

The Bus Stop

GAO XINGJIAN

TRANSLATED BY SHIAO-LING YU

CHARACTERS

SILENT MAN 沉默的人, a middle-aged man

OLD MAN 大爷, in his sixties

GIRL 姑娘, twenty-eight years old

HOTHEAD 愣小子, nineteen years old

GLASSES 戴眼镜的, thirty years old

MOTHER 母亲, forty years old

CARPENTER 师傅, forty-five years old

DIRECTOR MA 马主任, fifty years old

(The ages listed represent each character's age at his or her first appearance.)

Place: A bus stop in the suburb of a city

(A bus-stop sign stands in the middle of the stage. The words on the sign are no longer legible due to years of exposure to the elements. Beside the bus-stop sign are two rows of iron railings where the passengers line up. The railings are shaped like a cross, with each of the four posts a different length. This shape is symbolic of a crossroads, or a fork in the road on the journey of life, or a way station in the lives of the characters. The actors can come onto the stage from all directions. The SILENT MAN comes onto the stage carrying a bag. He stops under the sign to wait for the bus. The OLD MAN comes on empty-handed.)

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OLD MAN: Did the bus just pass?

(The SILENT MAN nods.)

Are you going to town?

(The SILENT MAN nods.)

When you go to town on Saturday afternoon, you have to start out early. If you wait till you get off work to catch the bus, you won't make it.

(The SILENT MAN smiles.)

(Turning his head to look) Not a bus in sight. Wouldn't you know there would be fewer buses on a Saturday afternoon, when everybody wants to go to town? If you leave one minute too late, you'll hit the "rush hour"—what a weird expression! The moment everybody gets off work, the rush begins. They all hurry to squeeze in, but you have to be strong to push your way through the crowd. At my age I just can't do it. It's a good thing I got an early start, before those who knock off early even get started on their way. I didn't even dare to take a nap. *(Feels relieved and yawns)* If I didn't have important business in town, I wouldn't come now. *(Taking out a cigarette)* Do you smoke?

(The SILENT MAN shakes his head.)

It's better not to smoke. Why waste your money to get bronchitis? Besides, it's hard to get good cigarettes. The minute the Big Front Door cigarettes' arrive in the stores, people start lining up in the street; the line goes all the way around the corner. Each customer is limited to two packs. When your turn finally comes, the sales clerk turns his head and walks away. If you ask him a question, he doesn't bother answering you. Is this "serving the customers"? It's only lip service! All those Big Front Door cigarettes have gone out the back door! It's just like waiting for the bus. When you stand in line according to the rules, there are always some who don't go by the rules. They push to the front, wave to the driver, and the door opens for them. They're the "preferred passengers with connections." God! How I hate that term! By the time you try to get on, the door is slammed shut again. That's how they "serve the passengers"! What can you do but stare at them in frustration? Everybody knows this happens, but nothing is ever done about it. *(Looking at the side of the stage)* Hey, someone is coming. You stand at the head of the line, and I'll stand behind you. In a little while when the bus comes, all hell will break loose. Whoever is strongest will get a seat. That's how people behave nowadays.

(The SILENT MAN smiles. The GIRL comes onstage holding a small handbag. She stops at a little distance from them. The HOTHEAD enters, and with one leap sits down on the iron railing. He then takes out a cigarette with a filter tip and lights it with a lighter.)

(To the SILENT MAN) See, that's the fad nowadays.

(The SILENT MAN taps the iron railing to show his agreement.)

HOTHEAD: How long have you been waiting?

(The OLD MAN pretends not to hear.)

How long does it take for a bus to come?

OLD MAN *(peevishly)*: Go ask the bus company.

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HOTHEAD: That's a funny answer. I'm asking you.

(The SILENT MAN takes out a book from his bag and starts to read.)

OLD MAN: Asking me? I'm not the dispatcher.

HOTHEAD: I'm asking you how long you've been waiting.

OLD MAN: Young man, that's not how you ask a question.

HOTHEAD *(realizing his mistake)*: Grandpa.

OLD MAN: I'm not your grandpa.

HOTHEAD *(sarcastically)*: Then Your Honor . . .

OLD MAN: There's no need for that.

(The HOTHEAD, feeling rejected, starts to whistle while glancing at the OLD MAN and swinging his legs.)

This railing is for people to rest their hands on while standing in line. It is not a seat.

HOTHEAD: You can't hurt it by sitting on it. It's not made of straw.

OLD MAN: Don't you see it is tilted?

HOTHEAD: Did I make it tilt?

OLD MAN: If everybody sits on it and rocks it, how can it not tilt?

HOTHEAD: Is it your private property?

OLD MAN: I make it my business to protect public property.

HOTHEAD: Don't argue with me! Why don't you go home and argue with your old woman?

(He shakes the railing even more.)

OLD MAN *(trying his best to control his anger, turns to the SILENT MAN)*: You see . . .

(The SILENT MAN has been reading; he has paid no attention to the conversation.

GLASSES comes running.)

(To the GIRL): Get in line. In a little while there'll be total chaos.

(The HOTHEAD jumps down from the railing and pushes forward. He stands in front of the GIRL. The MOTHER arrives, hurriedly lugging a big bag.)

Let's observe the rule of first come, first served.

GIRL *(to the OLD MAN in an almost inaudible voice)*: It doesn't matter. I'll just stand here.

(The sound of a bus is heard. The CARPENTER arrives with big, vigorous strides, carrying a tool bag. He stands at the end of the line. The sound of the bus gets nearer; everyone looks in the direction of the bus. The SILENT MAN puts his book away. The line slowly moves forward.)

(Turning back to look at GLASSES) Don't push.

OLD MAN: Get in line, everybody get in line.

(The sound of the bus moves past them. The HOTHEAD suddenly gets in front of the OLD MAN and the SILENT MAN and runs to the head of the line.)

OTHERS *(to the HOTHEAD)*: Hey! Hey . . . hey . . .

(The bus does not stop.)

ALL: Stop! Why didn't it stop? Hello . . .

(The HOTHEAD runs a few steps after the bus. The sound of the bus fades away.)

HOTHEAD: Damn it!

OLD MAN *(angrily)*: The bus is not going to stop if we all act like this.

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MOTHER: Hey, you people in front—please get in line!

GLASSES (*to the HOTHEAD*): Get in line, get in line! Can't you hear?

HOTHEAD: What's the matter with you? After all, I'm in front of you.

MOTHER: There are not that many of us. Wouldn't it be better if we got on the bus in an orderly fashion?

GLASSES (*to the HOTHEAD*): You were behind her.

OLD MAN (*to the SILENT MAN*): Ill-bred.

HOTHEAD: You're well-bred?

MOTHER: Do you think you don't have to stand in line?

OLD MAN (*enunciating every syllable very slowly*): You jump the queue when you're supposed to stand in line. That's what I call ill-bred.

HOTHEAD: If your feet itch, tell your old woman to scratch them for you. Why are you taking it out on me?

MOTHER: Young man, don't be so rude.

GLASSES: We all tell you to line up. Why are you so insensitive?

HOTHEAD: Who says I didn't line up? The bus didn't stop. Why are you all yelling at me?

GLASSES: You were behind someone else.

HOTHEAD: I'm in front of you anyway.

OLD MAN (*trembling with rage*): Get in line!

HOTHEAD: Why do you keep stirring up trouble? You think I'm afraid of you?

OLD MAN: Are you looking for a fight?

(The SILENT MAN walks over to them. Seeing that he is quite strong, the HOTHEAD backs up a step but continues leaning against the railing so as not to appear weak.)

HOTHEAD: If you're so powerful, why didn't you make the bus stop?

(He leans against the railing and shakes it some more.)

OLD MAN: Young man, didn't you learn anything in school?

HOTHEAD: It's none of your business. If you're so learned, why aren't you riding in a limousine?

OLD MAN: Waiting for a bus is nothing to be ashamed of; it's social morality. Didn't your teachers teach you that?

HOTHEAD: We never had such a lesson.

OLD MAN: Your parents didn't teach you either?

HOTHEAD: Your mother taught you, how come you didn't get on the bus either?

(The OLD MAN falls silent, not knowing what to say. He glances at the SILENT MAN, who has resumed reading.)

(Smugly) If you've never gotten on a bus before, you've lived all these years in vain.

GLASSES: We're all waiting for the bus; please be a little considerate of the others.

HOTHEAD: Am I not standing in line? I'm right in front of you.

GLASSES (*pointing at the GIRL*): You were behind her.

HOTHEAD: She can get on ahead of me. But when the bus comes, she must be able to squeeze in.

GIRL (*turning her back to him*): How disgusting!

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HOTHEAD (*to the OLD MAN*): If you can get on, just go ahead. If you can't, don't blame me. And don't block the way either. If you're such an educated and sensible person, you must know how to get on a bus. I haven't had much schooling, but I sure can get on a bus.

(The sound of a bus is heard.)

MOTHER: The bus is coming. Everybody get in line.

HOTHEAD (*still leaning on the railing, to the GIRL*): I'm after you. If you can't get on later, don't blame me for pushing you.

GIRL (*frowning*): You go ahead.

(The sound of the bus is getting closer. The SILENT MAN puts his book away. The CARPENTER, who has been squatting all this time, stands up. Everybody pushes forward along the railing.)

GLASSES (*to the GIRL*): Try to get on the bus from the side. Hold on to the door handle.

(The GIRL looks at GLASSES but says nothing. Everybody moves forward in the direction of the bus. The HOTHEAD stands outside the railing, following right behind the GIRL.)

OLD MAN: Stop! Stop!

GLASSES: Hello . . . stop!

MOTHER: We've been waiting a long time!

GIRL: The one before this one didn't stop.

HOTHEAD: That son of a bitch . . .

CARPENTER: Hey!

(They all run after the bus and crowd to one corner of the stage. The HOTHEAD suddenly dashes forward; GLASSES grabs him. The HOTHEAD swings his arm; GLASSES seizes him by his sleeve. The HOTHEAD turns around and slaps GLASSES. The sound of the bus becomes faint.)

GLASSES: How dare you hit me?

HOTHEAD: So what if I hit you?

(The two fight.)

OLD MAN: They're fighting! They're fighting!

MOTHER: Young people nowadays.

GIRL (*to GLASSES*): Why don't you get out of his way?

GLASSES: That troublemaker!

HOTHEAD (*rushing forward*): I'll slap you again!

(The SILENT MAN and the CARPENTER separate them.)

CARPENTER: You both stop! Stop! You guys have nothing better to do?

GLASSES: Stinking asshole!

HOTHEAD: You son of a bitch!

MOTHER: Oh, how awful. Don't you people have any shame?

HOTHEAD: Why did he pull my sleeve?

GLASSES: All I did was give him a little tug. Why didn't you stay in line?

HOTHEAD: Don't try to be a hero in front of the womenfolk. If you're really somebody, let's take a little walk.

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GLASSES: Do you think I'm scared of you? You idiot!

(The HOTHEAD lunges at GLASSES again, but the CARPENTER grabs his wrist, making him unable to move.)

CARPENTER: Don't make any trouble. Go stand in the back.

HOTHEAD: It's none of your business.

CARPENTER: Go to the back!

(He grabs him by the wrist and drags him to the rear of the line.)

OLD MAN: That's right. Don't let him create any more trouble. Otherwise, none of us can get on the bus. *(To the SILENT MAN)* He has it coming.

(The SILENT MAN did not hear what was said. He has started reading again.)

HOTHEAD: I was at the front of the line. Do you think only you people can go to town, but I can't?

MOTHER: Nobody said you can't go.

OLD MAN *(to the MOTHER)*: We all go to town for some purpose, but he only wants to make trouble. There are those "three-handed" people² on the bus; we'd better watch out for them.

(Everyone feels his wallet except the SILENT MAN and the CARPENTER.)

HOTHEAD: What makes you think you're so important? Old turtle!

(The GIRL and the MOTHER smile at each other. The OLD MAN glances at them disapprovingly.)

MOTHER *(quickly changing the subject, to GLASSES)*: There's no need for you to get into a fight with him. You're no match for him.

GLASSES *(heroically)*: Has anyone seen such a troublemaker? No one will be able to get on the bus because of him. Are you going to town?

MOTHER: My husband and child live in the city. It's such a headache trying to catch a bus on Saturdays. You have to fight your way on.

GLASSES: Why don't you ask to be transferred to the city?

MOTHER: Who doesn't want to be transferred to the city? But you've got to have connections. What can we do?

GIRL: Two buses have passed without stopping.

GLASSES: They're already full before they leave the starting point. Are you going to town for some business?

(The GIRL nods.)

You'd do better to get on at the starting point. Where do you live?

(The GIRL looks at him with a guarded expression and does not answer his question.

GLASSES, feeling put out, adjusts his glasses. The SILENT MAN closes his book and turns to look in the direction from which the bus had come. He appears a little anxious and buries himself in his book again.)

OLD MAN: I'm really worried. I have to be at the Cultural Palace in the city by seven o'clock.

MOTHER: You really have a zest for life. Going to town to watch a show?

OLD MAN: No such luck. Let the townspeople watch the shows; I'm going to a chess game.

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MOTHER: What?

OLD MAN: A chess game. Chariot, horse, cannon—do you understand? Checkmate!

GIRL: Oh, to play chess. You must be crazy about it.

OLD MAN: My young lady, I've played chess all my life!

GLASSES: Everyone has his interest. If people didn't have a passion for something, life would be very dull.

OLD MAN: Well said! I've studied all kinds of chess manuals. From *Patriarch Zhang's Secret Methods for Chess Playing* to the recently published *Solutions to One Hundred Unfinished Chess Games*—I can show you all the moves without missing a single one! Do you play chess too?

GLASSES: I play occasionally.

OLD MAN: It's not enough just to play it occasionally; there's a lot to chess. It's a specialized learning.

GLASSES: Yes, it's not easy to play it well.

OLD MAN: Have you heard of Li Mosheng?

MOTHER (*seeing that the CARPENTER's bag is next to hers, she moves her bag closer to herself*): Do you do carpentry work?

CARPENTER: Mm—

GLASSES: Which Li Mosheng?

MOTHER: You work on Saturdays?

CARPENTER (*too lazy to respond*): Uh.

OLD MAN: You say you play chess but you don't even know Li Mosheng?

GLASSES (*apologetically*): I have no recollection . . .

MOTHER: Do you fix chair legs? Our—

CARPENTER (*interrupting her*): I make fine furniture.

OLD MAN: Don't you read the evening news?

GLASSES: I've been busy preparing for the college entrance exam.

OLD MAN (*losing interest*): Then you don't even know the ABCs of chess.

MOTHER (*turning to the GIRL*): Does your family also live in the city?

GIRL: No, I have to do something there.

MOTHER (*looking her up and down*): To meet a friend?

(*The GIRL nods with embarrassment.*)

He must be a good young man. What work does he do?

(*The GIRL shuffles her foot, her head bent.*)

Is the wedding date near?

GIRL: What are you saying! (*Taking a handkerchief from her handbag and fanning herself*) How come the bus isn't here yet?

GLASSES: The dispatcher must be chatting with someone and has forgotten the time.

MOTHER: Is this how they "serve the passengers"?

OLD MAN: It's the passengers who serve them. If there are no people waiting at the bus stop, how can they prove their importance? You might as well be patient and wait.

MOTHER: In the time we've been waiting here I could have washed a big tub of dirty clothes.

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GIRL: You rush home on Saturday to wash clothes?

MOTHER: This is what married life is like: that husband of mine only reads his books; he doesn't know how to do anything else—can't even wash a small handkerchief! When you look for a husband, don't get a bookworm like that. A more resourceful person would have moved his family to the city long ago.

OLD MAN: But you asked for it. Why don't you have him transferred to the country? Every week you wait for the bus, push and shove to get on the bus. How can you stand it?

MOTHER: I have a child and I must think about his future. As you well know, rural schools are not up to standard. How many of their graduates get into college? (*Nodding toward the HOTHEAD*) I wouldn't want my Peipei to end up like that and ruin his future. (*The sound of a bus is heard.*)

GIRL: The bus is coming!

GLASSES: It's really coming. It's empty too.

MOTHER (*lifting her big bag*): Don't push. We can all get on and everybody will have a seat.

HOTHEAD (*to the OLD MAN*): You'd better watch your step. If you trip and lose your wallet and can't pay for your ticket, you'll really make a fool of yourself.

OLD MAN: Young man, don't be so sure of yourself. Sooner or later it will be your turn to weep. (*To the others*) No need to rush. Everybody line up to get on the bus.

(*They pull themselves together and form a neat line. The sound of the bus gets closer.*

DIRECTOR MA *arrives just in time, his jacket unbuttoned, his hands swinging. He walks straight toward the bus.*)

OTHERS: Hey, get in line! What's the matter? Don't you know the rules? Go stand in the back!

DIRECTOR MA (*disagreeably*): I just want to take a look. You people line up all you want.

GLASSES: Have you never seen a bus before?

DIRECTOR MA: I've never seen anyone like you before. (*Staring at him*) I'm looking for someone.

(*The sound of a bus passes by them; again the bus does not stop. DIRECTOR MA anxiously runs to the front of the bus stop.*)

(*Waving repeatedly*) Hey! Hey! Old Wang! Driver Wang! I'm Old Ma of the general supplies store!

(*The group breaks up and they all run after the bus.*)

GLASSES: Why didn't it stop?

GIRL: Several buses have come and gone. Stop this one quickly!

MOTHER: There were only a few passengers on the bus. Why didn't it stop?

DIRECTOR MA (*chases the bus, running and shouting*): Let me on! Open your front door! I'm Old Ma of the general supplies store! Just take me along . . .

OLD MAN (*cursing at the driver*): How can you act like this? Don't you have any concern for the passengers?

CARPENTER: That son of a bitch!

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HOTHEAD (*picking up a stone and throwing it at the bus*): I'm going to smash you to pieces!

(*The sound of the bus becomes fainter and fainter. The SILENT MAN gazes in the direction of the bus.*)

DIRECTOR MA: Okay. From now on don't you bus companies expect any favors from me.

OLD MAN: Are you Director Ma of the general supplies store?

DIRECTOR MA (*putting on airs*): What about it?

OLD MAN: You know the driver?

DIRECTOR MA: They've changed drivers. Those goddamned ingrates!

OLD MAN: Oh, that's why they don't appreciate what you've done for them.

DIRECTOR MA: Don't talk about it anymore. My friendly relationship with them is over.

Next time those bus company people come to me, I'll treat them just like everybody else. (*Taking out a cigarette*) Do you smoke?

OLD MAN (*glancing at the brand of the cigarette*): No, thanks. I forgot to bring my glasses with me.

DIRECTOR MA: It's the Big Front Door brand.

OLD MAN: That brand is hard to get.

DIRECTOR MA: That's for sure. Day before yesterday, the bus company people came to me, and I let them have twenty cartons. I had no idea they're so mean.

OLD MAN: How about letting me have a carton?

DIRECTOR MA: That'd be tough; they're in short supply.

OLD MAN: The Big Front Door has gone out the back door. No wonder these buses don't stop at their stops either.

DIRECTOR MA: What do you mean by that?

OLD MAN: Nothing.

DIRECTOR MA: What does "nothing" mean?

OLD MAN: It doesn't have any meaning.

DIRECTOR MA: What is the meaning of "it doesn't have any meaning"?

OLD MAN: It doesn't have any meaning means it doesn't have any meaning.

DIRECTOR MA: "It doesn't have any meaning means it doesn't have any meaning" does have meaning.

OLD MAN: Then what do you think it means?

DIRECTOR MA: It's very clear. You're saying that, as a director, I'm leading the way to open back doors. Isn't that right?

OLD MAN: You said it yourself.

(*The SILENT MAN paces back and forth in agitation.*)

GLASSES (*reading his flash cards*): Book, pig, desk, dog, pig, dog, desk, book . . .³

CARPENTER: Which country's English are you reading?

GLASSES: English is English. There's no which country. Well, I'm reading American English. The British and American people both speak English, but their pronunciations are different. It's just like the word "I" in Chinese; you say "an," they say "zan." In order to take the college entrance examination, we also have to take a test in foreign

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languages. I've never studied English before. I have to start from scratch now. I can't just stand here waiting for the bus and wasting my time.

CARPENTER: Go ahead and study. Study.

MOTHER (*murmurs to the audience at the same time as the GIRL*): My Peipei is waiting for me to make sweet dumplings for him. He doesn't like those made with sugar, bean paste, or five-kinds-of-nuts fillings . . . He only likes sesame seed filling . . .

GIRL (*in unison with the MOTHER*): We're supposed to meet at seven fifteen in front of the park entrance, across the street, under the third streetlamp. I'm to carry a purplish red handbag, and he'll be leaning against a Flying Dove bicycle . . .

(*The SILENT MAN walks up to them and looks at them with a melancholy expression. They stop talking.*)

DIRECTOR MA (*addressing the OLD MAN*): Do you know what's meant by "commodities in short supply"?

OLD MAN: Things you can't buy.

DIRECTOR MA: For consumers, it's things they can't buy. For us in the commercial departments, it's insufficient supply. Insufficient supply creates a contradiction between supply and demand. How do you solve this contradiction?

OLD MAN: I'm not the director.

DIRECTOR MA: But you're a consumer! Can you give up smoking?

OLD MAN: I've tried several times.

DIRECTOR MA: Do you know smoking is bad for your health?

OLD MAN: I know.

DIRECTOR MA: You know, so why do you still smoke? You know very well that we say one thing and do another. Don't we publicize family planning every year? But there's no reduction in the number of births, and our population continues to grow. Before grown-ups give up smoking, youngsters still wet behind the ears take up the habit. The number of smokers grows faster than tobacco leaves. Tell me, how can we solve this contradiction between supply and demand?

(*The SILENT MAN flings his bag onto his shoulder. He is about to leave, but halts.*)

GLASSES (*reciting in a loud voice*): Open your books! Open your pigs—not right; open your dogs—not right, not right!

OLD MAN: Can't you produce more?

DIRECTOR MA: You ask the right question! But that's the problem with the production department. How can we in the commercial department solve it? You blame me for opening the back door, but our back door can only take care of our old customers. Can we open our front door wide to the public? No way! It's always been like this: some people can get what they want, some can't. If everyone could buy whatever he wanted, there wouldn't be any contradictions, would there?

GIRL: What's all this yammering? How annoying!

MOTHER: You have no idea of what's annoying. Wait till you become a mother; then you'll know what's annoying.

(*The SILENT MAN turns around. The GIRL's eyes meet with his and she immediately lowers hers. The SILENT MAN does not notice her and walks off with long strides, not*

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even turning his head. The sound of soft music can be heard. The music expresses a painful yet determined search. The GIRL looks in the direction he has gone, lost in thought.)

CARPENTER: Excuse me for interrupting.

(DIRECTOR MA and the OLD MAN turn their heads.)

I'm not talking to you. You two just go on with your "comic dialogue."⁴

DIRECTOR MA: You think I'm wasting my breath with comic dialogue? I'm working on the ideology of my customer. (*Continues to persuade the OLD MAN*) You don't understand the situation in our commercial department. You're unhappy, right? Do you think it's easy being a director? You just try doing my job.

OLD MAN: I can't do your job.

DIRECTOR MA: Just try.

OLD MAN: I give in. You win.

DIRECTOR MA (*to the CARPENTER*): Did you see that? Did you see that?

CARPENTER: See what? You mean that teacher with glasses?

GLASSES (*making sentences*): *Do you speak English? I speak a litter . . .*⁵

HOTHEAD (*imitating him, in a strange voice*): Ai—si—pi—ke—ai—li—tu—er—

GLASSES (*angrily*): *Are you a pig?*

HOTHEAD: Look who's shitting!

GIRL: Stop it, will you? I can't stand it anymore!

CARPENTER: Excuse me, mister, what time do you have?

GLASSES (*looks at his watch, shocked*): What's happened? What . . .

CARPENTER: It stopped?

GLASSES: I wish it had stopped . . . Why, a year has passed!

GIRL: You're fooling us.

GLASSES (*looks at his watch again*): It's true. We've been waiting a whole year at this bus stop.

(HOTHEAD *puts his index finger into his mouth and whistles with all his strength.*)

OLD MAN (*glares at them*): Rubbish!

GLASSES: What do you mean, rubbish? If you don't believe me, look at your watch.

CARPENTER: No need to get excited. It's nothing serious.

MOTHER: How come it's only two forty on my watch?

HOTHEAD (*moves over to take a look*): It has stopped!

CARPENTER: What are you yelling about? (*To the OLD MAN*) Let's look at yours.

OLD MAN (*after much fumbling, takes out his pocket watch with a shaking hand*): How come it doesn't look right?

HOTHEAD: You're looking at it upside down.

OLD MAN: Ten past . . . one. It's stopped.

HOTHEAD (*gloatingly*): See, your watch is worse than hers. Your watch is just like you—too old.

DIRECTOR MA (*shaking his wrist, listens*): Mine has stopped too.

MOTHER: Look at the date. Doesn't yours come with a calendar?

DIRECTOR MA: It says "thirteenth month, forty-eight"—strange, my watch is an imported Omega!

HOTHEAD: Maybe it's only a plastic imitation.

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DIRECTOR MA: Go away!

GLASSES: Mine is a digital watch; it can't go wrong. Look, it's still ticking. I bought it last year and it's never stopped. It has six functions—it tells the year, month, day, hour, minute, and second. Look, hasn't a whole year passed?

CARPENTER: You really scare us. So what if it's a digital watch? That doesn't mean it keeps good time.

OLD MAN: My friend, we must believe in science. Electronics is science, and science shouldn't scare people. We're living in an electronic age. Something must have gone wrong with us.

MOTHER: You mean we really have been waiting a whole year at this bus stop?

GLASSES: It's true. It's really been a year—one year and three minutes, one second, two seconds, four seconds, five seconds, six seconds . . . Look, it's ticking away.

HOTHEAD: Hey, it's true, you guys. A goddamned year has really gone by!

(The GIRL runs away from the crowd, her hands covering her face. The others all look very grim.)

MOTHER *(muttering to herself)*: They must be out of a clean change of clothes by now. He doesn't know how to do anything; can't even mend his torn pants. Peipei must be crying his heart out for Mommy. Oh, my poor Peipei . . .

(The GIRL squats down. The others slowly crowd around her.)

GLASSES *(softly)*: What's the matter?

CARPENTER: Are you hungry? I have a piece of pancake in my bag.

OLD MAN: Stomachache?

DIRECTOR MA *(speaking loudly, to the audience)*: Is there a doctor among you? Someone please come and take a look at her.

(The MOTHER, keeping her own emotions under control, walks over to the GIRL and bends over her.)

MOTHER *(stroking the GIRL's hair)*: Are you not feeling well? Tell me.

(The GIRL buries her head in the MOTHER's arms and bursts out sobbing.)

We gals need to have a talk. You people please leave us alone.

(The others disperse.)

Miss, tell me, what's bothering you?

GIRL: Elder Sister⁶ . . . I feel so sad . . .

MOTHER *(caressing her)*: Lean against me.

(She sits on the ground and lets the GIRL lean against her, whispering to her.)

OLD MAN *(obviously aged)*: Ah, this chess game has fallen through . . .

DIRECTOR MA: You go to town to play chess?

OLD MAN: For this chess game, I've waited and waited. I've waited all my life.

GIRL: No! No! He's not going to wait for me any longer . . .

MOTHER: Foolish girl, he will.

GIRL: He won't, he won't. You don't understand.

MOTHER: How long have you known each other?

GIRL: This is our first meeting, at seven fifteen, in front of the park entrance, across the street, under the third streetlight . . .

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MOTHER: You've never met before?

GIRL: A friend of mine who works in the city, she introduced us.

MOTHER: Don't feel bad. You can always find somebody else. There are plenty of young men out there.

GIRL: Never again. No one will ever wait for me again!

DIRECTOR MA (*facing the audience, muttering to himself*): I must be going now. I was only going to be wined and dined at the Tongqing restaurant. Someone is giving a party, an old customer. But I don't have to wait a whole year just to have a drink in town. I have plenty of booze at home. Even that world famous Maotai, packaged in white porcelain bottles and tied with red ribbons—I only have to drop a hint, without even lifting a finger, and someone will bring it to me. I'm not boasting. I don't have to go to town. (*Loudly*) I don't have to!

OLD MAN (*excitedly*): I must play this game of chess!

DIRECTOR MA (*to the audience*): There are all kinds of weirdos in this world. They would even wait a whole year at the bus stop for a game of chess. (*To the OLD MAN, with kindness and pity*) I've played plenty of chess in my life, but I've never become so attached to it as you are. You must be getting very anxious to play by now. Come to my house, we can have a drink together and I'll play a game with you. We'll just drink and play, play and drink. Sir, you're advanced in years, why waste the rest of your life away at this bus stop? Come with me.

OLD MAN (*with contempt*): Come with you?

DIRECTOR MA: Sir, there are about one hundred employees in my general supplies store and no fewer than a dozen section heads and department heads, but none of them is my match. If you don't believe me, just go and ask them.

GLASSES (*reading*): pig, book, desk, dog . . . k . . . g . . . k . . .

OLD MAN (*trembling with excitement*): You . . . do you read the evening news?

DIRECTOR MA: Never miss it for a day. I only subscribe to the evening news. The evening news from the city is delivered to the post office in my township by noon-time and distributed to our general supplies store in the afternoon. I always keep the paper to read after supper. Then the next day I know all the news from the city.

OLD MAN: Do you know Li Mosheng?

DIRECTOR MA: Sure, that newly famous opera singer. He's marvelous!

OLD MAN: How can you say you play chess? I'm talking about our national chess champion!

DIRECTOR MA: Oh, you mean that Li somebody who took first place in the chess competition? He has the same family name as my wife.

OLD MAN: So what if he's the chess champion? His chess playing is just so-so.

DIRECTOR MA: My old friend, you mean you could be a champion too?

OLD MAN: The game he played to win the championship was published in the evening newspaper. I've . . . I've studied it. It's only because he lives in the city; if I also lived in the city . . .

DIRECTOR MA (*laughing*): Then you would be the champion.

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OLD MAN: I wouldn't say that. Anyway, I wrote him a letter and we agreed to play a game in the Cultural Palace in the city. It was for tonight . . . , a year ago tonight. When you play chess, you're not supposed to change your move. I shouldn't go back on my word either.

DIRECTOR MA: That's very true.

GLASSES (*trying to memorize with great difficulty*): *Bik, pook, Desgdokpikboog*—this really sounds awful!

HOTHEAD: It sounds like you're farting foreign farts.

GLASSES (*exasperated*): I'm not like you. You can goof off and do nothing, but I must take the college entrance examination! This is my last chance. If the bus doesn't come soon, I'll be too old to take it. Wait and wait—I've wasted my youth waiting. But you can't understand that. Please leave me alone.

HOTHEAD: I'm not bothering you.

GLASSES (*pleading*): Will you please leave me alone and let me have some peace and quiet? Can't you go somewhere else?

HOTHEAD: I can't go to the city!

(*He walks away, feeling bored.*)

(*Suddenly explodes*) Why is it that only city folks get to walk on city streets? Am I not a human being like anyone else? Why can't I go to the city and look around? I'm going no matter what.

CARPENTER (*irritated*): What are you shouting for? Can't you sit still?

(*He squats down, tears a piece of old newspaper from his tool bag, takes out a tobacco leaf, crushes it, and rolls it into a cigarette. Silence. The lights dim and the sound of cars can be heard in the distance. A barely discernible music is heard; the signature tune of the SILENT MAN becomes audible again. They all listen. It sounds like the wind and soon dies down.*)

DIRECTOR MA (*to the audience*): They've all been hit by some strange disease. (*To the others*) Hey, haven't you people given up yet? Are you leaving or not?

HOTHEAD: Where to?

DIRECTOR MA: Go back.

HOTHEAD: I thought you were going to the city.

DIRECTOR MA: I'm not crazy. Go all the way to the city just to have a lousy drink? I'm not that desperate.

HOTHEAD (*sadly*): But I just have to go to the city to have a taste of yogurt.

DIRECTOR MA: I'm not talking to you. Why are you butting in? (*To the OLD MAN*) You want to stay but I have to go.

(*They all look at one another, almost moved to action.*)

OLD MAN: Oh.

(*He looks at DIRECTOR MA, not knowing what to say.*)

MOTHER (*looks at the OLD MAN*): You . . .

GIRL (*looks at the MOTHER*): Elder Sister . . .

GLASSES (*looks at the GIRL with worried concern*): You . . .

CARPENTER (*watches GLASSES' action*): Hey!

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(DIRECTOR MA walks up to the CARPENTER, motioning for him to follow. The CARPENTER keeps looking at GLASSES. DIRECTOR MA glances down at the CARPENTER's tool bag and kicks it. The group stops looking back and forth at one another.)

HOTHEAD: Hey, where's that guy? Did he sneak away?

OLD MAN: Who sneaked away?

HOTHEAD: You're so old and confused. That guy who was standing right in front of you—he's gone without saying a word and left us all behind.

OTHERS (all become very excited, except the GIRL): Who? Who? Who are you talking about? Who's left?

OLD MAN (slapping his thigh, suddenly remembers): That's right. I said hello to him just a while ago. He's left without uttering a word.

MOTHER: Who? Who's left?

GLASSES (recalling): He was carrying a bag over his shoulder, stood at the head of the line, was reading all the time . . .

MOTHER: Oh, when you people started fighting, he was the one who broke up the fight.

CARPENTER: That's right. How come I didn't see him leave?

GLASSES: Could it be that he got on the bus?

DIRECTOR MA: They opened the front door for him?

GIRL (at a loss): The bus didn't stop at all. He went to town on his own.

DIRECTOR MA (pointing in two opposite directions): Did he go this way or that way?

GIRL: He was following the highway.

DIRECTOR MA: You saw him leave?

GIRL (sadly): He glanced at me, then walked off without even turning his head.

GLASSES: He must be in the city by now.

HOTHEAD: He must be.

OLD MAN (to the GIRL): Why didn't you say something earlier?

GIRL (feeling uneasy): Weren't we all waiting for the bus? . . .

OLD MAN: He's really a conniving sort.

GIRL: When he looks at you, his eyes don't even blink, as if he were looking right through you . . .

DIRECTOR MA (a little nervously): I hope he's not some official from the city who was here to investigate something. Was he listening to us when I was discussing ideologies with that old gentleman?

GIRL: I don't think he was at that time. He was pacing back and forth as if something was troubling him . . .

DIRECTOR MA: Did he collect . . . for example, information about the supply of cigarettes, or the selling of the Big Front Door brand through the back door?

GIRL: I didn't hear him say a single word.

DIRECTOR MA: Why didn't you tell him about the problems with the bus companies? The public is really unhappy with them.

OLD MAN: Nowadays, it's really hard to go anywhere. (Striking the iron railing while spinning around and pondering) This traffic, it's so confusing. Are you sure we're waiting at the right stop?

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CARPENTER (*uneasily*): Old man, what are you saying? This stop is not for going to the city?

OLD MAN: Maybe we should wait for the bus on the other side of the street.

GLASSES (*looks at the other side*): That stop is for going back.

CARPENTER (*relieved*): Oh, sir, you scared me.

(*He squats down.*)

OLD MAN (*trembling and facing the audience*): Y'all waiting for the bus? (*Talking to himself*) Can't hear anything. (*Louder*) Are you waiting for a bus to go back to the countryside? (*Talking to himself*) Still can't hear anything. (*To GLASSES*) Young man, I'm hard of hearing. Please ask them if they're going back to the countryside. If they're going back, I don't want to put myself through so much trouble to go into the city.

DIRECTOR MA (*shaking his head, sighs*): The city is not paradise. I'd better go back. My son is getting married. (*To the CARPENTER*) Do you do carpentry work?

CARPENTER: Min.

DIRECTOR MA: What about making some furniture for my son? It's better than wasting time here waiting. I'll treat you right.

CARPENTER: I'm not interested.

DIRECTOR MA: I'll give you wages and meals. You'll also get two packs of Big Front Door brand cigarettes, wrapped in tin foil, a day. (*Talking to himself*) Better not mention Big Front Door anymore. If the management of the commercial department hears this, I'll be in big trouble. Hey! I still don't know how your workmanship is.

CARPENTER: I make fine, hardwood furniture—those carved rosewood armchairs, black sandalwood screens for the living room. Can you afford them? It's a craft that's been handed down by my ancestors.

DIRECTOR MA (*to the audience*): He's really putting on airs. (*To the CARPENTER*) Let me tell you, city folks like to sit on sofas. Who wants to sit on your hard armchairs that hurt their butts?

CARPENTER: My furniture is for people to look at, not to sit on.

DIRECTOR MA: Huh, this is news to me. So, you only make ornaments?

CARPENTER: You can't find workmanship like mine anywhere. That's why the foreign trade company in the city wants me to teach my trade to a class of apprentices.

DIRECTOR MA: Wait here if you want to, but I'm going back. Anyone want to come with me?

(*Silence. The lights become dimmer and the sound of a bus can be heard in the distance. The signature tune of the SILENT MAN becomes audible again, soft yet distinct. The searching beat of the music becomes clearer.*)

GLASSES: Listen, can you hear it? It . . .

(*The music fades.*)

How come you all didn't hear it? That fellow must have gotten to the city long ago.

We can't wait any longer. It's no use to keep waiting. This is sheer torture . . .

OLD MAN (*at the same time as the MOTHER and the GIRL*): You're so right. I've been waiting all my life. Just wait and wait. I'm getting old . . .

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MOTHER (*at the same time as the GIRL and the OLD MAN*): Had I known it was going to be so much trouble, I wouldn't have brought such a big bag with me. It would be a waste to throw all these red dates and sesame seeds away.

GIRL (*at the same time as the MOTHER and the OLD MAN*): I'm exhausted, and I probably look a wreck. I don't want anything now; I just wish I could take a nap . . .

HOTHEAD: Stop that chattering. We could have crawled into town by now if you people hadn't wasted time arguing.

CARPENTER: Why don't you start crawling?

HOTHEAD: If you crawl, I'll crawl with you.

CARPENTER: My hands are for doing work. I don't crawl around like a maggot in a cesspool!

GLASSES (*facing the audience*): Hello, hello, are you still waiting? That's strange, no one answers. (*Louder*) Anybody over there still waiting for the bus?

GIRL: I can't see a thing in this pitch-darkness. It's night now; there won't be any more buses.

CARPENTER: We'll wait till dawn. The bus-stop sign is here. It can't be just a trick.

DIRECTOR MA: If the bus still doesn't come (*to the CARPENTER*), are you going to wait here for the rest of your life like a fool?

CARPENTER: I have my trade—they need people like me in the city. What would anybody want you for?

DIRECTOR MA (*feeling hurt*): I'm invited to a dinner, but I don't particularly want to go.

CARPENTER: Why don't you go back then?

DIRECTOR MA: I've been thinking about it for quite a while now. (*Worried*) I'll have to go through the open field; no villages or houses for miles. What if a dog attacks me in the darkness? Hey, which one of you wants to go back with me?

OLD MAN: I'd like to go. But going back is even harder—walking all that way in the dead of night.

HOTHEAD (*getting up, slapping his thighs*): Aren't you going?

DIRECTOR MA: Okay. The two of us will keep each other company.

HOTHEAD: Who's going with you? I'm going to the city to taste yogurt.

CARPENTER: To make perfectly good milk sour, how can that taste good? There's also that beer you find in the city; it tastes like horse urine. Not everything in the city is good, mind you!

HOTHEAD: I'm gonna have a taste of yogurt if it's the last thing I do. I'll drink five bottles of it in one go. (*To GLASSES*) Don't waste any more time with them. Let's the two of us get going.

GLASSES: What if the bus comes right after we leave? (*Facing the audience, muttering to himself*) And if it comes but still doesn't stop? My head tells me I should start walking, but I'm not one hundred percent sure. What if it's the wrong decision? But I must make a decision! *Desk, dog, pig, book*. Go or wait? Wait or go? That is the question of our existence. Perhaps fate has decreed that we should wait here for the rest of our lives, until we grow old, until we die. Why don't people take their futures in their own

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hands instead of submitting to the dictates of fate? Then again, what is fate anyway?
(*Addressing the GIRL*) Do you believe in fate?

GIRL (*softly*): Yes.

GLASSES: Fate is like a coin. (*Taking out a coin from his pocket*) You believe in this?
(*Tosses the coin in the air, then catches it*) Heads or tails? Pig, book, desk, dog, that decides it! Are you teachers? No. Are you a pig? No. I'm none of these. I am I. I am who I am. You don't believe in yourself, but you believe in this?
(*Self-mockingly he tosses the coin again and catches it.*)

GIRL: What do you think we should do? I don't have any strength left to make a decision.

GLASSES: Let's gamble with fate: tails we wait, heads we go. It all depends on this toss.
(*He tosses the coin in the air. It falls to the ground and he covers it with the palm of his hand.*)

Go or wait? Wait or go? Let's see what our fate says.

GIRL (*hurriedly pressing her hand over his*): I'm scared.

(*Realizing that she is touching his hand, she quickly withdraws hers.*)

GLASSES: Scared of your own fate?

GIRL: I don't know. I don't know anything anymore.

HOTHEAD: These two are really weird. Hey, are you going or not?

CARPENTER: Haven't you carried on enough already? Whoever wants to leave, just get moving. The bus stop is here, and people are waiting here. How come there's no bus? How can they pay their drivers if they don't take on any passengers?
(*Silence. The sound of a bus and the tune of the SILENT MAN can be heard, gradually becoming more distinct.*)

DIRECTOR MA (*waving his hands as if to disperse the disturbing sounds*): Hey, any of you want to leave?

(*The sounds stop. The OLD MAN, who has been leaning against the bus-stop sign napping, lets out a snort.*)

OLD MAN (*without opening his eyes*): The bus is here?

(*No one answers.*)

HOTHEAD: We're all glued to this wooden post. How stupid!

(*He does a handstand, then flops down on the ground listlessly. The others variously squat or sit on the ground. The sound of a bus is heard again. No one makes a move, but they all listen intently. The sound gets louder as the lights on the stage become brighter.*)

(*Still sitting on the ground*) Hey, it's here.

MOTHER: It's about time. Wake up, Grandpa, it's already daybreak and a bus is coming.

OLD MAN: A bus? (*Getting up hurriedly*) A bus!

GIRL: This time it won't drive by without stopping? Will it?

GLASSES: If it doesn't stop, we'll block the road.

GIRL: It's not going to stop.

OLD MAN: They wouldn't dare; it's their job.

MOTHER: What if it doesn't stop?

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HOTHEAD (*suddenly jumps to his feet*): Hey, Carpenter, do you have any big nails in your bag?

CARPENTER: What for?

HOTHEAD: If it doesn't stop, we'll blow its tires. Then no one will go to town.

GIRL: You can't do that—it's against the law to disrupt traffic.

GLASSES: I say let's block its path. Let's all line up to block the road.

CARPENTER: Good idea!

HOTHEAD (*picking up a stick*): Hurry up, it's coming.

(*They all stand up at the sound of the approaching bus.*)

GIRL (*shouting*): Stop!

MOTHER: We've been waiting a whole year.

OLD MAN: Hey you—stop!

DIRECTOR MA: Hey . . .

(*They all push to the front of the stage and try to block the road. A horn sounds.*)

GLASSES (*directing everyone*): One, two . . .

ALL (*together*): Stop! Stop! Stop!

GLASSES: We've waited a whole year.

ALL (*together, waving and shouting*): We can't wait any longer. Stop! stop! stop! . . .

(*There is the sound of a horn blaring wildly.*)

OLD MAN: Get out of the way! Get out of the way, quick!

(*They all get out of the way of the bus, then run after it yelling and shouting.*)

HOTHEAD (*rushing forward and waving his stick*): I'll smash it!

GLASSES (*holding him back*): You'll be run over.

GIRL (*closes her eyes in horror*): Oh, dear . . .

CARPENTER (*rushes forward and pulls the HOTHEAD back*): You want to get yourself killed?

HOTHEAD (*breaking free and running after the bus, throws the stick after it*): You son of a bitch! Go flip into a river and let the turtles eat you.

(*The sound of the bus fades away. Silence.*)

CARPENTER (*at a loss*): It was full of foreigners.

MOTHER: It's a tourist bus for foreigners.

GLASSES: Thinks he's a big shot because he's driving foreigners.

OLD MAN (*grumbling*): It wasn't even full.

CARPENTER (*feeling hurt*): Couldn't they even let us stand in that bus? It's not that we won't buy tickets.

DIRECTOR MA: Do you have foreign currency?⁸ You need foreign currency to get on that bus.

OLD MAN (*stamping his feet*): But we're not in a foreign country.

GIRL: I knew they wouldn't stop for us.

(*At this moment, a number of vehicles speed past them—cars of different makes and sounds and moving in opposite directions.*)

DIRECTOR MA: This is . . . this is just too much. They're playing tricks on us! If they don't want to stop here, then they shouldn't put up a bus-stop sign here! Let me

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tell you something: if this bus company is not shaken up, our transportation service will never improve. Why don't you all write a letter of complaint and I'll take it to the Transportation Department personally. (*Pointing at GLASSES*) You can write it.

GLASSES: How do I write it?

DIRECTOR MA: How to write it? Well, you just say this and that. What kind of intellectual are you? You don't even know how to write a letter of complaint?

GLASSES: What good would it do anyway? We'd still have to wait.

DIRECTOR MA: You can keep on waiting if you want to, what do I care? I didn't want to go to that dinner in town in the first place. I'm concerned for your sakes. Go ahead and wait, it'll serve you right.

(*They all remain silent. The signature tune of the SILENT MAN starts up again and changes into a fast and taunting melody in triple time.*)

GLASSES (*looking at his watch, shocked*): Oh, no!

(*The GIRL goes over to look at his watch. They count the numbers indicated on the face of the watch in time with the music.*)

GLASSES (*continuously pressing the indicator button on his watch*): Five months, six months, seven months, eight months, nine months, ten months, eleven months, twelve months, thirteen months . . .

GIRL: One month, two months, three, four . . .

GLASSES: Five months, six months, seven months, eight months . . .

GIRL: One year and eight months altogether.

GLASSES: Another year has just gone by.

GIRL: That makes two years and eight months . . .

GLASSES: Two years and eight months . . . No, it's three years and eight months. No, wrong again, it's five years and six . . . No, seven months, eight months, nine months, ten months . . .

(*They all look at one another in astonishment.*)

HOTHEAD: This is crazy.

GLASSES: I'm quite sane.

HOTHEAD: I don't mean you. I said that the watch is crazy.

GLASSES: Mechanical devices cannot become crazy—they don't have any nerves. A watch is just a device that measures time, and it isn't influenced by the psychological state of man.

GIRL: Don't say any more, I beg of you.

GLASSES: Don't stop me, please. This is not up to me. You can't stop the passage of time. Look, you all come and take a look at this watch.

(*They all crowd around GLASSES and peer at his watch.*)

Six years, seven years, eight years, nine years. Ten years have passed just as we were talking.

CARPENTER: Could it be wrong?

(*Grabs GLASSES' wrist, shakes it, listens to it, then looks at the face of the watch.*)

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HOTHEAD (*coming forward to press the button on the watch*): See, no more numbers, just a blank dial. (*Raising GLASSES' arm for all to see*) Just one touch of that knob and it stops. (*Smugly*) Almost got fooled by this gadget.

GLASSES (*solemnly*): What do you know? Just because you switched off my watch, it doesn't mean that time has stopped. Time is an objective reality; it can be proven by a mathematical formula— $T = a + \beta + \sum^2$, or something . . . It's all in Einstein's theory of relativity.

GIRL (*hysterically*): I can't take it anymore, I can't take it anymore!

OLD MAN: This is outrageous (*coughing*) making passengers stand around and wait till their hair turns gray. (*Suddenly becoming very old and decrepit*): Absurd . . . really absurd.

CARPENTER (*feeling very sad*): The bus company must be trying to get even with us for something. But we haven't offended them, have we?

MOTHER (*exhausted*): Peipei, my poor Peipei and his dad, what's going to happen to them now? They not only don't have a change of clothes, their clothes must be in rags by now . . . He doesn't even know how to hold a needle.

(*The HOTHEAD walks to one side and kicks a stone along the road. He then flops down on the ground, spreads his legs out, and stares ahead in a daze.*)

GIRL (*numbly*): I feel like crying.

MOTHER: Yes, dear, have a good cry. It's nothing to be ashamed of.

GIRL: But Elder Sister, I can't . . .

MOTHER: It's all because we were born women. We're doomed by our fate to endless waiting. First we wait for the right man to come along, and then we wait to get married. Then we wait for a child, after which we wait till the child grows up. By then we've already grown old . . .

GIRL (*leaning on the MOTHER's shoulder*): I'm old already, old already . . .

MOTHER: Go ahead and cry if you want; you'll feel better afterwards. I wish I could bury myself in his arms and have a good cry . . . I don't know why I feel this way . . . It's hard to explain.

DIRECTOR MA (*turns to the OLD MAN, sadly*): I'm telling you it's not worth it, old man. Why not grow old in the peace and quiet of your home? The playing of the zither, chess, calligraphy, and painting⁹ are for whiling away time. You can enjoy these in the comfort of your home. Why do you have to go to the city to compete with others? Is it worth throwing your last years away on the road for a few chess pieces?

OLD MAN: You don't understand. All you know is wheeling and dealing in business. But we chess players value the feeling of exhilaration we get from playing; it's all a matter of the spirit. The matter of the spirit, that's what life is all about.

(*The HOTHEAD, feeling very bored, walks up behind GLASSES and slaps him hard on the shoulder, which snaps him out of his reverie.*)

GLASSES (*angrily*): You don't know what pain is—that's why you're so numb. We've been cast aside by life and forgotten by the world. Life is flowing away right past you. Do you understand? You don't understand. You might be happy muddling along like this, but not me . . .

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CARPENTER (*saddened*): I can't go back. I make fine, hardwood furniture. I'm not going into the city just to make money; I've got my craft to think about. Back home I make a good living with my skills—putting a bed together, making a dining table or cabinet. My family and I have enough to eat. But I can't let the craft that's been handed down to me by my ancestors die out like this. You may be a director, but you don't understand how I feel.

GLASSES (*pushing aside the HOTHEAD*): Go away. Leave me alone. (*In a sudden fury*) I need some peace and quiet. Do you understand? Peace and quiet.

(*The HOTHEAD walks away obligingly, starts to whistle but then takes his fingers out of his mouth.*)

GIRL (*facing the audience while muttering to herself*): I've had many dreams in the past, some of them quite beautiful . . .

MOTHER (*facing the audience and talking to herself*): Sometimes, I really wanted to dream . . .

(*From here on, the GIRL's and the MOTHER's speeches are spoken simultaneously and weave together as they address the audience without interacting with each other.*)

GIRL: I dreamt that the moon laughed out loud . . .

MOTHER: But then I always collapsed on the bed, dead tired. I could never get enough sleep . . .

GIRL: I dreamt that he was holding my hand and whispering in my ear. I really wanted to get close to him . . .

MOTHER: The moment I opened my eyes I saw Peipei's toes sticking out of his socks . . .

GIRL: I don't have any dreams now . . .

MOTHER: The hem on his daddy's sweater sleeve was also undone . . .

GIRL: No more black bears jumping at me . . .

MOTHER: Peipei wants a little battery-driven car . . .

GIRL: or anyone chasing after me ferociously . . .

MOTHER: Tomatoes cost twenty cents a pound . . .

GIRL: I won't have any more dreams . . .

MOTHER: That's how mothers are. (*Turning to the GIRL*) I wasn't a bit like you when I was your age.

(*The following is a dialogue between the GIRL and the MOTHER.*)

GIRL: You have no idea how much I've changed. I've become so petty—I can't stand to see girls dressed nicely. I know it's not right to feel this way, but whenever I see city girls wearing those high-heeled shoes, I feel like they're walking all over me and flaunting themselves to humiliate me. Elder Sister, I know I shouldn't have these feelings.

MOTHER: I understand. I don't blame you . . .

GIRL: You can't imagine how jealous I am, how very jealous I am . . .

MOTHER: Come on, don't be silly. Don't be so hard on yourself . . .

GIRL: I've always wanted to wear one of those one-piece floral dresses, the kind with a little zipper at the waist. But I don't even dare to make one. If I lived in the city, it would be different. You see girls wearing those dresses all over the place. How could I wear something like that here?

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MOTHER (*stroking the GIRL's hair*): Wear whatever you want to wear; don't wait until you're my age. You're still young—some young man will surely be interested in you.

You'll fall in love, then you'll bear his child, and he'll love you even more . . .

GIRL: Go on, please go on . . . You noticed I have some gray hair?

MOTHER (*inspecting her hair*): No, I haven't found any.

GIRL: Don't lie to me.

MOTHER: Well, just one or two strands . . .

GIRL: Pull them out.

MOTHER: They don't show. Better not pull them out. You'll only get more if I pull them out.

GIRL: Please, I beg of you.

(*The MOTHER pulls out a gray hair. Suddenly hugging the GIRL to her, she starts to cry.*)

GIRL: Elder Sister, what's wrong?

MOTHER: I've got a lot of gray hair. Is my hair almost white?

GIRL: No, it isn't.

(*She hugs her and they cry in each other's arms.*)

HOTHEAD (*sitting on the ground, slaps a banknote down, takes three playing cards from his pocket, and throws them on the ground too*): Who wants to play? I'll bet this five bucks against any of you.

(*The OLD MAN feels his pocket.*)

Don't worry. I made this by doing odd jobs. The lucky person will win it. I'm not going to hang around here any longer.

(*The OLD MAN and DIRECTOR MA move closer.*)

Which one of you is putting up the stake? Three dollars in the left hand, two in the right—I'll be the five bucks banker in this game. My round-trip ticket and yogurt money are all in here.

DIRECTOR MA: How's a young fellow like you fallen to such bad ways?

HOTHEAD: Cut it out. Save your lecture for your own kids. How about it, old man? Want to try your luck? You can bet on both hands. If you pick the right card, then luck is with you; if you lose, well, what's a few bucks to a big shot like you? If they sell drinks here, I'll buy everyone a drink.

(*The CARPENTER walks over to join them.*)

Gate of Heaven, Gate of Earth, Blue Dragon, White Tiger.¹⁰ Which one you want to bet on?

(*The CARPENTER slaps him.*)

What if I don't want to go to town anymore? What if I don't want to eat yogurt anymore? (*Bursts into tears*) Let those goddamned city dudes strut on their city streets.

OLD MAN: Pick 'em up. My boy, pick 'em up.

(*The HOTHEAD rubs his eyes with his dirty hands, blows his nose, then picks up the money and cards. He continues to sob with lowered head. Silence. The sound of traffic in the distance mingles intermittently with the tune of the SILENT MAN. The tempo of the music speeds up and it turns into a lively melody.*)

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GLASSES: There's not going to be any bus. (*With great determination*) Let's start walking, like that man. While we were wasting our time at this bus stop, he's already gotten into town and gotten something done. There's nothing for us to wait for anymore.

OLD MAN: You're right. Young lady, don't cry anymore. If you had left with that man, you'd have been married long ago, and your child would be walking by now. But we stayed here waiting and getting more and more bent with age. (*With difficulty*) Let's go . . .

(*He staggers forward. GLASSES hurries over to give him a hand.*)

I'm afraid I won't be able to make it . . . (*To the MOTHER*) Are you coming with us?

GIRL: Elder Sister, should I still go to the city?

MOTHER (*smoothing down the GIRL's hair*): How unfair. Don't tell me that no one wants a nice girl like you. Let me introduce you to someone. (*Picks up her traveling bag*) I wish I hadn't brought such a heavy bag.

GIRL: Let me carry it for you.

DIRECTOR MA: Are you on a purchasing assignment for your unit?

OLD MAN: Are you coming or not?

DIRECTOR MA (*pondering*): If it's quality of life you're after, it's nice and peaceful in a small country town. We don't need to mention other things—just take crossing a street in the city for an example. I tell you, what with those confusing red and green lights, before you know what's happening you'll get yourself run over.

CARPENTER: I'm going.

HOTHEAD (*having regained his composure, to the CARPENTER*): Do you want us to carry you in a sedan chair?

DIRECTOR MA: What are you making such a fuss about? I've got high blood pressure and hardening of the arteries. (*Angrily*) I don't have to make it hard for myself. (*He exits, then looks back.*)

I forgot to take my medicine. It's made of wolfberry soaked in wine and formalin sedative with nutritive additives.

(*All watch DIRECTOR MA exit.*)

OLD MAN: He's gone back?

MOTHER (*muttering*): He's gone back.

GIRL (*feebly*): Don't go.

HOTHEAD: Let him go. We'll go our way.

CARPENTER (*to GLASSES*): Are you coming?

GLASSES: I want to take one last look to see if a bus is coming.

(*He wipes his glasses, then puts them back on. They all split up and pace up and down the stage. Some of them start to move; some remain motionless; still others collide with one another.*)

OLD MAN: Don't block my way!

HOTHEAD: Go on then!

MOTHER: What chaos.

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+1—

GLASSES: Ah, life . . .

GIRL: You call this living?

GLASSES: Sure it is. Despite everything, we're still alive.

GIRL: We'd be better off dead.

GLASSES: Why don't you die, then?

GIRL: If I die now, I've gotten nothing out of life.

GLASSES: There should be some meaning to life.

GIRL: But to live like this, how boring!

(They all walk in place and then turn around in circles as if possessed.)

CARPENTER: Let's go.

GIRL: No—

GLASSES: No?

HOTHEAD: Come on.

MOTHER: Yes, coming.

OLD MAN: Coming—

(Silence. There is the sound of falling rain.)

OLD MAN: It's raining?

HOTHEAD: Old man, if you go on dawdling like this, the raindrops will turn into hail.

CARPENTER *(looking at the sky)*: It's so unpredictable, this weather.

MOTHER: It's really raining.

(There is the sound of rapidly falling rain.)

OLD MAN *(mumbling)*: We've got to take shelter from the rain . . .

GIRL *(taking the MOTHER's hand)*: Let's go. So what if we get wet?

HOTHEAD *(taking off his shirt)*: We'll get wet for nothing if we stand around here. Oh, mighty heaven, you can send down knives on us if you wish.

GLASSES *(to the GIRL)*: Don't go. You'll catch cold if you get wet.

CARPENTER: It's just a shower, nothing to worry about. When the clouds pass over, the rain will stop.

(He takes out a sheet of plastic from his tool bag and puts it on the heads of the OLD MAN and the MOTHER.)

MOTHER: You think of everything.

CARPENTER: I'm on the road a lot, I'm used to all this wind and rain. *(To the others)*

Everyone come here and get out of the rain.

(It's raining very hard. GLASSES and the GIRL both come to stand under the plastic sheet in silence.)

(To the HOTHEAD) You're acting foolishly again.

(The HOTHEAD also gets under the plastic sheet. The light turns dim.)

OLD MAN: This autumn wind and cold rain is nothing to the young people. But when you get old and suffer from rheumatism, it's really hard on you.

GLASSES *(to the GIRL)*: Do you feel cold?

GIRL *(shivering)*: A little.

GLASSES: You don't have enough clothes on. Here, put on my jacket.

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—+1

GIRL: What about you?

GLASSES (*his teeth clattering*): I'm fine.

HOTHEAD (*pointing at GLASSES' watch*): Is that thing still ticking? What time could it be now, I wonder.

GIRL: Don't look at the watch! Don't look at the watch!

MOTHER: I have no idea what time it is now.

GIRL: It's better not to know.

(There is the sound of wind and rain. The following speeches are spoken against the background of the wind and rain. Several voices are heard simultaneously.)

HOTHEAD: The water level has risen in the river . . .

GIRL: Just sit here like this . . .

GLASSES: I like it this way . . .

HOTHEAD: I should be able to catch a few fish now . . .

GIRL: Let it rain! Let it rain! The wind is so cold . . .

GLASSES: Everything is fogged up, the field, the little hill over there . . .

HOTHEAD: Grandpa . . .

GIRL: But I feel warm in my heart . . .

GLASSES: The future road of life, everything is misty . . .

HOTHEAD: You want to bet?

GIRL: To lean against him, to sit together like this . . .

GLASSES: She is so gentle . . . so kind . . . so good . . .

OLD MAN: Young man, you're not so young anymore. If you muddle along like this . . .

GIRL: Your glasses are frosted up . . .

GLASSES: . . . so beautiful . . . How come I didn't notice it before? . . .

OLD MAN: . . . how are you going to have a family?

GIRL: . . . by water vapor . . .

GLASSES: Ah, water vapor—don't wipe it, just let it be foggy and misty . . .

(The following speeches are divided into three groups. They are spoken simultaneously, and sometimes they overlap. The dialogues and monologues in the three groups are sometimes loud, sometimes soft, as emphasis is shifted from one group to another during the course of the conversation.)

OLD MAN (*loudly*): It's about time that you learned a trade; otherwise, no girl would want to marry you.

GLASSES (*less loudly*): I'm past the age for taking college entrance examinations. Why am I going into the city?

MOTHER (*softly*): Once I was walking at night. It was also raining, raining without stopping.

HOTHEAD (*loudly*): What's the use? No one wants to teach me.

OLD MAN (*loudly, hinting with his eyes*): That master carpenter is right in front of you.

GLASSES: Without my knowing it, my youth has slipped away.

GIRL (*less loudly, nudging GLASSES with her shoulder*): Can't you take the examination for evening school? There're also correspondence schools. You'll pass the examinations, surely.

MOTHER: I felt like someone was following me. I glanced back but couldn't see clearly because of the rain. I only knew there was a person, carrying an umbrella and following me at a distance.

HOTHEAD (*loudly, gathering all his courage*): Sir, do you still take apprentices?

CARPENTER (*less loudly*): It depends on what kind of apprentice.

GLASSES (*loudly*): Do you think so?

GIRL (*loudly*): I do.

(GLASSES quietly holds her hand.)

MOTHER: When I walked faster, he also sped up; when I slowed down, he did the same.

HOTHEAD (*loudly*): What kind do you want?

CARPENTER (*less loudly*): Learning a trade is not like going to school. You must be nimble and hardworking.

GIRL (*loudly*): Please don't. This doesn't look good.

MOTHER: I was so scared, my heart was jumping wildly!

HOTHEAD (*loudly*): What do you think of me?

(Quickly withdrawing her hand, the GIRL turns to clasp the MOTHER's arm. GLASSES listens to their conversation with his hands clasped around his knees.)

GIRL (*less loudly*): What happened then?

MOTHER (*less loudly*): I finally reached home . . .

CARPENTER (*loudly*): A little too glib.

(A lively conversation ensues, with everybody joining it.)

MOTHER: I stopped; the person came closer. In the streetlight I could see it was a woman. She was also afraid—afraid that she was alone and she might run into some bad people.

CARPENTER: There are still more good people than bad people in this world, but you still have to be on your guard. Even if you don't take advantage of others, others may take advantage of you.

OLD MAN: It's this wanting to take advantage of other people that's so bad. You push me, I step on you. If we could be more considerate of others, we would all have an easier time.

MOTHER: If we could be close to one another and care for one another, wouldn't it be great?

(Silence. There is the sound of rustling wind.)

CARPENTER: Move inside a little more.

OLD MAN: Move closer together.

GLASSES: Lean against one another's backs.

MOTHER: We'll keep warm that way.

GIRL: I'm ticklish.

HOTHEAD: Who's tickling whom?

(They press together even more. In the roaring of cold wind, DIRECTOR MA's voice can be heard: "Wait for me—don't go!")

CARPENTER (to HOTHEAD): Who's calling over there? Go take a look.

HOTHEAD (sticking his head out from under the plastic sheet): It's Director Ma of the general supplies store.

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—+1

(DIRECTOR MA comes running, shivering from cold. He quickly ducks under the plastic sheet.)

MOTHER: You'll get sick from those wet clothes. Take them off quickly!

DIRECTOR MA: I hadn't gone very far, then . . . then . . . Achoo!

(He sneezes repeatedly.)

OLD MAN: You insisted on going back by yourself. If you had stayed with us, you wouldn't have become such a drenched chicken.

DIRECTOR MA: Ah, His Honor is still alive?

OLD MAN: I couldn't expire on the road, could I? You're still going to that dinner given by your connections in town?

DIRECTOR MA: You're still waiting for that long-ago-finished chess game?

OLD MAN: Can't I go to visit my chess-player friends?

MOTHER: You two, stop arguing.

DIRECTOR MA: It's that stinking mouth of his.

OLD MAN: You don't know how disgusting you are.

MOTHER: We're all under the same sheet together . . .

DIRECTOR MA: He made fun of me—(his sneeze not quite coming out) ach—

MOTHER: We'll feel better when the sun comes out.

DIRECTOR MA: Oh, this rain.

OLD MAN: It isn't rain, it's snow!

(They all stretch out their hands and feet from under the plastic sheet to find out.)

GIRL: It's rain.

GLASSES (stretching out his foot to step on the ground): It's snowing.

HOTHEAD (rushes out, leaping and jumping): It's goddamned hail!

CARPENTER: You're acting crazy again. Hold up the sheet!

(The HOTHEAD comes back obediently to hold up the plastic sheet. The sound of wind and rain mixes with other sounds—the sounds of vehicles starting and braking, the tune of the SILENT MAN, at first faint then becoming more lively.)

MOTHER: We won't be going anywhere after all. (Picking up her bag) Who knows how long we have to wait . . . This rain and snow, when will it ever stop? . . .

GLASSES (bending over a stack of flash cards and memorizing them): It is rain, that is snow.

OLD MAN (drawing a chessboard on the ground): The cannon moves horizontally from position 7 to 8; the horse moves horizontally from position 9 to 5."

(The GIRL, deep in thought, walks out from under the plastic sheet and from her character. An obvious change is taking place in her with every step, and she becomes a different person by the time she walks to where the audience sits. Light on the stage gradually dims until it is totally dark.)

GIRL: Who cares whether it's rain or snow, three years, five years, or ten years? How many ten years do you have in your lifetime?

(In the following dialogues, three voices speak at the same time.)

Your whole life is wasted in this way.

GLASSES (softly): It rain, it rained.

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+1—

OLD MAN (*even more softly*): The horse advances from position 9 to 8; the cannon moves back from position 4 to 3.

GIRL: You just keep on waiting and waiting forever?

GLASSES: *It is raining; it will rain?*

OLD MAN: The soldier moves horizontally from position 6 to 5; the chariot advances from position 5 to 1.

GIRL: Will you always have regrets, always suffer like this?

GLASSES: *It snow; it snowed.*

OLD MAN: The minister moves back from position 5 to 6; the cannon moves horizontally from position 4 to 7.

GIRL: Will we go on waiting endlessly, painfully, and never see the light at the end of the tunnel?

GLASSES: *It is snowing and it will snow.*

OLD MAN: The chariot advances from position 3 to 5; the minister moves back from position 5 to 6.

GIRL: The old have already become old; the newborn will be born soon.

GLASSES: *Rain is rain, snow is snow.*

OLD MAN: The chariot advances from position 3 to 2; the cannon moves back from position 4 to 1.

GIRL: After today there'll be another today. And there'll always be a future.

GLASSES: *Rain is not snow, snow is not rain.*

OLD MAN: The general moves back from position 5 to 3; the cannon moves horizontally from position 4 to 7.

GIRL: You just keep on waiting like this, and have regrets all your life?

GLASSES: *Rain isn't snow and snow isn't rain!*

OLD MAN: The general moves back from position 7 to 5; the chariot advances from position 3 to 7. Check!

(The stage becomes bright. The GIRL has already returned to the stage and to her character. The sound of wind and rain has also stopped.)

CARPENTER (*looking at the sky*): I said this rain wouldn't last long. See, the sun's coming out. (*To the HOTHEAD*) Fold up the plastic sheet.

HOTHEAD: Yes.

(He quickly folds up the sheet.)

MOTHER: Shall we start off?

GIRL (*looking at GLASSES*): Are we going?

OLD MAN: Where are you going?

HOTHEAD: Into the city. Right, master?

CARPENTER: You just follow me.

OLD MAN: Still going into the city? Will I ever get there at my age?

GLASSES: Wouldn't you have to walk if you go back?

OLD MAN: That's true too.

MOTHER: But my bag is too heavy.

GLASSES: Lady, I'll carry it for you.

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—+1

(He picks up her bag.)

MOTHER: Oh, thank you so much. Grandpa, watch your step, don't step in the water.

GIRL: Be careful.

(She supports the OLD MAN.)

OLD MAN: You people go ahead; don't let this old fellow slow you down. If I drop dead somewhere along the way, may I trouble you all to dig a hole for me? And don't forget to put up a sign and write a few words on it, which should say something like this: Buried here is an unrepentant chess fan, who has no other talents except having played chess all his life. He always yearned for an opportunity to go to the Cultural Palace in the city to show off a little. He waited and waited, grew old and decrepit, and finally collapsed on the road to the city.

GIRL: Oh, please don't talk like that!

OLD MAN: You're a nice young lady.

(He looks at GLASSES. Feeling uneasy, GLASSES keeps pushing his glasses up on his nose.)

Director Ma, are you going or not?

DIRECTOR MA: Yes, I must go to the city to lodge a complaint with the bus company. I'll find their manager and ask him whom their buses are for—for their own convenience or to serve the passengers? They should take full responsibility for abusing the passengers. I'm going to bring a lawsuit against them and ask them to pay for our lost years and health.

GIRL: You're a funny one. I've never heard of a lawsuit like that.

DIRECTOR MA *(to GLASSES)*: Please take a look at the bus-stop sign. What stop is this? What time is it now on your digital watch? Write all that down. We're going to settle accounts with the bus company!

GLASSES *(looking at the bus-stop sign)*: What? There's no name on it.

OLD MAN: That's strange.

DIRECTOR MA: Why did they put up a bus-stop sign without a name? Look again.

GIRL: There's no name.

HOTHEAD: Master, I understand now—we've been fooled by the bus company.

OLD MAN: Look again. How can there be a bus stop without a name?

HOTHEAD *(runs to the other side of the bus-stop sign, to GLASSES)*: Come take a look. It looks like a paper was pasted here before, but now all that's left is a few marks.

GLASSES *(examining it carefully)*: It was probably a notice of some sort.

DIRECTOR MA: Where's the notice? Look for it.

GIRL *(looking everywhere on the ground)*: With all this wind and rain, it's vanished without a trace.

HOTHEAD *(standing on the railing and looking at the bus-stop sign)*: The paste marks have turned gray. My God, it must have been ages ago.

MOTHER: What? This stop has been canceled? But last Saturday I still . . .

GIRL: Which last Saturday?

MOTHER: Wasn't it the last, last, last . . .

GLASSES: You mean which Saturday of which year, which month?

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(He peers at his watch with his glasses almost touching the watch.)

HOTHEAD: Don't look anymore. It's just a blank dial. Should've put in a new battery long ago.

CARPENTER: No wonder the buses don't stop here.

OLD MAN: We've waited for nothing?

GLASSES: Yeah, exactly.

OLD MAN (*sadly*): Why is this sign still here? They just use it to fool people?

GIRL: Let's go, let's go.

DIRECTOR MA: No, I want to sue them.

GLASSES: You want to sue whom?

DIRECTOR MA: The bus company. How can they fool people like this? I'll sue them even if I lose my director's job.

GLASSES: You'd better sue yourself. Whose fault is it that we didn't look carefully? Who told us to wait and wait? Let's go. There's nothing to wait for anymore.

CARPENTER: Let's go.

ALL (*together, mumbling*): Let's go, let's go, let's go . . .

OLD MAN: Can we still get there?

MOTHER: Could it be that a bridge on the road was washed away by floodwater and the road was blocked?

GLASSES (*impatiently*): How could it be blocked? So many cars have passed through.

*(The sound of cars can again be heard in the distance. They all look in that direction in silence. As the sounds begin to come from all directions, they are at a loss as to what to do. The sound of approaching vehicles becomes louder and louder, and the music of the SILENT MAN, like a sound from outer space, floats above the roars and rumbles of traffic. They all gaze ahead, some walking toward the audience, some remaining on the stage. They all come out from their respective characters. Light in the theater changes continuously while spotlighting the actors with varying degrees of brightness. The light on the stage disappears completely. In the following dialogues, all seven persons speak at the same time. The speeches by A, F, and G string together from utterance to utterance.)*¹²

ACTRESS A, WHO PLAYS THE GIRL: Why are they not going?

ACTOR B, WHO PLAYS DIRECTOR MA: Sometimes you

ACTOR C, WHO PLAYS THE CARPENTER

ACTRESS D, WHO PLAYS THE MOTHER

ACTOR E, WHO PLAYS THE OLD MAN: They all say it's more difficult to perform a comedy

ACTOR F, WHO PLAYS THE HOTHEAD: I don't understand.

ACTOR G, WHO PLAYS GLASSES

ACTRESS A, WHO PLAYS THE GIRL: Haven't they've said everything that can be said?

ACTOR B, WHO PLAYS DIRECTOR MA: just have to wait. Have you ever stood in line to buy fish? Oh, you

ACTOR C, WHO PLAYS THE CARPENTER: I don't mind waiting. When people wait, it's because they hope

ACTRESS D, WHO PLAYS THE MOTHER: Mother says to her son, "Walk,

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ACTOR E, WHO PLAYS THE OLD MAN: than a tragedy. When staging a tragedy, if the people in the audience don't cry,

ACTOR F, WHO PLAYS THE HOTHEAD: It seems

ACTOR G, WHO PLAYS GLASSES: I really don't understand.

ACTRESS A, WHO PLAYS THE GIRL: Then why are they still not moving?

ACTOR B, WHO PLAYS DIRECTOR MA: don't cook. But you must have lined up to wait for buses. To stand in line is

ACTOR C, WHO PLAYS THE CARPENTER: for something. If they don't have hope, that's really tragic.

ACTRESS D, WHO PLAYS THE MOTHER: my baby, walk!" The child can't walk.

ACTOR E, WHO PLAYS THE OLD MAN: the actors can cry. But this won't work for comedy.

ACTOR F, WHO PLAYS THE HOTHEAD: they're

ACTOR G, WHO PLAYS GLASSES: Perhaps

ACTRESS A, WHO PLAYS THE GIRL: But time is slipping away!

ACTOR B, WHO PLAYS DIRECTOR MA: to wait. If you waited a long time and then discovered what they sold was not hairtail!¹³

ACTOR C, WHO PLAYS THE CARPENTER: In the language of this young man in glasses, it's called despair. Despair is like drinking

ACTRESS D, WHO PLAYS THE MOTHER: You just have to let him crawl by himself. Of course, you can give him a hand from time to time,

ACTOR E, WHO PLAYS THE OLD MAN: If the people in the audience don't laugh, how can the actors

ACTOR F, WHO PLAYS THE HOTHEAD: waiting.

ACTOR G, WHO PLAYS GLASSES: they're waiting.

ACTRESS A, WHO PLAYS THE GIRL: I really don't understand, don't understand at all.

ACTOR B, WHO PLAYS DIRECTOR MA: but washboards—they make very good washboards in the city,

ACTOR C, WHO PLAYS THE CARPENTER: Didiwei.¹⁴ Didiwei is for killing flies and mosquitoes; why do people

ACTRESS D, WHO PLAYS THE MOTHER: then let him hold on to the wall

ACTOR E, WHO PLAYS THE OLD MAN: act merry on stage? . . . Besides,

ACTOR F, WHO PLAYS THE HOTHEAD: Of course it's not a bus stop,

ACTOR G, WHO PLAYS GLASSES: Time is not a bus stop.

ACTRESS A, WHO PLAYS THE GIRL: They're not going.

ACTOR B, WHO PLAYS DIRECTOR MA: the kind that's gentle on the clothes—but if you already have a washing machine,

ACTOR C, WHO PLAYS THE CARPENTER: take it and make themselves suffer? Even if they don't die from it, they still have to be taken to the hospital

ACTRESS D, WHO PLAYS THE MOTHER: and grope his way from one corner to the next and then to the door.

ACTOR E, WHO PLAYS THE OLD MAN: if the audience doesn't feel like laughing, you can't tickle them to make them laugh—they won't let you!

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ACTOR F, WHO PLAYS THE HOTHEAD: not a terminal.
 ACTOR G, WHO PLAYS GLASSES: Life is not a bus stop either.
 ACTRESS A, WHO PLAYS THE GIRL: Can we really go if we
 ACTOR B, WHO PLAYS DIRECTOR MA: then you have waited for nothing. How can that
 not make you mad? That's why I think
 ACTOR C, WHO PLAYS THE CARPENTER: to have their stomachs pumped—that's worse
 than death.
 ACTRESS D, WHO PLAYS THE MOTHER: Perhaps you should allow him to fall down,
 then help him get up.
 ACTOR E, WHO PLAYS THE OLD MAN: That's why it's more difficult to perform comedy
 than tragedy.
 ACTOR F, WHO PLAYS THE HOTHEAD: They want to leave.
 ACTOR G, WHO PLAYS GLASSES: They don't really want to leave.
 ACTRESS A, WHO PLAYS THE GIRL: want to? Then tell them
 ACTOR B, WHO PLAYS DIRECTOR MA: it's all right to wait, but you must know
 ACTOR C, WHO PLAYS THE CARPENTER: Say, have you ever traveled at night? You're
 walking through a wild country on a cloudy day.
 ACTRESS D, WHO PLAYS THE MOTHER: If a child never falls down, he'll never learn to
 walk. A mother
 ACTOR E, WHO PLAYS THE OLD MAN: Even if it's a comedy, you still have to put on a
 straight face
 ACTOR F, WHO PLAYS THE HOTHEAD: It's about time.
 ACTOR G, WHO PLAYS GLASSES: Let's go.
 ACTRESS A, WHO PLAYS THE GIRL: to go quickly.
 ACTOR B, WHO PLAYS DIRECTOR MA: what you're waiting for. If you just stand in line
 ACTOR C, WHO PLAYS THE CARPENTER: When it gets dark, you have no idea where
 you're headed.
 ACTRESS D, WHO PLAYS THE MOTHER: must have patience; otherwise she is not fit
 ACTOR E, WHO PLAYS THE OLD MAN: and act out those ridiculous and laughable inci-
 dents in life
 ACTOR F, WHO PLAYS THE HOTHEAD: They've finished talking.
 ACTOR G, WHO PLAYS GLASSES: We've said everything that can be said.
 ACTRESS A, WHO PLAYS THE GIRL: How come they're not going?
 ACTOR B, WHO PLAYS DIRECTOR MA: and spend half your lifetime—maybe even all of
 your lifetime—waiting.
 ACTOR C, WHO PLAYS THE CARPENTER: You just have to wait till daybreak. If it's al-
 ready daytime and you still
 ACTRESS D, WHO PLAYS THE MOTHER: to be a mother. That's why it's really hard to be
 a mother.
 ACTOR E, WHO PLAYS THE OLD MAN: for the audience. It is therefore much more dif-
 ficult to be an actor of comedy
 ACTOR F, WHO PLAYS THE HOTHEAD: We're waiting for them.
 ACTOR G, WHO PLAYS GLASSES: We're waiting for them to go.

—1
 —0
 —+1

ACTRESS A, WHO PLAYS THE GIRL: Let's all go at once.

ACTOR B, WHO PLAYS DIRECTOR MA: aren't you making fun of yourself?

ACTOR C, WHO PLAYS THE CARPENTER: hang around and don't get on your way, you must be a fool!

ACTRESS D, WHO PLAYS THE MOTHER: But to be a human being isn't very easy either.

ACTOR E, WHO PLAYS THE OLD MAN: than an actor of tragedy.

ACTOR F, WHO PLAYS THE HOTHEAD: Ah, let's go . . .

ACTOR G, WHO PLAYS GLASSES: Let's go!

(The sound of zooming vehicles from all sides gets closer and closer, mixed with the honking of all kinds of cars. Light on the center stage becomes brighter. The actors and actresses have all returned to their respective characters. The music of the SILENT MAN changes into a humorous grand march.)

GLASSES (*gazing at the GIRL, tenderly*): Let's go.

GIRL (*nodding*): Yes.

MOTHER: Oh, where's my bag?

HOTHEAD (*happily*): I'm carrying it.

MOTHER (*to the OLD MAN*): Watch your step.

(She goes over to support him.)

OLD MAN: Thank you very much.

(Helping and supporting one another, they are about to start their journey together.)

DIRECTOR MA: Hey, wait, wait for me! I have to tie my shoelace.

AUTHOR'S SUGGESTIONS FOR THE PERFORMANCE OF *THE BUS STOP*

The following suggestions are for reference only.

- This play experiments with the use of "polyphonic dialogue." At times there are two or three, and even as many as seven, characters speaking at once. Due to the conventions of the printed page, it is difficult to show the use of this device effectively. This may cause the reader some inconvenience. But then, a play is meant to be performed on the stage, where this "inconvenience" may contribute to the enrichment of dramatic expression.
- Just as one does not expect every instrument in an orchestra be played at the same pitch, the polyphonic dialogues need not be delivered at the same volume. The main theme should be complemented by various harmonies and accompaniment, but not overwhelmed by them. The director may handle this matter in various ways based on his interpretation of the play.
- Since drama, like music, is an art governed by time, various musical forms can be applied to it. In this play, I have borrowed the sonata and rondo forms to replace the conventional Ibsenesque dramatic structure. The director, like the conductor, should concentrate on the changing moods of the play.
- Sound effects, including music itself, should not be merely expository. In this play, sound effects and dramatic situations work as a whole, and the former often

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acts as a counterpoint to the latter. Harmonious combinations and disharmonious contrasts are used to give music an independent role, allowing it to carry on a dialogue with both the characters and the audience. When conditions permit the composition of original music for the entire play, the music of the SILENT MAN should be treated as a leitmotif with various musical variations.

- In traditional Chinese opera, drama and poetry are inseparable. This play is an attempt to meld modern drama and modern poetry. I hope the actors who perform this play will pay special attention to expressing the poetic quality of the work.
- In performing this play, greater emphasis should be put on artistic abstraction, or "essential likeness," rather than on realistic details. Examples of this approach can be found in traditional opera, such as in the vivid and subtle performance of Mei Lanfang in *Guifei zujiu* (*The Consort Gets Tipsy*) and Zhou Xinfang in *Xu Ce pao ma* (*Xu Ce Rushes to the City*). Care must be taken to present characters as real people in contemporary society, and exaggeration should be avoided.
- This play aims to combine dramatic action and inaction. When action is called for, clarity of physical movement should be stressed; when moments of inaction are indicated, characters should maintain a state of stillness while language replaces action.
- The dialogue is at times clear and direct, and at other times vague or even devoid of meaning, or is uttered simply for the sake of talking—like waiting for the bus without knowing why. This use of the dialogue can express the comic aspect of the characters. In delivering this kind of dialogue, there is no need to strive for clarity.
- This play is best suited to performance in theaters-in-the-round, assembly halls, and open-air theaters. If it is performed on the conventional stage, the performing area ideally should be extended in length but not in depth.

NOTES

This translation is based on the text in *Gao Xingjian xiju ji* (*Gao Xingjian's Collected Dramatic Works*) (Beijing: Qunzhong, 1985), 84–235. *The Bus Stop* was first published in the magazine *Shiyue* 3 (October 1983). This translation was first published in *Chinese Drama After the Cultural Revolution, 1979–1989*, ed. Shiao-Ling S. Yu, 423–84 (Lewiston, N.Y.: Mellen, 1996). The editor of this anthology wishes to thank Professor Yu and Mellen Press for their permission to include this translation here.

1. The brand-name Big Front Door, well known in China, serves as an ironic contrast to the practice of "backdoorism."
2. "Three-handed people" refers to pickpockets.
3. Glasses mumbles English words and phrases while waiting for the bus. The words and sentences in italics in this translation were in English in the original text.
4. "Comic dialogue," or *xiangsheng*, is a popular form of entertainment in which two performers engage in swift and witty conversation.

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5. This line by Glasses is in English in the original; the misspelling of "litter" for "little" is intended.
6. "Elder Sister" is a polite form of address for a woman about one's own age.
7. In the early 1980s, when this play was written, yogurt had just become fashionable in China, hence Hothead's desire to try this latest taste sensation. It was usually packaged in small porcelain jars and eaten with a spoon; it was also sold in bottles as a beverage and drunk through a straw.
8. Reference is to foreign currency exchange certificates (*waihuiquan*), which have the same face value as Chinese currency but are for use only by foreigners.
9. *Qin, qi, shu, hua* were the elegant pastimes of cultivated men in former days.
10. These names indicate the position of the cards in relation to the "banker."
11. The Chinese chessboard, like the Western chessboard, has eight squares by nine. A "river," a wide band, divides the playing area into two halves. On the baseline of each side there is a king's palace marked by two diagonals. The sixteen pieces do not stand on the squares but are placed where the lines cross, thus allowing for nine men to be set up on the starting line. The rules for the movements of the various pieces are as follows: The commander in chief (*jiang*) is not allowed to leave the palace and may move only forward, backward, or to the side in each case. The minister (*shi*) may move only diagonally within the palace. The general (*xiang*), also called elephant, moves two diagonal steps at a time and is limited to the land he serves. The chariot (*ju*), which is equivalent to the castle or rook, may cross the river. The cannon (*pao*) moves like the chariot but can take a piece only by jumping over another piece. The horse's (*ma*) move is a leap like the knight's move, but when another piece is standing next to it, its legs are hobbled in that direction. The soldier (*bing*) moves forward and, after crossing the river, sideways as well.
12. In this section of the play, all seven actors (they are out of character in this section) speak at the same time in an actual performance—in what Gao calls "polyphonic dialogue." The reader may wish to consult Gao's suggestions for the performance of the play at the end of this translation for a better understanding. Or the reader may want to read, say, all Actor B's lines together; for example, "Sometimes you just have to wait. Have you ever stood in line to buy fish? Oh, you don't cook. But you must have lined up to wait for buses. To stand in line is to wait . . ." Though there are breaks in the lines as presented in the play here, each character's lines are spoken simultaneous to those of the other characters and without interruption.
13. *Hairtail* refers to a kind of fish.
14. Didiwei is a pesticide.