

Document 9.1: “Hometown,” a short story by Lu Xun, first published in *Xin Qingnian* (*New Youth* magazine), May 1921

“Hometown” is one of the many stories that Lu Xun wrote using a first-person narrative style. The story is based on the author’s actual experience: a 1919 trip back to his hometown, Shaoxing, to sell his family property and bring his mother and his wife to Beijing. Like most of Lu Xun’s works, “Hometown” provides a valuable opportunity for readers to study the lives of common people in early twentieth-century China. By following the author/narrator’s footsteps and inner journey, readers are asked to ponder common people’s hardships, dreams, despairs, and hopes.

Braving the bone-cold weather, I was headed back to my hometown, a hometown from which I was separated by over six hundred miles and more than twenty years.

It was in the depth of winter and as I drew closer to the place where I’d grown up, the sky clouded over and a cold wind whistled into the cabin of my boat. Through a crack in the canopy, I peered out in the distance. Scattered across the distant horizon, towns and villages came into view under a vast and graying sky: they were drab, desolate, devoid of any semblance of life. I was assailed by a depression against which I was utterly powerless.

No! This was not the countryside I had recalled time and again for more than twenty years. The area *I* remembered was far, far more lovely. And yet, had you demanded that I summon its beauties from the recesses of memory or catalog its various excellences, no concrete image would have appeared in my mind’s eye and I would have been unable to reply. My “hometown” was probably nothing more than what lay before me. “This is probably what it really *was* like,” I told myself. “To be sure, there are no signs of progress, but then again it’s probably not so depressing as I seem to feel at the moment either. Perhaps it’s just that my attitude has changed, especially since I’m not coming back in a happy mood to begin with.”

My sole purpose in coming back this time was to bid my home an everlasting farewell. The old family compound in which members of our clan had lived for so many years had already been sold lock, stock, and barrel to people of another surname. The transaction was to be completed by the end of the year. In the short interim before the New Year, we would have to take our final leave of those comfortable old rooms and move away from this familiar countryside to the strange faraway place where I now earned my keep.

Early the next morning I stood before the gate of our family compound. Up on the tile roof, broken stalks of withered vines trembled in the wind and made plain the reason it had not been possible to keep those old rooms from changing hands. The pervading silence suggested that several branches of the family must have already moved out. By the time I made my way back to the rooms that our branch occupied, my mother had already come out to greet me. My eight-year-old nephew Hong'er darted out from behind her. Though she was obviously happy to see me, I also read hints of melancholy in her face. She bade me sit down and rest, gave me some tea, but avoided any mention of the impending move. Hong'er, whom I had never seen before, stood off at a distance observing me.

At long last we broached the subject of moving. I said I had already rented a place for us and even bought a few sticks of furniture. I explained that we would have to sell our household goods down here and then use the money to buy whatever else we might need up north. Mother readily assented. She already had our baggage pretty much gathered together and ready to go. On her own initiative, she had even sold the heavy furniture that couldn't readily be moved. She had not yet, however, been able to collect the money people owed her for it.

"As soon as you've rested a day or so, you can make the rounds of our relatives and then we'll be all set," she told me.

"Yes, Mother."

“And don’t forget to see Runtu. He asks for you every time he comes by. Says he would really like to see you again. I told him around what day you’d be back, so he *could* show up most anytime.”

Instantaneously, a marvelous scene flashed before my eyes: a round moon hanging against a blue black sky, beneath it a stretch of sandy ground planted with emerald green watermelons stretching as far as the eye could see, and standing in the midst of all those melons, a twelve-year-old boy, a silver ring around his neck, a pitchfork in his hand. Suddenly and with all his might the boy stabs at a *zba*, but the crafty animal makes a lightning turn, runs back between his legs, and makes its good escape.¹

The boy in that scene was Runtu. Back when I first met him—it will soon be thirty years ago—I couldn’t have been much more than ten myself. Since my father was still alive at the time, our family was still fairly well-to-do, and I was something of a “young gentleman.” That particular year it was incumbent upon our branch of the clan to perform a certain sacrifice that rolled around, or so it was said, only every thirty-odd years. Consequently it was to be an occasion of great solemnity.

During the first month, images of our ancestors would be displayed on the altar. The offerings set out before them would be lavish and the sacrificial utensils exquisite. With so many people participating, it would be necessary to guard against theft. However, we had only one “busy-monther” to help out and he already had more work than he could keep up with. And so he suggested that his son Runtu be brought in to keep an eye on the sacrificial vessels. (Down home, workers were divided into three categories: if they worked the whole year long for one family, they were “yearlongs”; if they worked by the day, they were “short-timers”; and if they tilled their own land but worked for a specific family just during the holidays or when rents were collected, they were “busy-monthers.”)

¹ Lu Xun invents his own character for the word *zba*. When he was later asked to give a closer identification of this animal, he said that it was probably a badger (*huan*) of some kind. Since the local dialect called it a *zba* he had made up a character to suit both the sound and meaning.

Since I had heard about Runtu for a long time, I was glad when father agreed. I knew he was about my own age. He'd been born in the *run* month and among the five elements he was lacking only in *tu*, so his father had called him Runtu. Best of all, Runtu knew all about how to set snares and catch birds!

From that time on I looked forward eagerly to the New Year, for I knew that when it came so would Runtu. It seemed that *this* year would never end. But the day did finally arrive when Mother summoned me to announce that Runtu had come and was now in the kitchen. I ran as fast as my legs would carry me.

He had a purplish round face and wore a little felt hat. You could tell that his father loved him very much, because around his neck he wore a large, shimmering silver ring. That meant that his father had feared that he might die during childhood and had taken him before a statue of the Buddha where, in exchange for the protection of his son, he promised to do something for the Buddha in return. It was then that they would have put that neckring on to show that Runtu was tied to life and protected by Buddha.

Runtu was shy with the adults around our house but wasn't at all timid with me, and would talk a blue streak whenever we were by ourselves. Before half the day was out, we had actually gotten to know each other quite well. I can't recall *what* we talked about—I only remember how excited and happy Runtu was. He told me that this was the first time he'd ever been to town and that he had already seen all sorts of strange and wondrous things he'd never even dreamed of before.

The next day, I wanted him to catch birds. "Can't right now. You have to have lots of snow. Out by the ocean where we live, I always wait till there's a good snowfall. Then I sweep a place nice and clean, take a little stick, and prop up a big, big bamboo basket. I sprinkle some grain underneath and tie a string to the bottom of the stick. Then I back way, way off and wait for the birds to come. One little tug and I've got them. A little bit of everything—bluebacks, hornchicks, paddychicks, pigeons..."

How I longed for snow!

“It’s kind of cold now, but you oughta come out our way in the summer. Days, we could go out to the beach and collect shells—reds, blues, ghost-scarers, Guanyin hands.² Nights, when Dad and me go to guard the watermelon patch, you could go right along with us.”

“Are you afraid people are going to steal your melons?”

“Nope. If somebody happens to be walkin’ by and picks one ‘cause he’s thirsty, we don’t take that as stealin’. What we’re lookin’ out for are badgers, porcupines, and *zha*. When the moon’s out and you hear a *crunch crunch*, you know you’ve got a *zha* bitin’ into a melon. You grab your pitchfork and...”

At the time I didn’t know what sort of thing a *zha* was to begin with—still don’t as a matter of fact—but somehow or other I felt it must look like some sort of little dog and be fierce as all get-out.

“Won’t it bite you?”

“Well you’ve got your pitchfork, right? You sneak up on him and when you’ve got him in sight, you let him have it. Are those little guys ever quick on their feet! They’ll turn around and run right back between your legs if you don’t watch ‘em. They’ve got these coats all slippery-slick, like oil, and...”

I had never dreamed that the world was full of so many new and marvelous things. Just to think that the seashore had all those wonderful colored shells to offer! And even watermelons had a danger-filled story behind them that I’d never suspected. All I’d known was that you buy them in fruit stores.

² “Ghost-scarers” were shells that the local children sometimes wore on bracelets to ward off evil spirits.

“Guanyin hands” were starfish, so named because their many arms called to mind the arms of the Thousand-handed Guanyin (Goddess of Mercy).

“Out there by the seashore just before spring tides, you’ll see a whole bunch of jumperfish hoppin’ all over the place. They’ve got these two little legs on ‘em like frogs and...”

Wow! Runtu’s mind was an inexhaustible treasure-house of exotic things, things my everyday friends knew nothing about, for while Runtu was out there by the sea, they—like me—had nothing to look out on but the square patch of sky that was visible above the high walls of a family courtyard.

Unfortunately the first month of the New Year came to an end and Runtu had to go home. I wailed. He cried too. In the end, however, his father took him away. Later on he sent me a package of shells by way of his father, and some beautiful bird feathers too. And I also sent him some things a few times after that, but I never saw him again.

Now, when my mother said that Runtu might drop by, memories of my boyhood suddenly came alive again as though illumined by a brilliant flash of lightning. For a fraction of a second, I even seemed to recapture that beautiful homeland I thought I had lost. “Great!” I said. “How...how’s he doing these days?”

“Now? Well, things aren’t going at all well for him.” Mother turned and looked outside as she answered. “*Those* people are back again. Pretend they’re looking at the furniture and then make off with whatever they can get hold of. I’d better go out and keep an eye on them.”

Mother got up and went out. I could hear the voices of several women outside the door. I motioned to Hong’er to come over and chat with me. I asked him if he knew how to write yet and if he was looking forward to our trip.

“Will we get to ride a train?”

“Yes.”

“A boat, too?”

“First we take a boat and then...”

“Would you look at him now! He’s even got a beard!” A strange, shrill voice suddenly sliced through the air.

Startled, I quickly raised my head and saw a woman of fifty or so standing before me. Her cheekbones protruded and her lips were thin. Wearing a pair of trousers (she hadn’t tied a skirt over them), hands on her hips, legs wide apart, she stood balanced on a pitiful little pair of bound feet, looking for all the world like a pair of compasses out of someone’s drafting kit.

“Don’t recognize me, huh? I used to hold you in my arms when you were just a kid!”

I was even more at a loss. Fortunately my mother came back in at this juncture and said, “He’s been away a good many years and he’s forgotten everything.” Then she turned to me, “But you really ought to remember her. She’s Second Sister Yang. You know, the woman who lived kitty-corner to our place and ran the beancurd shop.”

Now I remembered. When I was a child there had been a Second Sister Yang sitting from one end of the day to the other in the beancurd shop diagonally across from us. People called her the “Beancurd Beauty.”

Back then she used to powder her face, and her cheekbones weren’t so high, nor were her lips so thin. What was more, since she had always been seated, I had never before seen this “compasses” pose of hers. Back then people used to say that she was the reason the shop did such a surprisingly good business. No doubt because of my tender age, I must have been immune to the alchemy of her charms, for I had forgotten her completely. Thus, “Compasses” was more than a little put out with me. She looked at me with utter

disdain and the kind of smile that one might wear upon discovering a Frenchman who had never heard of Napoleon or an American who didn't know who Washington was.

Her laugh was cold. "Forgot, huh? Case of the higher you go, the snottier you—"

"How could I ever be like that...why I..." Completely flustered, I stood up.

"Well in that case, Elder Brother Xun, I'll put it right up front. You're rich now and it's not all that easy to move big, heavy stuff anyway, so why not let me take all this rickety old furniture off your hands. Poor folks like us can still get a lot of use out of it."

"I'm not rich at all. I have to sell furniture just to—"

"Come off it. I know you're a big official—a Daotai, they say.³ And you're gonna stand there and tell me you're not rich? You've got three concubines and an eight-man sedan chair team to carry you around wherever you wanna go. Not rich? Hah! You can't put anything over on me!"

I knew it would make no difference no matter what I said, so I held my peace and simply stood there.

"Yup, it's true all right. The more money they get, the less they'll turn loose. And the less they turn loose, the more they get!" Compasses angrily turned her back to me and slowly walked away, issuing a steady stream of chatter as she went. On her way out, she picked up a pair of my mother's gloves and shoved them into the waistband of her trousers.

During the next few days clansmen and relatives who lived nearby came around to pay visits. I met these social obligations as best I could, stealing time from them whenever possible to finish packing.

³ Although the republic had been established a half dozen years or so earlier, Second Sister Yang still refers to him with an official title that was employed during the late Qing dynasty.

One very cold afternoon just after lunch I was sitting and drinking tea when I heard someone come in from the outside. When I turned around to look I couldn't help but start with surprise. I scrambled to my feet and rushed over to welcome him.

It was Runtu. Although I recognized him right off, he was not at all the Runtu who lived in my memory. He seemed twice as tall now. The round and ruddy face of yesteryear had already turned pale and grey, and it was etched with deep wrinkles. The rims of his eyes were swollen and red just like his father's. I knew that most farmers who worked close to the sea got that way because of the wind. He was wearing a battered old felt hat, and his cotton clothes were so thin that he was shivering. His hands held a paper package along with his pipe. They were not the smooth and nimble hands that I remembered. Now they were rough, clumsy, and as cracked as pine bark.

I was beside myself with enthusiasm, but didn't know how to begin and simply said, "Brother Runtu, you've come..."

There was so much I wanted to say. There were so many words waiting to gush out one after the other like pearls on a string: hornchicks, jumperfish, Guanyin hands, *zha*—but at the same time I was aware of something damming them up inside me, so that they simply swirled around in my brain without a single one coming out.

As he stood there his expression was a mixture of happiness and melancholy. His lips began to move, but not a single word came out. Finally he assumed a very respectful attitude and addressed me in a loud clear voice: "Master!"

I shuddered as I realized what a wretched thick wall now stood between us. I too was at a loss for words. He turned around and said, "Shuisheng, kowtow to the Master." He grabbed a child who up to this point had been hiding behind him and hauled him around front. This boy was Runtu—twenty years ago, although somewhat paler and thinner than his father had been. The only real difference was that Shuisheng had no silver neckring. "This is my fifth. Hasn't been out and around much, so he's pretty shy."

Mother and Hong'er must have heard us talking because they came down from upstairs.

"Old Missus. I got your letter a long time back. You don't know how happy I was to hear the Master was comin' home," said Runtu.

"Hey, what in the world's come over you that you're so formal. You two used to call each other 'Brother.' Just call him 'Brother Xun' the way you used to."

"Ah, the Old Missus is really too... What kind of manners would that be? We were just kids then. We didn't know any better." While Runtu was talking, he was also trying to get Shuisheng to bow to my mother, but the boy was very embarrassed and stuck like glue to his father's back.

"Is that Shuisheng, your fifth?" Mother asked. "To him, we're all strangers. No wonder he's so shy. Why not let him and Hong'er go out together and play."

When Hong'er heard that, he immediately ran over and greeted the boy. Shuisheng wasn't the least bit shy with him, and apparently feeling very much at ease, went outside with my nephew to play. Mother asked Runtu to have a seat. He hesitated for a bit but finally sat down and leaned his long pipe against the table. He handed the paper package across to me and said, "We don't have much of anything in the winter, but these dried peas are the ones I sunned myself. Please accept them, Master..."

I asked how he was doing. He shook his head.

"Things are pretty rough. Even my sixth is old enough to help out now, but still with all the fightin' and people wantin' money of you every place you turn—you can never be sure how much—and with all the bad harvests, we just never seem to have enough to eat. When you *do* take whatever crop you've got and head off to market, you've gotta pay a whole bunch of taxes before you ever get there. Ends up so you don't even get back what

you've put into it. But if you *don't* take it to market, it's just gonna rot in the field anyway..."

He stopped talking but continued to shake his head. There was no movement in any of the wrinkles that life had etched upon him and one would have thought that his face was carved from stone. He probably felt all the pain, but could not find the words to express it. He sat in silence for a while and then picked up his pipe and began to smoke.

Through further questioning, Mother learned that he still had much to do at home and would have to leave tomorrow. She also found out that he'd gone without lunch and told him to go into the kitchen and make himself a little something.

After he went out, Mother and I both sighed at his plight: too many children, famine, harsh taxes, soldiers, bandits, officials, gentryfolk—everything had plagued [him] until he'd become the lifeless wooden figure we saw today. Mother said that we ought to see to it that he got as much as we weren't going to take with us as possible. So we told him to take whatever he wanted.

He selected a few things that very afternoon—two long tables, an incense burner, some candlesticks, and a set of scales. He also asked for the ashes from our kitchen stove. (We cooked with rice stalks, and the ashes would provide good fertilizer for the sandy soil out his way.) He gathered everything together and said he would come for it in a boat the day we moved out.

We chatted a bit more that night, but none of it amounted to anything. Early the next morning he took Shuisheng and headed back on home.

Nine days later the time of our departure finally arrived. Runtu came early in the morning. Shuisheng wasn't with him this time, but he'd brought along a five-year-old girl to keep an eye on the boat. We were so busy that we had no time to chat. Several other people came by, some to see us off, others to get things, and still others to get

things *and* to see us off. By the time we boarded the boat that afternoon, the old house had been swept clean of old and used things of every imaginable size and description.

As we proceeded upriver, the twilight-green mountains on either bank took on deeper hues and joined together in a single blue-green mass as they fled away into the distance behind the stern. Hong'er and I leaned against the window and watched the dimming landscape. Suddenly he asked, "Uncle, when are we coming back?"

"Coming back? What are you doing thinking about coming back before we've even left?"

"But Shuisheng invited me to go have fun at his place." Engrossed by thoughts of his new friend, Hong'er opened his large black eyes even wider in fascination.

Mother and I weren't immune to nostalgia ourselves, and began talking about Runtu again. She told me that ever since she'd started packing, Second Sister Yang—the Beancurd Beauty—had never let a single day pass without coming by. Just the day before yesterday she had retrieved a dozen or so plates from the pile of rice-stalk ashes. After questioning my mother, Second Sister Yang concluded that they must have been hidden there by Runtu so that he could make off with them when he came for the other stuff.

Having made this discovery, she apparently felt that she'd rendered us a rewardable service, for she picked up the dog-crazer without so much as a by-your-leave and took off with it just as fast as her legs would carry her. (The dog-crazer was a device we used back home in raising chickens. It consisted of a wooden bowl covered with a lattice-like arrangement wide enough for the chickens to poke their heads through, but too narrow for the dogs, who could only stand around "crazed" with frustration while the chickens ate.) Mother said she had never imagined that Second Sister Yang could develop such speed on those little feet of hers.

My hometown receded even farther into the distance and the familiar landscapes of the surrounding countryside gradually disappeared too. Strange to say, there was not a shred

of regret in my heart. I only felt that there was a high and invisible wall all around me that isolated me from my fellow human beings, a wall that was squeezing the breath out of my body. That usually comforting image of a little hero with silver neckring standing in the middle of a melon patch was now blurred out of focus and stirred nothing in me but a feeling of melancholy.

Mother and Hong'er had both gone to sleep. As I lay there and listened to the gentle slapping of water against the hull, I knew that Runtu and I were going on separate roads. "Even though we're irrevocably cut off from each other," I thought, "didn't Hong'er start to miss Shuisheng when we had barely set out? I hope they'll never live like my generation with everyone cut off from everyone else. And yet, just to keep that from happening, I wouldn't want them to have this vagabond life of mine, anymore than I'd want them to have Runtu's barren one. Still less I would want them to muddle through the hedonistic lives other people lead. There ought to be a *new* life for them, a life that none of us has ever known."

As my thoughts turned toward hope, a feeling of anxiety suddenly possessed me. When Runtu took the censer and candlesticks, I had laughed at him behind his back. "Can't let go of that superstitious idol-worship of his for a single minute!" But what was this thing called "hope" if not an idol that *I* had fashioned with my own hands. The things he hoped for were immediate, while what I wanted was somewhere far off in the murky distance—that was the only difference.

As I lay there half asleep, an emerald green plot of land by the sea appeared before my eyes. In the deep blue sky above it hung a moon, full and golden. "Hope isn't the kind of thing that you can say either exists or doesn't exist," I thought to myself. "It's like a path across the land—it's not there to begin with, but when lots of people go the same way, it comes into being."

Source: Lu Xun. *Diary of a Madman and Other Stories*. Trans. William A. Lyell. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990. 89–100.