

魯迅：故鄉

Home

By Lu Xun

Translated by Theodore Hutters

I braved the fierce cold to return to the home I was separated from by over two thousand *li* and which I had left over twenty years ago.

Since it was the dead of winter, as we drew closer to home the weather once again turned bleak, with the chill wind whining as it blew into the cabin of our boat; all we could see looking out through the openings in the awning was a scattering of utterly lifeless and forsaken villages spread out before us under the sallow sky. I could not help becoming disconsolate.

Ah! Surely this could not be the home that had been constantly in my memory for the past twenty years?

The home I remembered was not at all like this; it was so much better. But were you to ask me what was beautiful about it, or what its good points were, I have no actual impressions, nor words to express them. Perhaps it was always just like this, or so I explained to myself: my home had always been this way, and although it has not progressed, neither was it as desolate as I was feeling; it was simply that my state of mind had changed, because on this homecoming I was in low spirits.

I had returned this time solely to take my leave of it. The old compound our clan had inhabited for so many years had already been sold in its entirety to another family. The deadline for handing it over was the end of the year, so we had to move quickly so as to depart permanently from this familiar old place before the first day of the New Year; moreover, we had to venture far from here and move to where I now made a living.

I reached our front gate at first light the next day. A profusion of the broken stems of dried grasses on the roof tiles shook in the wind, as if to explain why the house had been obliged to change owners. Several branches of the family seemed to have already moved out, so things were pretty quiet. By the time I reached the place where my own family lived my mother was already outside to greet me, followed by my eight-year-old nephew Hong'er, who had scurried after her.

My mother was quite happy, even as she concealed certain signs of distress; she instructed me to sit down and have some tea, but said nothing about the move. Hong'er had never seen me before, so he did nothing but stand there and stare at me from a distance.

We did finally get around to discussing the move. I told her that lodging had already been secured elsewhere and that I had even bought a few pieces of furniture; aside from that, we would have to sell all the wooden furniture here and replace it later up there. Mother agreed, adding that the luggage was almost all packed, and that she had sold some of the wooden furniture that would have been too difficult to move, but had been unable to collect the money.

Mother said: 'Why don't you rest a day or two, go call on the relatives, and then we can leave.'

'Fine.'

'There's also Runtu: every time he comes to our place he always asks about you: he really wants to see you. I've already told him when you'd probably be here, so he may show up pretty soon.'

Just then a magical picture flashed across my mind: a golden full moon hanging in a deep-blue sky, beneath it a stretch of sandy seashore, on which was planted an endless expanse of bright-green watermelons; within was an eleven- or twelve-year-old boy wearing a silver necklet and holding a steel pitchfork that he was using to stab at a *cha* with all his might, but which evaded him with a twist and escaped between his legs.

The boy was Runtu. When I first met him, I was just over ten years old; it was almost thirty years ago. At the time my father was still with us and the family circumstances were pretty good; I really was quite the young master. That year our family was to hold the ancestral sacrifices, a duty that would only fall on us every thirty years, so it was an extremely solemn affair. In the first month of the New Year, the ancestral images were set out, along with a large

number of offerings. The sacrificial implements were meticulously crafted, and there were many worshippers, so we had to guard against theft. Our family had only a single part-time monthly (in our region workers are divided into three types: someone who worked for one family for the whole year was called a 'year-long'; someone who worked by the day was called a 'short-term'; and those who tilled their own land and only came to work for a particular family during the New Year, at festival times, or during the harvest, were called 'monthlies'). But because he was too busy, he asked my father if he could have his son Runtu come over to take care of the implements.

My father allowed it and I was delighted, as I had long heard of this Runtu, knowing he was about my age. He was born in an intercalary month, and his horoscope was deficient in the element of earth, so his father called him Runtu (intercalary earth). He could set traps and catch small birds.

So day after day I longed for the New Year, for when it arrived, so would Runtu. I bore up until the end of the year, then one day Mother told me that Runtu had arrived and I rushed out to see him. He was in the kitchen: a round pinkish face, with a small felt cap on his head and a luminous silver necklet around his neck, showing just how much his father loved him. Afraid that his boy might die, his father had made a vow before Buddha, and used this necklet to hang on to him. He was shy around people, but not with me, and whenever there was no one around he would talk to me, so before the day was half over we had become close.

I don't know what we talked about back then, I only remember Runtu's delight when he told me that upon coming to the city he had seen so many things he had never seen before.

The next day I wanted him to catch birds. He said:

'It won't work—we need a big snow first. When it snows out on our sandy shore I sweep out a clear space, use a short stick to prop up a big bamboo basket, scatter some spoiled grain under it, and stand aside. When I see the birds come to eat it, I pull the rope I've tied to the stick, and the birds are trapped under the basket. There're all kinds: pheasants, woodcocks, wood-pigeons, blue-backs ...'

I thus began to hope for snow.

Runtu said to me:

'It's too cold now, but come to us in the summer. During the day we'll go to the shore to collect shells; we've got red ones and green ones, and even ghost-scarers

and Buddha-hands. At night my dad and I go out to look after the watermelons—you can come too.’

‘Are you guarding against thieves?’

‘No. In our region, if passers-by get thirsty and pick a melon to eat we don’t consider it stealing. What we’re on the lookout for are badgers, hedgehogs, and *cha*. Under the moonlight you listen for the munching sound of *cha* eating melons, then you grab your pitchfork and sneak over ...’

Back then I had no idea what this thing he called *cha* was—which is still the case even now—for no particular reason, I just thought it was like a small dog, and very ferocious.

‘Do they bite?’

‘So we have the pitchfork. When you go over and see the *cha* you stab at it, but the animal is really smart: it comes at you and then scurries through your legs. Its fur is slippery as oil ...’

I hadn’t previously known the world had all these extraordinary things in it: that the seashore has so many multicoloured shells, that watermelons are under such threat; I had known only that they were sold at the produce market.

‘When the tide is high at our shore there are lots of jumping fish, and they all have two legs, just like frogs.’

Ah! Runtu’s mind was chock-full of fantastical things like this, all things that my regular friends knew nothing about. They were not aware of such things, and while Runtu was at the seashore, they, like me, could see only a rectangular patch of sky above our high courtyard walls.

The first month of the New Year ended, alas, and Runtu had to return home. I was so upset that I burst into tears, while he hid out in the kitchen, crying and not willing to leave. His father eventually took him away, but he had his father bring me a bag of shells and a couple of beautiful feathers, while I sent him some things once or twice, but we did not see one another again.

When my mother brought him up, these memories of my childhood suddenly came to life like a flash of lightning, and it was as if I saw my beautiful home. I responded:

‘That would be great! How uh, how’s he doing?’

‘Him? ... Things are not going all that well for him ...’ said Mother, who then looked out the door. ‘Here come those people again. They say they want to buy our wooden furniture, but they just run off with whatever they can lay their hands on, so I’ve got to go keep an eye out.’

Mother stood up and went outside, where the voices of a number of women could be heard. I called Hong'er over to me and began to chat: I asked him if he could write, and whether he wanted to go on a trip.

'Are we going to take the train?'

'We'll take the train.'

'And a boat?'

'We'll go by boat first ...'

'Ha! So, you look like this now! And your moustache is so long!' an oddly piercing voice suddenly blared out.

Taken aback, I quickly raised my head and saw standing in front of me a woman of about fifty, with protruding cheek bones and thin lips. Legs apart, hands on hips and without a skirt, she looked like nothing so much as a sharply pointed compass from a set of drafting instruments.

I was stunned.

'Don't recognize me? Why, I used to hold you in my arms!'

I was even more stunned. Fortunately, my mother had just come in, and she came up beside me and said:

'He's been away for years and forgotten everything. You must remember,' she said to me, 'this is Sister Yang from across the way ... She ran the bean curd shop.'

Ah, I remembered. When I was young there was indeed a Sister Yang who sat all day in the bean curd shop across the way; everyone called her 'Bean Curd Beauty'. But she powdered her face back then, and her cheek bones weren't so prominent, nor her lips so thin, and since she was always seated I never saw her compass pose. People used to say it was because of her that the business at the bean curd shop was so especially good. Probably, however, because of my age I was really never affected by this, thus leading me to forget everything about it. But the Compass was much aggrieved, and put on a look of utter disdain, as if jeering at a Frenchman who didn't know who Napoleon was, or an American ignorant of Washington.

'You forget? Of course the high and mighty can only see ...' she snorted.

'That's not how it is ... I ...' I said as I stood up, flustered as I was.

'So just let me tell you something, Brother Xun: you're rich; moving these would be too much trouble, and what do you need all this broken-down wooden furniture for, anyway? Let me have it: we humble folk can put it to good use.'

'We really aren't all that well off, so I have to sell these before I go ...'

‘*Aiyaiyai*, you’ve been made a big official, so how can you say you aren’t rich? You’ve got three concubines and whenever you go out, you go by palanquin with eight bearers, and you still say you aren’t rich? Hah, you can’t get anything past me.’

I knew there was nothing I could say, so I just shut up and stood there in silence.

‘*Aiyaiyai*, so it’s true the richer you are the less you’re willing to part with so much as a single hair, and then you get even richer ...’ the Compass prattled on as she indignantly turned to go, and as she leisurely took her leave she nonchalantly pocketed a pair of my mother’s gloves.

From that point on, a number of relatives and clan members who lived nearby came to visit. In between attending to them, I found time to do a bit of packing, and three or four days passed this way.

One very cold afternoon as I was sitting having some tea after lunch I sensed that someone had come in, so I turned to look. What I saw came as a complete surprise, and I immediately stood up to go over and offer my welcome.

The person who had come was Runtu, and although I recognized him at once, he was not the Runtu of my memories. He was twice as big as he had been, and the face that had once been round and pink had become ashen, with deep wrinkles; his eyes now resembled his father’s, red-rimmed and puffed up. I knew that those who farmed by the shore were whipped all day by the ocean breeze and mostly ended up this way. He had a felt hat on his head, and was wearing only an exceedingly thin cotton jacket, so was shivering all over; he was holding a paper packet and a long pipe, but it was not the round pink hand I remembered, rather a chapped one that was coarse and awkward, and which looked like the bark on a pine tree.

I was elated, but, at a loss for words, I just said: ‘Ah! Brother Runtu, you’ve come? ...’

Then all sorts of things came to me that I wished I could pour out like a string of beads: woodcocks, jumping fish, shells, *cha* ... but I just felt something blocking me, and all these things just swirled around in my brain; I couldn’t say a thing.

He stood still, a mixture of happiness and desolation reflected on his face; his lips moved, but no sound came out. He finally took on a respectful attitude and said distinctly: ‘Master! ...’

I seemed to feel a shiver, and I then realized that we had become separated by a dismal thick wall. I was also struck dumb.

He looked behind him and said: 'Shuisheng, come kowtow to Master,' then pulled out the child standing behind him, who was exactly like the Runtu of thirty years ago, only thinner and sallow, and without the silver necklet. 'This is my fifth, he knows nothing of the world, so he just tries to keep out of the way ...'

Mother and Hong'er came downstairs; they had probably heard our voices.

Runtu said: 'Ma'am, I got your letter a while ago and I was really happy to know that Master was returning.'

'Oh, how is it you've become so polite! Didn't you always call each other brother back then? Let's keep it that way: Brother Xun,' Mother said happily.

'*Aiyah*, Ma'am, really, what kind of manners would that be? I was just an ignorant child back then.' As Runtu said this, he again told Shuisheng to come and bow, but the child was shy and affixed himself behind his father.

'So this is Shuisheng? Your fifth? Everybody here is a stranger to him, so it's no wonder he's shy; why doesn't he go off and play with Hong'er?' said Mother.

Hearing this, Hong'er came over to get Shuisheng, and Shuisheng went with him, quite at his ease. Mother asked Runtu to sit down, which he finally did after some hesitation; he leaned his pipe on the edge of the table, and handed over the paper packet, saying:

'There's nothing I have to give you in the winter: we prepared these few dried beans ourselves, so please Master ...'

I asked him how things were going; he simply shook his head.

'Things are real tough. Our sixth now can help out a little, but there's never enough to eat ... and the situation just isn't peaceful ... They're demanding money everywhere, and there are no fixed regulations ... and the harvest was bad. When you grow something and carry it in to sell, you always have to make a few contributions here and there, so you lose money; but if you don't sell it, it just rots ...'

He just kept sitting there shaking his head, and although his face was etched with numerous wrinkles, none of them moved, as if they were on a stone statue. He probably felt the bitterness of it all, though he could not describe it, and after being silent for a time, he picked up his pipe and began to smoke it, without saying another word.

Having asked him, Mother knew that because he had a lot to do at home, he had to leave the next day; neither had he eaten lunch, so she told him to go to the kitchen and fry up some rice for himself.

After he went in Mother and I lamented his situation: too many children, crop failures, onerous taxation, soldiers, bandits, officials, the gentry had all crushed him down into being little more than a marionette. Mother said to me that whatever we didn't need to take away with us we could all give to him, and just let him choose what he wanted.

That afternoon he picked out a few things: two long tables, four chairs, an incense-burner and candlestick, and a scale. He also wanted all the ashes we had (we cooked with rice straw here, and the ashes could be used as fertilizer in sandy soil); he would bring a boat around to collect it all once we were set to go.

That evening we chatted some more, but not of anything important; the morning of the next day he and Shuisheng went home.

Nine days later came the day of our departure. Runtu arrived that morning, but without Shuisheng; this time he brought along a five-year-old girl to attend to the boat. We were busy all day, so we had no more time to chat. Quite a few visitors came by: those to see us off, those to get things, and those to do both. By the time of our evening departure, absolutely everything in the house—

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the broken-down, the large and small, the coarse and the fine—had all been cleared out.

As our boat made its way forward, the green mountains on either shore darkened in the dusk and receded toward the stern.

As Hong'er and I sat together by the window of the boat watching the hazy landscape, he suddenly asked: 'Uncle, when will we be coming back?'

'Coming back? How can you want to come back before we've even left?'

'But Shuisheng asked me over to his house to play ...' he said wistfully, opening wide his dark eyes.

Mother and I were both at a bit of a loss, so we talked again of Runtu. Mother said that as soon as we started packing, Sister Yang, the Bean Curd Beauty, would inevitably come over every single day, but the day before yesterday she had scooped out of the ash-heap a dozen or so plates and bowls, and after some deliberation had said for certain that it had been Runtu who had buried them there, so that when he came to take the ashes, he could take the plates and bowls as well. Sister Yang felt her discovery was quite commendable, so she then ran off with the dog-teaser (something we use here in raising chickens: it is a wooden plate surrounded by a railing on which chicken feed is placed; chickens can stretch their necks into it and feed, but dogs can't get at the food, so they become enraged). Given the size of her tiny bound feet and the height of her heels, all credit to her for being able to run so fast.

The old place was now even farther away; the scenery of my home was also gradually taking its leave from me, but I actually felt no attachment to it. I only felt that there was an invisible high wall on all sides, rendering me solitary and leaving me exceedingly depressed. The image of the young hero with the silver necklet in the melon fields that had once been so clear to me, now suddenly became blurred, which only grieved me more.

Mother and Hong'er had both fallen asleep.

I lay down and listened to the murmur of the water passing under the boat, knowing that I was going my own way. I thought: I am now separated by such a distance from Runtu, but the next generation is still close to one another—isn't Hong'er already missing Shuisheng? I hope they won't be like me, cut off from other people ... I do not, however, because I want them to remain close, want them to endure a drifting life like mine, nor do I want them to live a numbing existence like that of Runtu, much less the self-indulgent life some others lead. They should have a new life, a life we have not had.

As the thought of hope came to me, I suddenly became fearful. When Runtu had wanted the incense-burner and the candlestick I had surreptitiously laughed at him, at his worship of idols that he never seemed to be able to get out of his mind. But this hope of mine, wasn't it just an idol of my own device? It was only that what he wished for was close by, whereas what I hope for is far off.

In my blurry vision a patch of bright-green shoreline stretched out before me, above it a golden full moon hanging in the deep-blue sky. I thought: hope neither can be said to exist nor can it be said not to; it is like roads across the land—there were in fact none to begin with, but when many people pass by, a road is made.