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MOSQUITOES AND MOUNTAIN BALLADS

I HAD TO PAY ANOTHER CALL ON THIRD UNCLE, A SIMPLE AND unsophisticated old man.

In the open field, from a long way away, I saw that navy-blue undershirt of his. After washing the mud off his feet on the ridge of the field, he led me toward his home. As usual, none of the villagers we ran into along the way, men or women, old or young, greeted him, but simply walked on. Some turned around and stood there looking at Third Uncle's receding figure. The villagers were weighed down with worries.

Looking at Third Uncle's rather decrepit appearance, I felt a little sick at heart. His stride wasn't as brisk as before, either; he shuffled a little now. Walking with me, his old shortcomings resurfaced: he was constrained as he tugged at my arm. He wanted me to listen closely to a sound coming from the mountain. At times like this, I sometimes had absolutely no faith in my own judgment. I responded only vaguely, and so Third Uncle grew angry and went on by himself. After walking a while, he forgot his anger, and once more told me to listen attentively. But I listened for a long time, still without hearing anything. And so, by the time we reached his home, we were both peeved.

Third Uncle's home was sadly simple: it was just a one-room tiled lean-to in the foothills, with the hillside acting as one wall, as if the place were a dying old man leaning against the slope. Inside was a large coal stove taking up a third of the space. Next to it was a large storage cabinet that served as Third Uncle's bed at night.

Third Uncle had no sooner entered the house than he took a small copper kettle out of the cupboard so he could boil tea for me. After the tea had boiled for a while, he poured it into a large cup. The brown liquid smelled smoky. Frowning, I drank it. Beside me, Third Uncle said, "It's an herb tea—good for curing all kinds of ailments."

Well, I certainly didn't need to cure any ailments, so after one mouthful, I set it aside. Third Uncle was not at all pleased.

After a while, something stirred outside. A weak smile began floating on Third Uncle's face, and his rough old skin softened a lot. His eyelids drooped: he was waiting.

The one who came in was Awei, the village bum, a renowned blackguard in these parts. I had never understood the connection between him and Third Uncle. Given Third Uncle's seriousness and worldly ways, he ought to have put distance between himself and this sort of person, but contrary to all expectations, the two of them were close.

As soon as Awei sat down next to the stove, he picked up the copper kettle and poured himself some tea. Tipping his head back, he downed a large cup of it. He smacked my thigh with his dirty hand, and told me not to pretend to be refined. Disgusted, I moved a little way away from him, but—not one to let me off so easily—he crowded even closer.

"Hey, Awei, have you examined your feelings today?" Third Uncle asked.

"Yup. I think I have more and more antipathy for you. This morning, when you were walking in front of me, I nearly cut you down with my hoe. Just think what a great scene it would've been if I'd done that," Awei replied humorlessly.

"He's just bluffing, isn't he?" Third Uncle turned and fixed his eyes on me.

I didn't understand anything they were saying.

"Hey, Third Uncle, the amaranth oughtta be cut. I'll help you do it." With that, Awei rose and went out the door carrying a basket.

The door shut. The only light in the gloomy house came from a tiny tuft of light falling on the stove from the skylight. I felt a little antsy, and decided to find an excuse to slip away. From inside the storage cabinet I was sitting on came the sound of claws scratching on the wood. It was the black cat sharpening its claws inside: the sound made it seem that it was scratching my ass. I glanced furtively at Third Uncle: his expression had turned apathetic. Suddenly, from the field in front of us, we heard Awei singing mountain ballads. The dreary, melancholy sound came intermittently. I hadn't known that Awei could sing, and I was mesmerized by the sound. Awei sang several songs, and then the sound gradually grew distant and finally faded away. It was obvious that Third Uncle was also listening, but he kept his composure: no one could penetrate his innermost feel-

ings. In more than three decades, I'd never seen through to his heart, had I? As we were sitting there face to face in silence, I recalled bygone days.

Back then, when I was maybe five or six, I always loved tagging along with Third Uncle when he went to the mountain to chop firewood. After we got to the mountain, Third Uncle told me to sit on a flat stump and wait for him. Then he disappeared into the woods. He might be gone for a short time or a long time. He might come back after half an hour, or I might be waiting for him from morning until afternoon. How could I while away so much time? And I would for sure be afraid. So I learned how to find things to do. I racked my brains during those endless days. It was way back then that I began to realize that Third Uncle had cast a spell. About once an hour, I could hear Third Uncle hoarsely singing mountain ballads: he was deliberately circling back to this vicinity, chopping firewood in order to reassure me. The strange thing was that he wasn't the least bit worried that I might be in danger. He was very confident of this.

Looking back, I thought that Third Uncle's mountain ballads somewhat resembled what Awei was singing today. Was Awei singing in order to reassure Third Uncle? Could it be that Third Uncle was just as scared as I used to be? Considering this, I stole another furtive glance at him. He was sitting absolutely still and erect, clearly not the least bit afraid. I couldn't understand how a person like Third Uncle could be part of this world. For all I knew, as time passed, there would be fewer and fewer of his sort.

I never could rub away my childhood memories. After Third Uncle had finished chopping firewood, he and I would come down the mountain together. After leaving the mountain, he always turned around to look back. Sometimes, he also put down his load, and pricked up his ears and listened attentively. He kept prattling along the lines of "I'm getting old. I have to be a little careful about this kind of thing." It was as if he had become a different person from the one on the mountain. It was obvious that there were things that Third Uncle was afraid of, too.

I'd left the village years ago. Meanwhile, Awei had taken my place in Third Uncle's life. According to Third Uncle, back then, Awei couldn't go on drifting in the village. His mother was living in his elder brother's home. As for Awei, he never had enough to eat. One evening, when Awei had nothing to eat, he was dazed with

hunger and he charged into Third Uncle's home. From then on, he was a frequent guest.

When I first returned to the village, I meant to get back on the same old terms with Third Uncle; later, I realized this was no longer possible. With Awei squeezed in between us, I always felt that words couldn't express meaning very well. The two of them always understood one another tacitly. At first, I was jealous of Awei. Later, when I saw that Awei was the one Third Uncle thought a lot of, I gave up.

Now, Third Uncle's relationship with me has become delicate. Every few days, I come to see him. I just come and go, that's it. He never asks me questions, nor does he care about anything I'm doing. Sometimes, I bring up our time together when I was a child. He just says I used to love "making trouble" for him. With a word, he dampens my enthusiasm. Nonetheless, I always remember the endless waits in the woods, the movements of shadows cast by sunlight through cracks in the trees, the torment and the terror, the isolation and the helplessness I felt. Despair alternated with hope until delight and relief finally set in: I would remember all of this until the end of my life. With his mountain ballads, Third Uncle divided my time into segments. Was this because he felt compassion for my youth and innocence?

Time has rolled on: am I the one who has changed, or is it he who has changed? Third Uncle hasn't chopped firewood on the mountain for a long time. Now he just needs to get a little brushwood or straw to start the fire, because the village switched to cooking with coal long ago. Since coming back, I haven't heard him singing mountain ballads, either. Third Uncle's memory is worsening, too: he sometimes forgets to water the vegetables and fertilize the plants. He's a lonely old guy, without anyone to remind him. It's easy to imagine what will happen to him.

Now he's especially enamored of a senseless activity: battling with the mosquitoes at night. Third Uncle is sensitive to mosquitoes, but he doesn't bother to sleep under a mosquito net. Third Uncle has good eyesight: once he's awakened by a mosquito bite, he gets up and swats the mosquito with his hand. He also keeps track of the number he's killed—writes it down in a little notebook. According to him, one time he killed 137 mosquitoes in one night. I've seen the way he chases mosquitoes: he's overcome with excitement then—not at all like the average seventy-year-old. In the front and back of his home

are some loblollies, particularly good for nurturing mosquitoes. I urged him to fill in these loblollies. He sneered slightly and said, "You don't understand anything." That depressed me for much of the day. Mosquitoes are active at dusk. If you go to Third Uncle's home at that time of day, from a distance you can hear him smacking mosquitoes with his hand. As you get closer, you can see the fresh bloodstains all over his hands. He tries to explain things away by saying, "I'm sort of thin, but I guess my blood tastes okay."

Every year, he has a bout of malaria. It's hard to look at him when he's sick and his illness drags on for a long time. One time, I thought he was going to die. Awei also thought he wasn't going to make it. But the next day, we saw him actually creep along on the floor and drink water from the cat's bowl, because he'd already finished the last drop of water we'd given him the night before. By afternoon, he was gradually getting better. Three or four days later, he could wobble his way out the door. Third Uncle had lived seventy years, but it was as if he hadn't lived long enough. He began to value his life even more. As I was thinking of this, I was sitting on the cabinet, and the black cat made its way out of a hole in it. It leapt across the teapot, and bumped Third Uncle's teacup to the floor, where it splintered into several pieces.

As he stooped to sweep up the bits of porcelain, Third Uncle finally opened his mouth: "What else do you want to know?"

"Was the forest actually dangerous?" I asked.

"Probably."

"Weren't you afraid to leave me alone?"

"Of course I was afraid, you silly youngster."

As I left Third Uncle's home, I was rather distracted. I always felt the color of dusk was murky, and I walked aimlessly in my confusion. Suddenly I heard singing coming from the mountain. It was Awei, but I also thought it couldn't be Awei. After all, he had just been in the vegetable garden: even if he were fleet of foot, he couldn't have reached the mountain so swiftly. A light breeze carried the singing to me: it was certainly Awei. Could there be another voice like his? While I was working this out, I saw Awei sitting at the door of his home playing with a black rooster. What a rascal! I couldn't hear anything now. Awei's mother came out. Lifting a bamboo rod, she meant to strike Awei with it, but the rod hit the doorsill with a ringing *dang* sound. Awei had long since lobbed along, into thin air.

The old woman squatted on the ground, and broke into noiseless tears. I got away from this scene in a hurry.

So Third Uncle had figured out a long time ago that the forest was dangerous! This discovery seemed terrifically important. He was like everyone else after all—merely an ordinary old farmer: where had this hunch come from? I recalled people saying that his aunt had brought him to the village. The aunt hadn't stayed long, but had left Third Uncle in the village. Back then, Third Uncle was terribly emaciated: no one thought he would grow up. Of course, everyone was wrong. What had things been like for Third Uncle before he came to the village? I had never gotten a reliable answer to this question—not from him and not from anyone else, either.

My association with Third Uncle began very early. I was just five. One morning, I was playing alone at fishing for shrimp next to a small creek when Third Uncle's tall, thin shadow fell across the water. From above, he said, "Hey, little guy, want to go with me to the mountain?" I jumped up and went with him.

We kept up our relationship for years. What had attracted me to Third Uncle? After all, he was taciturn. The path to the forest was long and lonely. When he abandoned me to go off and cut firewood, it was even harder for me. Yet, I went to the mountain with him time after time. Sometimes, I simply couldn't wait to go. I heard the howling of wolves, and from a distance I saw a wild boar. The time I saw the wild boar, I fainted from fear. Or maybe I purposely fainted. At that moment, I was terrified: I was sure I was done for. When I came to, I heard Third Uncle singing nearby. The wild boar had vanished. I've always thought that I might have imagined the boar—that it might have been a hallucination born of the extreme strain I was under. Back then, when I told Third Uncle about the wild boar, he pondered for a long time. Finally, though, he didn't say anything—he just hoisted up his load of firewood and left.

The year I was fifteen, I left the village. I had a consuming sense of weariness. A few years before, I had stopped going with Third Uncle to the mountain to cut firewood. Naturally, we were still on close terms with one another. When I had nothing to do, I lent a hand in his vegetable garden—just as Awei did now. Bored beyond belief, I decided to change my lifestyle. Sitting atop the newly made storage cabinet in Third Uncle's house, I said, "tell me where I should go." I recall Third Uncle saying, "How can I tell you where

to go? I don't even know where I am going myself. Just go off with no direction, and don't look back." "Are you speaking from experience?" I asked. "Naturally," he said.

It wasn't until I turned thirty that I came back to the village. In the meantime, I'd been wandering aimlessly—right up until the day I once again saw the old camphor tree at one end of the village.

I was almost home, and someone rushed from behind to catch up with me. It was Awei. Awei wasn't shouting as usual, but was in low spirits.

"Your singing was great," I said.

"Hmmm." I head down, he seemed to be full of worries.

When I went inside, he did, too, and sat in the doorway.

"Well, in the end, Awei is sometimes also depressed," I couldn't keep from saying.

"You don't know shit. Third Uncle intends to slough us both off. What will I do? I sing because of the despair in my heart."

"It's really strange that you can't leave him. Aren't you annoyed with him?"

"It has nothing to do with whether he annoys me or not. You must know that. Let me ask you: do you hear the singing on the mountain over there? You must have heard it once, and probably not just once. Me, too. But what good is that? Neither of us can be like Third Uncle, who can hear it whenever he wants. It's we who've been truly muddleheaded."

"This really doesn't sound like Awei talking."

"And what's Awei all about? Awei is a bum all right: can't a bum think about his problems? I never thought you were such a vulgar person."

"How on earth did you figure out that Third Uncle means to cast us off?"

"We've both heard the singing on the mountain over there. This is the reason he wants to cast us off. Hey, talking with you has really worn me out. Can I sleep here for a while?" He toppled over against the doorsill, his face showing anguish and fatigue.

In August, Third Uncle refused to see Awei and me. We kept watch outside the door, and looked in through the window. We saw a swarm of mosquitoes besieging his spare frame. He lay on top of the storage cabinet, lingering on in a steadily worsening condition. Now

and then, he still swatted feebly at his face. At last, we ourselves were bitten by mosquitoes until we couldn't take it anymore. Our faces began to swell. Awei said if I wanted to go, I should just go. He could keep watch here by himself. He wasn't afraid of mosquitoes. He was just afraid of one thing. When he said this, he looked at me with eyes that were red and swollen. I wanted to stay, but in fact I was unable to. My nerves were too fragile.

I had to leave. On the way home, I heard again the singing I hadn't heard for so long. It was the same voice; some coquettish elements had been added to the song, bringing to mind a seductive fox spirit. Ahead of me were shadows. Going home, I seemed to run into quite a lot of villagers, but looking down, they didn't greet me—they walked straight on by. Could it be that my face was so swollen that they couldn't recognize me? All of a sudden, I thought of the many mosquito eggs in my blood. This was really enough to drive a guy crazy. Maybe these mosquitoes could also hum this kind of mountain ballad: this was the sweet, joyous music Third Uncle was hearing as he lay dying. Awei certainly knew everything: that was why he had finally looked at me like that. Did he want me to know these things, too? If it began raining tonight, would he force his way into Third Uncle's house?