

The two excerpts from Amy Tan's novels *The Hundred Secret Senses* and *The Bonesetter's Daughter* are excellent examples of the theme of vulnerability. They are connected to each other through the characters and Tan's physical, emotional, and cultural experiences that determine the revelations about the self. The three articles will allow you to write critically about this theme using both primary and secondary sources. They will also provide insight into Chinese and Chinese American feelings of alienation.



Amy Tan (b. 1952)

Amy Tan was born in Oakland, California, several years after her mother and father emigrated from China. Tan graduated with honors from San Jose State University, where she later earned an M.A. in linguistics. In 1989 her first novel, *The Joy Luck Club*, was published and became a surprise best-seller. The Joy Luck Club received numerous awards and was adapted into a film in 1994. Tan is also author of *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991), *The Hundred*

HEART

(2001)

These are the things I must not forget.

I was raised with the Liu clan in the rocky Western Hills south of Peking. The oldest recorded name of our village was Immortal Heart. Precious Auntie taught me how to write this down on my chalkboard. *Watch now, Doggie*, she ordered, and drew the character for "heart": *See this curving stroke? That's the bottom of the heart, where blood gathers and*

flows. And the dots, those are the two veins and the artery that carry the blood in and out. As I traced over the character, she asked: *Whose dead heart gave shape to this word? How did it begin, Doggie? Did it belong to a woman? Was it drawn in sadness?*

I once saw the heart of a fresh-killed pig. It was red and glistening. And I had already seen plenty of chicken hearts in a bowl, waiting to be cooked. They looked like tiny lips and were the same color as Precious Auntie's scars. But what did a woman heart look like? "Why do we have to know whose heart it was?" I asked as I wrote the character.

And Precious Auntie flapped her hands fast: *A person should consider how things begin. A particular beginning results in a particular end.*

I remember her often talking about this, how things begin. Since then I have wondered about the beginning and end of many things. Like Immortal Heart village. And the people who lived there, myself included. By the time I was born, Immortal Heart was no longer lucky. The village lay between hills in a valley that dropped into a deep limestone ravine. The ravine was shaped like the curved chamber of a heart, and the heart's artery and veins were the three streams that once fed and drained the ravine. But they had gone dry. So had the divine springs. Nothing was left of the waterways but cracked gullies and the stench of a fart.

Yet the village began as a sacred place. According to legend, a visiting emperor himself had planted a pine tree in the middle of the valley. The tree was to honor his dead mother, and his respect for his mother was so great he vowed that the tree would live forever. When Precious Auntie first saw the tree, it was already more than three thousand years old.

Rich and poor alike made a pilgrimage to Immortal Heart. They hoped that the tree's vital energy would rub off on them. They stroked the trunk, patted the leaves, then prayed for baby sons or big fortunes, a cure for dying, an end to curses. Before leaving, they chipped off some bark, snapped off some twigs. They took them away as souvenirs. Precious Auntie said this was what killed the tree, too much admiration. When the tree died, the souvenirs lost their strength. And because the dead tree was no longer immortal, it was no longer famous, nor was our village. That tree was not even ancient, people said afterward, maybe only two or three hundred years old. As for the story about the emperor honoring his mother? That was a fake feudal legend to make us think the corrupt were sincere. Those complaints came out the same year that the old Ching Dynasty fell down and the new Republic sprang up.

The nickname of our village is easy for me to remember: Forty-six Kilometers from Reed Moat Bridge. Reed Moat Bridge is the same as Marco Polo Bridge, what people now call the turnoff point to and from Peking. GaoLang's probably forgotten the old name, but I have not. During my childhood, the directions to get to Immortal Heart went like this: "First find the Reed Moat Bridge, then walk backward forty-six kilometers."

That joke made it sound as if we lived in a pitiful little hamlet of twenty or thirty people. Not so. When I was growing up, nearly two thousand

people lived there. It was crowded, packed from one edge of the valley to the other. We had a brick maker, a sack weaver, and a dye mill. We had twenty-four market days, six temple fairs, and a primary school that GaoLing and I went to when we were not helping our family at home. We had all kinds of peddlers who went from house to house, selling fresh bean curd and steamed buns, twisted dough and colorful candies. And we had lots of people to buy those goods. A few coppers, that was all you needed to make your stomach as happy as a rich man's.

The Liu clan had lived in Immortal Heart for six centuries. For that amount of time, the sons had been inkstick makers who sold their goods to travelers. They had lived in the same courtyard house that had added rooms, and later wings, when one mother four hundred years ago gave birth to eight sons, one a year. The family home grew from a simple three-pillar house to a compound with wings stretching five pillars each. In later generations, the number of sons was less, and the extra rooms became run-down and were rented to squabbling tenants. Whether those people laughed at coarse jokes or screamed in pain, it did not matter, the sounds were the same, ugly to hear.

All in all, our family was successful but not so much that we caused great envy. We ate meat or bean curd at almost every meal. We had new padded jackets every winter, no holes. We had money to give for the temple, the opera, the fair. But the men of our family also had ambitions. They were always looking for more. They said that in Peking, more people wrote important documents. Those important documents required more good ink. Peking was where more of the big money was. Around 1920, Father, my uncles, and their sons went there to sell the ink. From then on, that was where they lived most of the time, in the back room of a shop in the old Pottery-Glazing District.

In our family, the women made the ink. We stayed home. We all worked—me, GaoLing, my aunts and girl cousins, everybody. Even the babies and Great-Granny had a job of picking out stones from the dried millet we boiled for breakfast. We gathered each day in the ink-making studio. According to Great-Granny, the studio began as a grain shed that sat along the front wall of the courtyard house. Over the years, one generation of sons added brick walls and a tile roof. Another strengthened the beams and lengthened it by two pillars. The next tiled the floors and dug pits for storing the ingredients. Then other descendants made a cellar for keeping the inksticks away from the heat and cold. "And now look," Great-Granny often bragged. "Our studio is an ink palace."

Because our ink was the best quality, we had to keep the tables and the floors clean year-round. With the dusty yellow winds from the Gobi, this was not easy to do. The window openings had to be covered with both glass and thick paper. In the summer, we hung netting over the doorways to keep out the insects. In the winter, it was sheep hides to keep out the snow.

Summer was the worst season for ink-making. Heat upon heat. The fumes burned our eyes and nostrils and lungs. From watching Precious

Auntie tie her scarf over her marred face, we got the idea of putting a wet cloth over our mouths. I can still smell the ingredients of our ink. There were several kinds of fragrant soot: pine, cassia, camphor, and the wood of the chopped-down Immortal Tree. Father hauled home several big logs of it after lightning cracked the dead tree right down the middle, exposing its heart, which was nearly hollow because of beetles eating it inside out. There was also a glue of sticky paste mixed with many oils—serpentine, camphor, turpentine, and tung wood. Then we added a sweet poisonous flower that helped resist insects and rats. That was how special our ink was, all those lasting smells.

We made the ink a little at a time. If a fire broke out, as it had a couple of hundred years before, all the supplies and stock would not be lost at once. And if a batch was too sticky or too wet, too soft or not black enough, it was easier to find out who was to blame. Each of us had at least one part in a long list of things to do. First there was burning and grinding, measuring and pouring. Then came stirring and molding, drying and carving. And finally, wrapping and counting, storing and stacking. One season I had to wrap, only that. My mind could wander but my fingers still moved like small machines. Another season I had to use very fine tweezers to pluck bugs that had fallen onto the sticks. Whenever GaoLing did this, she left too many dents. Precious Auntie's job was to sit at a long table and press the sooty mixture into the stone molds. As a result, the tips of her fingers were always black. When the ink was dry, she used a long, sharp tool to carve the good-luck words and drawings into the sticks. Her calligraphy was even better than Father's.

It was boring work, but we were proud of our secret family recipe. It yielded just the right color and hardness. An inkstick of ours could last ten years or more. It did not dry out and crumble, or grow soggy with moisture. And if the sticks were stored in the coolness of a root cellar, as ours were, they could last from one great period of history to another. Those who used our ink said the same. It didn't matter how much heat or moisture or dirt from fingers soaked into the page, their words lasted, black and strong.

Mother claimed the ink was why our hair remained the blackest black. It was better for the hair than drinking black-sesame-seed soup. "Work hard all day making ink, look young at night while you sleep." That was our joke, and Great-Granny often boasted: "My hair is as black as the burnt shell of a horse chestnut and my face as wrinkly white as the meat inside." Great-Granny had a clever tongue. One time she added, "Better than having white hair and a burnt face," and everyone laughed, even though Precious Auntie was in the room.

In later years, however, Great-Granny's tongue was not so sharp or fast. Often she said with a worried brow, "Have you seen Hu Sen?" You could say yes, you could say no, and a moment later, she chirped like a bird, "Hu Sen? Hu Sen?" always requesting her dead grandson, very sad to hear.

19 Toward the end of her life, Great-Granny had thoughts that were like crumbling walls, stones without mortar. A doctor said her inner wind was cold and her pulse was slow, a shallow stream about to freeze. He advised foods with more heat. But Great-Granny only grew worse. Precious Auntie suspected that a tiny flea had crawled into her ear and was feasting on her brain. Confusion Itch was the name of the malady, Precious Auntie said. It is the reason people often scratch their heads when they cannot remember. Her father had been a doctor, and she had seen other patients with the same problem. Yesterday, when I could not remember Precious Auntie's name, I wondered if a flea had run in my ear! But now that I am writing down so many things, I know I don't have Great-Granny's disease. I can recall the smallest details even though they were long ago and far away.

20 The compound where we lived and worked—that comes back to me as if I were now standing before the gate. It was on Pig's Head Lane. The road started at the east, near the market square where pigs heads were sold. From the square, it hooked to the north and ran past the former location of the once famous Immortal Tree. Then it tightened into the little crooked alley where one compound bumped into another. The end of Pig's Head Lane was a narrow perch of earth above the deepest part of the ravine. Precious Auntie told me that the perch was originally made by a warlord thousands of years before. He dreamed that the insides of the mountain were made of jade. So he ordered everyone to dig, dig, don't stop. Men, women, and children dredged for his dream. By the time the warlord died, the children were old, with crooked backs, and half the mountain lay on its side.

21 Behind our compound, the perch became a cliff. And way down, if you fell head over toes, was the bottom of the ravine. The Liu family had once owned twenty *mu* of land behind the compound. But over the centuries, with each heavy rainfall, the walls of the ravine had collapsed and widened, rumbled and deepened. Each decade, those twenty *mu* of land grew smaller and smaller and the cliff crept closer to the back of our house.

22 The moving cliff gave us the feeling we had to look behind us to know what lay ahead. We called it the End of the World. Sometimes the men of our family argued among themselves whether we still owned the land that had crashed down into the ravine. One uncle said, "What you own is the spit that travels from your own mouth to the bottom of that wasteland." And his wife said, "Don't talk about this anymore. You're only inviting disaster." For what lay beyond and below was too unlucky to say out loud: unwanted babies, suicide maidens, and beggar ghosts. Everyone knew this.

23 I went to the cliff many times with my brothers and GaoLing when we were younger. We liked to roll spoiled melons and rotten cabbages over the edge. We watched them fall and splat, hitting skulls and bones. At least that was what we thought they had hit. But one time we climbed down, sliding on our bottoms, grabbing onto roots, descending into the underworld. And when we heard rustling sounds in the brush, we

screamed so loud our ears hurt. The ghost turned out to be a scavenger dog. And the skulls and bones, they were just boulders and broken branches. But though we saw no bodies, all around were bright pieces of clothing: a sleeve, a collar, a shoe, and we were sure they belonged to the dead. And then we smelled it: the stink of ghosts. A person needs to smell that only once to know what it is. It rose from the earth. It wafted toward us on the wings of a thousand flies. The flies chased us like a storm cloud, and as we scrambled back up, First Brother kicked loose a stone that gouged out a piece of Second Brother's scalp. We could not hide this wound from Mother, and when she saw it, she beat us all, then told us that if we ever went down to the End of the World again, we might as well stand outside the walls of the compound forever and not bother to come in.

24 The walls of the Liu home were made of rocks exposed from the washed-down earth. The rocks were stacked and held together with a mud, mortar, and millet paste, then plastered over with lime. They were sweaty damp in summer, moldy damp in winter. And in the many rooms of that house, here and there was always another roof leak or drafty hole in the wall. And yet when I remember that house, I have a strange home-sickness for it. Only there do I have a memory of secret places, warm or cool, of darkness where I hid and pretended I could escape to somewhere else.

25 Within those walls, many families of different positions and generations lived together at the same time, from landlord to tenants, Great-Granny to smallest niece. I guess we were thirty or more people, half of which was the Liu clan. Liu Jin Sen was the eldest of four sons. He was the one I called Father. My uncles and their wives called him Eldest Brother. My cousins called him Eldest Uncle. And by position my uncles were Big Uncle and Little Uncle, and their wives were Big Aunt and Little Aunt. When I was very small, I used to think Father and Mother were called Eldest because they were much taller than my uncles and aunts. First Brother and Second Brother were also large-boned, as was GaoLing, and for a long time I did not know why I was so short.

26 Baby Uncle was the fourth son, the youngest, the favorite. His name was Liu Hu Sen. He was my real father, and he would have married Precious Auntie, if only he had not died on their wedding day.

27 Precious Auntie was born in a bigger town down in the foothills, a place called Zhou's Mouth of the Mountain, named in honor of Emperor Zhou of the Shang Dynasty, whom everyone now remembers as a tyrant.

28 Our family sometimes went to the Mouth of the Mountain for temple fairs and operas. If we traveled by road, it was only about ten kilometers from Immortal Heart. If we walked through the End of the World, it was half that distance but a more dangerous way to go, especially in the summer time. That was when the big rains came. The dry ravine filled, and before you could run to the cliffs, climb up, and cry out, "Goddess of Mercy," the gullies ran by like thieves, grabbing you and whatever else was not deeply rooted in the soil. Once the rain stopped, the floodwaters

drained fast and the mouths of the caves swallowed the dirt and the trees, the bodies and the bones. They went down the mountain's throat, into its stomach, intestines, and finally the bowels, where everything got stuck. *Constipated*, Precious Auntie once explained to me. *Now you see why there are so many bones and hills: Chicken Bone Hill, Old Cow Hill, Dragon Bone Hill. Of course, it's not just dragon bones in Dragon Bone Hill. Some are from ordinary creatures, bear, elephant, hippopotamus.* Precious Auntie drew a picture of each of these animals on my chalkboard, because we had never talked about them before.

I have a bone, probably from a turtle, she told me. She fished it from a tuck in her sleeve. It looked like a dried turnip with pockmarks. My father almost ground this up for medicine. Then he saw there was writing on it. She turned the bone over, and I saw strange characters running up and down. Until recently, these kinds of bones weren't so valuable, because of the scratches. Bone diggers used to smooth them with a file before selling them to medicine shops. Now the scholars call these oracle bones, and they sell for twice as much. And the words on here? They're questions to the gods.

"What does it say?" I asked.

Who knows? The words were different then. But it must be something that should have been remembered. Otherwise, why did the gods say it, why did a person write it down?

"Where are the answers?"

Those are the cracks. The diviner put a hot nail to the bone, and it cracked like a tree hit by lightning. Then he interpreted what the cracks meant.

She took back the divining bone. *Someday, when you know how to remember, I'll give this to you to keep. But for now you'll only forget where you put it. Later we can go looking for more dragon bones, and if you find one with writing on it, you can keep it for yourself.*

In the Mouth of the Mountain, every poor man collected dragon bones when he had a chance. So did the women, but if they found one, they had to say a man found it instead, because otherwise the bone was not worth as much. Later, middlemen went around the village buying the dragon bones, and then they took them to Peking and sold them to medicine shops for high prices, and the shops sold them to sick people for higher prices yet. The bones were well known for curing anything, from wasting diseases to stupidity. Plenty of doctors sold them. And so did Precious Auntie's father. He used bones to heal bones.

For nine hundred years, Precious Auntie's family had been bonesetters. That was the tradition. Her father's customers were mostly men and boys who were crushed in the coal mines and limestone quarries. He treated other maladies when necessary, but bonesetting was his specialty. He did not have to go to a special school to be a bone doctor. He learned from watching his father, and his father learned from his father before him. That was their inheritance. They also passed along the secret location for finding the best dragon bones, a place called the Monkey's Jaw.

An ancestor from the time of the Sung Dynasty had found the cave in the deepest ravines of the dry riverbed. Each generation dug deeper and deeper, with one soft crack in the cave leading to another farther in. And the secret of the exact location was also a family heirloom, passed from generation to generation, father to son, and in Precious Auntie's time, father to daughter to me.

I still remember the directions to our cave. It was between the Mouth of the Mountain and Immortal Heart, far from the other caves in the foothills, where everyone else went to dig up dragon bones. Precious Auntie took me there several times, always in the spring or the autumn, never summer or winter. To get there, we went down into the End of the World and walked along the middle of the ravine, away from the walls, where the grown-ups said there were things that were too bad to see. Sometimes we passed by a skein of weeds, shards of a bowl, a quagmire of twigs. In my childish mind, those sights became parched flesh, a baby's skullcap, a soup of maiden bones. And maybe they were, because sometimes Precious Auntie put her hands over my eyes.

Of the three dry streambeds, we took the one that was the artery of the heart. And then we stood in front of the cave itself, a split in the mountain only as tall as a broom. Precious Auntie pulled aside the dead bushes that hid the cave. And the two of us took big breaths and went in. In words, it is hard to say how we made our way in, like trying to describe how to get inside an ear. I had to twist my body in an unnatural way far to the left, then rest a foot on a little ledge that I could reach only by crooking my leg close to my chest. By then I was crying and Precious Auntie was grunting to me, because I could not see her black fingers to know what she was saying. I had to follow her huffs and handclaps, crawling like a dog so I would not hit my head or fall down. When we finally reached the larger part of the cave, Precious Auntie lighted the candle lamp and hung it on a long pole with footrests, which had been left by one of her clan from long ago.

On the floor of the cave were digging tools, iron wedges of different sizes, hammers and claws, as well as sacks for dragging out the dirt. The walls of the cave were many layers, like an eight-treasure rice pudding cut in half, with lighter, crumbly things on top, then a thicker muddy part like bean paste below, and growing heavier toward the bottom. The highest layer was easiest to chip. The lowest was like rock. But that was where the best bones were found. And after centuries of people's digging through the bottom there was now an overhang waiting to crash down. The inside of the cave looked like the molars of a monkey that could bite you in two, which was why it was called the Monkey's Jaw.

While we rested, Precious Auntie talked with her inky hands. *Stay away from that side of the monkey's teeth. Once they chomped down on an ancestor, and he was ground up and gobbled with stone. My father found his skull over there. We put it back right away. Bad luck to separate a man's head from his body.*

41 Hours later, we would climb back out of the Monkey's Jaw with a sack of dirt and, if we had been lucky, one or two dragon bones. Precious Auntie held them up to the sky and bowed, thanking the gods. She believed the bones from this cave were the reason her family had become famous as bonesetters.

42 *When I was a girl, she said once as we walked home, I remember lots of desperate people coming to see my father. He was their last chance. If a man could not walk, he could not work. And if he could not work, his family could not eat. Then he would die, and that would be the end of his family line and all that his ancestors had worked for.*

43 For those desperate customers, Precious Auntie's father had remedies of three kinds: modern, try-anything, and traditional. The modern was the Western medicine of missionaries. The try-anything was the spells and chants of rogue monks. As for the traditional, that included the dragon bones, as well as seahorses and seaweed, insect shells and rare seeds, tree bark and bat dung, all of the highest quality. Precious Auntie's father was so talented that patients from the five surrounding mountain villages traveled to the Famous Bonesetter from the Mouth of the Mountain (whose name I will write down, once I remember it).

44 Skilled and famous though he was, he could not prevent all tragedies. When Precious Auntie was four, her mother and older brothers died of an intestine-draining disease. So did most of the other relatives from both sides of the family, dead just three days after they attended a red-egg ceremony and drank from a well infected with the body of a suicide maiden. The bonesetter was so ashamed he could not save his own family members that he spent his entire fortune and went into a lifetime of debt to hold their funerals.

45 *Because of grief, Precious Auntie said with her hands, he spoiled me, let me do whatever a son might do. I learned to read and write, to ask questions, to play riddles, to write eight-legged poems, to walk alone and admire nature. The old biddies used to warn him that it was dangerous that I was so boldly happy, instead of shy and cowering around strangers. And why didn't he bind my feet, they asked. My father was used to seeing pain of the worst kinds. But with me, he was helpless. He couldn't bear to see me cry.*

46 So Precious Auntie freely followed her father around in his study and shop. She soaked the splints and plucked the moss. She polished the scales and tallied the accounts. A customer could point to any jar in the shop and she could read the name of its contents, even the scientific words for animal organs. As she grew older, she learned to bleed a wound with a square nail, to use her own saliva for cleansing sores, to apply a layer of maggots for eating pus, and to wrap torn flaps with woven paper. By the time she passed from childhood to maidenhood, she had heard every kind of scream and curse. She had touched so many bodies, living, dying, and dead, that few families considered her for a bride. And while she had never been possessed by romantic love, she recognized the

throes of death. *When the ears grow soft and flatten against the head, she once told me, then it's too late. A few seconds later, the last breath hisses out. The body turns cold. She taught me many facts like that.*

47 For the most difficult cases, she helped her father put the injured man on a light lattice-work pallet of rattan. Her father lifted and lowered this by pulleys and rope, and she guided the pallet into a tub filled with salt water. There the man's crushed bones floated and were fitted into place. Afterward, Precious Auntie brought her father rattan strips that had been soaked soft. He bent them into a splint so the limb could breathe but remain still. Toward the end of the visit, the bonesetter opened his jar of dragon bones and used a narrow chisel to chip off a silver tiny as a finger-nail clipping. Precious Auntie ground this into a powder with a silver ball. The powder went into a paste for rubbing or a potion for drinking. Then the lucky patient went home. Soon he was back in the quarries all day long.

48 One day, at dinnertime, Precious Auntie told me a story with her hands that only I could understand. *A rich lady came to my father and told him to unbind her feet and mold them into more modern ones. She said she wanted to wear high-heeled shoes. "But don't make the new feet too big," she said, "not like a slave girl's or a foreigner's. Make them naturally small like hers." And she pointed to my feet.*

49 I forgot that Mother and my other aunts were at the dinner table, and I said aloud, "Do bound feet look like the white lilies that the romantic books describe?" Mother and my aunts, who still had bound feet, gave me a frowning look. How could I talk so openly about a woman's most private parts? So Precious Auntie pretended to scold me with her hands for asking such a question, but what she really said was this: *They're usually crimped like flower-twist bread. But if they're dirty and knobby with calluses, they look like rotten ginger roots and smell like pig snouts three days dead.*

50 In this way, Precious Auntie taught me to be naughty, just like her. She taught me to be curious, just like her. She taught me to be spoiled. And because I was all these things, she could not teach me to be a better daughter, though in the end, she tried to change my faults.

51 I remember how she tried. It was the last week we were together. She did not speak to me for days. Instead she wrote and wrote and wrote. Finally she handed me a bundle of pages laced together with cord. *This is my true story, she told me, and yours as well. Out of spite, I did not read most of those pages. But when I did, this is what I learned.*

52 One late-autumn day, when Precious Auntie was nineteen by her Chinese age, the bonesetter had two new patients. The first was a screaming baby from a family who lived in Immortal Heart. The second was Baby Uncle. They would both cause Precious Auntie everlasting sorrow, but in two entirely different ways.

53 The bawling baby was the youngest son of a big-chested man named Chang, a coffinmaker who had grown rich in times of plagues. The carv-

ings on the outside of his coffins were of camphor wood. But the insides were cheap pine, painted and lacquered to look and smell like the better golden wood.

Some of that same golden wood had fallen from a stack and knocked the baby's shoulder out of its socket. That's why the baby was howling, Chang's wife reported with a frightened face. Precious Auntie recognized this nervous woman. Two years before, she had sat in the bonesetter's shop because her eye and jaw had been broken by a stone that must have fallen out of the open sky. Now she was back with her husband, who was slapping the baby's leg, telling him to stop his racket. Precious Auntie shouted at Chang: "First the shoulder, now you want to break his leg as well." Chang scowled at her. Precious Auntie picked up the baby. She rubbed a little bit of medicine inside his cheeks. Soon the baby quieted, yawned once, and fell asleep. Then the bonesetter snapped the small shoulder into place.

63 "What's the medicine?" the coffinmaker asked Precious Auntie. She didn't answer.

64 "Traditional things," the bonesetter said. "A little opium, a little herbs, and a special kind of dragon bone we dig out from a secret place only our family knows."

65 "Special dragon bone, eh?" Chang dipped his finger in the medicine bowl, then dabbed inside his cheek. He offered some to Precious Auntie, who sniffed in disgust, and then he laughed and gave Precious Auntie a bold look, as if he already owned her and could do whatever he pleased.

66 Right after the Changs and their baby left, Baby Uncle limped in.

67 He had been injured by his nervous horse, he explained to the bonesetter. He had been traveling from Peking to Immortal Heart, and during a rest, the horse startled a rabbit, then the rabbit startled the horse, and the horse stepped on Baby Uncle's foot. Three broken toes resulted, and Baby Uncle rode his bad horse to the Mouth of the Mountain, straight to the Famous Bonesetter's shop.

68 Baby Uncle sat in the blackwood examination chair. Precious Auntie was in the back room and could see him through the parted curtain. He was a thin young man of twenty-two. His face was refined but he did not act pompous or overly formal, and while his gown was not that of a rich gentleman, he was well groomed. She heard him joke about his accident: "My mare was so crazy with fright I thought she was going to gallop straight to the underworld with me stuck astride." When Precious Auntie stepped into the room, she said, "But fate brought you here instead." Baby Uncle fell quiet. When she smiled, he forgot his pain. When she put a dragon bone poultice on his naked foot, he decided to marry her. That was Precious Auntie's version of how they fell in love.

69 I have never seen a picture of my real father, but Precious Auntie told me that he was very handsome and smart, yet also shy enough to make a girl feel tender. He looked like a poor scholar who could rise above his circumstances, and surely he would have qualified for the imperial

examinations if they had not been canceled several years before by the new Republic.

62 The next morning, Baby Uncle came back with three stemfuls of lychees for Precious Auntie as a gift of appreciation. He peeled off the shell of one, and she ate the white-fleshed fruit in front of him. The morning was warm for late autumn, they both remarked. He asked if he could recite a poem he had written that morning: "You speak," he said, "the language of shooting stars, more surprising than sunrise, more brilliant than the sun, as brief as sunset. I want to follow its trail to eternity."

63 In the afternoon, the coffinmaker Chang brought a watermelon to the bonesetter. "To show my highest appreciation," he said. "My baby son is already well, able to pick up bowls and smash them with the strength of three boys."

64 Later that week, unbeknownst one to the other, each man went to a different fortune-teller. The two men wanted to know if their combination of birthdates with Precious Auntie's was lucky. They asked if there were any bad omens for a marriage.

65 The coffinmaker went to a fortune-teller in Immortal Heart, a man who walked about the village with a divining stick. The marriage signs were excellent, the fortune-teller said. See here, Precious Auntie was born in a Rooster year, and because Chang was a Snake, that was nearly the best match possible. The old man said that Precious Auntie also had a lucky number of strokes in her name (I will write the number down here when I remember her name). And as a bonus, she had a mole in position eleven, near the fatty part of her cheek, indicating that only sweet words fell from her obedient mouth. The coffinmaker was so happy to hear this that he gave the fortune-teller a big tip.

66 Baby Uncle went to a fortune-teller in the Mouth of the Mountain, an old lady with a face more wrinkled than her palm. She saw nothing but calamity. The first sign was the mole on Precious Auntie's face. It was in position twelve, she told Baby Uncle, and it dragged down her mouth, meaning that her life would always bring her sadness. Their combination of birth years was also inharmonious, she a fire Rooster and he a wood Horse. The girl would ride his back and peck him apart piece by piece. She would consume him with her insatiable demands. And here was the worst part. The girl's father and mother had reported the date of her birth was the sixteenth day of the seventh moon. But the fortune-teller had a sister-in-law who lived near the bonesetter, and she knew better. She had heard the newborn's walls, not on the sixteenth day, but on the fifteenth, the only day when unhappy ghosts are allowed to roam the earth. The sister-in-law said the baby sounded like this: "*Wu-wu, wu-wu*," not like a human but like a haunted one. The fortune-teller confided to Baby Uncle that she knew the girl quite well. She often saw her on market days, walking by herself. That strange girl did fast calculations in her head and argued with merchants. She was arrogant and headstrong. She was also educated, taught by her father to know the mysteries of the body. The girl

was too curious, too questioning, too determined to follow her own mind. Maybe she was possessed. Better find another marriage match, the fortune-teller said. This one would lead to disaster.

Baby Uncle gave the fortune-teller more money, not as a tip, but to make her think harder. The fortune-teller kept shaking her head. But after Baby Uncle had given a total of a thousand coppers, the old lady finally had another thought. When the girl smiled, which was often, her mole was in a luckier position, number eleven. The fortune-teller consulted an almanac, matched it to the hour of the girl's birth. Good news. The Hour of the Rabbit was peace-loving. Her inflexibility was just a bluff. And any leftover righteousness could be beaten down with a strong stick. It was further revealed that the fortune-teller's sister-in-law was a gossip known for exaggeration. But just to make sure the marriage went well, the fortune-teller sold Baby Uncle a Hundred Different Things charm that covered bad dates, bad spirits, bad luck, and hair loss. "But even with this, don't marry in the Dragon Year. Bad year for a Horse."

The first marriage proposal came from Chang's matchmaker, who went to the bonesetter and related the good omens. She boasted of the coffinmaker's respect, as an artisan descended from noted artisans. She described his house, his rock gardens, his fish ponds, the furniture in his many rooms, how the wood was of the best color, purple like a fresh bruise. As to the matter of a dowry, the coffinmaker was willing to be more than generous. Since the girl was to be a second wife and not a first, couldn't her dowry be a jar of opium and a jar of dragon bones? This was not much, yet it was priceless, and therefore not insulting to the girl's worth.

The bonesetter considered the offer. He was growing old. Where would his daughter go when he died? And what other man would want her in his household? She was too spirited, too set in her ways. She had no mother to teach her the manners of a wife. True, the coffinmaker would not have been his first choice of son-in-law, if he had had another, but he did not want to stand in the way of his daughter's future happiness. He told Precious Auntie about the generous offer from the coffinmaker.

To this, Precious Auntie huffed. "The man's a brute," she said. "I'd rather eat worms than be his wife."

The bonesetter had to give Chang's matchmaker an awkward answer: "I'm sorry," he said, "but my daughter cried herself sick, unable to bear the thought of leaving her worthless father." The lie would have been swallowed without disgrace, if only the offer from Baby Uncle's matchmaker had not been accepted the following week.

A few days after the future marriage was announced, the coffinmaker went back to the Mouth of the Mountain and surprised Precious Auntie as she was returning from the well. "You think you can insult me, then walk away laughing?"

"Who insulted whom? You asked me to be your concubine, a servant to your wife. I'm not interested in being a slave in a feudal marriage."

As she tried to leave, Chang pinched her neck, saying he should break it, then shook her as if he truly might snap off her head like a winter twig. But instead he threw her to the ground, cursing her and her dead mother's private parts.

When Precious Auntie recovered her breath, she sneered, "Big words, big fists. You think you can scare a person into being sorry?"

And he said these words, which she never forgot: "You'll soon be sorry every day of your miserable life."

Precious Auntie did not tell her father or Hu Sen what had happened. No sense in worrying them. And why lead her future husband to wonder if Chang had a reason to feel insulted? Too many people had already said she was too strong, accustomed to having her own way. And perhaps this was true. She had no fear of punishment or disgrace. She was afraid of almost nothing.

A month before the wedding, Baby Uncle came to her room late at night. "I want to hear your voice in the dark," he whispered. "I want to hear the language of shooting stars." She let him into her *k'ang* and he eagerly began the nuptials. But as Baby Uncle caressed her, a wind blew over her skin and she began to tremble and shake. For the first time, she was afraid, she realized, frightened by unknown joy.

The wedding was supposed to take place in Immortal Heart village, right after the start of the new Dragon Year. It was a bare spring day. Slippery pockets of ice lay on the ground. In the morning, a traveling photographer came to the bonesetter's shop in the Mouth of the Mountain. He had broken his arm the month before, and his payment was a photograph of Precious Auntie on her wedding day. She wore her best winter jacket, one with a high fur-lined collar, and an embroidered cap. She had to stare a long time into the camera, and as she did so, she thought of how her life would soon change forever. Though she was happy, she was also worried. She sensed danger, but she could not name what it was. She tried to look far into the future, but she could see nothing.

For the journey to the wedding, she changed her clothes to her bridal costume, a red jacket and skirt, the fancy headdress with a scarf that she had to drape over her head once she left her father's home. The bonesetter had borrowed money to rent two mule carts, one to carry gifts for the groom's family, the other for the bride's trunks of blankets and clothes.

There was an enclosed sedan chair for the bride herself, and the bonesetter also had to hire four sedan carriers, two carters, a flute player, and two bodyguards to watch out for bandits. For his daughter, he had procured only the best: the fanciest sedan chair, the cleanest carts, the strongest guards with real pistols and gunpowder. In one of the carts was the dowry, the jar of opium and the jar of dragon bones, the last of his supply. He assured his daughter many times not to worry about the cost. After her wedding, he could go to the Monkey's Jaw and gather more bones.

82 Halfway between the villages, two bandits wearing hoods sprang out of the bushes. "I'm the famous Mongol Bandit!" the larger one bellowed. Right away, Precious Auntie recognized the voice of Chang the coffin-maker. What kind of ridiculous joke was this? But before she could say anything, the guards threw down their pistols, the carriers dropped their poles, and Precious Auntie was thrown to the floor of the sedan and knocked out.

83 When she came to, she saw Baby Uncle's face in a haze. He had lifted her out of the sedan. She looked around and saw that the wedding trunks had been ransacked and the guards and carriers had fled. And then she noticed her father lying in a ditch, his head and neck at an odd angle, the life gone from his face. Was she in a dream? "My father," she moaned. "I want to go to him." As she bent over the body, unable to make sense of what had happened, Baby Uncle picked up a pistol that one of the guards had dropped.

84 "I swear I'll find the demons who caused my bride so much grief," he shouted, and then he fired the pistol toward heaven, startling his horse.

85 Precious Auntie did not see the kick that killed Baby Uncle, but she heard it, a terrible crack, like the opening of the earth when it was born. For the rest of her life she was to hear it in the breaking of twigs, the crackling of fire, whenever a melon was cleaved in the summer.

86 That was how Precious Auntie became a widow and an orphan in the same day. "This is a curse," she murmured, as she stared down at the bodies of the men she loved. For three sleepless days after their deaths, Precious Auntie apologized to the corpses of her father and Baby Uncle. She talked to their still faces. She touched their mouths, though this was forbidden and caused the women of the house to fear that the wronged ghosts might either possess her or decide to stay.

87 On the third day, Chang arrived with two coffins. "He killed them!" Precious Auntie cried. She picked up a fire poker and tried to strike him. She beat at the coffins. Baby Uncle's brothers had to wrestle her away. They apologized to Chang for the girl's lunacy, and Chang replied that grief of this magnitude was admirable. Because Precious Auntie continued to be wild with admirable grief, the women of the house had to bind her from elbows to knees with strips of cloth. Then they laid her on Baby Uncle's *k'ang*, where she wiggled and twisted like a butterfly stuck in its cocoon until Great-Granny forced her to drink a bowl of medicine that made her body grow limp. For two days and nights, she dreamed she was with Baby Uncle, lying on the *k'ang* as his bride.

88 When she revived, she was alone in the dark. Her arms and legs had been unbound, but they were weak. The house was quiet. She went searching for her father and Baby Uncle. When she reached the main hall, the bodies were gone, already buried in Chang's wooden handiwork. Weeping, she wandered about the house and vowed to join them in the yellow earth. In the ink-making studio, she went looking for a length of rope, a sharp knife, matches she could swallow, anything to cause pain

greater than she felt. And then she saw a pot of black resin. She lowered a dipper into the liquid and put it in the maw of the stove. The oily ink became a soup of blue flames. She tipped the ladle and swallowed.

89 Great-Granny was the first to hear the thump-bumping sounds in the studio. Soon the other women of the household were there as well. They found Precious Auntie thrashing on the floor, hissing air out of a mouth blackened with blood and ink. "Like eels are swimming in the bowl of her mouth," Mother said. "Better if she dies."

90 But Great-Granny did not let this happen. Baby Uncle's ghost had come to her in a dream and warned that if Precious Auntie died, he and his ghost bride would roam the house and seek revenge on those who had not pitied her. Everyone knew there was nothing worse than a vengeful ghost. They caused rooms to stink like corpses. They turned bean curd rancid in a moment's breath. They let wild creatures climb over the walls and gates. With a ghost in the house, you could never get a good night's sleep.

91 Day in and day out, Great-Granny dipped cloths into ointments and laid these over Precious Auntie's wounds. She bought dragon bones, crushed them, and sprinkled them into her swollen mouth. And then she noticed that another part of Precious Auntie had become swollen: her womb.

92 Over the next few months, Precious Auntie wounds changed from pus to scars, and her womb grew like a gourd. She had once been a fine-looking girl. Now all except blind beggars shuddered at the sight of her. One day, when it was clear she was going to survive, Great-Granny said to her speechless patient: "Now that I've saved your life, where will you and your baby go? What will you do?"

93 That night, the ghost of Baby Uncle came once again to Great-Granny, and the next morning, Great-Granny told Precious Auntie: "You are to stay and be nursemaid to this baby. First Sister will claim it as hers and raise it as a Liu. To those you meet, we'll say you're a distant relation from Peking, a cousin who lived in a nunnery until it burned down and nearly took you with it. With that face, no one will recognize you."

94 And that's what happened. Precious Auntie stayed. I was the reason she stayed, her only reason to live. Five months after my birth in 1916, GaoLing was born to Mother, who had been forced by Great-Granny to claim me as her own. How could Mother say she had two babies five months apart? That was impossible. So Mother decided to wait. Exactly nine months after my birth, and on a very lucky date in 1917, GaoLing was born for sure.

95 The grown-ups knew the truth of our births. The children knew only what they were supposed to pretend. And though I was smart I was stupid. I did not ever question the truth. I did not wonder why Precious Auntie had no name. To others she was Nursemaid. To me, she was Precious Auntie. And I did not know who she really was until I read what she wrote.

96 "I am your mother." the words said.

97 I read that only after she died. Yet I have a memory of her telling me with her hands, I can see her saying this with her eyes. When it is dark, she says this to me in a clear voice I have never heard. She speaks in the language of shooting stars.