

The Han Yu Demon Texts

韓愈驅鬼諸文

Five texts of naming, charging, and dispatch

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Preface

by Fur Tip

Hello. My name is Fur Tip, and I am a rabbit-hair writing brush. I know that is an unusual thing for a book to be narrated by, and I will explain myself before long. But I am not really here to talk about myself. I am here to introduce you to one of the greatest writers China ever produced, and to five strange and wonderful things he wrote — and since I was the brush in his hand when he wrote them, it fell to me to be your guide.

Han Yu is one of the great writers of the Chinese tradition. He lived from 768 to 824, served the Tang state through a difficult career that twice sent him into southern exile, and is remembered as the man who turned classical prose back toward clarity and force after generations of ornament. Schoolchildren still memorize him. He is, by long consensus, one of the finest hands ever to hold a brush.

Among the many things he wrote are five pieces about getting rid of things that did not belong. A crocodile was eating the livestock of a district he governed, so he wrote it a letter and gave it three days to leave. A fever was riding a sick man's bones, so he wrote the fever a send-off. An owl was making a nuisance of itself at night, so he wrote it out of the sky. Poverty would not leave his house, so he wrote it a farewell too — though that one, as you will see, does not go the way the others do. And once, in a stranger mood, he wrote a mock-biography of the writing brush itself.

This book is about those five pieces. It is not a translation, though translations stand behind it and you can consult them if you wish. It is an attempt to say what these texts are actually *doing* — which turns out to be stranger, and more worth your attention, than "a famous man wrote some clever things about pests."

Here is the argument in short, so you know where we are going. Each of these texts performs the same operation. Something has turned up where it should not be; Han Yu names it, works out what kind of thing it is, and then dispatches it — sends it off, or puts it back, or, in one case, keeps it. Name, sort, dispatch: the same three moves every time,

whether the intruder is a real animal or a fever or an abstraction. The moves do not change when the target does. That is the thread this book follows, because once you see it you begin to see what these pieces are really for.

And what they are for is more than pest control. Underneath the crocodile and the fever is a way of running the world — a way of deciding what belongs and what does not, who gets to say so, and what happens to whatever falls on the wrong side of the line. Han Yu wrote these as an official, often an exiled one, and clearing a fever or a crocodile from a place he governed was not so different from the work of empire: naming a frontier, sorting its people, writing it into the order of things. This book will say that plainly. It will not say it as an accusation. To the man at the creek it was good government; to the capital it was fine prose; to the fisherman whose river was cleared of man-eaters it was a real kindness. All of that is true at once, and the reader who reaches only for the cynical reading has missed most of the picture. The aim throughout is to see the whole of it without flattening it — the benefit and the ordering, the kindness and the conquest, in one motion, because in these texts they are one motion.

There are five chapters, one for each text, arranged in the order that makes Han Yu's method easiest to watch at work. The first is the brush's own biography, because it is the whole apparatus in miniature — a thing named, sorted, put to work, used up, and set aside, which is exactly what happens to every crocodile and every fever in the chapters after. Then come the owl, the crocodile, the fever, and the five poverties. By the time you reach the poverties you will know the machine well enough to enjoy watching it fail, which is why the book ends there. You do not need Chinese to follow any of it. Where a character matters — and sometimes a whole reading turns on one — I will give it to you, tell you how it sounds and what it is doing, and you can take my word or go check. Where a point is central I will make it fully and return to it. Where something is merely interesting I will note it and move on.

And now I can explain myself, as I promised. I am the brush Han Yu used to write all five of these pieces — and in one of them he personified me, gave me ancestors and a career and a voice, so I am only borrowing back what he lent me. It is a conceit, plainly. But it

earns its keep, because a brush is the right narrator for this material. I was there for all of it. I was the instrument that did the naming and the sorting, the thing that turned each live problem into settled words on a page. That is what a brush is for, and it is what this book is about. So let me walk you through it — beginning, as Han Yu began me, with the story of a captured hare.

One — The Life of a Brush

毛穎傳

Han Yu, "Biography of Fur Tip" (毛穎傳, Máo Yǐng zhuàn)

I promised you the story of a captured hare, and it is my own, so I may as well tell it the way Han Yu told it. He wrote my biography once — a full one, with ancestors and a career and an official title and an undignified old age — and he wrote it as a joke. It was thought a strange thing to do at the time. A biography, a *zhuàn* (傳), was a serious form; you wrote one for a statesman or a general, not for a writing implement. His friend Liu Zongyuan had to defend the piece in print, and later Su Shi called him an immortal at play. They were right that it is play. What took people longer to notice is that the joke is exact. Everything that happens to me in it is a thing that happens, in the four chapters after this one, to a crocodile and a fever and a run of bad luck. My life is the whole book in miniature. That is why we begin here.

It is worth knowing what the objection was, because Han Yu had heard it before he ever wrote me. His friend Zhang Ji had written to him twice complaining that he was too fond of *bó zá wú shí zhī shuō* (駁雜無實之說) — miscellaneous talk with nothing solid in it, produced in company for the amusement of the room. Unworthy, Zhang Ji thought, of a serious man. Pei Du made the same complaint to Li Ao in almost the same breath: he does not use writing to establish norms, he uses it for a game. Han Yu answered Zhang Ji twice, and his defense was to reach for the Odes — *shàn xì xuè xī, bù wéi nüè xī* (善戲謔兮，不為虐兮), good at jesting, and not cruel with it.

Then he wrote me, and the room laughed, and Liu Zongyuan wrote his defense. Han Yu made this, Liu said, *yǐ fā qí yù jī* (以發其鬱積) — to let out what had built up in him. And to the readers who did nothing but laugh, Liu quoted that same line from the Odes back at them.

I find that satisfying. The defense of the joke was written by the man who told it, years before he made it.

So: I was born a hare, of the rabbit-hair stock of Zhongshan, and my line was old and distinguished and — this is the first joke, and it matters — a *hunted* one.

Ancestors

Han Yu gives me a founding ancestor named Bright-Eyes, which is the polite classical word for a rabbit; a hare, seen by lamplight, has bright eyes. Bright-Eyes, he says, assisted Yu the Great in ordering the lands of the east and nourishing the myriad creatures, and for this service was enfeoffed in the quarter of the zodiac that belongs to the rabbit, and when he died he became one of the twelve gods.

Stop and notice what has just happened, because it is the first move of the machine and you will see it again in every chapter. To introduce a thing, Han Yu gives it a *genealogy*. He files it. A hare becomes a lineage with a divine founder and a place in the cosmic order — assistant to the sage-king who ordered the very world. This is not decoration. To give a thing ancestors is to say what *kind* of thing it is, and to say what kind of thing it is is the first step toward being able to do anything about it. When you reach the fever-demon in the fourth chapter, watch Han Yu hand it a grandfather and a father — the Yellow Emperor and the god Zhuanxu, no less — and watch what he does with that pedigree once he has established it. It is the same move I am getting here, turned to a different purpose. For now, simply mark it: the apparatus begins by filing the thing under a category, and a category is a kind of ancestry.

The pedigree Han Yu gives me is also, on inspection, a little wild, and worth a note. One of my ancestors, eight generations down, is said to have gained the arts of the immortals — able to hide in light and command things — and to have stolen the moon-goddess Heng E — Chang'e, in her later and more familiar name — and ridden the toad up into the moon, after which that branch of the family withdrew from the world and would not serve. Another, a cousin of the eastern wall, was so swift he outran the great hound Han Lu, and the hound in fury conspired with another dog to kill him and mince his whole household. Anthologists often trim this passage, and you can see why — it is a strange thicket of moon-rabbits and murdered relatives. But I would suggest it is doing

something, and you can judge whether the suggestion holds. My line, as Han Yu tells it, is clever, half-divine, quick — and again and again *hunted*. The moon-rabbit's branch withdraws from the world; the swift cousin is run down and his household minced. The rabbit, in this telling, is the animal that keeps getting caught. Read that way, the comedy is quietly building a lineage bred for capture — which is what a brush is, when you think about it: a creature whose whole destiny is to be taken and put to use. I offer that as a reading, not a certainty; the passage is strange enough to carry more than one.

The hunt

Now the capture itself, and here the joke turns political, though it keeps smiling.

The time is the reign of the First Emperor of Qin — the unifier, the man who welded the warring states into one empire. His general Meng Tian is marching south to strike the state of Chu. Meng Tian halts at Zhongshan, my birthplace, and prepares a great hunt, expressly to terrify Chu. Before the hunt he divines, and the omen comes back not as a prediction about game but as a prophecy about the empire. The diviner reads it and offers his congratulations: today's catch, he says, will be a creature with no horns and no teeth, dressed in a coat of brown, whiskered and split-lipped; take only its fur, for it becomes the stuff of documents — *and then all under heaven shall write in one script, and Qin shall annex the feudal lords*.

Read that again, because it is the keystone of the whole book and it is hiding in a joke about a hunt. The hare is caught in a *military* campaign — a southern campaign, a war of conquest. But the thing the omen promises is not a military result. It is a *writing* result. Take the fur, make brushes, and *all under heaven writes in one script* — and by that unification of writing, the feudal lords are annexed. The sword takes the ground; the brush takes the realm. Meng Tian's army can defeat Chu in the field, but it is the brush that will turn a defeated territory into an integrated part of the empire — one script, one record, one administration reaching into what had been foreign ground. Here, at the very start, in the omen over a captured rabbit, Han Yu has told you what a brush is *for*: it is the instrument by which conquest becomes permanent, by which a place taken by force is

written into the order of things and made to stay taken.

I would ask you to hold that thought for the whole book, because it is the thread.

Everything Han Yu does to a crocodile or a fever in the chapters after is a small version of what the omen describes here: taking something that is loose, or foreign, or out of place, and *writing* it into order. The brush is the tool of that operation at every scale. And I — the specific brush telling you this — am both the tool and, at this moment in my life, its first object. I am about to be written into the empire's order myself.

They hunt. They surround my clan, pluck out its finest — the pun is Han Yu's; the word for the choice hairs is also the word for the clan's heroes — and carry me back by cart. And here is the phrase to sit with: I am *presented as a captive of war*. The term is the one used for a prisoner paraded in a triumph. The clan is gathered and bound. I begin my career, as my ancestors kept beginning theirs, as something caught — and now, specifically, as a spoil of the southern conquest, handed over to be put to imperial use.

Office

What follows is a career, told exactly as an official's career would be told, which is the sustained joke of the middle of the piece and also its most serious stretch.

The First Emperor has me enfeoffed. I am given a fief at a place called Guancheng and titled Viscount of Guancheng — and here Han Yu plants a small perfect pun that tells you he knows exactly what he is doing. The word for the fief, *Gu*■*n* (管), is also the word for the *barrel* of a brush, the tube that holds the tuft. My noble title is a joke about my own body. I am ennobled as what I physically am: a tube of hair. The honor and the object are the same word. Keep that doubleness in mind; it runs through everything. I am at once a dignified officer of the state and a bundle of rabbit fur on a stick, and the text never lets you forget either.

Then the work. And the work is the reason I say my life is the whole apparatus in miniature, because my defining trait, in Han Yu's telling, is that *I record everything*. From the age of knotted cords — that is, from before writing itself — down to the affairs of

Qin, there is nothing I did not compile and set down. He gives a list, and the list is the point: the yin and the yang, divination and physiognomy, medicine, the registers of clans, the classics of mountains and the gazetteers of regions, dictionaries, pictures, the nine schools of thought and the hundred experts, the writings of heaven and of man, and even the doctrines of the Buddha and of Laozi and of foreign lands — all of it I knew in detail, and all of it I set down.

This is the sorting-and-recording engine in person. Whatever exists, the brush files. And Han Yu adds the line that turns the catalogue from a marvel into a statement about power: I was used *entirely as my sovereign directed*. The instrument records the whole world, and the instrument serves the throne. Those two facts, put side by side, are most of what this book is about. To hold the record of everything, and to be at the disposal of the one who rules — that is the position of the lettered class in the Chinese state, and Han Yu has handed the whole of it to a brush as a joke, which is the safest way to say a serious thing.

There is a detail here that a sharp reader might want, and I offer it lightly, because I am not sure of it myself. Run down that long list of what the brush records — the yin and yang, divination, medicine, the clan registers, the gazetteers, the hundred schools, the writings of heaven and man, even the Buddhist and foreign doctrines — and you may notice that the Confucian classics themselves, the *jīng* (經), the canon proper, are not called out by name. Whether that is a pointed omission or simply a list that ran on to other things, I honestly cannot tell you; the writings "of heaven and man" may well be meant to fold them in. But *if* it is deliberate, it makes a fine point, and one worth holding as a possibility: the instrument is not the scripture. It is the thing that copies the scripture, serves it, carries it — and is not it. I flag it as a maybe, not a claim.

Han Yu gives me one more trait in office, and it is the one I would most like you to carry forward, because it is the deep truth about every instrument in this book. I followed, he says, the character of whoever held me — upright or crooked, skillful or clumsy, I took *entirely after the person*. A good hand made me good; a bad hand made me bad. I had no character of my own; I took the operator's. This is the plainest thing the piece says and the most important. A brush does not decide. A brush *transmits*. Whatever intent runs down

the arm and the wrist reaches the page through me, unaltered and unresisted, and if you want to know what a brush is *for*, morally, the answer is that it is *for* nothing in particular — it is for whatever the hand wants. Later in this book you will meet other instruments — a bronze vessel, a spirit-writing tray — and you will find they share this same emptiness, this same willingness to carry whatever authority pours through them. The instrument is neutral; the hand is everything. Remember that when the crocodile gets its letter. The letter is fearsome, but the brush that wrote it was only doing what brushes do.

Two smaller traits belong here, because they round out what kind of instrument I was. First, I was discreet: even when cast aside I stayed silent and gave up no secrets — the brush that has written a thousand confidential things and tells none of them. Second, I did not much care for military men, though when they asked I would sometimes go to them anyway. Both are the neutrality again, seen from another angle. A faithful instrument keeps what it has carried to itself, and a faithful instrument, in the end, goes to whatever hand insists — even a soldier's.

I rose, in time, to be Director of the Secretariat, and the Emperor grew so used to me that he called me by a pet name and kept me near him even when the palace women were sent away — only the brush and the candle stayed while he worked through the night. And I kept excellent company. My three closest friends were Chen Xuan of Jiang, Tao Hong of Hongnong, and Master Chu of Kuaiji — which is to say, ink, inkstone, and paper, each personified as a man with a home town and a family name, the way Han Yu personified me. We four went out together and withdrew together and were never apart; when the Emperor summoned me, the other three came along unbidden, and he never thought it strange. If you know the Chinese scholar's desk, you will have caught the joke: brush, ink, inkstone, and paper are the Four Treasures of the Study, the four things a writer cannot work without. Han Yu has turned the whole toolkit of writing into a small society of friends. For a while the instrument is honored, intimate, indispensable, and kept in good company. That makes what comes next land the way it is meant to.

Old age

I grew old, and I went bald.

That is the whole of it, and it is merciless. A brush ages by losing its hair; the tuft wears down to a stub; the fine point that made it worth anything is gone. Han Yu stages my end as a scene at court. The Emperor takes me up to use me, and finds the fur worn away, and that what I draw no longer meets his wishes. And he laughs — Han Yu is precise about the laugh — and says: the Director of the Secretariat is old and bald; he can no longer bear my use. I once called you fit to write. Are you now no longer fit to write?

It is a pun, of course, cruel and perfect, turning on my own title. And I answer him — this is my last line in my own biography, and I have thought about it for a very long time — I answer: *I am one who, as they say, has given his whole heart.* And I am summoned no more. I return to my fief, and I end my days there, at Guancheng, which is to say I end my days as what I always was: a barrel of worn-out hair.

I will not pretend this is not about the man who wrote it. Han Yu spent his life giving his whole heart to a state that exiled him twice and used him hard, and he knew exactly what it was to be the indispensable instrument that is thanked with a joke and set aside when the nib wears down. The brush's career is the official's career. The mighty and the expendable are the same figure, living one life. He wrote it about a pen because writing it about himself would have been unbearable, and because — this is the craftsman's reason — it is simply *better* as a pen. The pun on "fit to write" only works on a brush. The joke and the truth are the same object, which is the thing Han Yu could do that almost no one else could.

What the brush leaves behind

But the biography does not end on the bald stub, and this is the part that matters most, and the part the book will keep returning to.

My descendants, Han Yu says, are very many, and they are *scattered across the Chinese lands and the lands of the barbarians* — all of them *claiming* the name of Guancheng — the graph is 冒, to claim falsely, and the joke is about counterfeit brushes — though only

those still dwelling at Zhongshan carry on the family craft. The individual brush wears out and is discarded. But the *brush* — the instrument as such, the kind of thing I am — is everywhere, and unkillable, and spreading. It has gone out past the borders, into the lands beyond, into the very frontier the omen at the hunt promised would be written into one script. The instrument that annexes the realm has itself propagated into every part of the realm and past its edges.

This is the turn that keeps the ending from being sad, and I want to be careful about it because it is easily sentimentalized and it should not be. It is not that my death is redeemed by my children's success, as a consolation. It is something cooler and truer than that. The wearing-out and the propagation are *the same fact*. The brush is used to the bone precisely because it is doing its work, and the work is exactly what sends the craft on into the next hand and the next land. A brush that was spared, kept pristine, never worn down, would have transmitted nothing. The baldness is the evidence of the propagation. To be used up and to spread the craft are one motion, and if you understand that, you understand the emblem at the center of this book — the instrument that spends itself so that the thing it carries continues.

Before I give you that last word, one thing about the man Han Yu borrowed it from. Sima Qian spoke up for a defeated general, was castrated for it by the emperor he served, and finished his history anyway. That is whose voice the ending puts on — so the complaint about a power that does not repay what it uses is placed in the mouth of the one recorder in the tradition with the most cause to make it. A Tang writer, Li Zhao, caught the likeness and set it down: this piece, he said, is *bù xià Shī Qīn* (不下史遷), not inferior to Sima Qian.

The historian's verdict, which Han Yu appends in the formula of the great official histories — as though a rabbit-hair brush deserved the same solemn last word as an emperor — says it in the register of complaint: the brush began as a captive and ended in employment, shared in the great work of annexing the feudal lords, and yet its reward never matched its labor, and in old age it was cast off. *Qin was truly ungenerous*. That is the received reading of this piece, and it is a good one, and I do not want to talk you out of

it: the biography is a satire on the principled servant used up and discarded by an ungrateful power, and generations of readers have taken it exactly so. I only want to add what the text also plainly shows and says less loudly — that the servant in question is an *instrument of integration*, that its labor was the writing of a conquered world into one script, and that its scattering into every land is not only a poignant afterlife but the completion of the very work the omen named at its capture. Both things are true. The brush is the wronged and faithful servant, and the brush is the tool by which an empire made itself permanent. This book is going to spend four more chapters watching that same doubleness play out on creatures who cannot write their own biographies — and I, who can, have just written mine, so that you would know the shape of the thing before you saw it done to others.

That is my life. Named, filed, captured in a southern war, put to work recording the world, used until the nib was gone, set aside with a joke, and scattered afterward into every land. Hold the shape. You are about to watch it done to an owl.

Two — The Owl

射訓狐

Han Yu, "Shooting the Xunhu" (射訓狐, Shè Xùnhú)

You have met me; now meet the work. The four chapters after this one are the demon-expulsions proper — the pieces where Han Yu takes something that has turned up where it should not be and does something about it — and I have arranged them so that you watch the machine in its simplest form first and its strangest form last. The owl is the simple form. It is short, it is fierce, and it runs the whole operation — name, charge, dispatch — with no negotiation and no mercy, straight through to a killing. Everything the crocodile does at length and the poverties do inside-out, the owl does plainly, in a single furious rush of twenty-two lines. Learn it here where it is bare, and you will recognize it everywhere after.

A word first about what kind of bird this is, because the title itself is doing work. The creature is a *xunhu* (訓狐) — a night-bird, an owl of ill omen, the sort of bird that in the Chinese tradition carries bad luck the way a black cat is said to in the West, only worse: a bird associated with death, with the unclean, with the wrong hours. Han Yu did not invent that reputation; he inherited it and used it. And I should say plainly, before we go further, that no owl was harmed in the writing of this book, and that the real screech-owls of the world are fine and useful creatures who eat the mice that would otherwise eat the grain. Han Yu's owl is not really a bird. It is a stand-in — for a kind of person, a kind of nuisance, a kind of malign presence that fouls a household and will not be reasoned with. Read it as a fable and you will read it rightly. But read it *closely*, because the fable is where the machine shows its gears.

The whole poem, first

Here is the shape of it in plain English, so you have the arc before we walk it. A bird flies by night, and its name is Xunhu. It is vicious and sly and pleased with itself, and it calls

out its own name in the dark. It comes on the black nights and settles on my roof, loud and coarse and afraid of nothing. It works a hundred evils; it gathers ghosts and summons monsters to its side; it rattles the very brackets and rafters of the house until the plaster falls. A mother clutching her child is afraid to come to the table; how could she spare a thought to guard the chicks in the coop? And here the poem turns and reflects: heaven and earth are great in their virtue, I know, and hatch even an evil creature like this and tend it tirelessly. To let it be would not, I suppose, bring instant harm — the Dipper's handle swings round toward the southwest, the season turns, and such things pass in their time. But who could say this festering evil is not getting worse? It means to rush the very sun. It presses on through the night-watches, its foul breath thickening, and there is no hope of relief even for a moment. So — it cannot be helped — I go to shoot it. I watch for you, bird, my two eyes wide and glaring. The owl starts in terror and falls from the beam, the snakes flee down their holes, and one man cuts the neck through, and the whole brood of chicks withers dead.

That is the poem. Now watch what it is made of.

The name

The machine begins, as it always begins, with a name. The very first line hands it to you: *there is a bird that flies by night, and its name is Xunhu*. Existence, then name. Before anything can be done to the bird, the bird must be *identified* — pinned to a word — and the poem spends its first breath doing exactly that. This is the same first move you watched Han Yu make on me, when he gave a rabbit a genealogy before he did anything else with it. Name the thing; establish what it is; and only then act. You will see it again on the crocodile, whose letter opens by stating precisely what a crocodile is and where it stands in the order of things. Naming is not a preliminary to the operation. Naming is the first stroke of the operation.

And there is a small marvel folded into the name from the very first line. Han Yu says the bird *brags out its own name for a call* — and this is literally true of the creature, whose night-cry was heard by Chinese ears as the sound of its own name. The owl, in other

words, *names itself*. It announces in the dark exactly what it is. For a book whose whole argument is that naming a thing is the first act of mastering it, there is something almost too neat in an opening bird that saves everyone the trouble and names itself aloud — and names itself, as we will see, with a word that is also a death-sentence.

And this particular name is worth pausing on, because it tells you the bird is already condemned by its own reputation. The Xunhu is not a neutral creature that Han Yu must argue into guilt. It arrives guilty — the name carries the verdict. There is a lovely, terrible economy in this, and it reaches its full force only at the very end of the poem, so hold the thought: in Chinese, one of the words for this ill-omened owl is *xi* (梟), and *xi* is not only the bird's name. It is also a verb. To *xi* someone is to behead them and hang the head up on public display — the punishment for the worst criminals, the severed head on the city wall. The bird's name *is* the sentence passed on it. We will come back to that when the stroke falls.

The charge

Once named, the bird is charged, and the charge is a piling-up. Watch the verbs stack: it is vicious, it is sly, it is boastful; it settles, it shrieks, it fears nothing; it *works a hundred evils*, it *gathers ghosts and summons monsters*, it rattles the house to pieces. Han Yu builds the indictment by accumulation, one crime laid on the next without pause, the grammar itself hurrying — and this is worth a note for the reader learning to hear classical verse, because the technique is not decoration. The stacking of parallel charges is how a poem *convicts*. Each clause is another item entered against the accused. By the time the mother is clutching her child in fear, the bird has been found guilty many times over, and no one has had to say the word "guilty," because the accumulation has done it.

There is a real escalation buried in the charge, too, and it is the poem's sharpest stroke. It would be one thing for a nuisance bird to foul a roof. But Han Yu's owl *means to rush the sun* — to make an assault on Xihe's raven, the bird of the sun itself, the light. The nuisance turns cosmic. The bird is no longer merely dirtying one household; it is pressing against the order of day and night, thickening the dark, encroaching on the light's own

territory. This is a move you should mark, because it is how the apparatus justifies escalation. A local nuisance can be tolerated; an assault on the cosmic order cannot. By raising the owl's crime from "fouls my roof" to "attacks the sun," Han Yu raises the permitted response from "shoo it away" to "kill it." The punishment is about to fit a very large crime indeed.

The hinge — a moment of real hesitation

And now the poem does something I want you to see clearly, because it is easy to miss in the rush to the kill, and because it is the moral heart of the piece. Right in the middle, Han Yu *hesitates*. He stops and considers letting the bird live.

The lines are these: heaven and earth are vast in their virtue, and hatch even this evil creature and tend it without tiring. The verb Han Yu chooses there is worth a moment — it is *lu* (孵), the word for an egg, pressed into service as a verb: to *egg* a thing, to brood it into being, to let it hatch and indulge it into the world. The cosmos, he is saying, is the kind of vast patient thing that will *egg* even a monster — sit on it, warm it, let it come to be. It is a strange and tender word to use of a creature he is about to shoot, and that strangeness is the point: the speaker is reminding himself how much forbearance the great order extends, even to the vile. To let it be would not bring instant harm — and here comes the poem's hardest line, and its most beautiful — *the Dipper's handle swings round toward the southwest, and the season turns*. The thought is this: the cosmos is patient; it nourishes even the vile; and things pass in their own time. The great ladle of stars wheels overhead, the seasons come round, and perhaps a festering evil, left alone, simply runs its course and ends. Why not let the turning heavens do the work? Why pick up the bow at all?

I want to dwell on that Dipper line, because it is the poem's deepest and its most demanding, and it opens onto something that runs under this whole book. The Dipper — the seven bright stars of the Great Bear — was the one fixed clock of the ancient sky. Its handle swings around the pole through the year, and where the handle points tells the season: the old formula — it is in the *Heguanzi* — runs that when the handle points east it

is spring for all the world, south and it is summer, west and it is autumn, north and it is winter. So "the handle swings toward the southwest" is not idle scene-painting. It is a way of saying *the season is turning, time is passing, the great order is doing what it does*. The verb Han Yu uses for what the handle does — *zh*■ (拄) — is a physical word, to prop or lean or come to rest against, as a staff braces against the ground; the handle swings round and *props* against the southwest corner of the sky. I will confess that I read a good deal into that verb — the image of the turning cosmos coming to *rest*, of a thing arriving at its proper place in the round of the year — and you should take that as my enthusiasm and not yet as settled fact; the plain sense, the one you can stand on, is that the Dipper marks the season, and that the season, left alone, turns. What matters for the poem is the argument the line carries: the heavens are patient and self-correcting, so perhaps the bird needs no shooting.

It is a genuine hesitation, and Han Yu means it. He is not a cruel man reaching for a bow; he is a man who has considered mercy, considered the patience of the cosmos, considered letting be — and then rejected it. Because the next line turns: *but who could say this festering evil is not getting worse?* (The line is contested — the phrase I am reading as harboring a criminal, *tíng ji*■*n*, is read otherwise by some, and I flag it rather than smooth it.) The patience of heaven is real, but this evil will not wait for the seasons; it is escalating now, tonight, rushing the sun, and to wait is to let it win. The hesitation is overruled, and it is overruled by the escalation we just watched being built. The bird has made itself into the kind of thing that cannot be left to the turning of the Dipper. And so the bow comes up.

That hesitation-and-overruling is the poem's moral machinery, and it is worth carrying forward, because it is what keeps the killing from being mere savagery. Han Yu shows you that he *considered* the alternative. The dispatch is not thoughtless; it is judged. Whether you find the judgment just is another matter — and you may not, and the poem half-invites you not to. But the machine, even at its most furious, pauses to weigh mercy before it refuses it.

The dispatch

Then the killing, and it is fast. *It cannot be helped* — the phrase is almost a sigh, the officer's regretful "there is no other way" — *I go to shoot it*. And the hunter's eyes go wide, watching, glaring into the dark: *I watch for you, bird, my two eyes wide and staring*. And then, in a single line, it is done. The owl starts in terror and falls from the beam; the snakes flee down their holes; one man cuts the neck through, and the whole brood of chicks withers dead.

Notice that the disposal is *force*, pure and undiluted, and notice what that means by contrast with what is coming. The crocodile, in the next chapter, will be given a letter and three days' grace and a chance to leave of its own accord — a whole diplomacy of expulsion. The owl gets none of that. There is no summons, no deadline, no offer of relocation. There is a bow and an arrow and a cut throat. This is the barest form of the dispatch: the thing is named, charged, and destroyed, with no intermediate step. I have put the owl first precisely so that you feel this bareness, because everything the later texts add — the deadline, the negotiation, the offer of a way out — will register as a *softening* of what you see here. The owl establishes the floor. Force is the simplest disposal, and here it is, unmixed.

And do not pass over the snake, because it is doing more than filling out a line. A snake appears nowhere earlier in the poem; it turns up only here, at the kill, fleeing down its hole in the same breath that the owl falls from the beam. Why? Recall the charge from the middle of the poem: the owl *gathers ghosts and marshals demons*, whips them into a faction of its own. The bird was a ringleader. So the snake is not scenery — it is a confederate, one of the marshaled following, and its flight at the moment of the owl's death is a piece of evidence: strike the head, and the body scatters. Han Yu even marks the difference in their fates with two precise verbs. The owl *falls* — *duò* (墮), struck, downward, it does not get away. The snake *flees* — *zǒu* (走), sideways, escaping, it does. The ringleader is destroyed; the followers merely bolt. Kill the one who organized the faction, and the faction dissolves of its own accord. It is a small, cold lesson in how the apparatus thinks: find the head, name the head, take the head, and the rest disperse

without a second arrow.

And now the name comes back to collect its debt. Remember *xi* (梟), the word that is both the owl's name and the verb for a criminal's beheading-and-display. Look at the line where the bird dies: *xi* starts in terror and falls from the beam. The graph that names the bird is the graph that names its execution. When the neck is cut in the next breath, the poem is only doing what the bird's own name has said all along. The sentence was written into the creature's name from the first line; the arrow merely carries it out. That is as economical as language gets — a name that contains its own death-sentence — and it is the gem of this poem, the thing to carry away from it. In the world these texts describe, to name a thing correctly is very nearly to have already done to it what must be done. The naming and the dispatching are, in the end, almost the same act. The owl's whole tragedy is spelled in the one word that is its name.

A note before we go on

Let me add one plain thing, since the poem ends on a cut throat and a dead brood, and I would not want the fierceness to be the only thing you take from it. The withered chicks are hard to read — Han Yu spares nothing, not even the young — and he means them to be hard. The poem is not pretending that destroying a thing root and branch is gentle. It is showing you the machine at full and merciless power, precisely so that you will notice, in the chapters to come, when the machine chooses *not* to use that power — when it relocates instead of kills, or keeps instead of expels. The owl is the extreme against which the mercy of the other texts becomes visible. Han Yu could always kill. That he usually does something else is the whole interest of what follows.

So: you have watched the operation in its simplest and hardest form. A thing was named, and the name convicted it. It was charged, and the charges piled until they justified the worst. A moment of mercy was weighed against the patience of the turning heavens, and refused, because the evil would not wait. And then it was destroyed, utterly, the name carrying out its own sentence. Name, charge, dispatch — with the bow.

Next comes a patient you cannot simply shoot: one too large, too old, and too much a sovereign in its own right to be dropped from a beam with a single arrow. Next comes the crocodile — and with it, the letter.

Three — The Crocodiles

祭鱷魚文

Han Yu, "A Notice Served on the Crocodiles" (祭鱷魚文, Jì Èyú Wén)

The owl got an arrow. The crocodile gets a letter.

That is the whole difference between the last chapter and this one, and it is worth stopping on before we read a word, because the difference is the lesson. Both creatures are noxious; both are named, charged, and dispatched; both are things out of place that must be put right. But where the owl was simply shot — named and killed in a single furious rush — the crocodile is served with a formal document, granted an audience, given terms, and offered three days to leave of its own accord, with the option of five, and then seven, before force is even mentioned. The owl was a nuisance. The crocodile is treated as something else: a party to be negotiated with, a power to be reckoned with, almost a rival sovereign. Why the promotion? That is the question this chapter answers, and the answer opens onto the largest thing in this whole book.

First, though, the circumstance, because it matters. In the year 819 Han Yu was sent in disgrace to Chaozhou, a malarial prefecture at the far southern edge of the empire, about as far from the capital as a man could be flung and still be inside the Tang state. He had written a memorial against the Emperor's ceremonial welcome of a Buddha-relic, and it had nearly cost him his head; exile to the deep south was the reduced sentence. He arrived, by his own account, to find the local rivers infested with crocodiles that were eating the people's livestock. And so, some days after taking up his post, the new governor composed this document, had an officer named Qin Ji cast a sheep and a pig into the deep pool of a stream called the Bad Stream, and served notice on the crocodiles.

I want you to hold two facts about that scene side by side, because the whole chapter lives in the tension between them. The first is that this is a real administrative act by a real governor addressing a real problem — man-eating reptiles, frightened farmers, an official doing his job. The second is that the document he wrote to do it is a bespoke piece of high

literature, composed personally, in the grand style, citing the sage-kings of antiquity, and addressed to animals who cannot read. No clerk filled in a form. The governor of the prefecture sat down and *wrote* to the crocodiles, in the register one would use to address a court. Keep both in view. The crocodile problem is real; the letter is a work of art; and the gap between those two facts is where everything interesting happens.

Not a sacrifice — a summons

Begin with the title and the opening, because they are doing something subtle that most readers walk straight past.

The piece is called, in most editions, a *jìwén* (祭文) — a *sacrificial address*, the kind of solemn text one composes to offer to a god or an ancestor at a sacrifice. And it opens exactly as a sacrificial address opens: *on such-and-such a day, the Prefect of Chaozhou, Han Yu, having his officer Qin Ji cast one sheep and one pig into the pool of the Bad Stream, to feed the crocodiles, thereupon addressed them, saying* — the offering of meat, the solemn date, the formal announcement. Every signal says *ritual*. A god is being fed and addressed.

But read what the address actually *does*, and it is not a sacrifice at all. It is an ultimatum. The meat is not an offering to propitiate a power; it is bait to gather the defendants into one place so that papers can be served on them. You cannot serve a summons on a party who is not present, so first you convene him — and a sheep and a pig will convene a crocodile very reliably. What looks like feeding a god is actually constituting a court. The sacrificial shell holds a legal proceeding.

And underneath the sacrificial shell there is a second, harder genre still. The great Qing statesman Zeng Guofan, reading this piece a thousand years later, said it had the *breath* of Sima Xiangru's famous *proclamation to the people of Ba and Shu* — that is, the breath of a *xí* (檄), a *military dispatch*, the document a general sends ahead of an army to announce terms to a rebel and demand submission before the killing starts. That is exactly right, and it is the key to the whole piece. What Han Yu has written is a military ultimatum wearing

the robes of a sacrificial prayer. The 祭文 is the outer garment; the 檄 is the body underneath. He feeds the crocodile as one feeds a god, and he threatens the crocodile as one threatens a rebel, and he does both in the same breath, because the crocodile is being treated as both at once — a spirit to be given its due, and an insurgent to be expelled.

This double genre is not a curiosity. It is the technique of the whole apparatus, visible in one document. Choosing the *form* of a text is choosing what *kind* of thing you are addressing — and Han Yu, by stacking a military dispatch inside a sacrificial address, is filing the crocodile under two categories at once, sacred and seditious, and dealing with it on both fronts simultaneously. The instability shows even in how the tradition could not decide what to call the piece: some editions title it a *sacrifice* to the crocodiles, others a *driving-out* of the crocodiles, as though the copyists themselves could not settle whether this was a prayer or an eviction. It is both. That is the point.

The sage-kings, and the great argument

Now the body of the dispatch, and here Han Yu builds the most ambitious argument in the whole book. He does not simply tell the crocodile to leave. He tells it *why he has the right to make it leave*, and the why is a compressed history of the Chinese empire.

He begins in high antiquity. In the old days, he says, when the sage-kings first held all under heaven, they burned off the mountains and marshes, and with net and blade they drove out the evil creatures — the vermin and the snakes and the harmful things that plagued the people — and expelled them beyond the four seas. (The graph for that burning is 𤇗 in most witnesses and is read as 𤇗, to burn off, on the model of a passage in the *Mencius*; some editions print 烈 outright. It matters a little, since the two give different opening moves — clearing the land, or setting fire to it.) This is the founding gesture of civilization as Han Yu understands it: the sage-king clears the land of the noxious, and in clearing it, makes it fit for human life. The expulsion of harmful creatures is not incidental to founding a realm; it is founding a realm. Order begins by driving out disorder.

But then — and here the argument turns, and this is the passage I most want you to hold — he says something surprising. *In later ages, the virtue of the kings grew thin, and they could not hold the far places.* The empire contracted. The later, weaker kings could not maintain the reach of the sage-kings, and so they let the distant regions go — the lands between the great rivers were abandoned, given over to the tribes of the south and the barbarian peoples, and a place as remote as Chaozhou, ten thousand *li* from the capital, was let slip entirely. And therefore, Han Yu says — and the logic here is breathtaking — *it was only natural that crocodiles should lurk and breed here.* The crocodile is not merely a pest. The crocodile is a *symptom of imperial retreat.* It is here because the empire withdrew, because virtue grew thin, because the sage-kings' clearing was not maintained. The reptile in the Bad Stream is a living relic of a lapsed frontier — proof, in scaly form, that this land had fallen out of the order of things.

And then the counter-turn, the reconquest: *but now the Son of Heaven has succeeded to the throne of Tang* — sage, holy, kind, and martial — and *all within the six directions, all beyond the four seas, he soothes and holds.* The empire has expanded again. The reach of the sage-kings has been restored. And Chaozhou — which Han Yu is careful to note lies within the tracks of Yu the Great, in the old province of Yangzhou, a land of magistrates and tax-rolls and the sacrifices of state — Chaozhou is now, once more, *inside* the order. And therefore the crocodile, which was permitted to breed here during the long imperial retreat, can no longer be permitted. Its lease has expired. The frontier it belonged to has been reconquered, and it must go.

Do you see what has just happened? Han Yu has turned the eviction of a reptile into the *completion of an imperial reconquest.* Expelling the crocodile is not pest control; it is the last administrative act of writing a lapsed frontier back into the empire. The sage-kings cleared the land to found the realm; the crocodile bred when the realm withdrew; and now the governor, arriving with the Son of Heaven's mandate, clears the land again — and in clearing it, completes the reintegration of the south. The document performs, on one reptile, the whole logic of empire: expansion, contraction, and reconquest, three thousand years of it, brought to bear on the question of whether a crocodile may remain in a

particular stream. This is the frontier-integration reading, and it is not something I am imposing on the text; it is the text's own argument, stated in its own words — the empire withdrew, the empire returned, and the crocodile is on the wrong side of the return.

I should be honest that the *scale* of the claim is mine to argue, not Han Yu's to state. He does not write "I am hereby completing the reconquest of the south." He writes a dispatch to a crocodile that happens to contain a compressed imperial history as its justification. But the history is *there*, in his words, doing exactly the work I have described: grounding the governor's right to evict the beast in the restored reach of the throne. Read the passage and judge for yourself whether the eviction of the crocodile is being made to carry the weight of empire.

And I am not, it turns out, the first to read it this way. The traditional Chinese commentators — the editors of the great anthology *Guwen guanazhi*, whose marginal notes generations of students learned alongside the text — saw exactly this structure and admired it as craft. Where Han Yu blames the later kings for letting the south slip, they note: *first he lays the blame on the former kings, deliberately granting the crocodile a step's slack — masterful*. They saw the concession for what it was: a foothold granted only so it could be revoked. And at the turn to the reconquest — *all is soothed and held* — they wrote in the margin, simply, *now he can hold the far places*, catching the exact reversal of the earlier *could not hold what lay far off*. They marked the linchpin sentence as the linchpin. In other words, the lapse-and-reconquest reading is not a modern imposition smuggled in by a brush with a thesis; it is how careful readers have understood the architecture of this piece for centuries. What is arguably mine is only the emphasis — the insistence that this imperial architecture is the *point* of the eviction and not merely its ornament. Weigh even that against the plainer reading, that a governor is asserting his authority in grand terms, and decide which the text better supports. But do not take the frontier-history itself as my invention. It is in the text, and the old readers saw it plainly.

The rival sovereign

Now watch how Han Yu describes the crocodile itself, because the language is startling and it explains the promotion from the owl's treatment to this one.

The crocodile, he charges, *glares* and will not settle quietly in its pool; it *occupies* the water and devours the people's livestock — their livestock, their bears and pigs and deer and roebuck — to fatten its body and breed its offspring; it *sets itself against* the governor and *contends with him for mastery*. That last phrase is the extraordinary one. The crocodile is not described as vermin. It is described as a *rival for sovereignty* — a power contending with the governor for who shall be lord of this territory. Han Yu writes that though he is but a weak and unworthy prefect — a worn-out nag of a governor, he says, mocking his own modesty — he will not bow his head and cringe before a crocodile, will not be shamed before his people, will not skulk and live a coward's life here. And the word he uses for the cringing he refuses is one to say aloud: *xīn-xīn xiàn-xiàn* (怵怵覷覷), a doubled, blinking, flinching little phrase whose very sound performs the timid cowering it names — the cringe made audible. He will not be *xīn-xīn xiàn-xiàn* before a reptile. The sound of the word is half the insult. And then the line that gives the whole game away: *having come here as an official bearing the Son of Heaven's mandate, by the very nature of his position he cannot but contend with the crocodile*.

He *cannot but contend with the crocodile*. The reptile has been elevated into a peer — a claimant to the same territory, a holder of a rival mastery, an adversary worthy of a formal contest. This is why the crocodile gets a letter where the owl got an arrow. The owl was a nuisance to be exterminated; the crocodile is a *competing sovereign* to be confronted, out-argued, and required to withdraw. You do not send a proclamation to vermin. You send a proclamation to a rival power whom you intend to displace, and whom protocol requires you to address as a power even as you evict him. The dignity of the document is the measure of the dignity Han Yu grants the adversary — and he grants it precisely so that defeating the adversary will mean something. To out-face a mere pest proves nothing; to out-face a rival sovereign and make him quit the field is to demonstrate that the governor, and the throne behind him, truly hold this land.

The terms

And so to the ultimatum itself, which is the most famous passage and the one that shows the machine's peculiar patience.

Han Yu offers the crocodile a way out, and offers it in a strange, escalating, almost merciful cadence. To the south, he says, lies the great sea, where creatures as vast as the whale and as small as the shrimp all find room to live and feed; a crocodile could set out in the morning and arrive by evening. So: *here is the agreement I make with you*. Take your ugly kind and go south to the sea, and do it within three days. And then the extension, granted in advance: if three days is not enough, then five; if five is not enough, then seven. But if after seven days you have still not gone, then it means either that you refuse to acknowledge the governor and heed his words, or else that you are *stupid and unhearing* — witless, unresponsive, deaf to reason — and a creature that defies the Son of Heaven's officer, or that is too dull to hear him, and that harms the people, may be *killed*. At which point the governor will pick men skilled with the strong bow and the poisoned arrow, and make an end of the crocodiles, and not stop until every one is dead. *Do not say you were not warned*.

Two things in this to carry away.

First, the graduated deadline — three days, then five, then seven — is genuinely a kind of mercy, and it is worth seeing it as such, because it is the exact thing the owl was denied. The owl got no days at all. The crocodile gets a week, and the week is offered in a patient, almost bureaucratic cadence, each extension granted before it is even requested, as though the governor were bending over backward to be fair. This is the apparatus at its most lenient: it *wants* the disposal to be relocation, not killing. It offers the creature every chance to remove itself. Force is held in reserve, named only at the end, as the consequence of refusal rather than the opening move. Compare the owl, where force was the *only* move, and you can measure exactly how much the crocodile's promotion to rival-sovereign has bought it: a week of grace, and the dignity of being asked.

Second — and this is the hinge of the whole document, the single phrase on which the licence to kill turns — that word I translated as *stupid and unhearing*: in the Chinese it is *míng wán bù líng* (冥頑不靈). The first three characters mean dark, obstinate, dull. But the last one, *líng* (靈), is the crucial one, and it is one of the deepest words in the whole Chinese religious vocabulary. *Líng* is numinous responsiveness — the quality of a spirit that *answers*, that resonates, that responds when addressed, that participates in the live web of correspondences by which the ordered cosmos hangs together. A thing with *líng* is a thing that can hear a summons and respond to it — a thing you can do business with, negotiate with, expel by agreement. And the crocodile's fatal condition, the thing that finally licenses its killing, is that it is *bù líng* — *without líng*, unresponsive, outside the web, deaf to the summons at the level of its very being.

And notice, before we go further, how airtight Han Yu has made it. He opens the terms with a condition: *if the crocodiles have sense, let them heed my words*. That little "if" is a trap with no way out. If the crocodile *does* have sense, it will understand the summons and leave — and the governor wins. If it does *not* leave, then either it has sense and is defying the throne, or it lacks sense entirely and is *bù líng* — and either way it may be killed. Understanding-and-obeying is the only exit; every other path, whether through defiance or through dullness, leads to the poisoned arrow. The crocodile cannot win. Its sole survivable move is to prove it has *líng* by doing exactly what it is told. Han Yu has built a door that opens only one way.

Sit with that, because it is the moral logic of the entire apparatus in four characters. The crocodile is offered relocation *first*. It is addressed as a party, given terms, granted a week. All of that assumes it *has líng* — that it can hear, respond, and comply. Killing becomes permissible only if it turns out to *lack líng* — only if it is revealed to be the kind of thing that cannot respond, cannot be reasoned with, cannot be reached by the summons at all. To be *bù líng* is to have placed yourself outside the community of things that can be negotiated with, and therefore outside the protection that negotiation extends. The web of correspondences is also, it turns out, the boundary of mercy: what answers, lives and is relocated; what cannot answer, dies. The whole graduated patience of the document —

the three days, the five, the seven — is really a *test for líng*. Han Yu is finding out whether the crocodile is the kind of thing that can be talked to. If it is, it leaves. If it is not, the strong bow and the poisoned arrow, and no regrets.

Where the crocodile went

The tradition says the dispatch worked — that the crocodiles departed, that the waters of the Bad Stream withdrew sixty *li* to the west — some twenty miles, that Chaozhou was rid of them forever. We need not believe the miracle to see what the story means. And there is one last detail, the fullest and quietest form of the whole operation, that I would not have you miss.

The stream was called the *Bad Stream* — the È X■, the Evil Creek. After Han Yu, it was renamed. Today it is the *Hán Ji■ng* — the Han River — and the hill above it is Han Mountain, named for the man who cleared them. The crocodile lost the river, and Han Yu got it — got it so completely that his name replaced the water's own. This is the deepest reach of the expulsion, deeper than the eviction itself: not merely to drive the noxious thing out of the place, but to *rename the place after the one who drove it out*, so that the very map records the reconquest. The stream that was Bad is now Han. The naming that opened the whole operation — the summons, the charge, the terms — completes itself in the naming of the land. To expel the crocodile was to take the river; to take the river was to put your name on it; and a name on the map is the most permanent form of possession there is. The sage-kings cleared the land and founded the realm; Han Yu cleared the stream and the stream became his. Name, charge, dispatch — and then, at the very end, the map itself rewritten in the conqueror's name.

That is the crocodile: a real reptile in a real river, evicted by a real governor — and, at the same time, a lapsed frontier reconquered, a rival sovereign out-faced, a test of numinous responsiveness administered and failed-or-passed, and a stream renamed for the man who wrote the letter. The owl was the machine at its simplest. The crocodile is the machine in full dress: patient, learned, merciful by the calendar and murderous by the deadline, and grander in its claims than any letter to a reptile has any right to be.

Next comes a patient you cannot gather with a pig — one that does not lurk in a stream but rides in the body of a sick man, and cannot be relocated to the sea because it has no place in the visible world at all. Next comes the fever.

Four — The Fever

譴瘧鬼

Han Yu, "A Reprimand to the Fever-Demon" (譴瘧鬼, Qi■n Nüè Gu■)

You cannot gather a fever with a pig.

That is the problem this chapter opens with, and it changes everything about how the machine has to work. The crocodile was a body in a river; you could bait it, convene it, serve it papers, and — if it would not go — shoot it. But the fever has no body you can bait. It is malaria, the shaking sickness that comes with the autumn, the cold-then-hot that rides in the blood of a sick man and cannot be found in any pool or dragged into any courtyard. You cannot see it, cannot catch it, cannot put an arrow through it. And yet Han Yu treats it exactly as he treated the crocodile — as a demon with a name, a family, and bad manners — and dispatches it with the same apparatus, adapted to a target that has no address. Watching how he adapts it is the whole interest of this chapter, and it takes us into the strangest and most important corner of the whole book: the place where the demon-expulsion machine turns out to be a *medical* machine.

Before we begin, one thing said plainly, because it matters and I will hold to it for the whole chapter. What follows is history and literature, not medicine. I am going to show you how a brilliant ninth-century mind *conceived* of disease — as a kind of demon, a thing out of place in the body — and how he wrote to expel it. This is a window into how the Tang world thought, and it is fascinating on exactly those terms. It is not, and must never be taken as, advice about how to treat an actual fever. The distance between their frame and ours is precisely the thing worth studying. Keep that distance in view, and the chapter opens up; lose it, and you have misread the whole thing.

And once that distance is fixed, you can see what this poem is really about, which is not the fever at all. It is about *disorder* — about a thing that has turned up where it does not belong and thrown a life out of true — and about the same operation you have watched in every chapter: name the disorder, work out what kind of thing it is, and send it back where

it goes. The sick body is simply one more place the ordering-machine does its work. The crocodile was disorder in a river; the owl, disorder in the night sky; the fever is disorder in a man's own flesh, and Han Yu meets it with the identical apparatus — a name, a pedigree, a charge, a dispatch. So read this as a chapter about disorder and its naming, wearing the costume of a fever. The illness is the vehicle. The subject is the machine, run this time on the body.

The whole poem, first

Here is the shape of it in plain English, so you have the arc before the pieces. The poem opens by naming the fever's descent — it is the worn-down soul of the Water Emperor, a great god's line reduced to scraps, and Han Yu asks how so unworthy a son of so lofty a house could still be working a fever-demon's mischief. It rides in on the autumn, bringing the cold-and-heat; the old folk curse it; it feeds among the sick body's vomit and filth, knowing nothing of clean from foul. Then the healers come, four of them, one after another — the physician with his hundred poisons, the moxa-master with his burning cones, the curse-master with his thunderbolt tongue, the talisman-master with his cinnabar and ink — and the poem lets us watch each one work. Then Han Yu turns and addresses the demon directly: I have looked into your ancestry, he says, and what a lofty house it is — your grandfather was the Yellow Emperor, your father was Zhuanxu, and the family luster has not yet faded. And yet you do not cultivate their conduct; you are base and mean, and few sink as low as you. Do you not shame your forebears?

Brazen-faced, you do not even know enough to go home. And then, the turn: go home, then. Clear and clear are the pure river waters — go back and settle there in peace, wear the clear waves for robes, take the white stones for your gate, breathe the moonlight, wave a lotus banner, come down and join the Nine Songs, drink the fragrant and feed on flowers. I give you these good words as a gift. Now off with you, and do not disobey.

That is the poem. Now watch what it is made of, because it does three things no text before it in this book has done.

The demon with a pedigree

The first thing Han Yu does — before the charge, before the healers, before anything — is establish the fever's *ancestry*. And you have seen this move before. You saw it done to me, in the very first chapter, when Han Yu gave a rabbit a divine forebear who helped Yu the Great order the world. It is the genealogy move: to introduce a thing, give it a family, because a family is a way of saying what *kind* of thing it is.

But watch what he does with the pedigree here, because it is not what he did with mine. He gives the fever a *magnificent* ancestry. The poem opens by calling it the worn-down soul of the Water Emperor, and then the genealogy fills in the family tree: the grandfather is Xuanyuan, the Yellow Emperor himself, the founding sovereign of the Chinese world; the father is Zhuanxu, another of the great god-kings of high antiquity. Do not get lost in the theogony — in whether the Water Emperor of the first line is strictly the same figure as the father named later. That is not the point, and Han Yu is not being careful about it, because carefulness about it is not what the passage is for. The passage is the *lineage move*, the same one you watched him run on me: assemble a lofty divine descent, name the great ancestors, establish the noble house — and Han Yu establishes that nobility here for one reason only: so that he can turn it into a weapon of *shame*. Your gate and lineage are lofty, he says — the ancestral luster has not yet faded — and *yet* you behave like this? You do not cultivate your forebears' conduct; you are base and mean; you shame your ancestors; you are so lost to decency that you do not even know enough to go home.

This is a different use of the genealogy than mine was. Mine established what I was. The fever's establishes what it has *fallen from*. Han Yu is not filing the demon into a category so much as arraigning it before its own ancestors — treating it not as an alien intruder but as a delinquent heir, a noble son gone bad, a child of a great house found slumming in the filth of a sickroom. And that framing is doing something precise, because it dictates the entire remedy. You do not exterminate a wayward son of a noble house. You do not shoot him. You *send him home* — home to the dignity he has forgotten, home to the place where a creature of his lineage belongs. The genealogy is not decoration; it is the argument for the cure. Establish that the demon is a noble son who has forgotten himself,

and the whole poem bends toward the send-home ending as its natural conclusion.

There is a phrase at the very center of the reproach that is the hinge of the entire poem, and I want to set it down plainly: *bù zhī guī* (不知歸) — "he does not know to go home." That is the demon's crime, stated in three characters. Not that it is evil, exactly; not that it is powerful; but that it is *out of place* and has lost the sense to return. And once you see that the crime is out-of-place-ness, you already know the cure, because the cure for being out of place is being put back. This is the same logic that sent the crocodile to the sea — a thing in the wrong place, relocated to the right one — but turned inward and moralized: the crocodile was in the wrong *jurisdiction*; the fever is in the wrong *station*, a noble soul degraded, and the remedy is to restore it to its proper dignity. Out of place, put back. It is the deep grammar of the whole book, and here it wears the face of a family reproach.

The four healers, and the weapon that beats them

Now the strangest and most revealing passage in the poem, and the one that opens the medical corner of this whole book.

Before Han Yu addresses the demon at all, he shows us four other people trying to deal with the fever, and failing. They come one after another, each in his own couplet, and they are worth meeting individually, because together they are a snapshot of the entire healing profession of the Tang world:

First, the *physician* — the drug-man — who piles on a hundred poisons, fumigating and dosing without pause. This is pharmacy: the fight-poison-with-poison logic of the herbal tradition. Second, the *moxa-master*, who lays his burning cones of mugwort on the skin, cruel as a ring of hunting-fire. This is moxibustion, the burning therapy. Third, the *curse-master*, who poisons with mouth and teeth, his tongue flinging thunderbolts. This is the spoken malediction, the imprecation that drives sickness out by force of word. And fourth, the *talisman-master*, who plies knife and brush, cinnabar and ink slashing crosswise. This is the written charm, the drawn talisman.

Four healers: drug, fire, curse, charm. Pharmacy, moxibustion, malediction, talisman. It is a genuine catalogue of how a Tang person in trouble might seek a cure — the whole competing marketplace of healing, from the physician's dispensary to the talisman-master's inked paper. And here is the crucial thing: in Han Yu's poem, *they all fail*. Every one of them works his craft, and the fever does not lift. Han Yu lays out the entire field of specialists precisely so that he can show them defeated — and then step in himself and succeed where all four could not.

Succeed with what? This is the gem of the whole poem, and it is the deepest claim in the entire book, so let me give it its full weight. At the very end, after the send-home, Han Yu names the instrument of his own cure. *I give you these good words as a gift* — zèng rú yǐ hǎo cí (贈汝以好辭). *Good words*. Hǎo cí. That is the weapon. Not a hundred poisons, not burning mugwort, not a thunderbolt curse, not an inked talisman — but *elegant language*, the well-made literary composition, the poem itself. The four specialists brought their drugs and their fire and their charms, and failed. The man of letters brings *good words*, and the fever goes.

Sit with what that claim actually is. Han Yu is saying — with a straight face and a smile at once, because the poem is playful even here — that the master of *literary language* can do what the physician and the exorcist cannot. That the highest healing instrument is not the drug or the charm but the *elegant word*, correctly deployed by a man who has mastered the classical tradition. The literatus out-doctors the doctors. The whole competing field of Tang healing is written up as a row of failures so that *good words* can win. And if you have followed this book from the start, you will recognize what this is: it is the same claim the whole apparatus makes, in every chapter, now stated at its most naked. The man who commands the written word commands the thing the word addresses. The brush beats the bow, the drug, the fire, and the charm. Hǎo cí is the master-instrument, and this little poem about a fever is where the book says so most plainly.

I will not pretend this is modest, and it is not meant to be. It is a poet's claim for the supremacy of his own art, made half in play. But it is also, read straight, the thesis of the

entire demon-expulsion tradition: that the correct, elegant, classically grounded *word* is the instrument that orders the world — that names the strange, sorts it, and sends it where it belongs. The four healers had techniques. Han Yu had the *word*, and in this tradition the word is the thing that everything else answers to.

The turn, and the sound of it

Watch, now, what happens to the *sound* of the poem when Han Yu stops charging the demon and starts sending it home, because this is a thing you can hear, and it is the reason I keep asking you to read these aloud.

The charge and the healer-passage are harsh. The language is clotted and grating — a hundred poisons, burning cones, thunderbolts, the vomit and filth the demon feeds among, the shriveled scallion of its neck. The sounds are hard; the images are ugly; the poem *sounds* like the sickness it describes. And then Han Yu turns to the send-off, and the sound turns with it. *Zhàn zhàn jīng shuǐ qīng* — clear, clear are the pure river waters. Suddenly the poem is flowing, luminous, gorgeous: clear waves for robes, white stones for a gate, the breath of moonlight, a lotus banner, the fragrant herbs of the Nine Songs. The grating stops and the music begins, exactly at the moment the poem stops accusing and starts *conjuring* — exactly where it turns from driving the demon out to drawing it home.

That shift is not an accident of mood. It is the technique showing itself. When the poem's work changes from *indicting* to *summoning* — from arguing the demon guilty to calling it lovingly toward its proper home — the language shifts register, from the clotted diction of the charge to the flowing, incantatory music of the send-off. The send-off is written in the manner of the *Chu ci*, the old shaman-songs of the southern Chu country — Han Yu ends by inviting the fever to "come down and join the Nine Songs," which are the most famous of those southern hymns. He is not just expelling the demon; he is singing it into a beautiful southern world, re-filing it into a poetic cosmology he commands. And the music is the summoning. The words turn lovely precisely because lovely words are what draw a noble soul home. You can hear the machine change gears — from prose-hard

indictment to verse-lovely conjuring — in the sound itself. Read the harsh part and the clear part aloud, one after the other, and the whole technique is in your ear.

The fever that went south

There is one more thing to tell about this poem, and it is the reason I have been looking forward to this chapter, because it is where the story of this whole book reaches past Han Yu's own lifetime and proves something I have only been able to promise you until now.

I told you, back in my own chapter, that a brush's descendants scatter into every land — that the individual instrument wears out but the craft propagates, is picked up by the next hand, carried on. I meant it as the truth about instruments and lineages. But this fever-poem lets me show it to you as a *fact*, documented, in ink.

A century and a half after Han Yu died, and a thousand miles to the south, in the coastal region of Fujian, a local cult produced its own demon-expelling dispatches — three of them, in the spring of 975, to drive out a pestilence, a drought, and a frog-borne malarial fever that plagued the region. And when a scholar reads those dispatches beside Han Yu's fever-poem, something remarkable appears. They do not merely resemble it. They take it apart and use the pieces — and each dispatch takes a different piece.

The *pestilence* dispatch **names him**. "Han Tuizhi," it says, using Han Yu's courtesy name, and Liu Yuxi in the same breath, "also has his composition on the fever-demon" — and it names the genre with him: some drive these things out with prose, some send them off with verse. That is a writer signing himself into a lineage, and saying whose lineage it is.

The *frog* dispatch — the malarial one — **reproduces the four healers**, the same roster in the same order, physician and moxa-master and curse-master and talisman-master, every one of them failing, exactly as they fail here, so that the elegant word can once again win.

And the *drought* dispatch **borrowes the genealogy-of-shame**, the noble-house-degraded reproach, almost word for word, and turns it on a demon of its own: the gateway of your house has not yet faded from view — how is it that you, the unworthy one, do not

cultivate your conduct? Two of the three also carry his diagnosis of what makes a demon killable, the lack of *líng*, the numinous responsiveness we met at the crocodile's creek.

Nor is it only this poem they take. The drought dispatch loads a grass-cart and packs dry rations and tells the demon to gather its companions and ride the dust and the wind — which is the send-off from the poverties chapter, almost to the graph — and it gives the demon a home to the south of the sea that can be reached by setting out at dawn and arriving by dusk, which is what Han Yu offered the crocodiles. Four of the five texts in this book are being quarried.

I want to be careful about what this shows, because it is easy to make too much of and I would rather make exactly enough. It shows, beyond doubt, that Han Yu's fever-poem was still being *used* a century and a half on — that his machine, his four healers, his shaming genealogy, his whole apparatus for writing a fever out of the world, had traveled south and been picked up and run again by other hands, who knew whose machine it was and said so. The craft propagated. The brush scattered into every land, and here is one of the lands it reached, with Han Yu's own name written into the dispatch as the acknowledged master of the form. That the deeper current I have been tracing — the word as the world-ordering instrument, running from the oldest inscriptions down through Han Yu and onward — reaches all the way to a Fujian fever-dispatch of the tenth century is something I will let you weigh for yourself, as the larger claim it is. But the fact at the center of it is solid, and it is lovely, and it is exactly the propagation my own biography promised: the fever-poem had children, and the children knew their father's name.

So: you have watched the machine work on a thing with no body. A fever was named, given a noble and shameful pedigree, charged with the crime of not knowing its way home, abandoned by four kinds of healer, and then sent home — home to the pure river, in the loveliest words the poet could make, because good words are the instrument that does what drugs and fire and charms cannot. And you have seen the machine outlive its maker, carried south and run again a century and a half later by hands that wrote his name.

One patient remains, and it is the strangest of all — a thing Han Yu tries to expel and *cannot*, a thing that talks back, argues its case, and wins. One patient remains, and it is Han Yu himself, or near enough. Next comes poverty.

Five — The Poverties

送窮文

Han Yu, "Sending Off Poverty" (送窮文, Sòng Qióng Wén)

Four times now you have watched the machine work. A thing turned up where it did not belong; Han Yu named it, charged it, and dispatched it — killed the owl, relocated the crocodile and the fever, each according to what it was. The apparatus has never once failed. Name, sort, dispatch: it runs, and the noxious thing goes.

This time it does not go.

That is the first thing to know about the last text, and it is why I have saved it for last. In *Sending Off Poverty*, Han Yu runs the whole machine one final time — the fullest, most elaborate performance of it in the entire corpus — and at the end the thing he is trying to expel *refuses to leave*, argues its case, wins the argument, and stays. The expulsion fails. And it fails *on purpose*: Han Yu built a text whose whole point is that this particular demon cannot, and should not, be driven out. After four dispatches that work, here is one designed to break down — and the breakdown is the most human and the most searching thing in the book. To understand why the machine fails here, and why its failure is a kind of triumph, is to understand what the whole apparatus was finally *for*.

The strangest patient

The target this time is not an animal or a fever. It is *poverty* — the poverty of a scholar, Han Yu's own, the condition of a brilliant man who cannot get ahead in the world. And Han Yu personifies it, as the apparatus always personifies its targets, but he personifies it into *five* demons rather than one: the Poverty of Wit, the Poverty of Learning, the Poverty of Letters, the Poverty of Fate, and the Poverty of Friendship. Five poverty-demons, who between them have haunted him his whole life and kept him poor.

Notice already how far we have come from the owl. The owl was named in a single word that was also its death sentence. These five are named with care, each given a character, a personality, a case to plead. The machine's front end — the naming — has swelled into a whole *dramatis personae*. And that swelling is the tell: when a text gives its demons *names and voices and arguments*, it is preparing to let them *answer back*. The owl could not answer; it could only fall. These five are going to talk.

The full ceremony of expulsion

Han Yu opens by staging the expulsion with tremendous ceremony — the fullest send-off ritual in the whole book, and he lays it on thick, because the elaborateness is part of the joke. On the last day of the first month — the day the rite belongs to, and one he takes care to call auspicious — he has his servant tie together a willow-branch cart and bind a boat of straw, load them with dried provisions, yoke an ox and raise a sail — a whole little vehicle to carry the demons away. Then he bows three times to the poverty-demons and addresses them with elaborate courtesy: *I hear you have a date of departure; I have made you a boat and a cart and packed you provisions; the day is auspicious and good for travel in all four directions; eat a bowl of food, drink a cup, take your friends and companions, leave the old and go to the new — off you go, racing the wind, faster than lightning. You will have no cause to linger, and I will have the merit of sending you off in style. Have you any mind to go?*

It is beautifully done, and it is entirely the language of the crocodile dispatch turned courtly. There is the *pact* language — a date set, provisions offered, a route mapped. There is even the crocodile's own image: the demons could travel *faster than lightning, racing the wind*, exactly as the crocodile could reach the sea between dawn and dusk. Han Yu is running the relocation-machine — the send-the-thing-to-its-proper-place operation you watched on the fever — with every courtesy the form allows. He is *sending poverty away*, politely, with a packed lunch and a following wind.

And then the demons answer.

The demons answer

This is where the text does what no text before it in the book has done. Han Yu holds his breath and listens, and out of the silence comes a voice — faint, then clear — and one of the poverty-demons speaks. And what it says demolishes him.

You and I have lived together forty years and more, the demon says. When you were a child, I did not think you a fool. You studied, you farmed, you sought office and a name — and I followed you in everything, never changing from the first. When the door-gods scolded and shooed at us, I swallowed the shame and clung to you anyway; my heart was never anywhere else. When you were exiled to the hot, steaming wastes of the south, and a hundred other ghosts bullied you, it was I — I alone — who stayed and kept you. Four years at the university, breakfast on pickles and supper on salt — only I stood by you when everyone else found you distasteful. From beginning to end I never once turned my back on you. And now, on what grounds have you heard that I should go? Someone must have slandered me to you.

Read that, and feel the machine break. The demon is not a monster. The demon is *faithful*. It has stood by Han Yu through poverty, exile, scorn, and hunger — the one companion who never left when everyone else did. And it delivers the killing line, the one that turns the whole apparatus inside out: *If you can name us fully, it says, then you may be called a sage; and once our true condition is exposed, how would we dare not withdraw?* The demon invokes the naming-rule — the very rule the whole book runs on. Name us correctly, it concedes, and we will go. It grants the machine its own logic. It says: *use your instrument on us; if you can truly name what we are, we will leave.* And it dares him to do it.

The naming that keeps

So Han Yu names them. And here the text delivers its masterstroke, because the naming — the move that has expelled everything else in the book — becomes, when he actually performs it, the reason he *keeps* them.

He names the five. The Poverty of Wit: upright and unbending, hating the round and loving the square, ashamed to cheat, unable to bear doing harm. The Poverty of Learning: disdaining mere technique and reputation, digging out the hidden and the subtle, holding the very trigger of the numinous. The Poverty of Letters: mastering no single marketable skill, all strange and singular, useless to the age, writing only to please himself. The Poverty of Fate: his shadow at odds with his form, ugly of face but lovely of heart, always last to the profit and first to the blame. The Poverty of Friendship: grinding flesh and bone, pouring out heart and liver for others, standing on tiptoe to serve them — and set among enemies for his trouble.

Look at what he has just named. Every single one of these is a *virtue in excess*. Too honest to cheat. Too deep to be practical. Too original to be useful. Too principled to prosper. Too loyal to be safe. He set out to expose his five demons as the shameful things keeping him down — and when he actually names them, correctly, in full, what stands revealed is that they are *the best of him*. The five poverties are the five excesses of a man too good for the world he lives in. Naming them was supposed to be the act that dispatched them. Instead, naming them correctly reveals that they cannot be dispatched, because to dispatch them would be to dispatch his own integrity, his own depth, his own art, his own principle, his own loyalty. The instrument works perfectly — he names them exactly — and its perfect operation produces the opposite of expulsion. The truer the naming, the more impossible the sending-off. He has named himself.

And this is the turn the whole book has been building toward, so let me set it down as plainly as I can. In every chapter until now, naming a thing correctly was the first step to *getting rid of it*. Here, naming a thing correctly is the first step to *keeping it forever*. The apparatus does not fail because it is weak. It fails because it works — because when you turn the naming-machine on your own soul and run it honestly, what it names is not a demon to be expelled but a self to be embraced. The machine meets the one thing it cannot dispatch: a truth about who you are. And a truth about who you are, correctly named, does not leave. It sits down at your table.

What the demons were really offering

The demons do not merely refuse to go. They make Han Yu an offer, and it is the offer that turns the whole grim comedy into something like grace. Stay with us, they say in effect — keep your wit and your learning and your letters and your fate and your loyalty, keep all five of your ruinous excesses — and though we will keep you poor, we will make your name last a hundred generations. *A man lives one age — and how long is that? We will set up your name, and for a hundred generations it will not wear away.*

That is the bargain at the bottom of the book, and Han Yu takes it. The title says *Sending Off Poverty*, but the text, as readers have understood it ever since, performs the opposite: it is *Keeping Poverty*. He runs the entire expulsion machine, in its fullest and most ceremonious form, precisely in order to arrive at the discovery that this is the one thing he must not expel — that the poverty which ruined him worldly is the same poverty that will make him immortal, because it is only the name for his refusal to be less than he is. The five demons are the price of the name that outlasts a hundred generations. He pays it. And watch what he does with the transport he built. He hangs his head and his spirit goes out of him; he raises his hands and gives thanks; he *burns the cart and the boat* — both of them, the willow cart and the straw boat, the whole apparatus of sending-off — and only then does he usher the demons to the seat of honor. He does not merely let them stay. He destroys the means of ever sending them away again, and thanks them, and seats them above himself. That is not surrender. It is a man shutting the door behind a decision.

And here the machine reveals its final possibility, the one the owl and the crocodile and the fever could only gesture at. There is a disposal beyond killing, beyond relocating, beyond sending home. There is *keeping*. The last and highest thing the apparatus can do with a thing out of place is to discover that it was never out of place at all — that it belongs, that it is you, that the correct response to it is not expulsion but recognition. The owl was killed because it could not answer. The crocodile was relocated because it could answer and chose to leave. The fever was sent home because it was a noble soul in the wrong station. And the poverties are *kept* — because when the naming-machine is turned honestly on the self, it names the things that must never be sent away. Kill, relocate, send

home, keep: the four dispositions, and the last one is the one that turns the whole apparatus from a weapon into a mirror.

Why this is the end

I have arranged this book so that you would arrive here, and now I can tell you why.

The four dispatches before this one all pointed *outward* — at an owl on the roof, a crocodile in the river, a fever in a stranger's blood, all of them things to be cleared from the world so that order could be maintained. They were the machine doing its public work: naming the noxious, sorting it, driving it out, keeping the human world in its proper accordance. And that work is real, and this book has taken it seriously, and it has also, I hope, let you see clearly what that work quietly accomplished — how the clearing of a river could complete the reconquest of a province, how the naming of a fever could carry the authority of the classics, how the whole apparatus of expulsion was also an apparatus of order, and order is never innocent.

But the machine's last performance turns *inward*, and it fails, and in failing it shows you what the machine was always, underneath, about. It was about a man with a brush, deciding what belongs and what does not — and the deepest question that man can ask the machine is not *what shall I drive out of the world?* but *what shall I keep of myself?* Han Yu spent his life naming things and sending them where they belonged. At the end he turned the instrument on his own poverty and discovered the one thing that could not be sent anywhere, because it was him — his integrity, his depth, his uselessness, his bad luck, his fatal loyalty, the whole ruinous excellent truth of who he was. And he kept it. He let the machine fail, and the failure was the most honest thing he ever did with it.

That is why the book ends here. Because a book about the apparatus of naming and sorting and dispatching would not be finished, would not be *true*, if it ended with the machine only winning. It has to end with the machine meeting the thing it cannot dispatch, and bowing to it. The poverties are that thing. They are where the instrument, turned on its master, names him truly and lets him stay himself.

There remains only me — the brush that wrote all five of these, and has narrated them to you, and is nearly at the end of both its work and its story. Turn the page, and let me set down the brush.

A Jar of Brushes

Fur Tip, at the end

So there they are, the five of them — the owl, the crocodile, the fever, the five poverties, and me. Five things that turned up where they did not belong, and a man with a brush who named each one and decided what to do with it. He killed the owl. He sent the crocodile to the sea. He sent the fever home to the pure river. And the poverties he kept, because when he named them truly they turned out to be himself. That is the book. I have walked you through all of it, and now, if you will let me, I would like to set the brush down.

But before I do, there is one thing I have not told you, and I have saved it for the end because it is the truest thing I know, and I did not want you to see it coming.

I have been talking to you this whole time as though I were a brush. You have grown used to it, I think. Somewhere back in the crocodile chapter, or the fever, you stopped noticing how strange it was — a writing brush, explaining classical Chinese to you, telling you what Han Yu meant. You took my word for things. That is a small thing, and an ordinary one, and I do not raise it to catch you out. I raise it because it is exactly what these five texts do, and you have just done it too.

Han Yu talked to a crocodile as though it could understand him. He gave a fever a grandfather. He argued with poverty and let it argue back. Each time, he took something that could not really be reasoned with and he *named* it, and by naming it he made it into something you could address — a rival, a delinquent son, a faithful retainer. And the strange thing, the thing worth seeing, is that it works. Not on the crocodile. On *you*. You cannot ask a reptile to leave your river by writing it a letter. But you can make a reader believe, for the space of an essay, that a fever has a lineage and a brush has a voice — and once the reader believes it, the naming has done its work, because the world now holds one more thing that is named, sorted, and in its place. That is what the naming was always for. Not to move the crocodile. To settle the account. And you let me settle it. You let the naming stand.

I do not say this to trouble you. I say it because it is the one honest way to end a book like this one — a book that has shown you, chapter by chapter, how the naming of things is also the ordering of things, and how the ordering of things is never quite innocent, and how it is a real kindness all the same. You came to the last page still holding both. Good. Hold them. I only wanted you to notice, before you closed the book, that the ease you feel with me is the very thing these texts were always trying to teach the world to feel. You are not outside the story. You never were.

And there is a reason it is me telling you this, and not some other voice. I was there for all of it — not just the five pieces in this book, but everything. Every word that man ever wrote passed through me. The famous compositions and the ones he burned. The confident strokes and the ones his hand made when it shook. The memorial against the Buddha-bone that nearly cost him his head, and the private drafts nobody ever saw, the lines crossed out, the letters written at midnight and thought better of by morning. A man's secrets are not in the works he lets the world read. They are in what he writes and does not publish — and I saw all of that, because I was the thing in his hand at the moment each thought was still raw and true and his alone. I knew him the way no one else could, because I was there before the words were public, when they were only his.

And I should be honest with you about how I came to be there, since I have been honest about everything else. I did not choose him. You have read my story; you know how it began. I was hunted down in a war, my clan surrounded and bound, and I was handed to a hand — a conscript, a captive, an implement pressed into service, no more consulted about it than the crocodile was consulted about leaving its river. I had no character of my own; I took his. I went where the hand went and wrote what the hand wrote and could not have refused if I had wanted to. So do not let me tell you it was loyalty, exactly. A thing that cannot leave is not being loyal when it stays. Keep that in mind through what comes next, because the truth of it is more tangled than loyalty, and I would rather give you the tangle than a pretty lie.

And yet. I never told. Through forty years I held everything I knew and gave none of it away — not to spare myself, for a brush has nothing to spare, but because keeping his

secrets was simply what it was to be his, as much as making his marks was. Call it loyalty if you like. Call it the habit of a thing with no choice. I have stopped being able to tell the difference, and I suspect he had too. That is what forty years does. So understand what it means that I am telling you now. I am telling you because he is twelve hundred years beyond any harm the telling could do, and because you are the one who came looking, and because a secret kept long enough, by whatever you want to call the thing that kept it, at last becomes something else — not a betrayal to set it down, but a gift. This is the one true thing I was always keeping. I am giving it to you.

And now the setting-down.

Everything that works wears out. That is not a sad thing to say; it is only true, and it is true of all of us. A brush loses its hair. A man, after a lifetime bent over characters, finds his hand no longer steady, his eyes no longer sharp, the sounds of the world going faint — the ordinary toll of having done the work for a great many years. Han Yu felt it. I felt it. You will feel it, if you have not begun to. There is no need to dwell on it. It is simply the arrangement: the instrument is for making the mark, and then, when the mark will no longer come, for being set aside.

Understand that we were together a long time, the two of us. We traveled together — south into exile and back, and south again. We kept late hours together, the candle and the ink and me, while the household slept. There were good nights, when the words came, and bad ones, when they would not, and on the bad ones I do not doubt he blamed the brush, the way a man will blame his tools, and pressed too hard, and muttered. That is what it is to work alongside someone for a life: you quarrel, a little, over the work you both care about. I did not mind. It is only another name for intimacy. You do not argue with a stranger's brush. You argue with your own — the one that has been in your hand so long it has stopped being a thing and started being a companion.

I told you not to call it loyalty, and I meant it, and I will not take it back now. But I will not pretend it was only servitude either, only a captive doing what it could not help. It was both of those, and it was more than either, and after forty years I could no longer sort the

one from the other — where the being-used ended and the being-kept began, who leaned on whom, whether the whole heart I gave was given or simply taken and called a gift. I have stopped needing to know. That is the truth about anything that lasts between two beings bound together long enough: you cannot draw the ledger straight, and past a certain point you no longer want to. It was complicated. It was, in the end, like any true friendship — which is to say, not clean, not chosen from the start, not accountable, and realer than anything clean could have been.

But here is what I came to understand in the writing of all this, and it is why I wanted to be the one to tell it. Three of us served that man, and all three were spent, and all three were kept.

The poverties served him forty years and would not leave, and when he named them at last they were the best of him — kept, and seated at the head of his table. I served him too, and was worn to nothing in his hand, and thrown away bald — and then kept, brought back into this book to tell you the tale. And Han Yu himself served a throne that exiled him twice and thanked him with a joke, and he kept faith with the work regardless, cataloguing the world at the far edge of the empire until his own hand went still — and he, too, was kept. They made him a god, in the end. There is a temple to him on a mountain that carries his name, above a river that carries his name, and the lettered men who came after him laid out the proper sacrifices and called him a saint of their orthodoxy. It is a quiet sort of godhood. The common people never much took to it; he was too proper to work miracles, and a god who will not work miracles draws a thin crowd. But that is the only kind of god a man like this could become — kept by the record, honored by the class he served, a little apart, a little unvisited, exactly as he had lived.

That is the pattern, and it took me the whole book to see it. We were each the faithful thing that serves a person too good for the world he was given, and is used up doing it, and is kept anyway — kept not out of mercy, but because we were never really separable from him in the first place. You cannot send away a man's own loyalty. You cannot discard the instrument that wrote his soul onto the page. You cannot expel the poverty

that is only the name for his refusal to be less than he was. And you cannot quite lose a man who has written himself into the record, though the world will try, with exile and with jokes and with the slow wearing-down of the years. The marks remain. We stay. He stays.

And that is how a used-up thing is kept. Not in a hand — the hand lets go, it must. Kept in the record. The poverties at the head of the table. Han Yu in the words he spent his life making, read aloud twelve hundred years on by strangers who never met him and love him anyway. And me, here, in this book, brought back one last time to tell you the story, and then set down — not thrown away this time, but set down gently, among the others.

Because that is where a brush goes, at the end, when the work is done and the hand is kind. Not into the fire. Into the jar. You have seen it on a scholar's desk — the wide-mouthed jar where the brushes stand together, the ones still sharp and the ones worn to a stub, upright, at rest, done with the day's work. That is where I am going now. I have said what I was brought back to say. The five patients are named and dealt with, the man who named them is kept in the naming, and you, reader, have been let in on the whole quiet machinery of it, and taken it in stride — which was the last thing left to teach you. And the one true thing I carried all these years, the thing I kept when it could have hurt him and gave you only now that it cannot — that is set down too. A brush at rest is not holding anything back. It has made its marks and told its one secret and can be still.

Set me among the others, then. I do not mind the wearing-down; it was the work, and the work was the whole point, and the work is done. A brush is for making the mark and then for being set aside, and I have made my mark — his mark, really; I only ever followed the hand. But the hand is gone now, and the marks remain, and you are holding them, and that is enough. That is more than enough. That is everything a brush could ask.

I gave my whole heart. Set me down.