

Outside in Magic

Six poems and short story

Peter Stickland

A pledge to cheerfulness

While writing, I don't quite know my spirit.
I appear absent, but I'm trembling in
A world of secret happiness, grasping
Nothing, blissfully intoxicated.
Being carefree is important, just as
It's crucial to enjoy playing structure.
It can be sweet when these things pursue us;
Then we want to be everything for them.
The fine, subtle, delicate things, seem best,
But there are questions that can't be answered.

I'd like to suggest that the absence of
An answer can be heavenly when it's
A vague, enchanted, majestic reply
And I'd like this to be true for longer.
Those who are raised to be competitive
Are not like those brought up to honour love.
I say this as I want to remember;
We are damned with too much judgement, it stops
The heart from getting enough love to grow.
There's little doubt we've all suffered from this.

I'm thinking about a kind heroine,
Thinking myself the hero of this tale.
In a mood of audacity, I cross
The boundaries of the familiar
And thrust myself through the crust to freedom.
With words, I try to smile a charming smile
But it is too delicate to smile it.
I am not a human among humans
I'm a scent grown fragrant by the heart, one
Who swims alone in a human breast.

When I choose to create a fantasy
From my secret reveries and daydreams,
Conjuring, say, sweet meadows to lie in,
A place to gaze up at birch tree branches,
I do these things to pledge my cheerfulness.
I have no desire to own anything
And still my branches grow higher each day.
All I am is what I have never been
And should you now start dreaming about me,
The concerns I have will melt in the night.

When my thoughts afflict me, I pile them up.
Grief isn't cute, my anger lacks worth and
I torment blues in the soul needlessly.
I will never glare at you crossly, I'd
Hate to encourage your woes and sorrows.
You can afford to be gentle, don't slay
Your noble emotions and mellow voice,
Don't keep your elegance on the inside,
You must know there are times when the simple
Can only be grasped with almost no effort.

The trees apologized, but they hadn't
Done a thing that required a confession.
I know nothing, so I keep as quiet
As a painter with a full brush of paint.
Then, when my lucid consciousness sits up,
Alert, I gather my thoughts in a flash
And strike out, sensing that all lives can lead
To a new path of possibilities.
It's pleasing to pull oneself together
After seasons loyal to inertia.

This poem was inspired by *Looking at Pictures*, a collection
of texts by Robert Walser. Published by New Directions.

Dinner with the Djinn

In a few seconds the light decreased in
Lustre from dazzling brightness to a pale
Spectacle of flickering candlelight.
A djinn told me that I had summoned him,
I'd craved a place at his table and here
He was, offering his invitation.

He conjured a dark chamber lit with lamps,
Where odours of pungent oils, frankincense
And ambergris hung in the solid air.
He conjured a table of meat and wines,
Saying, this is your exclusive banquet,
But I knew this was my funeral feast.

I fought him by conjuring emerald
Meadows, but with sweet asphodel blooming
I was only conjuring my afterlife.
He took my ring, bid me sleep and tried to
Invite my slumber with a song, but I
Grabbed the ring and placed it on my finger.

I was possessed by a frightening power.
A great noise boomed, I flew into the air,
The djinn sped thunder-like behind me.
A grim fight ensued; I, holding on to
The ring, which curled and stung me as I flew,
And the djinn screaming he'd not be cheated.

Suddenly, I was on a tennis court.
The djinn had vanished, and spectators threw
Bunches of bright flowers onto the court.
The umpire spoke, "*first set to the poet,
Who summoned the djinn by trying to live
While suffocating her dreams and fancies.*"

Lost among Monkeys

William, seven, wanders the gallery
As if he is walking through poetry.
He is lost, and his mother is frantic,
But the art is calling out to him like
Soft ripples gliding over still waters.

The art shows him how the sun creates its
Gold and how the queen of the clouds descends
Onto silver terraces where tigers
Play the lute and the phoenixes dance the
Ancient, regenerating flamenco.

He presents himself to three carved monkeys,
And asks each one where he should be going.

The first, with gentle look, says dreamily.
Pass the city ruins where the road ends,
Where the bears and wild boar play in the woods,
Where the flowers lure you and the rocks ease you,
Where clouds darken, and the day swiftly ends.

The second speaks gravely. You must search
The woods for the stone gate your forebears built.
It was broken by the God of Thunder.
Go without fear past the sphinx-like shadows,
Randomly cast by the angel of death.

The third whispers, just walk on. It seems like
Only yesterday that you passed by here.
You smiled, blinked and continued your singing.
Some imagined they heard the bubbling brooks
But I heard pipes summoning your spirit.

Princess of a Thousand Valleys

With feelings of sadness growing within,
I dreamt that I climbed the highest mountain,
Beyond the flight of birds, to survey the
World and drink from the springs of rivers that
Nurture those who approach death. I wanted
To be close to heaven's Jade City, to
Bathe in restoring virtues, but in my
Dream the peaks were forever before me,
Each ascent showing more mountain-ranges
Divided by precipitous valleys.
Exhausted, I lay down to sleep and dreamt
Of angels riding brightly coloured clouds.

They showed me a woman's head carved in rock
Which shone with unexpected splendour.
Her face, dour or cross, was pale; maybe she
Was ill, yet she looked sturdy and healthy.
The eyes, gazing from her white face, gave her
A primitive, unworldly, knowing look.
When her eyes, blue or green, stared with increased
Insight, her pupils dilated to black.
With craggy rock for hair and smiling lips,
Her force and vision pierced me. This sculpture,
This destination for holy pilgrims,
This rock, spoke to me in soothing tones.

I'm the princess of a thousand valleys,
I carved these hills, so when clouds heap the sky
And this mountain darkens, I keep my light.
With my will to carve, each rock is a life
Renewing sculpture. When troubles darkly
Swirl around your peaks, don't lose your chisel,
Reconfigure, and sculpt your rocks anew.
When you doubt your strength and long for vision,
Remember me with your aching heart and
Know I am here, my face like spring's surprise.
To some I am a mountain, but to you,
I am the place that inspires endless change.

Redemption

1. Happy Joe Lucky

Happy go lucky Joe trusts cheerfully to
Luck and never worries about the future.
To be lucky is to be wise, but some say Joe's
Good luck is also his foolhardiness.

Joe never evades love.
He never shuns demands.
He never dodges conflict.
He never inhibits invitations.

2. Carla Maria Mendoza

The ballroom invites Carla out of the
Repressive hole she has spent her life in.
As the dancers whirl past she wipes away
Tears trickling down her astonished cheeks,
Aware that her knees have started to move.

She is working more intensely than at
Any time since she was five; her tears are
Joy and the look on her face is elation.
Carla is re-charging her batteries,
Taking the world in, weighing it all up.

Carla thinks by moving in unison,
These dancers shake off futile defeats.
More than anything she wants to lose her
Divided self in their collective world
And have pleasure unite her many parts.

She needs lifting out of her oppressive
Disquiet, her relentless struggle to stay
Alive, to be reborn on the dance floor.
Dancing as a child was miraculous
And she'll be a magical child again.

3. Joe and Carla

Carla moves gently up and down,
Thinking that fruit is rewarded with
Sweetness after months of bitterness.
Joe sees the intense piety of her moves
In silence; his words would shroud the
Ecstasy of her actions in obscurity.

Smiling, Carla unbuttons her shirt.
She remembers the angel of death
Gliding gracefully into her bedroom,
Displaying his impressive wings.
She'll never be afraid to die alone.
No one enters Joe's world lightly.

Joe offers Carla-Maria his hands.
She opens her arms; her coat falls.
Every dancer watches as Carla takes
Joe's hands and slowly shuffles one
Foot forward and then the other.
Joe's archaic life glows with intensity.

The life of a sensualist is not an illusion.
Brief encounters and chance events are
Ephemeral but noble, they're like gifts of
Abundant moisture from a virile earth.
Joe bends his knees, willing Carla's love
Of pleasure to bloom. Her bliss is close.

Not expecting a dance to occur, Joe
watches Carla shuffle forward wearing
A smile that has the countenance of one
Who deserves a reward. She's sharing a
Thing that's close to poetry, carrying
Out an act of justice that's long overdue.

Seeing the disquiet that has filled Carla's
Days, Joe whispers gentle words in her ear.
*Let your action start at your heart, move
It to your back and send it down your legs.*
All eyes are directed at Carla who is snared
In the carnal existence of ballroom dancers.

Reticence is about to engulf her when she
hears Joe whispering again. *Be indulgent.*
Carla's knees bend and straighten just like
She did as a child. The physical beauty
of her movement is like a sumptuous gift,
It's is the action that will change her life.

This is Carla's redemption, the move she
has hung her dreams on, a new commotion
In her life that will cause her heart to know
Of a love that operates beyond the realms of
Legend, where she can sing to the stars and
Fill the heavens with her growing pleasure.

Sleep-walking

Having landed here from a far-off isle
And feeling upbeat in my pyjamas,
I follow sleep-walking signs and enquire
About the garden of Hesperides.

A dragon appears, and I stand rigid
In its shadow. I'm present in body,
But wholly absent in spirit and sense.
The brute is huge and I'm beyond weeping.

The golden apple tree bids me onward,
So, I send flames from my sleeve and wave my
Arm as though I'm using a wand; I can
Surely banish this hideous monster.

Three women dance around the apple tree,
Causing dusk's golden light to fill the sky.
I blow breath into their dancing and my
Pulse causes their memory to vanish.

With gusts of air, I decrease the light and
Increase the passing of hours. Then, spraying
Lyrics into the air with a fine sleepy dust,
I sing a lullaby that prompts their sleep.

Like an angel, fearing to tread, I make
My feet walk to the far distance, past the
Lullaby, and find a path through a gale,
Keeping an even keel with my head down.

When I spy the apple tree, the calm night
Welcomes me to its realm. I'm now truly
Ready to be amazed by the golden
Fruit or anything suspended in air.

In the moonlight, I head for the apples,
Never putting a foot wrong; I'm walking
On a moonbeam, being a star, reaching
Up to the golden globes in the branches.

Weighing gravity's authority, I'm
Poised, ready to pluck my prize, so I grab
A branch, get pricked by thorns and hear my wife
Complain that I'm ruining her roses.

The Breath of Jīngshén

Jīngshén, a young architect, is celebrated for her exceptional kindness, but the innocence of her actions is both her dowry and her downfall. She is a dreamer, given to vivid hallucinations, and everyone avoids her, believing dreamers are impossible to comprehend. Jīngshén refuses to work on the computer until she has produced a great quantity of models and pencil drawings and insists upon conversing with the drawings she is working on and asking the finished buildings if they like her proposals. Jīngshén is incredibly beautiful and she has hundreds of admirers, but none try to start a relationship with her. The truth is, no man could be certain of winning her and none are brave enough to try. The modest glow of their smouldering flames could not survive the rays of her incomparable brightness. Jīngshén has no desire to dash hearts, but her lack of confidence only fans the flames. Any modest flush of embarrassment on her delicate cheeks sends shockwaves through every eligible man. For her own part, Jīngshén wilts under the gaze of everyone because she sees into their hearts and minds. She has no idea that such a facility is extraordinary, for she imagines that everyone has a talent to read minds.

The news of Jīngshén's breath-taking loveliness spreads rapidly beyond the office and soon it is talked about throughout the city. Her astounding grace are on everyone's lips and each day, pictures paying homage to her are shown on the internet. Men even stand outside her office in blissful awe, trying to catch a glimpse of her. So vast is her fame that some declare she's more beautiful than the ancient Goddess Bai Mudan. They talk as if Bai

Mudan has descended to earth, incarnate as a mortal, and some even boast they have seen the Goddess glaring angrily at Jīngshén, because the temples where she is worshipped are now deserted.

Bai Mudan, a lightening performer if her reputation is threatened, is angry.

“Yù Huáng,” she roars, “I am the representative of beauty on earth. You promised my loveliness would shine above all rivals. Take my cause and remove the threat of Jīngshén. Can I be expected to share sovereignty with a mere mortal who imitates me? Must I do nothing while my bright name, registered in the heavens, is dragged in the mud of mortals? Motherly Dao, great Queen, do you assume that I am content to share in the attention given to this wretched flirt? Do I reign with tiny glimmers of reflected glory alone to nurture my beauty? This cannot be! Help me make this enticing tease pay for her impudence. She cannot usurp my holy name, good looks and place of honour; I must take reprisals and have vengeance.”

The gods realise that Jīngshén’s sweet loveliness will become a grave wound, but they allow Bai Mudan her monopoly of beauty. In Jīngshén’s defence, they insist that she never claimed to be beautiful, but Bai Mudan cares not for their sympathy and vows to turn Jīngshén into a fool. She calls her assistants and asks them to find a young demon who can turn himself into the ugliest creature imaginable. After an extensive search they find Sun Wukong, who has just returned from a journey to the west. They present him to Bai Mudan and she explains his task.

“A girl called Jīngshén has taken all of my admirers and denied my supremacy. I want you to exact a terrible revenge on this vile and detestable impostor. There is not one who offers divine adorations to me anymore; they celebrate love through this

slip of nothing. They look upon her daily and scatter flowers in her path. These are the tributes due to me, not some despicable spoilt brat who has too much attention. She must be punished. I require you to turn yourself into the vilest thing that ever lived and make her agree to marry you. Then you will bring her here to me.”

Sun Wukong marvels at her wild anger and finds her appalling temper a thing that only increases her stormy magnificence. His attention sharpens when he realises it's a young woman of incomparable beauty who has caused her anger, for he suspects there may be something in this for him to appreciate. He can't believe he never learned of a woman whose grace and charm are so remarkable that people travel to catch a glimpse of her. He can hardly wait to set his eyes upon her.

Even before Sun Wukong has seen Jīngshén, the tricky demon is smitten with desire for her. He has never punished a girl of unique beauty before and he's not about to start now. He leaps like a wild hurricane to her father's house, sees Jīngshén seated alone in the garden, and his predatory instincts erupt. She's the revelation confirming every fantasy he's ever invoked. Not one fibre that's alive in him fails to resonate with deep passion. He flies to her father's office, where he and his wife are discussing their unwed daughter. He whispers in the father's ear.

“Go to the Temple and there Yù Huáng will tell you what do about Jīngshén.”

Jīngshén's father instantly informs his wife what he is about to do, and she is delighted that he is finally taking some action about their daughter's dreamy nature. At the Temple, the father offers prayers and sacrifices to Yù Huáng and vows to follow his advice, providing it produces a husband for Jīngshén.

Sun Wukong, hiding behind the giant statue of Yù Huáng, tells

Jīngshén's father that she must be betrothed to an ugly demon this evening and when she wakes in the morning she will discover that he is a handsome young Lord. Her father refuses, but Sun Wukong insists that even if her spouse is a creature of the blackest night, he must obey. Bai Mudan watches the young demon's actions and she's delighted by his plan. She returns to her palace, singing for all the world to hear, a thing she's not done for many months. Jīngshén's father cannot alter the meaning of the sacred words, nor refuse to comply with Yù Huáng's instruction without losing his honour. Utterly devastated, he returns woefully home to inform his wife.

When Jīngshén hears of her fate she is desolate, this edict is more pernicious than all her frightful reveries put together. Her visions destroyed her peace, but these ghostly revelations of her father will shipwreck her life. She refuses to reconcile herself to the demands of his aberrant justice, but once all the family have gathered she knows she has no choice. Soon, Sun Wukong presents himself in the form of the vilest monster any of them have ever imagined and a ghastly howling fills the house, sending tears down Jīngshén's cheeks. She gently wipes her eyes and asks the gathered crowd to cease their weeping, for she must accept her fate. When the house finally becomes silent, Sun Wukong takes Jīngshén in his arms and leaps into the air with her. All are aghast, and their wailing commences, howls they do not stop for days. When the news of Jīngshén's fate reaches the architect's office where she works, all are appalled by this abysmal waste of a delicate and graceful life.

Yù Huáng sees what this wicked monkey is up to and asks Feilian, the god of wind, to comfort Jīngshén. As she is carried through the air, he whispers in her ear.

“Jīngshén, you can be saved providing you make a connection with the healing rhythms of the natural world. You must listen to the stories told by all forms of life on earth; only they can coach you in the delicate art of natural survival. You must tune your senses and know that your frailty has occurred because you have ignored the true nature of things. You must learn that the imagination is in everything, not in your head. Anything can be a vessel for soul; a river can ease a tortured mind as well as fine words or ideas. You must make yourself available to the world, let it to teach you that it is filled with meaning. Every single thing in the world has an elementary form of breath.”

It was the intention of Sun Wukong to hide Jīngshén in the mountains, but as he is flying over Sōng shān, Yù Huáng asks Hou Yi, the heavenly archer, to shoot an arrow into Sun Wukong’s arm. The tricky monkey releases Jīngshén and falls into a river. Before Jīngshén falls too far, Feilian whisks her up and places her gently beside a mountain stream. She stands up, bewildered, loses her balance and falls in to the stream. The stream understands her anguish and raises Jīngshén out and places her on the bank among the herbs. Jīngshén cannot picture where she is. She has faced so many tragedies in such swift succession, she is completely lost.

Tǔ Dì Gōng, the earth God, sits by the river watching his herd of goats eating the grass. He sees Jīngshén’s sorrow and knows the reason for her dazed look, so he makes her a cosy bed. Tǔ Dì Gōng picks up his pipes and blowing melodiously, addresses Jīngshén in lyrical tones, sweeter than music itself.

“In my old age, I have expertise in many things, including that which wise men call divination. I see by your short breath, your pale hews, your sobbing sighs and your watery eyes that you are in

danger and you have lost your way.”

Jīngshén, feeling comforted, falls into a deep sleep, and Tǔ Dì Gōng continues to speak to her through his pipes.

“Jīngshén, may the oblivion of cares leave you while I pillow and aid your drowsy head. You are wandering through a maze where music washes over you. Before you there’s a garden, golden with the light of lamps that hang in great profusion from many branches. Before you, ripe pomegranates, quince, apples and pears are yours to eat. Lie here on this bank that we have piled with purple cushions and allow your limbs to recover and relax. Try to believe that you’re clad in the richest silks, fringed like the ends of clouds round the sun. When you wake, you will not recall the many confused hours that preceded this fine sleep. You may be dimly aware that some evil has recently befallen you, but these tyrannies will disappoint recognition as though a potent drug has charmed you into a lasting forgetfulness. It is in this condition that you will begin your tireless journey through many lands and other worlds. Though very many hardships will hamper your journey, you will in time flourish.”

After this considerable turmoil, Jīngshén is still at the starting point, but it is at a place where things can begin afresh. She is the most beautiful woman in China, yet she is vulnerable to every possible danger and her life will only get more difficult. She has no resources and she can’t imagine how she’ll be brave enough to start again, or how she can wander the world, living as a pauper. She is without any idea how she will exist and from where she must learn to grow, but at this moment of despair a stone she is sitting on speaks to her.

“This is how the world began, the place where hope resides; a profound region, a region below that place where despair can

operate. Here, it's pure nature, where everything that is subject to anticipation fails, where virtue thrives, and submission and acceptance is the only working rule. Jīngshén, it is your breath that knows this, and it is never without hope. It is the will of your breath that knows how to support expectation. Trust it."

When Bai Mudan learns that Sun Wukong has played a wicked trick on her, she is on holiday, reinvigorating her worn out beauty in a sea resort where spas and springs are renowned for rejuvenating the damaged bodies and spirits of the Gods. She screams for all to hear.

"What did this monkey think, that I was a mistress of harlots by whose introduction he could become acquainted with a maid who commandeers my name and fakes my finest virtues? I shall have his tail in a hotpot and relish the loss. Come, courtiers, we must leave this retreat and fly to Sōng shān to capture this girl."

Jīngshén is drifting aimlessly, hoping the eye of providence will facilitate her. Her mind goes out to the future, down the ladder of all time, a gossamer seed blown about without a single breath of hope. She fantasises about just resolution and prays she will be saved. She has no friends; her hunger brings sickness and her only source of conversation is with the grass and stones. This could be taken for madness, but this delicate and sensitive contact provides Jīngshén with a form of healing. She is not losing her mind; nature truly speaks to her, offering her its wise and valuable advice. The reeds by the river scan the horizon for her and whistle sounds that she translates into the facts that help her survival. As Feilian predicted, it is in this manner that Jīngshén discovers friendship and some kind of familial attachment in the world.

One morning, with rare optimism, Jīngshén spies a temple on top of a hill and imagines that praying here will have a beneficent

affect. Moved by wilful breath, she undertakes the difficult journey, but the temple is deserted, bearing the same neglect that she endures. Sheaves of corn in heaps, old rusty blades, withered garlands, reeds of barley, hooks and scythes, all of them tossed aside. Sickles, and other reaping instruments lie in a disordered state as though they were cast to the floor by the hands of labourers. Resting in the corn, she slips into a reverie. When she wakes, still exhausted, she is upset by the surrounding muddle and, thinking it an offence to neglect the temple of any God, she gathers up the various items and gives them a form of order. Guānyīn, seeing the princess busy in her chapel, calls out to the obliging maid.

“Dear Jīngshén, I know you are needful of mercy, but I must warn you, Bai Mudan is searching for you everywhere. She’s intent upon exacting her revenge on you and yet you neglect your safety, being more mindful of caring for my temple.”

With Guānyīn before her, Jīngshén falls on her knees and washes the feet of the Goddess with her tears. Then, wiping the ground with her hair and weeping with lamentation, she pleads to Guānyīn to do all in her power to grant her a pardon.

“Allow me to hide away among these sheaves of corn until the anger of Bai Mudan is past and I am out of danger.”

“Dear Jīngshén, I am greatly moved by your prayers and tears, please know I desire with all my heart to support you, but if I allow you to hide, I’ll increase the displeasure of Bai Mudan. We have a treaty of peace, an ancient promise of amity. I dare not break it. Depart from here. I will at least refrain from giving the angry Goddess news of your whereabouts. In other circumstances I would gladly allow you to abide and remain in my temple, for I cherish your innocent gracefulness.”

Jingshén wearily stumbles out, a forlorn outcast. Now, contrary to her hopes, she's doubly afflicted with sorrow. Leaving the mountain, Jingshén sleeps in the shade of a tree and does not wake until the next day when the sun is high in the sky. Seeing the shadow of a head lengthening on the wall before her, she starts up and gazes appalled as it fills and darkens the wall. As Jingshén leaps up the shadow disappears. Did she frighten an animal or is some unknown beast engaged in stalking her? A cackled voice tells her not to fear. Jingshén sees an old woman bent under the weight of many willow sticks. The woman smiles and Jingshén, seeing the goodness she radiates, doesn't ask her what kind of messenger she is. The woman unties a cloth bag, takes out a package of rice and meat and hands it to Jingshén.

“Eat this and listen to my counsel. In that direction you will find a fast-flowing brook where you can drink and refresh your forehead with its lovely coolness. Like you I am a wanderer and must go, but I will see you again, be sure.”

With this, she lifts her load of willow sticks and walks on. After the much-needed sustenance of rice and meat, Jingshén looks for the brook to drink, to wash and to cool her weary body. On the bank she sees a second woman, much like the first. She sits like a beggar, requesting alms with her hand outstretched. A broad smile on her face, she addresses Jingshén.

“Maybe not tonight, maybe not tomorrow, but you'll have the key to the mystery before long. There is much fear. Don't heed it. Fear is what paralyses you. Stay ahead of it; it costs you nothing. We'll keep you in view.”

The woman walks awkwardly away from Jingshén, who imagines a whistling sound in the air long after she has disappeared. Then, her body heavy, Jingshén moves slowly up a

hill where she spies another Temple. Having no desire to pass a place where hope might direct her, she walks towards the sacred door. She passes trees adorned with prayers, litanies engraved with letters of gold, hanging on the fresh branches. The Temple is dedicated to Xiwangmu and the columns bear her name. These days, Jīngshén is happy to seek the pardon of any Goddess. She enters within and kneels down before the altar, embracing it with her hands. She wipes the tears from her eyes and starts to pray, but she has no time to finish as a servant of Bai Mudan, called Zūnxún xíguàn, flies in and shrieks at her in a gruff voice.

“Wicked harlot; now you will know you have a mistress who is above you. I am ordered by Bai Mudan to haul you to her palace. Don’t show surprise, as though you didn’t know about the great efforts we have undertaken to find you? I shall delight in throwing you in the darkest pit, even to the gates of Diyu. Now you will feel agony, and I will witness your pain with great pleasure, for it will be a lesson to the world. No one will ever think to set themselves above Bai Mudan again.”

Zūnxún xíguàn pulls Jīngshén from the temple by her hair, throws her in a chariot and with speed brings her to Bai Mudan. The Goddess eyes her and smiles, as all wicked persons are accustomed to do before inflicting a punishment. Jīngshén is about to speak, but Bai Mudan raises her hand in censure.

“You might imagine that your visit to this place is the start of forgiveness but wait until you learn of the abysmal punishment I’ve planned. I will not try to list the numerous reasons I have to punish you, you deserve it simply because you are a Wūpó.”

She instructs Zūnxún xíguàn to take Jīngshén to a storeroom where a great quantity of wheat, barley, poppy seed, peas and lintels lie in complete disarray. Bai Mudan mixes them all up

together in a heap.

“It would appear that you succeed because of your diligent and painful service, so now we will determine the full extent of this fine skill. Divide this pile of grains one from another and arrange them into separate piles. And, so you don’t think the trial is too easy, ensure that you have the job complete before nightfall.”

Bai Mudan screeches an appalling laugh for all to hear and, leaving Jīngshén to her appointed task, she locks the door and goes to the hall where a great banquet has been prepared in her honour.

Jīngshén can’t begin the chore of separating the grains, it being a thing that’s impossible to achieve. Astounded by the cruel behaviour and mean demands of Bai Mudan, she weeps in misery. A little ant, taking pity on Jīngshén’s immense difficulty and labour, runs hither and thither. Cursing the injustice of the Goddess, she vows revenge on her insulting behaviour.

“Come my dear friends, my quick sons of the ground, mothers of all things, take mercy on this poor maid. Gather now to assist her.”

Soon one ant after another arrives and busily begin dividing the grain. After they’ve put each kind in order, they run away in haste, fearing to be caught.

Bai Mudan, having drunk far too much, returns from the banquet smelling of balms and wearing a garland of roses. When she spies what Jīngshén has achieved she spits out her sadistic anger.

“You have not achieved this by labour, but by evil magic, just you wait, tomorrow I will set you a more difficult task.”

Early next morning, Bai Mudan returns and takes Jīngshén out onto the terrace.

“You are to go to the mountains on the far side of the river and find the black goats that graze there. I command you to cut the wool from their fleeces and bring it to me.”

Jingshén sets out, determined to throw herself into the river. As she approaches the bank, a green reed, inspired by his love for all things, gathers the wind and speaks to her with gracious tune and sweet melody.

“Oh dear, kind Jingshén, I beg you, please don’t trouble or pollute these waters by taking your life. Set to the task appointed you, but you must not go anywhere near the terrible black goats until the heat of the sun is cooler. When the sun is at the zenith, the goats live in a kind of fury. They have sharp horns, stony foreheads and great gaping throats. They are armed only for destruction. Until they have refreshed themselves in this river, you must hide here by me, under this plain tree. As soon as their time of great fury is past, you may wander along their pathways. Walk only among the rocks and bushes on the mountainside, for here you can gather pieces of black fleece on the rocks or on the tangled briers.”

Once the great fury of the goats has abated, Jingshén gathers up the locks, puts them in her apron and takes them to Bai Mudan, grateful to the gentle and benign reed that saved her life. The success of this labour does not please Bai Mudan, who claims she has still not gained proper evidence of Jingshén’s skills. She growls.

“It is certain this is not your doing. I will prove that you are not so stout, as good at courage or as singularly practical as you appear to be. In this next test, failure will mean the death of you. From the top of that mountain, water runs out with a black and deadly colour. These waters fill the valley of Diyu. I charge you to

go there and fill this bottle of crystal with that water.”

Jingshén sets off on her journey to the mountain, but not to fetch water; she takes it in the hope that she will end her short life. A week later, she arrives at the ridge of the mountain and sees a great rock gushing out thunderous fountains of black water. She knows it is useless for her to attempt the trial. The shrieking blackness is born downward over rocks and ravines to the dark valley far below. On each side, great green dragons stretch out long, bloody necks, searching for intruders. Terrifying, corrupt and watchful, they never stop to rest, always keeping an eye on the river should any try to approach. The winds, whistling around the mountain, cry out in fearsome tones. ‘Away, away, fly or be slain. Away.’

Jingshén stands utterly rigid, as if she’s been transformed into stone. Present in body, she is absent in spirit and sense. The peril here is so great, even her ability to weep is beyond her. Just then, an eagle who has been watching the young girl, decides to help her. He swoops down, landing on a rock next to this very frightened and bewildered girl, and addresses her.

“Oh, simple woman, without all experience, do you think you can manage to gather up any drop of this dreadful water? No, assure yourself that you will never be able to get close to it. You are innocence itself. Have you not heard? It is a custom among men to swear by the grace of the Gods and the custom of the Gods to swear by these dreadful waters? The Gods themselves fear the very sight of this place, but all is possible if I assist you.”

Jingshén hands him the bottle without a thought and the valiant bird plunges into the loathsome valley. The majestic bird hovers high above the vile river, then dives abruptly down to the water and fills the flask. Taking his escape midway between the

many dragons, he returns and gives the flask to Jingshén. Amazed at the support that comes from such unlikely quarters, she places a grateful hand on the eagle's wing by way of thanks, and returns to Bai Mudan with the bottle, grateful that the bottle is full and sad that her heart is empty.

The Goddess is not appeased. She terrorizes Jingshén with cruel words.

“You are a witch and a sorceress. Now I will set you an impossible task. What you have accomplished is not what we expect mortals to achieve, so beware; the next commission I set you will undeniably put an end to your long run of incredible luck.”

Bai Mudan leaves Jingshén alone for days, hoping to sap her spirit. When she returns, she holds a small box in her hands. She informs Jingshén that she must take this precious casket to the gates of Diyu. The look of horror and confusion on Jingshén's face clearly indicates her misery. In her view, she is already in Diyu; the kind of Diyu that comes from a dark and forlorn state of mind.

“Your assignment is to take this box to Heibai Wuchang, the two deities who are responsible for escorting the spirits of the dead to the Underworld. It is said that they always steal a little beauty from the young women who pass by and this beauty they keep in a secret store. You are to ask these two spirits to take a little of their beauty and place it in this box, just enough to keep me going for a day. They will not give up this beauty lightly, so you must find an excuse; tell them that I have consumed a great quantity of my own beauty in fighting you if you think this will work. Whether they will give it up or not depends entirely upon their mood, not upon the cause, so all is hopeless, but try to return with an empty box and I will make you wish you had remained in

Diyu. The Theatre of the Gods begins next week, so this isn't a journey of coquetry and gazing about. If I do not have my beauty by next week my vengeful wrath will know no bounds. Now get yourself off!"

As she stumbles on, Jīngshén perceives the end of all fortune. How can she find the skills to enter such an awesome domain when no one before her has ever accomplished it? Imagining all the dreadful terrors before her, Jīngshén's heart chills. Certain she'll never return from this trial, she finds every step a wretched misery. She is only spurred on by the notion that from the top she could throw herself down. As she contemplates this terrible act she hears a voice on the wind.

"What brings one such as you to this sad and lonely place?"

Jīngshén exhausted and bewildered, falters at the voice. To her right lies an old tower covered in ivy. Beautiful and sombre, it seems almost to be a living thing. She moves slowly towards it, wondering if someone or something is within. The old ruin is empty, save a beautiful butterfly fluttering about its walls. She looks through a window and hears a faint insistent whistling within. The more intently Jīngshén listens, the more her hearing becomes attuned to it. She imagines the wind blowing through the tower is turning the silent ruin into a supernatural voice box. For Jīngshén, delicately holding on to whatever loose threads are still connected, this ancient ruin is a living, active, breathing construction, offering wisdom known only to the wind.

"What's your direction?" A voice speaks.

"I seek Diyu," says Jīngshén. "Tell me, who or what are you?"

"I am not a tower, as you imagine, a thing made with stone and mortar, I am better described as a harp. My days are spent with poetry and music. If you would like to hear my inspiration, I

may find words to connect you to the insights of nature and give you advice to lift your drab spirits.”

“Lift my spirits? I doubt I would recognise my spirit, lifted or otherwise. I am threatened by Bai Mudan. She sees me as an enemy and insists I go to Diyu.”

“Oh, poor miser, you must have angered her greatly. Was it your beauty? I wish I had eyes to enjoy it. Is this why you wish to slay yourself? Why give in to the idea that death will be a solution? Once your spirit is separated from your body, you shall surely go to Diyu and never return again. Accept this final challenge. You are soul and mind and breath and life, these are all the forces within you. There are many things that can challenge the wrath of Bai Mudan and they will be yours if you know how to activate them. So now you must travel to Diyu to stay alive and somehow you must discover how to get there.”

“Bai Mudan has given me this box; demanding that I ask Heibai Wuchang to fill it with beauty. Once achieved, I must return it to her before the new moon.”

“Time is a complex issue, but in Diyu it doesn’t exist. You need not be in a hurry there. Now listen. You must go Mount Tai and ask for directions to Fengdu. There you will find a hole leading to Diyu. But take heed, you cannot think of going to that land of darkness empty handed. You must take with you four bags of fresh hay; that’s two for going in and two for coming out.”

Jingshén stares hard in the direction of the voice and from her silence the tower realises she knows nothing about the dangers of the task that lies ahead of her. He lets out a low sigh.

“My poor, innocent woman, there is much I must tell you, for I must act as your guide. When you have reached the base of Mount Tai, you must go in the direction that looks to be the darkest. It is

neither up nor down, neither rocky nor smooth. Moss covers everything and there is an insidious dampness. Only by the dark alone will you know the direction. Remember this. Don't imagine that your heart will fail before you get there. It is difficult, but you have no reason to fear. Even the robbers among its many inhabitants take no benefit from robbing. You must stay alert and you must look out for tricks. Attend closely. When you have passed a good part of that way, you'll see a lame mule carrying wood and a lame fellow driving him. The fellow will ask you to pick up the sticks that have fallen from the mule but pass on and do nothing. Don't ask me why. You can forget why. Only your wits will get you through this. Your intention is all that matters."

"Suddenly you will come upon Niú wéishǒu and Mǎ miànlín, the guardians of Diyu. Before they have time to menace you, you must feed each of them a bag of hay. An old woman will give you these bags. She sits beside rivers in the guise of a beggar. She's your guardian and has most certainly been kind to you before. Niú wéishǒu and Mǎ miànlín will relentlessly wave their hands about, pleading with you to scratch their ears, but you must pay no regard to their piteous shrieks. No matter how much they cry out, you must ignore them. This, it seems, is not a skill you learned in life, but now is the precious time to learn it. You must walk briskly away until you meet Heibai Wuchang, the escorts in Diyu. They will be very sweet to you, but it's a trap, so beware. Your only hope is to be rude and brusque to them. Be true to yourself and have no fear, simply ask for what you have for. When you have received the beauty in your box, don't delay one second. Don't even stop long enough to thank them. Imagine the box is yours and they have stolen it. Nothing else works. You must make certain you come back into the world the same way you left. All powers must obey

this law, including the evil ones, it has been like this since the beginning of time. Above all things you must not look in the box. Move heaven and earth to eliminate your curiosity about the treasure that lies within it. The divine beauty it contains is not for you. You may think that you will not be so moved, as having too much beauty has already been the cause of your many trials, but do not doubt that temptation is never very far away. Don't imagine you will not do it because you have made up your mind against it. One can act instinctively for good or bad. Remember this; how to invite generous intuition is your great assignment."

"Now you must rest. No danger can come to you while you are sleeping. No dreams will come to infuriate your spirit and no intrusive apparitions will aggravate you and cause you fear. Know this, nothing will demand you exert physical energy on this sinister mission. When you are awake, be alert and most importantly, you must never let fear get the better of you. I am the breath of the wind and if you can hear my words of instruction, then know that the breeze imparts wisdom. Listen, remember, relate; do this and you will travel many worlds."

These were the last words from the tower. As she comes down the mountain, grateful for the tower's tuition and insight, Jīngshén gives thanks to the breath of the wind blowing through it. Trusting to fate, Jīngshén walks in the direction of Mount Tai, fighting her despondency with optimistic thoughts about the pleasure Bai Mudan will receive from the box of beauty. Now and then Jīngshén asks the way from those who appear friendly. They all direct her to go straight on, saying it's not far to go, but she never reaches the place. Before each hill, she wills it to appear. Gazing through the shimmering waves of heat rising from the rocky plain, she often thinks she sees it in the tricky light, but each

time she is misled. Jīngshén spends her days, straining her eyes in a desperate effort to separate illusion from reality. She frequently wills herself to boost her resolve, but the shape-changing landscape fills her with fear, as do the many shadows that cross her path. When the dear old woman carrying willow sticks appears, she is a welcome surprise.

“Fear not. These visions are not designed to act as siren to your innocent sailor. If you are looking for Mount Dai, you are already on it and Fengdu is just ahead of you. Take these four bags. They contain the fresh hay you must feed to Niú wéishǒu and Mǎ miànlín. You must know this; these two will surprise you, but you must not expect them, such thoughts will lead you astray. Don’t be fooled; keep straight on track. Believe that the Fates have you in view and that Diyu is before you. Don’t be afraid. If you see a spring beneath you or a hole in the ground, know that Diyu is very near.”

The moment the old woman vanishes, Jīngshén stands frozen to the spot, amazed that water could just appear at her feet. With great speed, it flows down the valley, trying to pull her with it. She stands fast, wishing it would transport her from this baleful place. Unexpectedly, she sees is a dark gaping hole and intuitively, Jīngshén steps into it. As she steps into the dark, the breeze and the sun are no more.

Having passed over into an unexpectedly cold and damp Diyu, Jīngshén walks on in the dark. When she least expects it the lame man and his useless mule appear.

“A favour from you, dear woman, I am not wealthy enough to lose a single stick and yet this mule of mine continually drops them. Please pick them up for me and return them to his back?”

Jīngshén ignores the request and runs from him. It is difficult

in the darkness, but she keeps to the appointed route and within minutes two great heads are before her. Jīngshén is mesmerised by the heads flaying in all directions, each a cavernous trap, a saliva-filled nightmare that could end her life in seconds. She quickly opens two of the bags and fills each mouth with hay. While they are munching, Níú wéishǒu and Mǎ miànlín relentlessly wave their hands, pleading with her to scratch their ears, but she pays no regard to their piteous shrieks and moves quickly on.

Suddenly, Jīngshén glimpses two huge gates, with Heibai Wuchang standing guard before them. They courteously invite her to enter, but she ignores them and sits on the ground. She attempts a casual pose and starts to compliment the fine gateway, but then she recalls the advice the tower gave her. 'Act naturally and come straight to the point.' Jīngshén stands and addresses them sharply.

"I have been sent by Bai Mudan because she wants you to fill this box with some of the beauty you have stored. She has great need of it."

No sooner is the sentence out than Mr. Black and White take the box behind the gates and return with it filled and sealed. They start chattering amiably about the journey ahead, but Jīngshén snatches the box from them and runs back in the direction she came. They do not chase her, but soon Níú wéishǒu and Mǎ miànlín are upon her. Without a thought, she throws her two bunches of hay at them and they bend to eat it.

Suddenly, Jīngshén feels ecstatic, she feels completely free. She imagines she's travelling in space, past transient stars towards a place where she feels at one with the Universe. She pictures new winds sighing from the mountains, clearing mists that have mustered in valleys for centuries. The winds gently refresh waters

that have long stagnated in hidden brooks. Many secret wells flow again. Rain washes the land and soaks the vegetation, filling the air with fresh green scents. The birds, perched in their trees, pipe merry songs and fragrance issues from a garland of roses that now sits on Jǐngshén's head. She imagines that the breath of the wind is resonating across the bright blue oceans, filling the air with a sweet music that multiplies with endless variations from mountainous terrains to boundless deserts. Jǐngshén, conceiving she is growing taller, start to sings. She imagines her voice is magical, that it can resound through a million hearts and all who hear the echoing sounds talk of a new dawn. For the first time she can imagine the possibility of love springing into the air; she feels confident and excited at the prospect of starting anew.

Jǐngshén, her valiant and exhausting mission almost complete, walks back the way she came. She is in no hurry and there is no lame man with a totally useless mule to demand assistance. She follows her intuition, anticipates nothing and avoids fear. She has no idea how she can return to the land of the living, but she had no idea how to get to the land of the dead either. She trusts that the same kind of magic that transported her from the mortal world will also transport her back again. She remembers it as a sudden transformation, so she remains alert. There are no signs displaying the way and no visible geography or devices to gauge it by. She makes for the high ground and takes in the vast panorama that is spread out before her. On top of one of the hills she spies a tower in a ruinous state. Certain it is the tower that is companion to the wind, her spirit sings out with gladness. She runs toward it, feeling the faint breath of the breeze getting stronger as she approaches. She touches its walls lovingly and waits for the words of the tower to assist and revitalise her. On a

window sill, a butterfly rests; its wings folded. A tiny crack between door and jamb reveals a bright shaft of light. Jīngshén gently steps up to the threshold and looks at the world inside. A draught of air whistles through the opening. She pushes the door open and steps inside. When she closes the door, she is again in the mortal world, breathing in the sky and the sunlight.

Suddenly, Jīngshén's exhaustion turns to tiredness and she falls into a sweet sleep, hardly moving a muscle. When she wakes, she gazes towards the sunrise and reflects upon her fearlessness and her success. She hopes her trial is complete. She wonders if Bai Mudan will now find it possible to forgive her. She gazes proudly at the box, knowing that the beauty demanded by Bai Mudan is within. Idly, she runs her finger nail between the lower box and the lid. Creating the slightest of cracks, she instantly falls into a deadly sleep. A blast of air gusts swiftly from the tower, but it is too late, the disastrous contents of the box have invaded her.

With her body frozen, she lies on the ground, a sleeping corpse. Jīngshén cannot know what caused her to jeopardise her happiness, but her reward is now clear, it can only be oblivion. Why did her finger nail lift the lid? Was it to glimpse its contents, to steal a little beauty for herself, a reward for her efforts? We will never know.

The tower, recognising that Jīngshén must be saved, dispatches the iridescent butterfly from its window sill to find MǐnRui, who is working in an architect's office.

MǐnRui, always ready, instantly recognises the butterfly and drives quickly to the tower. There he sees Jīngshén sprawled out before its walls. He gently awakens Jīngshén with a kiss and deftly hides the casket in the tower's foundations.

“Oh, my beautiful friend, you will never know how close you

came to oblivion.”

“Well, my beautiful friend, I cannot tell you how relieved I am that you found me. What brought you to this place?”

“The tower alerted me by sending the butterfly to my office.”

While MǐnRui drives Jǐngshén back to his office, Jǐngshén explains that she was working in an architect’s office when she was taken over by a series of strange visions. MǐnRui explains how he became friends with the tower and how the sounds through its walls help him with his architectural projects. Jǐngshén then explains that she is still fearful that Bai Mudan will once again hound her and demand the casket of beauty. Língmǐndù comforts her.

“Believe me when I say, she is a thing of the past. From now I would like you to work with me and use your visions to create fine places for people to live in. You will never have to go through these trials again.”

That evening, MǐnRui invites his family, friends and colleagues to a feast. Once they are assembled he addresses them.

“I will tell you what I know of Jǐngshén’s extraordinary qualities. I must inform you that her connection with nature is so profound that my words will probably sound like an exaggeration, but please accept this. Jǐngshén has *a compassionate sense of connection with everyone and everything* and her talent for listening is so great she could engage in a dialogue with the lazy breeze. As you can see, Jǐngshén possesses extraordinary beauty, but what she’s most admired for is living without spite or envy. I have invited her to work with me at ‘Material Imagination’ and I hope you will welcome her and enjoy her company.”

It is easy to see why Jǐngshén was readily accepted as a new member of the architect’s practice known as ‘Material

Imagination' and how her work with MǐnRui and his fellow workers brought new life to many buildings in the city. It doesn't need elaborate words to explain how delighted MǐnRui and Jǐngshén were at their marriage and it is not possible to describe the breath-taking delight they felt at the birth of their daughter, Xiyue.

