

SUMMER GRASS, WINTER WORM

CHRISTOPHER LINFORTH

In his office, Cheng sipped his cup of *yartsa gunbu* tea and then rubbed his left shin, hoping the ache would soon fade. He took a second gulp, replaced the cup in its saucer, and rested his elbows on the desk so his hands joined, though not in prayer, but as a base to support his fat chin. He stared at the thin pile of crime reports—the list of petty grievances reaffirming his long-held resentment serving as the chief of police in such a provincial town. He longed for a post east in Chongqing, where he had a brother, or if the Party were smiling, Quanzhou.

Inspector Lin Shu knocked on the half-open door and came in. He was a stocky man, his chest easily filling the jacket of his olive green uniform. His bony face was weather-beaten and his hands were rough from years in the fields. Cheng liked Lin Shu, who, as a local, was trusted by the farmers and yak herders that populated this section of the Tibetan Plateau.

“Outsiders struck in the fields again,” said Lin Shu.

Cheng sighed. He knew from experience this matter would take some time to resolve. He rose from his chair, grabbed his cup, and went to the window that overlooked a sprawl of old *siheyuan* courtyards. “Last night?” he asked wearily.

“On the widow Yu’s land.”

“That will make things difficult.” Yu was once married to

Lungtok, a popular man who fought decades before against the invading Chinese army. He had died prior to Cheng's appointment in the town. A newspaper obituary reported that his death had not been heroic—a simple heart attack one morning in the fields, while he was tending to his herd of yak. To counter the propaganda of the Party, the town whispered the legends of Lungtok's exploits. One, in particular, caught Cheng's attention. A baker in the square told him Lungtok had assisted the Dali Lama out of the country by digging a tunnel from his house into the fields, to where his retinue spirited him to India.

"You will visit her today?"

Cheng nodded. "If my leg holds up."

"The tea helps?"

"A little," he said, looking at the cup's murky contents.

Yartsa gunbu was the larvae of the ghost moth and was rumored to cure many ailments. He knew the moth laid its eggs in the grassy plains, leaving the hatched larvae to burrow into the dirt where often it was infected by fungal spores. Over time, the fungus subsumed the larvae, and forced a stroma to erupt out of the ground. The delicacy, often known as worms, was harvested locally and sold to the dealers who came from Lanzhou and paid several hundred *yuan* for a fist-sized clump.

Cheng drove his old sedan into the square. He sped past the concrete statue of Chairman Mao and the shiny Zongshen motorcycles leaning against it and took the new asphalt road to the grassy hills that rose out of the plateau. The steep incline caused his engine to stutter as the road wound around the hills. He wished he owned a Land Cruiser like his counterpart in Quanzhou and he often regarded it as a slight that he had not been issued one. The road curved around the fields and ended in a giant loop that acted as a turning circle. He parked next to a wooden gate and got out of his car. The steep hill worried him. His leg had been tender for months now—a dull ache flared in the bone when he placed too much pressure on

that side of his body. His doctor was unsure of the cause. Tests revealed little—although, Cheng was thankful bone cancer had been ruled out. In pain, he hiked the final *li* along a dirt path that curled around the hill and led to a large white farmhouse decorated with prayer flags.

A small boy opened the door and stared at Cheng for a moment. He sported a dollop of black hair cut in a bowl shape, and Cheng guessed the boy was around five-years-old. Before he could say a word the boy sprinted off, shouting something Cheng couldn't make out. He stepped inside to try and talk to the boy again, to explain why he shouldn't be afraid. The house smelled of boiled duck fat and Cheng heard the clang of cooking pots in the kitchen. Surveying the living room, he thought the furniture was in good shape—most of the farmers were herdsman and lived in yak-hair tents. Yu had done well. There were two *pegams* with hand-carved panels shaped in the lotus form and a row of silver-painted *thangka* boxes hemmed in by a side wall. He peered through the small glass panels of a gold floral shrine and saw the shelves were empty of Buddha statues. A black-and-white photograph tacked above the shrine caught his eye. A man he assumed to be Longtok knelt on the hillside, grinning as he pointed to something in the distance.

Yu appeared in the hallway. She had cragged pale skin and silver hair braided in a long ponytail. She wore a silk *chuba* and an amber bead necklace tight on her neck. Her eyes bunched as she studied Cheng and her hands began to shake. He tipped his cap, but she carried on shaking her hands, and he yanked his cap off and tucked it under his arm.

“*Tashi delek*,” he said, offering his limited Tibetan.

“You're late,” she noted, grazing past him and sitting down in a pine chair, the back panel decorated with a coral-red temple. “Twelve hours ago would have been useful.”

“I only—”

She pointed a bony finger to the picture of Lungtok. “Punctual man. He saved many lives.”

"I heard," he said.

Yu snorted as though she didn't believe him. She went to the kitchen and returned with a wicker basket. She picked out a worm and held it in the air. "It took all morning to find this." She brushed the dirt off the larva and thrust it toward Cheng. The larva half was colored a dull yellow, while the fungus was dark brown and shaped like a thin twig. "But only this one."

Cheng pocketed the worm. "I will add a patrol for tonight."

"And tomorrow? And the next day?"

"Resources are limited."

She spat: "Those are the words of a politician."

The small boy popped his head around the corner and Cheng waved to him.

"Silang," Yu shouted, drawing the boy in. He stood next to Yu, hands behind his back, and lowered his eyes. The sleeves of Silang's woolen *chuba* were frayed and speckled with mud. Yu spanked his rear and said, "Outside." Silang ran, crying.

Cheng hesitated to say anything. Lungtok had died at least eight or nine years ago and he wondered who Silang's father was.

Yu shook her head.

"Shall we go?" said Cheng.

Even though it was hot, Yu tied a brightly-colored *bang-dian* around her waist and put on a white cloth hat. Cheng found it curious that she wore the apron, that she carried on the tradition as if she were still married. Yu led Cheng to her yard where a flock of chickens pecked in the dirt and some tools were kept in a ramshackle pile. Yu stuck a trowel in her sash and guided him to the fields. The sweep of green land stretched to the line of angular hills on the horizon. They walked toward them and Yu shouted at Cheng to keep up. As she zigzagged through the long grass, she muttered that he was slowing her down. "You need to fix that leg," she scoffed. "Fat man." Yu flipped the brim of her hat, and knelt down to ferret through the grass for *yartsa gunbu*. She used the trowel

methodically to part the blades and nestle into the earth. He knew the thin brown stalks grew barely an inch out of the soil and were difficult to spot. Although he had never farmed, his family had owned a large garden that sprawled from the rear of their house and grew pak choi and sorghum.

Yu moved on, searching another area with wildflowers sprouting in large clumps. Cheng caught up to her and Yu cursed under her breath.

"Nothing," she said. "The men stole all the worms."

He studied the scene, hoping to find some evidence that this was the case. Although *yartsa gunbu* was valuable, it was also over-harvested. By uprooting all of the fungus, there were fewer spores to infect the larvae. He could not locate any freshly dug mounds and he crossed his arms, feeling defiant.

She glared at him and threw the trowel into the dirt near his feet. "This will be a bad season," she said.

Cheng could not disagree. The summer's end brought monsoons and a fusillade of extreme weather. Winter was nothing but sub-zero temperatures and cutting winds. He was not sure he could bear another one. "For all of us," he said.

Yu's brow creased as if she were surprised by his forthright words. "Send Lin Shu," she said. "He's a good man."

"Two policemen will come tonight," he replied, reaching for her trowel. He weighed the metal blade in his hand for a moment and then offered it to her. "They will be sufficient."

Returning to town, Cheng found a pilgrim truck parked on the edge of the square. Monks swaddled in vermillion robes were shifting small rolls of cloth off the bed of the truck. Over the years Cheng had witnessed an increase in monks passing through the town, selling rope incense and red clay burners to generate income for the monastery. Recently, the Party had passed a new tax penalizing the ground upon which a monastery was built. He wasn't sure how many months it would be until the monks began to protest in the streets and he would have to call in supplementary police from the other towns in

the province. After locking his car, he followed the monks over to the market on the far side of the square. He jostled through the stalls, nodding at vendors who recognized him, and bought a bag of raisins. He ate them for a while until he noticed several men he had not seen before. They were crowded in a circle around a cardboard box filled with worms. Cheng stood closer and watched as a gold-toothed man pointed to his hand smudged with numbers. The dealer wore a polo shirt and carried a cell phone. He laughed at the demands the seller was making and accused him of inserting lead wire into the worms to make them weigh more. Cheng sunk his hands in his pockets and walked away. The town had changed over the last few years as the price of *yartsa gunbu* had sharply increased in value and brought outsiders in. Tired, he went home and telephoned Lin Shu, ordering a patrol to guard Yu's land.

Cheng woke late the next morning and arrived at his office without having eaten breakfast. He slunk in his chair, feeling flustered, and leafed through the fresh paperwork stacked on his desk. The report detailed a series of car thefts and traffic accidents, and a stabbing at one of the bars flanking the square. "Drunks, no doubt," he said under his breath and tossed the sheet of paper. He lifted his calf onto the desk and rolled up his pant leg so that his shin was exposed. Running his fingers over the fine black hairs, he searched for the cause of the pain. He could not find any external clue and he sighed.

Lin Shu entered the office carrying two cups of green tea. He plunked one cup on Cheng's desk and drank from his own. A little embarrassed, Cheng swept his leg to the floor.

"The widow Yu reported thieves again," said Lin Shu.

"She probably saw the policeman and mistook them for criminals."

"She's not happy," he said.

"I doubt she's ever been."

Lin Shu stepped to the window and checked his reflection

in the glass. "You should have known her when Lungtok was alive," he said. "She was a different woman. Happy. Joyous."

"The past is a strange place."

Lin Shu smoothed down his jacket. "You're becoming a philosopher."

"I suppose."

"We were all yak herders then," said Lin Shu, turning to Cheng. "Yu fed us in the evenings: steaming hot *thenthuk* and a mound of flatbreads piled like rocks. It was a very different life."

Cheng could not quite picture Lin Shu's positive description of Yu. She had not offered him any hospitality—no noodle soup or freshly baked flatbread. He felt aggrieved in helping her. Yu, though, still had friends high up in the community and visiting her again would be the simplest of solutions. "I'll deal with her later," he said, and picked back up his paperwork. "Maybe this afternoon."

Cheng ate a late lunch of boiled mutton and greasy noodles and drank a large glass of dry *huangjiu*. He wiped the sweat from his brow with a napkin and noticed his cell phone was ringing. He did not recognize the number and he considered not answering it.

"*Wei?*" he said, after a moment.

"Lijun," the voice said. "Ministry of the Interior."

Worried the call concerned something serious, Cheng remained quiet. It was unusual for the Ministry to bypass the National Police Agency—that much he was aware of. Then he remembered he had submitted a transfer request some time ago and he wondered if the Ministry was now reviewing it.

"Yes."

"The increase in crime. Unacceptable," said Lijun.

Cheng listened as Lijun listed the crime rates and berated him after detailing each one. Lijun emphasized that Cheng was shaming the Party and then he hung up.

Cheng flipped his phone onto the table, closed his eyes and deliberated on what to do. When he reopened them, he refilled his glass with wine and drained it in one swallow. He knew to be offered the transfer he had to lower the rates. Hazy reasoning led him to start with the theft statistics. He drove to Yu's land slightly drunk and cursing his job. He parked his sedan at a crooked angle and slipped off his cap and rubbed his temples. A new slick of oily sweat coated his forehead and he wiped it away with his cuff. He thought of turning back, sending Lin Shu instead to deal with Yu. That would only make her madder, he sensed. He stepped out of the car and without shutting the door staggered toward the fields. Along the dirt path he saw Silang running through the long summer grass. He noticed Cheng and bolted over.

"Hello," said Silang.

"Your mother at the house?"

Silang shook his head, lending a light flop to his mound of hair. "In the back fields," he said.

"You need a haircut," said Cheng, mussing the boy's locks.

Silang stepped to the side. "I want it longer," he snapped.

"All right," said Cheng, beguiled by the boy.

Together they walked to the farmhouse. Silang moved in bursts, fast and then slow—sometimes circling Cheng as if he were his prey. "You're a strange one," he said to the boy. Silang reminded Cheng of his two nephews and how much he wanted to visit them again. His last trip to Chongqing had been almost a year ago. When he returned he had conceded to himself how little he understood the land here and how desperate he was to leave.

Farther along the path, Cheng noticed a smooth shard of gray trapped between the slopes of the hills and realized it was a lake. As he focused on the contours of the shoreline—trying to remember the lake's name—he felt a cramp in his calf and asked to stop for a moment.

"Are you hurt?" asked Silang.

"No, it's just my leg."

Silang pointed to the hill. "My father is over there."

Cheng was confused. He shaded his eyes, but he could not see anyone. "Over there?"

"Would you like to see?"

Cheng half-nodded. He was in no hurry to talk to Yu again and he was curious to meet Silang's father. His leg was a concern. He reached inside his pant pocket and brought out some pills his doctor had given him. He swallowed two of them and gestured for Silang to lead the way.

"Follow me," said Silang.

Silang sprinted and Cheng told him to slow down. Silang explained they needed to hurry, that the hills wouldn't be around forever. Cheng laughed and told Silang he was right, but that he was old. Silang stuck his fist out and his thumb up, and said, "*Yapodu*." Cheng liked the boy walking beside him and his constant neck craning to see if he was all right. He soon found, though, the steady incline of the hill deceptive, the air thin, and his lungs aching a little. Then a strong breeze washed over his face and he felt a rush of air inside of him. For a few strides he felt energized, like his old self. Then his leg began to twinge, the pain banding around the muscle as he climbed higher. He had doubts about what the doctor had told him, that he had been misdiagnosed. Cancer was infecting his leg.

Bending over, he rested his palms on his knees. He spat a glob of thick phlegm and watched the blooded mucus weigh down a blade of grass. When he straightened, up Silang snatched his hand and tugged hard.

"You're strong," said Cheng.

"I know," said Silang.

Cheng allowed the boy to pull him up the last part of the slope. The grass thinned to patches of pale green and gave way to stumps of knotted juniper and finally an ash-gray moss. A sharp wind whipped Cheng's cap off and blew it over the

top of the hill. Silang giggled and removed his left boot and threw it high into the air. As they watched the wad of tanned yak leather fall flat to the ground, the pain radiated through Cheng's leg and he felt as though he were going to faint. He collapsed onto one knee and cursed himself under his breath.

"Are you all right?" asked Silang.

Cheng clasped his fingers around his shin and said, "Help me sit."

Silang guided Cheng to the ground and he rested supine on the bare rock and looked at the brightness of the sky. A dusting of storm clouds massed on the horizon and he thought of the long hike down the hill. The wind dropped away and he saw Silang's legs running over to a small pile of rocks. For a short while he watched the boy and how he kept his hands tight by his sides and his head lowered. Then when Silang didn't move, Cheng sat up and saw the rocks were actually bones. He had heard of sky burial: the ritual dissection of a body laid out on a flat slice of stone. Several vertebrae were missing and also both femurs. Wolves and vultures, he guessed, had gnawed on the body after the ritual cleaving of the corpse. Full of curiosity at this discovery, he rose and hobbled over to Silang, to be sure what he was seeing. A dozen worms were arranged in a circle around Lungtok's sun-bleached remains.

"I remember him," said Silang.

Cheng knew that wasn't possible, that Lungtok was not Silang's father, and had died before he was born. He put his arm around Silang. "We all remember him," he said, and held the boy tighter. As Silang knelt and touched the skull with his fingers, Cheng looked down to the fields below and saw Yu lugging a spade up the hill.