

The Mercurian



A Theatrical Translation Review
Volume 7, Number 3 (Spring 2019)

Editor: Adam Versényi
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The Mercurian is named for Mercury who, if he had known it, was/is the patron god of theatrical translators, those intrepid souls possessed of eloquence, feats of skill, messengers not between the gods but between cultures, traders in images, nimble and dexterous linguistic thieves. Like the metal mercury, theatrical translators are capable of absorbing other metals, forming amalgams. As in ancient chemistry, the mercurian is one of the five elementary “principles” of which all material substances are compounded, otherwise known as “spirit.” The theatrical translator is sprightly, lively, potentially volatile, sometimes inconstant, witty, an ideal guide or conductor on the road.

The Mercurian publishes translations of plays and performance pieces from any language into English. *The Mercurian* also welcomes theoretical pieces about theatrical translation, rants, manifestos, and position papers pertaining to translation for the theatre, as well as production histories of theatrical translations. Submissions should be sent to: Adam Versényi at anversen@email.unc.edu or by snail mail:

Adam Versényi,
Department of Dramatic Art, CB# 3230,
The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill,
Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3230.

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Editor's Note

Welcome to the Spring 2019 issue of *The Mercurian: A Theatrical Translation Review*! This issue contains translations of plays from Mexico, Indonesia, and China; as well as two book reviews, all of which present unique aspects of theatrical translation.

The issue opens with Jacqueline Bixler's translation of the Mexican playwright Alejandro Ricaño's play, *Hotel Good Luck*. Both Bixler and Ricaño's work have appeared previously in *The Mercurian*, with Bixler's translation of Emilio Carballido's play *Photograph on the Beach* published in Vol. 5, No. 2, Fall 2014, and Ricaño's play *Pork Kidneys to Soothe Despair* appearing in Daniel Jáquez' translation in Vol. 5, No. 4, Fall 2015. *Hotel Good Luck* is another example of this contemporary Mexican playwright's innovative theatricality. As Bixler describes in her introduction, the play is an example of what Ricaño describes as "narraturgy"—a theatrical style that relies "on the spoken word and a hybrid mix of narration and dialogue." This dark comedy posits the existence of parallel universes where characters are dead in one reality and alive in another. All of these characteristics create a style of dramaturgy in *Hotel Good Luck* that might be described as sweetly absurd.

Hotel Good Luck is followed by Bryan Stubbles' translation of Indonesian playwright Dhianita Kusuma Pertiwi's play *Night Market for Brojo*, a play that shows the effects of the massacre of between 500,000—3,000,000 supposed Indonesian Communist Party members by the military in the mid-1960s through a young boy's loss of the experience of visiting the night market with his mother. The play somewhat resembles the working-class drama form *ludruk* studied by James L. Peacock in *Rites of modernization: symbolic and social aspects of Indonesian proletariat drama* (University of Chicago Press, 1987) in its investigation of the combination of politics and class struggle in twentieth century Indonesia.

Night Market for Brojo is followed by Junjie Jiang's translation of Chinese playwright Guo Shixing's play *Toilet*. As Jiang's introduction makes clear, the play, which takes place in three different acts portraying three different time periods in China, presents a number of translation issues including the portrayal of historical and cultural context, urban vs. rural accents, and the suggestive, humorous and/or sarcastic nature of the characters' names in Chinese. Readers can assess for themselves Jiang's solutions to these issues as the play portrays a public toilet attendant's evolution from the early 1970s to the late 1990s.

The issue concludes with two book reviews. Vladimir Zorić reviews *Selected Serbian comedies*, a new collection edited by Branko Mikasinovich, whose previous edited volume, *Selected Serbian Plays*, was reviewed in Vol. 6, No. 4, Fall 2017. Penny Black reviews Geraldine Brodie's *The Translator on Stage*, an investigation of the theatrical translator's art and position that analyzes ten productions of translations on London's commercial and subsidized stages.

Back issues of *The Mercurian* can be found at: <https://the-mercurian.com/>.

As the theatre is nothing without its audience, *The Mercurian* welcomes your comments, questions, complaints, and critiques. Deadline for submissions for consideration for Volume 7, No. 4 (Fall 201) will be October 1, 2019.

--Adam Versényi

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Hotel Good Luck

By Alejandro Ricaño

Translated by Jacqueline E. Bixler

In 2016, Alejandro Ricaño asked me to translate *Hotel Good Luck* into English for a potential staging in the US. I felt comfortable with this request as I had previously published an anthology of three of his plays—*Historias para ser contadas: tres obras de Alejandro Ricaño*, LATR Books, 2012—had seen most of his plays on stage, and had also written critical studies of some of them. I worked primarily on my own, meeting just once with Ricaño in Mexico City. The main challenge I faced while preparing the translation was in maintaining the cadence of the language used by the playwright. Given that the work deals with the concept of alternate universes and the idea that the same things can happen or not happen in one or another, there is a significant amount of repetition. At times it was difficult to capture the terse, staccato style of the discourse. Ricaño is known for his use of colloquial, often vulgar language, which presented an additional challenge, as there is not always an easy equivalent to such terms in English. While I have made every effort to create a natural-sounding translation, it is ultimately quite literal in the sense that I have omitted nothing from the original.

Alejandro Ricaño (Xalapa, Mexico, 1983) is one of Mexico's most successful and well-known playwrights. He began writing plays at an early age and by the time he was thirty had won several of Mexico's most prestigious awards for dramatic writing: Premio Emilio Carballido for *Más pequeños que el Guggenheim*/Smaller Than the Guggenheim (2008); Premio Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda for *Fractales*/Fractals (2011); Premio INBA for *El amor de las luciérnagas*/Love of Fireflies (2011). Another play, *Un riñón de cerdo para el desconsuelo*/Pork Kidneys to Soothe Despair (2008), was a finalist for the Premio Geraldo Mancebo del Castillo (a translation by Daniel Jáquez appeared in *The Mercurian*, vol. 5, no. 4, Fall 2015). Ricaño has also been the recipient of several grants, among them FONCA's Young Creators program, the Antonio Gala Foundation in Spain, the Lark Play Development Center in New York, and CONACYT (Mexico's National Council on Science and Technology). His plays have been staged in many parts of Mexico as well as in Spain, Hungary, Belgium, New York, Los Angeles, Miami, Peru, and Buenos Aires.

A prolific writer, Ricaño has created some twenty plays to date, all of which have been staged, while some have had multiple stagings. His most successful play, *Más pequeños que el Guggenheim*, earned him instant recognition in Mexico and was later staged in other parts of Latin America and in Europe and the US. In this work and several others, Ricaño follows a dramatic trend known as “narraturgy,” which features a reliance on the spoken word and a hybrid mix of narration and dialogue. This trend is best exemplified in *Idiots Contemplating the Snow*/Idiots Contemplating the Snow (2010), in which one or more narrators stand to the side of the stage and relate the characters' thoughts and past histories. More complex are *Más pequeños que el Guggenheim* and *Timboctou* (2010), in which the characters alternately act and serve as narrators of their own story and those of the other characters. While these plays contain intersecting characters and plot lines, *Hotel Good Luck* posits the possibility of parallel universes, in which one can be dead in one “reality” and alive in the other. Other plays by Ricaño include *Un torso, mierda y el secreto del carnicero*/A Torso, Shit, and the Butcher's Secret (2006), *Cada vez nos despedimos mejor*/We Say Goodbye Each Time Better (2014), *Un hombre ajeno*/An Outsider (2014),

La guerra en la niebla/War in the Fog (2016), *Lo que queda de nosotros/What Remains of Us* (2016), and the play offered here in translation, *Hotel Good Luck*, which premiered in the Teatro Milán of Mexico City in late 2015. In the spring of 2019, he was preparing to stage a new work, *Tal vez mañana sea un día cualquiera*.

Ricaño is known for his ability to tell amusing, memorable anecdotes, to capture the colloquial, often crude language used by the masses, and to use metaphor as a way to lend universal meaning to stories that are invariably about the common man. Other trademarks of his theatre include black humor, non-linear texts, intersecting plot lines, agile dialogue, and characters that are endearingly obtuse. The texts are relatively short and deceptively simple. Given the dominance of verbal discourse and the lack of stage directions, Ricaño's play can be staged virtually anywhere. While his inspiration has always been the stories of the hapless who live around him, he acknowledges the influence of writers Beckett, Molière, Camus, and Paul Auster as well as cinematographers Wes Anderson and Paul Thomas Anderson. A perfectionist, Ricaño almost always directs his own works and with a level of professionalism that has attracted some of Mexico's most famous actors, including Diego Luna. His skill as a director, along with his uncanny ability to mix the profane and the poetic, the prosaic and the profound, has led him to become a perennial favorite among the audiences of Mexico City.

Jacqueline Bixler (Ph.D. 1980, University of Kansas) is Distinguished Professor of Spanish at Virginia Tech, where she teaches courses on Latin American literature and culture and the occasional course on translation. She also serves as the Editor of the *Latin American Theatre Review*, a journal devoted to the study and dissemination of Latin American and Latinx theatre. A specialist in Latin American and particularly Mexican theatre, Bixler has published books on Emilio Carballido, Sabina Berman, Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda, Mexico's women playwrights, and trans-acting, as well as over sixty articles on Mexican, Argentine, Peruvian, and Chilean theatre. Rather a novice in the art of translation, she has published only one previous translation, *Photograph on the Beach*, by Emilio Carballido, in *The Mercurian*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2014.

Hotel Good Luck

Alejandro Rocaño

Translated by Jacqueline Bixler

Prologue

Bobby sits and smokes in front of a small basement ham radio set.

He leans into the microphone.

Bobby:

Tokyo Airport, 1954.

At a small counter, someone hands customs agent Takeshi Fukushima a passport from a country he's never heard of.

Taured.

Fukushima is surprised to find three official stamps from the same customs office that show three previous visits to Japan:

1953.

1952.

And 1951.

Fukushima raises his eyebrows at the traveler.

Then, without taking his eyes off him, he awkwardly walks backwards toward the office of his supervisor.

A moment later, Fukushima returns with the Head of Customs, Kaoru Hashimoto, a man with a wary look and a small, porcine body.

Peering over the counter, Hashimoto takes a close look at the man from Taured and requests that he accompany him to a small, dark detention room.

There, standing a bit on tiptoes, he rolls out a map of the world on a rickety metal table and asks the man from Taured to point out his country.

The man from Taured runs his index finger across the whole map without finding any place to stop.

“So?” Hashimoto asks.

“It's not there...” The man from Taured responds gravely.

From among his belongings, the mysterious traveler pulls out a drivers license.

A library card.

A membership card for a public pool.

And the photograph of his wife, a plump, sad-looking woman.

The man from Taured is escorted to a hotel, where he spends the night guarded by two men stationed outside his room.

Who would create a fake passport from a non-existent country? Hashimoto rhetorically asks himself in front of an ashtray full of cigarette butts.

In the morning Hashimoto goes to the hotel.

The guards, who have not moved all night, knock on the door.

The man from Taured does not answer.

When Hashimoto finally opens the door, he finds the room unoccupied.

Pause.

There was no exit other than the one the guards had watched all night.

The only window in the room, on the twelfth floor, had no exterior ledge.

And the only thing below that was a busy street.

Pause.

The man from Taured had vanished into thin air.

Silence. Bobby uses the ashtray to put out his cigarette.

Here at Parallel Radio, station 590, it is 12:56. And this is “7 Heures du Matin” by Jacqueline Taieb.

He sets the needle down on the record.

Music.

Bobby leaves the radio booth.

Scene I

Bobby rolls down a screen in front of a slide projector and directs himself to the audience. “7 Heures du Matin” plays in the background.

Bobby:

This is my grandfather Cachalote. Bobby Cachalote. Lawyer.

He projects a slide of his grandfather Cachalote.

A strapping swimmer, national champion in the 100-meter freestyle, my grandfather Cachalote decides to become a lawyer after breaking both of his arms in an accident on a tandem bicycle with my grandmother.

On November 6, 1971, having recovered the use of his arms, my grandfather Cachalote defends his best friend, Tom Morsa, accused of having killed Jimmy Callo de Hacha in a bar fight. My grandfather Cachalote argued that Jimmy Callo had accidentally shot himself. To demonstrate his theory, my grandfather Cachalote takes the pistol from the evidence, not knowing that the gun is still loaded, puts it to his head, and shoots his brains all over the jury. My grandfather Cachalote wins the case and Tom Morsa is exonerated.

This is my grandfather Chuletón, Bobby Chuletón. Jockey.

He projects a slide of his grandfather Chuletón.

On November 6, 1972, my grandfather Bobby Chuletón, who had never won a race, suffers a heart attack just 500 meters from the finish line, but remains on his horse. For the first time in his life, my grandfather goes from last place to first place, and becomes the first and only dead person ever to win a race.

This is my grandmother Manatí, Lori Manatí, Cachalote's widow. Daredevil.

He projects a slide of his grandmother Manatí.

On November 6, 1973, my grandmother Manatí becomes the second woman ever to survive Niagara Falls in a barrel. That same afternoon, my grandmother Manatí slips on a banana peel and breaks her leg so badly that it has to be amputated. She dies from surgical complications.

This is my grandmother Burbujitas, Lori Burbujitas, widow of Bobby Chuletón.

He shows a slide of his grandmother Burbujitas.

On November 6, 1974, my grandmother Burbujitas suffers a heart attack while reading me a story about the fear and acceptance of death.

Bobby rolls up the screen.

The light focuses on him.

For four years my grandparents left this world on the same date, from which I derived four undeniable truths:

1. Everyone dies. Everyone.
2. Death can be fucking amusing.
3. The world is full of ridiculous coincidences.
4. I fucking hate the sixth of November.

Scene II

Bobby again lowers the projector screen. He shows a slide of a sad dog.

Bobby:

This is Miller, the melancholic dog.

He shows a picture of his dog Miller looking melancholic.

Lone survivor in a litter of nine, Miller likes cloudy days, the music of Mahler, and the poetry of Walt Whitman.

This is Miller's face when someone throws him a ball in the park.

He shows a slide of Miller looking inexpressive.

And this is how he looks when other dogs want to play with him.

He shows the same slide of Miller, inexpressive.

And this when someone buys him an icecream.

The same inexpressive face.

This story begins with Miller's death.

Scene III

Bobby:

Miller's bloated body was on the side of the highway, in front of Dad's house, just a few feet from the sea. He was almost completely buried in sand.

I had abandoned him a year before.

This is what happened a year before:

From his dark, wooden dog house, Miller hears a car arrive.

He walks lazily to the front of the house.

He finds me sticking a pale, worn-out suitcase into the trunk of a taxi.

We look at each other for the last time.

Bobby looks at the audience, as if Miller were there among them.

From the front gate of the house, Miller follows me with his eyes until the taxi turns the corner.

Scene IV

Bobby:

Dad's house is fifty yards from the sea, and a half mile from Mom's house, but I'm not going to talk about that right now.

After my last grandmother died, I set up a small radio station in my father's basement.

After a year, my little radio station had only managed to get four listeners:

Dad, Mom, my friend Larry, and Lily, whom I also abandoned.

I called her on the phone.

Bobby talks on the phone.

At the bus station.

Pause.

As far away as I can get.

Pause.

You know what day tomorrow is, Lil?

Pause.

November 6. I'm not gonna stick around and watch another member of my family die.

Pause.

I have four fucking listeners, Lil.

Pause.

You'll be here, like always, Lil, waiting for me to take that step that I'm never going to take.

To the audience.

And this is what Lil said to me, from the other end of the line:

He attends again to the phone.

Where are you?

Pause.

Are you leaving?

Pause.

I don't know. Tuesday?

Pause.

What about your radio station?

Pause.

What about me?

Pause.

I don't want you to take any step, Bobby. I just want you to be here, on your own terms. And I want to be with you, just the way we are, no matter how strange that may be. I'm not going to pressure you. I'm not going to pressure you again to be something that you aren't.

To the audience.

I don't want to be here at all—that was the last thing I said to her before I hung up and left.

But the furthest I got was the next town over, where I washed dishes for a year in a restaurant and battled my obsession with death.

One day I decided to return.

I was thinking about Miller and about the last time I saw him through the back window of the taxi.

And I knew that I needed to be with him before he died.

But that same morning before I returned, Miller slipped through the front gate, following the scent of the salty sea breeze, and was hit by a car.

When the taxi parked in front of my father's house, I found his swollen body on the side of the highway.

Dad wasn't there and Mom had moved out five years earlier.

I couldn't bury him by myself.

I called Lily.

Again on the phone.

Split open, Lil, in front of Dad's house. I picked him up and took him inside. And now I can't bury him. *(Pause)* I know that I can't just up and call you like this. I would've liked to have called you just to tell you that I had returned. But then this happened. And now I need you to come over.

To the audience.

And this is what she said to me from the other end of the phone line:

I'm with someone else, Bobby. I waited a long time for you to return, until I convinced myself that I was never going to see you again. And while I could drop everything right now and be with you, like

before, I need to move on. I can't keep waiting for you to call me every time you feel lonely, just to go and find that you're not completely here. I'm really sorry about Miller.

Bobby hangs up.

So Lily didn't come.

Pause.

I couldn't bury Miller all by myself.

I left him lying in the patio. I stroked his white head and looked at his eyes, dim and opaque.

I told him, I love you so much, Bud.

As if he could understand me, or at the very least hear me.

Then I went up to my room.

I laid down on the bed, sank my head into the pillow, and fell asleep.

Scene V

Bobby:

I fall asleep.

I dream that I'm sleeping.

I dream that I'm dreaming.

And in my dream a nightmare wakes me up

In the middle of my dark room.

Anxious.

With my tongue all dry.

I'm thirsty.

In my dream I'm thirsty.

In my dream I was dreaming that my parents were dying.

Run over by a car, like Miller.

A warm breeze slips through the open window.

It's hot.

I'm thirsty.

I go to the kitchen

My T-shirt soaked in sweat.

Floating.

I stop in front of the refrigerator.

But I don't hear the metallic hum of its old, rickety motor.

The refrigerator is disconnected.

In my dream

Someone disconnected the refrigerator.
I pull on the handle
And as the door magnets jiggle,
A dim light outlines
The edges of the door.
A soft, natural light
Like a small, cloudy dawn inside the refrigerator.
Steam emanates from inside.
I can't see anything.
I stick my hand in the refrigerator but I can't find the back of it.
I'm dreaming.
Something is calling me from inside.
A whisper.
I get in the refrigerator
Amidst the vapor.
Where I'm blinded by a bright light.
A bright light that envelops everything.
I can't see anything.

(Silence)

My sight begins to clear,
A foggy sea.
A dusty picture window.
I find myself in an empty room
Lying in front of a large picture window
That looks out on a calm, foggy sea.
Seagulls fly through the fog
Screaming above the waves.
I get to my feet.
I put my nose to the window
And my breath
Makes a small circle of steam on the glass.
Where am I? I write with my finger.
Where am I?

(Silence)

I hear a bark.
A bark that comes from the sea.
Miller!
I leave the room
Run down the stairs

Out to the street.
Miller is walking idly along the beach.
I walk over to him,
Kneel down,
Hug him against my chest.
The sea breeze wets my face.
Where am I?
I turn around.
Behind me
An abandoned building.
Above the entrance, a name in shining letters.
Blinking:
Good Luck
Hotel Good Luck.

Scene VI

Bobby and Larry, in the office of the latter.

Bobby:

This is Doctor Tocino, Larry Tocino, my best friend. And only friend. In the last year of elementary school, Larry broke the noses of nine children. When the principal asked him why, Larry simply responded: I felt like something was burning inside me. *(Pause)* It's entirely unethical, but Larry is my psychoanalyst.

Larry: Like a tunnel?

Bobby: A doorway.

Larry: A doorway.

Bobby: I dreamed that I was dreaming. And then that I was waking up. In my dream. Do you understand?

Larry: A dream within a dream.

Bobby: And I was thirsty. So I went to the kitchen for a beer. I went to the refrigerator, but it was disconnected.

Larry: Did you disconnect it?

Bobby: No, but someone did. I opened the fridge and something like a door opened. I entered, because something was calling to me from inside, Larry. I stuck my leg in and then I simply went in. And I came out on the third floor of an abandoned building that was facing the sea. And it was as if I had woken up, Larry. I heard a bark and left the building and there was Miller, walking along the

beach. I found him, you know, dead on the side of the highway, Larry. This morning. Now I don't know if I dreamt that Miller died or if I'm dreaming now. What's going on with me, Larry?

Larry: Have you slept since then?

Bobby: Yeah.

Larry: And?

Bobby: Nothing happened. I woke up here again. Miller was asleep at my feet.

Larry: Did you try to return to the building?

Bobby: What for?

Larry: To see if there was another refrigerator.

Bobby: Why would there be another refrigerator?

Larry: I don't know, like a return exit.

Bobby: No. *(Silence)* No. Am I crazy, Larry?

Larry: No, Bobby, you aren't crazy. It's clearly a case of dimensional simultaneity.

Bobby: Say what?

Larry: You don't need a psychologist, Bobby. What you need is a physicist.

Bobby: A physicist?

Larry: A physicist who specializes in quantum mechanics.

Bobby: Where am I gonna find a physicist who specializes in quantum mechanics?

Larry: It just so happens that I'm a physicist and a specialist in quantum mechanics. It's my night job. Do you mind if I change my jacket?

Bobby: ...

Larry goes to the coat rack and changes into a jacket that is almost identical to the one he was wearing. He returns, sits down, and crosses one leg over the other. He's excited.

Larry: I thought this day would never come. According to the principle of dimensional simultaneity, two or more realities can coexist in the same space and time.

Bobby: Since when are you a physicist?

Larry: Since 1970.

Bobby: You've been a physicist since 1970?

Larry: It was a surprise.

Bobby: For whom?

Pause.

Larry: I needed another job, o.k.? I have less and less patients.

Bobby: Well, you aren't going to have any patients if you keep hitting them.

Larry: Bobby, you know that burning feeling I have inside.

Bobby: Inside.

Larry: I'm burning inside.

Bobby: You're going to end up without any patients.

Larry: I'll still get more patients than you get radio listeners. May I continue?

Bobby: ...

Larry: Well, every little movement we make, Bobby, splits our universe into an infinite series of possibilities. Every little movement instantly opens up an adjacent universe that we can't see, just an inch away. You've apparently discovered in your dreams, Bobby, a portal between one parallel universe and another.

Bobby: How do I get back to the original universe?

Larry: There is no original universe, Bobby. There's a universe to which you belong, but I don't know how you get back. Maybe another doorway will open up. Meanwhile you should know that what doesn't happen in one universe can happen in another. Are you familiar with the case of the man from Taured?

Scene VII

Bobby: Miller was alive. He was dying, but he was still alive. Or he had already died and come back.

Dad had already died, too. Or at least it seemed that way.

I found him lying on the floor of the study with a glass of whiskey.

And it struck me that Dad had realized at precisely that moment that he hadn't actually done anything with his life. I saw it in his eyes, which were looking at the salt encrusted on the ceiling.

His eyes looked like this.

He imitates his father's eyes, looking at the ceiling.

And this is the sound the sea was making, one hundred yards from the window, while he stared at the salt on the ceiling.

Music.

This is what I think, Bobby—he said to me when I came in—I spent my life writing a book that didn't say anything to anyone. That's the story of my life. That's what I'm going to leave behind, Bobby. And now I'm afraid of dying alone. *(Pause)* “We are born alone and we die alone.” Those are probably the words of some idiot who cheated on his wife, like I did.

Five years before that, he had cheated on my mother with an undergraduate. Mom caught them on the beach. She left that same night and then, after a month, inexplicably moved to the nearest house, just a half mile away from his.

She didn't take anything with her, you know?, he said to me.

Her bike, I answered.

Her bike. Why the hell would she want her bike? We haven't used them for years. Mine is still sitting there. Why did she take her bike?

I don't know, Dad, I said, just to end the discussion and get out of there.

Miller and I went to the beach.

Miller's body felt brittle and bony in my arms. But he was happy.

While I was walking with him on the beach, most likely for the last time, Dad, stretched out on the floor, found a letter tucked under his desk. It was from Mom.

Bobby takes the letter from his jacket pocket and unfolds it.

This is Mom's letter. And this is what it said.

He reads.

How long has it been since I found you with that student of yours, you fat son of a bitch? I replayed that image in my mind until it had no longer had any effect on me. So many times that it dissolved in my memory and all that remained was you, naked, lying on the beach. And all I felt like doing was lying down at your side. Who in the world came up with the insane idea that we should sleep with the same person for the rest of our lives? If I loved you, if I really loved you, you fat bastard, I would simply have wished you a good time and the best fuck of your life—or at least the second best, as I'm sure I gave you the best one. The rest is just an unbearable possessive feeling. Time follows its course, my dear, but I still haven't worked up the courage to come back, tell you that it wasn't such a big deal, and sleep in your arms again. I'm afraid you don't want me anymore. So I spend the days, looking from time to time at the window, to see if you are coming to get me. And since that hasn't happened, I snuck in when you weren't here and hid this letter, hoping that it won't be too late when you find it.

Yours forever, your foolish, jealous wife.

Scene VIII

Bobby:

This is the sound of my father's bicycle.
The rusty chain.
Clanking.
The squeaky seat.
The cracked tires, quickly turning.
This is the wind, hitting his face.
Messing up his gray hair,
All tangled up.
This is Dad,
Riding a bicycle as bent and rusty as he is,
Trying to make up with Mom.
This is his heart
And this is the blood roiling and running through his body.
A light suddenly flashes in the sky.
A flame tracing a straight line.
A meteorite,
Slicing through the clouds.
Dad stops,
Turns and looks up
With his mouth half open
The light passes over his pupils.
He hears the tires of a car
He turns and looks behind him.
A taxi is about to hit him.

Scene IX

Half an hour earlier, while Mom was looking from time to time at the highway that ran to Dad's house, as she had been doing for the past five years, a warm gust of wind moved the curtains and revealed a piece of paper folded and stuck between the shutters of the same window that she had been watching every afternoon.

It was a letter from Dad that had been there the whole time.

Bobby takes another letter from the pocket of his jacket. He unfolds it.

This is Dad's letter. And this is what it said.

He reads.

I can think of a ton of excuses. I could tell you, for example, that it's an insane idea to sleep with the same person for the rest of our lives and that I was simply being true to my nature, but I would only be trying to convince you of something that I myself don't even believe. A fantasy, by definition, my dear, is a falsehood. What is truly insane and painful is to wander through this fucking life pursuing things that always slip away. I prefer to go through life bound to the only real thing I know: you. I dreamt about you last night, so I can say that you're still the woman of my dreams. You appeared at the door and told me that you were coming back because you couldn't stand to sleep without your back pressed against my chest. I can't muster up the courage to look for you because I'm terrified that you won't even want to see me. I spend my days at the door, until night falls, hoping that you'll come back on your own. Since that hasn't happened, I snuck in while you weren't home and hid this letter, hoping that you'll find it soon and know that I'm dying to see you.

Yours always, your fat, stupid husband.

Scene X

Bobby:

This is the sound of my mother's bicycle.
This is the wind, caressing her face,
Her rosy cheeks,
The thin line of her uncontrollable smile.
And this is her little burning heart.
This is Mom, pedaling as fast as she can toward Dad's house,
Finally.
A light suddenly illuminates the sky.
A meteorite.
Mom stops.
She turns to look upward
The light passes over her pupils.
She hears the tires of a car
She looks behind her.
A taxi is about to hit her.

Scene XI

Bobby, in the radio station.

Bobby:

On November 6, 1975, a meteorite cuts across the sky.

Below, on a narrow highway, Trinidad and Tobago, twins separated at birth by their parents, are about to meet for the first time.

Neither of them suspecting that they share the same profession as taxi drivers.

A fleeting flash of light in the sky draws their eyes from the road.

The incandescent celestial body little by little disintegrates as it enters the atmosphere and falls into the sea, a rock barely the size of a basketball.

Twins Trinidad and Tobago turn their eyes back to the road and suddenly see a man and a woman on bicycles.

And run them over.

Pause.

Terrified, Trinidad and Tobago make a U turn and flee, not knowing that they were within one hundred yards of meeting each another.

Even more importantly, not knowing that they had just run over an older couple on the verge of getting back together.

Silence.

Here on Parallel Radio, station 590, it's 12:36 and this is "Not Dark Yet" by Bob Dylan.

He sets the needle on the Dylan record.

Music.

Bobby rests his head on the back of the chair. He starts to fall asleep.

Scene XII

Bobby:

I fall asleep.

I dream that I'm sleeping.

I dream that I'm dreaming.

And a nightmare wakes me in my dream

Anxious.

I'm thirsty.

I go to the kitchen

I stop in front of the refrigerator

The refrigerator is disconnected.

I pull on the door

A bright light.
I get in the refrigerator.
I can't see anything.

(Silence)

My vision starts to clear.
Ocean fog.
A dusty picture window.
I hear my parents' voices outside.
I leave the room
Run downstairs
And out to the street.
I find them walking on the beach,
Barefoot.
I run up to them.
I hug them.
The sea breeze wets my face.

Scene XIII

In the office of Doctor Tocino.

Larry: This is clearly a case of dimensional simultaneity.

Bobby: I know, Larry! That's what you told me yesterday!

Larry: You were here yesterday?

Bobby: It was a different "here."

Larry: You never come to see me two days in a row.

Bobby: It's not two days in a row. It's twice the same day.

Larry: And we talked?

Bobby: You told me you're a physicist. You changed your jacket.

Larry: You saw my physicist's jacket?

Bobby: You said that what didn't happen in one universe could happen in another. My parents died in that other fucking universe, Larry. And in this one they're alive again. I got in the fucking refrigerator and went to the fucking hotel, and there they were, walking on the beach. What kind of shitty world is this?

Larry: So you know that I'm a physicist?

Bobby: Yes, I know you're a physicist, Larry. I'm telling you that my parents are alive again. Could it be a form of reincarnation?

Larry: Reincarnated as themselves? What the hell kind of reincarnation would that be?

Bobby: I don't know.

Larry: Do you believe in reincarnation?

Bobby: I have to believe in something.

Larry: You could believe in the fucking principle of dimensional simultaneity.

Bobby: Something spiritual, Larry. I have to believe in something spiritual.

Larry: So you know that I'm a physicist.

Bobby: What the hell does it matter?

Larry: I thought you'd be surprised.

Bobby: You told me you needed another job.

Larry: You think I studied physics because I needed another job?

Bobby: Why else would someone like you study physics?

Silence.

Larry: So, the Good Luck Hotel?

Bobby: Yep.

Larry: I was in a building like that once.

Bobby: Did you get there through a refrigerator?

Larry: No, through a travel agency. It was the first time I went to India. I went... you know, to learn how to control that burning.

Bobby: The burning...

Larry: Varanasi is a city on the banks of the Ganges River. According to Hinduism, Bobby, everything that dies in Varanasi on the banks of the river is free of reincarnation; the soul passes directly on to Nirvana. There was an abandoned building on the river that some called "The Hotel." It was a shelter for the old and dying who went there to spend their last days. They were hoping to see those dawns for the last time. Some think that the idea of reincarnation is insane. Some simply want their soul to die forever, Bobby, never to return.

Scene XIV

Bobby:

Mom had come back home.

Miller, Mom, and Dad were alive. They wandered peacefully from floor to floor, unaware that they were already dead somewhere else.

Mom and Dad did at least knew that they were going to die soon.

They held hands and looked at one another as if for the last time.

As if they secretly knew that someone was going to come and drag them out of there without any kind of warning.

At any moment.

Pause.

I called Lily.

Bobby speaks on the phone.

It's me, Bobby. I got back this afternoon. Or three days ago; it's hard to explain. *(Pause)* Was Miller alive or dead the last time we talked? *(Pause)* Alive. *(Pause)* No, he's fine, Miller is fine. Or, I don't know, it's hard to explain. *(Pause)* Listen, Lil, some things are... happening, things that you wouldn't understand but that have helped me understand a lot of things. *(Pause)* For example, that we are only here for a moment. A brief moment. But as long as that moment, that brief moment lasts, Lil, one has to make the most of it. *(Pause)* I know you probably waited for me until you were convinced that you were never ever going to see me again. And that you are probably now with someone else, and that I can't show up, just like that, and ask you to come back, because you have to keep moving forward. But one has to keep believing, during this brief moment, that nothing is lost. *(Pause)* I believe we aren't totally lost, Lil. And that if I take that step now, maybe, just maybe, I'll still find you on the other side.

I kept on talking for an hour, trying to convince her that we should be together.

It was raining.

I was still talking when they came to the door.

I left the phone on the table and went to open the door.

Lily was out there, soaked, trying to catch her breath.

When did you stop listening to me? I asked her.

When you said that you wanted to find me, on the other side, she answered, smiling.

Scene XV

Bobby shows a slide of the back of a woman who is facing the sea. A woman with small shoulders and blonde, wind-blown hair.

Bobby:

This is Lily.

For as long as I've known her, Lily has mixed up words.

If she wants to say, for example, that a movie is based on real events, she says that it's based on "verdict" facts.

When she wants to stick to her principles but doesn't know what to do, she says that she's in a moral "condilemma."

Her favorite kind of cheese is Rockefeller cheese.

When she tried to explain to me that they named her Lily after one of the flowers that takes the longest to wither, she said that she was named after an "unwitting" flower.

Don't you mean "unwilting"? I asked her.

Pissed off, she responded, "that's what I said."

Scene XVI

We walked on the beach while the sun was setting.

It had stopped raining.

Behind us were

Two curved lines,

Dotted

With the exact outline of our feet.

Lily took my hand.

But something felt uncomfortable.

I thought I could be with someone else, Lily told me, but I never, no matter how hard I tried, stopped thinking about you. I've always been here, on this side, waiting for you. That's the only thing that makes sense.

Lily squeezed her fingers

But they didn't fit with mine

I felt awkward and out of place.

I'm named after a flower that lasts, she continued. I lasted, Bobby, til the last moment. I thought I was going to wither and die if you didn't come.

Silence.

Lily stopped in front of me
And put her head on my chest.
But I felt disconnected
From her and from everything
Without understanding why.
Then she raised her face and looked at me closely.
I wanted to kiss her but I couldn't.
I wanted to get out of there.
I couldn't get even one inch closer.
Are you having doubts?, she asked.
I couldn't answer.
Lily started to tremble.
Listen, Lily, I said, not knowing where to look, I know I said I wanted to be with you just a moment ago, a short moment ago, but now I don't know. I don't know why. *(Pause)* When I'm alone, I want to be with you, and when I'm with you, I want to be alone. I always want to be the other way. Maybe what I really want is not to be here. Just that: not to be here. *(Pause)* We're never going to be all right, Lil, because I can't be anywhere knowing that the other person is going to leave at any moment. Or knowing that at any moment I'll cease to be here. I can't be at peace. I can't.

Lily was unable to respond.

She stood there on the beach.

I looked at her for the last time and then started to walk away from her.

I walked without looking back.

I walked until I no longer knew where I was.

Scene XVII

I got home at dawn. Dad was writing in the study.

Where's Mom? I asked him.

Sleeping, he said, without looking up from the typewriter.

Are you working on your novel?

I'm writing what I was never able to say. Because I didn't dare to. Or because I couldn't find the right words. Or because it wasn't the right moment. But I'm going to tell everyone else that it's a novel, OK?

OK, I said with a smile.

Just then I heard a voice outside the front door.
It was clearly Lily's voice.
Bobby, she called.
Bobby.
But when I opened the door, all I found was a white cat staring up at me from the porch.
Then the phone rang.
It was Larry.
Lily's dead, he said.
When I turned back around, the cat was gone.

Scene XVIII

Bobby:

We scattered her ashes along the beach on a rainy day.
I remember her in front of the water
With her feet sunk in the wet sand.
And her honey-colored skin
And her piercing blue eyes
Brightly lit.
And her small heart
Unfading.

Pause

With her unevenly worn shoes
Lily went back to her cabin after she saw me.
She sat down on a chair
And listened to the waves for the last time.
She felt sad,
Sadder than she had ever felt in her whole life.
Before night fell
Lily was dead.
They found her at dawn, cold,
Seated in her chair
Coated in sea breeze.
There was no explanation.
When the coroner opened her body,
Before they cremated her,
He found something like a small wilted flower,
Pale and dry,
In place of her heart.

Scene XIX

Bobby:

I fall asleep.
I dream that I'm sleeping.
I dream that I'm dreaming.
I wake up.
I go to the kitchen
I stop in front of the refrigerator
I pull on the door.
A bright light.
I get in the refrigerator.

Silence

I see a foggy ocean.
A dusty picture window.
Outside I hear Lily's laugh.
I leave the room
Run downstairs
Out to the street.
Lily is sitting on a rock, looking at the sea.

Pause.

The sea breeze wets my face.
What the fuck is going on?

Scene XX

Bobby, in the radio booth. He lights a cigarette and leans toward the microphone.

Bobby: Among all the unlikely destinies that could await us, to burn from the inside out is probably the last thing that would cross our mind.

On November 6, 1966, London firefighter Jack Stacey responded to a fire in an abandoned building. The house showed no signs of damage on the outside.

In the living room, however, Stacey found the burning body of an obese hobo, whom we shall call Oink, hobo Oink.

Oink had a tear about three inches long in his stomach. Flames were bursting out of it, like a blowtorch.

Stacey sprayed Oink's body with the hose and put out the fire.

There was no doubt that the fire had started inside the man's body.

There are dozens of documented cases of people who burned alive without any external ignition. Doesn't matter where they are, they just start burning from the inside, and no one can do anything about it.

Oink was a victim of spontaneous human combustion.

Silence.

Here at Parallel Radio, station 590, it's 12:56. And this is "Babe, I'm Gonna Leave You" by Led Zepellin.

He sets the needle on the Led Zepellin record.

Music.

Scene XXI

In Doctor Tocino's office.

Larry: You saw my physicist's jacket?

Bobby: Yes, Larry, I saw your fucking physicist's jacket, which is, by the way, identical to your fucking psychologist's jacket. What I'm trying to tell you is that I'm living the same day every day. But with a different dead person.

Larry: You think my two jackets look alike?

Bobby: I'm telling you that everyone is dying, Larry! And then they show up alive somewhere else. Do you know what that is?

Larry: These stripes are vertical and those are horizontal. How can you say that they are the same?

Bobby: Are you listening to me, Larry? Every day I bury or cremate someone and throw their fucking ashes in the ocean, and before I can even start to cry I wake up on the other side and they're alive again.

Larry: It was going to be a surprise, Bobby. They're supposed to be similar, but not identical. You can't come here and tell me that they're identical.

Bobby: What the fuck are you talking about?

Larry: I'm talking about my jackets, Bobby! I have a psychologist's jacket and another, similar one that's used by physicists. Sufficiently similar for you not to notice it hanging over there, but sufficiently different for you to notice that it's different when I put it on. I had planned this surprise to the nth degree. And now you come and tell me that my two fucking jackets are identical. If you believe that my two fucking jackets are the same, it also means that you know I have two jackets, and if everything

you are telling me is true, it means that for at least three parallel universes you've known that I'm a physicist and haven't given a shit.

Bobby: ...

Larry: I've spent five years studying physics for you, Bobby, so that I could try to understand the world and tell you that it's not a bad place after all, and that I would like for you to stay. I visited you every day in that fucking desert town you moved to. I sat at one of the tables in the restaurant, with a disguise that was better than my damned physicist's jacket, and watched you while I drank coffee. I was worried that your obsession with death would lead you to do something stupid. *(Pause)* Come with me.

Scene XXII

Bobby: Behind Larry's office there's a small patio with a huge tree. Larry had hung a swing from the highest branch. He took off his jacket and threw it on the ground. Then he sat on the swing.

Larry: According to some scientists, death is nothing more than an illusion, Bobby, just like time and space. If time and space are things that exist only in our mind, death cannot exist in any real sense, do you understand?

Bobby: I'm trying.

Larry: We were taught to associate death with our biological body. But our body, like any spatial illusion, is just a concept that we invented to give meaning to things. In a world without spatial or temporal borders, Bobby, we're immortal. If it is life that creates the universe, and not the other way around, our mind can create a universe in which everything is possible. *(Pause)* I don't want you to be afraid, Bobby. You shouldn't be afraid of death. *(Pause)* Have you ever heard of spontaneous human combustion?

Bobby:

Larry began to swing.
Pulling his legs in
And then stretching them out,
Hanging tightly on to the ropes,
While the wind caressed his face.
He was smiling,
With his eyes closed.
The tree branch began to break.
Larry swung faster
Each time higher.
Until he suddenly looked like just a flicker
The last light of a soul

Trying to flee to the other side.
Don't be afraid, Bobby!
That was the last thing he managed to say as he started to burn.
A flame emerged from his belly and then engulfed him completely,
With me unable to do anything.
I tried to reach him but the heat threw me back.

Pause.

When I got back up, Larry had been consumed by the fire.
His body had been reduced to a pile of ashes that the wind was starting to blow away.
He was gone.

Silence.

Above the swing, which was still swaying slightly in the wind, was a note:
"My job was always to burn, Bobby."
It said.
"And in the mornings, when I was with you, my job was to be your best friend. I always had two jobs."

Scene XXIII

Bobby:

When I got home, Mom and Dad were sitting, dead, on two lounge chairs, facing the sea.
Cold and stiff, they held hands.
Miller was lying at their side, his eyes lifeless, no longer breathing.
I went in the house. I called Lily. But she didn't answer.
They had all died, again, and I couldn't do anything to stop it.
I needed to fall asleep.
And pass through the doorway again.
And come out at the Good Luck Hotel.
And they would be there.
And everything would be fine again.

Pause.

I went up to my room.

And laid down on the bed.

Scene XXIV

Bobby:

I fall asleep.
I dream that I'm sleeping.
I dream that I'm dreaming.
In my dream, I dream that everyone dies.
Miller.
Mom and Dad.
Lily.
Larry.
Everyone.
And I'm left alone, in the darkness.
In the dream within my dream, I dream that I wake up
I go down to the kitchen
And I stop in front of the refrigerator.
The refrigerator is disconnected.
I open it.
I get in the refrigerator.
I come out on the empty floor of the Good Luck Hotel.
I go down the stairs
And find all of them
In front of the sea.

Pause.

And I know that they will die again.
Once again.
One by one.
And I will again be standing in front of the refrigerator
And I will again cross over to the Good Luck Hotel
And they will again be alive
And then I will watch them die
Once again.
One by one.
And everything will repeat itself
Time and again
Time
And

Again.

So I run back to the Good Luck Hotel.

I climb the stairs

But I find only a wall,

Damp and peeling.

I throw myself against it

One

Two

Ten times.

But I end up lying on the floor,

Hugging my knees,

Wishing that this would end

That it would end for once and for all.

Silence.

I wake up.

I wake up in my dream from the other dream

A breeze rustles the curtains in my room.

I go downstairs

To the kitchen.

I stop in front of the refrigerator

The refrigerator is disconnected.

I open it

Something inside is calling to me.

A whisper.

I'm about to cross the threshold,

Again,

But I stop myself.

Pause.

I stand there in front of the refrigerator

Looking at that endless bright light.

“What is truly insane and pitiful is to wander through this fucking life pursuing things that always slip away.”

I take a step back.

I close the refrigerator

And plug it back in.

I hear the hum of its old, rattling motor.

I leave the kitchen

And go up the stairs.

I lie down on my bed

And close my eyes.
I close my eyes as hard as I can.

Scene XV

Bobby:

I wake up.
The cold morning wind rustles the curtains
Pale winter light filters through the window
I hear a voice below.
I get up
Go downstairs
Through the kitchen
And out to the patio.
I find Dad standing there
In front of Miller's dead body.
Where am I?
Where the hell were you? he asks me.

Silence.

I don't know.
You don't know?

Pause.

Sleeping.
You were here? I spent the whole damned morning trying to figure out where you'd gone. Larry told me that you were in the next town over.
Did you think to look in my room?
Why the hell would I look in your room? You left a year ago.
I came back yesterday afternoon. *(Pause)* I think.
You think? Miller got hit by a car. Everyone is coming over.

Scene XXVI

Mom arrived at noon. She stood in the doorway.

When Dad saw her, he raised his eyebrows and choked on his own spit.

I'm so glad you came, he said to her when he was finally able to say something. The truth is that I was kind of missing you.

I found the letter this morning, you fat coward, Mom quickly responded.

Dad smiled and said, and I found yours. Miller's outside. Let's go.

He took her hand and they walked together to the patio.

I heard a voice at the door. It was clearly Lilly. Bobby, she called.

When I turned around, Lily was in the doorway.

Forgive me, Bobby, was the first thing she said. I should've come yesterday after you called me. But I couldn't move. I'm always going to be here, just as we were.

And I'll always be here, just as we were, I said with a smile. Always. *(Pause)* Come with me. Miller's outside.

Mom was kneeling in front of Miller, stroking his white head. We sat down next to her.

Did the funeral already begin? Larry's voice interrupted from the doorway.

We're going to eat first, Dad said. I don't remember the last time we were all together.

Mom started to cry.

Miller is in a better place now, Lily said to console her.

In a better place? Dad asked. In what fucking better place is he going to be? He's going to be in the ground. That's where he's going to be. We're going to bury him in the garden and plant a tree on top. In the end that's what we do, return to the earth. Serve as manure so that something else can grow. If that's not enough for you, you can believe that he's in fucking dog heaven walking at the side of a bearded faggot or that he was reincarnated as a butterfly and is going to smash into a windshield. I'm gonna go to the garden, see the tree, and think, there's Miller, whatever is left of him. And that he was a good dog.

Dad looked for a last time at Miller's body and went back in the house.

If you want, I can get an orange tree, he said without turning around. That way you can believe he was reincarnated as fucking juice.

He went in through the door.

Mom, Lily, and Larry followed him inside.

Silence.

I knew that all of them were going to die, again.

Or perhaps for the first time.

And I felt relieved.

For the first time in my life I wasn't afraid.

Scene XVII

Bobby, at the controls in his small radio station. He lights a cigarette and leans toward the microphone.

Bobby:

Time follows its course.

And in the middle of it all, for one brief moment, we're here.

Frightened.

Counting the days.

And the hours.

And the seconds.

Knowing that everything, at some point, is going to end.

Pause.

And that's fine.

That's fine.

Pause.

This is my last program.

My name is Bobby, Bobby Good Luck. And this is the story of the man from Taured.

Tokyo Airport, 1954.

Scene XXVIII

Bobby:

We dug a hole in the garden.

Mom, Dad, Lily, Larry, and I.

We laid Miller at the bottom

And then,

While we cried,

We covered him with dirt.

I hugged my mother.

Dad took the little orange tree

Leaning against the wall

And planted it on top.

Does anyone want to say something?
My mother asked, lifting her sad cheek from my shoulder.

Silence.

I want to sing a song, I said.

Bobby sings, very softly, the first stanza of a poem by Pessoa. Larry accompanies him on the ukulele.

“Sometimes, in a sad dream,
among my wishes exists
a faraway place
where happiness consists
merely of being happy.”

Silence.

We started to walk toward the house.
Maybe he’s at the Good Luck Hotel now, I muttered.
Dad turned around and looked at me with raised eyebrows.
How do you know about the Good Luck Hotel?, he asked me.
I looked at him silently for a moment.
Have you been in the Good Luck Hotel?
Your mother and I. It was a small hotel that faced the sea. We spent a night there. It was the first time we ever smoked marihuana. We made love until dawn. And as our damned luck would have it, your mother ended up pregnant with you.
How do you know it was that time?
You know when you get pregnant. You know it right away, my mother said, entering the house without turning to look at us.
Dad and Lily followed her in.
Larry lit a cigarette.
I stopped at his side and we looked at the sky.

Larry: I listened to your program about the man from Taured.

Bobby: Ah, that was you. Did you like it?

Larry: A lot. Have you ever heard of the law of dimensional simultaneity?

Pause.

Bobby: No, but I’m sure you can explain it to me. After all, you’re a physicist, right?

Larry: You know I’m a physicist?

Bobby: You’re my best friend, Larry. I have to know a few things.

Silence. Larry smiles.

Larry: According to the law of dimensional spontaneity, Bobby, ...

Larry's voice fades. Little by little the light focuses on Bobby.

Bobby:

I often think about Miller, sniffing the salty air before crossing the highway.

And about my parents, one hundred meters away, trying to make up with one another.

And about my friend Larry, on a lonely swing, swaying with the wind.

And about Lily and her unwilting heart.

I often think about the last goodbyes.

And the last brief shared moments.

And the last strolls.

And the last hugs.

And the last looks.

And the last seconds.

And it makes me believe that, in the end, death is nothing but an illusion of our own making.

And that soon we'll all be looking at a calm sea

In front of the Good Luck Hotel

Feeling a light breeze on our faces.

Mexico City, September, 2015

Night Market for Brojo
By Dhianita Kusuma Pertiwi
Translated by Bryan Stubbles

A *pasar malam* is literally a “night market,” a cross between an open-air market and a county fair. All sorts of toys, food, and games and rides that children love are available there. It still exists, though in the past it was primarily a place where poor Indonesian families could shop and enjoy themselves.

The Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI) was the second-largest political party in the country in 1965. After the mysterious murder of several generals were blamed on Communists, the government and its supporters went on a witch hunt and slaughtered a huge number of people. Wikipedia gives an estimate of [500,000-3,000,000 dead](#). The actual number will likely never be known. Many others were imprisoned, including the author’s grandfather, who spent thirteen years in prison. Dhianita Kusuma Pertiwi is active in groups demanding redress from the Indonesian government. These prisoners were only released due to international pressure. The families of the victims still face stigma and emotional and psychological scars from more than fifty years ago.

The women’s auxiliary of the PKI was called *Gerwani*. Gerwani members were also killed and many were raped in prison. In the play, Brojo’s mother is a member of Gerwani, and what happens to her sets everything in motion. The play spans the years from the persecution until the twenty-first century.

Deep in his heart, Brojo still misses his mother, who frequently asked him to go to night market. However, until his old age, Brojo is unable to go to the night market and find a happy life, despite his financial success. Brojo’s separation from his mother during the killings affects the way he perceives the world and interacts with others.

The play is in Indonesian, but the author is ethnic Javanese. The play uses Javanese kinship terms as well as certain cultural terms that are difficult to translate. Slametan is a Javanese Muslim feast combined with rituals. There is a specific one for the seventh month of pregnancy. One character mentions their mother didn’t do this ceremony. It is a big deal.

The cloth that Brojo requests is for *kain kafan*, essentially what an English-speaking reader would consider as a burial shroud, made from two pieces of cloth.

Most people refer to adult Brojo as *tuan*, literally “lord” (a sign of respect). The play translates this as “sir” and “you” depending on context. On a minor point, the Indonesian *ya* corresponds to the English “yes,” but sometimes it’s “yeah” in the play because the sounds are more similar.

As for formatting, Indonesian plays follow a slightly different format when dividing a story into acts and scenes. What an American author may label as a “scene” has been labelled as an “act” by the author, per Indonesian custom. The translation keeps this format. Often, Indonesian plays will give extended stage directions where American plays would put parentheticals. The translation moves many of the Indonesian “parentheticals” to American stage directions.

-- Dhianita Kusuma Pertiwi & Bryan Stubbles

Dhianita Kusuma Pertiwi is an Indonesia-based writer, designer, and researcher. Born as the granddaughter of a former New Order political prisoner, she has a deep interest in issues of human rights violations in Indonesia; especially what happened during the New Order regime. Mass human rights violations in that period have become the main theme for several of her works, both literary and non-literary. She also participates in several non-governmental organizations connected with the effort to gain government redress for the victims and survivors of that tragedy. *Buku Harian Keluarga Kiri* (A Leftist Family Diary) is her first novel and several of her plays have been performed. She maintains a [blog](#) at where she discusses Indonesian history, society and politics.

Bryan Stubbles is an American playwright and translator. His work has been produced in London, Los Angeles, Chicago, Seattle and even Taos, New Mexico and Provo, Utah, among other places. His Liberia-set thriller *Death Sings in the Shadows* is published by Broadway Play Publishing and he has a couple short works in Smith & Kraus' *Best 10 Minute Plays* series. His blog [Unknown Playwrights](#) profiles playwrights not named "Shakespeare." His latest play is about cannibal pumpkins. His hobbies include: history, languages, music, cooking, hiking and avoiding food poisoning.

Night Market for Brojo
By Dhianita Kusuma Pertiwi
Translated by Bryan Stubbles

Synopsis: His mother's disappearance in his youth haunts Brojo through the years.

Characters:

Brojo's father: 30s+. A peddler of snacks.

Brojo: (M) At various ages in the play, including 8, late 40s and late 50s. Casting very flexible.

Sarjono: Brojo's uncle.

May: Brojo's wife.

Brojo's mother: Appears only in silhouette. An ideal made from childhood memories.

Susilo: (M) Personal aide to the adult Brojo. In his 40s and 50s.

Courier: (any gender) Courier and messenger hired by the adult Brojo.

Note: All characters are Javanese.

Double and triple-casting possible and encouraged.

Time: 1960s/1990s/2010s

Setting: Brojo's childhood home, his adult home, a hospital room.

BROJO'S WAIT

ACT I

SCENE 1

A simple living room. A wooden table is located in the middle of the room, and four rattan chairs are arranged around the table. An ashtray, a pack of cigarettes, and a lighter are on the table.

BROJO'S FATHER and BROJO sit in the middle chairs in the living room. BROJO'S FATHER SMOKES while relaxing. BROJO, Still eight years of age, crosses his feet on the table.

BROJO: Dad, where'd Mom go?

BROJO'S FATHER: Spending the night at your aunt's house.

BROJO: Why didn't she invite me?

BROJO'S FATHER: Who knows? Your mother also went alone there. Maybe there's something she needed to discuss with your aunt.

BROJO: How many days will she be there?

BROJO'S FATHER: I also don't know. Maybe you already miss her?

BROJO: Yeah. *(acting cute)* You never tell me bedtime stories.

BROJO'S FATHER: *(speechless)* Let's drop you off in your room.

BROJO: *(standing up)* It's okay, I'll go straight to sleep.

EXIT BROJO.

BROJO'S FATHER sits quietly while taking a smoke. An empty stare.

Several moments later a KNOCK at the door.

SARJONO: *(off-stage)* Sir...

BROJO'S FATHER: Come in. It's unlocked.

SARJONO ENTERS the room. HE'S BROJO'S FATHER'S younger brother-in-law. HE sits facing BROJO'S FATHER.

SARJONO: How is it, brother, is there any news?

BROJO'S FATHER shakes his head weakly.

BROJO'S FATHER: Not yet. It's been two nights and I don't know where my wife has been taken to.

SARJONO: Did you try asking?

BROJO'S FATHER: Who should I ask?

SARJONO: Simon the soldier must know where Mrs. Sul is now.

BROJO'S FATHER: Yeah. But Simon is also new here, we don't know what he's like. It'll make things worse if it turns out he has the same duties as them.

SARJONO: What is it they're actually looking for??

BROJO'S FATHER: Who really knows? Brojo's mom is just an ordinary member of Gerwani, she's not always active to follow gatherings.

SARJONO: I'm scared, brother.

BROJO'S FATHER: The important thing is to take care of your wife and child, and help me take care of Brojo.

HE puts out the cigarette in the ashtray.

SARJONO: Is Brojo asleep, brother?

BROJO'S FATHER: He just went to sleep.

SARJONO: Is he looking for his mom?

BROJO'S FATHER: Yeah. He's still not fussy like that, but he claims to miss his mom. That's what my mind is now.

SARJONO: What do you tell him, brother?

BROJO'S FATHER: I say his mom is spending the night at your house.

SARJONO: It'll calm him down for a bit.

BROJO'S FATHER: Yeah, but I can't keep on lying. He'll get bigger and bigger, and in addition if the news spreads, he'll hear gossip from his friends at school.

THEY're both quiet.

BROJO'S FATHER: Help me...

SARJONO: Gladly, brother, Minah and I will do the most we can.

BLACKOUT

ACT II

SCENE 1

BROJO sits on the living room floor, busy doing a task. Then BROJO'S FATHER ENTERS carrying a bag full of market snacks. HE walks to BROJO.

BROJO'S FATHER: Here, I got you some snacks from the market.

HE gives the bag to BROJO, then sits in one of the chairs and lights a cigarette.

BROJO takes the bag from his FATHER.

BROJO: Are you selling now, Dad?

BROJO'S FATHER: Yeah, your mom asked me to keep the store open before she left.

BROJO: Dad?

BROJO'S FATHER: What, son?

BROJO: Mom joined Gerwani, right?

BROJO'S FATHER: (*hesitant*) Yeah...

BROJO: Does mom have a heart?

BROJO'S FATHER: What do you mean heart?

BROJO: The heart to cut up the bodies of the generals killed at Lubang Buaya.

BROJO'S FATHER: Who said that?

BROJO: My history teacher. He explained what Gerwani was, and also said if one of our mothers doesn't come home for several weeks, it is likely that she belongs to Gerwani member and has been arrested.

BROJO'S FATHER: Then, do you think Mother should be arrested?

BROJO: (*shaking his head*) No.

BROJO'S FATHER: Why?

BROJO: During the Lubang Buaya incident, Mother was at home, so it was impossible for her to do as my teacher said. So it's true Mother was arrested, Dad?

BROJO'S FATHER: Yes. She was arrested a week ago.

BROJO: So Mother isn't sleeping at Aunt Min's house?

BROJO'S FATHER: No.

BROJO: Where's Mom now, Dad?

BROJO'S FATHER: I also don't know, son. Nobody gives any news, whether she's in jail or how, I also don't know much.

BROJO: We also don't know when Mom'll come back?

BROJO'S FATHER: Yeah, we don't know. Sorry.

BROJO: I'm already big, Dad. Don't worry. We wait until Mom comes back.

BLACKOUT

ACT III

SCENE 1

BROJO'S FATHER and SARJONO sit in the living room. BROJO'S FATHER looks worried.

SARJONO: How does he know, Brother?

BROJO'S FATHER: He said the history teacher at school told it in the class. I can't stop thinking of the type of history they're giving to our kids.

SARJONO: How're things with Brojo?

BROJO'S FATHER: He seems to persevere and accept the situation, but he really likes to shut himself up in his room. I can't do anything.

SARJONO: Take him walking for a while later Sunday, so you can get him to talk more.

BROJO'S FATHER: Where?

SARJONO: Someplace cheap, maybe the night market.

BROJO'S FATHER: Yeah, good idea. *(smiling)* He often went there with his mother before.

SARJONO: Try to entertain him a bit there.

BROJO'S FATHER: Yeah. I hope he wants to go with me.

SARJONO: Why, Brother?

BROJO'S FATHER: Brojo was always very close with his mother, he went everywhere with his mother. He says he misses his mom's stories before sleeping.

SARJONO: Then this is the right time to get closer to him.

BROJO'S FATHER: Yeah, you're right. Fine, I'll tell him.

SARJONO: I must go, Brother. *(standing)* I'll come here often to keep you company.

BROJO'S FATHER: *(standing)* Yeah, thanks.

SARJONO EXITS the house. BROJO'S FATHER waits in the room, then walks to Brojo's room.

ACT III

SCENE 2

BROJO'S room. A small, dim room. A futon couch in the corner, a wardrobe next to the futon, and a desk near the door.

BROJO is reading on top of the futon. Someone knocks on the door.

BROJO'S FATHER: Son...

BROJO stands and opens the door.

BROJO: Yeah, Dad?

ENTER BROJO'S FATHER.

BROJO'S FATHER: What're you doing?

BROJO: Reading, Dad, there's a quiz tomorrow.

BROJO'S FATHER: Don't you like the night market?

BROJO: Yeah, Dad. I liked going there with Mom.

BROJO'S FATHER: Let's go to the night market next Sunday. It'll be just the two of us. It's been a long time since you've been to the night market, you just study in your room.

BROJO: *(quiet)* Sorry, Dad. I'm waiting for Mom to go to the night market.

BROJO'S FATHER: Will you really wait for your mother?

BROJO: Yes, Dad.

Sleepy.

BROJO'S FATHER: But nobody knows when she'll be back.

BROJO: I know. But I really want to go there with Mom. I'm going to wait until Mom comes back and we'll go to the night market, just the two of us.

Awkward silence.

BROJO'S FATHER: Fine, if it's like that. *(quiet)* Have you eaten?

BROJO: Yes, Dad.

BROJO'S FATHER: Fine, keep studying. I have to take inventory.

BROJO: Sure, Dad.

BROJO'S DAD EXITS.

BROJO: I want to go to the cheap night market where everyone is happy, but only with Mom.

BLACKOUT

ACT IV

SCENE 1

BROJO'S FATHER sits on a sofa with a sad expression.

BROJO'S FATHER: The incident turned out to really change everything, whether one was directly involved or not. Me, my wife and my child are just ordinary people who actually don't know about the real incident, who gave the order, who got the order, who was killed and who did the killing. But we were also affected, see how our family began to fall apart.

(standing) Now I no longer know what I can do to comforting Brojo. His mother belongs to Gerwani, a thing that was previously normal but now needs to be eradicated.

(angry) I want to know what that history teacher said about Gerwani, and especially about my wife. How could they say my wife is a wicked murderer?

(walking back and forth) Actually, what was wrong with me until Brojo refused my invitation to go to the night market? During this time, I was not very close to him, but it was also beyond my control. Then how long will we wait? No one knows for sure when the innocent will be released and if they'll be alive. How long will you wait so you can go to the night market again with your mother, son?

Will you also leave me later?

(crying) And let me grow old here alone? Bear the fate of being ridiculed as the husband of an inhuman Gerwani member, and dying in loneliness? Is that what you want, son?

Or maybe that decision is the best for you, and to stay far away from your father, just go. So I don't have to feel ashamed of all these things...so I don't have to wait to sell all the merchandise just to eat good food. Go find entertainment from the lights scattered on the night market as you wish. And leave me here—*(harsh smile)*—imprisoned in an invisible jail, waiting, waiting for you to talk to me.

Cries.

BLACKOUT

BROJO'S SEARCH

ACT I

PROLOGUE: Off-stage, the sounds of the bustling night market; sounds of children laughing, playing, and merchants offering their wares.

SCENE 1

YOUNG BROJO: *(voiceover)* I want to go to the cheap night market where everyone is happy, but only with Mom.

Brojo's living room. A space with the following furniture: sofa, table, a rack consisting of a glass display and a photo of Brojo and his wife, May.

BROJO is sitting on the sofa. He is a man of nearly 50 years of age, he's wearing brand name casual clothes.

BROJO: The night market. Why is the night market cheap but makes people happy? We don't need to bring a thick wallet to ride an exciting ride, like the lofty amusement parks. The food sold there is

also very cheap, sometimes it's possible to use credit if you know the seller. If you want to ride the windmill until it feels like you're drunk or eat cotton candy until you get diarrhea, it's no problem.

Of course, I miss going to the night market. But I have dignity. Because I'm already successful, Brojo's rich, I'm not the son of an itinerant grocer. Rich people don't go to the night market. If I go there, people will think I'm being poor and thirsty for entertainment. If I obey my heart, I can buy a karaoke or movie theatre to use it to satisfy myself and my wife. But those things will only make everyone know of my enormous wealth.

When was the last time I went to the night market? It feels like it's hard to remember because it's been so long. Ah, never mind; don't let anyone know I'm still looking for the night market.

MAY, Brojo's wife, ENTERS the room. SHE's much younger than BROJO, with an attractive, made-up face. The clothes she's wearing also looks expensive. SHE walks casually but her gaze is sharp and her gestures alert.

MAY: Night market again?

BROJO: Huh, May?!

MAY: You weren't talking to yourself just now?

BROJO: What?

BROJO: *(voiceover)* Never mind, Roh, you trust me. We just elope, leave this village and forget all our identities. If we need, we can change our names just to make them sound more urban.

MAY: You remember? Although finally only me who changed my nickname from Maesaroh to May, and you keep your name.

BROJO: I just miss it.

MAY: Do you miss your mother, too?

BROJO silent. MAY sits next to BROJO and acts friendly.

MAY: Listen, honey, I don't want to argue right now, but lately you prefer to stay home, you even only go to the office two or three days a week. At home you just sit around, no longer caring for the bird. I've asked you to go out together, but you always make excuses. So I go out with friends often, rather than walk alone. Aren't you happy living with me?

BROJO: It's not like that, May, but...yeah, that, I miss the village with the night market...and I miss Mom.

MAY: Forget it, honey, your mother's never coming back. I'm not even sure they're still alive now, chances are they've been tortured since their arrest. Now isn't the time to wait.

BROJO: Then what should I do?

MAY: Yeah, just forget everything. We're already rich, You have proven your words and promises when you held me without our parents knowing. What more are you looking for? I'll tell you what's important for us now.

BROJO: What?

MAY: We must always be circumspect in telling stories about our past to other people including our hired help. Don't let it slip that we were in a difficult time when we were kids, especially don't let them know that our parents have a dark history.

BROJO smiles weakly.

MAY: We must always remember that we are only children from wealthy families and all of their property belongs to us after they die.

BROJO is quiet and nods slowly. MAY kisses BROJO's cheek.

BLACKOUT

ACT II

SCENE 1

A silhouette of LITTLE BROJO with his MOTHER in the middle of the night market.

LITTLE BROJO: Mom, you're happy to go here?

BROJO'S MOTHER: Yes, since I was little I liked going to the night market.

LITTLE BROJO: Later, when I'm old, there'll still be the night market?

BROJO'S MOTHER: I don't know, now it's rather difficult to find the night market than before. But the important thing is that you'll have to find the real night market.

LITTLE BROJO: What's that?

BROJO'S MOTHER: A simple life that makes you happy, son. like a night market that can provide happiness at a cheap price for those of us who just barely live.

The sound of their talking is drowned among the boisterous crowd.

BROJO walks to the living room, then sits on the sofa.

BROJO: Sus, Susilo!

SUSILO ENTERS in hurry to BROJO. SUSILO is BROJO's personal aide, a man in his late forties, he looks neat and acts politely.

SUSILO: Yes, sir?

BROJO: Are there any letters today?

SUSILO: There is, sir. One.

BROJO: From who?

SUSILO: I forgot, sir. Not an official letter. In an envelope that's usually sold at the store.

BROJO: (*frowning*) Please bring it here, Sus.

SUSILO: Yes, sir.

EXIT SUSILO. HE returns with a letter in his hand.

SUSILO: Here, sir.

HE gives the letter to BROJO.

BROJO: Yeah, thanks, Sus.

BROJO opens the envelope, then takes out what's inside and reads it:

BROJO: If this letter is actually read by a man who was born and grew up with the name Brojo, then it is not in vain that I write it and ride a bicycle to the post office to send it. This is your father who wrote it himself. Your father whom you left while you wandered, and I lived alone at home until your mother finally came home. Yes, your mother is now at home, even though she isn't as healthy as she used to be and every day she keeps thinking about you. She's just like you were when you missed your mother; In silence, you miss each other.

I often hear from people at the market that you've become a rich trader. Of course, I'm very thankful, that you can escape from the shackles of poverty which we used to live in together. I'm afraid to find your house to knock on the door, because maybe my feet are too dirty for slick and clean tile. I'm even scared to ask you to come here to see your mother, because maybe your busy life as a rich person won't allow you to meet people like me.

Brojo, are you still waiting for your mother to take you to the night market?

Your mother often cries at night, and there isn't anything that can make her happy besides you. In tears she said she was proud to have a child who's successful like you, however she's worried if it's still appropriate to be called a mother. I'm just a lucky person, dear, she says. I can survive with all the physical torture as well as the harsh words that prison officials always gave me. And the spirit of my life is none other than our child, I know Brojo still misses me. That's what your mother says to me almost every night.

Your mother did not know that I had found your address and wrote a letter on this shabby paper. I'm certainly hoping and waiting for just a reply from you.

However, as your own father, I feel that I'm not worth your reply anymore. Enjoy your life, Brojo. Maybe this is your time to enjoy the night market that you made yourself with your hands.

BROJO is quiet and looks with a blank expression.

BROJO: It turns out that mother is still alive, and she returned home safely. I want to meet her, but how? May could be furious if she finds out that I went back to my village, because I always forbade her to go there. I also could not invite Susilo because I already lied to him that I was a direct descendant of a conglomerate family. If Susilo knew what his employer was like, he might not believe it and leave here.

I have to find a reason strong enough to cover the purpose of my departure.

(thinking)

Ah, just say there is a sudden business outside the city.

BLACKOUT

ACT III

SCENE 1

MAY ENTERS the room, SHE's wearing fashionable clothes and has a handbag. SHE sits and looks at her surroundings.

MAY: Why is it so quiet? Sus!

ENTER SUSILO to MAY.

MAY: Where'd Brojo go?

SUSILO: Err, he left the city, Ma'am.

MAY: When did he leave? It seems he was still at home this morning, right?

SUSILO: Yes, this morning he got a letter, it said there was some business outside the city. And he left right away.

MAY: You don't know where?

SUSILO: No, Mister Brojo didn't say.

MAY: *(gloomy)* Hmmm. That's all, Sus. Oh, he didn't say for how many days?

SUSILO: No, Ma'am.

MAY: Okay, if that's the case.

EXIT SUSILO slowly.

MAY: I'm often worried about Brojo. These days he always looks anxious, thinking a lot. He seems to be thinking about something to do with his father in the village, or he misses his mother who

vanished somewhere in the jungle. Yes, maybe he misses them, I also miss my parents. But we have promised to forget everything and play our new role as rich people.

Behind her there's a silhouette displayed of BROJO with MAY as teenagers, preparing to leave the village.

BROJO: *(voice-over)* Do you still want to wait for your mom?

MAY: *(voice-over)* It's not that, but my sister...

BROJO: *(voice-over)* Your sister is already big, she can find her own life. We also have to find our own decent life on our own. Do you want to be rich?

MAY: *(voice-over)* I want it, but...

BROJO: *(voice-over)* Fine, you think carefully first. What is clear, after we leave here, we build a new family and build our dreams together. We forget everything here, leave our identity, change our names if we have to. But I also can't wait long, next week we have to leave home.

MAY: *(voice-over)* Why so fast?

BROJO: *(voice-over)* What more are you looking for?

MAY silent for a moment.

MAY: *(voice-over)* Fine. I'll follow you.

The silhouette finishes.

MAY: Luckily we really are rich, even though we had to work terribly hard and hustle when we moved to the city. But the important thing now is that our ideals have been realized.. But Brojo is now sick, so I often worry that he'll suddenly relapse because of thinking too much. It's useless to be rich but not enjoy it. He rarely leaves without telling me, even if only by telephone. Hmm, I hope he's fine.

BLACKOUT

ACT IV

SCENE 1

BROJO sits in the guest chair with a sad face. ENTER MAY.

MAY: Apparently your mom is still alive?

BROJO: *(surprised)* Where did you hear that?

MAY: From your father. Is there some sudden business in our village?

BROJO: What do you mean, May?

MAY: Stop. Don't avoid it, Brojo! You really aren't good at lying, especially to your wife. You should've burnt the letter from your father, instead of putting it on your desk carelessly.

BROJO: Oh, fine. I just got back from the village.

MAY: How's your mother?

BROJO: There's not much to be done, she's very happy when I visit. But her eyes are often empty, sometimes she's not aware of my existence. It's no longer possible to take her to the night market under such circumstances.

MAY: (*low tone*) Do you know my mom's circumstances?

BROJO: I asked your father, he said your mother didn't come back. She died in her cell.

MAY: (*quiet*) I knew she wouldn't come back, so I never had the desire to look for her again. Since giving birth to my sister she is often sick, people say it's because she didn't perform the seventh-month prayer ceremonies when she was pregnant with my sister. I wasn't sure from the start that she could survive in such a situation.

BROJO: Sorry I...

MAY: Don't worry. Truth be told, I'm also relieved.

BROJO: What do you mean?

MAY: I'm relieved you met your parents. At least you won't think about them anymore. What do you want to find now? You're rich, you have a loyal wife, it turns out your mom is still alive. You're a lucky man, Brojo.

BROJO: There's one more thing I'm looking for, May.

MAY: What? A young wife?

BROJO: I'm looking for the night market my mother talked about.

MAY: What's that?

BROJO: A happy simple life. Like a night market that can provide happiness at a cheap price.

MAY: (*snorting*) I'm not following you this time. I'm finished with all this.

SHE stands up and EXITS. BROJO sees her leave.

BROJO: To Hell with it all! After all this, I'm looking for simplicity!

BLACKOUT

BROJO'S BURIAL

ACT I

A hospital room. A bed on the right side of the stage, a guest chair and small table on the right side. The room is all white and filled with luxurious amenities. The room's door is on the left of the stage.

BROJO, a conglomerate owner in his late fifties, is a patient receiving treatment in the room. HE often coughs and lays on the bed.

HE coughs really hard, drinks from a glass of water then sits on the bed.

BROJO: It turns out growing old feels like this; no longer being able to drink a lot, smoking two or three cigarettes a day and coughing overnight.

(clears throat)

Old, sick, too. I can only eat tasteless food. I can no longer order fast food from a fancy restaurant that is usually delivered to the house. Ah yes! My house is my palace. It must now look like a quiet palace; without the king and queen living there. There are only helpers who never get bored to sweep the floor and clean up stuff.

SUSILO, BROJO'S personal assistant, a man in his late 40s, looking neat and behaving politely, ENTERS the room carrying a package of fruit.

HE stands in front of the door.

SUSILO: Good morning, sir.

BROJO: *(coughing)* Good morning, Sus. Sit down.

SUSILO puts the package on the table.

SUSILO: These are from the missus.

HE sits. BROJO peeks inside the box.

BROJO: Did May go back home?

SUSILO: Not yet. All night the missus called the house. She asked me to bring some fruit for you, Sir. She said she has one week left in Singapore.

BROJO: *(nodding)* Yeah, of course. May always wanted to take part in a world class fashion show. I'm sure she doesn't want to leave that event for even one minute.

(cough)

Even though her husband is dying.

BROJO laughs bitterly.

SUSILO: Don't talk like that, sir. You have to think that you'll recover quickly. How are you now?

BROJO: No idea, Sus. I feel every day that nothing changes with me.

HE coughs hard and long.

SUSILO: It all comes back to your mind. I once took care of my mother who was seriously ill. In addition to medicine that she had to take, many believe she recovered because of her thoughts.

BROJO: I'm not certain, Sus. There are many who say that rich people are great and not to think too much. You need this, you need that, just swipe a credit card. But in fact, I have to think about how to look after the palace and its contents.

(clearing throat)

Sus, who knows that I'm being treated at the hospital?

SUSILO: Yesterday two people came to the house claiming to be your nieces.

BROJO: Tsk. Tsk. How many months has it been since I've seen them? Did any of them talk to you?

SUSILO: Just light chatter, sir.

BROJO: No, I don't believe it. There must be something important for them to come to the house after such a long time.

SUSILO: I can't tell you now, actually I planned to tell you after you got better.

BROJO: No, Sus. Tell me now. You're the only one I can trust in my life now.

SUSILO: Well, they asked how much you're worth, and how much inheritance they'll get.

BROJO: *(a pitiful smile and a gentle laugh)* The same as before, there's nothing to change.

SUSILO: What do you mean, sir?

BROJO: You know, Sus, the wealth of our family is like a dynastic treasure that has been passed down for generations. This wealth seems to never run out because each of us has never failed in business, so we continue to grow this family's wealth.

BROJO coughs hard then takes a drink.

SUSILO: Do I need to peel the fruit, sir?

BROJO strokes his chest while waving to SUSILO, refusing the offer.

BROJO: Later, Sus. Now let me continue my story so that you can understand how my family is.

SUSILO: Go ahead, sir.

BROJO: It's normal that when a family member is seriously ill, the relatives will gather to discuss the inheritance.

SUSILO: *(shaking his head frantically, then silent)* Umm... actually they also talked about the will, Sir.

BROJO: Of course! That's our family tradition. A will isn't something taboo and to be feared. I'll write it tonight.

SUSILO: But, sir...

BROJO: But what? Is it not certain I'll die soon? Of course, no one knows for sure about human life. But that's the way our family tradition is, like every one of us is ready for death.

BLACKOUT

ACT II

Hospital room. Brojo sits on the bed and writes his will.

BROJO: Damn! Even until now I still have to pretend. The two people Susilo mentioned must have been the children of Bangun, my strongest rival. How can he still remember the promise of inheritance?

(sighs)

In order not to run so badly I have to arrange it as neatly as possible, I won't let the cat out of the bag even until my death.

ENTER a COURIER carrying a burial sheet and gives it to BROJO. HE is a secret messenger paid by BROJO, a young man who moves quickly.

BROJO: Is the size according to my request?

COURIER: Yes. Is there anything else you need?

BROJO: Tomorrow bring me batik fabric the same size as this burial sheet.

COURIER: Yes. Anything else, sir?

BROJO: Bring something to sew with. That's all.

COURIER: Yes, sir.

The COURIER EXITS the room. BROJO inspects the fabric and puts it in the desk drawer, then he writes more.

BROJO: I thought at that time he was just joking about the inheritance. It turns out he's really a bastard. Already rich, he still wants to ask about the inheritance for his children. But if I don't give it to him, he'll make trouble, he can sue. Don't you dare come to my burial!

BLACKOUT

ACT III

Hospital room. BROJO sits on the bed, reading the will.

BROJO: Ah, the flow of money is always the same. Get inheritance, use it for business development, land, houses, cars, traveling abroad, food and wine parties,

(coughing hard)

And finally, to pay for hospital fees. Everything about matter and wealth, what else can be inherited in this family besides money?

SUSILO: Sir?

BROJO: Enter, Sus.

SUSILO ENTERS slowly and sits.

BROJO: Sus, I want you to be my witness.

SUSILO: Witness what, sir?

BROJO: My witness to sign the will I've drawn up. That this is really me who wrote and signed it.

SUSILO: Yes, sir.

BROJO: *(signing the will)* Come back tomorrow and I'll give you this will along with my request.

SUSILO: What should I bring?

BROJO: *(coughs)* You don't need to bring anything, Sus. Come back tomorrow.

SUSILO: *(standing)* Yes, sir. I'll be back tomorrow.

EXIT SUSILO

BROJO: Hey, come in.

The COURIER ENTERS quickly.

BROJO: Susilo almost caught you. Didn't I tell you to come at night?

COURIER: Sorry, sir. My son asked me to take him to the night market later.

Quiet.

COURIER: Umm...here, sir.

HE hands the cloth to BROJO, who takes it.

COURIER: Is there anything else you need?

BROJO: No.

Quiet.

COURIER: Umm... I think I can leave now.

HE bows.

BROJO: Do you often go with your wife and child?

COURIER: Every so often, sir. Umm...but we usually don't go very far, just to the night market or the swimming pool. The important thing is it's cheap and everyone's happy, sir.

BROJO: Fine. Go back home.

COURIER: Yes, sir.

EXIT COURIER. BROJO stares at the COURIER leaving and looks pensive, then he inspects the cloth and needle. He takes the burial sheet out of the drawer and begins sewing.

BROJO: The important thing is it's cheap and everyone's happy.

BLACKOUT

ACT IV

Hospital room. BROJO sits on the bed and SUSILO on the chair.

SUSILO: The task you mentioned yesterday, what is it, sir?

BROJO: Oh, yeah.

HE takes out the burial sheet and the batik that has already been sewn together from the drawer and gives them to SUSILO.

SUSILO: What's the meaning of this, sir?

BROJO: I want you to open my storage locker. There is one suitcase that I planned to use to celebrate our wedding anniversary on a private island in Europe. Take out the money, burn it and wrap the ashes with the cloth and bury it in the back garden.

(coughing)

Do you understand, Sus?

SUSILO: I understand sir, but what does it all mean?

BROJO: Just do it, Sus. Right after you do everything, you can read the will to my family who are thirsty for that inheritance.

(coughing)

Do it now, Sus!

SUSILO: Umm...Fine, sir.

SUSILO stands and EXITS.

The light in the hospital goes out.

The ground in the backyard of Brojo's house has been dug out.

ENTER SUSILO carrying ashes wrapped in the cloth. HE stops, faces the audience and pulls out a bunch of money from his pocket.

SUSILO: He won't know about it.

HE laughs a little and slyly puts it in a bag.

HE buries the bag of ashes.

BLACKOUT

ACT V

A burial. A basket of flowers has been placed on the side of a tomb. MOURNERS stand around, pray and spread flowers. One by one the mourners EXIT. BROJO ENTERS onto the stage with the COURIER, using a stick and walks with a little limp. THEY stand beside the tomb.

BROJO: Sus, after all this time I thought I could trust you.

(taking and sprinkling flowers)

It turns out that everything is fake. Nothing is really pure and clean. There are always lies in every corner of the story or life. Maybe it's still better if the lie can make you happy

(smiles, to COURIER)

Hey, I want to go to the cheap night market and everyone is happy.

COURIER: Yes, sir.

BLACKOUT

The end.

Toilet: A Play in Three Acts
By Guo Shixing
Translated by Junjie Jiang

Toilet (2004) is the first play in the contemporary Chinese playwright Guo Shixing's (1952–) “Dignity Trilogy,” followed by *Crematory* (2007) and *Homecoming* (2011). These plays came after his earlier “Loafer Trilogy” of *Birdmen* (1993), *Chessmen* (1996), and *Fishmen* (1997).¹ Acclaimed to be “the squatting *Teahouse*,” *Toilet* is one of Guo's exemplary works.²

Toilet has been translated into French by Pascale Wei-Guinot and Italian by Sergio Basso.³ This is the first English translation of *Toilet*. Some claim that a foreign play is untranslatable and a translated play is unperformable. I do not agree with such a claim. While introducing its own challenges, the task of translating *Toilet* into English presents many opportunities for creativity. The following reasons may account for such challenges.

First of all, the playwright sets the three acts against the backdrop of three respective decades that witnessed numerous political movements and drastic changes in the ideological, cultural, and socioeconomic environment in China. The characters adapted themselves to the changing environment while retaining certain traits and idiosyncrasies.

The 1970s was a major turning point in modern Chinese history. It saw the conclusion of the political frenzy of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), the beginning of the economic reform (known as “the Reform and Opening-up,” 1978) that led to the end of a planned economy and the burgeoning of a market economy, the restoration of the education system marked by the reinstatement of the national college entrance exams in 1977, and milestones in foreign diplomatic relations with the United States and Africa.⁴

In Act I, the characters still live in the wake of the Cultural Revolution and a planned economy. Vocabularies and symbols of the Cultural Revolution and even earlier campaigns such as the Great Leap Forward (1958–60) and the Anti-Rightist Campaign (1957–59) remained in their memory and everyday conversations. One would find phrases such as “educated youths,” “Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside,” the Northeast, “Three Years of Difficult Period,” “Five Reds,” “Destroy the Four Olds,” “Gang of Four,” to name a few, and such symbols as a Mao suit (which stands for the proletariat), *The Reference News*, and *The Red Detachment of Women* (which represent state control on press and arts). New developments in China's foreign and diplomatic relations also made

¹ To read more about Guo's biography and his other works, see Gabrielle H. Cody and Evert Sprinchorn, ed., *The Columbia Encyclopedia of Modern Drama* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 571. For an English translation of Guo's *Birdmen*, see Guo Shixing, “Birdmen: A Drama in Three Acts,” trans. Jane C. C. Lai, in Martha Cheung and Jane Lai, eds., *An Oxford Anthology of Contemporary Chinese Drama* (Hong Kong; New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 295-350.

² *Teahouse* (1957) by Lao She is a well-received Chinese drama classic.

³ Guo Shixing, *Toilettes publiques*, trans. Pascale Wei-Guinot (Paris: Maison Antoine Vitez, 2004), unpublished manuscript. Guo Shixing, *Cessi pubblici*, trans. Sergio Basso (Bologna, Italy: Cue Press, 2017), digital.

⁴ For explanations on political and economic campaigns as well as related vocabularies, see detailed footnotes throughout the translation.

their way into the play: ping-pong diplomacy, Nixon's visit to China, the foreign aid project in Africa to build the TAZARA Railway, and so on.

The effects of the economic reform were felt more keenly in the 1980s. The toilet, once free of charge, turned into a pay toilet and started charging its patrons for their visits. Peddlers, once considered "the evil remnants of capitalism" and heavily persecuted, popped up on the streets and tended small businesses freely. The conversations between the characters became less politically charged. There were no references to the military other than the Sino-Vietnamese border conflicts (1979–91). The 1980s also saw the rise of popular culture and the beginning of public discourse on love and desire.

The market economy flourished in the 1990s. Popular culture continued to flourish. A sexual revolution started and still continues today. Foreign companies, employees, and tourists had more and more presence. In the initial encounter with foreigners, the characters made naïvely racist remarks despite their well-meaning efforts to be friendly and welcoming. Guo was one of the earliest writers to explore such sensitive topics as sexuality, gender, and racial discrimination. We can see the playwright's immature attempt to depict a character named Yingzi when the vocabulary for and the understanding of the LGBTQ community were still lacking. Yingzi was a transgender, based on Guo's description of her excitement about having access to the women's toilet, yet she was referred to as "gay." The Chinese word Guo used, *tongxinglian* 同性戀, literally means "same-sex love" and refers to gays and lesbians. We can also see his exaggerated portrayal of a rebellious and sexually open-minded next generation represented by Liangliang and his stereotypical depictions of the appearances and habits of foreigners who are overly generalized as "Europeans" and "a black man."⁵

Examined today, some of Guo's characterizations and plots, insofar as they make a fumbling attempt at consciousness-raising in an era and a society that had (and still has) a very different—not necessarily ill-intentioned—understanding of and sensitivity to such issues as obesity, homosexuality, and otherness, risk of being misunderstood and gravely offensive to an English reader who is unfamiliar with the Chinese society. For instance, the characters' names Fats and Slim may sound politically incorrect. However, it is generally acceptable in China (though the level of sensitivity is changing due to Western popular culture influences) to comment on body shapes of friends, acquaintances, and sometimes even strangers, showing one's care or concern about the other person's health. To give a personal anecdote, my parents' and grandparents' generations, who have been through famine and extreme poverty, do not appreciate the popular aesthetics of slimness dictated by fashion and the fitness industry. When I return home, they will exclaim overjoyed, "You've gotten fat!" or remark with much worry, "You're so skinny!" They dismiss my attempt to lose weight because, for them, being "fat" means being healthy and robust, while being slim is sickly. Since this is the first English translation of this play, I try to present this play faithfully and have preserved the potentially controversial parts even though they may lead to misunderstanding.

⁵ For a discussion on this issue, see Claire Conceison, "The Occidental Other on the Chinese Stage: Cultural Cross-Examination in Guo Shixing's 'Bird Men,'" *Asian Theatre Journal*, vol. 15, no. 1 (1998), 87-101 and *Significant Other: Staging the American in China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004).

The three decades also witnessed three generations. Shi Sr., who belonged to the first generation, initially resisted the changes and was unwilling to try new things until the end of the play. The second generation was more proactive in adapting to the changing society, while some made faster progress than others. Shi Jr., for instance, was often surprised by the new identities of the pickpocket. Shi Jr. still occasionally referenced the past (e.g., *Red Lantern*), of which the third generation such as Liangliang had no understanding.

Since the playwright deliberately sets the scenes against the particular political, economic, and social circumstances of the respective decades, context is crucial in understanding this play. It is challenging to strike a balance between introducing and explaining as much context as possible and keeping the text colloquial and performable while not being tedious or overwhelming. Regarding the slogans, buzzwords, anecdotes, as well as political and popular culture references particular to a certain decade that may be unfamiliar to an average English reader and even a young Chinese reader, I provide extensive footnotes for those who intend to use this text for academic study.

As for performance, directors may have different ideas about how much context is necessary and adopt different approaches accordingly. Sergio Basso, for instance, in his ingenious Italian production of the play *Cessi Pubblici* (2017), chose to emphasize “the universal theme of human ordeal” and convey the Chinese context in a minimalistic, symbolic way.⁶ Only a few toilet bowls remain in his simple stage set without the partition between the men’s and the women’s, and the outside of the toilet building is simply represented by the dark surrounding space outside the borders (which are marked by white lines that form a square on the floor) of the lit central stage. Specific Chinese costumes in the original play are almost reduced to symbols—a green Communist army cap with a red star and pieces of red cloth.

If Basso is interested in how to strip the context to its bare minimum, I am interested in the exact opposite—how to provide as much context as possible and to negotiate the risk of overburdening the audience with too much context. At the conference “(Un)performable & (Un)translatable” that took place at Trinity College, Dublin in 2017, I presented my experiment on the extent of the translator’s intervention. I inserted sentences and even passages of my own creation into the original, introducing footnotes as characters and (re)inventing slangs and wordplay. In my proposed translation (or adaptation, if you will), footnotes take on a life of their own, figuring out their mission, justifying their existence, and competing with the characters for attention. The following is an example of my transformation of the footnote for “military dancer” into a dialog:

FOOTNOTE 1 (FN 1) is staring at DANDAN with full attention, and at the same time, scribbling on a notepad.

FN 2 Hey, Footnote my bro! What are you staring at?

FN 1 gives no reply as if he did not hear FN 2. FN 2 pats on FN1’s shoulder.

FN2 Hey!

⁶ Sergio Basso, personal communication, October 19, 2017.

FN1 Oh, you're talking to me?

FN2 Of course I'm talking to you! Isn't your name "Footnote"?

FN1 Yes, but your name is Footnote, too!

FN2 Right, I'm Footnote Two, and you're Footnote One.

FN1 Fine. What do you want?

FN2 What are you doing?

FN1 Studying my subject.

FN2 What subject?

FN1 "Military dancer, ..."

FN2 What's a military dancer?

FN1 Exactly! That justifies my existence.

FN2 Like a prostitute? A stripper?

FN1 No, no, no. "A military dancer is a dancer affiliated with the military who performs for the troops for their morale and entertainment." What do you think?

FN2 Hmm... Maybe joining the military is not a bad idea...

FN1 That's not what I'm asking. Hmm... try again. "Military dancers are a special category of soldiers whose main duty is to perform for the troops' morale and entertainment." A little better?

FN2 (lost in thought) Hmm...⁷

I constantly found myself struggling back and forth between providing too little context to be helpful and too much to be distracting and even overwhelming. In the following passage translated from the original, I inserted the footnote's thwarted attempts to showcase the anxiety over too much context as well as the competition between the author (represented by the "original" characters) and the translator (represented by the inserted, if not intruding, characters) to claim authority over the text:

OLD ZHANG Our reception of Nixon should be neither warm nor cold, neither humble nor arrogant.

⁷ Any text highlighted in gray is my creation not to be found in the original

FATS *(Turns off the radio, sings a line from a Beijing opera)* “His expression is neither sunny nor gloomy.”

FN2 *(pops out)* This is a line from a model opera. A model opera is, during the Cultural Revolution...

Before FN2 can finish, FATS shoves FN2 out of the way.

OLD ZHANG The party directive does *not* read that.

FATS Kissinger enjoys watching belly dance.

OLD ZHANG Where did you learn that?

FATS *The Reference News.*

FN2 *(pops out, speaks in a rushed pace)* It was the single newspaper allowed to directly quote news translated from foreign media.

FATS shoves FN2 away again. FN2 is excited about her success in inserting a line nevertheless.

...

FATS I heard, during the campaign to “Destroy the Four Olds” *(FN2 tries to pop out again but FATS shoves her aside before she can talk)*, ...a piece of calligraphy was found. Some guy Ji’s Pingfu tie.

(whispers to FN2, fiercely) Don’t even try!

Apart from the political and cultural context, another source of challenge is multiple vernacular languages used in this play. The playwright does not limit himself to standard Mandarin—the official language of the current Chinese state—but adopts slangs and colloquialisms from the local Beijing dialect as well as other northern dialects. In spite of a common written script, vast linguistic differences exist among various dialects spoken in China to the extent that many words and expressions in this play are foreign to me as a southerner who grew up in the Jiangnan region of China and as a member of the younger generation who grew up speaking standard Mandarin and feels distanced from vernacular languages. Salomé Paul observed that Sergio Basso’s Italian translation echoes the multilingualism of the play by incorporating words from other European languages such as English, French, and Spanish.⁸

The play shows how linguistic differences become hallmarks of identity and the shibboleths to discriminate against the Other. Among Beijing residents, a worker from Hebei (the neighboring province of Beijing) and an out-of-towner (a generic nonlocal whose hometown is not specified) spoke with distinctive accents. Residents of such big cities as Beijing (the same can be said for Shanghai), who in general enjoy better resources and a higher standard of living, tend to feel entitled

⁸ Salomé Paul, personal communication, October 29, 2017.

and look down upon those who come from other places. Attracted by the opportunities and resources in Beijing, many out-of-towners strive to become Beijing residents and to gain the identity and recognition as a “local.” Because of China’s household registration (*hukou*) system that ties one’s social security benefits (including pension, education, medical insurance, and unemployment insurance) to one’s registered residency status (*hukou*), one needs to change one’s residency status from one’s hometown to Beijing in order to live a decent life in Beijing. However, due to the state control of Beijing’s population density and local residents’ general reluctance toward domestic immigrants, such migration within China is difficult.

It happened twice in the play that after the out-of-towner spoke, a Beijing local questioned whether the out-of-towner was a nonlocal, based on his accent. The conversation is centered around the derogatory term “*waidiren*” 外地人, literally “a person from another place,” versus the neutral term “*waixiangren*” 外乡人, literally “a person from out of town.” The locals called the out-of-towner *waidiren*, while the out-of-towner insisted on calling himself the less derogatory term *waixiangren*. What these two phrases share in common is the word “*wai*,” which means “outside” or “foreign.” Originally, *waidiren* and *waixiangren* are neutral synonyms; however, *waidiren* has accrued a negative overtone. Here, the basis of discrimination is one’s place of origin rather than race, ethnicity, education level, or socioeconomic status albeit the last two are oftentimes implied. Equivalents in English are difficult to find, not because no such discriminations exist in English-speaking countries, but because understandably, such discriminations, along with the derogatory terms they generate, are oftentimes specific to a certain area or group but not universal. Possible choices include “foreigner,” “alien,” “immigrant,” “hobo,” “visitor,” “guest,” etc. I eventually chose “outsider” versus “out-of-towner.”

FATS	... Are you an outsider?
OUT-OF-TOWNER	I’m an out-of-towner.
OLD ZHANG	Out-of-towner, you’d better watch your words.
...	
SHI JR	You’re not a local?
OUT-OF-TOWNER	No, I’m an out-of-towner.
SHI JR	An outsider.
OUT-OF-TOWNER	“Out-of-towner” sounds more welcoming.

The accent of the out-of-towner is not pronounced in the written text of the original play other than in the directions. The playwright does not specify what accent the out-of-towner has. However, the choice of the out-of-towner’s accent is worth careful consideration and could produce different power dynamics between the out-of-towner and the Beijing locals ranging from urban versus rural to north versus south or Beijing versus elsewhere. An irony is possible when his accent is associated with the vulgar and uneducated (as most accents are), while the out-of-towner is perhaps the most

learned person in the play, who read in the toilet to prepare for the college entrance exam and eventually became a professor. Another possibility is a southern urban accent, such as Shanghaiese or Cantonese, which could make the out-of-towner sound condescending in his own way. As to performance in English, for example, a British accent would produce a rather different effect from a southern American accent or an Irish accent.

A third challenge is to translate the packed names of the characters. Suggestive names rich in meanings are common in Chinese literature. How can I translate these very compact yet telling names? For example, the main character of the play, Shi Jr., the second-generation toilet guard, is known as “*Sbi-ye*” 史爺 in Chinese. The family name *Sbi* 史 means “history,” yet it is also a pun of *shi* 屎, which means “shit.” The family name therefore links the role of a toilet guard to a witness of history through the transformations of the toilet over time. The visual and aural similarities between the *pinyin* (the Romanization of Chinese characters) “*sbi*” and the English word “shit” are convenient for me as the translator to establish the link between the family name and the toilet albeit not readily invoking history. To establish the link between shit and history and convey the scatological joke, I experimented with another insertion:

SHI JR	Pieces of shit! Why must I clean the toilet! ...I mean, why must the Shi family run the shitter?
SHI SR	You ask me? I wonder about it myself!
OUT-OF-TOWNER	Because you're Mr. Shit—both of you!
SHI JR	Hey, hey, our family name is Shi. Shi as in shit, not shit as in shit.
OUT-OF-TOWNER	Shi...t?
SHI JR	No, s-h-i, SHI. The “t” is silent.
OUT-OF-TOWNER	Still sounds like “Shit.”
SHI JR	Anyways. It means history.
OUT-OF-TOWNER	Shit is history... and history is shit... Fascinating! Shistory... Fascinating... Much like shit, history reeks at first, is then solidified and eventually baked into the landscape. You ask if it does any good. Well, it is a monument of failures, admonishing people to watch their step. However, because it's always there and it's situated low, people neglect it and rush through it. Sometimes it gets stuck on somebody's sole for a while, which may be a nuisance, but as a result people grow wiser and learn to watch where they're going. What can we get out of it? Well, we may study it, but the historical conditions are ultimately unrecoverable and irreproducible,

no matter how meticulous and industrious we are, so we may never figure it out. But it's always there—it looks the same but is not exactly the same—and in the making it is repeated, and unfortunately stepped in, every day.

SHI JR *(Silent for a few seconds.)* Shi...t.

SHI SR You do know shit.⁹ We can't pick our family name, but we do have family members who have made their names known within the Four Seas...

Sarcasm and humor, especially those based on puns and wordplay, are so difficult to translate that oftentimes the situation calls for inspired rewriting.

Further, multiple ironies are built into the name *Shi-ye*. In the Beijing dialect, *ye* 爺 has at least five different meanings with very different overtones. Depending on the context, *ye* can be a colloquial way to say papa or grandpa, a respectful honorific to address an official or a scholar who had reached a certain level in the imperial civil service examination system, or used ironically to show disrespect and sarcasm. How can I convey the shades of meaning as well as the cultural richness of one simple word? We know from the list of characters that Shi-ye is one of the so-called “educated youths.” The irony of this historical term “educated youths” is that this term may mislead one to think of such youths as well-educated young intellectuals or scholars, while in fact, most of them merely received elementary to high school education, and only a small number matriculated at the college or university level. We learn later in the play that Shi-ye never went to college. He always worked as a toilet cleaner and frequently misused idioms. Thus, to call him *ye* is ironical. “Sir” or “Mister” sounds too formal and fails to convey the irony. I have considered using “Doc,” suggesting “Dr.” but not quite; however, I worry that the irony may not come across. Eventually, I have to settle with simply “Jr.”

I translate Shi Jr.'s post “*kan cesuo de*” 看廁所的 as a “toilet guard” rather than a “toilet cleaner” in Act I because I cannot help to go along with the irony and embellish the story. The Chinese word “*kan*” 看 can mean “to tend” or “to guard.” Here I choose the latter to expose the irony between the heroic act of guarding and the baseness of toilet, invoking the historical absurdity of the “Red Guards” during the Cultural Revolution. I have also given color to such a neutral original phrase as “to replace his father as the toilet guard” by translating it as “to receive his hereditary right to be the toilet guard” to mock at the absurd degree of nepotism in almost every aspect of society. (The playwright mocks at nepotism in the dialog of “shit replacement” between Fats and Slim.)

Another character that has *ye* in his name is the pickpocket. His name “*Fo-ye*” 佛爺 is the Beijing slang word for “pickpocket.” Its meaning is very clear to a person who speaks Beijing dialect; however, it creates a challenge for translation. “*Fo*” 佛 (literally “Buddha”) is a pun for “*fu*” 拂, “to swipe.” “*Ye*,” again, is an ironic use of an honorific. “*Fo-ye*” is a Buddha or the sarcastic Beijing slang

⁹ *This is my shit.* –Translator

referring to a pickpocket as a swipe master. Certainly, no equivalents can convey all layers of meaning in this one word. I considered options such as “Baron Swipe” yet eventually had to settle with simply “pickpocket.” In her French translation, Pascale Wei-Guilot translated Fo-ye as “Poussah,” which means “pot-bellied man” through corruption of the Chinese word *pusa*, meaning “bodhisattva.” Sergio Basso, in his Italian rendition of the play, comically named the pickpocket “Manolo Manolesta.” “Manolo” is a Spanish name, also used in Italian, which means “little Manuel.” “Manolesta,” literally “fast-hand,” is the Italian slang for “pickpocket.” “Manolo Manolesta” reminds the audience of comic strips characters such as “Ispettore Manetta” (the Italian name of Detective Casey in Disney’s *Mickey Mouse*), literally “Detective Handcuffs.”¹⁰

I consider translation to be less of a mechanical process of finding equivalents than a process of re-creation, a form of rewriting inspired by the original. However, *les belles infidèles* are always lurking like a specter. I have taken some liberties adding or changing words, sentences, moving things around, and making small nips and tucks here and there. Sometimes I was motivated by my desire to free myself from the shackles of the original, but then I felt interrogated by the moral principle of faithfulness, so I go through some form of self-censorship and change my own rendering back to one that is closer to the original. Sometimes I felt I was a slave of the original and I questioned what it meant to be faithful—to the signified or the signifier?

As for rich puns, vivid slang, and wisecrack, I generally adopt a foreignizing strategy. When a literal translation of an idiom makes sense, I adopt the literal translation rather than looking for an English or American idiom; when it does not, I try to invent an idiom, a pun, or wordplay in English. For example, when Liangliang was teasing Shi Jr. for having a crush on her, she used the idiom *laoniu chi nencao* 老牛吃嫩草, literally “an old ox munching on fresh grass,” referring to an old guy wooing a young girl. To make the suggestiveness in this phrase clearer, I translate it as “If there’s fresh grass on the field, munch on it, old ox,” invoking the saying “If there’s grass on the field, play ball,” transforming the baseball field in the English saying into the grazing field in the Chinese one. When a Chinese pun does not automatically translate, I rewrite to create new wordplay in English. Take the following witty comeback as an example. The original is based on the Chinese pun *zao duan lian* 早鍛鍊 (“morning exercise”) and *zao lian* 早戀 (“underage love”), and I shifted the wordplay to the phrase “puppy love.”

Literal Translation:

UNDERCOVER	Did you have underage love while in school?
SHI JR	It was morning exercise, not underage love.

My Translation:

UNDERCOVER	Did you have puppy love while in school?
SHI JR	I had a puppy, no love.

¹⁰ Sergio Basso, personal communication, December 6, 2017.

Sometimes, I try to create a new pun. For example, the popular saying, “*yanjiu daodan de hai buru mai chajidan de*” 研究導彈的還不如賣茶雞蛋的, which promotes the anti-intellectual ideology during the Cultural Revolution, literally means “those who research on missiles do no better than those who sell tealeaves-boiled eggs” and relies on the pun *dan* 彈, “missiles,” and *dan* 蛋, “eggs.” In order to introduce a pun, I traded eggs with miso and translated the saying as “those who study missiles do no better than those who sell miso.”

The loss in translation is unavoidable; I, however, do not feel so sorry for such loss because whatever richness the translated text loses here, it has the possibility to gain elsewhere. Since this is the first English translation, in this version, I keep my intervention to the minimum in order to present this play to the English reader as faithfully as possible. Therefore, I have excluded most of my experimental insertions discussed above. Any text highlighted with gray is my creation, insertion, or adaptation not to be found in the original but adjustment I deem necessary. It is impossible to mark out every tiny bit of my “unfaithfulness” due to the nature of a translation. A reader might find it most revealing to read the Chinese original and the English translation side by side. However, I sincerely hope a reader who does not read Chinese would find it rewarding just reading the translation.

This work is experimental and a result of many compromises. I welcome all comments, corrections, and criticisms.

GUO Shixing (1952–), based in Beijing, is one of the most prominent contemporary Chinese playwrights. Born into a family of high-level *Go* chess players, he learned how to play *Go*. When he was little, he enjoyed going to the theatre near his home. *In the Name of Revolution*, a Soviet-themed children’s play in the 50s (which was made into a popular film in the 60s) that featured Lenin and Kerensky, left a deep impression on him. Guo first worked as a lathe operator who sharpened blades. After attending a journalist training program in 1978, he started working as a staff correspondent for *Beijing Evening News* the following year. As a journalist who covered theatre, he watched thousands of shows and interviewed hundreds of actors, playwrights, and directors. Guo also participated in Gao Xingjian’s theatre experiments. In 1989, Guo finished his first play *Fishmen* with the encouragement from Lin Zhaohua, one of the foremost experimental theatre directors. Lin directed *Fishmen* as well as Guo’s later plays, *Birdmen*, *Chessmen*, *Crematory*, and *Homecoming*. Known as the “Loafer Trilogy,” *Fishmen*, *Birdmen*, and *Chessmen*, focus on leisurely activities of fishing, bird keeping, and *Go* chess playing, which are traditional entertainment for Beijing locals. Guo draws his characters and themes locally and focuses on ordinary people’s everyday life. He revitalizes the theatre with cultural and existential inquiries and reexamines what is considered “improper” or “impossible” on the stage by his choice of subjects: language, trivial hobbies, and private, “inelegant” topics such as the toilet, the crematory, and dementia. Guo’s major works include the “Loafer Trilogy” of *Birdmen* (1993), *Chessmen* (1996), and *Fishmen* (1997), *A Street of Bad Talk* (1998), and the “Dignity Trilogy” of *Toilet* (2004), *Crematory* (2007), and *Homecoming* (2011). An English translation of *Birdmen* can be found in Martha Cheung and Jane Lai eds., *An Oxford Anthology of Contemporary Drama in China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 295–350.

Junjie Jiang (1990–) was born and raised in a provincial town near Nanjing in China. She holds a B.A. from Columbia University, *summa cum laude*, Phi Beta Kappa, and an M.A. from Harvard University. She loves stage acting and film acting, writing about theatre, literature, art, and film, and translating between Chinese and English. Her article has appeared in *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*. She won the 27th Liang Shih-chiu Literary Award (the Jury Award in Prose Translation). She aspires to become an actor, playwright, and screenwriter. <https://scholar.harvard.edu/jjiang>

Acknowledgement

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Toilet: A Play in Three Acts

By Guo Shixing

Translated by Junjie Jiang

SETTING:

A public toilet and its surroundings in Beijing in the early 1970s, the mid 80s, and the late 90s.

CHARACTERS

SHI JR: male, 20s into 40s, an “educated youth” who has returned to the city to receive the hereditary right to be the toilet guard

SHI SR: male, 50s into 70s, SHI JR’s father

DANDAN: female, 20s through 30s, an “educated youth,” later a disabled veteran, and LIANGLIANG’s mother (can be played by the same actor who plays the adult LIANGLIANG)

LIANGLIANG: female, from about 8 into 20s, DANDAN’s daughter

OLD ZHANG: male, 50s into 70s, known as the “old cadre,” a toilet graffiti vandal

PICKPOCKET: male, a pickpocket

FATS: male, a freelance writer of “educated youth” literature

SLIM: male

GUY III: male, a construction contractor

YINGZI: male, 30s into 50s

UNDERCOVER POLICEMAN: male, 30s into 50s

OUT-OF-TOWNER: male, a nonlocal patron of the public toilet

QIN YUE: male, 20s, a rock star

Public toilet patrons, Chinese and foreigners, male and female, old and young

1970s, a male military officer and female recruits

1980s, street jianbing peddlers outside of the toilet and a tailor who measures Shi Jr. for a suit

1990s, a foreigner deputy hotel manager, a waitress, a security guard, a busboy, and other restaurant staff

ACT I

One morning in the 1970s, in a narrow alley in Beijing, a gray-brick public toilet building is closely ringed by simple one-story dwellings, whose chimneys are emitting charcoal smoke. In the distance is a white tower.¹¹ The sound of folk instruments called pigeon whistles can be heard from time to time.¹²

The public toilet has individual holes for defecating over a deep pit, where people squat and take a dump, and a urinal trough made of coarse clay. This is an unobstructed space for collective urination and defecation. No one is concerned about privacy, and everyone feels comfortable and at ease.

The interior of the public toilet building on the stage should be visible. The audience should be able to see the upper body of the actors. It is recommended to use light to direct the audience's attention to the ongoing actions in different sections of the stage. For those areas where no action is taking place for the moment, actors may wait for their turn on the stage or exit and re-enter later. A revolving stage may also be used.¹³

The radio is broadcasting a cross-talk sketch, "An Ode to Friendship" by Ma Ji and Tang Jiezhong.¹⁴

Two types of people use the toilet. Those who need to empty their chamber pots do not need to wait in the line—they simply enter and empty their pots. Those who need to move their bowels have to wait in line for the holes to be available to take a dump.

A few people come into the toilet to empty their chamber pots and leave.

The men's toilet, interior.

There are six holes over the pit and no partition walls. All of the holes are occupied. The urinal trough is one meter away from the pit, and people are dumping into the urinal trough the content of their chamber pots.

¹¹ Such narrow alleys, called *hutong* 胡同 in local parlance, are formed by and run along the interstices of Chinese quadrangles (*sibeyuan* 四合院), which are traditional courtyard residences in Beijing. Multiple quadrangles are joined together to form a neighborhood. *Hutongs* are commonly associated with northern Chinese cities, most prominently Beijing.

¹² Pigeon whistles (*geshao* 鸽哨) are folk instruments tied onto pigeons' tail feathers. Pigeons are raised as pets in Beijing. The whistles catch the wind as pigeons fly and make a haunting sound. Pigeon whistles have a history of over a thousand years. Beijing is known for exquisite craftsmanship and variety of pigeon whistles.

¹³ Previous productions by Guo at Beijing People's Art Theatre (BPAT) featured a revolving stage, e.g. *Birdmen*, which would likely have inspired him to envision this possibility for staging when he wrote the script.

¹⁴ Cross-talk (*xiangsheng* 相声) is a traditional Chinese comedic performance in the form of a dialogue between two performers, or, less commonly, a solo monologue or a multi-person dialogue, full of puns, allusions, and quick exchanges of banter. The closest equivalent would be a stand-up comedy but with two comedians. Cross-talk is typically performed in the Beijing dialect or with a strong Northern accent. The piece "An Ode of Friendship" (*Youyi song* 友谊颂) (1972) is based on the building of the TAZARA Railway (built 1968–1975), also called the Great Uhuru Railway (*uhuru* being the Swahili word for "freedom") or the Tanzam Railway, which links Tanzania and Zambia and is the longest railway in sub-Saharan Africa. Following the World Bank's and the Soviet Union's refusal of the Tanzanian and the Zambian governments' request for help in building the Railway, China financed and executed the construction, making it the largest foreign-aid project undertaken by China in the 1960s and the 1970s. The Railway has been considered a monument of the brotherhood between China and Africa. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), severe censorship was imposed, and "An Ode of Friendship" was one of the very few sketches passed by the censor. Ma Ji 马季 (1934–2006) and Tang Jiezhong 唐傑忠 (1932–2017) were famous cross-talk masters.

OLD ZHANG, *squatting over one of the holes, is dodging the splashes of urine.*

OLD ZHANG: Watch out! A man's trying to poop here!

POT EMPTIER: Sorry sir, didn't mean to. Yo, why all dressed up for the shithouse?

OLD ZHANG: For work. Foreign affairs.

POT EMPTIER: I'll take your spot after you're done.

The public toilet building, exterior.

People waiting impatiently outside the toilet shout, "Hey! Don't cut the line!"

POT EMPTIER: Brothers, I've got the runs. Would you be considerate...

People shout, "Don't cut the line!"

POT EMPTIER has no choice but to come outside and go to the end of the line.

Suddenly, people stop shouting and fix their eyes on the entrance of the women's toilet. DANDAN, an attractive female soldier, holding a chamber pot covered with a lid, walks into the building.

MAN 1: She's a military dancer.¹⁵

MAN 2: Hmm, makes sense... Look at her big breasts and wide hips...

DANDAN comes out of the toilet building and puts the chamber pot on the ground. She waits outside, turns her back to the crowd and looks away. Obviously, the women's toilet is full.

MAN 3: The women's toilet has only two holes.

MAN 4: How do you know that?

MAN 3: Count the windows. Two-thirds fewer than the men's.

MAN 1: Gender inequality right there!

An old lady comes out of the toilet building, and DANDAN hurries in with the chamber pot.

SHI SR and his son SHI JR are bicycling toward the toilet building. SHI JR has a rubber hose for flushing and a broom on his bike rack.

SHI SR: Here we are, the last public toilet in the area. Starting tomorrow, you'll be on your own. I won't be there to lead you.

SHI JR: I've heard President Nixon is visiting China soon...

¹⁵ A military dancer is a dancer from the military song and dance troupe who performs for the soldiers to boost their morale. The 2017 film *Youth* (Chinese: *Fanghua* 芳华), directed by Feng Xiaogang and written by Yan Geling, features military dancers.

SHI SR: Maybe the First Lady will visit the toilet, so you better clean it well.

SHI JR gets off the bike and starts to take out his sanitation tools.

The men's toilet, interior.

OLD ZHANG: Our reception of Nixon should be neither warm nor cold, neither humble nor arrogant.

FATS: *(Turns off the radio, sings a line from a Beijing opera)* “His expression is neither sunny nor gloomy.”¹⁶

OLD ZHANG: The party directive does *not* read that.

FATS: Kissinger enjoys watching belly dance.

OLD ZHANG: Where did you learn that?

FATS: *The Reference News.*¹⁷

OLD ZHANG: We should focus on the good side. Kissinger is friendly to China after all.

FATS: Are you suggesting belly dancing is not good?

OLD ZHANG: It's kind of dirty.

FATS: Dirty? How?

OLD ZHANG: The belly...

YINGZI: Belly dance is very sexy, not dirty.

FATS: I wouldn't know until I've seen it.

OLD ZHANG: That would require a trip to the Middle East. *You* probably won't have the chance.

FATS: Then I'll just look at belly *(pause)*, dance—another time.

YINGZI: It's like this... *(Imitates the moves, wiggling his bottom.)*

GUY III: Hey, don't shit on me!

¹⁶ The line is from the modern Beijing opera *Shajiabang* 沙家浜, composed during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). It received nationwide popularity at the time. It belongs to the category of the so-called “revolutionary opera” or “model opera” (*yangban xi* 样板戏) and tells the story of how communist soldiers fought against the Japanese invaders in the 1940s. Having a neither sunny nor gloomy look means showing an ambiguous attitude.

¹⁷ *The Reference News* (*Cankao xiaoxi* 参考消息) is a newspaper daily with a 3-million circulation WHEN WAS THAT?, the largest in mainland China. It is published by Xinhua News Agency, the Chinese government's official news agency. *The Reference News* was at first reserved only for communist party cadres and their families, but later made available to the entire public. Before the 1980s, it was the only newspaper allowed to directly quote news translated from foreign media.

FATS: I heard, during the campaign to “Destroy the Four Olds,” someone scooped out a gold bar from this pit.¹⁸

YINGZI: I heard there were jewels too. A jade thumb ring got flushed in the water and turned the whole trough green...

SLIM: No, that happened from someone who had eaten too much spinach.

FATS: I heard a piece of calligraphy was found. Some guy Ji’s *Pingfu tie*.¹⁹

OUT-OF-TOWNER: Must have been fake. Zhang Boju donated the original to the state long before.²⁰

SLIM: Worth a lot?

OLD ZHANG: Worth a pile. Cost him a fortune to buy it.

YINGZI: So the state must have rewarded him grandly?

OUT-OF-TOWNER: The state gave him the grand title of “Rightist” and sent him north to a labor camp in Jilin.

OLD ZHANG: Not right away. Only later, when there happened to be an Anti-Rightist Movement...²¹

FATS: How come during the “Destroy the Four Olds” campaign no one dared to pick up the treasures in the toilet?

OLD ZHANG: You would be picking up trouble. Even auction houses wouldn’t take them.

OUT-OF-TOWNER: As the saying goes, “When you’re out of luck, even gold loses its luster; when you’re in luck, even iron shines.”

SLIM: Throwing treasures into the toilet—this sort of thing can only happen in China. Old Zhang, you’ve been to many places. Are there other countries like ours?

OLD ZHANG: The Chinese people aren’t greedy for gold—which is good!

¹⁸ The campaign to “Destroy the Four Olds” (*Po si jiu* 破四舊) was to bring an end to old customs, old culture, old habits, and old ideas during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) with the belief that it was the tradition and everything old that were holding China back.

¹⁹ Lu Ji 陸機 (261 CE–303 CE): a famous calligrapher and literatus in the Western Jin dynasty (266 CE–316 CE). *Pingfu tie* 平復帖 is the oldest extant authentic calligraphy masterpiece and the first to have a clear provenance history. It is now collected by the Palace Museum in Beijing and considered national treasure.

²⁰ Zhang Boju 張伯駒 (1898–1982): a famous collector, known as one of the Four Childe of the Republic of China 民國四公子. He and his wife donated *Pingfu tie* to the Chinese state in 1956 together with other seven pieces of their collection, which was big news at the time.

²¹ Anti-Rightist Movement (*Fan you yundong* 反右運動) (1957–59) consisted of a series of campaigns initiated by Mao Zedong to purge alleged “rightists” including prominent communist party members and intellectuals.

OUT-OF-TOWNER: *Which* is good? Not being greedy for gold, or gold? In my opinion, one day the Chinese will rediscover how good gold is.

FATS: Not necessarily. Gold or life? Of course you would choose life.

OUT-OF-TOWNER: Gold is gold...

FATS: In this land, gold is shit!²² Are you an outsider?

OUT-OF-TOWNER: I'm an out-of-towner.

OLD ZHANG: Out-of-towner, you'd better watch your words.

FATS: Slim, you still have paid sick days off?

SLIM: Chronic diarrhea. I get tested whenever I want a day off. But I must be precise and calculate how many days I take per month. If I take too many, I don't get a full salary. If I don't take enough, it's a waste.

FATS: Let me have some of your shit.

SLIM: What if we get caught? They might find out.

FATS: No, they won't. Lab workers may know shit, but they don't know shit about whose shit belongs to which shitter.

OLD ZHANG: What kind of work ethic is this! What will become of our country?!

OUT-OF-TOWNER: Sooner or later, we got to pay medical bills out of our own pockets.

OLD ZHANG: That's too much. Socialism should at least retain some of its advantages.

OUT-OF-TOWNER: (*gesturing to FATS*) Look who's taking advantage!

FATS: Who? My dad is proletariat! I'll beat the shit out of you!

FATS grabs OUT-OF-TOWNER and tries to push him down into the trough. OUT-OF-TOWNER and FATS get into a fight. Others try to stop them.

OUT-OF-TOWNER: Even the capitalists wouldn't dare!

FATS: Sure. Wait, dare what?

OUT-OF-TOWNER: Use fake shit!

FATS: It's not fake. It's a replacement. Replacement is in fashion now! Sons replace fathers. A commander's son joins the army. A diplomat's son travels abroad... I don't have those connections. I'm just replacing my shit with someone else's.

²² A variation from the clichéd expression “to regard gold and money as shit and dirt” (*shi jinqian ru fentu* 視金錢如糞土), used to describe someone who has nobler pursuits than money.

SLIM: So you're my bastard son?

FATS: No, you're my bastard son.²³

SLIM: Just kidding. You got a box?

FATS: *(Passes a pill box over OLD ZHANG's head to SLIM)* Just finished a box of hawberry pills.²⁴
Perfect.

OLD ZHANG: *(Ducks immediately)* Not over my head!

FATS: New box, no shit in it yet.

(With evil grin) Wait for it to come back around.

SLIM: Your hassle disturbed me. I can't poop. Let's try again tomorrow morning.

FATS: What!

The men's toilet, exterior.

MAN 3: Don't waste time chatting! Hurry up!

MAN 1: Where is that mellow fellow from?

MAN 2: The Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

MAN 3: Ministry of Foreign Affairs comes here to move his bowels? What's this shit about?

MAN 4: Why can't someone from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs poop here? I've heard Chairman Mao answers nature's call in the wilderness. His bodyguards carry the spades and follow him. They dig holes for the Chairman to do it.

UNDERCOVER: Where did you hear this?

MAN 4: ...on the bus.

SHI JR and SHI SR are parking their bicycles against the toilet building wall.

SHI SR: *(to the patrons)* Excuse us for a second. We'll be quick.

SHI JR carries the hose into the toilet building.

MAN 1: Your apprentice?

SHI SR: No, my second son, just back from the Northeast, to take over my job.

MAN 2: Your son? You've retired? Have you reached the age yet?

²³ Fats is mocking at nepotism when he talks about replacement. He literally says, "I'm your father," which in Beijing slang is like saying "I fucked your mother," hence an insult. However, the father-son logic here seems somewhat flawed.

²⁴ Hawberry pills (*shanzha wan*山楂丸) are traditional Chinese medicine that helps digestion.

SHI SR: What options do I have other than retirement? I should thank the government as long as my son is back and secures a job. I don't want to retire. To be honest with you, I can't sleep or eat well if I don't smell the toilet.

The men's toilet, interior.

SHI JR is connecting the hose to the tap.

OLD ZHANG: I haven't finished.

SHI JR: I'll just wait here.

OLD ZHANG: I can't poop while you're staring at me.

OLD ZHANG and other squatters hurry to pull their pants up. SHI JR turns on the tap and uses the hose to flush the toilet. Everyone flees. OUT-OF-TOWNER is reading a book.

SHI JR: Don't read here! Hurry up!

OUT-OF-TOWNER: I totally rely on this bit of time.

SHI JR: You're not a local?

OUT-OF-TOWNER: No, I'm an out-of-towner.

SHI JR: An outsider.

OUT-OF-TOWNER: "Out-of-towner" sounds more welcoming.

SHI JR: What's the use of wasting time reading?

OUT-OF-TOWNER: Universities are about to resume admitting students through the college entrance exam.

SHI JR: But what's the point of reading? Even those who handed in blank answer sheets have gone to college. You can automatically go to college as long as you descend from one of the "Five Reds."²⁵

OUT-OF-TOWNER: Things are going to change. There's no such thing as free lunch.

SHI JR: Don't talk about food here. You hurry up.

OLD ZHANG is tidying up his Zhongshan suit, walking out of the toilet.²⁶

²⁵ "Five Reds": short for "Five Red Categories" (*bong wu lei* 紅五類), i.e., revolutionary soldiers, revolutionary cadres, workers, extremely poor peasants, and moderately poor peasants.

²⁶ Zhongshan suit (zhongshan zhuang 中山裝), named after Sun Yat-Sen 孫逸仙, is a style of modern Chinese male attire introduced by Sun Yat-sen (also known as Sun Zhongshan 孫中山, the first president and founding father of the Republic of China) as a form of national dress shortly after the founding of the Republic. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the suit became widely worn by males and government leaders including Mao Zedong as a symbol of proletarian unity and an Eastern counterpart to the Western business suit. In English, it is often referred to as a Mao suit.

The men's toilet, exterior.

MAN 1: Have you eaten yet?²⁷

OLD ZHANG: Excuse me?

MAN 1: Er... you see, how should we treat Nixon?

OLD ZHANG: Today we'll inform the cadres below Level 14, tomorrow the party members, the day after tomorrow the people. Wait to read the announcement from your employer.

MAN 2: I don't have an employer.

OLD ZHANG: Listen to your residential committee.

MAN 3: I'm not local.

OLD ZHANG: Your former employer.

MAN 4: Not yet assigned a job.

OLD ZHANG: Wait to read the newspaper.

SHI SR: (*Shouting*) After you finish, poke the hose to the other side!

SHI JR pokes the hose through the hole on the wall into the women's toilet. SHI JR comes out with the broom and stops at the entrance of the women's toilet. The men who have been lining up outside rush into the men's toilet.

SHI SR: Holler first.

SHI JR: (*shouting*) Anyone in there?

DANDAN comes outside with the chamber pot. SHI JR and DANDAN stare at each other. SHI JR lowers his head.

DANDAN: Why are you doing this?

SHI JR: You look down upon this? Even for a job like *this*—my dad had to give it to me so that I can have it.

(Shouting) Anyone in there? (Walks into the women's toilet.)

DANDAN: Wait, someone is still in there!

Before DANDAN can finish, SHI JR scampers out, chased by a middle-aged WOMAN.

WOMAN: Creepy pervert!

²⁷ "You've eaten?" is a typical way of informal greeting in Beijing. It is like saying "how are you."

SHI JR: I shouted. Why didn't you answer?

WOMAN: What? What did you say? Whatever!

SHI JR: I can't take this anymore!

SHI JR throws the broom on the ground and rushes offstage.

WOMAN: What did he say? He was offended!

SHI SR: Don't be angry ma'am. He did shout. You didn't hear him, did you?

WOMAN: Speak up!

DANDAN: She is a little deaf.

The middle-aged WOMAN mumbles and leaves.

The men's toilet, exterior.

UNDERCOVER: *(Stops MAN 4)* Take a walk with me.

MAN 4: What do you want?

UNDERCOVER: I want you to elaborate on how our great leader answers nature's call.

MAN 4: I... want to piss. Please lift your hand high in mercy so that I may pass under it! Spare me this time.

UNDERCOVER: I want to piss too. Let's go to the police station and piss together. Free toilet paper.

SHI SR is organizing the cleaning tools. DANDAN Puts down the pot and pursues SHI JR.

DANDAN: Little Shi! Wait!

SHI SR looks at DANDAN and shakes his head. SHI JR runs back and hides into the men's toilet.

DANDAN: *(Shouting)* Come out. Listen, I have some things to tell you...

PICKPOCKET walks over cheerfully.

DANDAN: Sir.

PICKPOCKET: *(Nervously)* What?

DANDAN: Would you please ask the young guy in there with the family name Shi to come out here?

PICKPOCKET: Go in and ask yourself.

DANDAN: Cut the shit.

PICKPOCKET enters the toilet. In the toilet, an old man is the only one squatting.

PICKPOCKET: Hey man, there's a soldier outside asking for you.

SHI JR walks out reluctantly.

PICKPOCKET draws out a wallet, pulling out several bills and some food stamps. He then takes out a souvenir pin for the Asian-African-Latin American Table Tennis Friendship Invitational Tournament,²⁸ wears it on his chest, and throws the empty wallet into the trough.

PICKPOCKET: What are you staring at? This pin is for the Asian-African-Latin American Table Tennis Friendship Invitational Tournament. Pops, you want some food stamps? 15 cents!

The old man stares at PICKPOCKET in silent astonishment.

PICKPOCKET: Pretending not to hear me?

PICKPOCKET struts out of the toilet past SHI JR and leaves. SHI JR gives him a look of disdain.

OUT-OF-TOWNER comes out of the toilet with a book under his arm.

SHI JR: You finally remembered to come out?

OUT-OF-TOWNER: Defecation is the most important thing for human beings. The Bible has recorded the first order Moses ever gave, leading the Israelites out of Egypt, crossing the Red Sea to the Sinai Peninsula...

SHI JR: What was that about?

OUT-OF-TOWNER: The Israelites had been fleeing for their lives and had much to busy themselves with, but the order Moses gave was—bury your defecations.

SHI JR: Was the order necessary?

OUT-OF-TOWNER: Totally. Some people just don't do it. Aren't there common slogans on the walls that read "No peeing or pooping anywhere on the street?"

SHI JR: That's for those without self-discipline.

OUT-OF-TOWNER: For sure. As for those with self-discipline, even if they see such slogans as "Welcome to pee and poop anywhere on the street," they won't do shit.

SHI JR: What a shame that you've spent all your effort on defecation. Is it a subject in college?

OUT-OF-TOWNER: It belongs to the field of anthropology. Anyways, you won't understand.

²⁸ The 1st Asian-African-Latin American Table Tennis Friendship Invitational Tournament (*Ya Fei La pingpangqiu youbao yaoqingsai* 亞非拉乒乓球友好邀請賽) was held in Beijing in 1973 to strengthen the friendship between the third world countries. Table tennis also played an important role in the normalization of Sino-U.S. diplomatic relation.

DANDAN: I think your brain is replete with capitalist ideas like the Bible, like Moses. A university is not for people like you.

OUT-OF-TOWNER: Who is it for then?

DANDAN: For the proletariat.

OUT-OF-TOWNER: A university should be open to anyone who needs it!

SHI JR: Yeah, like a toilet!

OUT-OF-TOWNER: We'll see. Either universities will be open to everyone, or even toilets will be reserved for the proletariat only. In twenty years of time, many of you won't be worth shit! Even this style of defecation will become history! (*Exits.*)

SHI JR: Who are you talking about?

DANDAN: (*Nudges SHI JR.*) Don't mind him.

SHI JR: He said we are not human; we are crap!

DANDAN: Little Shi, you have such a clean political family background—three generations of poor peasants. Why don't you try to go to college? You going to college will be a blow to these kinds of people!

SHI JR: It won't be a blow to anyone. Workers, farmers, and soldiers turned college students? What's the use of that? I'll have to pay the tuition for nothing. No better than guarding the toilet. Some proletariat live a comfortable life and some don't. Some fly jets and some, like me, clean toilets.

DANDAN: You're not making any effort! I got into the army because of my own effort. This has nothing to do with Jingjing. Don't overthink.

SHI JR: It has nothing to do with me either! You join the army; I clean the toilet.

SHI SR: You two don't have to stand here. Wanna come home to chat?

DANDAN: No, thank you. A bus will come soon to pick me up and take me to the train station.

SHI SR signals to SHI JR, but SHI JR doesn't even look at him. SHI SR walks away feeling spurned.

DANDAN: Can't you at least wish me luck?

YINGZI takes a coquettish walk toward DANDAN, handing DANDAN's chamber pot over to her.

YINGZI: Comrade, your pot. You left it there, and I was worried that someone might take it.

DANDAN: (*Annoyed*) Can't you see we're busy? What are you doing hanging around here?

YINGZI: (*Feeling wronged*) How can a People's Liberation Army soldier be so rude!²⁹

SHI JR: I wish you a future as splendid as brocades.

SHI JR gets on the bike and rides away.

DANDAN runs with her chamber pot for a few steps and finally gives up.

The light dims.

The narrow alley. The sound of car brakes. An officer shouts offstage, "New recruits from the Global Alley please get on the bus." Sound of female soldiers chatting and giggling. DANDAN with a neat backpack walks across the stage toward the bus.

MAN 1: Look! A bus full of female soldiers! Each one is so spirited and fresh!

DANDAN turns around and her eyes linger on the alley with nostalgia, searching for SHI JR.

SHI JR hides in the toilet building.

FATS: (*Waves to the bus and shouts in Swahili*) Kwaherini!³⁰ [Farewell!]

DANDAN turns away embarrassed.

FATS: (*Sloganeering*) Learn from the People's Liberation Army!

(Some people echo him.)

Salute the PLA!

The female soldiers burst into laughter.

FEMALE SOLDIER: Look at him! What a clown!

OFFICER walks up.

OFFICER: No more shit talk. Let me lead a song. "The Army and the People"—Ready, sing!³¹

People sing "The Army and the People." Sound of the bus driving away. SHI JR comes out of the toilet and stares for a long time in the direction the bus has gone. Suddenly, water bursts out from the hose he is still holding in his hand, and he rushes back into the toilet building. SHI SR comes out behind a corner and peeps into the toilet. SHI JR comes out of the building and tosses the cleaning tools heavily on the ground.

SHI JR: Pieces of shit! Why must I clean the toilet!

SHI SR lets out a sudden yell that startles SHI JR.

²⁹ People's Liberation Army (PLA): the armed forces of China under the leadership of the Communist Party.

³⁰ For the significance of Swahili, see the previous note on the Great Uhuru Railway.

³¹ "The Army and the People" (*Jundui he laobaixing* 軍隊和老百姓): a military song traceable to the Anti-Japanese War during the WWII (1937–1945).

SHI SR: What are you doing?! I knew you would be bumming around when I'm not here. You dare to toss the tools! The toilet is our livelihood. How ungrateful you are for what you have!

SHI JR: I, I didn't mean to offend you! I mean, why must the Shi family run the shitter?

SHI SR: You ask me? I wonder about it myself! We can't pick our family name, but we do have family members who have made their names known within the Four Seas...³²

SHI JR: Who? Why isn't he offering to help us out?

SHI SR: "Nine Tattooed Dragons" Shi Jin. In the *Water Margin*, he ranks 23rd among the 36 Heavenly Spirits of the 108 heroes of Mount Liang, after "Red-haired Devil" Liu Tang and before "Unrestrained" Mu Hong...³³

SHI JR: What's the use of mentioning someone from a thousand years ago in the Song Dynasty!

SHI SR: You only just returned to Beijing, and you're already starting to complain that the meat in your bowl is too lean or too fatty.³⁴ I tell you, you should thank the heavens for keeping you alive till this day... No, instead, thank the Party! You had three older siblings and none of them survived. When I was worried about you, hah, Liberation came along.³⁵ We started to earn wages and had corn-flour buns³⁶ to feed ourselves, though the Three Difficult Years³⁷...was another story. All you have today comes from your dad unclogging the toilet! I tell you, if you think this job is beneath you, go back to the Northeast³⁸ if you have the guts! I'll take over the toilet again. I don't feel like myself if I give up my job!

SHI JR: Fine. You wanna make me go back? Just watch. I'm going back! I'll never ever return to Beijing again! I'm joining the army too!

³² The Four Seas (*sihai* 四海) were four bodies of water that metaphorically made up the boundaries of ancient China. Hence, "within the Four Seas" means in China.

³³ *Water Margin* (*Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳), written in the 14th century, attributed to Shi Nai'an 施耐庵, is one of the Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature. The story, set in the Song dynasty (960–1279), tells of how a group of 108 outlaws gathered at Mount Liang, or Liangshan Marsh, to form a sizable army before they were eventually granted amnesty by the government and sent on campaigns to resist foreign invaders and suppress rebel forces. Shi Jin 史進 is a character in the novel.

³⁴ 挑肥揀瘦 (*tiao fei jian shou*): an idiom, literally "to pick the fat or choose the lean" (part of the meat), which means being picky.

³⁵ The Liberation (*Jiefang* 解放) refers to the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949.

³⁶ Corn-flour buns (*wonotou* 窩窩頭) are the most common main food for the poor in Northern China.

³⁷ Three Years of Difficult Period (*sannian kuman shiqi* 三年困難時期), or the Three Years of Natural Disasters (*sannian ziran zaihai* 三年自然災害), is a euphemism for the Three Years of Great Chinese Famine. It refers to the widespread famine and food shortage from 1959 to 1961 due to drought, unfavorable weather, and the policies of the Communist Party of China, though the relative weights of the contributions are disputed because of the Great Leap Forward 大躍進 (1958–1960), an economic and social campaign stemming from Mao's unrealistic goals to modernize China's economy. An estimated 10 million to 50 million people starved to death during the three years.

³⁸ The Northeast (*beidabuang* 北大荒), literally "the northern, big, barren," refers to the northernmost area in China's Heilongjiang Province 黑龍江省, where is extremely cold in winter, has a very short growing season, and used to be sparsely populated. Many "educated youth" were sent there to transform wasteland to fertile fields. Today, the Northeast is one of the most important agricultural regions in China.

SHI JR turns around and takes off. SHI SR drags SHI JR back and slaps him in the face.

SHI SR: You ungrateful little shit! If not for your paralyzed mom, would you be able to come back home? Leaving at your whim—how dare you! Join the army? You think the army doesn't have toilets? It's all written in your dossier. Go join the army and be a toilet soldier! (*SHI JR starts crying.*) I tell you, a son should never despise his mother because she is ugly, just like a dog should never despise its home because it's poor.

SHI JR: I'm not despising... as long as you aren't...

SHI SR: To your grandma, I'm a hundred percent pious...

SHI JR: I mean my mom.

SHI SR: ...that's your mom, not my mom—anyway, I don't despise her either. For people like us, who unclog toilets, what's the point of marrying a Diaochan? Not to mention that we can't afford to offend someone like Lü Bu or Dong Zhuo.³⁹ An ugly wife and a barren field are treasures for a peasant family.

SHI JR: Why? It's unfair that we got all the bad stuff.

SHI SR: Bad stuff? These are good stuff—nobody else wants it, so we can have it for our entire life without fearing that someone may take it away from us. Remember, if you can sweep the toilet all your life and never let anyone snatch the job away from you, you've accomplished something with your life!

SHI JR: Sweeping the toilet for my whole life?!

SHI SR: I've been wasting my breath. If you can clean the toilet for a lifetime, the Sanitation Bureau will pay you, and you'll be able to feed a family—then you'll be able to afford a wife and children!

SHI JR: So there are really no other options? If I really have to work here for life, one day I'll put tiles on all these walls and cleaning balls in the urinals, and I'll have sinks for people to wash their hands out there. You'll smell the nice odor before you even open the door.

SHI SR: And you'll wear a white lab coat and a stethoscope. You think it's a hospital? What bullshit!

SHI JR: Anyway, I'm going to make the toilet clean and comfortable. Those who use it and those who guard it must both look decent.

³⁹ Diaochan 貂蟬 is one of the Four Beauties of ancient China and lived in the late Eastern Han dynasty, roughly between the first to the second century CE. Lü Bu 呂布 was a military general and warlord, the foster son of Dong Zhuo 董卓. Dong Zhuo was a politician and warlord who seized the power and ruled with tyranny and cruelty. There are many versions of the story, but the most prominent one is from the historical novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* 三國演義. *Romance* is one of the Four Great Classical Chinese Novels. It is attributed to Luo Guanzhong 羅貫中, written in the 14th century and set in the turbulent years towards the end of the Eastern Han dynasty (25–220) and the Three Kingdoms period (220–280). In the novel, Diaochan volunteered to sacrifice herself in order to put an end to Dong Zhuo's tyrannical rule. She had a romance with both Lü Bu and Dong Zhuo and caused Lü to betray and kill his foster father Dong.

SHI SR: If that were to happen, would it still be your job to guard the toilet? The minister's son would fight for this job.

SHI JR: That's none of your business. I can't be cleaning the toilet the way you did. I'm going to make the toilet nice enough to live in.

SHI SR: Good boy! You want to divide up the family property and not live with me?

SHI JR: I'll save you a bed.

SHI SR: ...Check one more time. See if someone has dropped something in the pit.

SHI JR: There is a wallet.

SHI SR: Pick it up!

SHI JR: Might be empty. Don't be so obsessed with money.

SHI SR: (*indignant*) You! What's the use of you being my son?! You don't know your father at all! When it was time to "Destroy the Four Olds," I scooped up gold bars and pieces of jade in here, and I handed all of them in to the authorities! Your dad has never in his life taken any money he was not supposed to take! That year, I found a leather wallet and there was a train ticket in it. I delivered the ticket to the owner's unit according to the address, and he almost knelt down before me, telling me that their factory was small and their budget stringent, and he would have had to pay from his own pocket had he lost that ticket for his business trip... Go and pick it up! If you don't, I will!

SHI SR turns around and enters the toilet. SHI JR sighs and follows him into the toilet.

ACT II

A street in the 1980s with many storefronts lining on both sides. A pay toilet lies among the stores.

There is an entrance for men and another for women on either side of the toilet building. In between the two entrances, there is the studio and office of the toilet manager. Through the window, we can see in the room a single bed, a three-drawer desk, a chair, and a gas stove over which sits a kettle of boiling water. Some kitchen utensils such as woks, bowls, gourd dippers, and basins are laid at the corners. On the wall hangs a certificate of merit and a framed photo taken in the 1970s of SHI JR, SHI SR, mother, and siblings.

Outside the toilet building, there is a food stand that sells jianbing.⁴⁰

SHI JR is putting tealeaves into a small teapot. He is making tea with the boiling water on the stove.

OLD ZHANG walks into the toilet and sticks his head into the window.

⁴⁰ *Jianbing* 煎饼 is a street-food crepe from northern China made with eggs, cilantro, scallions, peanuts, chili and sweet sauce, and a crunchy deep-fried dough wafer.

The toilet building, exterior.

OLD ZHANG: How much?

SHI JR: One coin.⁴¹

OLD ZHANG: That much?

OLD ZHANG pays and enters the men's toilet.

SHI JR sticks his head out of the window and fixes his eyes on the jianbing stand.

SHI JR: Make me one.

J. PEDDLER: Two eggs?

SHI JR: Just one. Too much cholesterol. No cilantro.

SHI JR sticks his head back in and sips his tea.

The JIANBING PEDDLER passes the jianbing into the window to SHI JR. SHI JR takes some change from a small carton on his desk and gives it to J. PEDDLER. J. PEDDLER uses a bamboo clipper to collect the money. SHI JR gives the jianbing a bite.

J. PEDDLER: Not after washing your hands?

SHI JR: I sell hundreds of tickets a day. Do I have to wash every time I've touched money? Would have washed my skin off.

J. PEDDLER: What's for lunch?

SHI JR: Anything but jianbing.

J. PEDDLER: Fine. *(Exits.)*

FATS walks into the toilet building with a newspaper. He passes a 2-mao bill into the window. SHI JR puts down the jianbing and takes up the bill. He holds the bill against the sunlight.⁴²

FATS: There ain't fake notes for two-bits.⁴³ Not worth the trouble.

SHI JR: Go ahead.

FATS: Toilet paper.

SHI JR: Don't you normally use newspaper?

FATS: Not today. My article is in it today.

⁴¹ *Kuai* 块: literally, "chunk," a colloquial way of saying *yuan* 圆, the basic unit for the Chinese currency.

⁴² To read the watermark.

⁴³ *Mao* 毛: literally, "fluff," a colloquial way of saying *jiao* 角, a smaller unit for the Chinese currency. 1 *yuan* (*kuai*) = 10 *jiao* (*mao*).

SHI JR: On how to forge a fake monthly bus pass?

FATS: Mention it again, I'll be mad.

SHI JR: What else can you write about?

FATS: It's on educated youth's literature...

SHI JR: What do you know about educated youth's literature?!

FATS: Some middle school students go to work on the farm, unhappy about it, thus make up some stories to publish. This is educated youth's literature.

SHI JR: You haven't even been to the countryside...

FATS: The author of *Journey to the West*⁴⁴ never went to India to fetch scriptures. The author of *Madame Bovary* never drank poison.

SHI JR: Hurry up and go shit.

FATS: I'll lend you the newspaper. On the third page.

SHI JR: How much is the royalty?

FATS: Ten coins.

SHI JR: Enough for fifty toilet visits. Take the newspaper with you.

FATS: Big deal! Having been to the Northeast... (*Takes his newspaper and walks into the toilet.*)

The men's toilet, interior.

There are eight pits with partitions and doors. The pits are connected together underneath. Plastic buckets lay one after another in a long urinal trough. The walls are ceramic tiled. By the entrance, there is a mirror, a basin, and a bar of soap.

FATS opens one door after another, looking for the cleanest pit. A smoker is squatting over the first pit, glowering at FATS.

FATS: Why don't you bolt the door? (*Closes the door.*)

FATS opens the second door. The pit is not flushed. He closes the door with disgust. He opens the third door. OLD ZHANG is drawing porn on the partition. Startled by FATS, OLD ZHANG drops his pen into the pit.

FATS: Doodling dirty drawings! Nixon has his Watergate and you have your Shitgate. What do you plan to do about this?

⁴⁴ *Journey to the West* (*Xiyouji* 西遊記) is one of the Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature. It was published in the 16th century and attributed to Wu Cheng'en. Set in the Tang Dynasty (618–907), it tells the story of a Buddhist monk who went to India to fetch sutras with his four disciples.

OLD ZHANG: They are not all by me.

FATS: What are you planning to do?

OLD ZHANG: You name it...

FATS: Treat me.

OLD ZHANG: I treat you noodles with soybean paste.⁴⁵

FATS: No, I don't like the association. You've got to get something that looks a bit more different from what's in this pit.

OLD ZHANG: Roast duck?

FATS: Deal.

OLD ZHANG: But doesn't the sweet flour paste⁴⁶ also look like...

FATS: Doesn't matter.

OLD ZHANG: Then you haven't seen anything.

FATS: Go on.

FATS opens the fourth door, goes in, and closes the door.

OLD ZHANG sneaks out of the toilet.

The toilet office, exterior.

SHI JR is wiping his hands with toilet paper in his office.

OLD ZHANG passes the office with assumed composure.

SHI JR: So fast today? Not dry?

OLD ZHANG: Still got some business to take care of in the Ministry today.

SHI JR: The Ministry doesn't have a toilet yet?

OLD ZHANG: I prefer to be close to the people...

SHI JR: Oh, tell me some more about diplomacy...

OLD ZHANG: ...no permanent friends, no permanent enemies... (*Exits hurriedly.*)

SHI JR: Whether friends or enemies, they'll all have to use the toilet...

⁴⁵ Noodles with soybean paste (*Zhajiāngmiàn* 炸醬麵) is common local Beijing food. Fats thinks soybean paste looks like shit in terms of color and texture.

⁴⁶ Sweet flour paste (*Tiānmianjiāng* 甜麵醬): brownish, sweet sauce made from fermented flour, common in Beijing. It usually goes with roast duck.

Several construction WORKERS rush to the front of the window and pay.

SHI JR: Don't splatter your pee out of the trough.

WORKERS run into the toilet giggling. SHI JR follows them.

The men's toilet, interior.

WORKERS are peeing.

SHI JR: Pee into the buckets.

WORKER 1: Can't aim so precisely.

WORKER 2: Why into the buckets?

SHI JR: To make medicine.

WORKER 1: How?

SHI JR: Crap. If I knew how, I would make medicine myself.

WORKER 2: So you aren't the one that wants the pee?

SHI JR: I've got my own. Why would I want others'? The authorities put the buckets here. They must be filled.

FATS: *(Comes out of one pit.)* The article is quite heavily abridged. Whoever touches a word of mine, may he end up a prisoner and she a prostitute! I heard the pee is for making fertilizer.

SHI JR: Fertilizer is extracted from crude oil.

WORKERS exit.

FATS: *(Opens OLD ZHANG's door and screams)* The roast duck flew away!

SHI JR: Who drew this?

FATS: The foreign affairs imposter.

SHI JR: What a talent.

FATS runs out.

SHI JR: Why are you running?

FATS: Chasing my roast duck.

SHI JR watches FATS run away.

A pack of Educated Youths (EYs) in their 30s wearing fake military uniforms force themselves in.

SHI JR: Bought tickets?

EY 1: Tickets even for the toilet?

SHI JR: Cut the bullshit. Two bits per person.

EY 1: Ain't got money.

SHI JR: No pay no pooping.

EY 1: Can't hold.

SHI JR: Still no.

EY 1: It's already out.

SHI JR: No more need for toilet then. Go back and clean yourself.

EY 2: Yo, ain't this Shi from Regiment 31...!

SHI JR: You?

EY 2: Don't remember? I'm "Big Tooth" from Regiment 10, the rubber-wheel tractor driver. I gave you a lift once.

EY 1: He's also from the Northeast?

SHI JR: All of you are?

EYs: Yep, all of us.

SHI JR: My rotten luck.

EY 1: What's the matter?

SHI JR: My treat. Help yourself.

The Educated Youths pee.

EY 1: Bro, since you treat us with free pissing, we'll treat you with some free booze.

SHI JR: No, no, I'm at work.

EY 1: This shit counts as work?

SHI JR: I can't leave.

EY 1: In case someone steals the shit?

SHI JR: In case someone shits out of the pit.

EY 2: Who would do that?

SHI JR: Look, someone doodled porn here, when I wasn't paying attention.

EYs: Where is it, where is it? (*Surrounding the third pit. Salacious laughter.*)

The light dims.

The toilet office, interior.

EY 1: Fill the glass. Fill it.

The EYs are drinking with SHI JR. The room is filled with foul cigarette smoke.

SHI JR: Not while on duty...

EY 2: Cut the shit. Drink.

SHI JR takes a sip reluctantly.

EY 1: Why do you have to take this job?

SHI JR: A minister's son becomes a minister; A toilet cleaner's son becomes a toilet cleaner.

EY 1: My dad was shot.

SHI JR: Well... soon you will be too.

EY 3: I can take any job but sweeping toilets.

SHI JR: Why did you come back?

EY 2: You've been back for a few years yourself. Is that place even livable for humans?

SHI JR: Northeast, what a vast place! Endless meadows stretching beyond the horizon.

EY 2: Not like that anymore. All cultivated land now.

SHI JR: And all those forests, birches and oaks.

EY 2: Long burned as firewood.

SHI JR: Look at what you've done!

EY 1: It wasn't our choice.

EY 2: What does your wife do?

SHI JR: I'm alone.

EY 1: Divorced?

SHI JR: Never married.

EY 2: You're the prophet. It's so hard for people with a family like us to return to Beijing. I had to get divorced first to come back.

EY 3: Who told you to marry a local?

EY 2: You married a Beijing girl, but only one of your two kids can return...

EY 1: Stop... I feel sorry for my kid.

SHI JR: Given away?

EY 1: Yea.

SHI JR: Not so bad as long as they're all alive. Blackie's wife hung herself, didn't want to be separated from him.

EY 4: Speaking of human rights, being able to live together is the most basic right.

SHI JR: All of you are right, but Beijing can't accommodate this many people. You leave as a couple but come back with at least one extra person. Not enough jobs for all of you. To be frank, not even enough room for you to stay. Siblings are married. How can you live together? You may crash with them for a day or two, but can't tag along for a lifetime, right? I heard some have already gone back to the Northeast.

EY 1: Stop tempting us. Are you going back?

SHI JR: I thought about it, but I don't have the courage... I live in the toilet building only because I have no other place to stay. As the old saying goes, stay long enough, and you stop smelling the odor.

EY 2: You're still a virgin by this age! What's the point of living a life like this!

SHI JR: The loneliest person is also the most valiant.

EY 2: What's the use of valiance? Who can you challenge?

SHI JR: You need valiance to live.

YINGZI walks up to the window. Around his eyes are a decade of wrinkles. He passes a 2-mao note into the window.

YINGZI: Here is the money.

EY 2: Can't you see we're eating?

EY 1: Men's or women's toilet?

YINGZI: How much is the men's? How much is the women's?

SHI JR: The same. Two bits.

YINGZI: The same, then what's this rubbish about?

EY 1: Anyway, you can't enter the men's.

YINGZI: I don't mean to, anyway. Do you have a say about the women's?

EY 1: Want a fight?

YINGZI: I'm afraid you don't have the balls.

SHI JR: Enough, enough. Just go in and pee.

YINGZI wiggles into the men's toilet.

EY 1: Drink!

EY 2: Eat, eat. Don't just drink.

A BLIND WOMAN comes out of the women's toilet to the window.

BLIND WOMAN: Is this the toilet?

SHI JR: What do you think?

BLIND WOMAN: I say, it's not.

EY 1: What is this then?

BLIND WOMAN: It smells of fried beltfish,⁴⁷ don't you think?

EY 1: We are disgusted by the toilet smell. You think we're happy to eat here?

SHI JR: I'm used to it. I'm okay eating with the smell.

BLIND WOMAN: I'm not used to it. Every place should have its proper smell. No mixing. The blind rely on smell to tell places apart. I was squatting there and then I started to doubt myself, and I said to myself, I can't be in a restaurant—that would be so embarrassing! Please, I beg you, don't eat in the toilet.

SHI JR: ...This is a difficult favor to ask. If I can't eat here, ...I, you go home first. I'll report this issue to the authorities.

BLIND WOMAN leaves grunting.

EY 1: How can we bear a life like this? Let's get out of here!

All the EYs stand up and are about to leave.

YINGZI walks out of the men's toilet like a martyr and shouts into the window.

YINGZI: Gays should be protected by law!

EY 1: You're dead!

YINGZI runs away wiggling his body.

EY 2: This is the last time we're coming here!

⁴⁷ Beltfish (*daiyu* 帶魚), also known as the large-head hairtail (*Trichiurus lepturus*), a kind of salt-water fish that looks like a belt, is common seafood in China.

All the EYs hug each other goodbye and disperse, dispirited.

SHI JR holds up the glass, about to bash it onto the ground, then puts it down slowly.

SHI JR: I'd be a fucking bastard if I were happy to eat here.

PICKPOCKET dashes close, tosses 2-mao into the window and goes into the toilet.

SHI JR freezes for a second and then follows him in.

The men's toilet, interior.

SHI JR opens one door after another and drags squatting PICKPOCKET out of the fourth door.

PICKPOCKET: Wait, I'm not doodling! I'm pooping!

SHI JR: (*gruffly*) Stand straight! (*Searches PICKPOCKET's body.*)

PICKPOCKET: What are you doing!

SHI JR: Picking the pickpocket's pocket!⁴⁸

PICKPOCKET: Who is the pickpocket!

SHI JR: If you dare to clog my toilet with a wallet again, I'll make you scoop it out and swallow it down!

PICKPOCKET: When was that old story? I'm rich now. I have nothing but money!

UNDERCOVER POLICEMAN breaks in.

UNDERCOVER: Let him go.

SHI JR turns around and let go.

UNDERCOVER: Nobody has the authority to conduct a body search except for us.

PICKPOCKET: Bro, officer,⁴⁹ thanks!

UNDERCOVER: Don't call me bro. Go.

PICKPOCKET: I haven't pooped yet.

UNDERCOVER: Come to the bureau after you finish.

PICKPOCKET: Sure, sure. (*Steals into the fourth door and closes it.*)

The toilet office, exterior.

⁴⁸ To pick the pickpocket's pocket (*xi foye* 洗佛爺): Beijing argot. *xi* is short for *xijie* 洗劫, "to rob someone so thoroughly that as if everything were washed away by water," to rob someone blind. Pickpockets were usually swift but not strong or good at combat. Anyone can rob an "unprotected" pickpocket, but some pickpockets are protected by local mafias.

⁴⁹ The Beijing argot for "undercover policeman" is *leizi* 雷子, a colloquial term for landmine.

UNDERCOVER: He's a source of ours.

SHI JR: No more pickpocketing?

UNDERCOVER: Tending a stall, selling smuggled cigarettes.

SHI JR: None of my business, as long as he doesn't toss wallets into my toilets.

PICKPOCKET walks out of the toilet, fastening his pants. UNDERCOVER OFFICER and PICKPOCKET walk away side by side.

SHI JR: Did you buy the ticket?

UNDERCOVER: I didn't go.

SHI JR: (*watches UNDERCOVER & PICKPOCKET, shouts*) No fooling around here without using the toilet!

UNDERCOVER: Whoa. I'm gonna arrest him...

PICKPOCKET: Let him. Let him. A toilet guard. (*sweet-talks UNDERCOVER into leaving.*)

GUY III comes to the toilet with his HONEY.

SHI JR: No lovepits. Gotta go separately.

GUY III: Shi, you don't know me?

SHI JR: Too many people. Don't remember.

GUY III: I'm Guy III. I'm in charge of big projects now.

SHI JR: Gotta buy tickets regardless.

GUY III: Look at you. Can't I take a tour?

SHI JR: Of the women's toilet?

GUY III: What are you talking about? I've brought my own women's toilet.

HONEY: (*mad*) What are you talking about! Stop being so filthy.

SHI JR: What do you want?

GUY III: Renovate your toilet. I still have a good number of nice tiles left.

SHI JR: I don't have a say in it. It's the Sanitation Bureau's business.

GUY III: Make some inquiries for me? I'll thank you with good kickbacks. Bye-bye sir. (*walks away flirting with HONEY.*)

SHI JR: Nowadays all sorts of little brats have become big wigs. He used to be a mere tile worker! A pickpocket becomes a boss with a cop as his bodyguard. Hm, a source of the police? What a

farce! People with integrity have no future! Look at me, nearly lost my place to eat. Another day, another person doesn't like my snoring, I can't even sleep here.

A seven- or eight-year-old girl LIANGLIANG pushes a wheelchair, on which DANDAN sits, and comes to the window. LIANGLIANG stops the wheelchair and comes to buy the tickets.

LIANGLIANG: Mister,⁵⁰ one ticket.

SHI JR: No one is in there to help. Your mom—is she your mom? (*LIANGLIANG nods*)—can she do it herself?

LIANGLIANG: I'm the one going.

SHI JR: Go ahead.

LIANGLIANG goes into the toilet.

DANDAN: Use your own toilet paper!

SHI JR's and DANDAN's eyes meet. DANDAN lowers her head.

SHI JR: Dandan? (*Almost choked by water. Puts down his cup and rushes out of his office to the wheelchair*) What happened to you?

DANDAN: Went to perform for the soldiers at the Laoshan⁵¹ front. Stepped onto a landmine.

SHI JR: The Vietnamese?

DANDAN: Our own.

SHI JR: (*sadly*) How on earth could you step...

DANDAN: I just wanted to look for a clean spot to go the bathroom. There was a verdant plantain tree, with a bird chirping... Ah, let's not talk about this. How about you...

SHI JR: Me? What could I accomplish? Wanted to join the army but didn't have a way, remember?

DANDAN: Good. Peaceful.

SHI JR: Just green and inexperienced.

DANDAN: I've got the experience, but I lost my legs. No more dancing for me.

SHI JR: Even if you still had your legs, you'd need a career change by your age.

DANDAN: That's right. Oh, how have you been? What does your spouse do?

⁵⁰ The original is *shushu* 叔叔, literally "uncle." In China, a child may call any male around his/her father's age, unrelated to her, uncle as a polite form of greeting.

⁵¹ Battle of Laoshan 老山战役 (1984), a.k.a., Battle of Vị Xuyên, the major campaign during the Sino-Vietnamese border conflicts (1979–1991), also known as the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War, the Chinese Self-Defense Counterattack on Vietnam, or the Third Indochina War.

SHI JR: My... where... which spouse?

DANDAN: How many spouses do you have?

SHI JR: I... I've divorced several times.

DANDAN: Wow, so modern! How did you meet them?

SHI JR: They... they came here to poop.

DANDAN laughs with tears.

SHI JR: Your spouse... is Jingjing?

DANDAN: *(Nods)* Sacrificed his life for the country.

SHI JR: So unlucky.

DANDAN: Can't always be lucky.

SHI JR: What do you do now?

DANDAN: I don't need to work, but bumming around is boring, so I want to find something I can do. What if I come to guard the toilet with you? I sell tickets, and you do the cleaning...

SHI JR: ... No. A thousand, ten thousand times no. Just leave once your daughter finishes. This is heart-wrenching.⁵²

An OLD LADY comes and looks into the window.

OLD LADY: Where is the toilet guard?

SHI JR: Here!

OLD LADY: Which way is the toilet? Why are you standing outside, not in your office?

SHI JR: I have a friend here.

OLD LADY: I don't have change. Give me three bits back.

SHI JR: I'm not taking your money. Give it to me next time. Go ahead.

OLD LADY: I didn't mean to take advantage. *(Enters the toilet.)*

DANDAN: How is your current spouse?

SHI JR: ...She is alright...

DANDAN: You can't expect too much out of marriage.

SHI JR: No. I'm just a toilet guard...

⁵² Literally, "I feel so upset as if a cat were scratching my heart."

DANDAN: That's not what I meant. Oh, what's her name?

SHI JR: ...Same as yours.

DANDAN: What a coincidence?

SHI JR: I wouldn't have had her, if that wasn't her name.

DANDAN: But she has legs and is able-bodied.

SHI JR: Her legs are short. Even your broken legs are longer than hers...

DANDAN: How is that possible... a pygmy.

SHI JR: You could say that.

DANDAN: Do you have feelings for her?

SHI JR: ...I really do.

DANDAN: I don't understand you.

SHI JR: As long as the middle parts fit, the top and the bottom don't matter.

DANDAN: You, how can you be so gross.

LIANGLIANG: (*Comes between SHI JR & DANDAN*) You know each other?

DANDAN: Uncle Shi is mama's middle school classmate and comrade in the Northeast.

LIANGLIANG: Why Mr. Shi? Because he guards the toilet?

DANDAN: Nonsense.

SHI JR: It's okay. She didn't mean offence. What's your name?

LIANGLIANG: Liangliang.

DANDAN: Say goodbye to Uncle Shi.

LIANGLIANG: Goodbye Uncle Shi!

SHI JR: Bye-bye! Come back to play next time!

LIANGLIANG helps DANDAN away. SHI JR stares at their backs sadly.

SHI JR: (*Slaps his own face*) What the fuck is this pussy pygmy, better to say she is a damn ghost!⁵³

The toilet office, exterior.

A bright moon is hanging in the sky.

⁵³ Literally, "What motherfucking pygmy, better to say ant!"

SHI JR lets out a sigh and turns around.

SHI JR: *(Sings)* “The moon is floating in the white lotus-like clouds. The evening wind brings gusts of merry sound of songs...” *(sad song)*⁵⁴

Suddenly, a beautiful voice of a girl, as if singing in response, comes from the women’s toilet. It’s DANDAN’s voice. SHI JR stops singing and listens carefully. The girl’s voice stops. SHI JR sings again, and DANDAN’s voice appears again. SHI JR gets out of bed. DANDAN’s voice disappears again. SHI JR walks out of his office and shouts towards the women’s toilet.

SHI JR: Anyone there in the women’s toilet?

No one responds. It is very quiet. There is only the sound of water dripping from the pipe. SHI JR sings again, and the singing in the women’s toilet resumes.

SHI JR: Anyone in the women’s toilet? *(The singing stops.)*

I’m about to come in! *(No one answers.)*

The women’s toilet, interior.

SHI JR clears his throat once and walks into the women’s toilet. He pulls open one door nervously, but there is no one. He pulls open another door, still no one. He pulls open every door, and all is empty. He sings aloud out of fear. The sound of his singing is troubled. The wind rises, making the glass windows squeak. The doors close themselves. He sings even louder. One woman who comes to use the toilet gives out a scream and runs away. SHI JR is startled and rushes out of the toilet.

The toilet building, exterior.

Outside the toilet building, SHI JR is petrified. He sees a big crowd staring at him. He takes a step forward, and the crowd takes a step back.

SHI JR: *(Explains with embarrassment)* Someone was singing in there...

No one replies. SHI JR gives a reluctant smile but it looks awful. He sneaks back into his office and then into his comforter. Shortly, he gets out of bed and turns off the light. Immediately, he turns on the light again and screams. He sees his window filled with faces that are peeping inside the room. He jumps out of bed and dashes out of the room. Outside, seeing him come out, people scatter with a hubbub.

SHI JR: *(Roars)* Never seen people sleeping? Or shitting? Go away!

People are looking at SHI JR with interest, gossiping. UNDERCOVER OFFICER pushes himself through the crowd.

UNDERCOVER: Disperse, guys. Disperse.

⁵⁴ A popular children’s song that first came out in 1958 titled “Ting mama jiang na guoqu de shiqing” 听妈妈讲那过去的事情 (“Listen to Mama Talking about the Stories of the Past”). It was adapted and remixed multiple times in the following decades by various artists and remained its popularity.

People start to leave.

The toilet office, interior.

SHI JR goes back to his office and sits on his bed smoking a cigarette grumpily.

UNDERCOVER: (*Examines toilet paper and stuff on the table*) Anything like this ever happen before?

SHI JR: Never.

UNDERCOVER: What's your relationship with the woman who was singing?

SHI JR: Former classmates.

UNDERCOVER: You went to school before?

SHI JR: Middle school.

UNDERCOVER: Did you have puppy love while in school?

SHI JR: I had a puppy, no love.⁵⁵

UNDERCOVER: So you were just classmates?

SHI JR: Later we went to the Northeast together. So I guess we count as comrades.

UNDERCOVER: How did your relationship with her develop in the Northeast?

SHI JR: No development. She joined the army through her connections.

UNDERCOVER: You came back for work also through your connections.

SHI JR: I took my father's job.

UNDERCOVER: That I know. Everybody knows. The nepotism is open. Others who want this job can't have it.

SHI JR: Who wants this job?

UNDERCOVER: I'm just saying. Have you fallen in love with her?

SHI JR: I haven't seen her in more than ten years.

UNDERCOVER: Let bygones be bygones. She's been here recently?

SHI JR: Today she came to use the toilet with her daughter.

UNDERCOVER: Not to see you?

SHI JR: No. She lost her legs.

⁵⁵ The original is *shi zao duan lian meiyou zao lian* 是早鍛鍊沒有早戀—“It's morning exercise, not underage love.” *Zao duan lian* 早鍛鍊 (morning exercise) and *zao lian* 早戀 (underage love) are puns in Mandarin.

UNDERCOVER: How?

SHI JR: Performed at the battlefield and stepped on a landmine. Our own landmine.

UNDERCOVER: Is she a deserter?

SHI JR: Can't be. Vietnam is even poorer than us.

UNDERCOVER: **Don't jump to conclusions.** What was the song you were singing?

SHI JR: The moon is floating in the white lotus clouds.

UNDERCOVER: Good song. Sing it again. (*SHI JR sings.*)

(*Listens to the sound from women's toilet*) It's drippy.

SHI JR: My voice?

UNDERCOVER: Women's toilet.

SHI JR: Yes.

UNDERCOVER: No one is singing with you.

SHI JR: Is it because you're here?

UNDERCOVER: That's right. The righteous prevails over the wicked.

SHI JR: Which side is the wicked?

UNDERCOVER: That side of course. (*Points at women's toilet*) Let's go take a look.

SHI JR: It's late. I'd better not trouble you.

UNDERCOVER: Can't leave my work unfinished. Let's go.

SHI JR: (*Stands up*) After you, or after me?

UNDERCOVER: After you. This is the way.

The women's toilet, exterior.

SHI JR: (*Shouts*) Anyone there in the women's toilet? (*No answer.*)

UNDERCOVER: Go in.

SHI JR: I usually shout three times.

UNDERCOVER: Why three times?

SHI JR: Third time is the charm.⁵⁶ Once I shouted twice, a deaf woman didn't hear me and almost caused an accident.

Anyone in the women's toilet? (*No answer.*)

Anyone? (*No answer.*)

UNDERCOVER: Go in. (*Goes in with SHI JR*)

The women's toilet, interior.

UNDERCOVER: It's my first time in the women's toilet.

SHI JR: I come here every day.

UNDERCOVER: You ruin the pleasure by repetition. Open the doors.

SHI JR opens one door.

SHI JR: It's no different from the men's.

UNDERCOVER: Yea, I've heard they all use toilet bowls abroad.

SHI JR: It's not sanitary to have skin contact with the bowls. Not to mention bowls are supposedly for food, not for shit.

SHI JR opens another door. No one is there. He opens all the doors.

UNDERCOVER POLICEMAN inspects closely pit by pit.

UNDERCOVER: The women's toilet is smaller than the men's.

SHI JR: Because there is no urinal trough.

UNDERCOVER: Fewer pits too.

SHI JR: Is it because we have more men than women?

UNDERCOVER: No, it's because men are less perseverant than women.

SHI JR: Perseverant?

UNDERCOVER: Women hold it longer than men. Look at those who get caught. Men frequently ask to go to the toilet.

SHI JR: That's because women are shy.

UNDERCOVER: You're saying it's embarrassing to go?

⁵⁶ The original is “*shi bu guo san*” 事不過三, which is an old Chinese saying that means one does not repeat the same mistake over three times, i.e., one must learn one's lessons. SHI JR is misusing the saying here.

SHI JR: Can we chat somewhere else?

UNDERCOVER: Yes, this is not a place fit for hanging around. (*They start to walk toward the exit.*)

SHI JR: If the toilet can be cleaner and more private, there will be more female patrons.

UNDERCOVER: Toilets in China can't be too private; otherwise, someone will take advantage. Transparency is needed in all activities.

SHI JR: You mean, you have to let other people watch you poop?

UNDERCOVER: You like to misinterpret everything. Did you notice? There is filthy graffiti in the women's as well.

SHI JR: I scrub often, but it's no use.

UNDERCOVER: Who did it?

SHI JR: Must be some female creep.

UNDERCOVER: So women are not shy. We need to be alert.

SHI JR: What did you see?

UNDERCOVER: A scribble of poetry. (*Reads*) "Nature has excelled herself in one fairy cave. / On the perilous twin peaks dwells beauty in her infinite variety."⁵⁷

SHI JR: This is the Chairman's poem.

UNDERCOVER: I know. But that illustration totally changed the interpretation.

SHI JR: Maybe you're the only one to think that way. Maybe the scrawl and the doodle are not done by the same person.

UNDERCOVER: This kind of thing can only happen in our time.

SHI JR: Were it in the time of the Gang of Four,⁵⁸ even I would be interrogated.

The toilet building, exterior.

⁵⁷ Mao Zedong's poem "To Inscribe the Photo Comrade Li Jin Took of Mount Lu's Fairy Cave" 為李進同志題所攝廬山仙人洞照, written in September 9, 1961: Amid the growing shades of dusk stand sturdy pines 暮色蒼茫看勁松, / Riotous clouds sweep past, the scene is swift and tranquil 亂雲飛渡仍從容. / Nature has excelled herself in the fairy cave 天生一個仙人洞, / On perilous peaks dwells beauty in her infinite variety 無限風光在險峰. This English translation is from the Maoist Documentation Project by Marxists.org. Some argue that Mao plagiarized the second couplet from a Qing erotic novel *Hua yin lu* 花蔭露 ("Dew of the Flower's Shade," the title is suggestive of vaginal discharge): Nature has excelled herself in the immortals' cave 天生一個神仙洞, / On the jade peaks dwells beauty in her infinite variety 無限風光在玉峰. The fairy cave, or the immortals' cave, refers to a woman's vagina, while the twin peaks refer to her breasts.

⁵⁸ Gang of Four 四人幫 (*si ren bang*): was a political faction formed during the Cultural Revolution composed of four Chinese Communist Party members, Jiang Qing 江青 (Mao's wife), Wang Hongwen 王洪文, Zhang Chunqiao 張春橋, and Yao Wenyuan 姚文元, who tried to seize power and started a period of political terror.

SHI JR: Then who could the singer be?

UNDERCOVER: Maybe you hallucinated.

SHI JR: I never hallucinate.

UNDERCOVER: Contact me right away if something happens again.

The light dims.

The toilet building, exterior.

Next morning, people in twos and threes stare at the toilet, not daring to come close.

SHI JR is trying hard to invite them.

SHI JR: Would you like to use the toilet? Please come in. It's not busy.

A construction WORKER with a Hebei accent passes by.⁵⁹

SHI JR: Young lad, use the toilet?

WORKER: Forget about it. No water for a day. No pee. (*Exits.*)

SHI JR: A cock—no pee only poop.⁶⁰

A GIRL walks by.

SHI JR: Young lady, use the toilet?

GIRL: Go away. (*Exits.*)

SHI JR: Rude.

An OLD MAN walks over to buy a ticket.

SHI JR: Old sir, use the toilet? Thank you so much. You don't need to pay.

OLD MAN: (*Shakes his head.*) What do you mean? You think I can't afford two bits? Don't be so generous at the state's expense.

SHI JR: Okay, two bits.

OLD MAN: I'm not going.

SHI JR: Why are you eating your words?

OLD MAN: Because of you. I'd better not get involved in suspicious activities. (*Exits.*)

SHI JR: (*Shouts*) What about your pee? You'll get sick if you hold it.

⁵⁹ Hebei is the province closest to Beijing. A large number of workers in Beijing come from the rural areas of Hebei.

⁶⁰ A rooster does not urinate.

OLD MAN: (*Aloud*) I'll save it for tea.

J. PEDDLER: No business the whole day?

SHI JR: Make me a jianbing.

J. PEDDLER: Still in the mood for food?

SHI JR: To convert sadness into strength. Make it two eggs.

In front of the jianbing stand, J. PEDDLER gives a jianbing to LIANGLIANG, who has been waiting aside.

LIANGLIANG: (*Eating jianbing, about to leave, stopped by SHI JR*) Uncle Shi.

SHI JR: Hey, Liangliang, hello. Use the toilet?

LIANGLIANG: I'm eating.

SHI JR: Go after you finish.

LIANGLIANG: Why?

SHI JR: Do you believe in luck?

LIANGLIANG: That's idealism.⁶¹

SHI JR: Whether it's idealism or materialism, just tell me if you believe it.

LIANGLIANG: I'm not lucky. I did poorly on my test again.

SHI JR: My toilet can bring you good luck.

LIANGLIANG: For real? Here is the money. (*Takes out the money.*)

SHI JR: Free for kids. (*LIANGLIANG gives the jianbing to SHI JR and runs into the toilet.*)

One more jianbing. (J. PEDDLER is making jianbing. LIANGLIANG runs out.)

So soon?

LIANGLIANG: No pee.

SHI JR: Okay. It's your faith that matters. If it works, invite your classmates for toilet here after school.

LIANGLIANG: Okay. (*Takes the jianbing and leaves.*)

SHI JR watches her walk away. The light dims.

The toilet office, interior.

⁶¹ The official ideology of the Communist Party of China is dialectical materialism. Idealism is considered its opposite.

TAILOR is measuring SHI JR.

SHI JR: I really don't have to pay out of my own pocket?

TAILOR: I'm only responsible for measuring.

SHI JR: Where do you work?

TAILOR: I'm with the Department of Expatriate Services.

SHI JR: Why must we all wear suits?

TAILOR: To meet international standards. Don't you see the assistants at the grocery shop next door are wearing suits when selling flour?

SHI JR: Grocery shop assistants wearing suits? Anyways, they can't wear black.⁶²

TAILOR: It's all white, the same as what Hong Changqing wears.⁶³

SHI JR: How much do you think the state has to spend?

(Suddenly, there is the sound of pinwheels.)

(Sticks out his head and sees a Pinwheel PEDDLER selling pinwheels.)

Go sell over there!

Pinwheel PEDDLER pulls out a small pinwheel and holds it out against the wind. The pinwheel makes a merry sound.

P. PEDDLER: Take this and give it to your kids to play with.

SHI JR: You're bribing me. How much is it for one?

P. PEDDLER: What are you talking about how much? Take it.

SHI JR: How much for all of them?

P. PEDDLER: Then I thank you. Altogether twenty-five pinwheels, five bits each. Just give me eight coins.

SHI JR: *(Takes out some change from his pocket and counts)* Altogether seven coins five bits.

P. PEDDLER: Okay. That's it. I'll make two toilet visits then.

SHI JR: Deal. Give you extra toilet paper. *(Takes over the pinwheels stuck on the straw stick.)*

⁶² Probably because black clothes get dirty easily with white flour.

⁶³ Hong Changqing 洪常青: a fictive character in *The Red Detachment of Women* 紅色娘子軍, a 1960 film directed by Xie Jin 謝晉, made into a ballet which premiered in 1964 and one of the Eight Model Operas which dominated the national stage during the Cultural Revolution.

Pinwheel PEDDLER takes the stack of toilet paper SHI JR passes over and goes into the toilet.

A gust of wind blows. SHI JR holds the pinwheels against the wind. The pinwheels make a loud sound. All passersby stop to watch. SHI JR's face is glowing with excitement. Some idlers are cheering.

IDLER: For sale?

SHI JR: No. (*Pinwheel PEDDLER walks out of the toilet.*)

Hey, one of them doesn't spin.

P. PEDDLER: Simply fix the pin. (*Fixes the pinwheel.*)

SHI JR pushes Pinwheel PEDDLER away. A group of KIDS are running toward the toilet following LIANGLIANG. SHI JR has a hallucination—DANDAN is running toward him carrying her chamber pot, but she disappears shortly.

LIANGLIANG: Uncle Shi, it's working! I joined the Young Pioneers!⁶⁴ (*The red tie on LIANGLIANG's neck is swaying with the wind.*)

SHI JR: Congrats.

LIANGLIANG: The pinwheels are nice.

SHI JR: Take one with you into the toilet.

KIDS crowd around and talk about the pinwheels.

LIANGLIANG: How much?

SHI JR: A gift for you. These are your classmates? Everyone who uses the toilet gets one.

LIANGLIANG takes the lead and takes one pinwheel and goes into the toilet.

KID 1: Give me one!

KID 2: Give me one!

KIDS divide all the pinwheels between them and sprint into the toilet.

TAILOR: Give me one as well.

SHI JR: (*Gives him the straw stick*) There are none left. You take this.

KIDS come out of the toilet, everyone with a sound of a pinwheel. Then the pinwheel sounds disperse into all directions.

SHI SR comes to the gate of the toilet building, staring at the sign that reads "Pay toilet. 2 mao each."

⁶⁴ Young Pioneers (*shao xian dui* 少先队, short for *shaonian xianfeng dui* 少年先锋队): a mass communist youth organization whose symbol is the red triangular tie.

SHI SR kicks down the sign.

A man comes to buy a ticket. SHI SR stops him.

SHI SR: Don't pay! In the past, we went to every household to collect crap to use as fertilizers, and we never charged them. Now they come here to crap, we are charging them. I won't let you charge!
(Stepping on the sign loudly.)

A crowd gathers around. SHI JR, wearing a neat suit, hurries out.

SHI JR: Pops, sabotaging my sign?

SHI SR: Having some responsibilities as big as shit, you dare to call your papa pops! Now you're a toilet manager, but I can still slug you!

SHI JR: It's you, papa. Why are you here?

SHI SR: You can come here but I can't? Don't forget who gave you this job.

SHI JR: The Party gave it to me.

SHI SR: Bullshit. If I hadn't let you, you wouldn't have gotten it.

SHI JR: You had worked for decades. It's time to enjoy life.

SHI SR: The toilet is a place to serve the people. How can you charge the people? If he doesn't bring money, you make him shit his pants?

SHI JR: The toilet needs maintenance, plus utilities, and wages for the guard—where is all that supposed to come from?

SHI SR: The shit isn't money?

SHI JR: Nobody wants it.

SHI SR: That's news. Look at you, you dare to wear a suit? Who dares to come in when you're dressed like this?

SHI JR: *(Tidies his suit)* It's given to me. The assistants at the grocery shop have worn suits like this for a long time.

SHI SR: Be careful whom you emulate. The grocery shop is doomed.

SHI JR: Even if the grocery shop is finished, our toilet won't be.

SHI SR: What have you done to the toilet? *(Sticks his head into the window.)*

You hang my picture here. You borrow a tiger's hide to intimidate others.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ 拉大旗做虎皮 (*la daqi zuo hupi*): a saying that means to drape oneself with a big banner, namely, in the name of a revolution, as a tiger's hide to intimidate others.

SHI JR: Pa, stop it.

SHI SR: Many retired people are hired back. I need to move my hooves before being whipped too.

SHI JR: You want a salary together with your pension—is it reasonable? You need to leave some room for the young.

SHI SR: I'm not doing it for money. I have to find something to do. I can't just eat and wait to die. I'll guard the toilet for free.

SHI JR: You'd make us look even lower.

SHI SR: Then you have to elevate yourself.

SHI JR: So small a room, both you and me?

SHI SR: Don't you remember the time when you and your four brothers lived together with me in one room...

SHI JR: I moved into the toilet because it was too crowded there...

SHI SR: I'll talk to your boss. (*Exits.*)

SHI JR gives out a long sigh and loosens his tie. OUT-OF-TOWNER enters with a book under his arm.

OUT-OF-TOWNER: This seems to be the old place...

SHI JR: What are you looking for?

OUT-OF-TOWNER: The old place where I reviewed my books.

SHI JR: You... are that... Bible? Out-of-towner?

OUT-OF-TOWNER: Newcomer.

SHI JR: That's you. That's what you said. You also said we were all crap and sooner or later this way of defecation was going to change!

OUT-OF-TOWNER: It's you! I can barely recognize you. A suit and leather shoes. Shinier than a professor!

SHI JR: What's so great about being a professor? During the Cultural Revolution, weren't students testing teachers?⁶⁶ I've heard those who study missiles do no better than those who sell **miso**.⁶⁷ How are you? Didn't get into college?

OUT-OF-TOWNER: I did. I'm teaching at a university.

⁶⁶ During the Cultural Revolution, students were prosecuting teachers in the name of anti-(academic) authority.

⁶⁷ 研究導彈的還不如賣茶雞蛋的 (*yanjiu daodan de hai buru mai chajidan de*): Literally, those who research on missiles do no better than those who sell tealeaves-boiled eggs. A popular saying at the time that fit the anti-intellectual ideology during the Cultural Revolution. 彈 (*dan*), "missiles," and 蛋 (*dan*), "eggs," are puns in Mandarin.

SHI JR: A professor?

OUT-OF-TOWNER: A lecturer.

SHI JR: Then why are you still reciting books?

OUT-OF-TOWNER: Preparing for lessons. It's too messy at home.

SHI JR: You stayed in Beijing? But you're no better than me. What did you say at that time? We were all crap. See? I've got my own studio. Won't you admit this is advancement?

OUT-OF-TOWNER: This isn't an ideal locale for defecation.

SHI JR: What's the ideal way to defecate? Explain it, since you study this.

OUT-OF-TOWNER: People in Hangzhou poop lying down with two bamboo poles, one under the feet, one under the back...

SHI JR: Can't push it out that way. I was in the hospital once, having my appendix removed. Used a bed pan. Couldn't push it out at all.

OUT-OF-TOWNER: It's a problem with the diet here in the north. What do we eat in the south? Veggies, fruit... What do you eat in the north? Machine pressed noodles, steamed buns with extra flour... Let's not talk about this. Anyways, sooner or later, every Chinese family will have a toilet in their home, a flush toilet.

SHI JR: Really? How much water would we waste? I oppose it! The Chinese don't like to go alone. Everything needs to be transparent, no hiding. No matter in which of the twenty-something toilets in the area in the past, no matter who it was, as soon as he raised his butt, I knew what kind of shit he pooped...⁶⁸

OUT-OF-TOWNER: You would be infringing upon others' privacy! We'll see. Your toilet will be closed down one day... Do you know how everyone else in the world defecate? Many toilets are automatic. For example, in Germany, there is a kind of timed toilet. When time is up, if you don't come out, it will automatically open the door and expose you!

SHI JR: That's Germany. Do you know how rural people wipe their butts? Using clods of dirt.

OUT-OF-TOWNER: The world is connected. The foot of civilization will step on all soil. You can't escape!

SHI JR: ... What do I do then?

OUT-OF-TOWNER: Like I said, you're a batch of waste created by the era... (*Enters the toilet.*)

⁶⁸ 一掀屁股就知道拉甚麼屎 (*yi jue pigu jiu zhidao la shenme shi*): literally "as soon as one raises one's butt, (I) know what kind of shit one has pooped," a slang that means to know someone really well.

SHI JR: Even waste can't be wasted... Besides, who made me watch the toilet? Now you leave me here... (*Dazed, realizing a crisis, thinks for a while, and suddenly*) Wait, he didn't pay!

Outside the toilet building, deafening sound of the engineer of a bulldozer. GUY III is directing the workers. SHI JR and SHI SR are standing on a pile of rubble, watching.

SHI SR: The toilet is still quite new. No problem for another twenty years.

SHI JR: They say they're gonna build a better one. In a restaurant.

SHI SR: That brat looks like Guy III.

SHI JR: It's him.

SHI SR: What shit does he know.

SHI JR: Even the great hero Han Xin crawled under other's crotch.⁶⁹ Don't belittle people.

SHI SR: Self-inflicted setbacks.

SHI JR: Who are you talking about?

SHI SR: Who? The state!

UNDERCOVER POLICEMAN comes out of nowhere.

UNDERCOVER: You're talking about the state? What do you mean by self-inflicted setbacks? Sir, you follow me.

SHI JR: No, no. The old sir is talking about the bulldozer.

UNDERCOVER: Don't you interrupt.

SHI SR: I'm going with you. I dare to say it wherever I go.

SHI SR walks down the pile of rubble with UNDERCOVER POLICEMAN.

SHI JR: I'm going too, sir.

UNDERCOVER: I invited him, not you.

SHI SR: I'm not afraid. What can anyone do to a toilet guard?

SHI JR: Be very careful...

(Rumbly sound of the bulldozer.)

⁶⁹ Han Xin 韓信 (c. 231 BCE-196 BCE), a military general who served Liu Bang during the Chu–Han Contention and contributed greatly to the founding of the Han dynasty. He was named as one of the “Three Heroes of the early Han dynasty,” along with Zhang Liang and Xiao He. He bore the humiliation of crawling under some hooligans’ crotch when he was young. 胯下之辱 (*kua xia zhi ru*), the humiliation of crawling under other’s crotch, is an idiom that describes a real man who can lie low and bear humiliation to avoid fights when the odds are against him must be able to walk tall and achieve great things in the future.

ACT III

A toilet in the 1990s.

This is the entrance of a restroom inside a grand, luxury restaurant. The restroom is located at the rear of the lobby. In the distance, the restaurant door and a doorman can be seen. An elevator exit is another possibility. Most of the people coming out from the elevator and going into the toilet are patrons of the restaurant. Those who enter from the front of the lobby and go straight into the toilet are local residents who live nearby or UNDERCOVER POLICEMEN. A café is on the other side.

We can see all the characters who have appeared in the 1980s in the restaurant, walking back and forth close to the toilet, hesitating. They have not yet recognized each other. They are just unsure whether it will cost a lot to use a fancy toilet like this, and nobody dares to be the first to try. Some take out their wallets to see how much change they have.

OLD ZHANG is striding toward the toilet from the front of the lobby, but his gait is a little unsteady due to old age. He is asking the busboy who is cleaning the floor something. The busboy politely points at the direction of the toilet.

The men's toilet, interior.

OLD ZHANG pushes open the toilet door. SHI JR, waiting at the bathroom vanity, is all smiles.

SHI JR: Good day, sir.

OLD ZHANG: *(Nods)* Is today the opening of this new toilet?

SHI JR: Yes, and the opening of the restaurant as well. Ah, sir, you look familiar.

OLD ZHANG: I don't think so. I left the Ministry of Foreign Affairs several years ago. Who would still recognize me?

SHI JR: Ministry of Foreign Affairs? That can't be wrong.

OLD ZHANG: *(Walks into a clean cubicle, about to lock the door, but stopped by SHI JR)* I've already left the Ministry. No use asking me for favors. No more power.

SHI JR: You don't have a pen with you, do you?

OLD ZHANG: So much rubbish. I've told you! I've got a pen, but I don't sign any papers!

SHI JR: Sir, give me your pen and I'll keep it for you for a while. I'll return it to you after you finish.

OLD ZHANG: Foreign Affairs are no small matter. I can't give up my pen so easily...

(About to shut the door by force.)

SHI JR: If you don't hand in your pen, you can't use the toilet.

OLD ZHANG: Nonsense! It's my pen. Why would I give it to you?

SHI JR: I'm afraid you'll draw filthy graffiti!

OLD ZHANG: (*Outraged*) Why are you talking this nonsense? I'll complain to the manager!

(*Gets out of the cubicle and walks toward the exit in a fury.*)

SHI JR watches OLD ZHANG walking out, not knowing what to do.

The door opens again. OLD ZHANG comes in with a foreigner DEPUTY MANAGER.

MANAGER: This patron complains that you're confiscating his pen.

SHI JR: He has a hobby of drawing filthy graffiti.

MANAGER: It's the first day of our restaurant. How do you know he draws porn?

OLD ZHANG: I'm sorry, what **horn** do I draw?

MANAGER: Porn.

OLD ZHANG: **Corn**? I don't understand.⁷⁰

SHI JR: I know him.

OLD ZHANG: I don't know you.

MANAGER: Enough. (*To SHI JR*) You can't confiscate his pen. Make sure he uses the toilet undisturbed.

SHI JR: What if he draws?

MANAGER: If you can scrub it off, then I know nothing. If you can't, I'll fire you.

SHI JR: Okay. (*To OLD ZHANG*) Go doodle.

OLD ZHANG: What?

SHI JR: Go, dude.

OLD ZHANG goes into the cubicle and closes the door.

FATS comes in.

FATS: Hey, Shi Jr! Made it into the hospitality industry?

MANAGER: (*Turns back*) How come everyone here is your friend?

FATS: "The Ministry" went in just now? Ten years ago, he owed me a roast duck.

MANAGER: (*to SHI JR*) It's work time, not happy hour with your friends.

⁷⁰ The original is "What palace do I draw" 我畫甚麼宮? "Springtime palace" 春宮. "I don't understand" 我不懂. 春宮 (*chungong*), literally "springtime palace," refers to porn.

FATS: You misunderstood, sir. I'm facilitating your work by going to the toilet. That old guy just now has an addiction to drawing porn.

MANAGER: Really? How good is he?

SHI JR: What do you mean?

MANAGER: If he draws well, we can publish his works; if he draws terribly, we can sue him for vandalism and ask him to compensate for damage.

OLD ZHANG: (*Shouts*) I'm not drawing, no, I'm not going! (*Pushes the door open and comes out.*)

SHI JR, FATS, and DEPUTY MANAGER stare at him with suspicion.

SHI JR: (*Opens the tap*) Please, sir.

OLD ZHANG washes his hands quickly. SHI JR passes him a paper towel. OLD ZHANG wipes his hands, throws the towel into the trashcan, turns around and leaves right away.

MANAGER: (*Opens the cubicle door*) He didn't doodle. You insulted the patron.

FATS: Wait. You don't know where he usually does it. (*Sticks his head in to take a look*) It's here. I bet he forgot his old-man glasses. All the figures have eight legs. Time didn't spare him—his pen no longer draws his mind.

SHI JR takes a wet towel and hastens to wipe it off.

MANAGER: Let me have a look. (*Looks carefully*) I think this is a crab.

FATS: It's a human. Nezha in the temple has eight legs.⁷¹

MANAGER: That's a myth.

FATS: It's still porn. He is getting old. The perspective doesn't look right.

MANAGER: Maybe it's a national emblem?

FATS: Which country's?

MANAGER: Mauritius. Or Madagascar.

SHI JR: Right. That he knows. Old guy worked for the Ministry.

MANAGER: What? He is an officer with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs? Why didn't you tell me earlier? It's our honor to have him here.

FATS: Why are you so snobbish?

MANAGER: In the future, he can do whatever he wants here. Don't spoil his fun.

⁷¹ 哪吒 Nezha: a protection deity in Chinese folk religion. He is in the form of a fully-grown boy and has three heads and eight (or six) arms.

FATS: I'd better hurry. Almost forgot what I came for. (*Goes into the toilet, shuts the door.*)

Sound of defecation comes from inside the cubicle.

FATS: (*Chatting while pushing*) Did—he—Oh!

SHI JR: Sorry, sir, I can't chat with you.

FATS: Alas, roast duck! I forgot again!

Water flushing sound. FATS comes out.

SHI JR: (*Opens the tap reluctantly*) Come.

FATS: Aye, aye.

(*Presses the button on the soap dispenser on the wall*) Is it okay to use a little bit more?

SHI JR: As long as there is a little left for the next patron.

FATS: I don't need that much. (*Looks at the basin*) Is it okay to spit? Then flush it with water?

SHI JR: As long as you don't pee in it.

FATS: Funny. (*Spits, washes his hands, takes the paper towel SHI JR passes over, wipes his hands, and dries them under the hand dryer.*) "The Ministry" didn't mention the impeachment of President Clinton?

SHI JR: I don't know who Clinton is.

FATS: What a provincial frog who lives inside a well and all it can see is a sky the size of the well,⁷² no, who lives inside a toilet and can see nothing but shit... Still not colloquial enough.

SHI JR: What's taking you so long? You're roasting potatoes?

FATS: (*Drying hands*) The temperature is not high enough.

SHI JR: It's enough. You take forever.

FATS: I haven't drawn dirty graffiti yet!

SHI JR: I haven't beaten you up yet. Get out of here!

FATS: Be careful or I'll complain about you!

SHI JR: Be careful or I'll write educated youth literature!

FATS: ... Alas, I've switched to writing about marriage and family.

SHI JR: Be careful or I'll draw fake monthly bus passes!

⁷² 坐井觀天 (*zuo jing guan tian*): to look at the sky from the bottom of a well (like a frog), a popular idiom to ridicule provincial people with a limited horizon. It is an allusion from the essay 原道 ("Yuan dao") by 韓愈 Han Yu (768-824).

FATS: Who still draws those? People all draw fake passports now. You're really outdated.

SHI JR: Didn't invite Slim to come with you?

FAT: What for? Borrowing his shit? Who takes medical leaves now? Careful not to get laid off. Oh, I tell you, Slim was not faking it. Didn't he always get enteritis? Later developed into rectal cancer. Died. (*Whistles lamely and runs away.*)

SHI JR is cleaning the bathroom vanity. MAN 1, 2, 3, 4 enter the toilet. They all look older than in the past. They are peeing. MAN 1 finishes, turns around, and the urinal flushes itself.

MAN 1: Wow, it's automatic.

MAN 2: What about mine?

MAN 1: Can't you try?

MAN 2: (*Steps back while peeing*) It doesn't flush.

MAN 3: You need to stand at more of an angle.

SHI JR: What are you doing? Messing around here?

MAN 2: Sorry... Yo, Shi!

MAN 4: Haven't seen you in over ten years? You look old.

SHI JR: Please leave after you finish. You can't chat here. (*Opens the tap for MAN 1, 2, 3, 4 to wash hands.*)

MAN 1: How much?

SHI JR: No charge.

MAN 2: What did I say? Should've come in earlier.

MAN 3: Do you use perfume for the toilet? Smells French.

MAN 4: You have a fancy job here and are distancing the people.

SHI JR: You're done. Leave!

A BLACK MAN walks in. SHI JR gives him an unnatural smile because of the presence of MAN 1, 2, 3, 4. The black man smiles, showing his teeth, and stands in front of a urinal. MAN 1, 2, 3, 4 look at him with curiosity.

SHI JR: Don't start any trouble. Just leave.

MAN 1: I've never seen one.

SHI JR: It's rude since the foreign guest can hear you.

MAN 2: He doesn't understand Chinese.

BLACK MAN: You've never seen people piss?

MAN 2 is stupefied and screams. MAN 1, 2, 3, 4 flee.

BLACK MAN: I'm gonna complain to the restaurant!

SHI JR: I'll be your witness.

The BLACK MAN walks off in anger.

SHI JR straightens his back, pounds his back with his hand to give himself a massage. When he is about to lean on the wall and take a rest, the door opens.

UNDERCOVER POLICEMAN opens the door with one hand and shows PICKPOCKET in with another. They both look a bit aged. PICKPOCKET has pompadour hair and wears a black brand-name three-piece suit. UNDERCOVER POLICEMAN wears a leisure suit. Both of them wear spotless shoes.

UNDERCOVER: Please, sir.

(Opens the cubicle door and closes it for him, then stands aside and keeps watch.)

SHI JR rubs his eyes as if it is hard for him to believe what he is seeing.

UNDERCOVER: *(Walks over and whispers beside SHI JR's ear)* Later our president is going to steal a roll of your toilet paper. Please pretend that you don't notice.

SHI JR: How can I do that? What am I here for?

UNDERCOVER: Our company will compensate you. *(Opens a leather bag and takes out a roll of toilet paper)* Please just don't expose him.

SHI JR: You have your own toilet paper. Why are you taking ours?

UNDERCOVER: Didn't P for President use to be P for Pickpocket?⁷³ In order not to forget his roots, he needs to practice in winter during the coldest nights and in summer during the hottest days, just like a boxer can't leave his fists idle or a singer his vocal chords.

SHI JR: What kind of president is he?

UNDERCOVER: President of Cheng Yaojin⁷⁴ Security Door Factory's general distributor in Asia.

SHI JR: He is already a business owner. Why hasn't he given up on his old habit?

UNDERCOVER: Our president says, forgetting the past means betrayal!⁷⁵

⁷³ The original literally reads, "Didn't Fo-*zong* (President Fo) use to be Fo-*ye* (Sir Fo, slang for "pickpocket")?"

⁷⁴ Cheng Yaojin 程咬金 (589-665): a hero, famous general. Also a character in popular literature, such as *Sui Tang yanyi* 隋唐演義 (*Romance of the Sui and Tang*) by Chu Renhuo 褚人獲 (1625-1682) and the 18th century novel *Shuo Tang* 說唐 (*On the Tang*). In *Romance of Sui and Tang*, Cheng Yaojin is a righteous bandit; Pickpocket likely got the idea from there.

⁷⁵ A famous line often mistaken as a quote from Lenin. It is actually a line from the character Lenin in the children's play "In the Name of Revolution" 以革命的名義 in the 50s, adapted into a popular film in the 60s.

The door opens. PICKPOCKET walks out with composure.

SHI JR: (*Opens the tap*) Sir, please.

PICKPOCKET holds one arm tightly against his chest and washes briefly.

SHI JR: Use some hand soap?

UNDERCOVER: Don't you look for trouble!

PICKPOCKET: You're worried what I've shoplifted might fall out of my jacket?

SHI JR: Yo, Pic—President, I don't know what you're talking about.

PICKPOCKET lets loose his arm and shakes his upper body. Nothing falls out. SHI JR picks up a brush to brush off PICKPOCKET's suit. UNDERCOVER POLICEMAN stops SHI JR, grabs the brush and tosses it back onto the bathroom vanity. He urges PICKPOCKET to leave, but PICKPOCKET insists on staying and starts to comb his hair in front of the mirror.

PICKPOCKET: The emperor Zhu Yuanzhang ate the “Pearl, Emerald, and Jade Soup” a beggar cooked.

PICKPOCKET: The King of Yue, Gou Jian, slept on firewood and tasted gall. That's how they accomplished big things. Do you know why I take Bro Officer with me? He retired in advance because he was moved by me. After Han Xin became the General, he didn't kill that wretch who made him crawl under his crotch. Instead, he treated him well and gave him a post.⁷⁶

SHI JR: Isn't it pathetic?

PICKPOCKET: That's why you can only guard the toilet, a big toilet at best, and accomplish nothing great!

SHI JR: You must help me, like a vet who tries to treat a dead horse as if it were still alive.⁷⁷ You can't just watch me continue on like this.

⁷⁶ Anecdotes of famous historical figures, Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋 (1328-1398), Gou Jian 勾踐 (c. 520 BCE-465 BCE), and Han Xin 韓信 (c. 231 BCE-196 BCE), who had endured great hardships and humiliations before success. *Wo xin chang dan* 臥薪嘗膽, literally, sleeping on firewood and tasting gall, and *kua xia zhi ru* 胯下之辱, literally, the humiliation of crawling under other's crotch, are famous idioms associated with Gou Jian and Han Xin, respectively. It is said that Gou Jian, King of Yue, a conquered state, slept on firewood and tasted bitter bile everyday for years to remind himself of his goal to avenge the humiliation and restore his kingdom. Anecdotes on Zhu Yuanzhang's life as a poor beggar before he became the emperor are also well-known. *Zhenzhu feicui baiyu tang* 珍珠翡翠白玉湯, literally, Pearl, Emerald, and Jade Soup is ironically soup made of cheapest ingredients—Chinese cabbage stalk, spinach, rice grits, and/or tofu. *Dankou xiangsheng* 單口相聲 (crosstalk by a single comedian, very similar to stand-up comedy (See note on crosstalk) master Liu Baorui 劉寶瑞 (1915-1968) created a namesake crosstalk on the abovementioned anecdotes and the sketch was very popular.

⁷⁷ 死馬當活馬治 (*si ma dang huo ma zhi*): A saying. Literally, to treat a dead horse as if it were still alive. Namely, to make every possible effort no matter how bad the situation is.

PICKPOCKET: Generosity! It won't do without generosity and endurance of humiliation. Life is all about honor and humiliation. Even if others bind your fingers with shoelaces or untie your belt, you have to be able to endure it. If you understand this, you can have a peaceful mind.

SHI JR: What would you say great accomplishment is?

UNDERCOVER: Stop pestering the President. We're busy.

PICKPOCKET: No formalities with old friends. We're just gonna pick up some chicks anyway. It's okay to be a bit late. What were you asking?

SHI JR: I asked: what is great accomplishment?

PICKPOCKET: To educate people on how to protect themselves from theft and burglary. I use my own act to teach people a lesson. Those who steal other people's money are dishonored, but those who steal other people's minds are respected. I'd rather steal money than minds.⁷⁸ (*Picks up the perfume bottle on the vanity and sprays some into his hair.*)

UNDERCOVER: (*Whispers*) Be careful, sir. The toilet paper may fall out.

PICKPOCKET: Oh, I forgot to take it.

UNDERCOVER: Ah, sir, you wanna go again?

PICKPOCKET: The chance is gone. Don't arouse suspicion.

The door opens. GUY III walks in, dressed smartly.

GUY III: No dumping wallets here in my territory.

PICKPOCKET: How come it's your territory?

SHI JR: The toilet is his project.

UNDERCOVER: Watch your tone.

GUY III turns around to confront PICKPOCKET.

PICKPOCKET: As the old saying goes, even a river can change its course.⁷⁹ Don't look at me with old prejudices.

GUY III gives out a humpf and elbows PICKPOCKET. PICKPOCKET ducks sideways. GUY III dashes to the urinal and starts to piss. PICKPOCKET has an extra cellphone in his hand. The cellphone rings. PICKPOCKET picks up the phone.

⁷⁸ Not sure of the allusion. An old Chinese saying close in meaning would be “*qie gou zhe zhu, qie guo zhe zhubou*” (竊鉤者誅, 竊國者諸侯), which means those who steal a hook are sentenced to death but those who steal a state become dukes. “*Gou*” (hook) and “*guo*” (state) are puns. “*Zhu*” (be dead) and “*zhubou*” (become dukes) are puns.

⁷⁹ 三十年河東, 三十年河西 (*san shi nian he dong, san shi nian he xi*): a saying, literally, “the village is to the east of the river for the first three decades and the west for the next three,” which refers to a complete change of circumstances.

A young woman's voice, "Why are you not answering?"

PICKPOCKET: I'm pissing.

A young woman's voice, "Who is so vulgar?"

PICKPOCKET: A thief.

A young woman's voice, "Wow, so exciting! Can you come with him to meet me?"

PICKPOCKET: Let me ask him. Hey, your chick is asking me out.

GUY III: (*Touches his pocket, shocked*) I'm calling the police!

PICKPOCKET: Just kidding. I apologize. I'll treat you in this restaurant.

UNDERCOVER POLICEMAN takes the phone and gives it to GUY III.

GUY III: Do I need you to treat me?

PICKPOCKET: Looking down on me? Afraid of me...

SHI JR: Sir, for you two, this is easy. Just don't discuss eating in the toilet, okay?

GUY III: Okay. You must drink a lot.

SHI JR: Wine is others', but the stomach is your own.

GUY III: Don't think of yourself as our friend. The patrons are discussing their business. How can a toilet attendant interrupt?

SHI JR: You...

GUY III: We have class distinctions again now, remember? We do not belong to the same class. You're lower-class, understand?

UNDERCOVER: What nonsense!

SHI JR: In the past, my papa said the state was creating self-inflicted setbacks, and you took him away. Today, he says we have class differences again, but why are you not arresting him?

UNDERCOVER: It's out of my power nowadays. There are things much worse.

The door opens again. Some EUROPEANS come in. PICKPOCKET attempts to approach them.

SHI JR: Don't. They're Italians.

PICKPOCKET: Italian wallets use good leather.

UNDERCOVER: No, they're mafia.

PICKPOCKET sticks out his tongue. UNDERCOVER POLICEMAN leads the way. PICKPOCKET and GUY III leave the toilet. EUROPEANS leave some tips on the vanity.

SHI JR: (*Uses hand gestures*) No tips, thanks, thanks.

A EUROPEAN takes out some more money and leaves it on the vanity. SHI JR waves his hand. The EUROPEAN puts down another 10 kuai angrily.

SHI JR: Sir, you misunderstood. (*Takes the money on the vanity and tries to tuck it into the EUROPEAN's suit pocket.*)

EUROPEAN: (*Smiles*) No, thank you.⁸⁰

SHI JR: I washed my hands! Sir.

EUROPEANS leave the toilet.

SHI JR stares at the tips sadly.

The door is bumped open. A chic, gender-ambiguous young person staggers into the toilet. She is LIANGLIANG, drunk, and pushed in by friends. SHI JR doesn't recognize her at first.

A burst of laughter. Some YOUNG PEOPLE with guitars who play rock music break in.

LIANGLIANG: (*Points at the urinal*) What's this?

YOUNG PEOPLE laugh.

SHI JR: Are you a mister or a miss?

LIANGLIANG: What do you think?

SHI JR: My eyes are dumb.

LIANGLIANG: What do you mean dumb?

SHI JR: Stupid.

LIANGLIANG: What do you mean stupid?

Another burst of laughter.

SHI JR: If you know how to use a urinal, then you're a mister; if you don't, then no more waste of words, don't make trouble for me. Please exit the stage.

LIANGLIANG: He says exiting the stage. He knows what we do.

YOUNG PEOPLE give out a loud cry at once and start to play the guitars.

LIANGLIANG: (*Sings rock*) "The moon is floating in the white lotus clouds..."

SHI JR freezes. There suddenly comes a line in the original melody and SHI JR suddenly realizes that LIANGLIANG looks almost exactly the same as DANDAN, only in a very different style. SHI JR

⁸⁰ The European is speaking English.

hallucinates: DANDAN moonwalks toward him, holding her chamber pot; LIANGLIANG walks toward him with a pinwheel.

SHI JR: *(Gives out a sudden, loud cry. Recites following the rock music rhythm)* “The moon is floating in the white lotus clouds...”

In the last variation after some strong passages, the music is back to its original melody.

SHI JR: *(Sings)* “The moon is floating in the white lotus clouds...”

LIANGLIANG: *(Stops the guitar, runs her eyes up and down on SHI JR)* Uncle Shi?

SHI JR: Dandan! No, Liangliang!

The door opens. MANAGER storms in, shouting angrily at SHI JR.

MANAGER: Where do you and your friends think you are?

SHI JR: I’m quitting this job!

MANAGER is astonished.

The door opens again. FATS rushes in, taking out a notebook and a ball pen.

FATS: Are you with the band Pests? I’ve finally found you! Talk about your new album. Oh? The female lead vocalist is also in the men’s toilet? Ah, I’ve got big news for *Beijing Youth News* this time.

QIN YUE: We’ve adapted a nostalgic song from the 1950s. It’s very catchy. *(Points at SHI JR)* Even the toilet guard is singing and dancing with us. Which newspaper are you with?

FATS: I’m an independent writer. May I ask why you’re rehearsing in the men’s toilet?

QIN YUE: We’re not rehearsing. We’re betting on something.

MANAGER: Excuse me, sir, the event is over.

BAND MEMBERS are walking out.

SHI JR: *(Pulls LIANGLIANG)* How is your mother?

LIANGLIANG: We’ve severed our relationship.

MANAGER: What? There is a madam?

SHI JR: Why severing the relationship?

LIANGLIANG: She says I’ve fallen!

SHI JR: What about her? What does she do?

LIANGLIANG: The government is taking care of her. No more questions! *(Runs out crying.)*

SHI JR: Stop! Wait! *(Runs after LIANGLIANG)*

MANAGER: You should remain in your post!

SHI JR: I'm quitting! I'm laid off! (*Runs out of the toilet.*)

FATS follows and rushes out.

Outside the women's toilet, interior.

LIANGLIANG runs into the women's toilet.

SHI JR stops chasing, walking back and forth in front of the entrance.

BAND MEMBERS: (*Walk over and surround SHI JR*) Pops, you can't chase a chick like that! Pops, don't hang yourself on a single tree!⁸¹

The security guard walks over and asks the young BAND MEMBERS to leave.

BAND MEMBERS leave.

FATS: (*Moves closer*) You pursue a star as well?

SHI JR: Pursue your mother!

FATS: Yes! (*Runs toward the IC card pay phone.*)

MANAGER appears.

MANAGER: You need to go back to your post for the moment.

SHI JR: No!

MANAGER: Then go change and take off your uniform.

SHI JR: I'm afraid she'll run away.

MANAGER: You love her?

SHI JR: I would not dare to think that I don't love her.

MANAGER: (*Doing calculations*) Double negative equals positive. Still love. It's okay. I'll make her stay.

SHI JR: I'll be right back. (*Runs to the changing room.*)

FATS comes to the toilet entrance with old YINGZI, whose way of dressing is gender ambiguous. YINGZI is a bit timid.

MANAGER: I'm sorry. You can't go in.

⁸¹ 別在一棵樹上吊死 (*bie zai yi ke shu shang diao si*): a saying, literally, don't hang yourself on one single tree. Namely, don't be so stubborn to limit yourself to one single pursuit, quite often referring to a romantic pursuit, while ignoring the whole forest.

YINGZI has cold feet.

FATS: He is talking about me. May he choke to death. *(Stops, encourages YINGZI.)*

YINGZI enters the women's toilet.

SHI JR runs back, wearing the old suit he got when he was working for the pay toilet.

FATS: Yo, isn't this suit the old toilet uniform?

SHI JR: You don't have to speak to prove you're not mute.⁸² I mean, after the government demolished the old buildings and resettled you into new ones, you all have a toilet in your own home—why are you still coming to the public toilet?

FATS: It's not exciting enough going at home.

Two foreign women enter the toilet.

YINGZI helps LIANGLIANG out. YINGZI looks glowing. He is thrilled to enter the women's toilet for the very first time. It is obvious that he has just reapplied some makeup while in the women's toilet.

LIANGLIANG pushes YINGZI aside. Her face is wet and her makeup messed up.

YINGZI: Good. Sniffing white powder inside. Junkie girl.

MANAGER: *(To YINGZI)* Wait, you're a guy?

FATS: No, a Thai lady boy. Went through the surgery!

MANAGER: You go to the security office and explain. *(Gestures at the security guard.)*

SHI JR helps LIANGLIANG walk to the café. The security guard is about to stop them, but DEPUTY MANAGER waves his hand.

DEPUTY MANAGER and the security guard take YINGZI and FATS away.

The café, interior.

SHI JR sits down pretentiously. LIANGLIANG sits down.

WAITRESS brings the drink menu. SHI JR reads the menu with a pretentious air.

WAITRESS looks at SHI JR with contempt.

SHI JR: Soda is baking powder. I'm not leavening dough. Alcohol is watery. It's all to rip people off. How come the winter melon soup is so expensive?

WAITRESS: It's freshly pressed.

⁸² 没人把你当哑巴 (*mei ren ba ni dang ya ba*): literally, no one takes you as mute, short for “if you don't speak, no one takes you as mute,” used as a comeback to someone who has just made an unwelcome remark.

SHI JR: Raw?

WAITRESS: How else could it be?

SHI JR: How much is the winter melon's peel?

LIANGLIANG: Stop messing around. This is not a pharmacy.

SHI JR: Bring me some flower tea.

LIANGLIANG: Mineral water.

WAITRESS leaves.

LIANGLIANG: Ask.

SHI JR: You...

LIANGLIANG: Can you take your fake suit off?

SHI JR: I'm only wearing an undershirt. The restaurant won't let me. You take drugs?

LIANGLIANG: You believe that hermaph? Are you asking about me or my mom?

SHI JR: I ask...I ask about you.

WAITRESS brings the drinks. SHI JR and LIANGLIANG sip their drinks.

LIANGLIANG: Have a crush on me?

SHI JR: You...

LIANGLIANG: It's okay. If there's fresh grass on the field, munch on it, old ox.⁸³ Cool!

SHI JR: You and that gang...

LIANGLIANG: Hey, hey, it's not a gang, it's a band.

SHI JR: You dare to enter the men's toilet. What do you not dare do?

LIANGLIANG: What's the big deal about the men's toilet? I've seen much of it.

SHI JR: You being so... open is dangerous.

LIANGLIANG: Not so complicated. The most fashionable way now is to help yourself.⁸⁴ No risk of AIDS.

SHI JR: Really? Ah, so...

⁸³ 老牛吃嫩草 (*lao niu chi nen cao*): literally, "an old ox munching on fresh grass," a saying that refers to an old guy wooing a young girl.

⁸⁴ "To help yourself" is a euphemism for masturbation.

LIANGLIANG: Didn't you do this all the time in the pay toilet?

SHI JR: Alas! How did you know!

LIANGLIANG: We all saw you.

SHI JR almost faints.

LIANGLIANG: Are you gonna run off without paying?

SHI JR: (*Sits straight*) Is there still a way in this world for people like me?

LIANGLIANG: I was kidding you. I was guessing.

SHI JR: Gee, I thought you really saw...

LIANGLIANG: Let's talk about something else.

SHI JR: How do you make a living?

LIANGLIANG: Not rock.

SHI JR: Let's partner up?

LIANGLIANG: Are you good?

SHI JR: Good at what?

LIANGLIANG: In the sack.

SHI JR: (*Lowers his head, soon raises it again*) That's not what I meant. I mean, can we do something like in the *Red Lantern*?⁸⁵

LIANGLIANG: What *Red Lantern*? What do you mean?

SHI JR: Live together like a father and daughter?

LIANGLIANG: Did you screw her?

SHI JR: Who?

LIANGLIANG: Who else? My mom.

SHI JR: You, how can you!

LIANGLIANG: I can ride however old a horse but no incest. Be honest—am I your biological daughter?

SHI JR: Look at you. Do you have respect for the martyr—your father?

⁸⁵ 紅燈記 *Red Lantern (Hongdengji)*: modern Beijing opera, one of the eight approved so-called revolutionary operas or model operas during the Cultural revolution. See the note on *Shajiabang*.

LIANGLIANG: Don't be so tragically heroic. Now we're bros with the Vietnamese again. His martyrdom is gonna be really inconvenient to mention.

SHI JR coughs vehemently.

LIANGLIANG: Take it easy.

SHI JR: I'm suffocating. Miss, more water!

WAITRESS: (*Walks over*) Extra charge for more water.

SHI JR: Charge me! It's not like I don't have money. How much?

WAITRESS: Ten coins.

SHI JR: (*Feels his pocket*) You bring me three more pots of water.

WAITRESS: Don't you want a new pot of flower tea?

SHI JR: How much is a new pot?

WAITRESS: Twenty.

SHI JR: Unreasonable pricing. A new pot.

WAITRESS takes the pot away.

SHI JR: People say Beijing people dare to say whatever.

LIANGLIANG: Not me. I dare to do whatever.

SHI JR: Do you think your Uncle Shi is a mushy pumpkin?⁸⁶

LIANGLIANG: No. I think you must be tough. Smoked and drank when you were a baby; raped, whored, set fires, and murdered once you grew up a little.

SHI JR: You should rinse your mouth out.

LIANGLIANG: I don't have a clean spot on me. Even that, they all fight to ride me!

SHI JR slaps LIANGLIANG on the face.

SHI JR and LIANGLIANG stare at each other.

WAITRESS brings the flower tea, pours it for SHI JR, and leaves.

LIANGLIANG gives a weird smile.

SHI JR: All my life, I've never touched a woman, not even a finger.

⁸⁶ 西瓜 (*mian gua*): literally a soft, mushy melon, means pumpkin in some dialects and refers to a dumb, timid, or indecisive person.

LIANGLIANG: You're trying it on an acquaintance today.⁸⁷

Several musicians walk over to the piano.

SHI JR: Seeing you again reminds me that I also had my time of youth. Your mom also had her time of youth.

LIANGLIANG: Why are you separating them into two “times of youth”?

SHI JR: In case you misinterpret.

LIANGLIANG: I'm not interested in interfering in affairs like food and sex.⁸⁸

SHI JR: Do you know why I still haven't found a wife?

LIANGLIANG: Because your lowbrow tune is too low to be accompanied?⁸⁹

SHI JR: Every time I close my eyes, I see your mom running toward me with a chamber pot. (*In a trance.*)

LIANGLIANG: My mom was with you or an elephant?

SHI JR: What do you mean?

LIANGLIANG: Do you have that much?

SHI JR: (*So mad that he laughs*) Don't you think I'm a duckling.⁹⁰ Nothing more than spending a little money and *fuck you!*⁹¹

LIANGLIANG: I admire your courage. One doesn't learn a new skill after thirty. Leave it.

SHI JR suddenly kneels down.

The band is playing a romantic serenade.

SHI JR: I beg you...

LIANGLIANG: I'm softhearted. Since you've knelt down, I'll marry whatever and follow whatever, be it a cock or a bitch.⁹²

⁸⁷ 殺熟 (*sha shu*): literally, to kill the acquainted, to rip off acquaintances by taking advantage of their trust or friendship.

⁸⁸ 飲食男女 (*yin shi nan nü*): Traditionally, the Chinese think humans have three basic needs—eating, drinking, and man and woman, namely sex.

⁸⁹ 曲低和寡 (*qu di he gua*): a parody of the idiom 曲高和寡. 曲高和寡 (*qu gao he gua*): literally, highbrow songs find few singers to join in the chorus. It used to mean it is very hard to find a soulmate. Now it is usually used to describe artworks that are too highbrow to be popular. The idiom is from an anecdote in the ancient text “對楚王問” (*Dui Chuwang wen*, In Response to the King of Chu) attributed to 宋玉 Song Yu (c. 298 BCE-c. 222 BCE).

⁹⁰ 雛 (*chu*): a chick or a duckling, refers to a virgin.

⁹¹ Shi Jr. is using the English phrase “fuck you” in a Chinese sentence in a grammatically incorrect way.

⁹² 嫁雞隨雞嫁狗隨狗 (*jiayi suiji jiagou suigou*): a saying. Literally, follow a rooster after marrying a rooster; follow a dog after marrying a dog. In the past, women did not have much agency in terms of marriage and could only make the best of things. Old ethical codes also required a woman not to leave her husband, whether he was good or bad.

SHI JR: I beg you to talk no more, okay?

LIANGLIANG: Why?

SHI JR: I've never felt so unsettled in my life.

LIANGLIANG: Since you've already "fucked," stop whining about the sorrows of Young Werther.⁹³

SHI JR: I'm just motherfucking wanting to... you...

LIANGLIANG: Sure. That's performance art. The lead vocalist of Pests makes another sensation.

SHI JR gives a silly grin.

A sudden shout. SHI SR is standing in front of SHI JR.

SHI SR: Stand up!

SHI JR stands up.

SHI SR: Fooling around here to pick up some honey.⁹⁴

LIANGLIANG: (*Laughs frantically*) This old geezer is experienced.⁹⁵ You pick up chicks often?

SHI SR: No, I sweep the toilet often.

LIANGLIANG: How do you know the slangs?

SHI SR: Always in the toilet, what do I not know?

WAITRESS comes.

WAITRESS: What would you like to order?

SHI SR: I'd like to have my son.

WAITRESS leaves.

SHI SR: Chick, don't bully him. He's got virgin boy's balls. You follow me. I've been to the brothel with a real gun.

SHI JR: Pa, look, we're at a restaurant.

LIANGLIANG: Impressive! In your time, everything was so backward. Did you even have brothels?

⁹³ The word "fuck" is in English.

⁹⁴ 糗蜜 (*qiu mi*): 糗 (*qiu*): in multiple dialects, originally means to cook rice, noodles, or dumplings for too long and cause them to stick together; refers to (for someone) to stay somewhere indoor for too long and look spiritless. 蜜 (*mi*): a buzzword at the time, directly translated from the English word "honey," refers to a mistress.

⁹⁵ 老燈 (*lao deng*): literally old lamp, a derogative slang word in the Northeastern Mandarin for an disagreeable old guy, old thing.

A foreign little girl, holding a pinwheel, comes into the restaurant with her mom. The pinwheel is making a sound. LLANGLIANG and SHI JR can't help turning around to look at the pinwheel.

SHI JR: Pa, don't be mad. We're fooling around. She is Dandan's daughter.

SHI SR: *(Dispirited)* I'm here to see your boss.

SHI JR: What for?

SHI SR: Ever since you started to guard this foreign toilet, you, you, you're such a dickhead.⁹⁶

SHI JR: Pa, I just quit the job...

SHI SR: Quit? Then... who will feed you?

SHI JR: *(Brag)* I plan to open my own toilet.

SHI SR: Are there gonna be patrons?

SHI JR: If there aren't any, it'll save me the trouble of cleaning.

SHI SR: That's right.

SHI JR: It's quite a trip for you to come all the way here. I can't afford to treat you to a meal. I'll treat you to a toilet visit.

SHI SR: I'm not going.

SHI JR: This is the last chance. I'm not coming back tomorrow. *(Helps SHI SR stagger toward the toilet.)*

SHI SR: *(Turns back)* Damsel, wait here for us...

LLANGLIANG is wiping her tears secretly. She turns and runs out of the restaurant.

SHI JR holds his sadness and his old father and walks toward the toilet.

At the entrance of the men's toilet, DEPUTY MANAGER stops SHI JR.

MANAGER: Someone has already taken your job.

SHI JR: I'm using the toilet this time.

MANAGER nods.

SHI JR pushes the door open and helps SHI SR in.

Inside the men's toilet, interior.

SHI SR squeezes his eyes, shocked by the luxury toilet.

⁹⁶ 犯狗屌 (*fan gousong*): literally to become a dog's cum. To ridicule someone who is weak, incompetent, or dumb.

SHI SR: It's indeed cleaner than the kitchen.

SHI JR: Whose kitchen?

SHI SR: Of course theirs.

SHI JR: Have you seen it?

SHI SR: I'm guessing.

SHI JR: Their kitchen is cleaner than this.

SHI SR: It's kind of a waste to crap here.

The new toilet attendant is sniggering.

A cubical door opens. OUT-OF-TOWNER comes out.

OUT-OF-TOWNER: Little Shi! No, Old Shi!

SHI JR: (*Tries to recognize*) Hey! What a coincidence. All acquaintances today. About a decade ago, you said every household in China would have a toilet at home in the future, and you got it right!

OUT-OF-TOWNER: Yea, but they still want to go to the toilet together.

SHI JR: Would you call them losers?⁹⁷

OUT-OF-TOWNER: No, you can't say that. You know, in the ancient Roman baths, there were three thousand pit toilets. On the wall a maxim was engraved—

SHI JR: Please flush after use.

OUT-OF-TOWNER: That isn't a maxim. It was a sentence like this: a people who can defecate together is a people of unity.

Silence.

SHI JR: So, is the collective way better, or is the individual way better?

OUT-OF-TOWNER: Many things are hard to say. Like the issue of wasting water you mentioned has already become a world problem. You know, two-thirds of the people on this planet don't have access to clean water, but we're using it to flush toilets here. Now there are waterless no-flush toilets...

SHI SR: I'm not gonna poop, just peeing is enough. Can't be too greedy. (*Stands a foot away from the urinal, pushes SHI JR away.*)

SHI JR: You should stand closer. There is a mechanism: after you finish, it'll flush automatically.

⁹⁷ 賤骨頭 (*jian gutou*): literally base-bones, refers to a wretch who suffers from self-imposed misery. It can also refer to someone without self-respect or sense of humiliation.

SHI SR: Watch me. (*A stream of water goes straight into the urinal.*)

If you can still pee like me when you're this old, you're a good boy! (*The stream of water stops.*)

Why doesn't it flush itself?

SHI JR: You're standing too far away. I'll show you after.

Practiced, SHI JR comes to the vanity, performing every move ahead of the new attendant. SHI JR opens the tap to let SHI SR wash his hands. Then he takes SHI SR's hand to push the button on the soap dispenser.

SHI SR: So smooth. Is there a charge for this?

SHI JR: No.

SHI SR: About to go bankrupt soon.

SHI JR quickly takes out two pieces of tissue, gives to SHI SR, and leads SHI SR to the hand dryer.

SHI SR: (*Drying his hands*) It's warm. How much electricity does it use?

OUT-OF-TOWNER is washing his hands.

SHI JR: (*To OUT-OF-TOWNER*) What would you say is the scientific way to go?

OUT-OF-TOWNER: This is an eternal question, really. I can't give you an answer right away. You know science has its own limitations. Every time scientific discovery solves one problem, it brings a new problem. This new problem may be worse than the old one.

SHI JR: You're too pessimistic! There is no problem that can't be solved. Have you heard that shit is used for cooking in the countryside?

SHI SR: (*Fears that he misheard, but gets mad after seeing SHI JR's face full of certainty*) What motherfucking nonsense.

OUT-OF-TOWNER: Chinese expressions can be explained in multiple ways. What you're saying is to use shit to make bio-gas, use bio-gas to make fire, and then use fire to cook.

SHI JR: (*Stands in front of the urinal*) Pa, watch, I walk here and it'll flush. (*The urinal flushes indeed.*)

OUT-OF-TOWNER: The countryside is being urbanized. Sooner or later, they will encounter the same problems we have. Sooner or later, they will use flush toilets, while defecation mixed with water can't produce bio-gas that is concentrated enough.

SHI JR: It's easy in the countryside. You just go in the field.

OUT-OF-TOWNER: This brings us back to Moses' order in the Bible. But there is not that much land any more. If hundreds of millions of people go in the field, their defecation will cover crops, pollute rivers and underground water, burn trees and flowers, produce maggots and germs...

SHI JR: That's your business. Since you're receiving money from the state, you have to do something.

OUT-OF-TOWNER: *(Drying hands)* You're right, but I don't have Moses' wisdom. He merely used two words to solve the problem...

SHI JR: What I can do is to start from myself...

OUT-OF-TOWNER: Well said!

SHI JR: It can only be that everyone takes one less sip of water, one less bite of food, and one less visit to the toilet!

Silence.

SHI SR: Why are you listening to his bullshit? How can one hold his pee!

OUT-OF-TOWNER: Perhaps one day people won't live so densely together. There will be crops and woods outside the houses...

SHI JR: Let's go.

SHI SR: You should take a pee too.

SHI JR: I almost forgot. *(About to pee, stands for a long time.)*

OUT-OF-TOWNER: Two paths: either you bury your defecation, or you're buried by it...

SHI JR: I... can't piss!

Sound of flushing. Increasingly loud sound of flushing. Sonorous sounds of flushing finally turn into the sound of big waves crashing on the shore.

-THE END-

First draft Christmas Eve, 1998

Second draft early winter, 2003

Selected Serbian Comedies

Branko Mikasinovich (ed.), New Avenue Books 2018

Reviewed by Vladimir Zorić

The latest compilation from the scholar and anthologist Branko Mikasinovich brings together nine plays by three Serbian playwrights. The selection builds upon Mikasinovich's earlier pioneering anthologies of South Slav drama, *Five Modern Yugoslav Plays* (1977) and *Selected Serbian Plays* (2016). The editor seems to have been driven by what Ondřej Vimr defined as supply-driven translation: the plays have been rendered into English purely for the sake of their being available to English-reading audiences rather than meeting an existing demand in those audiences. Yet, dispatching a play (or plays) originally written in a 'small' language into a vast, largely self-centred publishing market is similar to sending a man or—more in keeping with the comic nature of the subject—a dog into space. Regardless of the editor's explicit goal, there is necessarily a broader context within which such a mission can make sense: why exactly have those plays been selected and what are they going to do there? In other words, what is seen as comic in a given source culture at a given point in time and how is this quality conveyed in another time and another, target culture?

A remarkably ambitious endeavor, Mikasinovich's anthology goes some way towards addressing these questions. The editor's selection frames three playwrights from three very different epochs and cultural milieus: the Serb from the then Habsburg province of Vojvodina Jovan Popović Sterija (1806-1856), the Aromanian-born Branislav Nušić (1864-1938), and Dušan Kovačević from the plebeian Western Serbia (b. 1948). Likewise, the plays selected cover a wide range of comic plots: from a group of sycophants, caught in the whirlwind of the revolution of 1848, who support the Serbian or the Hungarian cause as the wind blows (Sterija's *Patriots* [*Rodoljupci*, 1849-1853]), to a veritable menagerie of petty-bourgeois careerists, matchmakers and home-wreckers in the Serbian and, later, Yugoslav kingdom (Nušić's *Suspicious Character* [*Sumnjivo lice*, 1887], *Mrs Minister* [*Gospođa ministarka*, 1928], and *PhD* [*Dr*, 1936]), to the allegorical representations of mentality patterns tinged with graveyard humor and absurd (Kovačević's *The Marathon Family* [*Maratonci trče počasni krug*, 1972], *The Gathering Place* [*Sabirni centar*, 1982], *Larry Thompson, the Tragedy of a Youth* [*Lari Tompson, tragedija jedne mladosti*, 1996], *Kumovi: (A Comic Look at an Everyday Tragedy)* [*Kumovi*, 2013], *Hypnotized by Love* [*Hipnoza jedne ljubavi*, 2016]). The common thread in all these comedies, regardless of their time of composition or their particular plot, is Serbia's precipitous, never accomplished transition from a staunchly patriarchal society, driven by bonds of family kinship and the sacrificial myth of Kosovo, to a modern nation-state, marked competitive entrepreneurship, where success is reserved for individuals.

Mikasinovich's belief that his selection "embodies the best that Serbian comedy can offer" begs some questions. While it is difficult not to agree that the trio should indeed be included in any translation canon of Serbian drama it seems unjust to exclude Aleksandar Popović (1929-1996), whose play *The Revolutionary Road of Bora the Tailor* [1967] was voted the best Serbian play in the second half of the twentieth century. Another peculiarity of Mikasinovich's selection is the conspicuously uneven balance in space, i.e. the number of plays, accorded to each of the three playwrights: Sterija's work is represented by a single play, in Nušić this figure rises to three and in Kovačević it peaks at five plays. Unless further explanations and qualifications are made—and Mikasinovich does not make them—

this ratio may well take on axiological connotations and indicate an aesthetic progress from Sterija to Nušić to Kovačević. In the existing scholarship and criticism there is no prevalent view, let alone a consensus, about this kind of teleology. Interestingly enough, a similar uneven balance affects the work of Kovačević himself: his most renowned plays, from the first part of his career (1970s and 1980s) give way to his later plays (2010s).

One can speculate that part of the reason for this disequilibrium is that Mikasinovich's earlier theatrical anthologies were structured on a more balanced ratio whereby each playwright is represented by a single play and which also feature a larger selection of writers (including Aleksandar Popović). It is possible that after these more rigorously structured anthologies the editor wanted to go for something broader and bent on a more recent period. In any event, in this latest anthology there is a tension between the canonizing approach of the anthologist and the disseminating work of the translator.

The plays of Sterija, Nušić and Kovačević have been rendered into English by four translators—two of them drama practitioners—who applied a variety of translating strategies, including domestication, foreignization, and a mixture of both (Venuti). Any translator of Serbian plays will face a series of formidable challenges which arise from different grammatical, semantic, and cultural patterns in Serbian and English. To begin with, there is a mismatch between many fundamental grammatical categories: for instance, perfective and imperfective verbs in Serbian have to be rendered by very different, indirect means in English. Furthermore, the elaborate Serbian system of kinship terms, reaching out to very distant cousins and long deceased ancestors, has no equivalent in English. Finally, the political cultures in the South Slav and the Anglo-Saxon lands have developed in different ways which means that Serbian- and English-speaking audiences will often see the same event as comic but in different ways.

In addition to these general difficulties, the three playwrights in Mikasinovich's anthology present obstacles specific to their own poetics. The language of Sterija is an irregular, macaronic medley of Hungarian, German and Serbian, the latter with a significant input of Russian. Nušić, for his part, relishes in smalltown chatter, a peculiarly contrived mixture of feigned sighs, preposterous threats, and angry outbursts. Kovačević's characters regularly complement their points with an impressive gamut of curses and swear words which involve anything and everything from family, to flora and fauna, to planets, creating a peculiar microcosm of blasphemy. None of these theatrical idioms is easy to render in English and the translators often had to make creative choices which influenced the semantic as well as performative aspects of the play.

In Sterija's *Patriots*, for instance, the principal source of comedy is the tension between the hypocrisy of nationalist turncoats and the realism of true, unassuming patriots. Whereas the ever-shifting political loyalties of the earlier are reflected in a peculiarly convoluted mixture of the baseline Serbian with Hungarian and German, both provided in Serbian transliteration but without translation, the latter speak frankly and unostentatiously in the Serbian language spoken by the common folk at that time. In Jelena Ilić's translation of the play, this tension between the artificial and the natural has been displaced: the main opposition is between the different language sequences whereby the baseline is English (for Serbian) and Hungarian and German provide a contrast. These code-switching sequences

are provided in the original orthography (Hungarian, German) rather than in transliteration, with each non-English sentence translated in a footnote.

In Nušić's play *Mrs. Minister*, the main comic contrast is between vulgarity and pretense: a narrow-minded, middle-class housewife turns into a Serbian, and distinctly comic, Lady Macbeth when her husband unexpectedly becomes a government minister. In G. N. W. Locke's English translation, the fragmented, platitudinous speech of Nušić's characters, which follows the breathless rhythm of the protagonist's rise and fall, gets a more complex syntactic structure and hence longer sentences. Nušić mixture of rusticity and pompousness is consolidated into the smooth jargon of the late Victorian era and thereby provided with a certain class dignity. The consequence of this syntactic and stylistic evening out is that the play becomes inherently more rational and also more familiar to English-speaking audiences but at the same time more difficult to stage because of the length of the play in translation and the homogeneity of its style.

The most prolific source of comic effects in Kovačević's play *The Marathon Family* is the proximity of, and tension between, death and obscenity: a hilariously discordant, exclusively male family of undertakers bury the dead but also procreate in both deed (through fornication with opposite sex) and word (by swearing at each other). In Miloš Mladenović's translation, Kovačević's staccato of brusque, sardonic sentences is conveyed by equally fragmented sentences in English and the Serbian swear-words and curses are domesticated by nearest equivalents in English. This strategy makes Kovačević grotesque vision of the declining patriarchy eminently stageable in English translation. Another play by Kovačević, *The Gathering Place*, develops a different kind of interplay of death and love: undertakers retreat and the dead step in, mourning their loved ones who are still alive much more than the latter are mourned by them. Unlike Mladenović's rendition of *The Marathon Family*, Denis Barnett's translation of the play smooths out the dialectal and personal differences in the speech of different characters and fuses them into a *danse macabre* which will steer the director towards a melancholy rather than comic tone on the stage.

On the technical side, the editorial apparatus occasionally leaves something to be desired. To be sure, the pronunciation guide to Serbian names is useful as are occasional explanatory footnotes in the main body of the text. However, the background information, introduced through a brief introduction at the beginning, three pithy biographical paragraphs ahead of each of the three playwrights' sections, and an afterword at the end of the volume, is simply not enough for an English reader to contextualize the plays in the source culture. Also, by failing to provide even the basic stage and translation history of the nine plays, Mikasinovich also misses a good opportunity to make a case for their relevance in theatrical context of the target culture. In the present era of the global austerity, the populist assault on democracy and the jingoist rhetoric of the sundry nationalists, which produced Brexit, the Trump family, and the anti-immigrant campaign, the political verve of such plays as Sterija's *The Patriots*, Nušić's *Mrs Minister* and Kovačević's *Kumovi (A Comic Look on everyday Reality)* should be obvious.

For this reason, the Serbian comedies in English translation will not end up as a hapless dog dispatched into a wide and indifferent space. Although scholars will probably need to peruse other sources for more details, Mikasinovich's book will be of great interest to general readership as the most significant

primary resource on Serbian comedy in English translation and it will also stimulate theatre professionals by the scope and intensity of satire.

Vladimir Zorić is an Associate Professor in Slavonic Studies at the University of Nottingham. His research interests include the tropology of exile in law, literature, and the humanities, and, recently, the construction of the Habsburg Monarchy and Central Europe in South Slavic literatures. He is the author of *Kiš, legenda i priča* (*Kiš, Legend and Narrative*, 2005) and *The Rhetoric of Exile: Duress and the Imagining of Force* (2016).

The Translator on Stage

Geraldine Brodie, Bloomsbury, 2017

Reviewed by Penny Black

I am going to come clean straightaway: I came to translating plays through practice not through academia. I originally studied drama in Vienna, and when I returned to the UK found myself employable only playing German roles, of which there was a dearth. Then a small theatre asked me to translate a play for them—and I was off, it was 1989 and everyone wanted plays originally written in German. I learned by doing, and I did a lot of doing!

As a result, I find it deeply frustrating when translation theorists set out their narrowly-defined theories on how to translate a play for the stage—and it should be noted that Venuti never did—as experience shows that each individual play and the circumstances of its production are completely different. An *As You Like It* in the open-air naturally-lit Globe Theatre is inherently different to an *As You Like It* done on the main stage at the RSC in Stratford, and again both will radically differ from a four-hander version touring rural areas. Very few of the books on translation that I have read allowed for this particularity of translating for the stage as opposed to the page and, as a result, translations for the stage have often been judged by criteria that do not allow for a complete picture of the requirements of the translation.

It was in this frame of mind that I came to Brodie's *The Translator on Stage*. The book is the result of research, Brodie's stated method being the Latour-Actor-Network-Theory, "recording not filtering out, describing not disciplining," (9) and it is this openness of approach that makes this book so interesting. She goes on to state at the start of the book that her aim is "to investigate the agency of the translator in theatre, with specific reference to plays in translation in performance on the main London stage," which included not only commercial theatres but also subsidized theatres such as the Royal National Theatre (NT) and the Royal Court.

Brodie took a sample of ten translated plays that were in production in 2015 that she found advertised and reviewed in the mainstream British press, and within this framework she looks not only at "direct translation," for example a translation by David Tushingham, a German-speaker, of Roland Schimmelfennig's *The Woman Before* for the Royal Court, and "indirect translation" (and Brodie is aware and sets out how contested these terms are), which uses an interim translator to provide a literal translation for a playwright usually with a track record for commercially and critically successful productions. The two subsidized theatres in this book represent these two ways of working, the NT on the whole using the indirect methods, whereas the Royal Court has always aimed for direct translations as part of its brief to work with writers.

However, there are many others in this sample, including David Eldridge's translation/adaptation of the film *Festen* at the Almeida Theatre (and she spends some time discussing how the terms translated by/adapted by/in a version by can often be interchangeable when it comes to publicity) and Tony Harrison's poetic re-worked translation of Euripides' *Hecuba* for the NT. This breadth of productions in a variety of theatres allows for a considered in-depth investigation of how translations end up on stage and in what shape.

Having found a time framework of plays for her research, Brodie goes on to interview as many people as possible involved with each production. All in all, she carried out eighteen in-depth interviews with artistic directors, producers, literary department personnel, directors, playwrights, and the translators themselves, who she divided into direct, indirect and literal. She also examines the physical and economic conditions of the productions, which plays were the most successful, their origination within the theatre—notes that some of the plays started outside London, looks at reviews of the productions, and shows how the translation is referred to in the reviews. She looks carefully at the process and development of each individual translation and interviews each of the translators in depth, not only about the process of translating the specific work, but also how each translator fitted into the collaborative process of making the play, whether through physical meetings or email exchanges, as well as the acknowledgement of their work in publicity material going out from the theatres.

On the way she examines how decisions are made through costume choice, set design and lighting, and very specifically at how class comes into play when performing a foreign text in translation on the British stage. In considering David Hare's adaptation of Garcia Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba* Brodie writes:

At home in the impressive surroundings created by the set designer Vicki Mortimer, Poncia's clothing and demeanour portray her more as a middle-class housekeeper than a servant, and her language reflects this presentation. Hare's version corresponds with Lorca's original through the literal translation but addresses the linguistic challenges in his idiosyncratic manner. (49)

When considering Hare and others and allowing herself to *describe* as opposed to *discipline*, she proposes that “the use of a celebrity translator highlights the act of translation and the existence of translations themselves” (104). A point of view that irritates all translators but at the same time reflects the reality of making theatre; a celebrity director or designer or writer or actor will often ensure a larger audience from the off and is a key part of putting on plays.

Her *describe* as opposed to *discipline* approach also allows surprising facts to emerge. One example: “the directors of translated productions are still more likely to be male, with Katie Mitchell a notable exception, as are the writers and visible translators of texts for staged translations. It would certainly appear from this sample that view theatre practices through a translation prism provides information pertaining to theatrical hierarchies and visibility ... especially in relationship to the least visible practitioner: the literal translator” (102). Sadly, not such a surprise to female theatre practitioners.

The interviews with the translators are fascinating. Brodie's approach is magnanimous and her interest in each translator and not only their translation process but also their careers in general is sincere. Brodie's genuine interest in all aspect of her research and her awareness also of the generosity of the time given to her by freelance practitioners, all of whom share her interest in translation and her desire for more to be known about it comes through at all levels.

In her concluding chapter, Brodie states:

Theatre presents the opportunity to examine the significance of the commissioning process in translation via its listing of the agents involved in all aspects of production. Its visible procedures proved material enabling reflection on translation for the theorist, and the potential to raise awareness of translation for the practitioner. (164)

Theatre translation often sees itself as the poorer cousin to prose or poetry translation, there is a sense that the translator is not in charge and even stating that theatre is a collaboration can feel defensive and open debate about the authorial voice. What's more, the individual translator can sometimes feel embattled against the opaque machinery of theatre, seeing only a rejection of their hard work as opposed to understanding that there are many choices behind the commissioning of a new translation and that the programming of a play is not a stand-alone decision.

This book, through the prism of ten plays, opens up an understanding of translation as well as the workings of theatre for translators, theatre makers and laypeople alike. Consequently, it is a book that everyone with an interest in the subject – academic or practical – would benefit from reading. Behind the research is Brodie's passionate interest in translation and translators which, combined with her forensic approach, makes this book fascinating to read.

Penny Black studied drama at Schauspielschule Krauss in Vienna and started her translating career by adapting *Yes, My Fuehrer* and *The Galizian Jewess* from the novels by Brigitte Schwaiger for the Edinburgh Festival 1993 and London 1994. Since then she has translated and adapted over forty plays for a variety of theatres such as the Royal Court, the Gate, the National Theatre, Lyric Hammersmith, Arcola Theatre, as well as venues in America and Australia. Her translation of *Venezuela* by Guy Helminger is taught on the MRes in Playwriting Studies at Birmingham University. Her translation of Nobel-prize-winner Elfriede Jelinek's *Sportsplay* toured the UK in 2012 and was chosen as a Cultural Olympic Pop-Up event.

Her first original play *Making Babies* was produced in 2004 in Heilbronn, Germany; *See No Evil*, at Southwark Playhouse in 2007; and *Sudden Silence*, as part of a festival of new writing at the Arcola Theatre in 2009. In 2018 she was commissioned to write a one-person show about Emilie Flöge, the woman in Gustav Klimt's painting "The Kiss," which was been to Australia, New Zealand, the USA, Britain, and Germany and will be in Japan in May 2019. She is currently adapting a novel, *Absent*, by the Scottish-Iraqi writer Betool Khedairi, to be entitled *Human Honey*, for Merchant Culture in Glasgow, and has just finished adapting Maggie La Tourelle's book, *The Gift of Alzheimer's*, for the stage.

Penny also works as a dramaturg: projects include *Tosca's Kiss* by Kenneth Jupp for Annette Niemtzw, NYC, and work with Simon McBurney on his *Magic Flute* for the DNO/ENO.

Penny is president of the Dramaturgs' Network and is the 2017-2018 Royal Literary Fund Fellow at St Mary's University, Twickenham.