

Extract from „For a song and hundred songs: A Poet’s Journey Through a Chinese Prison” (Liao Yiwu) , Translated from the Chinese by Wenguang Huang, New Harvest Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013

Page 343

I had been resting for only a few minutes in the unusual solitude when I heard someone calling my name. I leaned over the side of my bed and looked down. A bespectacled inmate with a big head stood in front of my bed, waving up at me. His boyish face made him look more like a college student, the yellow-striped prison outfit resembling an ill-fitting school uniform. “I’m Li Bifeng. You can call me LBF,” he said humbly. “I’ve heard so much about you. I would never have imagined that we would meet here.”

I hadn’t heard such a heartwarming greeting in what seemed like an age. For a moment, I was speechless. Seeing my stunned surprise, LBF snatched his hat off and exposed the bald crown of his ample noggin. “I’ve read your poems ‘Dead City’ and ‘Yellow City.’ In fact, I’ve read them many times. When you went to visit your sister in Mianyang, I almost went to meet you but decided against it.”

“Is that true?” I jumped down from my bunk to shake hands with my new acquaintance. “Did you know my sister Fei Fei?”

“A friend of mine was your sister’s coworker before his arrest,” LBF explained. “He said when your sister died, many women at her collective farm were grief-stricken.”

Page 344

They bought wreaths and collected money for your family. She was well loved.” “Yes, yes.” I nodded. Listening to a stranger praising my sister, I was so astonished and touched that I found it hard to breathe. LBF suddenly changed the subject. “Okay, it’s almost dinnertime. You can rest up for a few more minutes. We’ll catch up later.” With that short farewell, he turned and disappeared; it was as if he had evaporated. I stood there astounded, my shoes untied. “That bastard! He got me all interested and then he ran away,” I thought, somewhat annoyed. In later months, I came to realize it was merely LBF’s typical manner. The poet and activist was always in a hurry, even in prison, perpetually running against the passage of time. At dinnertime, LBF hurried over to join me, carrying his bowl of noodles. “I have a jar of pickled vegetables we can share,” he said, squatting down next to me. Our section leader, Zhang, greeted LBF warmly. “Mr. Crazy, I heard you are a good fortune-teller. Can you tell mine?”

“I can, but I’m afraid that you might be following Chairman Mao’s lesson to ‘bait the snake out of its cave to kill it.’ Do you see what I mean?” LBF said half jokingly. “What if I tell your fortune and then you go tell the officer in charge that I’m spreading superstition?” “What do you mean by ‘baiting the snake out of its cave’? The snake inside my crotch has been dormant for more than ten years. It can’t wait to get out of the cave,” the section leader teased. Other inmates roared with laughter, but somehow LBF didn’t get the innuendo. He still wanted to explain what Chairman Mao had meant. “Chairman Mao encouraged everyone to speak their minds but then he clamped down on them . . .”

I interrupted my new friend and dragged him out of the dorm. In the yard, prisoners clustered around with their food. Some were standing and others squatting. A middle-aged officer in a long coat paced up and down the second-floor balcony. “He’s watching us,” I reminded LBF. “No need to worry. The hunting dogs are always there, but we are not violating any rules,” said LBF. “Our section has gathered several generations of political prisoners. That’s why the guards are supervigilant. For example, Old Dai, who is sleeping under you, was a former official.”

Page 345

During the Cultural Revolution, the Red Guards went to raid his home. He picked up a knife and fought back, causing serious injury to a Red Guard. He was supposed to be executed, but since he was well connected and very cooperative, the court commuted his death sentence. He's been here for twenty-four years."

"Twenty-four years? How has he managed it?" I shuddered.

Page 356

On a regular day our dinner was served at five o'clock, and afterward inmates could relax and move about inside our compound freely. Those with musical talents used the time to indulge in their hobbies inside the dorm. A middle-aged flautist performed his usual "Soldiers Return from Shooting Practice," a revolutionary tune from the Cultural Revolution. A much older man played the erhu, a twostringed fiddle, and his favorite tune was "The Water in the River," a legendary piece about a heartbroken woman who mourned the death of her husband in ancient China. The erhu player swayed his head and looked caught up in the music, as if he were performing for a sold out concert. Two inmates liked to amuse others by singing contemporary love songs, most of which were written for female vocalists. When the sex-starved prisoners belted them out in their hoarse voices, it gave me goose bumps. During this time, LBF and I would stay away from the chaotic entertainment center and trot around in the yard, where a small group of inmates would stroll or squat in the corners for chats. We soon made the daily trot our compulsory homework. In the early summer evenings, I spent hours in the heat outside, the moon splattering on the walls like pieces of sparkling shards of glass.

Page 357

In one of those leisure moments, I asked about LBF's face, one side of which was slightly misshapen, causing his chin to tilt at an odd angle.

"Were you born this way?" I said, but he shook his head.

"Those are souvenirs from my various border-crossing adventures," LBF said dismissively.

"During the student protest movement," he continued, "I delivered speeches on the street in Chengdu and distributed many of my antigovernment poems. After the crackdown, the local government put me on its most wanted list. So I fled to Yunnan Province with several friends. While seeking shelter in a temple, we became acquainted with a monk who constantly took people across the border to Myanmar. We paid him money and he promised to take us. After hiking through the mountains for several days, we finally stepped out of China. But, after the monk left, we got lost inside a forest in Myanmar. Soon my friends also inexplicably disappeared. I was left alone in the dark woods, and for hours, I couldn't even see the sky. I went around in circles and couldn't find a way out. I was soaked with sweat, and clouds of mosquitoes attacked me like little hand grenades. When the mosquitoes showed up, I knew it was approaching evening and I was sure that I would be eaten alive by wild beasts. Then a voice sounded in the thick leaves. 'Don't move,' it said. I couldn't believe someone was speaking Mandarin to me. I felt my head exploding — I was shaking all over and my poor legs suddenly lost control and buckled. I knelt on the ground. But, don't laugh when I tell you this, I was so scared that I peed my pants. After spending all that money and effort, I ended up getting caught. Suddenly I heard the same voice again: 'Raise your hands above your shoulders. Bow your head. Toss out your weapons.' "So you ran around in circles and accidentally stepped back into China?" I asked.

"No, I wasn't that stupid. I was still in Myanmar."

"How come the guard spoke Mandarin?" I asked.

"I ran into the People's Army, a guerrilla group affiliated with the Myanmar Communist Party. It was very active in the 1960s and '70s and attracted many young radical Chinese who were

sent down to the rural areas in Yunnan Province. They crossed the border and joined the guerrilla forces, hoping to overthrow the government in Myanmar and spread Communism in the region,” LBF explained.

Page 358

“The People’s Army kept close contacts with the Chinese border police. My captors tied me up, blindfolded me, and handed me over to the Chinese border police on the same night. I was detained in an office first, where the mosquitoes continued to feast on my flesh. The next morning, a Chinese soldier used one end of a long rope to tie up both of my hands and connected the other end to the back of a tractor. Just like that, I ran after the tractor on the winding mountain path, like a trafficked slave.” LBF held up his wrists as an illustration, and continued. “Sometimes, when I tripped over a bump, the tractor would drag me along for a long period, my body scraping against the muddy surface. I wouldn’t be able to get up until the tractor slowed down on an uphill road. One time, I was knocked out by a roadblock. When I woke up again, I was at a detention center, where the border police turned me over to the local police. Four men pulled me to an empty space in the yard and punched me in the face over and over again. That’s how my good looks were ruined.” LBF would retell this horrific story often. He was a performance artist and craved public attention. The No. 3 Prison, is, along with Qincheng on the outskirts of Beijing, a notorious jailhouse for political prisoners. Inmates called the place the largest and most prominent counterrevolutionary camp in Sichuan because it had housed political prisoners from every historical period since 1949. Many long-term residents were reluctant to discuss their past. However, there was one exception, said LBF. “We have a self-proclaimed emperor, who lives in my dorm. He can’t wait to share his stories with others. He was a peasant who opposed the onechild policy. So he and his friends declared his village an independent kingdom, free from government rule. The government sent troops and arrested him on subversion charges. “At his trial, the judge realized that he was uneducated and uninformed, and commuted his death sentence to life imprisonment. His Majesty now spends lots of time reading ancient books on Chinese medicine. Last month, he applied for correspondence university. Since he had no money for tuition, he wrote to the Chinese president and premier, ordering them to allocate funds from the national treasury to cover his tuition. The authorities intercepted his letter. The prison’s Party secretary chastised him at a meeting.”

Page 359

“Are you making this up?” I said, marveling at the fellow’s boldness.

“I swear it’s true. You’ll meet him some day. He wrote his letter to the Chinese president with a ballpoint pen and called it his ‘holy edict.’ He brazenly addressed President Jiang Zemin as his ‘loyal minister.’ You can imagine how scared the officials are — if this had been during the Cultural Revolution, he would have been dead.” My mouth twisted into a wry smile. LBF went on with stories of other regular criminals, all of which intrigued me at first. But as more stories came my way through other inmates I became numb and started to find them exhausting and repetitive. I felt strangled, as if I had been trapped inside a coal shaft, surrounded by a large group of dark, indistinguishable faces smeared with coal dust. My throat tightened as I listened to the tales, and I wished I could crawl out for some fresh air. The narrative assault was unceasing. The personal histories of the criminals were brutally dissected, admired, disparaged, and gradually erased in the long, dark, and boring hours behind bars.

Page 362

The final outcome of the riot investigation rejuvenated all the ’89ers, even though several were beaten and had paid a hefty price. To commemorate the occasion, six of us had a

group picture taken during a family visit. We wore shabby prison uniforms and our arms were folded behind us. After my release, I gave a copy of that picture to a friend overseas, and it subsequently appeared in *Newsweek* and *Vanguard*, a magazine based in Hong Kong. Prison authorities soon learned that the picture had been published. Thinking that it had been leaked by the '89ers still in custody, police raided their dorm. "There were many soldiers that night," LBF told me later. "They searched our beds for pictures and frisked us one by one. They even checked the soles of our shoes. Before the police left, they confiscated all of our writings — letters and journals.

"It's my fault," I said with a pang of guilt. "People must have hated me."

To the contrary, LBF was grateful.

Page 363

"We should thank you for making it possible for people overseas to remember us. No matter how miserable life is, we can take it, but the most unbearable thing for a political prisoner is to fade into oblivion."

LBF's sentiments were shared by Lei, the '89er who called on students to dig up Deng Xiaoping's ancestral tomb.

Page 365

On the seventeenth day, a secret meeting of the '89ers was called during a break and plans were laid for a hunger strike. The protest began on the day we received our only meal with meat for the week, a special day for everyone. My comrades each collected their lunchtime meal — fragrant rice and the saliva-inducing meat — and gathered in the middle of the courtyard, where, one by one, they left their untouched bowls and retreated to their cells.

I did not join the hunger strike. Greedy as a pig, I ate every last grain of rice, chewed every shred of meat, and even licked the bowl.

LBF snatched the book I'd been reading from my hands. He was furious, and so, he said, were all the other political prisoners. I could only apologize. "I suffered acute hunger as a child and at the detention center," I said, by way of explanation, and in memory of my early attempt at a hunger strike while in detention. "Just the thought of a hunger strike gives me headaches and an irregular heartbeat."

LBF was unimpressed and launched into an angry tirade. "If you are in trouble someday, everyone else will do the same . . . solidarity . . ." I cut him off. "I'll do anything, anything except a hunger strike."

Page 366

LBF glared at me, but he could see the strength of my resolve and knew better than to waste his energy on my stubbornness. He was clever at finding compromises. "Right, then; you can represent all of us in negotiations with the prison authorities for Lei's release."

Page 377

LBF stood by my side for hours at a time, like a loyal guard of the imperial army, moistening my lips with drops of water and forcing me to swallow herb tonic to make me sweat out the fever. I was covered with a heavy quilt. Several times my temperature climbed precipitously, then plunged. My undergarments were soaked and had to be changed every few hours. Finally I wrapped myself naked in the quilt and threw it off when the heat became unbearable. LBF would climb up to my bunk bed, pin me down like a slab of meat to be butchered, and wrap me up again. Soon I would be too weak to struggle and, panting for breath, surrender.

In my delirium, I asked for my flute, which hung on the wall near my bed, and hugged it to my chest. I mistook LBF for Sima and went on and on about the song "Su Wu Herding the Sheep" and how Sima played it with dozens of variations of rhythms, making it heartwrenching yet uplifting. He transformed the famous tune by infusing it with his own life until it was not Su Wu of the ancient legend who tended the sheep while exiled in the remote enemy land, but Sima himself.

"I'm sure it made sense to you at the time," he chuckled.

My fever broke, but I was very weak.

As my lungs recovered, I resumed my practice. Gradually I felt my music rise more and more from my heart. "A tune is like a corpse," I told myself. "Once you blow your essence into it, it comes to life and dances at your will." I tried my hand at the popular revolutionary song "The East Is Red." LBF told me I had turned the Communist anthem into a funeral dirge.

Page 386-387

In the spring of 1997, Hippie Poet, Chen Dong, and I sat down at a dinner table, drinking. By then, both of them were flush with money but personally bitter and lost. When I told them about my attempt at a prison memoir, Hippie Poet said sarcastically, "Why do you always think you are the only one who is qualified to write about history? Go do something more practical."

Fortunately, I still had the company of a few of my fellow political prisoners who refused to give up their fight.

"Political prisoners are constantly tormented by a fear deeper than the endless confinement and unbearable physical torture," my friend LBF wrote to me. "Whether it is through writing or group protests, we hope people outside the high walls will remember us. We were imprisoned because we fought for our conscience, our dignity, for justice and high principle. I hope your book can serve as a testimony to an important part of Chinese history which has now predictably been distorted and whitewashed by the Chinese government." LBF was released a few months after me. He married his longtime girlfriend and they had a son. To support his new family, he picked up odd jobs at factories and started an enterprise in the rural area outside Chengdu. A couple of years later, he managed a hotel and fish restaurant near the North Gate Bridge. The place quickly attracted his fellow former '89ers, who ate and slept at his hotel for free. LBF never lost his sense of political conviction. In the spring of 1997, he notified the US-based organization Human Rights in China and the overseas media about a demonstration in his hometown, Mianyang, where several thousand workers at a state-run enterprise blocked the highway to demand pay raises and pensions. Trouble followed him once again. LBF was soon targeted for arrest and he fled Sichuan. One day, he suffered such homesickness that he went back to Mianyang to see his wife and child. Neighbors alerted the police and half an hour later, two police cars arrived and arrested him. This time, LBF was sentenced to seven years on charges of economic fraud. He served out his sentencing in 2004 but was back in jail in 2012, after I escaped to the West. This third imprisonment was partially linked, earthbreakingly, to me; authorities falsely accused him of assisting in my defection to Germany in the summer of 2011. I have started an international petition to gain his release and try to be in close touch with his family as well as I can be. I know that our story together is not finished. LBF's adventure in life and his brushes with death are enough for a separate book.