

Backwater

Extract from a story by David Ewen

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Jiang slid the boat into the river, stepped aboard, and used a pole to push clear of the bank. It was nearly ten o'clock, later than usual. Sand, raked from the plains by the wind, filled the air like a visitation of tiny insects. For a third morning Jiang had waited for it to disperse, so he might better see the river's traffic: tankers laden with petrochemical products, barges carrying industrial machinery, cargo ships with wheat and livestock; leviathans that left vortices coiling in their wake. It had been weeks since Jiang had taken anything from the river, months since he had made any money. And so, again, he headed out to take his chances among the ship-spun whirlpools.

Jiang reached the far shore and worked his way upstream, visiting the river's backwaters. Some were formed by boulders the size of houses, toppled centuries ago from the mountains and rolled downstream by flood. Others were created by a build-up of silt and could appear or disappear in a day.

Detritus bobbed and turned: plastic bottles; a light cover from a car; a wash basin; a mobile phone cover; a bicycle tyre. Close to the bank Jiang prodded the churning ochre water with his pole, probing below the overhanging branches for anything trapped, while being careful to avoid the holes that were home to catfish ranged in the banks like missiles in a silo. Jiang had lost the tip of a finger to a catfish, trying to remove the thrashing fish from the end of his pole.

Oliver peered from the water's edge. He had come across the fishermen some weeks earlier when on a rare day off he had walked far downstream, past the heaving factories, beneath the cable car, and out towards the shade of the countryside, keen to escape the fetid heat of the city. He had wondered about the absence of a net and a rod, and what a fisherman might possibly pull from the water with his bare hands.

Through the gilded mist Jiang recognised the man's outline. The thin neck, sloping shoulders, fat gut: it looked like he was melting. Jiang pushed closer. He too was curious: the man might be a customer, a well-paying customer. He wouldn't rush to volunteer his services, however. His father had shown him it was more profitable to promise nothing, to be a last hope.

"Hello!" shouted Oliver. "What are you after?" He motioned the lifting of a net, a mime to supplement his basic Mandarin.

Jiang punted the boat towards Oliver, allowing the current to bring the boat back parallel with the shore, and stepped out. He tied the boat to a tree.

"Nothing today?" asked Oliver.

Jiang took a package from a pocket: strips of dried meat rolled in bamboo leaves. "Nothing today."

"I've seen you before. Same place."

"It only looks like the same place," said Jiang. "The river's always changing."

Oliver studied the wooden boat. It was perhaps ten feet long, wide enough to stand on at the back, tapering to a point, and with a shallow keel. "I thought you'd have a net," he said.

"A hook's better."

"Where do you put your catch?"

"I drag it behind. Dead things float." Jiang chewed on the meat. "Why did you call me ashore?"

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