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Lu Yin



Lu Yin (1898-1934)

From birth, Lu Yin (born Huang Luyin) faced a series of challenges and setbacks that plagued her short life. Her mother, an illiterate and superstitious woman, considered Lu Yin an evil presence in the family because her own mother died on the very day of Lu Yin's birth. Lu Yin's father was an educated Qing dynasty bureaucrat but was indifferent to his infant daughter, and she was sent to live with a wet nurse in the countryside. She was later essentially

abandoned by her family in a Protestant missionary school outside Beijing. Ironically, it was her family's rejection that enabled Lu Yin to obtain the education she needed to become a professional writer and teacher, and to develop the fierce independence for which she would later become famous.

In 1919, after teaching and saving her money for two years, Lu Yin enrolled in the newly opened Beijing Women's Normal College along with future women writers Feng Yuanjun and Su Xuelin, and later Shi Pingmei. Lu Yin flourished at the college. She became involved in May Fourth student politics, published her first essays and short stories in the school's literary magazine, and forged deep friendships with several of her classmates, most notably with Shi Pingmei. Like so many women writers of the period, Lu Yin launched her literary career while still a student with the encouragement of a male mentor. The well-known literary critic Zheng Zhenduo, also a native of Fujian, recommended one of Lu Yin's early stories for publication in the influential literary journal *Short Story Monthly* in 1921. Lu Yin never stopped writing after this, publishing a steady stream of fiction, essays (both personal and political), and poetry until her tragic death after childbirth, at the age of 36, in 1934.

In an autobiography written shortly before her death, Lu Yin divided her literary career into three periods. Her first stories followed patterns typical of early May Fourth realist Woman Question fiction by depicting young women and men whose lives and dreams are derailed by the dictates of traditional Confucian rules of decorum, particularly the custom of arranged marriages. After a series of ill-fated teaching jobs and love affairs, the style and attitude of Lu Yin's writing changed dramatically. No longer did she write with an optimism and idealism for the future; instead the first-person narrators in her pieces agonized over the futility of life.

The two selections translated here, "After Victory" and "News From the Seashore," a response to her close friend Shi Pingmei's letter "Lusha" (see the previous section of this anthology), are both from this middle period of Lu Yin's literary career. Before her untimely death, Lu Yin changed her style yet again as she experimented with fictional biography, travel writing, and novels in an attempt to produce the more socially engaged writing that came into vogue in the 1930s.

Published in 1925 in *Short Story Monthly*, "After Victory" is similar to Lu Yin's best-known work, the novella "Seaside Friends." Both are long, emotionally brooding pieces written in the first person and embedded with letters and conversations telling the stories of several college girlfriends. After graduating with high hopes for their futures and marrying their "true loves" (thereby, refusing to allow their parents to arrange marriages for them), the friends discover that life after the "victory" of breaking with traditional social conventions and obtaining an education does not offer them the satisfaction they had expected. The characters are lonely, despondent, and mourning the loss of the support and intimacy of close female friendships and the hopes and dreams of their college days. Lu Yin's style is not subtle, but it was hugely popular among the first graduates of women's high schools and colleges, who were by the mid-1920s beginning to feel that their aspirations were not being achieved.

Shortly after Lu Yin completed "Seaside Friends," her first husband, Guo Mengliang, died suddenly, leaving her with an infant daughter. Wandering from her in-laws' home back to Shanghai and then finally to Beijing, Lu Yin fell into a deep state of depression that no doubt influenced the dark, melancholic tone of her stories and letters from the mid- 1920s. The letter translated here, "News From the Seashore," was written for her closest friend Shi Pingmei (whom she called Bowei) and published in *Women's Weekly* in

1925. The death of Shi Pingmei in 1928 plunged Lu Yin further into despair. In 1930, she married her second husband, the poet Li Weijian. Their marriage caused a great stir—particularly after the couple serialized their love letters in a newspaper in 1931—as Li Weijian was nine years Lu Yin's junior. Unfortunately, Lu Yin's tragic death came only a year after she had written optimistically, "I would like to devote my entire life to literature, and I hope that when I write my autobiography at sixty I will have written two or three successful works."

AFTER VICTORY

(1925)

The room here is way too cramped; a rectangular desk in front of the window occupies an entire third of the room, and with the addition of two sofas and a small tea table, there's barely enough space to turn around in. The courtyard is square and neat, like a piece of dried tofu; there are markings on the ground, but no one has ever planted any grass or flowers there. No matter how apparent the signs of spring are elsewhere, the notes of the swallow songs, the moans of the cuckoo, and the yawns of the blooming flowers never reach this little courtyard. This does, however, spare the room's occupants some sadness, for they live like old monks at the base of a deserted mountain cliff; neither the light of spring nor the hues of autumn ever disturb them, leaving their minds free and untroubled. Yet the passing breeze and the birds seem to take pity on their solitude and ennui, and occasionally drop hints that spring has arrived or autumn is drawing near. But in fact, like the sound of footsteps in a deserted valley, even these signs can be somewhat intrusive.

A lengthy spell of spring showers has filled the past few days and the grey sky and endless pattering of falling rain have naturally left the room's occupants feeling rather lethargic. When Pingzhi sat up in bed, the dark clouds were still thick in the sky. He looked about the room and, feeling cold and gloomy, yawned lazily, pulled the covers up around him, and dozed off again just as his wife, Qiongfang, came in from the rear room. Seeing that Pingzhi had fallen back asleep, she didn't disturb him but just sat down at the desk, staring off blankly. As she straightened up some old newspapers, she happened to notice an unopened letter that was, as it turned out, from her friend Qinzhi. She quickly cut it open and read:

My dear friend Qiongfang,

Life is truly unpredictable! Since our parting three years ago, your life has changed completely. I hear that you've already become a mother and your baby is even talking. Oh, Qiongfang! How strange this is! The last time I saw you, you were little more than a naive, innocent child yourself. And now, everything is completely different. It's not just you, I too can only look back on the past with a deep sense of nostalgia! I want to tell you everything that has happened to me since we parted: When I left Beijing and wrote you my last letter, I felt that I would roam about to the ends of the earth forever. Had this happened, you probably would have lamented that I was a lost soul who had never managed to find her true calling. On every clear moonlit evening, a storm would have blown up in your subconscious and you would have shed a few painful tears for the drifter! Yet truth be told, I too can be counted among those who have achieved "victory." After bidding farewell to my friends, I was planning to go abroad to study at the end of the summer, but unfortunately, once the news leaked out that Shaoqing and I were about to leave, his father learned of it and forbade us to depart without getting married. We would have to wait until after we were married to finally carry out our plan to venture overseas.

And how was I feeling at the time? Certainly I was not unhappy about bringing my life as a drifter to an end, but whenever I contemplated all the sacrifices I would have to make once I got married, I couldn't help but feel hesitant! But, Qiongfang, eventually I let my emotions win out and last spring, amid plum blossoms and narcissus blooms, we made our bows to the ances-

tors and prostrated ourselves before the gods of love! On our honeymoon, we went to the place where long ago you and I once spent those days by the seashore—that little thatched hut carpeted with the fallen petals of pear tree flowers and lined with bright red bricks and windows facing the white froth of the crashing waves. We sat on the rocky cliffs by the shore, quietly staring out to sea; one moment filled with joy, the next with sadness. Qiongfang, such a mood of joyful melancholy defies description. All in all, when I think back to when I first married Shaoqing after having endured so many hardships, I should be pleased to have achieved such a victory; yet whenever I recall the past, I can't help feeling overwhelmed with grief. However much a dream life may be, we were living in an even deeper dream state, for in that brief moment of infatuation we felt that the world was smiling on us and even the mountains and streams seemed happy for us!

During our honeymoon we were drunk with love; nothing could have altered our feelings for each other. We felt only the deepest devotion and everything seemed bright; we never gave a single thought to the future. Luckily, spring was just at its most enchanting; warm breezes were blowing and the blooming flowers all smiled upon us, while bees and butterflies fluttered and danced about. Whenever we got tired of staying inside our little hut, we would stroll together along a remote dirt pathway. There was a cemetery for foreigners nearby that was usually very peaceful. Often, some sentimental individual would have left bunches of fresh flowers on the graves for the departed souls. Sometimes there would be roses, their blossoms bent toward the sun, sometimes snow-white flowers mixed together with pale yellow camellias and sea roses. And all the while the holiest of tombstone angels stared up at the sky as if blessing the dead. And as we sat at the angel's shining feet, it blessed us too. This beautiful remote place brought a sense of balance to us after the frenzied lifestyle we were used to. We sat leaning against each other and, whether we were exchanging our innermost feelings or singing love songs, other than a few occasional eavesdropping spring birds or some spirits peeking at us from behind marble gravestones, nothing ever disturbed us!

But before we knew it, this pretty picture faded and our profound passionate love gradually came to feel very common-

place. Of course, reality also prevented us from going on so leisurely and carefree. Soon Shaoqing went back to work. He would leave every morning at eight and not return again until four or five in the afternoon and I would be left alone in this quiet, remote courtyard. Before long, the wheels in my mind had begun turning again as I contemplated all manner of things, both past and present. Marriage—what they call the biggest event of one's life—was resolved, yet life was not that simple and there were numerous other events aside from this major one! Housework was one. Customarily, of course, it's supposed to be a woman's sole responsibility after marriage. But I could never reconcile myself to leaving it at that, and the moment I began questioning whether women were born simply to take care of the house, I couldn't help wondering what the future held for me. It's true! I was still teaching at the time, which helped console me, and I also had a lot of free time to read, so my unsettled mind was comforted, at least temporarily.

Before long the rainy season began; the sky was dark and gloomy during the day and it rained off and on. The air was so heavy and close that I began to feel dull and bothered again. One afternoon, Xiaoyu braved a storm and came over for a chat. She talked about married life and how depressed she felt. "As for the joys of marriage," she said, "there's nothing to it." When I thought about it later, I found myself agreeing with her, but seeing how despondent she was at the time, I did my best to comfort her. I reasoned, "Our marriages may not be perfect, but marriage is nothing more than a social arrangement, and having already reached this point, we must force ourselves to cheer up. Staying single for the success of one's career is quite the rage now, but leading a spiritually empty life might only be worse. Besides, where there is a will there is always a way, and there's no reason why we shouldn't be able to make a contribution to society after getting married. One must simply not get too used to personal comfort and pleasure, so as to avoid turning as dull as a coat rack; that in itself should be satisfying enough. Why make yourself suffer for some elusive and empty notion of fame and glory?" Xiaoyu listened to my lengthy explanation but still looked quite sad. Afterward she said again, "You are much stronger willed than I am. I'm already too listless and weak, the best I can do is just accept things as they are. And then there will be children . . .

they'll hold me down even more... how can I even begin to think about making a contribution to society?"

Oh, Qiongfang, what are your thoughts after reading about this conversation?

The truth is, Xiaoyu is not alone in feeling nostalgic about the past, troubled by the present, and fearful of the future. I was always the one who was supposed to be able to figure things out, but have I? Whatever happened to the aspirations I had when I left school, let alone the dreams I had as a child? My lofty wish to sacrifice myself for the human race still remains nothing more than a wish! It used to be that whenever I learned of some great historical figure, I would devoutly prostrate myself before him or her and cry. I remember when the famous Indian poet came to China last spring, I admired his demeanor, his shining, peaceful eyes that seemed to embrace the entire universe, and the clarity of his ideas and purpose, which revealed the most fundamental and purest human nature.² As I quietly listened to his magnificent theories, I was moved to tears! I cried out of admiration for him, but mostly over my own inferiority!

Last week I got a letter from Zong. She knows what an anxious mood I've been in lately and urged me not to be so bothered by the praise or condemnation of the world. Ever since I received her letter, I have really felt that she has a much stronger will than we do. Don't you agree?

The strangest thing is that I have recently grown nostalgic about the idyllic maiden days of my past. Qiongfang, you must still remember that beautiful early autumn morning when the fields were green with just a hint of deep yellow. It was very early in the morning, only about six o'clock, and although the first rays of sunlight had begun to penetrate the sky, the cold wind on our faces already made it feel like late autumn as we walked together so excitedly on that path to the park. When we entered the park, we heard the rustling of the wind blowing through dry leaves. The birds, already startled from their dreams, turned to the rising sun and combed their wind-ruffled feathers with little beaks, and the magpies flew off with their friends in search of food. We were the only people in the park other than a lone

²- A reference to Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, who visited China in 1924.

worker sweeping the pathways and a vendor arranging his tables, chairs, and dishes. Arriving at the rock garden, you found a clean, white stone to sit on while I reclined on the green grass beside you. You once joked that I was crazy, but since that day, such picture-perfect moments seem to exist only in dreams, and my craziness exists only in your memory!

The evening before last, Shaoqing went out to see a friend and I stayed behind in this cold, desolate room all by myself. It was a beautiful, moonlit night—so bright that I turned out the light, sat on the sofa facing the window, and observed a long flower-shaped shadow cast across the snowy white curtains. I couldn't restrain myself from going out to take a closer look and discovered some wiry yellow flowers blooming by a little rock in the garden. A silvery light flooded the white-pebbled ground as I gazed up at the stars glowing in silence here and there. The tips of the willow branches in the next courtyard cast shadows on the ground, rising and falling in the wind like silver waves. As I was enjoying this scene, I suddenly remembered that spring, years ago, when you, Zong, and I were traveling together in Japan. There was one night—the evening we went by boat to Hiroshima—when not long after boarding the ship at dusk, we noticed a full moon slowly rising from the horizon where the sea and sky met. It reached the middle of the sky and its dazzling brightness as it reflected off the cold green ocean waters was overwhelming. Twinkling stars vied with the lights on shore to illuminate the ocean surface, and each time the waves surged, thousands of tiny flames sparkled on the water. Everyone else on the boat had gone to sleep by ten o'clock, and only the rhythmic sound of the sea slapping against the sides of the boat could be heard. A bleak, chilly scene—it was as if we had been plucked off of this mixed-up world and placed down all alone onto a cold, mysterious deserted island. We leaned on the railing without speaking and stared at the moon, ready to entrust everything to the care of the cloudy sky and the green ocean. Only when the boat was about to weigh anchor did we finally go back inside. Having reached such a level of exhilaration, rid of the troubles of the world, how could we imagine that as soon as we got back, daily affairs would entangle us once again? Oh, Qiongfang! The moon remains the same year after year, but people are always changing. Tonight I mourn for the past. Why do I feel so sad?

Qiongfang! All these thoughts of the past make the life before me seem dull and insipid. How can I describe my situation after "victory"? For months I've been forcing myself to act content. When others criticize me for being eccentric, I can only hang my head and accept their words in silence!

This past May, Wenqi came from her hometown for a visit and we just sat and stared at each other in silence, as if there were no words adequate to express our feelings, though a single glance into one another's eyes was enough to immediately understand the dark secrets we each hid in our hearts. Wenqi, of course, can be proud: up until now she has managed to maintain her virgin life and regard us as the odd ones. But Qiongfang, no mortal can hide from the shackles of humanity, can they? I am sure you must be curious to know how she is faring now.

Do you remember how after we all went our separate ways, Wenqi accompanied her father back to their hometown? At first she just took it easy; her family lives in the countryside in an area surrounded by water, and the beautiful scenery was enough to wash away her troubles. She'd purchased a lot of Buddhist tracts that she read with her mother every day and taught her little brothers and sisters, so life remained free from worldly cares. But who would have guessed that within six months, the people of her village would discover that she had an education and insist that she come to the city and be the principal of the first girl's elementary school there? Finally, at the urging of many people, she abandoned her life of spiritual self-cultivation for a frantic and busy job. Last month she sent me this letter:

Qinzhi,

I was so happy to receive your unexpected letter! I read the poem you enclosed over and over; it stirred up old feelings and emotions and made me feel quite distracted. I haven't been doing much writing recently other than an occasional song for my little students when I am feeling motivated. My spare time is very limited—there are so many trivial matters to attend to and my colleagues are not even worth mentioning. Only busy people can truly understand this situation. Alas, such an unnatural burden

of work wears me out. How can I plan a course of self-study comparable to that of my friends who can simply sit at home and read? I'm in such agony!

Qiongfang! Just reading this single paragraph of Wenqi's letter brought back memories of our frenzied early days in Beijing, so I know how keeping busy can also alleviate boredom at times.

With all of this talk I have not yet gotten to tell you about Wenqi's recent situation. Do you know Shaoqing's friend Changjun? He's a very intelligent and warm person, about thirty or so this year, with a baby face that gives him a kind, yet very poised and unaffected manner. When I tell you he's not yet married, however, you might think it rather strange as China, after all, is a country where people marry young, so what sort of a person is it who has reached the age of thirty without getting married? Actually there's an explanation: Changjun was married at twenty, but sadly his wife passed away three or four years ago and he has never remarried. He is good friends with Shaoqing and comes to our home often; one day when I received a picture Wenqi had sent me, Changjun happened to see it and we soon got to talking about her life and studies. Changjun was very impressed and asked us to introduce them. When I thought about it at the time, I decided it would be a good idea, and immediately wrote a letter to Wenqi. However, you know Wenqi is not really very assertive and always obeys her family, so without knowing whether it would work out or not, we just thought we would give it a try. Later we had someone mention it to her father and were surprised to learn how much he approved of Changjun, so after this it was naturally easy to persuade Wenqi. Later, when Wenqi brought her students on a visit to our school, she had a chance to meet Changjun. Changjun is very learned and articulate, and Wenqi herself is a woman of high mind and spirit, so during the two weeks she was here they gradually got to know one another. But Wenqi still hesitated to make a move, mainly, I am sorry to say, because of us! A few days ago I received another letter from her:

Qinzhi!

I haven't heard from you in quite some time. Aren't you feeling out of touch? I put your last letter among those I

intended to answer a long time ago, but in the end I didn't because I really am very busy and my mind is terribly dull. But why have you been so quiet? I know that you have all kinds of things to worry about now that you've started a family. I received a letter from Xiaoyu in which she wrote: "When I think back to our school days, I want to abandon my present life." Her letter brought back many memories and I began to feel that life now was dull indeed. I learned a new saying recently: "The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world." Allow me to be the one to share this with you!

During an education conference this summer in Nanjing, several of my friends started saying: "Women's education in China today is a great failure. Once women who have received higher educations get married, not only do they have little skill in managing the household, but they also lack the energy to take up work in society. They simply turn into a class of upper-crust drifters." What do you think of such talk? What's the point of higher education for women if they abandon their work in society the minute they get married?

I've let my thoughts wander and now I've written a great deal without realizing it. Perhaps you don't want to read such depressing thoughts, but now I've already written them, so I'll send the letter to you anyway! Why not give it some thought? I really want to hear what family life is like for you!

There is something else that I want to tell you, Xiaoyu, and everyone else: Even though our classmates predicted that our futures would be mediocre at best, how can we accept this? I think we should remain undaunted and work toward the future. But what can we do to forge ahead? How should we plan our futures? I sincerely hope that you can give me some guidance!

Qiongfang, it sounds as though Wenqi really has begun to have her doubts about us, doesn't it? Yet the truth is, it's hard to blame her, since even we can't say we don't have doubts about our own fates. But I feel that even though a married woman does face many obstacles that keep her from working for social change, that doesn't mean that it's absolutely impossible for her to care about social causes. We feel discouraged now, not just because

we can't free ourselves from housework, but also because society doesn't have anything for us to do. In China today, it's hardly worth mentioning how the people's labor is exploited by the bureaucracy, but now even our sacred educational system has begun to decline just as quickly! Under the current system, I doubt that students can really be taught well. I doubt the sincerity of any academic undertaking, let alone any other sordid occupation. Teachers who mechanically repeat things just like recording machines, for example, simply can't live up to the expectations of their students or themselves.

I remember when I was a teacher in Beijing, one day after class as I sat in the teachers' lounge, I suddenly felt very self-conscious. My heart began to burn and I felt extraordinarily ashamed as it dawned on me that I was one of the biggest frauds on earth. I shouldn't be fooling those innocent children or myself, I thought, for when I put on that "serious face" to teach the children, did I really know anything more than they did? Perhaps I was just better at deceit and trickery! Whenever they felt upset and started to cry, adults would always say to them: "It's shameful to cry" or "One must always put on a smiling face in front of others." Oh, what can be said about such an unnatural way of life? What can an education that destroys human nature accomplish? And how many people who are working as educators really feel that education is a sacred undertaking? They just grab a book of teaching materials, muddle through an hour, collect an hour's pay, and that's the end of the story! Well, I don't think that the women who compete with men for this dirty teaching rice bowl are necessarily any better off than those who stay quietly at home taking care of the housework. They shouldn't feel ashamed of accepting any meager reward men will give them for it!

As for there not being much else for a woman to do besides teaching, simply put, in China today everything is in a state of disarray. Everyone knows that women can't find occupations, but what of all those men without work? They once received higher educations as well. Just think how many of them there are. Of course a large number of such men are just plain lazy, but don't the majority of them actually want to do something, but can't?

Qiongfang, when our school was looking for a new principal, you can't imagine how many people maneuvered to get the job.

Well, if I were to begin to tell you even some of the details about how people jockeyed for the position, education circles would really lose face. Alas, with society in such a condition, we'll never have a bright future without radical change!

But regardless of everything else, Wenqi's letter is really quite inspiring. The truth is, the Chinese family system is more than enough to wear down any woman's willpower. I feel that ever since I got married, my old friends have grown fewer and fewer, while the friends I have now are either simply social friends or else relatives with whom I have no real rapport. We either just go through the motions with fixed pleasantries to cope with each other halfheartedly or play cards or see a show. Any intellectual discussions are out of the question. I can hardly find a friend with whom I can have an intimate conversation and besides, there are so many household matters to take care of. The minute I open my eyes in the morning, I find myself hopelessly caught up in the web of daily affairs. It's not easy to sit down calmly and read, let alone take up some other activity. Oh, Qiongfang, it's pitiful how stupid people really are—before getting married, we dream of living full and satisfying lives after marriage, but in the reality of this flawed world, we wind up with nothing but regrets!

All this reminds me of Lengxiu. You probably still remember her lively and carefree personality, but have you heard about her recent situation? She's even more pitiful than the rest of us—she's really the one who's lost out the most! When we were all going to school together, no one would ever have guessed that with her proud outlook on everything, she would fall the lowest. She always said that life was a big experiment and never followed anyone too readily. She was even less anxious about the ways of love, but in the end it was with the hope of a final "victory" that she bravely stepped into this particular experiment. Although there were many sharp brambles along the way that might have pricked at her feet, she did not let them slow her down. When she was first introduced to Wenzhong, no one could foresee that the two would fall in love, as Wenzhong was already married and Lengxiu had always held herself in such high regard. In the end, however, Cupid's bow brought them together, but after the marriage they returned to Wenzhong's hometown, where his first wife still lived. Wenzhong and Lengxiu had sought the first wife's approval before marrying, so on the surface at least, everyone put on friendly smiles when they met. But according to Lengxiu's letter,

her feelings changed completely soon after she arrived there; she always sensed some deep regret lodged in her heart that she could not quite express. As she lay in bed every night before falling asleep, she would ponder how true love could not tolerate a third party—even if the person were nothing more than a formality, love would be marred. Because of this, her lively spirit gradually faded. I remember some especially moving words of hers:

I was once able to use my sharp eyes to evaluate life, just like those pessimistic, world-weary philosophers who realize that the world is a sea of suffering, that everything has a limit, and everything is a void, yet can never free themselves from the bonds of the human world. I have discovered nothing extraordinary in the course of my own life. I have been fooled by love and I have shed tears; and I have wielded the sharp sword of knowledge to stab at a fragile heart. I once resembled a weak little lamb who, full of hope, joined an enormous flock of sheep to seek the most fitting partner. In my imagination, a perfect love was as simple and clear as the cloudless autumn sky; nothing could stop me from a harmonious union. It was also like a frost-covered chrysanthemum in midautumn with a mysterious, pervasive fragrance reserved for only a few exceptional people while the bees and butterflies barely got a chance.

It isn't hard to achieve these hopes, but poor Lengxiu found that even after she had cleared a spot for a garden in a remote and barren spot and planted rose seeds, the brambles still had their roots intact and found a way to flourish. Her clear sky was eventually obscured by passing clouds and the lively fire in her soul was nearly extinguished by a gust of cold wind. What does she feel as she sits silently engulfed in her sadness before a flickering lamplight? Who can blame her each time she lets out a deep mournful sigh? Last March, she sent me the words to a new poem she had written and I was upset for days after reading it. Unfortunately I have lost her original text, but I can still vaguely remember it. It went something like this:

The rain pours, the wind drones on,
The stars shed tears, the clouds weep.

I sit in silence by the lamplight,
 How deep my sorrow!
 I bemoan what is lacking on earth,
 The oceans of hate can never be filled!
 Longing for you, I grow all the more sorrowful.
 Ending my infatuation, I end up confused!
 How sad! How sad!
 Why can't I attain enlightenment?
 Why do I falter on the wrong path?
 Ashamed by the words of Western thinkers
 That say: perfection or nothing!

Qiongfang, how does reading such a mournful poem make you feel? Still, I think we should not shed tears of compassion for Lengxiu alone, but also for the countless other Lengxius living in a transitional era such as this one. If Lengxiu, having been unable to secure a flawless love, has already come to such an end, then what of all those others—such as Wenzhong's first wife—who bear empty tides but can't find even a morsel of love? How can we even begin to fathom their misery and sorrow?

Oh, Qiongfang, I used to say that Lengxiu was a free bird who became entangled in the grim net of human affairs only after obtaining the victory she fought so hard for! She gained nothing from it but a heart of misery that consumed her strong will and courage. When I think about it now, I can't help but bemoan the fact that women in China today are altogether too pitiful!

The day before yesterday, Xiaoyu's daughter turned one month old, so I went to their home and found Xiaoyu sitting with her baby sleeping in her lap. Seeing me, the corners of Xiaoyu's eyes suddenly turned red and she said, "It's still better to stay single, we've all taken the wrong path!" Oh, how painful her words were! We really were all so stupid. How heroic it seemed when we fought with our families and willingly sacrificed everything for love! We've all managed to achieve this victory, but now after victory our joys are few and our troubles great. And we have little to aspire to. What happiness is left in life, when all the thoughts that were once so comforting are suddenly wiped away? We used to think that if we found a true partner in love, then we could give up our other ideals. Now, the outcome of our experiment shows that nothing is beyond the control of circumstances.

Otherworldly joys appear to me now only late on clear, starry nights when I suddenly meet with the flower spirits and feel that I've drifted to the corners of the universe and am suspended between heaven and earth. As for the celestial island of endless skies and seas, and scenery of fine grasses and delicate flowers, I must wait a long time—till death—before I can hope to see them. Qiongfang, my days pass so slowly, and I can hardly console myself any longer. Lost in thought in this isolated room, I feel as if I'm drifting away. I had originally planned to go on vacation with Shaoqing to Italy next spring, hoping the scenery would help alleviate my malady, but that was just wishful thinking as there is always the question of money. Instead, we can only, as the saying goes, "sketch pictures of food to satisfy our hunger."

Thank you, Qiongfang, the knowledge that you are still writing helps lift my spirits. I've always wanted to do the same, but as the years have passed I've gotten caught up in life, and at some point my lofty aspirations faded away. The few times I have written, I've just been putting words on paper; where can I find any inspiration to water the barren fields of my mind and make the flowers bloom again? Qiongfang, can you predict what the future holds for me?

Qinzhi

After finishing Qinzhi's letter, Qiongfang felt as if something were lodged in her chest. She looked around at her own surroundings; natural beauty, an ideal life, these are no more than castles in the sky. Without thinking, she sighed. "This is all there is to life after 'victory.'"

Pingzhi had already awakened and could not help overhearing her. He asked, "What did you say?" Qiongfang did not want to reveal the secret in her heart, so she simply laughed and said, "It's late, aren't you getting sleepy?" Pingzhi answered lazily, "What is there to do? There is no point in jetting up!" Qiongfang could not hold back a sigh. "There's no point in living!" Pingzhi replied, "That's right, there is no point at all in living." This strange conversation ended there, leaving nothing but a slight trembling in both of their hearts.