

At the End of the Bird's Foot

"Americans are eatin their evidence," roared Mike Waddle, thrusting two freezer bags under my nose. Both had a shrimp inside, one shiny with pink flesh, an orange line bulging from its head down the spine indicating fertile eggs; the other shrimp looked pale and sickly, smears of blackness under the head like globs of congealed oil and tar balls on the water, in the reeds, in birds' feathers, the familiar images after the BP spill. How did the oil get into the head of a shrimp?

"This one was caught before the spill." Mike pointed to the pink shrimp, then the pale one. "This was caught last month, two years after the spill. The oil and dispersant they sprayed to cover the spill had finally entered its brain."

I nodded. I was not an expert on seafood, but anyone could tell that the skinny black-headed shrimp was sick, and unappetizing.

"I haven't touched seafood since the spill. The dispersant is toxic. It changes living things at the cellular level. When BP hired me for the clean up, I was required to wear rubber gloves and suits. They said it was just for caution and there was no real harm, but I know, I know the exposure to dispersants, by air or touch, can damage my nervous system, my blood, kidneys and the liver. How do I know? Because everything it touches just rots away, my rubber boots, gloves, pants. My ship is rotting, and all the fishing boats that sailed in the toxic soup. If it can eat away the steel, imagine what it can do to a living thing? BP sprayed over a million gallons of the chemicals, on top of the ocean, into the leaking well 5000 feet deep, at the bottom of the sea. The chemicals break down the oil and turn the thick goo into billions of droplets that look transparent, almost like the lens over an alligator's eyes. It made the ocean surface look cleaner, no longer so thick, so gooey, so sickly dark and orange, but the oil doesn't go away. Not at all. You see, those billions of droplets just sank below the surface, hang in the top 30 to 50 feet of the ocean like columns, turning the Deepwater Horizon water into a dead zone. And guess what? Venice is one of the last few spots where blue fin tuna and other marine animals come and lay their eggs in the warm water in May and June, where the eggs hatch

and larvae float until they get bigger and stronger for the sea. The Gulf is their nursery, their home. Now it has become a killing zone. Fish are dying, shrimps are dying, birds are dying, reeds are dying, cypresses are dying, and we're dying, slowly, with mutations and cancers. All the seafood I catch got strange growth in their brains, on the skin. You see the shrimp? The black spots in its head? They should be eggs, red and orange like this shrimp I caught before the spill, but now it's nothing but tar, like the oil slick, and there are some half-formed eggs on the legs. Poor thing, she lost her sense how to make eggs and where to keep them. Can you blame her? No! Because the dispersants had turned her brain into tar balls. And if I eat this, my brain will turn into the same shit."

Mike stopped to breathe. His face was red and puffy from talking in one long breath. I could tell that he had hypertension, that his blood pressure had risen to at least 160, unless he was taking meds, but judging from their trailer home, I had a sense that he didn't have health insurance, which meant he couldn't afford the meds. He opened his humongous refrigerator lined with packs of Coke and beer. He pulled out a can. His sugary diet wouldn't help his hypertension. A thought suddenly occurred to me when he popped open his drink.

"But you're still going out shrimping tonight. And all the other fishermen. Who are buying the seafood? Who are eating them?"

Mike smiled slyly. "Well, the Chinese buy most of them. Our shrimp are sweet and juicy, because it's wild. Everything else is farm raised now. People are willing to pay for the wild thing, and it's worth every penny."

"Do they know it's tainted?"

He laughed. "Oh hell they know. The dealers know it damn well. But what do they care as long as there's money to make? And it's big money, because there are lots of rich Chinese nowadays, and they love seafood, the best kind, the wild kind, and only they can afford our gulf shrimp."

"But what about the toxin?"

“Our shrimp is a thousand times cleaner than the seafood in China. You know that already, right?” He looked at me with his bulging eyes.

Yes, indeed. And that was why my heart ached so, and why I was here, with a thousand river flags made by a thousand folks who cared for rivers. I had grown up on the biggest fishing island in the East China Sea. Every morning I walked 5 miles to the market, standing on long lines for our daily food from rice to tofu to meat, and the only thing that didn’t require waiting was seafood. Piles and piles of them from the sea, yellow, silver, red, shrimp, crab, squid, and fish of all kinds, fresh, abundant, cheap, a few cents a pound. They were the cleanest food on earth, because there was hardly any industry on the fishing island then, except for a small paper mill inland, near the Navy Compound where I lived. As a child, I paid no heed. I took the abundance for granted. If the land failed because of drought or flood, which happened so often, the ocean would always come up with food for us, fresh, clean, delicious. The first time I heard that fish were getting scarce and the price was shooting up on the island, I laughed in disbelief. Then I heard that fishermen started fish-farms because there was too little to catch in the sea, I was appalled. Then I heard the horrible pollutions everywhere, the land, the air, the sea, and the complete collapse of fishery in the China Sea, and I felt nauseas. How could this happen so fast, in 20 years?

I looked at the shrimp in Mike’s hands. I grew up eating shrimp like this. My favorite way was to blanche it in boiling water in 30 seconds, no salt, no spice. The shrimp, so sweet, fresh and juicy, tasted like the flower of the sea, nectar of the salty wind. And that was why I had just bought two pounds of the Gulf shrimp from the Coastal Seafood before my departure. Tony, my favorite fishmonger, had guaranteed they were the best shrimp one could have. Never frozen, straight from the Gulf, he added, smiling proudly. Did I see the tar balls in their heads? Nope, there were no heads at all. Just the bodies. The heads were gone. A cover for the evidence? How long had I been eating the tainted shrimp?

“Look at the poor thing,” Mike said, his eye caressing the sick shrimp in his hand. “It no longer knows if it’s a she or he, laying eggs everywhere, legs, shells, going crazy...if you put it out in the sun, even flies won’t touch her, or lay larvae on her. Too toxic. So this is the food for the fish, the birds, and us nowadays. No wonder we all go crazy like the shrimp, no wonder we don’t know who we are...” His voice became thick with sorrow. “I try to alert people, the local fishermen, the traders, the coast guards, the government. I try to show them with the evidence. But nobody wants to hear it. They want to move on, keeping fishing, selling, buying, as if nothing bad had happened, like the dispersants that turn the slick into transparent droplets in the sea. They name me the ‘Bug Man’ because I can’t stop telling people how no flies would lay eggs on the damn shrimp. They laugh as soon as I show my face on docks, those fishermen, white and Asian. But I don’t mind. They know exactly what I’m talking about. They won’t eat the seafood themselves, like me. They keep fishing, too, like me, because we’ve got to make a living, right? What else could we do? There’s no job around here, apart from the oilrigs. And it’s back breaking work, literally. I broke my back twice working for BP. They patched me up and sent me back to work until I am no good for them any more. Can’t lift the heavy equipment with my crooked spine. Pension? Insurance? Are you kidding me? Why would they invest money on a broken man? Especially a broken man with a big mouth? I’m on their blacklist. They make sure I will never get a goddamn job with them again. They know who I am in Venice, in the whole parish, the whole gulf. There are lots of drug addicts around here. Lots of oil, and hurricanes. My home has gone under water so many times, the Katrina, then Isaac, and many others. You see the levee outside the window? The Army Corps fortifies it every year, but we know better. We’ve seen how the water rising, rising, rising, jumping over the levee and boom, everything goes under. Man conquers nature? Poof! Hallucinating. The more we meddle with nature, the worse we are. It’s a scheme, I tell you, like the Mafia from New York. They kill people, grind up their bodies and stuff the evidence in the hotdogs. We eat them and say hmmm delicious. The government and corporate take our money, brainwash us through schools, commercials, turn us into zombies so they can rob us blind, and we say hurray thank you Uncle Sam and Oil Man. But not me. My eyes and

mouth are wide open. That's why they hate me. The coast guards harass me like crazy, those scumbags, paid by my tax money. They hope I'd go away. I want to go away, from time to time. This place has too much oil, too many drugs, broken spirits, too much everything except for hope. Lili wants me to move to Seattle, where her folks live. But I can't. This is my home, no matter what happens."

He stopped, out of breath again, his face scarlet red, almost purple, his eyes blood shot. I was worried he might keel over and drop on the floor. But he stood tall and still, the only thing moving was the Coke in his hand, shaking violently, uncontrollably.

A Katrina in his brain. No medicine or acupuncture could calm this hurricane.

Outside the trailer, Lili was barbecuing chicken and brats in a tiny clearing of the woods. I had gone out to help her, but the clearing was big enough only for a small grille and the petite Lili. She squat over the grille, turning the meat with long chopsticks. There was no room for a chair. The overturned crate served as a tabletop. There was no seafood on the grille, as Mike said repeatedly. Fragrance rose with the roasting meat. I was suddenly hungry, very hungry. It was 2:30 pm, and I hadn't eaten since 7:00 am, when we said good-bye to Dave and drove to Venice.

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Since our arrival at New Orleans, Dave Brinks had been texting and calling his uncle in Venice, but no response came.

"He must be working on the oilrig. Fishing really sucked after the spill," said Dave, frowning. "Do you have to visit Venice? I heard there's nothing left after the Katrina and BP. Pierre Joris and his wife tried to find some Vietnamese fishermen to interview for an opera. They were commissioned to write the libretto. They drove all the way to Venice, but every town along the shore seemed empty. Even when they did find someone, those Vietnamese either pretended they did not speak English, or simply refused to talk. Perhaps you're better off just hang around in New Orleans. I can try to get more concert tickets for you."

Immanuel nodded. He was still wrapped in the ecstasy of Thurston Moore's concert. It was a unique experience. The concert was set in the backyard of a ghetto house that was converted into a giant music box, with spiral staircase, barn, and toy houses filled with musical instruments. Thurston flowed in and out of each of the toys like a fish, tinkering with different instruments and making crazy music that enchanted the audience to no end. Immanuel was enraptured. I knew he was eager to meet Thurston. So I asked Dave to introduce us after it was over. Thurston was indeed going to Naropa, arriving the day I'd be leaving. And he was indeed collaborating with Anne Waldman. In fact, they were going to perform together at the Boulder concert hall. Immanuel was tongued tied as usual, but I knew he was gobbling down every word Thurston uttered.

"Thanks Dave. But I really need to bring the flags to the end of the road, the end of the river, into the Gulf of Mexico."

He saw my face and knew that I was going, with or without his uncle's boat. He sighed.

"Just be careful, ok? Don't hang out there too long. Call me anytime if you need to. I wish I could get in touch with my uncle..."

I assured Dave everything would be just fine. We'd stay one night and come back to Nola the next day. He still looked worried. But why?

We got onto Highway 23 South, the only road along the last strip of the Mississippi. It was not the official Great River Road. Highway 61 ended in Nola, but the air smelled more of the Mississippi than any other part of the Great River Road. The houses along the highway were sparse, sprawled and crouched low to the ground, as if they were dodging invisible blows. Some of the houses crumbled, crushed by wind and flood. I remembered the map that showed the last part of the Mississippi. This road was the main highway for hurricanes as well as for cars and trucks. Venice was called the end of the Bird's Foot, because Highway 23 ended there, and so did the main channel of the Mississippi. After Venice, the river

bloomed into a flower, its main branches forked into three like a bird's foot. This flower, this bird's foot, had drawn me like a magnet, and I couldn't keep my gaze away. The last time I looked, however, I discovered that the bird's foot resembled more like a bird's head, a young eagle, with its beaks and wings wide spread and still forming, with Lake Pontchartrain being its heart full of blue blood, and the Mississippi as its artery, and now we were driving along this artery feeling the pulse of the giant river pumping its blue blood from its heart up to its brain into the Gulf-- batum, batum, batum...

Something was waiting there, something magical and terrible at the same time, I said to myself. I could sense it in the air, and I could see it in Dave's eyes. But I was ready to receive it, whatever it was...

We entered Venice. Its short main street was littered with abandoned grocery stores, bank, motels...I was experiencing a *déjà vu*, as if I was returning to Cairo, the ghostly towns and cities along the Three Gorges before the dam, except the buildings here with black gaping windows were shabby, built with cheap materials in rush, nothing like the marbled designer architectures in Cairo.

I was hungry, but there was no hope finding anything to eat or camp.

After the main street, the road became narrow, zigzagging along a thin strip of land. On our right hand, the scenery took away my breaths: vast shallow water filled with reeds along the shore and bald cypress trees with singing birds, schools of mullets gathering and scattering like quick sand. I remembered Al's remark: they jump because they're happy. My heart leapt with them.

Immanuel nudged me gently. I looked to the left and jumped. On the other side, the shore was lined with oil structures similar to what I saw in the Atchafalaya River, except that the pipelines and factories here were a thousand times bigger, newer, and darker. No reeds, no trees, flowers, only the hum from the machines, the black smoke from the chimneys, the mountain of waste piled to the sky with huge

black tires, rusty pipes, carts, large schools of crows and vultures circling and cawing above...

So close were Paradise and Hell, one painted by God, the other by humans, separated by a narrow road, also linked by this narrow road.

The road forked. Immanuel veered to the left and we almost ran into a giant wall with a giant sign: **Halliburton. No trespassing.** Immanuel braked hard. I lurched forward violently but didn't protest. I'd have done the same in front of this bloody force.

"Wait a moment," I said as Immanuel turned the car around gingerly. "I want to get out."

"Are you insane?!"

I opened the door and jumped out. I didn't want to reason or argue with him. No time, no point. He'd never understand. I didn't even understand myself. I just had the urge to say something to the wall. A gust of chemical odor hit me like a hurricane, almost knocking me out. So this was what it was like in the heart of a beast. Halliburton. Didn't they supply the concrete to seal the wells in the deep sea? Didn't their concrete fail and cause the well to erupt? Halliburton with the BP spill. Halliburton with the Iraq war. Halliburton with the former vice-president, with all the news, rumors, catastrophes, wars...Halliburton. The letters were painted with such large neon red they threatened to burst through the wall and engulf me if I dared going forward another inch. I made a step forward, then another. The air was thick and heavy, as if I were pushing into a sea of blood, of dark oil.

The wall rumbled with waves of warning.

"I am not afraid of you, Hal-li-bur-ton." I uttered the name, syllable by syllable. "You have no business in this paradise, our paradise. Leave the marsh alone, leave the river alone, leave the fish, trees, birds alone, leave the earth and sky alone. Just leave us, just let us be." I said slowly, my eyes wet as I thought of all the

drillings in the sea, swamps, mountains, prairies, all the oil stained animals, birds, all the dying trees, all the dams choking rivers, all the cars on the highways and streets, including my own. How could we stop this?

The wall swelled with anger. The letters opened their scarlet mouths. I stood firm. *Swallow me if you can. I'll fight you from inside.*

"Get into the car, right now!" Immanuel ordered in a hissing voice. "Someone is coming. You don't want to get arrested, right? We need to hang our flags, remember?"

I looked up. A man in uniform was walking fast towards us. He looked armed to the teeth. I waved at him, flashed a smile, and got into the car. Immanuel was right. We had important business to finish here. We'd install the river flags at the end of the Bird's Foot, to send a thousand wishes from the entire Mississippi River into the Gulf of Mexico. Our wishes, our words, our imagination and love, would triumph over oil, steel, weapon, power, money and greed. How I wished to hang a banner here, even if just for five minutes. Our river flags could transform the dark energy into something positive, perhaps? But the guard was approaching, and Immanuel had started the engine. I turned to look at the wall. It seemed to have settled and relaxed. Was it digesting the message I had just delivered?

We got back to the main road and kept going until it ended. There was a gravel path to the left, but this time Immanuel stopped. We got out. So this was the end of the Bird's Foot? The place looked abandoned. A small storage house with tires leaned against its door, a rusty structure with a pulley, and a rusty ship on the shore. I climbed on the ship. This would be a perfect place for the flag installation. The distance between the ship to the pulley was far, but if I tied three banners together, it would work beautifully. I looked up. The noon sky was overcast, but I had a feeling the sun would come out soon. I'd wait till the sunset. I wanted the twilight to ignite the flags flying over the marsh and river. I looked around and saw a forest of sails.

“There’s a harbor over there,” I shouted, pointing to the gravel path. “Let’s go and find someone with a boat and willing to take us to the gulf. Perhaps we can even find something to eat.”

The harbor was a well-paved, well-maintained place. Hundreds of million-dollar boats parked neatly along the dock. It was quiet and clean and white, but the air smelled uneasy, and I couldn’t understand why. No one seemed around except for a group of husky men loading the boat with coolers, fishing gears. Someone said something, and the group burst out laughing like drunken trolls. I walked toward them hesitantly. I didn’t want to talk to them, but I had to find someone with a boat, someone willing to take me out into the sea. I knew these drunken men would not, but perhaps they could lead me to someone they knew? One man turned to my direction, fixing his drunken eyes on me for a minute and going back to his group. He didn’t see me. I was a ghost in his stupor. Perhaps they were ghosts, in this ghost harbor with all the ghost ships. I really didn’t want to talk to these ghosts, but I must find a boat, at any cost...

A cough from my right. I stopped. Not Immanuel. He stayed in the car, waiting. He hated talking to strangers. I resumed walking. Another cough, more forceful this time, enough to make me turn. A man on the dock, mending a fishnet next to a fishing boat, small and shabby among the million-dollar boats, like a rusty nail sticking out of a white marble wall, a trailer home among the skyscrapers. Both the man and his boat seemed out of the place in this pristine harbor gleaming with white wealth, yet they stood their ground without shame or apology. They stood knowing they belonged to this place, truly. I walked toward him, a puppet pulled by an invisible string. The sun was coming out, shining on his face, red, blue veins pulsing on his temple, sweat dripping down his neck, soaking his T-shirt. He was burning in the sun, burning with anger, and I felt the dock rumble under my feet. If I lit a match, the whole harbor and the whole gulf would explode. I walked towards him. He and his shabby fishing boat and his anger were real, more real and solid than all the boats in the harbor, all the oil and money in the gulf.

“Hello,” I said, extending my hand. “My name is Ping. I’m from Shanghai, China, the mouth of the Yangtze River, but now I live in St. Paul, Minnesota, near the headwaters of the Mississippi.”

He looked up, his blue eyes fixed on my eyes, first steely, smoldering, suspicious, then softened. The pulsing veins calmed down, and the redness receded from his cheeks like a tide. A small smile opened his mouth. He gave me his hand.

“Mike, Mike Waddle. I was born and live here all my life. Welcome to Venice, the End of the Bird’s Foot.”

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Lili came in with a giant tray of chicken, brats, hamburger paddies, lamb shishkeba, all perfectly smoked on the small grille in the back of their trailer, looking and smelling delicious. Even though I had met her an hour ago and had helped her with the grille and chatted with her about Vietnam, I was still startled to see how beautiful and calm she looked, and how steady her feet were. How could a 70-year-old move like a young girl! How could she stay up all night long working on the shrimp boat, not just one night, but weeks, months, years? She could outdo every man in Venice, even me, said Mike, laughing, full of amazement and affection. What truly amazed me, however, was that Lili spoke Mandarin, fluent Mandarin. Lili Liang was a 100% Chinese, born and grew up in Vietnam, had three children with an American soldier, and left her beloved country with her children by hanging onto the last fleeing American helicopter.

Lili was my key into Venice.

The conversation with Mike had been difficult. After the initial greeting, he went back to his old self, and grunted one-syllable answers to my fast questions.

“All these beautiful boats on this beautiful day, Mr. Waddle. But where’s everyone?”

“God knows!”

"Is this your boat? Are you a fisherman? What do you catch?"

"Shrimp."

"How's the fishing business?"

"Bad!"

"Why?"

"BP." Spat.

The dock under my feet shook with his anger. The lava in his chest moved with his spitting. I waited for the explosion. But there was only silence, and his trembling hands over the broken net. I was losing my nerves.

"I was looking for, eh, a boat to take me into the gulf, Mr. Waddle. Do you know anyone..."

"Nope!"

He looked up and saw my face in despair. His steely eyes softened. "Why?" he asked, almost tenderly. "You don't look like one of those crazed sport fishing men."

"No, sir," I said, and started telling him about the river project, how it started, how it snowballed, and why I wanted to bring the flags to the gulf. His eyes opened wider as I talked, his hands stopped moving in the tangled net. A smile came up into his blue eyes.

"I could have taken you in my boat, but I'm planning to go shrimping tonight, and I'll stay out all night in the Gulf, unless you want to do that. Ever tried that?"

"I'd love to, Mr. Waddle," I shouted, jumping up and down. "I grew up on the biggest fishing island in China, on the East China Sea. I grew up eating seafood, every day, but never went out in a fishing boat. Chinese fishermen never allow a woman on their boat, for fear of tipping..."

"No, we won't, Ping!" said Immanuel.

We both looked at his ashen face. The smile on Mr. Waddle's face receded. I wanted to seal Immanuel's mouth with masking tapes. *Just keep your mouth shut please, as usual*, I pleaded silently. *Please don't say a word. Please let's go to the gulf in his fishing boat. We'll never have another chance like this.*

"There's no time, Ping. We have to install river flags along the shore this afternoon, and tomorrow we have to go back to New Orleans for the big party Dave is preparing for us. We can't go out all night chasing shrimp. No way we can do that."

"Yes way, Immanuel. This is what we came all the way from St. Paul for, to go fishing in a real fishing boat with a real fisherman in the Gulf. There won't be another chance like this."

"Oh yeah? How come you never discussed this with me? Did I count for something in your eyes, ever?"

I looked at his trembling eyelids. He was right. I had never told him about my desire to go fishing with a real fisherman. But I hadn't known it myself till now, when the opportunity came up, a minute ago. So how could I have discussed the possibility? Immanuel's anger was real, and it was not the first time. He had burst into anger when I brought home a cast away chair, a used dining table, or food outside the Seward Co-op without discussing with him first. He wanted to be a man, a king, as he claimed, and I must treat him accordingly.

"Never mind!" grunted Mike. "I don't want to cause no trouble."

A heavy silence fell upon us. I looked at Mike. He was back mending his net again. The volcano opened for only a minute, and sealed again by Immanuel's desire to be the king. For a second, I regretted bringing him along. Pleading with him would be useless. I could tell he was reeling in his own mental maze again. What about going fishing with Mike just by myself? Where would Immanuel sleep tonight? What would he eat? There was no motel or restaurant in this place. Perhaps he could just

camp on the side of the road? Sleep in the car? And make his own damn food? Be his own king?

“My wife is Chinese,” said Mike out of the impossible silence, his head bent over the net, his words shooting up like mullets’ joyful jumps. “She was born and lived in Vietnam, then came to America when the war was over.”

“Does she speak Chinese?” I asked, almost whispering, my heart jumping high like an Asian carp.

He looked up, his eyes full of tenderness. “I think she does. I think she misses speaking her mother tongue. Her folks live in Seattle. All her Asian friends here are Vietnamese.”

“I’d love to meet her and talk to her. I miss speaking my mother tongue, too.”

He looked into my eyes for a long time, then dropped the net around his feet. “Come with me. I’ll take you home.”

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“Time for lunch,” said Lili, her voice sweet and moist like the perfectly steamed sticky rice. She set the tray down on the table, the only one in the trailer, on which sat a MacBook and a giant TV blasting a Vietnamese soap opera. It was being used as a desk, a dining table and TV holder, just like the central space of the trailer being used for the living room, dining room and kitchen. Every piece of furniture was tightly packed into the small place: a couch at the entrance, a table against the window where a TV and MacBook sat, surrounded by paper, bills, ads, a giant refrigerator that occupied half of the wall in the kitchen area, a small counter top and a sink, then a recliner by the door where two tiny terriers looked up at Mike with adoring eyes, begging him to sit down so they could jump on his lap. It was a typical trailer home of America, practical and masculine, softened by Lili’s hand, its walls, door handles and windows charmed by ancient coins, peace knots, figurines of gods for money and safety. It was a home.

Lili started pushing the paper away to clear a space for her spread.

“Don’t touch them,” Mike shouted, and dashed forward to stack the paper with great care. “Look here,” he said, waving an envelope, “Almost forgot. I wrote to the governor of Louisiana, the federal agency for the environment, and many other places I could think of about the BP spill and what it’s done to our place. I was telling them the dispersants are causing permanent damage to all the lives in the sea, on the land, in the air. Even flies won’t lay larvae, because the flies know how toxic the seafood has become. I sent them tons of pictures. I wish I could send them my shrimp samples. I wish they would send somebody to see what’s going on here. The president did show up, and our governor, but we couldn’t get near them. Nope ma’am, we small people couldn’t get close and speak our voice. The Coast Guards, paid by my tax money, shoved me out of the town hall as far as God allowed them. If they could shove me straight to hell, they would, just to get my big mouth out of the hall of lies. Yes, ma’am, they have their pretty lies and reports for the President and Governor, and they don’t want to hear no truth from Mike Waddle. This is what they finally sent me, out of hundreds of letters. This is all they’ve got to say to my pleas.”

He tried to pull the letter out, but his hands shook so much that he nearly tore the envelope in half.

“Damn hands,” he cursed, holding his right hand out in front of his chest, opening and closing as if the tremble would go away. But it only shook like a netted fish gasping for air. He dropped it in despair. “The day the Gulf burst into fire, my hands started shaking like this, as if they got a life of their own. My little brain couldn’t fathom what was coming at that time, but my hands knew. They’ve touched every inch of the Gulf, its water and bottom, every living creature. They know the pulse of the sea, and they’ve been crying.”

I wanted to tell him that the shaking came from the wind, the wind that rose from his liver. According to the Chinese medicine, the liver was the general, commanding and distributing qi and blood to the whole body. This general was courageous, but also hot tempered. When he was angry, too much blood would rise

to his head and hands, causing red eyes, red face, ringing ears, and shaking hands with a vertigo. But I kept quiet. I liked Mike's theory better. His hands did know what was coming to the Gulf. They did have the foreseeing eyes, and they were angry.

I took the letter he handed me. It had two pages. The first page was actually the letter that Mike wrote to the Governor on 2/2/2012.

Dear ones, I write this because of what I have seen on the sea after the Mississippi Canyon 252 incident. Just because of the visible fish feeding frenzy on a substance that others and I witnessed and never notice before the "BP" incident.

If you would view a time-lapsed photograph study using shrimp caught in this region you can see when a species, that has been inflected with a visible inflection are less, that the "Flys" will not lay larvae on their carcass and you will see that these insects will come but they will soon fly away. No matter how you handle the specimens or where you place them are under any normal condition that the flys will act the same.

I found if I mix the shrimp with other species that this has similar effects just as in blending and mixing.

Hopefully you will be able to show cause why some of the dead foul odor around my home shows similar events are taking place. Not asking for help will likely jeopardize the Gulf Coast fishing industry and future generations.

May God Bless you in my Jesus name I ask this.

Respectfully

Mr. Jan Michael Waddle

I noticed Mike notarized his letter on Feb. 25. So he waited three weeks before he sent it out. I turned to the Governor's response from his constituent service office.

Dear Mr. Waddle:

Thank you for contacting the Governor's office regarding marine life and the Gulf Cost. Rest assured that your concerns are of great importance of the Governor.

As you may know, this matter falls under the jurisdiction of the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries. I have forwarded your information to them for further review, and you should be receiving a response from them in the near future.

Holding the letters in my hand, I felt dizzy with déjà vu again. I'd read so many petitions from the Yangtze, heard so many angry, tearful pleas from the men and women displaced by the Three Gorges Dam. Not in a million years would I have dreamed of reading a petition at the end of the Mississippi River. The Chinese petitioners had asked me to tell their stories to the world, especially America, the symbol of democracy and freedom. What would they think if they heard Mike's story? True, Mike did receive a letter from the Governor's constituency's office, but it offered nothing. They just kicked him to another department.

"Did the Wildlife and Fisheries department send someone to investigate?" I asked Mike, just to make sure.

He stared at me, red eyes bulging.

"This is the only letter I've got. They responded because they wanted my vote. This is democracy. This is America. Ha!" He laughed loudly, but it sounded more like sobbing.

"Let's eat Babe. Food is getting cold, and our guests are hungry," said Lili, her hand on Mike's sleeve so gentle that for a moment he seemed to stop shaking, his breathing back to normal.

"Go ahead and eat." He waved at us to sit down at the table and sipped the Coke he had been holding in his hand. "I'm not hungry."

I surveyed the colorful and fragrant spread of meat smoked in perfection. Mike had no appetite. Lili didn't seem like a meat eater. So she had prepared this feast just for us. I was hungry, but I couldn't take my eyes away from her hands, scarred, wrinkled, speckled with brown spots. Her face and body had made peace with all the tragedies in her life, but not those hands. Like Oskar Kokoschka's painting where hands took the central stage, hers was the mouth that screamed her stories, the gate to enter and exit her inner world.

"What are you waiting for?" Mike scolded me. "I thought you're hungry. The food is clean, and Lili is an incredible cook. She used to run a restaurant in Venice, the best Vietnamese food in Louisiana. I say this because it's truth, not because she's my wife." He padded Lili with great affection.

"I believe you," I said, still mesmerized by Lili's hands. She noticed my gaze, and tried to hide them under her apron.

Immanuel picked up a brat. "Not the hotdog by NYC mafias, right?" He joked, alluding to Mike's earlier comments about the mafia hotdogs. I laughed, happy for his effort for humor, though it was a bit ill-timed.

"Maybe yes, maybe no," smiled Mike cunningly.

Immanuel turned ashen. He stopped chewing.

"Just kidding. It's clean. It's venison. My brother is a hunter."

Immanuel sighed with a relief and went back to his plate.

The food was truly delicious, but I felt full quickly. It was hard for me to eat under Mike's watchful eyes while Lili darted around cleaning, washing, bringing us drinks as if she were serving in a restaurant. I wanted them to sit down and eat with us, but that didn't seem likely.

My cell rang. It was Captain Morgan returning our inquiry about hiring his fishing boat. I found him on the Internet, among hundreds of ads boasting their records of

catching the biggest marlins and swordfish for their clients. Of all the messages I left, only Captain Morgan called back.

“It’s too late to go out now,” he said. “You need to spend a whole day out there to catch something decent. So 6:00 am tomorrow? I’ll give you a discount. \$600.”

“What about this afternoon for 2 or 3 hours?”

“I can’t guarantee that you’ll catch anything.”

“I’m not interested in catching,” I said. “I just want to be in the Gulf for an hour or two.”

Pause. I could hear Captain Morgan’s silent muttering: some crazy foreign woman. From the Internet search, I discovered that Venice was a fishing and birding town, both for commerce and tourism. If one went out to the Gulf, the only purpose was to fish, nothing else. I could explain to Captain Morgan why I wanted to go to the Gulf, but it would make him even more confused. Captain Morgan was already intoxicated, judging from his slurry speech. I felt Immanuel eye me with his question: *I thought you wanted to catch shrimp with Mike*. I remained silent. There was a difference between experiencing fishing with a real fisherman and catching fish for trophies. I already got my trophy: a 45-inch musky in my very first fishing trip to the Battle Lake in Minnesota. I had no desire to collect more. There was only one first-time luck, right?

“Well, how much would it be for a short trip?” I asked.

“Well, ma’am, it won’t be much cheaper than the whole-day trip. \$400.”

“\$400 for 2 hours!”

“Yesum.”

“May I call you back later, Captain Morgan?” I said politely and turned off the phone.

Mike put down his Coke.

“Well, if you want, I can take you there in the morning. Don’t worry about the fee. Just cover my gas, which seems to increase every day.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. Was he giving up his shrimp trip for us? That was a gift too big and heavy for me to accept.

He waved his hand. “My net is messed up. I was hoping to fix it today, but there’s not enough time. So I’ll go shrimping tomorrow. I know you want to go out there today, but it’s too rushed. Tomorrow morning is better. Captain Morgan is no fool. He knows he’s in no condition to go today. And you never want to rush into the Gulf. Have to make sure all the equipment is in good condition, and the man in charge. You never know what can happen in the sea. So I’ll go get everything ready for tomorrow and try to fix my damn fishnet. By the way, where are you staying tonight?” He asked as he walked to the door.

“Ehhh, I was thinking perhaps we could find someone’s backyard to set up our tent?” I said hopefully, looking at Mike. I’d already surveyed his yard. It was small, but enough for us to camp.

“Mosquitoes will eat you alive,” he said. “Stay with us. Lili will prepare the guest room. Don’t argue with me. I know you Asian people have to put up a fight to show your politeness. It doesn’t work with me. Lili will also prepare a dinner for us all. She’s excited already, I can tell. You know, she’s a great cook. But I’m still used to my daily burgers and hotdogs. Can’t eat Asian food all the time. But tonight is special. We don’t have guests like you every night. What time do you want to go to the Gulf tomorrow?”

It took me a while to find my breath and answer his question. “I’d like to catch the sunrise, if we could.”

“That’s fine. We’ll need to get up at 3:00 am, then.” He closed the door before I could say anything. He knew I’d say oh no let’s go later, even though I really wanted to see the sunrise in the Gulf. He had been living with Lili for ten years, after all.

“Wow!” I said, turning to Immanuel. He looked dazed. Such hospitality was unheard of in the north. Minnesota-Nice stayed only on the surface. A polite, smooth

mask meant everything. And personal space was guarded as sacred. If I got too close, whether by accident or intension, physical or emotional, people would get flustered, embarrassed, even indignant. For me, it was all so familiar. I'd encountered so many strangers who fed and sheltered me as I traveled along the Yangtze River, even at the risk of being arrested by the police. The deeper I went into the South along the Mississippi, the more familiar the scenes became: BMW, Quapaw Canoe, Mike Castro, Dave Brink, and now Mike Waddle and Lili Liang. Was it the river that made people so kind? Didn't Ranger Bob say that river people were different species? And who was I to receive such gifts? How was I ever able to repay so many cups of kindness?

"Let's hang river flags in their yard," I said to Immanuel, "and save some for the roadside when the sun goes down."

Hundreds of flags hugged along the fence, around the trailer, and fluttered between the trailer and fence. The wind picked up, sending them up and down in the afternoon sun like school children. Lili came out to help, her eyes shining as I told her where and how each flag was made, and stories pouring out of her mouth like birds, together with laughter and tear. She was the twelve-year-old girl again, going to the Chinese school with her sisters and brothers in Saigon, her parents strict and loving, her nanny keeping a close eye on her every move. She was the flower of the Liang family, the beauty queen, groomed to marry into a richer and nobler family, to bring more honor to her mother and father. But the war came. Everything shattered, no mother, no father, no fiancée, no siblings, no hope, only fire, bullets, bombs, hunger, fear, and surviving at any cost, bar girl, dance girl, children by GI Joes, beatings, fleeing from Vietnam to Thailand, from Thailand to America, fleeing, always fleeing, more abusive men, more cheating business partners, until she met Mike, and together, they bought the old shrimp boat from Mike's brother. Her children wanted her to move to Seattle, to retire and rest in their mansions on the shore, facing the Pacific, facing home.

"But Mike won't go. He will never leave Venice," whispered Lili." He belongs to the water here, his bone and spirits. I am torn. I want to be with my kids, but Mike needs me. He's had a hard life. He won't last long on his own if I move to Seattle. He won't last long either if he moves to the west coast with me. That's why I'm still here, stuck." She

smiled, her gaze on the flag with the image of the Buddha from the Three Gorges. I had taken the photo in a temple that was now under the water after the dam completion. The Buddha's half closed eyes fixed on her with compassions.

“Mike may talk and act tough, but inside, he's as soft as a lamb. Just look at how he plays with his dogs. They're his children. He has a son, 35 years old, but he hasn't seen him since his wife shot herself, and her family took the boy's custody.”

“How could they take the boy from his father?”

Lili looked at me pensively. “Well, anything is possible if one has money. It's true everywhere, right? His wife's family is wealthy. They didn't want her to marry Mike in the first place. But she was a rebel, I guess, and manic depressive, from what Mike described about her. Mike was working on the drilling rig when she shot herself. That same night, he broke his back. You can imagine the pain, the inside and outside pain. He had to take lots of drugs, including the morphine, to smother it. And her family used it against him, and took the boy away. Mike rarely mentioned his son, but I know he thinks about him every day, every night...”

Tears filled up Lili's eyes. “Did you say these flags will travel to Tibet and join in all the prayer flags there? Did you say the prayers and wishes will come true if they are sent from the roof of the world?”

“Yes, we'll bring them to Tibet in 2013,” I said. “And yes, Tibetans do believe their prayers, if sincere and pure, will come true. The mountains will lift them high, close to the sky, then the rivers will bring them to the right place and right person at the right time.”

She looked around the yard, crowded with her papaya tree, her vines of melons, beans, tomatoes, and the little bush where she put her tiny grille. It was so tiny there was no room for a chair when she cooked her meals.

“I wish for a little more land to grow vegetables,” she said, giggling and blushing because she was being “greedy.” “Well, I do have a wish,” she said shyly. “My old home in Saigon, if I could set my feet on it again before I die.” Her lips trembled.

“Would you like to make a flag?” I asked gently. “I promise I’ll bring it to Tibet.”

She nodded. “Mike would like to make a flag, too. Can we make it together?”

*

The sun was setting on the paradise side of the road, painting the lagoon with a sheen of gold, pink, purple, lilac, blue, gray. The colors took my breath away. No human hand could possibly paint such a spectacular canvas. Mullets went crazy with their twilight feeding, and the lagoon trembled with rings of joy. The birds joined in with their last dance for the day, flying between cypress and reeds, sky and earth, feeding, singing, calling.

I took out three rolls of flags and tied them together to form a long banner. No tree on the roadside. They had retreated into the deep of the marsh, as if trying to get away from the dump and oil pipes on the other side of the road. In fact, the trees closest to the road were all dead or dying. Even the light refused to cross over. While the paradise side was awash with brilliant light, colors, sounds and movements, the hell side was gray, steely, static, and silent. Even the vultures that circled above the garbage mountain made no sound, as if their voice had been swallowed by the dark force.

I shuddered and turned my back. Was it possible never to face the dark again?

I surveyed the road. There was an electricity pole next to a pile of rocks littered with Coke and beer cans. Two men were fishing there, but left soon after our arrival. I could use the pole and my car for the installation. I tied the rope as high as I could reach, and Immanuel brought the other end towards the car. I raised my camera as he tried to loop it around the antenna.

“Wait, the antenna will snap. Besides, it’s too low. Could you just hold it up?”

He did. The long banner looped between the pole and Immanuel, cupping the entire lagoon in the middle, with all its birds, trees and water, and the pink sun resting on top of a cypress skeleton. Everything was in the shadow, the flags, the road, the water, Immanuel. The only thing illuminated was the sun and the gold pink path it cast upon the water, reaching all the way to the banner, all the way to my heart, setting it ablaze.

I lifted my camera and clicked away. When it was done, we moved the banner toward the shipyard. By the time we reached the end of the road, we'd have covered the entire Mississippi River with our flags, from Itasca to Venice, the End of the Bird's Foot, 2,320 miles and 3,734 km long, not including the tributaries I'd paddled, hiked, biked, driven in the past two years: the entire St. Croix, the Minnesota, the Missouri, the Ohio...with words and art, music and food, dance, all infused in the river flags. Were our words matter? And our imaginations? If not, then why were they as indestructible as the matter itself, expanding like our universe, and spreading like wild fire?

We almost reached the abandoned shipyard, the very end of the road, the very end of the Bird's Foot. We were going to wrap the entire place with the flags. Let them face the Gulf. Let the wind send a thousand wishes across the water, all the way to the Yangtze River.

I was folding the banner when Immanuel said:

“Wait. Let's hang the flags across the road.”

What? Flags on the dark side? No! Absolutely not! I was about to scream, then I saw his eyes, illuminated by a light I'd never noticed before, and suddenly I got it. Our river flags could reach the darkness, penetrate it, and bring the light in. The banner was a bridge between the day and night, water and land, truths and lies, hope and despair. I hugged him, the banner between our chests, a bridge that linked our hearts and souls. The way was open between us, for now.

In the twilight, the dead cypresses came alive from the deep of the lagoon.

*

So this is it, I said to myself, my heart pumping as Mike fired the engine, and the rusty boat inched away from the dock. We're going into the Gulf. We are entering the bird's foot, into its brain. My dream is coming true. Our mission is half complete.

I remembered the times my heart leapt like this: my first time travel on my father's navy ship to visit my grandma in Shanghai, my admission into Beijing University, my flight to NYC, starting a new life beyond my imagination, my first book laying in my hands like a dream, my PhD diploma, births of my two sons, their first step, first word...

Somehow this was different, something immensely joyful and heavy at the same time, something larger than myself yet intensely personal and emotional. Dave's words came to me again: be careful, Ping, be careful. I put my hand on my heart. It beat in sync with the engine, batum, batum, batum, fast, furious, and steady. Mike gazed at the water, his hands light and firm on the steering wheel. They were not trembling at all, and his eyes no longer blood shot. I bet his blood pressure went down to normal. *He belongs to the Gulf*, Lili's words echoed in my ears. Droplets of mist rushed to the windshield, then trickled down like tears. On both sides, shores with thick reeds and oilrigs receded quickly. Immanuel sat in the back, a fishnet hanging over his head. Above the windshield, a heavy-duty GPS showed the Mississippi's three branches in the shape of a bird's foot, and we were sailing through its central fork, the ending of the North America's artery...

Something was going to happen, and I didn't know what.

Boats passed by, 3-5 times bigger than ours. One of them belonged to the Vietnamese fishermen I had just met at the dock. At 3:30 am, Lili woke us up apologetically. Mike was waiting outside the trailer. I rushed out of the door without using the bathroom. By the time we got the boat ready for departure, I had to pee. There was no bathroom on Mike's boat. You could use a Coke can, he said, half joking half

serious. Or pee into the Gulf from the end of the boat, like us when we're fishing. I shook my head. Mike sighed, and gestured me to follow him. He took me to a group of Asians picking shrimp in the twilight, a giant boat parked at the dock. The men all looked young, laughing and shouting "Hey Bug Man" when we approached them. At the head of the table stood a beautiful middle-aged woman. She smiled as she watched Mike pick up a shrimp and examine its head.

"What can I do for you, Mike," she asked. She never looked at me once, but I knew she had already sized me up from head to toe the moment we started walking to them.

Mike greeted her with Lili's best regard, then asked if I could use the bathroom upstairs. She frowned, acted as if she didn't hear him, and chatted about the weather and fishing for ten minutes, which seemed forever, and my bladder was about to burst. Suddenly she nodded to Mike,

"Ok, she can use it, but no photos."

I ran upstairs and entered a spacious office decorated with ink paintings and gods of money. They must be doing well if they could afford such a big fishing boat plus the two-storied office building. Did they catch shrimp better than Mike? It didn't seem so. The pile of shrimp on the table looked pale, sickly, and emancipated. Mike showed me the black spots in the head as the young fishermen watched and laughed, imitating his words while decapitating the heads to make the shrimp look "normal." I asked a friendly looking man if they planned to go out shrimping that day.

"Nope," he shook his head, "not much to catch in the Gulf. Seafood is not coming like the old days. It took us three days to get this much," he pointed to the pile on the table. "It won't even cover the fuel cost."

I was aghast. Three days for this? How much could they sell? Definitely not enough for gas, let alone to pay all the workers. And why did they wait three days to process the shrimp? No wonder it looked on the verge of rotting. Well, they must have lost interest in processing their catch, because there was no money...

I locked the bathroom, sat down on the toilet. Such immense relief! I looked up in gratitude. Before me, next to the toilet paper, was a file box full of manila folders. Some of them were open, revealing copies of checks. The first sheet had three checks copied together, in the amount of \$21,000, \$50,000, and \$19,750. They were all paid for shipping goods from Louisiana to Texas. I picked up that folder, and flipped through the sheets, each with three or four checks, starting from \$15,000 to \$75,000, each folder containing at least 30-40 sheets. I counted the folders. 15 in total, each bulging with checks, some paid, some past due.

Mike said the Vietnamese ran multi-million fishing business every year. If it was true, then it was nothing compared to the transportation business.

What did they transport?

No wonder the woman forbade me to photograph. Did she know her file box was open? I jumped up, flushed, and ran out. If she suspected I was a Peeking Tom in her bathroom, who knows what would happen!

I waved at the passing boat. The woman stood at the end of the deck, looking at me without blinking. Oh god, she was coming after me for her files. But how would she know that I had peeked? Was she going to shoot me? Mike cranked up the engine. His boat roared and sped up. The young fisherman behind the steering wheel laughed and sped up his engine too. For a minute, we raced neck to neck, and the woman didn't take her eyes off me. My hair stood on end, and I held my breath until the woman and her boat passed by, leaving us in the huge wakes.

"Son of a gun!" said Mike, laughing like a child. He was having tremendous fun racing. My shirt was soaked with cold sweat. The woman didn't move an inch. She looked like a statue on the deck, her big eyes so melancholy and beautiful. It occurred to me, now that the boat had passed us, that she was not looking at me, but through me into a distance place, in search of something.

Was she looking for her old home she had left behind? Was it why she looked so sad despite her big boat and big money?

And where were they going? The young fisherman had told me they were not going out fishing today.

“They must be hunting for some work,” said Mike, reading the question in my eyes. “They don’t really need to, since their boats are all paid for. The Asians have tight family ties. They pool their money together to buy boats, in cash. They don’t like to owe money to bank and become their slaves. And they like to work. It’s in their blood. I’ve never seen anyone work harder. That’s why I have no qualms about their big boats and big earnings...they earned every god damn penny with their sweat and brain.”

Should I tell him what I saw in the bathroom? Probably not. Mike was right. They worked hard for every penny they made. It was not my place to question or judge.

Mike kicked a small stool towards me. “If you want to sit. It’s Lili’s. But she rarely uses it. She just squats all night cleaning sorting shrimp I catch.” He pointed to the metal boxes and a bag of brine on the deck. “The catch goes into this box. Lili soaks them in the brine water to keep it fresh and shiny, then she sorts. The shrimp stays, and the rest, fish, crab, eels, have to go back to the sea, dead or alive. We are licensed only to catch shrimp, and that’s what we are allowed to keep. We can’t even eat the fish or crab, even if they are dead. It used to bug me to no end. What a waste! And how absurd! How humiliating! I, a fisherman all my life, can’t eat the seafood I catch with my own hands, and have to buy it from a fish dealer. But the law is the law. If I get caught, we lose the license.”

He sighed deeply. “But it doesn’t matter any more. Everything from the Gulf is poisoned anyway.”

“Do you miss seafood, Mr. Waddle?”

“Do I miss sea food?” he said, syllable by syllable, his eyeballs almost bursting out of his sockets. “Do you mean to ask if I miss the air, water, and earth? I am the sea. The sea is me. I was born here, grew up here, and will die here. When I die, I want my ash scattered in the Gulf, my womb and grave. They say you are what you eat. How true! Sometimes I believe I’m a fish, a shrimp, a crab, a bird, a reed, things I live on from the

day I was born. My parents, my grandparents, my great-grandparents, all lived off the sea since they crossed the ocean from Ireland and settled in the Gulf. We have owned the land, lost it in the floods, then owned more, and lost it again, back and forth, back and forth, like the moon cycles. But we live on happily as long the Gulf lives, as long as life comes in and out with the tides. It's a circle, rings of circle connected and connecting, things we see and unsee, hear and unhear, touch and untouch...our genes mixed, after our daily exchanges, our cells...Two years without seafood, and I'm starved, not just here," he pounded his stomach, where his guts had spilled in the Katrina, then his chest, hold together by a steel rod in his spine. "My heart is also starving. Ask Lili, she knows. She's also a sea creature, a mermaid. All the Vietnamese are, coming from the Mekong and the Pacific coast. There's a reason why so many of them live in Louisiana as fishermen. And I have to say they're the best fishermen I've ever known. They speak the fish language, sing their songs, move with their rhythms. That's why they do so well here, with their big fishing fleets. Other fishermen are jealous, but not me. As long as I can fish, eat what I catch, I'm happy..."

The sun was coming out of the shoreline, gilding the reeds and water with its metallic light. Somehow it made the river look darker, like the ink sky before dawn. The GPS showed we were at the end of the river's plume, and soon, we'd enter the Gulf of Mexico.

As the channel became wider, more and more pipes appeared in the reeds and waterways, each with a sign warning for trespassing.

"Spaghetti fields," said Mike, pointing at the pipelines.

"What?" I knew what he was saying, but I had to make sure. It was too poetic to be true. Too visual not to be true. Spaghetti fields.

"The whole Gulf and delta is rigged like a plate of spaghetti. What you see here is nothing to what is really going on. 28,000 wells along the coast, 5000 feet into the sea. Imagine the constant leaking...Yes, the wells leak all the time, small and big, because the cement to seal them is equivalent to glue something full of dirt and loose debris with superglue. It doesn't last long, even without the constant drillings and shaking and

breaking. 28,000 wells, 28,000 holes punched into the Gulf. And let me tell you something you may not know. Our sea floor is fragile, because it's filled with salt, gas, oil, and radio active minerals. The reserve is huge, the size of the Mount Everest, held together by a thin crust. You punch a hole into the crust, you change the pressure, and the whole structure could collapse, just like the lungs. That's why it took BP 88 days to seal the damn well of the Deepwater Horizon. It's not the first time, and won't be the last. We're sitting on the mound of Hell, with 28,000 bombs ticking."

His hands were shaking again. No wheel or water can extinguish the storm in his brain. I started shaking too. I could see, hear, and smell the hell Mike had just described. I glanced at Immanuel, stiff like a statue, tears filling his eyes. He truly believed in the end of the world on the Maya calendar, had already filled our basement with water, beans and rice for emergency.

"I'm leaving, Ping," he said, tears streaming down his face. "I love you, your beauty and energy, but I am a king, an eagle, and I need my own kingdom, my own sky to achieve that."

He cried, covering his eyes with his hands. I looked at him, dazed, blindsided. His decision came without a sign. Or perhaps I was blind to the signs? Only three weeks ago, when we were planning for this trip, he had asked me to buy him a house so that he could use it as his studio. It'd be your retirement investment, he said. I told him it didn't make much sense. First of all, I didn't have that kind of money, even if I pulled out all of my pension, unless he started contributing to the house he was living in now, as well as to the house he wanted me to buy. But that couldn't happen until he paid off his huge credit card debt. Besides, if we broke up, what would I do with the house?

"Oh, you'll still be the co-owner," he said cheerfully.

I laughed. "I've already done that, Immanuel. And the guy who's living in our co-owned house hasn't paid the mortgage for two years. The house is in foreclosure. I have no plan to have this happen to me again, Immanuel."

Was he mad that I rejected his request? Would I have saved the relationship if I had bought him the studio he wanted? Perhaps not. I'd done that already, for a man who claimed to love me with his soul and wrote love letters with his blood.

"Why are you crying?" shouted Mike at Immanuel, his shaking finger pointing at me. "She's supposed to be crying, not you, damn it!"

Immanuel sobbed louder, covering his head with his hands, as if he were afraid of the dangling fishnet coming down and snatching his neck. I wanted to laugh. I wanted to put my hand on his head, told him that the kingdom he imagined was a small and lonely one, and the sky wouldn't be a real sky unless it was free and open for all the birds to fly. But I looked beyond him. We were entering the water much wider, darker, and much more turbulent. The Mississippi was about to end, and the Gulf about to begin. All the shores, borders and other restrictions would disappear soon. It'd be just one body of water, one world, where we'd be all free. Immanuel was setting himself free, setting me free, too. From now on, I'd sail and fly with nothing to hold me down.

"Just shut up," screamed Mike, exasperated by Immanuel's sobbing. "You've been contemplating of the break up for a while, haven't you? You didn't just come up with the idea here and now. So why on earth are you here in the first place?"

Immanuel winced and stopped crying. For a long time, nobody said a word. The only sounds were the roar of the engine and the seagulls crying in the wake.

Good question! Why were we here? And why were you here, Mr. Waddle, despite your anger and frustration and your love for this water and land? I wanted to ask, but didn't know how to start. Why did we travel all the way here, from the river's headwaters to its very end, hanging our one-thousand flags along the way, camping, paddling, talking to people, hosting workshops for poetry and making new flags, searching for food, shelter, getting lost, finding new paths? This was not the typical vacation for most people. There were no five star hotels or restaurants, no fenced in beach or golf course, and there was nothing glorious about the project but working late into the night after night in my basement, cutting, dying and ironing the fabric for the flags, scanning, photoshopping and updating the website and facebook group, spending hours and hours on proposals, letters,

workshops and installations at river communities, bringing people in, by tens, hundreds, thousands, artists, poets, writers, musicians, composers, dancers, scientists, teachers, students, seniors, government agents, including National Park Service and Army Corps of Engineer, the youngest 1 year old, the oldest 93 years old...what was it that sustained me and the core group of people to keep snowball rolling? What was the force that drew so many people in, including Immanuel, despite his repeated resistance? He'd said over and over again that this was my project, not his, and the trip was a vacation for him and nothing else, and yet, he had been helping all along.

What force had drawn us together? What force had sparked our imagination?

Was it our belief that something beautiful would come out of it? Our capacity to believe, to love, to hope?

Hope. Was it a matter? If it was, then why did it have no physical substance to occupy space, for people to see, feel, touch, hear, smell or taste? If it was not, then why did it permeate with so much force, persist with so much determination, and last as long as life started with the big bang? And nothing could destroy it?

If hope was indeed a matter, where did it originate? Our heart? Our mind? Our soul? If our body served as a temple for this force, then where would it go when the body died?

"Look, the Gulf!" shouted Mike, his eyes bright and clear as if lights had switched on from inside, his face open like a sunflower.

And I smelled it. The smell of the ocean tides mixing with the fresh water, salty, fishy, sweet, pungent...My lungs contracted first, as if hit by a fist, then opened hard and wide, and the oxygen rushed in, filling my alveolar sacs with air, filling my brain with light. I opened my mouth, inhaling and exhaling as if I were a new-born.

I was home. The sea, the origin of life, destination of all rivers. Tears filled my eyes as déjà vu flooded me with its tidal waves. I was in Shanghai again, the mouth of the Yangtze, the beginning of the East China Sea, where I was born, then grew up on an island fed by the mighty river, the Adam's apple in the neck of the blue dragon with its

head at the mouth of the Yellow River, a thirsty dragon stuck in the muck of pollution. And I was also here, at the end of the Mississippi, the beginning of the Gulf of Mexico, a rising phoenix, powered by all the gas, oil and minerals underneath. Between them, the thin strip of land that connected America and Mexico, that separated the Atlantic and Pacific. What would happen when they met?

Mike took something out of his chest, and opened them. Two flags. One with “Love from Little Dick, Jan Mike Waddle,” the other with “Please give back our river, our Gulf, Lili Liang.” They had made the flags in the middle of the night. These lovely people. They had almost nothing in their possession. They could have wished for so many things: his son’s return, her return to her old home in Vietnam, a small garden...yet all they asked for was love for the Gulf. The sun had leapt out of the horizon, lighting up the flags, the words and flower on the fabric, the hands that held them, the wind that blew them up, and the sparks in Mike’s eyes. I unfolded the flags from the Upper Mississippi, humming with the spirits of the makers, children and seniors, artists and scientists, politicians and government agents, people who loved the rivers and earth, who put their wish and energy into the fabric, therefore, made the flags magic. The wind whipped the banner open, sending it up into the sky, joining in with Mike’s flags.

And inch by inch, the Gulf was lit from the top down, the bottom up. It revealed the 28,000 rigs in the sea floor along the coast, the dark crude oil flowing up along the pipe lines forming the spaghetti fields which turned into a giant bird, its feathers and scales in neon green, red, and yellow, its eyes gleaming with an insatiable hunger, its beaks and claws poised to snatch, snatch, snatch, its cancerous veins sucking the essence from the sea and earth and sky. Oh no, the Piasa! I shuddered and was about to close my eyes when something else came alive in the deep water: blue fins, croakers, marlins, swordfish, tilefish, shrimp, crab, oysters, plants, deformed and sick from the polluted sea, yet living, stubbornly. One by one, they lit up, like torches in the cold night, like stars in the deep sky, forming constellations around the Piasa, the spaghetti fields, setting fire on them, transforming them into light. The whole Gulf was re-rigged into a new constellation, a new bird...a phoenix full of beauty and vigor and good spirits. I listened to its hum, and the flags in our hands started humming too, along with the flags in Mike

and Lili's yard, at the major confluences, along the entire Mississippi and its tributaries, along the entire Yangtze River, and all the rivers on earth. When all the flags reach Tibet, the roof of the world, the phoenix from the Gulf will pull the blue dragon out of its muck of pollution and droughts, and the great dance will begin. Their singing and dance will create a giant energy field that cut through the walls of Halliburton, greed, money, suffering, wars, deaths...

The phoenix was rising. The great dance was about to begin, blue and red, water and fire, yin and yang, life and death, sky and earth, forever moving, changing, transforming from one element to another, one form to another, one matter to another...the world would become one, connected by one body of water.

"That's why we are here, Mr. Waddle," I said loudly, lifting the banner higher into the air. "It is the wish from the sky and earth, the seas and rivers, the mountains and valleys and prairies, , and all the sentient beings in the universe, the wish to live in peace, dignity and harmony. It is our hope, our will, our choice. This is matter, our matter, and nothing could destroy it, or take it away from us."

My cell phone dinged. Dave Brink had just sent me a video clip: Issa sends a blessing from the water dragon. I pressed the play button, and lifted it high to the sky and sea. Kneeling between a wooden xylophone and Indian drum on the family mahogany table, Issa, Dave's beautiful one-year-old, was sending her blessing song to the world.