, and you couldn't call them real mountains, but it was still an effort for a seven-year-old child to walk the whole way. Mother had been muttering complaints at my father all the way there – vacation time is hard enough to come by as it is, why on earth would you bring us to a place like this to have a miserable experience. Father answered her with silence, continuing to stride out faster with his steady paces. The more anxious mother became to catch up with him, the more she wallowed in her complaining. I was soon left trailing behind and forgotten, though at the time I didn't find it frightening. Instead, I slipped deeper into the confusion I had felt right from the start. I could hear the sound of each footstep striking the pathway.

Then that big mist came down.

It was no ordinary mist. It looked at first no different than everyday fog, but I knew there was something out of the ordinary about it, even though back then mists were a new thing to me.

I carefully sniffed the air, detecting scents of both rot and freshness, a smell like tree branches on a rainy day. I looked all around to find myself completely enclosed by the mist, but if I narrowed my eyes carefully and imagined a straight line cutting through the mist, the path stretching onward, I could see clearly the trampled parasol tree flowers and the arrow-straight lines of the manmade forest plantation, and I could just make out the outline of far-off mountaintops. To stop the more real world fading from sight, I squinted hard, then I fell asleep.

Before drifting off, I heard the sound the mountain was making, like the sum of the sounds of ancient skies, rocks shattering, and a wild beast tearing its hide, like a train bearing straight down on my heart.

The sound gradually faded, but not before part of it firmly lodged in my mind. There was a point at which I attempted in a half-asleep daze to struggle to my feet, but my efforts were in vain. While I was trying, the echoing sound transformed into a more gentle kind of soundscape; I felt a sense of ease between spasm after spasm of anguish.

It was only now that, as if I had completed some task, I was able to fall into a proper deep sleep. Such that how they later found me and the hard slap my mother gave me seemed of little consequence. From then on, my life seemed to be like living in some other great cloud of mist, though no matter how hard I narrow my eyes, the things I have lost will not come back to me.

## **On the Road**

Me, sixteen years old, getting by on telling lies and hitching rides.

For the hitchhiker, there is no highway at any time that is not arrow-straight and shining brightly. The light soaks through your body and converges in front of you. The air is a mix of grit, fumes, and the smell of souring manure. These constitute all the grounds on which we are obliged to deliver ourselves. Such grounds were not established before, but with them, we have all the necessary conditions for that to happen.

In the world of the hitchhiker, “delivery” is very important. People might laugh to hear it put in those terms and say we’re making it all sound so nice when quite plainly we’re just taking a gamble, but if you characterize a hitchhiker as someone “gambling,” it makes fate far too mighty a thing, and I’ve never seen fate in that way, which is why I use the prosaic and substantive term “delivery.” A word that carries a suggestion of transfer seems more apposite.

Delivery also implies being left somewhere. Whether or not a driver is willing to stop and aid the continuation of the hitchhiker’s journey, the hitchhiker is destined to get left somewhere. This means that their journey is never a whole; it is cut up into broken, soft and swaying things by different modes of transport. When things are going well there is hardly a gap between one ride and the next and you get to where you are going in a very short time. When you’re out of luck, you can wait for ages with the cars whooshing heartlessly past. Some of them even give you a few blasts of the horn. On a day like that you’ll like end up in the 24-hour convenience store passing a long night struggling to keep your eyes open. Anyway, what these two different outcomes have in common is they both leave you distracted and dizzy, though a kind of hunger makes your sense of your own existence become incredibly sharp.

I don’t know though whether telling lies is an essential skill for the hitchhiker. Yueh says he’s never reckoned on doing it because he simply dropped any fixed identity when he was about my age, and a person with no identity has no need to make one up. I haven’t got his courage, so I’m always hard at it concocting identities the better to satisfy drivers, so you don’t have to take any criticism for breaking those unbreakable bits of your identity. Really, who doesn’t want to be honest if they can be? It’s just that lying really is necessary, don’t you see? It’s *ne—cess—ary*.

After I started going hitchhiking alone I discovered straightaway that I am a natural born liar; it was not something I had absorbed during my time with Yueh. In the world of lies, my thinking and logic are clear in a way they’ve never previously been. I find it easy to lock down the chain of cause and effect in a lie, all mutually verifying, and even if the driver asks a really detailed question, something reasonable-sounding but nothing to do with the actual me pops straight away out of the databank of fake material in my head. Even if I use the same identity on different rides there will be discrepancies in the way I present it, though I’ve never got it all mixed up. It wouldn’t matter if I did get it in a muddle, because the kind of driver who chooses to chat with you is usually pretty excited and not actually really paying much attention to what you are saying.

Stick out your thumb, then tell lies. Your identity is decided for you by others. All that’s left behind is a long lonely road through the smoke and dust.

Ah, that was an overcast day, so close you could hardly breathe.

## Ride No. 1

The silver five-seater Toyota SUV slowed down nice and smoothly, you could pretty much call it one neat maneuver. The car contained what was clearly a family group. The front two seats contained a married couple approaching middle age and of course there were three bickering kids

in the back. In a few years the dad would likely start getting grey at the temples, though middle age probably hadn't actually hit him just yet; the way he chatted with the children still exhibited a bit of the enthusiasm of youth. The mother struck me as very pleasant; it was surely her who got the father to give me a ride.

"What year are you in?" It was a question that always got me stirred up because this was the axis around which the lies to come would revolve.

"Oh, I'm in my second year at college." Grown up already but still with a bit of the kid about you, the pure gleam of your challenge to the unknown dancing in your eyes, there was no age (or identity) better entitled to be enjoy the right to travel as a hitchhiker.

"Oh, so you're a young person; then this sort of adventure is just great." It seemed like the father had some fellow-feeling towards the identity I'd created. He did most of the talking as drove, the mother only chiming in occasionally.

"Daddy, I don't want to have to walk over to your work after school tomorrow, you can come and take me straight home," the little girl screeched at high pitch.

"Lazybones, Mummy and I are both too busy."

"Biology is going to be tough this time, even XXX in the other class says so, then there's English and Civics..." The junior-high-age girl butted in.

"Let's go for hotpot one day this week," suggested Mother.

"Loads of meat, and I'm going to eat it all – all of it!" Ah, the thin, husky tones of a voice about to break, talking nonsense but wanting to make a show of it, really takes you back.

I was wrapped around in talk of the everyday run, holding things steady for the sake of the lie.

## **Ride No. 2**

The silver Mitsubishi SUV showed up at a juncture that was neither good nor bad. I'd been waiting around thirty minutes or so, feeling a touch of disappointment but not enough to get me anxious. It slowed down nice and smoothly, you could call it one neat maneuver. There were eight people in the car. Probable husband and wife up front, the man going grizzled at the temples and chin, wearing a cream baseball cap and silver wire-framed spectacles, a check shirt, and a down vest. The woman was in sports gear, a sleeveless polo top over a tight, black long-sleeved undershirt, with similar black leggings under her skirt and a sun visor on. The two seats in the middle row were occupied by women who looked at little older than the couple, chatting away for all they were worth. The rear seats held a group of seniors, two men and two women, probably married couples too but you really couldn't tell their relationships for certain just by looking.

"Hello, where are you trying to get to?" The male driver only glanced a little to his right, casting a ray of light with the reflection off his glasses.

"H---- Town," I replied pleasantly, like a good boy.

## Final Chapter

### Going Home

It was only after waiting many days that I decided I really would start writing. Actually, before we came here to this cave, my writing had been in the doldrums for a long time. Nothing I wrote was any good, probably because I hadn't yet opened up my heart and faced certain feelings.

I wonder how the world of the living is doing right now? I'm doing fine here, it has brought a liberation for my soul, at least. Of course, I hope I can stay alive to pass on this energy to the world, but if that's not possible I can only leave it to the mountain.

The feeling of liberation is probably what inspires me to think of my childhood. It's all a lot of small details...I could tell you hundreds and thousands of our memories, just so long as I can still speak, can still write, so I won't get bored, even though death is drawing close.

I even found myself here thinking that if I get out alive, I'll have a child when I'm thirty-five, otherwise I'll still be letting you all down but also unable to understand you all.

I wonder if anyone will find this place? I have decided to talk to you every day, keep talking until the very last moment. It doesn't matter how clever my writing is, none of that is real. Now we have come to this cave, all I want to say to you are things from the heart. So don't think of blaming the cave; if we had never come in here, I would be dead and we would still be unhappy just the same.

I suffer a lot in the night because I really miss home. I want to show you my pure self but if my physical body can't come back, I will leave part of my pure self on the mountain and bring part back home.

You mustn't worry about me, it is only now for the first time in my life that I have learned how to truly let go and relax. Although I really do want to live, I leave that decision up to the mountain now; though even though there's not enough food, if I keep writing like this, keep on writing, then it feels like I'm not going to die.

It is only now that I feel like I have truly become a writer.