

STRANGE

BEASTS

OF CHINA

A N O V E L



YANGE

“Raw and electrifying.” —*Post Magazine*

From one of the most exciting voices in contemporary Chinese literature, an uncanny and playful novel that blurs the line between human and beast ...

In the fictional Chinese city of Yong'an, an amateur cryptozoologist is commissioned to uncover the stories of its fabled beasts. These creatures live alongside humans in near-inconspicuousness—save their greenish skin, serrated earlobes, and strange birthmarks.

Aided by her elusive former professor and his enigmatic assistant, our narrator sets off to document each beast, and is slowly drawn deeper into a mystery that threatens her very sense of self.

Part detective story, part metaphysical enquiry, *Strange Beasts of China* engages existential questions of identity, humanity, love, and morality with whimsy and stylistic verve.

“I loved the novel—charged with melancholy surrealism, its preoccupations with being and loneliness are both timeless and all too timely.” —**Sharlene Teo, author of *Ponti***

“Playful and darkly subtle . . . The world shown here is full of chaos and vulnerability . . . You could choose to despair at this, or take hope that Yan Ge cares enough to write tenderly about it.” —***The Irish Times***

“If Yan’s book was simply a selection of surreal vignettes centered around the beasts, a la Jorge Luis Borges or Italo Calvino, it would likely be compelling enough . . . The novel as a whole abounds with moments where vivid imagery coincides with an ever-present sense of danger.” —***tor.com***

“What appears to be a postmodern series of fantastic fables morphs into something more unexpected, expertly crafted by Yan Ge: an obscure meditation on the wildness of everyday existence, an evocative, bizarre consideration of the fragile boundaries between the self and the world beyond.” —*The Skinny*

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O F C H I N A**

Y A N G E

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SORROWFUL BEASTS

THE SORROWFUL BEASTS LIVE IN THE NORTH-EASTERN QUARTER of Yong'an City. As the Splendid River passes through the city centre and heads east, it separates into the Lotus and Peacock Rivers in Luoding District. The beasts live in a housing development on the Peacock's southern bank.

These old buildings, their walls thick with ivy, are known as the Leye Estate. They were originally built as dorms for the Ping Le Cotton Mill, where many of the sorrowful beasts have worked for years, ever since they first came to Yong'an City from the south and settled here.

Sorrowful beasts are gentle by nature, and prefer the cold and dark. They love cauliflower and mung beans, vanilla ice-cream and tangerine pudding. They fear trains, bittergourd, and satellite TV.

The males of the species are tall, with large mouths and small hands, scales on the insides of their left calves and fins next to their right ears. The skin around their belly buttons is dark green, but other than that, they're just like regular people.

The females are beautiful—long, narrow eyes, ears a little larger than normal, slender figures with reddish skin. For three days at the full moon, they lose the ability of human speech and squawk like birds instead. Otherwise, they're just like regular people.

Sorrowful beasts never smile. If they do, they can't stop, not until they die. Hence their name.

If you look back far enough, you might trace their forebears to a poet from ancient times, too far back for there to be any evidence.

Male sorrowful beasts are skilled with their hands, which is how they ended up weaving textiles. The females, being good-looking, often work as salesgirls in the fabric stores. The people of Yong'an City come shopping for textiles to this dilapidated little district all the way across town, just so they can catch a glimpse of these attractive beasts.

Legend has it that a sorrowful beast's smile is so beautiful, no one who sees it could ever forget. But no matter how many jokes you tell them, they never smile.

This makes the loveliness of the female beasts seem all the more to be cherished and pitied, and so the tycoons of Yong'an City take pride in marrying them—the females can mate with humans, giving birth to children exactly the same as normal people. The males can't do this, and so Leye Estate is filled with bachelors, while the ladies end up in the wealthy district to the south, their faces like ice, having fled so fast their feet barely touched the ground, leaving the estate increasingly desolate.

Zoologists raised an outcry in the newspapers: if things went on like this, these rare creatures would surely go extinct. The government passed a law: sorrowful beasts could only marry their own kind. If they wished to couple with a human, special

permission was required, and could only be balloted for once every five years. A beast-wife now became an even greater status symbol. With the upper crust going mad for them, the government picked up a fair bit of revenue.

. . .

LEFTY, A PAINTER, WAS THE FRIEND OF A FRIEND. THE STORIES about her and the sorrowful beast had spread far and wide amongst our circles, but few people knew the truth. One day, she came up to me at a party and said, 'I know you, you specialise in beastly tales. I want to tell you a sorrowful beast's story. Are you interested?'

I said, 'Yes, but I have to pay you something.' 'I don't want anything at all.'

'But,' I said, 'that's the rule, I have to give you something.' I smiled, but her face remained blank. She said, 'I'd love a vanilla ice-cream.'

I bought her one, and she devoured it with gusto, almost forgetting to speak. I'd smoked two cigarettes before she finally opened her mouth again.

She said, 'My sorrowful beast died last week.'

. . .

LEFTY MET THE MALE BEAST AT A TIME WHEN THE PING LE Mill was doing badly—all the salesgirls had run off to marry tycoons, leaving no one to sell the goods. Many workers had been laid off. She first encountered him at the Dolphin Bar—he walked over and said to her, 'I've just lost my job, could you buy me a drink?'

She looked up at him. He was very tall, with a serious expression, the skin of his face shiny and unwrinkled. 'All right,' she

said. As they drank, Lefty noticed an exquisite fin behind his ear. She said, 'You're a beast.' He answered, 'Yes, and I'm out of work.'

That night, he followed her home, and she tamed him.

The beast was named Cloud. He slept quietly at night, didn't talk much, loved baths, and ate nothing but three vanilla ice-creams a day. If anyone turned on the TV, he'd let out a shattering howl and his eyes would flash red—his beastly nature revealing itself.

Lefty stopped watching television. When she got home, they'd sit at either end of the sofa, each reading a book. When he was happy, he'd let out a long cat-like rumble, but never smiled.

At night they slept together, Cloud in the nude. His physique was just like a human male's. The skin around his belly button was green as the sea, even a little translucent. Lefty often found herself wmesmerized by that patch of skin. 'It's so beautiful,' she'd say.

She stroked him, and he purred like a contented cat, but they couldn't make love. 'It's because you're human,' he explained.

They slept in each other's arms, like a couple of beasts.

It was a lovely time. The male beast was even more nurturing and good with his hands than a human girl—he cooked for Lefty and washed her clothes. The food was mostly vegetarian, and the laundry had a strange fragrance. As Lefty ate, he'd watch from across the table, his expression tender. She almost thought of him as her husband.

This all happened last May. Lefty painted quite a few portraits, with the male beast as her model, and gave a very successful exhibition at Evergreen Gallery. Everyone knew she had a sorrowful beast with long, sturdy legs, a flat, greenish stom-

ach, and bright, empty eyes. Standing or sitting, he became an object of affection for all the young women in the city.

. . .

I SAW THAT EXHIBITION. THE FIRST RUMOURS I HEARD ABOUT Lefty and the sorrowful beast were from our gossip king, Charley. ‘That wench Lefty definitely slept with him,’ he said.

I said, ‘Male beasts can’t do it with humans.’ Charley sniggered. ‘You believe that?’

Yet I did believe this was a pure beast. In one of the paintings, he sat on a window sill, not a stitch on him, clearly showing the scales on his calf. His expression was a little shy, and therefore captivating. Everyone thought how good-looking he’d be, if he would only smile.

But he didn’t.

If he smiled, he would die.

‘He’s dead,’ said Lefty now. She sat across from me, taking great mouthfuls out of her ice-cream. She looked terrible, not smiling either.

. . .

LEFTY SAID THAT ON A FULL-MOON NIGHT, THEY HEARD A long cry, like a phoenix. Cloud’s eyes opened wide. In a panic, he ran to open the door. A girl was standing outside. Even in the murky light of the corridor, you could see she was gorgeous. She couldn’t speak, just let out another cry, then hugged him tightly.

Lefty asked her to come in and gave her a vanilla ice-cream. The girl’s skin was flushed red, as if blood was about to seep from it. Cloud said, ‘She’s sick.’

This female beast was married to a rich man from the south-

ern district. Cloud said she was his sister, Rain. She clung to him, not leaving his side even when they slept. They got her to drink a tincture of woad, and still she wouldn't stop shrieking. Cloud didn't know what to do, so he called the human husband, only to have him snap in frustration, 'She keeps screeching, and I don't know what she wants—after all, I'm not a beast!'

Cloud hung up and hugged his sister, kissing her cheeks over and over again. Both beasts were now letting out similar cries. Sitting in the armchair across from them, Lefty phoned her ex-boyfriend, Dr Fu.

The doctor hurried over, looking—according to Lefty—even more handsome than before. He nimbly took Rain's temperature and blood pressure, then said she was pregnant, and gave her an injection.

Lefty called Rain's husband, who was so overjoyed he could barely speak. Practically in tears, he choked, 'Thank the Heavens, an heir for the Wang family!'

Lefty hung up in a rage. Next thing she knew, a Mercedes Benz was pulling up outside. When they said goodbye to Rain, she was still shrieking non-stop, though her body had grown less red.

Cloud was all sweaty, and went to take a shower. Dr Fu paced around the living room, then suddenly embraced the painter and said, 'I've missed you.'

They stayed with their arms wrapped around each other, reminiscing about bygone days, touching and kissing, their breath urgent. As they tangled, the splashing noises from the bathroom were like the warm embrace of ocean waves.

The next morning, Cloud was dead.

Lefty said, 'He never smiled. I don't know how he died.' I said, 'I don't know either.'

The artist looked distraught, which made her even more beautiful. She said, 'I want to know how he died, I was practically in love with him.'

. . .

THE PARTY THAT NIGHT ENDED ABRUPTLY, AND I WALKED home. Outside the clubhouse, I saw Lefty and a man screech by in an expensive sports car.

The man next to me couldn't stop praising her. 'Ever since she got herself a sorrowful beast, she's a new woman. Her paintings are more stunning than ever, and so is she—wonder when I'll find one for myself.'

He turned to me. 'Don't you know about these things? Go find me one.' I said, 'It takes destiny for a human to tame a beast.'

He wasn't having it. 'How many beasts are there in Yong'an City? In the end, who knows who's taming whom.'

I laughed. 'If you're scared, you should leave.'

'No one who comes here is able to leave,' he said. 'This town is too full of monsters, too enchanting, too bewitching. A paradise for artists and wanderers.'

I thought of Lefty. I'd heard that when she first arrived here from the north, she was as coarse as gravel and had a strong country accent. People laughed at her behind her back. And now, many years later, she'd become an elegant lady with lips the colour of blood, as if she'd been in this city all her life.

. . .

THE SORROWFUL BEASTS CAME TO THE CITY MANY YEARS AGO and never left, never mind the dire warnings of zoologists, never mind floods or droughts or recessions or wars or stock

market crashes or epidemics, they just stayed put in Yong'an, their numbers stable, like an eternal riddle.

Fifty or sixty years ago, Yong'an had a great many beasts, and human beings were just one breed amongst them, but then war broke out, and amidst this unrest, people battled the beasts for a whole decade. This period of history had vanished. It wasn't that long ago, but everyone knew or pretended to know only the barest facts about it. Most of the beasts vanished, driven to extinction. The sorrowful beasts survived, and became the most populous tribe in Yong'an City.

But no human being truly got to know them. The females married out, but the males couldn't mate with people.

And so, when I went online to search for information about sorrowful beasts, trying to find out how Cloud died, I found no leads apart from these scraps.

'Maybe he ate too much bittergourd and it killed him,' I joked.

I phoned my university professor, the famous Yong'an zoologist. 'Have you researched sorrowful beasts? I need to know what could suddenly kill them, apart from smiling.'

He was silent for a moment. 'Meet me for coffee tomorrow, we'll talk then.'

. . .

IN THE MORNING PAPER, I READ ABOUT LEFTY IN THE ENTERTAINMENT section—a story about her being spotted on numerous dates with the son of a well-known construction magnate. In the accompanying pictures, they were drinking at a rooftop bar, the man young and dashing, grinning smugly. You could make out Lefty's left profile, an eye-catching hoop dangling

from one ear, her features exquisite. She was calm and melancholy, unsmiling.

I took a sip of tea, and then another, and wondered if she was still in love with the dead beast.

The phone rang just then—my professor again. ‘Have you seen today’s paper? The picture of the lady painter.’

‘That’s what I wanted to ask you about—it was her sorrowful beast who died.’ A long silence. ‘Listen, it’s best if you don’t go poking into this.’

‘Why?’ I asked. ‘Do you know how that beast died?’

‘He may not have died.’ A pause. ‘His soul might be immortal.’ I laughed. ‘You mean the City of Souls?’

This was a place that, according to legend, lay beneath Yong’an City. Humans and beasts, cars and roads, rock bands and their followers, all living forever. Every mother scared her child with this horror story: Don’t spend too long a time reading in the loo, because while you’re distracted, a soul might rise up through the pipes and possess your body. This gave us all a healthy fear of the toilet bowl, and it was only when we grew up that we realised we’d been tricked.

The phone was buzzing, the signal weak. He said, ‘Anyway . . . what I meant was . . .’ We got cut off.

When I was still a little girl, I used to squat by the toilet for a long time, staring and hoping a soul would float up to talk with me. Human or beast would be fine. If one showed up, I’d say hello.

That’s the sort of courteous child I was. It was sure to like me.

. . .

I VISITED THE FEMALE BEAST RAIN IN THE WEALTHY DISTRICT to the south. Her belly was already faintly swelling. She greeted me politely in the hall. 'I've read your novels. They're very good.'

She was drinking iced chocolate, and her skin glowed pearly pink, her voice soft and warm. She sat in a corner of the room, her back to the light, her eyes gleaming black.

A sense of unease prickled me. 'I'm here to ask about your brother.' Rain's face was blank. 'Brother? I don't have a brother.'

As I gaped at her, the security guard briskly walked in from the outer chamber. 'Madam isn't feeling well, miss,' he said. 'You should come again another day.'

He was very tall and expressionless, the spitting image of a sorrowful beast, but he was human. He grabbed my arm with his big, strong hands. 'This way, miss.'

Rain remained on the sofa, guilelessly watching me. She said, 'What's wrong?' Her ears were a little larger than average, making her look like a temple Buddha floating amongst the clouds, unaware of worldly torments, asking his acolytes, 'If they're hungry, why not just have a meat bun?'

That night, at the Dolphin Bar, I ran into Charley with his new girlfriend, a cautious-looking lady who sipped a glass of orange juice and sat silently next to us.

I bummed a cigarette off him, and told him what happened that morning. 'It's infuriating,' I said, 'Getting pushed around like that.'

I blew smoke right at his face, and he frowned as he waved it away. He said, 'It's not like you're new to this, didn't you know this would happen? You can't blame anybody else.'

. . .

OUR LOCAL GOVERNMENT WAS ON PEOPLE'S ROAD, A CLUSTER of unappealing, squat grey buildings, with guards standing ramrod straight at the front entrances. Too many to take in at a single glance. God knows how many documents they pumped out into the world each day to be circulated, proclaimed, or peeped at.

Amongst these were the regulations for marriage between sorrowful beasts and humans: beforehand, the female beast should undergo hypnosis or surgery to eliminate her beastly memory, and have monthly hormone shots to suppress her beastly nature. This meant all beasts with human husbands had amnesia. They didn't know who they were, or even that they were beasts. Sitting in their sumptuous living rooms, waiting for their husbands to come home, then disrobing and getting into bed with them, perpetuating the human race. Yet when the moon was full, they'd recover their beastliness, losing the power of human speech. Afterwards, they forgot what happened in those two or three days.

A new type of hormone was being invented that would leave the beasts unable to remember anything of their origins, even when the moon was at its roundest, instead remaining human forever, all their lives. They'd still be unable to smile, though, let alone laugh—if they did, they wouldn't be able to stop, and then they'd die.

I phoned my tutor and asked if there was really any such thing. He flew into a temper and yelled, 'If there isn't, then who wrote that essay for you? The one on this topic, just three months ago. I can't believe I taught a loser like you. Imagine ending up as a novelist!'

I quickly hung up, then picked up the receiver again, meaning to call Lefty, but I couldn't make myself do it.

Nights in Yong'an City were always full of animal cries of no discernible origin. I was born here, and got used to it early on. My mother used to tell me, 'You can't be sure that beasts aren't people, or that people aren't just another type of beast.'

But that wasn't how things were. People would always be scared of beasts.

I put down the phone again. Someone was sobbing quietly, someone was hugging me tightly and weeping. Someone was saying, 'Hello, hello, hello.'

I lived alone on the seventeenth floor of Peach Blossom Villas, the Splendid River visible in the distance. My spacious flat was empty, but still I heard crying. 'Stop that,' I said.

But it continued.

. . .

THE PAINTER LEFTY HAD GONE A BIT CRAZY. SHE KEPT PHONING to tell me stories about her and the beast. I understood she had no one to talk to, and asked, 'What do you want in return for these tales?'

She didn't want anything, she already had everything, and she'd never get anything again.

Now and then, I'd see her in the papers. A beautiful painter will always have someone to love her. A young, wealthy human male, his eyes full of exuberance. On the phone, she sobbed, 'I've been getting these headaches recently, I'm always so confused, I don't know who I am.'

She couldn't find her sorrowful beast, the one who belonged to her. She'd tamed him. He'd stayed with her, mostly silent, drawn to dark and damp places, fond of ice-cream, sweet-natured, empty-eyed, preferring to go without clothes, to wander naked around the flat—and she painted every one of his

movements, the mesmerizing green patch on his belly that somehow seemed to be expanding.

His body was cool, which made it hard to keep your hands off him on summer nights. At times he let out a low moan, at times he spoke, but mostly he preferred the former. He was a beast. The scales on his leg gave off such a dazzling light.

Perhaps he really was the descendant of a poet, melancholy by nature.

I went back to the gallery where she'd held her exhibition, but all the portraits of Cloud had already been sold. I asked the owner who'd bought them. He stammered and refused to tell me, so I used Charley's name.

'It was Mr He,' said the owner. 'He Qi.'

He Qi. He Qi. I quickly found the face—I'd just seen him in the papers. He was Lefty's boyfriend, the prominent Yong'an construction magnate's son.

. . .

MR HE QI TURNED OUT TO BE A READER OF MY BOOKS. I SAT IN his vast reception room, clutching a cup of Blue Mountain coffee, my attention somewhat unmoored. I asked him, 'Did you buy all the paintings of that beast?'

'Yes,' he answered, nothing evasive about his beaming face. 'Why?'

'I'm in love,' he said, still smiling. 'In love?'

'Yes.'

I hesitated. 'Do you mean with the beast,' I said, 'Or the painter?' He smiled, not responding.

'He died, you know.' 'Who?'

'The beast.'

'Did he die? He didn't die, his soul is immortal.'

‘I mean . . .’

‘Does it really matter? I’m looking forward to your next novel.’

. . .

THE PING LE COTTON MILL WAS IN THE LOWER REACHES OF the Peacock River. It produced well-crafted blankets, bed-sheets, and towels, to be shipped far and wide. Because the male beasts were so skilled with their hands, they held sway here, more or less dominating the market in Yong’an City. Their lives were hard, because the government imposed such high taxes on them. Charley whispered to me about what our leaders were saying behind the scenes. He claimed they were relying on the placid natures of the sorrowful beasts, otherwise there’d have been a revolt long ago!

At the entrance to Leye Estate was Yong’an’s largest ice-cream distribution centre. A gang of young male beasts was there, staring at the shop. I asked one of them if he’d like a cone. He nodded eagerly.

I bought him an ice-cream, and he happily started eating it. Sitting across from me, he said, ‘Auntie, you’re a good person.’

‘Why don’t you call me Big Sister instead?’

He obligingly switched. ‘Big Sister,’ he murmured. I asked how old he was. He said five.

We sat in a little park outside Leye Estate. The walls were covered in layers of ivy, making the buildings look like countless enormous trees, birds of paradise resting on their branches after long migrations.

‘What are you looking at?’ he asked. ‘It’s so pretty.’

The little beast seemed startled. ‘What’s that on your face?’
‘A smile,’ I said.

‘Smile?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why can’t I do that?’

‘You can’t smile,’ I told him. ‘You’d die if you did.’

‘I see,’ he said. ‘How interesting.’ He looked relaxed, while it was I who felt uneasy. ‘You call that a smile, but we call it pain. My Daddy says when the pain reaches its end, we die.’

‘Would you like another ice-cream?’ I said, trying to change the subject. ‘Yes, please.’

I bought him another one, and he attacked it happily, until a long cry came from the distance, like the roar of nature itself.

He said he had to go home. ‘Bye-bye Big Sister. You’re such a nice person, when I’m grown up I’ll marry you.’

I smiled again. ‘You’re too young. Besides, you can’t marry me, I’m human.’ ‘I can, My Daddy says I can, but if I do, you’ll laugh.’

‘Laugh?’

He turned, his silhouette like a god in the gloom. ‘That’s right. You people would say, you’ll die.’

. . .

THE NEXT TIME I SAW OUR RESIDENT TROUBLEMAKER CHARLEY at the Dolphin Bar, he had a different girlfriend. I said, ‘Did you know He Qi bought all of Lefty’s sorrowful beast paintings?’

Charley looked sidelong at me. ‘Of course I know. Why the big fuss? No wonder you’ve never amounted to anything.’

He went on, ‘I was the one who brought them together. He Qi saw those paintings and came pestering me for an introduction to Lefty. I gave him her phone number.’

‘And then?’

‘And then the same old story. He Qi called and said they’d finally met in person. He was enchanted by the beast.’

‘The same beast?’

‘Yes. He Qi said he loved him.’

That night, Lefty phoned me. She and He Qi were sparking like crazy and she’d forgotten all about the beast. I said, a little angrily, ‘I thought you were so in love with him.’

She was quiet, then asked, ‘Is love possible between humans and beasts? Not the ones who marry rich men, the ones with so much surgery and hormone shots, they believe they’re people. The ones who’re still beasts. Can they be in love with humans?’ ‘I love him,’ the painter concluded.

. . .

THE SORROWFUL BEASTS ALREADY EXISTED IN ANCIENT times. Thousands of years ago, they came south to Yong’an City. This squarish city had sandstorms to the south and west, humidity to the north and east—so they settled in the northeast, becoming an isolated community that married off its attractive females to the highest bidders, splitting the proceeds forty-sixty with the local government. As our city acquired skyscrapers and elevated highways, they continued in their dilapidated estate, at peace with the world, placid and mild.

When I was at university, my professor said, ‘All beasts have a beastly nature. Please take care around them.’

I phoned and told him about my latest discoveries. ‘Don’t dig any further,’ he said seriously. ‘It won’t do you any good.’

‘I want to know how he died.’

My tutor sighed. ‘Stubborn as ever. There are things it’s better to forget.’

But I couldn’t forget this: the night before graduation, my

professor brought me to see his collection of specimen beasts, soaking in long vitrines, their faces human. I remembered the male sorrowful beast. The green patch on his belly had been cut open, and inside were two rows of tightly packed teeth, a space between them. My tutor said, 'That's his true mouth. His beastly mouth.' I couldn't stop retching. I dashed out of the lab, and never went back.

Every beast has a beastly nature. At the full moon, human children ought to stay at home. My mother would say, 'The beasts all want to eat people, just like people eat them.'

Mutual destruction is the only way to survive. That's the circle of life. That's truth.

But scientists said they'd invented and put out a brand-new hormone that could completely suppress the beastly nature of female sorrowful beasts. Even on full-moon nights, they'd no longer make their birdlike cries.

They held clinical trials, and the results were undeniably successful. The drug went into mass production, with a hefty price tag—after all, the wives of rich men had someone to foot the bill. Charley was outraged. 'This disrupts the ecological equilibrium!' he yelled. His new girlfriend gazed worshipfully at him.

I took a deep drag on my cigarette. It was easy to imagine a Yong'an many years from now with no beasts left, all of them dead from the hormones. Or else completely under control, stuffed full with humanity, passing between the skyscrapers, hopping in and out of lifts, dating and getting married, reproducing but stopping at one child, never mind if it's a boy or girl.

When that time came, all novelists would have hormone injections to turn us into computer programmers, and all zoolo-

gists would undergo surgery to become bus conductors. Everyone would give up their research into the nonexistent, and there'd be no myths, no beasts, no history, no fantasy. The government would rattle along, printing money. Yong'an would truly become an international metropolis.

Therefore, historians of the future ought to thank the female beast Rain. She was allergic to the hormone shots, which turned her skin bright red, leaving her screeching non-stop. Most Yong'an residents saw this horrifying scene on TV: Rain's skin scarlet and almost transparent, the human foetus dimly visible through the bare skin of her belly, her hair flying wildly as she ran naked through the streets, the TV station's van careening after her.

People saw a terrified, tormented sorrowful beast, and just like the little beast said to me, she was smiling. Sorrowful beasts don't smile from joy, but only because of sadness, because of pain. Once they start, it's impossible to stop, not until they die.

Her smile was so beautiful, even I wept for her. The whole city was captivated. As she sprinted, she shrieked like a bird. Old people said they'd die without regrets, having lived to see the smile of a sorrowful beast.

She smiled down the entire length of Yanhe Street, then climbed the statue of the ancient hero in Victory Square. Her foetus stared helplessly through the pink translucent skin of her belly.

She let out a final, shattering cry, her smile as dazzling as the peach blossoms. Everyone nearby said seeing her was like looking upon a goddess.

She died. Once sorrowful beasts smile, they die.

. . .

PRODUCTION OF THE NEW HORMONE WAS HALTED. THE SORROWFUL beasts of Leye Estate went on a protest march, roaring as they paraded down the street. Humans ducked out of their way, terrified. The mayor came forward to speak. He offered his apologies, and arranged a funeral for Rain, the most lavish one ever seen.

On TV, her husband sobbed heart-rendingly, his shoulders heaving. A moving sight. Charley

brought me to the funeral. Outside the ceremonial hall, we ran into Lefty and He Qi.

Lefty looked at me with a strange expression. She was even lovelier than ever, but so fragile, unsmiling, her expression pensive, her figure frail. He Qi clutched her hand tightly.

None of us said a word about Cloud. We nodded somberly and went inside. Lefty wanted to see Rain's body. He Qi held her back, but she said, 'I want to take a last look, I didn't take good care of her.'

He Qi said, 'Don't go over there, it'll make you sad.' No one could have expected what happened next.

Lefty ran over like a madwoman, shoved the coffin lid open, and stared at the body inside. She reached out, as if to touch her, but before making contact, she smiled.

It was a radiant smile, and everyone was momentarily enchanted. Charley, standing beside me, let out a very male sound, a meaningless exhalation.

She was smiling, and so she couldn't stop. He Qi stumbled over to tug at her. 'You mustn't smile,' he gabbled, 'She's dead, but don't smile!'

He wept, and still she smiled. He said, 'I love you so much, please don't leave me. It cost so much for us to be together. Stop smiling!'

Still smiling, she let out a peal of proud, beautiful birdsong. Her voice rose up, startling everyone present.

Then she died.

And that was how the painter Lefty met her end.

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IN YONG'AN CITY'S DOLPHIN BAR, ONE OFTEN RAN INTO THE resident busybody Charley. His most recent piece of gossip had to do with the painter Lefty and her sorrowful beast.

The way he told it, the government carried out an autopsy on her corpse, and in her belly, which was still faintly green, they found the teeth that hadn't yet broken down, and the half-digested remains of the real Lefty's body.

My professor phoned to scold me. 'I warned you not to dig any deeper.' Then he asked if he should come and see me, but I said there was no need.

Much later, I ran into He Qi at a party. He'd grown more feeble-looking. Pulling at my arm, he asked, 'You've written so many stories, you tell me, can humans and beasts love each other? Can they be together?'

I felt cold all over, and suddenly thought of the painter Lefty, or perhaps by then she was already the sorrowful beast Cloud, asking me sadly on the telephone, 'Can humans and beasts love each other? Is it possible?'

'I love him,' she'd said.

I'd once thought I knew the whole of this story. I thought it was him and her. Who'd have guessed it was a tragedy of him and him? They'd thought they could be together, but in

the end, it lasted no longer than flowers in a mirror, the moon reflected in water. It ended because her smile was so beautiful.

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THE SORROWFUL BEASTS LIVE IN THE NORTH-EASTERN QUARTER of Yong'an City. Guileless by nature, they prefer the cold. Since ancient times, no calamity has weakened them. At the full moon, the female beasts let out long mating calls, and the males hasten to them. It's easy to produce male sorrowful beasts but not female, for on nights when the moon is full, a male is able to mate with a human woman, and at the moment of greatest pleasure, he opens his green belly-mouth wide and swallows her whole. He then takes on her likeness, slowly digesting her consciousness, finally becoming a new female beast, and so reproducing, generation after generation.

These beasts are faithful, and only seek one mate in life. But they never smile. If they do, they die—hence their name, sorrowful.