Writing Sample

Alai

Includes "The Fish."

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When I first came to know the nature of fish, I felt they liked silence and were languid—just like the infants, still unable to talk, who stared entranced at them for a long time. On the shore, in cool, shady spots under the trees, these infants were sucking their thumbs and gazing at the clouds in the deep blue sky. They were like the fish in the water. The infants’ bright eyes were serene and blunt. This serenity came from the dark green mountains filled with forests on all sides of the valley. It came from the kitchen smoke gradually spreading in the village.

One infant didn’t suck his thumb much. Lying on his tummy on the shore, he focused on the fish in the water. Because of the sunshine, when summer ended, the skin on the children’s bare bottoms was even rougher and darker than the skin on their faces. The hair on the backs of their heads was luxuriant, but the hairline on their foreheads was high. From birth, such a child had shallow lines on its forehead, but if by chance he had the good luck to live to old age, the lines did not necessarily deepen much more. Now, waves of slender sunbeams reflected off the water onto this child’s face. Behind him came the rich, textured sounds of women hoeing up weeds and men repairing sheds, of the growing trees, and of highland barley, wheat, oats, and ramie that were jointing, of insects, and of birds and beasts. The sounds the children heard were pure and clear and bright—almost like the limpid water where the fish lived.

Now, as the sun’s heat intensified, the fish came up higher and higher. They came out from the deep water—their tails swaying slowly, their silly wide mouths opening and closing. They also struggled to hold up their heads, which—compared with their bodies—seemed to be square. That’s how they stubbornly swam toward the shallow water where the current was slow. The springtime waters were clear and cold. And when the fish lingered over the pebbled river bottom, they looked savage and cruel—and laden with misgivings. But now it was summer, and the plentiful river water brimmed over its usual course. Grass on the low-lying land could grow only under water. Fish—big ones and small ones—lay in the cattle and sheep hoof prints that remained distinctly visible in the grass. Not many days earlier, a large school of mother fish—dragging their swollen bellies—had run wild all over the grass, and with male fish chasing them, they had struggled to drop their strings of bright pale yellow eggs on the grass. Then, the warmest and quietest days of summer arrived, and the river water rose to its highest point. If the plants that greened in the mountains, fields, waters, and air grew continuously, they’d be hard to hold in check. Unbridled, they would crowd into humankind’s living space. The pasture, the conifer forests, the mixed forests of conifers and broadleaf trees, the livestock, and the flowering oats all sent forth smells inducing drowsiness. In this season, it was easy for men to feel sleepy; they lay under the shadows of sheds waiting to be repaired, and listened to the last long drawn-out syllables of the women’s sweet singing floating up in the center of the broad fields. After they fell asleep, the lice finally relaxed and emerged from their hair and enjoyed the sunshine. The one with the most lice was probably the infant watching the fish. This baby wasn’t much like others. Someone concluded that this baby had resulted from the
inbreeding from cousins intermarrying. Progeny of inbred marriages were always an extreme form of life: if they weren't too dull-witted, then they were too intelligent and didn't live very long. Often, too, because of the pure blooded relationship, this kind of family forms a sense of nobility. And, because each supplies the other's needs through inbreeding, the accumulated wealth is not easily exhausted. In this village called Ke, after inbred marriages had made one clan illustrious for several generations at a certain time that clan began its decline. And then another clan adopted the same pattern to attain an illustrious position and become aristocrats with a pure blood relationship. They had the biggest flock of sheep and the biggest herd of dairy cattle. And their house emitted the longstanding smell of foodstuffs eaten by insects. This somewhat pungent, somewhat sweet and sour smell stimulated people's nostrils and throats, producing a stifling feeling. At such a time, the declining clan's last child would like some strange things.

For example, this infant liked fish. Fish seemed mysterious, and people were in awe of them.

Only one kind of fish lived in this region's rivers. Along the shore of this river, people spoke different languages in the many quiet villages between the deep forests. But they all used the same word for fish: jiuyue. The sound jiu was low and deep; the sound yue was mild and light and then slowly disappeared into the cracks between one's teeth. And so, the feeling of awe and mystery was fully displayed.

The warm sun was shining on the fish as they lay quietly beneath the water. Under the sunlight, the water flowed slowly, rising and falling slightly. The surface of the water looked like silks and satins. The smell of fish came from the water. It was as if this smell came from the rotten grass in the water. This fishy smell, along with the muddy odor from the river water, was even stronger than the noontime shade of trees. The mud-colored fish didn't have scales or shells. Their heads and upper bodies similar to those of snakes, the fish lay in the silt and grass at the bottom of the river. Turning slowly on their sides, they revealed bellies the color of pale tea.

The infant chortled happily.

In the river, the eggs laid several days earlier had hatched. Like sewing needles, the large and small fry were swimming quickly. They seemed happy and timid. Clouds bringing a slight chill to the air and wind bringing the smell of mud could make them flee in a hurry. As they gradually grew up and rushed to maturity, the first thing people noticed was the bulging eyes—bright and innocent, along with a heavy inherited sorrow.

The eyes of the infant who watched the fish for a long time would become like the eyes of the fish.

It was the summer of 1958.

The infant watching the fish was a posthumous child. His father had died in battle on the grasslands. His uncle had named him Dukar. His uncle didn't know what the name meant. When religion had been more influential, newborn infants were all named by profoundly learned lamas proficient in the written language. But the standard Tibetan language was seldom like the local dialects. As life settled down, the religious influence gradually wanted. In choosing names, people no longer relied on the lamas, but they still used names that had been around earlier. And they knew the meaning of the names. In the standard form of address, the clan's name should precede the given name.

The infant watching the fish was called Modo Dukar.

But after this he would be called Fish-eye Dukar.
As Fish-eye Dukar—head bowed—scrutinized the school of fish, he gave a carefree, happy laugh. His chuckling sounded much like a wooden bowl that had slipped out of one’s hands and was rolling down steep, narrow stairs. Just then, his mother ChüChü’s nipples felt as painful as if a sharp awn of wheat were stabbing them. ChüChü was pulling weeds in the cooperative’s wheat field. The wheat was unusually sturdy; this was the cooperative’s first season of crops. She gazed at the deep blue sky overhead: news of her husband’s death in battle had come from that distant horizon. The blue sky seemed even more remote. Once more, she bent down silently and pulled up the strong bitter wormwood Artemisia.

Because of her longing, ChüChü didn’t have a very strong female scent. Tears were about to spill from her eyes. After her tears disappeared, the corners of her eyes itched from the salt they left behind. The wheat fields were linked with a distant expanse of dark green grasslands. Everything she could see was deserted again. No one had ever told her in so many words how her husband, who was also her cousin, had died. In her imagination, her husband had died more than once. Again and again, he had come back to life, then died again. ChüChü had also personally experienced the feeling of death more than once. When she imagined that her husband had been killed by bullets, her heart would be grazed by a burning hot, sharp hard thing. When she imagined that her husband had been killed by a knife, a snake would wind around her neck until she turned ice cold from terror....

The uncle who had named Dukar was taking a catnap under the shade of the sheds. In a haze, he felt that the fish were swimming into his brain. This emaciated young guy sat up, feeling distracted. He got up and walked toward the riverbank.

As he walked past the tree, the shade washed over his head like water, then flowed down to his heels. He took an indistinct path from the water-logged low-lying grasslands beside the crop lands. Single-pedaled yellow flowers filled the low-lying land. The spongy turf under foot was giving off the smell of fish crowded together in the water. He traversed the land soundlessly, as if he were someone else or a group of people walking in a dream. When he glanced back, the grass he had just stepped on was slowly springing back. When the accumulated water beneath the turf sounded gugu, he thought it was the cries of fish in his dreams, Gugu, gu. Gugu. Sorrowful and untroubled. After he walked through the low-lying land, the solid ground cleared his head. He recalled people saying it was unlucky to dream of fish.

When his shadow was thrown toward the surface of the river, the little fish turned around abruptly and scurried toward the center of the river, almost making him smile. When the babies on the riverside grass saw him coming, they all slowly pulled their thumbs—clean from sucking—out of their mouths. His nephew Dukar was lying on his tummy facing the river. He trotted over and gave him a hug. In an instant, he sucked one of his uncle’s fingers—sucked for all he was worth. There was a lot of thick saliva in the infant’s mouth. The baby’s toothless gums were grinding back and forth. Immediately reminded of the mouths of fish with no visible teeth, he hastily pulled his fingers out of his nephew’s mouth. The infant started crying—loud and clear, disturbing the fish for quite some time before they slowly calmed down. Earlier, the fish had straightened up their dorsal fins, dragged their tails on the bottom of the water stirring up silt, and stretched their backs taut in preparation for a fast escape. They kept this rigid posture as they listened attentively. When they realized that the sound of crying carried no threat, they slowly relaxed and sank to the silt at the bottom of the river.

When Uncle bent his head to examine the child who had suddenly stopped crying, he saw that Dukar’s eyes bulged just as fish eyes did. He felt the water light ripple before his eyes, and he couldn’t hold back his terror. It was as if he had carelessly touched an ice-cold fish—like a snake.

The sun was already overhead.

The women who were weeding turned around and came over to the riverside.
Carrying the baby, Dukar’s uncle walked to the side of the wheat field. He was watching the women continuously stretching out their dark sturdy arms to poke the wheat aside so they could make their way out. The flowering, fragrant heads of wheat scratched the women’s bare arms, and rammed their warm, soft bellies. He couldn’t help but sway like the wheat. He even imagined that his dead brother’s wife was as pure and fresh and likable as her name ChüChü.

Just then, someone snatched the child from his arms.

He saw an ugly face in a towering rage. A bare chest revealed breasts like two tiny pockets, covered with traces of blood from scratches from wheat awns. It was this winter that Chinese newspaper, books, picture books, and some documents had begun to show up in the village. These things didn’t appear in an instant. Rather, at first a few appeared, and then gradually a lot more. A few years later, the bright Fish-eye Dukar would know quite a lot of Chinese characters, and he would notice that his mother’s face was identical to the faces of landlords’ wives in the picture books. Even children not as bright as Fish-eye Dukar could figure this much out.

In a towering age, ChüChü had whisked her son from the arms of the young uncle whose eyes were closed and who was swaying as if inebriated. When she stuffed her nipple into the child’s mouth, her milk poured out automatically, straining places deep in her breasts. ChüChü held her breasts up and kneaded them lightly. Sonam’s mother and Shangba’s mother, who had given birth the same year as she, made the same movements—holding the baby with one hand, while lightly and slowly kneading the breasts with the other hand. ChüChü still didn’t know her future destiny. But she knew that after her milk had been completely sucked dry, her heart would be hollow again. She thought destiny was a wonderful thing that people could never touch with their minds. When she was young, she thirsted for love. When she didn’t get normal love, she thirsted for love that was immodest. Her family was comparatively well off, but because she was ugly, she knew she didn’t have any prospects. She realized that landlord families were among the “bad elements,” thus making it even harder for her to make a good match.

ChüChü saw her young brother-in-law standing in front of several nursing mothers, and she couldn’t stop herself from flying into another rage.

“Bah!”

She spat out the grass she’d been chewing. Its juiciness had turned her saliva a disgusting green color. The saliva drowned two ants. She spat angrily again, frightening both the child at her breast and her young brother-in-law. Then she calmed down a little. Young brother resembled her husband who had died in the war on the grasslands, but this was like the similarity between wheat that had just sprouted and wheat ripe for the harvest. Young brother was fifteen. The downy hair on his face, his tiny nostrils, and his thin eyebrows all showed that he was still a child. But, in her imagination during this last year, her dead husband had become even older. She imagined that someday in the future, young brother would no longer be so small. His delicate skin, fingers, wrists, and Adam’s apple would grow big and strong and solid, and he’d have a head of thick curly hair. Then, he would inherit all of his elder brother’s property-house, son, some family heirloom jewelry, the cattle and the vegetable plots that they still owned after the cooperative was organized, and even the large fox-skin cape and the otter-skin cloak that the elderly had especially warned should be saved, and even a few rare Russian carpets. Naturally, he would also inherit a bad-tempered, well-intentioned wife.

ChüChü couldn’t stop tender feelings from surging up in her heart. She also visualized the time six years ago when she had pressed his head down on her breast. No one could yet detect on ChüChü’s body the special odor associated with old women whom no one is interested in. It wasn’t the same
as the smells of fresh mud and her own flesh that clung to her now, but was a cotton cloth odor and the bland odor of dry dust. Her little cousin Shaja who rushed around her all day smelled of clean water and green grass. Shaja was afraid of fish. When ChüChü set him down at the edge of the field, he sat obediently under the cool shade of the cypress tree or the clouds. Shaja’s mother had died giving birth to him. He was a pitiful baby. At least ChüChü could remember how her mother had looked when she died. She had lain quietly under a coarse ox-hair blanket, and before she died, her face—crow-black from suffocating—turned fair and clear. Lice climbed up from her gradually cooling body—climbed very quickly, lending a panicky feeling to death. After the lice disappeared, death became peaceful and serene, with the power to comfort human melancholy. Later, when ChüChü heard beat over and over like the sound of cold earth falling on her mother’s coffin when she was buried.

In a flash, ChüChü also recalled a summer five years earlier.
Back then, people still worked their own land. ChüChü was twenty-seven, and already had an old woman’s eccentricities. When she pulled weeds, she took along her little cousin Shaja who was like a son. She kept her distance from fellow villagers who were coming up to help with the work. Suddenly feeling the swift and fierce soughing of the wind, she looked up and saw an eagle-holding its wings back tightly, raising its sharp talons calmly—plunge to the surface of the river and grab a large fish. Under the strong sunlight, the fish become a ball of white light. When the eagle spread its wings, it covered the sunlight, and the fish became a fish again—a suffering, struggling fish. When the eagle flew overhead, the little cousin who was playing screamed, and the fish slipped out of the eagle’s grasp. Like a pool of mucus, it hurtled down in front of ChüChü with the sound pada. It arched its back once, and made a great effort to assume the posture of swimming in the water. It failed in this effort, and only tossed its tail a few times: pada, pada, pa—da, pa—da—da, each time with less strength than the time before. Then its belly swelled up and it died, and a transparent sticky substance slid from its body onto the wheat awns and grass. ChüChü hurriedly walked away and screamed in shock. Only when people ran up to her from distant wheat fields did she stop up her mouth with her fist.

Her father was the first to reach her side.
Her daughter helped his daughter to sit in the shade of a tree at the edge of the field. He also snapped off a cypress twig so that she could inhale its pure, fresh, clean fragrance. He was unusually patient as he listened to her cry. Then he asked if she had finished crying. I’m better, A-ba. Then turn and look at me. Father said, after I die, you must arrange your marriage. I promised my brother I’d consolidate these lands, cattle, and sheep. They used to be joined, Father said, and now they must be merged again, and you must let Shaja’s elder brother marry you.

Father said, you must add a relationship to the relationship; it's like ... it’s like adding sugar to milk. ChüChü, you aren't beautiful, but you can give birth so sturdy sons. Naturally, by then, I will have already died.

Father, you cannot die.
Back then, that was how she implored her father.

Now, ChüChü changed to the other breast for the son in her arms, and said, None of our fathers can die. Tears trickled slowly from her eyes. Through misty eyes, ChüChü saw her father uncross his legs again, support himself with both hands, lift his rear end up from the grass, kneel on one leg and press down on his kneecap, open his mouth wide and gulp down a lot of fresh air, and then—his cheeks bulging—he struggled up and swayed for a moment. After regaining his balance, he said he had promised his brother the marriage just before he died last year.
ChüChü was watching Father turn and walk away from her. He began swaying again. But, step by step, he walked into the distance, then disappeared into the waves of wheat. When Father was found, his body had already stiffened. He lay on his side in the wheat, his body stretched out and relaxed, but his face half-stained with mud. After the mud was washed off, you could see the cut where the wheat stalks had scratched him. A thread of fresh red blood seeped out and flowed into the mud.

That night, Shaja dreamed of his uncle.

In the dream, Uncle changed into a fish, and kept opening and closing his mouth, saying nothing. His face was stained with mud. Twice, he nearly told his aunt that Uncle had changed into a fish in the river. But in the end, he held onto this secret. In Ke village and even bigger regions, people thought fish shapes weren’t aesthetic. The shapes even disgusted people. Fish were like a lot of other mollusks—for example, toads, earthworms, lizards, snails, and leeches. Yet, they also deserved pity. A nationality that hadn’t yet had a zoologist didn’t know what they ate. So they thought that since they were living and yet had no food, they were sometimes tormented by hunger. They must be animals that had incurred heaven’s punishment. In previous incarnations, they must have been much too sinful: they had amassed too much wealth through excessive taxation, had been much too cruel and deceitful, and so forth. Fish were also pitiable. People took similar attitudes toward the treatment of fish and the treatment of a beggar suffering from leprosy. The fish grew more gigantic by the day. An ominous feeling overcame people when a dark mass of fish spread out and filled a bend in the river where the water flowed quietly. In this respect, fish resembled crows.

The next day, while everyone else was sacrificing and praying to Uncle Shaja went to look at that dead fish in the wheat field.

For the rest of his life, he never understood why he had made the effort to conquer his fear to look at that fish.

A fish, after all, was just a fish.

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In the twinkling of an eye, Dukar reached school age.

Dukar, Sonam, and others of the same age became the first group of children to attend a Chinese-medium school in a nearby village that was larger than Ke village. Every day, they took their lunches and went to school. Dukar’s father had been forced to marry his cousin who was eight years older than he, and later he had left home to take part in the rebellion and had died in battle on the grasslands. At the same time, Sonam’s father, whose family was poor, had driven draft animals and transported cannon balls and fodder for the People’s Liberation Army. After the war ended, he had brought home a lot of hardtack, canned food, and boat-shaped hats, and even some seemingly light and interesting stories about death. In the several years when all of China endured the torment of hunger, Ke village continued to enjoy good harvests. Every year, Sonar’s family also had one fat pig they could kill. Back then, the breed of pig had not yet been improved, and domestic pigs were exactly the same as wild pigs—thin and small and vigorous. Most weighed only thirty or thirty-five kilos. But Sonam’s family’s pigs were always about forty kilos when they were butchered.

An old steelyard was used to weigh the pigs.

The paint on the steelyard’s beam had worn off, revealing the glossy, smooth, fine grain of the wood. Dukar’s family owned the only steelyard in Ke village. Its sliding weight, forged of pig iron, had long since been lost. For as long as they could remember, all the villagers had gone to Dukar’s home to borrow the steelyard. The sliding weight of the steelyard was now a solid pebble.

The steelyard was used most in spring and autumn.
Spring was the season when people exchanged all kinds of seeds for crops. Autumn was the season for killing pigs and slaughtering sheep.

Sonar remembered that when he was four, his family had killed another pig. He knew his father would tell him to borrow the steelyard again, so he snuck off. At the entrance to the village, he ran into Fish-eye Dukar.

“Our family killed a pig.” Sonar looked sad and spoke cautiously.

“Your family killed another pig?” Dukar asked. “I’m going to the riverside.”

“I want to go, too.”

“I won’t let you. My fish would be afraid of you. Tomorrow, the fish won’t show themselves. As soon as there’s a frost, they go into a hole.”

Sonar still remembered that he asked him what the fish ate in the grotto—the grotto filled with ice-cold water. Fish-eye Dukar said he didn’t know, either; his tone was utterly ashamed. A few years later, one day during class, Dukar suddenly told him, in the winter the fish must burrow down to another side of the globe. Since the teacher said when it was night here it was daytime there, then winter here was summer there. A bright child, Sonar raised another question: a very deep hole must be very black, so how could the fish see? At this, the sensitive, shy Dukar’s head drooped. Sonar noticed that Dukar’s neck was slender and his veins distinct. He promptly finished the assignment to write a sentence using “It is just like….” He wrote: I made him bend his head. That was just like breaking the bones of his neck.

But that happened later.

Back then, he stood obediently where he was. He was watching Dukar bend down and make his way between the sheds and go into the wheat fields, and then, all of him disappeared into the wheat fields, leaving behind only some heavy wheat stalks and some scarecrows wearing shabby, tattered clothing and swaying lightly in the wind.

From the village behind them came the noontime crow of the cock and the creak of a courtyard gate being pushed open.

He turned and walked toward the village. When he had almost reached the entrance of his family’s courtyard, he changed his mind and went to Dukar’s home. The sunshine outside was strong, so—once inside—he couldn’t see anything at first. He only heard the ugly village woman say in a soft pleasant voice, “The steelyard is behind you.”

He turned around and fumbled for it, and suddenly—with a clank—he ran into the steelyard’s pan. When he steadied the steelyard in his hands, the lingering sound reverberated in the room. By then, Sonar’s eyes had grown accustomed to the dim light indoors. On the walls and on the cupboard, smoke had yellowed the pictures of longevity—shining like the sun and the moon—that had been hung up at New Year’s time. Dukar’s mama stood next to the cupboard.

She smiled. “Your family’s pig must have very thick fat.”

“This thick.” He stretched his small hand out.

“The pigs our family killed every year used to have fat that thick, too.”

“Aren’t the pigs you kill now plump?”

“We haven’t killed pigs for three years. We have none.” ChüChü suddenly looked strange as she smiled, “When my husband died, I didn’t see him die. Land was distributed to people with little land, but I could still see the wheat on the land. Go over and look out the window. In the past, most of that land belonged to Father and my husband’s family.”

“For three years,” she said again, “we haven’t killed pigs…. Take the steelyard with you.”

Sonar wanted to say a little something. “I saw Dukar. He said he was going to the riverside to watch the fish.”

“Let him look—the pitiful thing.”
Sonar didn’t know if she was saying the fish or her son was a pitiful thing. He turned and went downstairs. The strong sunlight forced him to shut his eyes. Just then, he heard a woman’s gentle, lovely voice call his name: “Sonar!”

Opening his eyes, he heard another call. Turning, he saw ChüChü’s ugly face at the window. “When you get home, tell your aba,” her voice became indignant and pressing, “I don’t want the steelyard. I’ll trade it for a piece of pork. Dukar and I are about to forget the flavor of pork.” With that, she banged the window shut.

ChüChü was satisfied: the sound of the window closing was neat and tidy.

She sat down, poured a cup of tea, put it on the place of honor at the fireside where men generally sat, and then assumed a man’s posture when she sat down on the carpet. She drank the tea as if drinking a large cup of alcohol—and with a rumbling sound. It wasn’t proper for either men or women to eat or drink noisily. Only when men were very hungry and very thirsty and had done something that justified showing off would they deliberately make a lot of noise.

The strong tea left a bitter aftertaste.

This ugly woman—this widow—fantasized that she had become a man whose wife didn’t need to raise pigs and could still eat pork. Couldn’t this be so? The half-new three-foot-square carpet under her bottom could be traded with that money-grubbing guy over there for a large, fat sheep. Could it be that in this village’s loftiest and most imposing house there weren’t enough things to trade for delicious food? There were. There was her own family property that had been amassed slowly over the last several generations and had not yet been dispersed. In fact, all of this was the will of God, not man. Now they had also reached the days of financial decline that were predestined. Since fate had decided that a woman squanders just as a man does—well, then, go ahead and squander, even if she was an ugly woman whom no one loved!

ChüChü stood up. With another pattering sound, she opened another window, and shouted toward the stockade across the way: “Hey! Shaja! Shaja! Shaja—“

Her brother-in-law appeared on the rooftop terrace.

“Are you calling me? Sister-in-law!”

“If you know I’m calling you, come over here right now!”

“Immediately?”

“Yes!”

The young brother’s shiny head dropped down through the stairs. He was frail and shy with pale, smooth skin. Like a girl. ChüChü knew he wasn’t a girl. But, just as she had fantasized being a man, something deep in her heart stubbornly thought that Shaja should be a girl—a sentimental and vulnerable, delicate and graceful girl. To come here, Shaja had to go downstairs first. He was always cautious going downstairs, and then he went through the courtyard. Finally he came through the courtyard on this side, and then up these stairs. This took a little time—and he could take even more time than anyone else. While ChüChü was thinking, she deftly removed her unpreventable old, tattered gown. She pulled a long woolen maroon-colored gown from the clothes rack, put it on, and fastened it with a water-green-colored belt. In the courtyard below, there was still no activity. She ran her eyes unhurriedly over the clothes rack. This thing that we called a clothes rack was a smooth cypress tree trunk whose strong scent could repel moths and other insects. It was suspended on the left side of the room, and clothes hung on it. Hanging on another wooden pole were some brand-new carpets and bedding. The remaining pole could hold all kinds of air-dried meat. At present, there were only some dark grease spots on that pole.

ChüChü was looking at the pole with no meat on it—recalling that in the past a whole sheep had hung on it, and a whole side of pork. She recalled that the pork then smelled unpleasantly of clams.
Just then, someone pushed the courtyard gate open, the gate creaked three times. The person seemed to be hesitating. ChüChü sat down at the fireside again. When she heard a step on the stairs, she shouted loud and clear, “Come on up. Don’t be scared.” At the same time, she realized she needn’t talk in such a loud, clear voice. But no sooner had the young brother’s head appeared at the entrance to the stairs than she said in the same loud, clear voice, “Come and sit down. Don’t be scared!”

“I’m not,” young brother murmured.

Actually, ChüChü didn’t know, either, what young brother would be scared of. Still, she repeated, “Sit down. Don’t be scared.”

“Okay. I’ll... sit down. I’ve sat down.”

“Are you sitting down?”

“Sister-in-law, what’s wrong with... you?”

“Me?” ChüChü looked at herself. She was wearing her dead husband’s clothes. Looking down, she also saw the tip of her broad nose.

“Were you asking me?”

Young brother didn’t say anything. At last, he noticed that his sister-in-law was wearing new clothes.

“Ask me. I’m wearing new clothes—are they pretty?”

Hard-pressed, young brother looked down at the tips of his toes.

“I pour a bowl of tea for me. The bowl is here. Good. Pour a bowl for yourself, too... Ah, you drink tea so noiselessly. Only cats drink water that way.... Afterwards, make however much noise you want. If no other girl loves you, and you want to love someone, think of me as that girl, and do whatever you want.”

ChüChü was gazing comfortably at the young fellow whose head was hanging low. He was holding the tea bowl—not knowing whether to lift it up or set it down.

“Today, we’re having tea. Later on, we ought to have some alcohol. In the past, when your elder brother drank alcohol, it seemed a waste to me. The old folks all said that drinking alcohol dissipated the family property.”

Tears welled up slowly and spilled from her eyes.

“Your elder brother didn’t love me.”

“He loved you.”

“Then why did he go and fight a war that didn’t concern him? Tell me, what was that for?”

“I, I don’t know.”

Her tears slowly flowed back again. ChüChü’s tears never overflowed. They all flowed from the inside to the outside, then cycle back from the outside to the inside. The salt content of the tears became stronger and stringer, so that each time the tears brimmed over, they stabbed her eyeballs. ChüChü had heard that the salt formed in Thousand-Year Lake in the northwest was like the beautiful needles of frost before dawn on a winter day. She was trying to touch her eyeballs, but she didn’t feel anything like that. Young brother was staring blankly. What could he see? Could he see deep into a woman’s heart?

She smiled, “Come over for some meat this evening.”

“...”

“I traded the steelyard—that old steelyard. I reckon that between us, we have a lot of things we can trade for food.”

“I remember Father weighed things with a steelyard whenever he lent anything and whenever he was paid back.”

“All right! Your nephew is at the riverside watching the fish. Go tell him to come home!”
Shaja went down the stairs. Burning hot tears welled up in ChüChü’s eyes again. By this time, the sun hanging down in the west was near the mountainous land, its rays shining almost straight into the window—falling on the floor and walls, turning everything rusty red. At a certain stage of weathering, some rotting wood and rocks were this shade of red.

“Shhhhh—“

Fish-eye Dukar heard footsteps behind him. By this time, the setting sun was reflecting on the water, so that it blazed color. What was visible was the metallic light on the surface of the water. Everything underwater was invisible. But he still felt that the somewhat small fish that had gone underwater had already left the shore. They had simply left when the wind blowing over the river had grown chilly. Even smaller ones had begun leaving more than ten days ago, then hadn’t come back.

A light wind carrying a chill from the snowy northwest mountains blew over the river. After the wind-crumpled water surface had calmed again, the fish that had been quietly hiding at the bottom of the water reappeared. The little dark fish had already swum away. The rising river water had also dropped a lot. The medium-sized fish and the several large fish that were the minority remained in their summer habitats. It was only with the clear, shallow river in the depths of autumn that they became visible. Just then, a gust of wind sent the fish disappearing under the tightly woven ripples.

Shaja shivered.

“Dukar.”

“Shhhh—“

“You mother….”

“Shhhh—“

“told me to tell you….”

“Shhh!”

“to tell you to go home.”

In spite of his nephew’s shushing, Shaja persisted in finishing what ChüChü had told him to say. He just matter-of-factly passed ChüChü’s words along—without any sense of urgency.

Shaja stood cautiously next to his nephew, and watched the stupid-looking fish that could generate dread in people.

Shaja felt that if it weren’t for the fish with these snake-like colors and bodies—fish that constantly made a show of chewing the clear water and spitting it out—then the waters of autumn, the stones and sand at the bottom of the autumn river, and the drops of autumn sunlight that fell like golden coins to the river bottom would indeed be more beautiful than the river of summer. What was beautiful about summer was the agreeable coolness of the grassy riverbank, and the clouds, the cypress trees, the willow trees, and even the birches. The waters of summer weren’t one kind of pure thing. The smell alone seemed too much of a mixture. The summer river carried the smell of women like ChüChü.

Eyes bulging like eyes, Dukar said, “These fish will leave today and come back next year.” He asked, “Uncle Shaja, where do these fish go in the winter?”

“You mother wants you to go home for a meat dinner.”

“As soon as the fish leave, winter comes.”

“You ma traded the family’s old steelyard for meat.”

“The steelyard? Only that fish can be called old.”

“Pork.”

Shaja spoke emphatically, and at the same time heard himself swallow a mouthful of saliva. He actually tasted the appetizing flavor of pork, and felt his mouth fill with tasty pork fat.
“Uncle, look at that fish’s beard.”
“Which one?”
“The large floundering fish with a beard like spiders’ legs.”
Suddenly, Shaja’s heart filled with soft, gentle pity for this fatherless child. Something bitter was irritating his nose so much that he almost began coughing.
“We’re not watching the fish, we’re going home to see your mother. She’s waiting for you.”
As he gazed at the golden light on the river, a different kind of tenderness welled up in Shaja’s heart, and he said, “When she waited for your aba, he didn’t come back. You can’t make her wait for you all the time. Let’s go home.”
Dukar pulled his thumb out of his mouth, placed his index finger vertically at his mouth, and once more made a shhhh sound. Standing on tiptoe, he whispered, “They’re going to leave right away.”
The big, long-bearded fish kept opening and closing its mouth. It was as if they could hear the fish’s mouth clucking.
Another gust of wind passed over the river, blowing a lot of invisible ice-cold foam into their faces. They shivered. This is merely to say, after the harvest, the scent of wheat disappeared quickly from the air, and winter arrived.
For several winters, Dukar—eyes bulging and pooled with tears because of the cold wind, eyes resolutely investigation everything—asked all the men: Where do the fish go?
The question he asked women was: Are the fish cold? Rubbing their ice-cold fingers, the women felt an ominous premonition rise in their hearts.

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Three more winters went by in this way. A lot happened in three winters. The ones related to this story are: One of the Modo family’s two houses was expropriated. In the political movement of the spring of 1965 assigning people to class categories, his family became landlords. Referring to the last generation’s Dukar and his fish eyes that appeared weirdly ominous, the Ke villages all said that this family had already used up its fate. The rise and fall of one clan wouldn’t arouse many emotional sighs among the multitudes who believed in destiny.

At the same time, another clan began rising in prosperity. This was Sonar’s clan—the same Sonar who was Dukar’s age. His father—because he had transported ammunition and provisions for the troops in the war—had become the accountant for the brigade level of the People’s Commune. Actually, as the reader knows, this process of growth and decline had already started three years earlier when ChūChū traded her family’s old steelyard for a piece of fatty meat from the back of a pig. That night was the same as this one: the flames in the fireplace seemed cheerful and relaxed. ChūChū, Shaja, and Dukar had pork grease smeared on their mouths. The room had no lamp. The three people’s lips shone in the reflection of the flames. Their faces, though, were sunk deep in darkness. The young fellow’s eyes were drawn to his widowed sister-in-law’s full lips—lips that were quite enchanting. And because of the moist pork fat, ChūChū wasn’t moaning and complaining as she had in the past. The fire today was still twinkling gently and softly. The Modo family and Sonar’s family slaughtered pigs at the same time. The Modos had traded a length of pulu fabric—heavy woolen cloth—for the piglet. The Modo’s pig had been cleaned and scalded in a very unclean way—the result of ChūChū and young brother working cooperatively. Earlier, when the pig was stabbed to death, young brother had been frightened. ChūChū had shaved the pig’s hair off, and then—hands shaking constantly—he had poured the boiling water. Several times, the water landed not on the pig but on his sister-in-law’s hands. Afraid of a scolding from ChūChū, he shook even more.
Separated by only a split rail fence, Sonar’s family was also killing a pig in the courtyard of their new home—landlord’s property expropriated by the People’s Commune. Several experienced hands
were helping out, and the pig was boiled until it was white and clean. The belly had already been sliced open, and a large pile of steaming curled-up entrails was spread out on a bamboo mat. The light snow in the courtyard had been trampled until it was filthy. A lot of Chinese People were also looking on. These workers had moved to the opposite shore this spring; they were building the new lumberyard. Because the river had no bridge, the people on the two shores had just looked at each other curiously for the last half year. This morning, they’d been attracted by the squeals of the pig that was about to die, and had crossed over cautiously on the frozen river. Looking hesitant, they had come into the village, then had strolled slowly into the courtyard that they’d looked at for so long from the opposite shore, where in the summer great burdock and poppies blossomed and where now it was frozen solid. Without exception, they were wearing blur overalls. Watching the Tibetans kill a pig was like watching sacrifices to the gods. A mystical expression appeared on their faces.

In the village, not much was known about these people. People knew only that they had come to fell trees, and that belonged to a nationality that ate fish.

But after one summer had passed, they saw that the workers had only dug up vegetable plots and built houses. Now, they lived in a row of orderly wooden houses that were low and long, and even curved. Now, peasants and workers—these people who were curious about each other—silently sized each other up and maintained a certain distance. But, on this severe winter morning, the white breath they exhaled mingled in the air and was inseparable.

Watching, Dukar had trouble understanding the significance behind this phenomenon. He saw that as the sun rose and the sunlight grew more intense, the curling fog disappeared. He saw that as the sun rose and the sunlight grew more intense, the curling fog disappeared. He saw Sonar’s father’s strong, healthy arms and puffed-up cheeks. He was straining to the clean pig upside down.

In a loud voice, he told his son to bring the steelyard.

Sonar brought the steelyard. The fat pig was unloaded and divided into the head and four limbs—five pieces altogether. After weighing it, he told Sonam to hand the steelyard through the wattle fence.

Dukar took the steelyard.

The smooth, icy cold steelyard made him think distractedly again of the fish whose whereabouts he didn’t know.

Sonar said that his family’s pig weighed fifty-four kilograms.

“Heigh your family’s pig, and see how heavy it is,” Sonar said to Dukar. “My aba told me to tell you.”

Shaja glanced anxiously at the steelyard, as if it weren’t a steelyard but some other thing—something sinister. “We don’t want to.”

“What are you afraid of?” ChùChù asked.

“I’m afraid our pig isn’t as heavy as theirs.”

“I’m not afraid. Don’t you know that coming here has brought this family to its end? Haven’t you heard the saying that a family lasts a hundred years? I’m not afraid that our pig won’t weigh as much as other people’s. I’m just afraid that the men in my family aren’t as gutsy as other men. Or as energetic.” As she scolded young brother, she hung the two halves of the pig on the steelyard hook and came up with its approximate weight. “Twenty-eight kilograms, twelve ounces.”

When Dukar took the steelyard back, he said, “My ma ChùChù said, the pig weighs twenty-eight kilograms, twelve ounces.”

“I know. When I heard your pig cry louder and clearer than ours, I knew.”
Indeed, when a pig was near death—even though ordinarily it rarely made a sound—it gave a high-pitched howl. Not the same as sheep. Sheep bleated all the time, but when they were slaughtered, even if it was a large flock, silence reigned.

All of a sudden, Dukar asked Sonar’s father, “Where did they go?”

“They?”

“The fish. Them.”

Dukar noticed that he looked like all the other people he had asked—disgusted with him, and with his clan that was doomed to winter away—and with the fish.

“Oh, I don’t know. Young fellow, what kind of brain lies behind your strange eyes? I’d sure like to open it and take a look.” Clamping Dukar’s little head with his big strong fingers, he pressed with all his might. “Ah, do your eyes always bulge like this, or is it because I pressed so hard that they’re about to explode?”

Sonar’s father relaxed his hands—wet with pig’s blood—and said, “Say thank you for letting go of me.”

Dukar said, “Thank you for letting go of me.” But it seemed he only moved his lips. He didn’t hear his voice. He just heard the buzzing sound brush past his eardrum when the blood surged back to his head. He walked slowly to his courtyard, where he overcame his dizziness and nausea.

He passed Sonar’s father’s final words on to his mother and uncle. “For each pig, one has to turn twelve and a half kilos over to the government.”

In a weepy tone, ChüChü said, “Ah, the government, the government.” Dukar thought it was I just this way that she chanted his father’s name when she was grief-stricken with nowhere to turn.

Uncle squatted next to the large pot of hot water and sorted out the pig’s tripe and chitterlings. Turning the pig’s belly over, he slit it open, and squeezed the shit out of the guts. It ran onto the snowy ground—pitter-patter. Lots of white tapeworms—still mixed into the steaming watery shit—wriggled briefly, then were quickly frozen stiff.

The family sat beside the fireplace.

ChüChü and young brother Shaja were surreptitiously sizing each other up. Dukar sensed all the ingredients of impatience, including trembling with fear.

Suddenly, he heard his own words break the rare, relaxing silence, “Sonar’s pa doesn’t know, either, where fish fide in the winter.” He licked his lips. “He told me to ask those Chinese people.”

“Did you?”

“Yes, but they didn’t understand what I said.”

Mama interrupted, “Dukar, don’t bring up such strange ideas. Your uncle has quite a lot of stuff in his head already without your adding weird ideas to it. Now the two of you need to sleep in different places so you won’t muddle his head while he’s sleeping.”

Just then, from the building opposite, came loud crying and hearty laughter from people who’d had too much to drink. During the People’s Commune movement, that house, including a lot if its valuables, had been expropriated. All young brother could do was live with his widowed sister-in-law. Back then, when he’d come over with empty hands and not a clue about what he should do, he could hardly keep from throwing himself into ChüChü’s bosom and weeping bitterly. Her hair was disheveled. And she was glaring and spitting at him. This wasn’t how a young brother of the same generation should be treated; rather, it was how a harsh stepmother treated her predecessor’s sons.

Dukar blinked his fish eyes several times: “Then, am I going to sleep with Mama?”

ChüChü smiled. She stared sternly at the young brother. “Your uncle will explain, my son.”

Shaja knew what would happen in the end, and knew all the villagers thought it was already happening. He knew it would be tonight. He knew he had to cross this strategic pass. Since
everything—others’ good fortune and the Modo family’s misfortune—was unfolding, well, then, just get on with it.

Shaja said, “If your papa were here, he would have told you long ago to sleep apart from the adults.”

[...]

Translated from the Chinese by Karen Gernant and Chen Zeping