

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Village Of Stone

Xiaolu Guo

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About the Author

Xiaolu Guo was born in a fishing village in south China. She studied film at the Beijing Film Academy and published six books in China before she moved to London in 2002. The English translation of *Village of Stone* was shortlisted for the *Independent* Foreign Fiction Prize and nominated for an International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. Her first novel written in English, *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* was published by Chatto in 2007 and shortlisted for the Orange Broadband Prize for Fiction. Xiaolu's film career continues to flourish: her feature, *How is Your Fish Today?* (2006) was screened at international film festivals and the ICA, London. She is currently Cannes Film Festival Cinefondation resident, based in Paris.

To my home town, Shi Tang, where everything began

Xiaolu Guo

VILLAGE OF STONE

TRANSLATED FROM THE CHINESE BY
Cindy Carter

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

I see myself on a boat, steering out to sea, to the seas of the Village of Stone. As the waves grow clearer in my memory, I find myself moving farther away from this enormous city, these enormous buildings and enormous crowds ... Scattering torpedoes as I go, I storm the secret fortresses of my soul, conquering them one by one, as explosions reverberate through my eardrums and shattered whitecaps drench my clothes. Soon all this subsides, drifting down to the deepest seafloor, torpedoes still exploding into schools of cruising fish. The sea turns red and I feel pain - all those fish, I never wanted them to die ... I stand on the deck weeping, watching my tears fall into the sea, the sea of the Village of Stone, this place where I bury my fish, my memories, my childhood, and all the secrets of my past incarnation ...

Xiaolu Guo
Autumn, 2000

1

IT ALL STARTED with a parcel of dried eel. A parcel of dried, salted eel posted by some nameless sender from some unknown address in the Village of Stone.

It is a large marine eel, approximately eighty-five centimetres in length, with the dorsal, rear and tail fins still attached. The tail fin is extraordinarily long. I imagine that the eel must have been prepared in the traditional manner of the Village of Stone, which means that it would have been dried in the sun after being salted with two kilograms of coarse sea salt for each five kilograms of eel. You can still see the scar where the blade of the knife sliced into the eel's silvery-white belly, before being pulled out again to shear the eel slowly from head to tail, shaping it into a pair of long strips connected at the centre.

Such an enormous eel, I decide, must have been caught during the seventh moon of the lunar calendar, when eels are said to be at their plumpest and most delicious. The eel would first have had its entrails pulled out and then been hung from a north-facing window to dry for the duration of the winter fishing season. When it had hardened to the consistency of a knife blade, some hand - whose hand I know not - must have taken it down from the rafters, parcelled it up and mailed it to a city one thousand eight hundred kilometres away, this city Red and I call home.

As I lay the fishy-smelling package on the kitchen table, Red is standing at my side, watching. Red, my best friend in this city and the one and only man in my life, asks me suspiciously where the parcel is from.

‘The Village of Stone,’ I answer absently.

‘The Village of Stone?’ The words seem to perplex Red, as if he were hearing the abstruse syllables of some remote antiquity.

The package is heavy. When I draw the enormous eel from its wrappings and set it on the table, Red freezes in shock. The eel is eerily lifelike. With its monstrous tail protruding upwards, it looks poised to swim away from us at any moment.

And in an instant, the salt scent of the East China Sea and the smell of a Village of Stone typhoon come rushing back to me, as if from the body of the eel. Synapses connect, the floodgates are thrown open, the torrents of memory unleashed. They rush through the tunnels of the past, threatening to flood the earth and blot out the sky.

I spent the first fifteen years of my life in the Village of Stone, but I have left it far behind me. I now live one thousand eight hundred kilometres away, with a man who knows nothing about my past, in a city as diametrically opposed to the Village of Stone as any place could possibly be. It has been years since I corresponded with anyone in the village, and yet now I find myself thinking about it, about the things that happened there and the people who lived there – those whose lives I passed through and whose lives passed through me.

Had it not been for that parcel of dried, salted eel sent from a faraway place, I would never have started to remember those events, all the things that happened in the Village of Stone.

That was how the memories began.

2

LET ME CLOSE the door to the past for a moment, while I explain a bit about the present.

Red and I live together in the enormous, parched megalopolis that is Beijing. I'm twenty-eight and Red is twenty-nine, just a few days shy of his thirtieth birthday. Confucius said that thirty was the age at which a person should settle down, but Red and I have never had the sense of being truly settled, not in a city like this. I suppose we're at the age when people start to become sensitive about the loss of their youth, but I haven't noticed anything particularly different about being twenty-eight. Twenty-eight is just old enough to be past the ignorance of youth, yet it's still a good long way from being octogenarian. The only thing about being twenty-eight that holds any significance for me is that Mazu Niangniang, the Sea Goddess, was twenty-eight when she died. Of course, people in the Village of Stone never said that she died; they said that she 'ascended straight to heaven' and became an immortal. There wasn't a fisherman or woman in the village who didn't worship her memory. During her lifetime, Mazu Niangniang was a wise woman said to be able to predict bad weather and even rescue ships lost at sea during typhoons. When she died of an illness at the age of twenty-eight, she left in her wake a whole string of temples dedicated to her memory, temples that wafted incense smoke over the rocky, typhoon-swept promontory of the Village of Stone. And now here I am too at the age of twenty-eight, still alive and well - although I'm not sure I could be considered completely well, for I often live in fear.

Fear of what, I'm not quite certain. I doubt that Mazu Niangniang ever knew fear. Maybe that's why she was able to show so much love and concern for others. As for me, I've always been one to look out for myself.

I work at a video rental shop in the north part of Beijing, up in the Haidian District on a street near University Road. It's a tiny little shop, squeezed in behind a row of huge poplars. These are the same poplars that, each spring, release millions of fluffy white seed-bearing pods that float through the sky like filthy balls of airborne cotton wool. To the left of the video rental shop is a pharmacy specialising in those kinds of medicines, toys and tonics euphemistically called 'adult items'. To the right is a shop selling brightly coloured children's clothing made by some minor manufacturer. Our three shops manage to coexist quite nicely, because none of us could ever steal the others' clientele. Although our shops are small and inconspicuous, not much more than tiny specks on the map, this city needs us, in much the same way that we need this city.

I work part time for the owner of the video shop. The shop is only twelve metres square, and the walls are covered with posters of film stars such as Jackie Chan, Tom Cruise and Julia Roberts and advertisements for films from America and Hong Kong. It's my job to rent out the tapes, so I'm behind the tiny counter every day, helping customers find the video they're looking for, ringing up sales and sneaking peeks at the latest movies. The job is a bit monotonous, but I'm happy that I can watch movies while I work and I earn enough to pay our rent. Red has just quit another job, which is probably just as well because he hates working anyway. Red says that jobs are idiotic. Fortunately, he has parents who help him out financially. When all is said and done, Red's decent, although it's hard to say how long we'll be together.

Red and I are like a pair of hermit crabs encased in a huge high-rise building. There are twenty-five storeys in

our building, but we live on the ground floor. Sometimes, when we're lying in bed, nestled under the covers, it feels as if our bodies are becoming heavier, more oppressive, much harder to move around. This could have something to do with the twenty-four storeys overhead, the combined gravitational weight of thousands of our fellow residents bearing down upon us. Actually, rather than say we're like hermit crabs, it would probably be more fitting to say that we envy hermit crabs their lifestyle, for they live their lives in a portable shell. Hermit crabs can crawl out from under their shells any time they please and move into a new and more fitting shell, unlike Red and me.

And so the two of us live together in this ground-floor flat like hermits, clinging to each other as if our lives depended on it, silently reading our books and sleeping away the hours like two elderly people who know they haven't got much time left for this world. We've never tried to keep a cat, much less a dog, although we once had several potted plants that we thought might be flowering plants. We never did find out, though, because the identical twenty-five-storey high-rise opposite ours blocked most of the sunlight from our flat. In other words, if those pathetic little potted plants wanted to get any sunlight at all, they had to stretch themselves out to their full length and try to absorb all the light they could during the brief period of morning sunshine which lasted from exactly 8.00 to 8.45 a.m. If they missed those precious forty-five minutes of wan, indirect sunlight, they had to wait and try to make it up when the sun appeared for another forty-five minutes between 4.00 to 4.45 p.m. Of course, they also had to hope that their owners had remembered to remove the clothes they had hung out to dry, and all of the various and sundry other objects blocking their sunshine. If we had forgotten to clear a path, the plants were cruelly deprived of their rightful daily allowance of sunlight. For this reason, the

plants succumbed to an early and perhaps fated death a mere six months after we began raising them.

At one time, we also had a pair of pop-eyed goldfish named after two of the characters in the Japanese television drama *Tokyo Love Story*, Kanji Nagao and Rika Akana. We put Kanji and Rika together in a large green glass tank by the window, in the hope that they would carry on in the spirit of that immortal romance. However, when we realised that the process of raising goldfish mainly involved weekly trips to the market to buy replacement Kanjis and Rikas, we could not bring ourselves to condemn any more new life forms to that watery green tank. The fish tank still occupies the same space on the window sill, although it is now a much more dried-up shade of green. The romance of Kanji and Rika is but an empty memory. And so it is that the only living creatures in our gloomy ground-floor flat these days, besides the cockroaches that can occasionally be seen crawling across the floor, are Red and me.

Of course, there are the other occupants of the high-rise, who seem to spend each and every minute of each and every day cooking and chopping, fucking and fighting, flushing and showering, hammering and drilling, alternately spanking and doting on children, doing aerobics and playing mah-jong, from morning to night, weekdays, weekends and holidays. It feels as if the sheer vitality of their everyday lives, the accumulated heartiness of their quotidian existence is piling up layer upon layer above us, expanding to fill all twenty-five storeys of our building. They press down upon our drab ground-floor lives in much the same way that my childhood memories have started to bear down upon my otherwise placid existence. Sometimes I try to talk to Red about the Village of Stone, but I realise that Red really knows very little about me. The whole time we've been together, neither my feelings nor my past have figured very prominently in his life. Red and I have

different lifelines; our blood runs separately. Each night our flesh may intertwine, but our memories, whether by day or by night, never mingle.

Between the tale of Red's life and the tale of my life, there is zero correlation.

Red's world, you see, is a closed circle. Not that it matters. I know that I'm a closed circle, too, and it's all I can do to find some starting point from myself, while at the same time trying to find my own terminus. There's no way I'm ever going to find my beginning or end in somebody else's circle. Two people together never add up to anything more than one person added to another. That we continue to add ourselves up in this way is the reason human beings will always be lonely.

Love is uncertain, jobs are uncertain, our future in this rented flat is uncertain. My future with Red is, if anything, even less certain.

In fact, the only thing I can say with any certainty is that I've travelled very far from that rain-drenched, typhoon-swept village by the sea. I've put a lot of distance between myself and the tiny fishing village where rooftops are covered with rocks and streets are paved with stones. I have managed to escape my childhood, the chaos and emotional turmoil of those years.

But the Village of Stone – that tiny corner of the sea that, on a map of China, appears as nothing more than a deep blue stain, with no air or shipping routes to link it with anywhere else – still exerts a strange sort of pull on me. Like a recurring dream that appears each and every midnight, or some profound and inescapable homesickness, I somehow find myself remaining loyal to its memory. I think of it at odd and unexpected moments: as I am walking through the city, listening to buses making their slow stops at deserted stations, or evenings after work, as I am in the kitchen lighting the burner and starting to make dinner, or mornings just after rising, as I am taking the top from the

toothpaste tube and getting ready to brush my teeth. The memories come unbidden, like the tides of my childhood village, waters surging out of nowhere to inundate us up to our knees.

3

I WAS SEVEN when it happened.

That's as far back as my memory goes, to when I was seven. Before that, my memories are blurred and indistinct, like scenes glimpsed through a pane of rain-spattered glass. But so many things happened the year I was seven, things fearful and impossible to articulate, that I would always remember that year and everything that happened after it.

I was seven, then, not so young really, just old enough to understand ordinary human feelings such as warmth and kindness. But actually, I knew that human feelings ran both hot and cold, because I had seen a lot more things than most children my age. For a child of seven, I must have appeared unusually aloof. I had never known my parents, never really had a mother or a father. My grandmother told me that my mother had given birth to me in a rowing boat. It was a difficult birth, and by the time the little boat reached shore, my mother had already died from loss of blood. Why she had taken a boat out to sea, and whether anyone was with her, my grandmother never said. Of course, I have no memory of these events. As for my father, he wasn't even there to witness them. He had fled the village before my birth to escape the fisherman's life. While he was gone the villagers branded him a 'Capitalist Roader' for his bourgeois views. This was during the Cultural Revolution, and had he returned to the village, he would have been imprisoned.

After I was born, my grandfather named me Coral, a name connected with the sea. The Chinese characters in

my name mean 'red coral'. Though I've seen white coral and green coral many times, I've never actually encountered red coral. I think the red must be my mother's blood, the blood that stained the planks of the rowing boat. My grandfather also gave me a nickname, 'Little Dog'. Dog is a good nickname, a lucky name. My grandfather told me that there were more than ten children in the village nicknamed Dog; the conventional wisdom being that the worse-sounding your nickname, the less likely it was that the Sea Demon would want to carry you off. And it's true - the worst-sounding nicknames are always the luckiest. Every year during typhoon season, when the Sea Demon emerged from the ocean to carry off children playing on the shore, it was always the kids with the nice-sounding names who got taken away. After all, who in their right mind would want to take a child nicknamed Dog, or even worse, Leper?

The Village of Stone was my entire world, my fortress without windows, a place where they had dug my grave almost as soon as I was born. The villagers buried their dead on the far side of the craggy hill that stood behind the village and screened it from the world beyond. As soon as a person was born, their relatives would consult a Feng Shui practitioner to select a gravesite with an auspicious location and direction. When the site was chosen, the family would erect a tombstone bearing the newborn's name to ensure that nobody else could claim the gravesite later. How could a person bear to leave the place that had set aside a gravesite just for her the moment she was born? As a child, I didn't imagine I'd ever flee the Village of Stone, not ever.

Of course, at the age of seven, I didn't yet know the word 'flee', nor had I ever stopped to consider the concept of fleeing. I didn't miss the word, just as I had never missed my parents. You can't miss something you've never had. It

was as if my parents had never existed, as if I had just spontaneously materialised in this world.

Actually, I wasn't at all like a piece of red coral. I was more like a tiny pebble that had been flung up from the sea and fallen into one of the cracks between the cobblestones, to be trampled on by passing feet. Every day the fishermen, with their fishing nets and floaters in tow, would walk through the cobblestone alleys in their waterproof boots, and the fishermen's wives would step over and around the shallow, circular bamboo baskets they used for drying shrimps. They would leave the cobblestones drenched. Then, at noon, the sun would emerge to evaporate the brackish water from the stones, so that soon, all the cobblestones were bleached a pure white and covered with a fine crust of dried sea salt. The house I grew up in was along one of those cobblestone alleyways skirting the sea. I was nothing more than a tiny stone - crusted in salt, silent, unnoticed and insignificant.

The little lane on which we lived stretched from my grandmother's doorstep all the way to the muddy roar of the sea. The cove near our house had once been a hideout for Japanese pirates, who would occasionally come up into the village to rape, loot, pillage and wreak general mayhem on the villagers. For this reason, our lane was known as 'Pirate's Alley'.

When I was seven, I would go out every day during the typhoon season, to stand idly at the end of Pirate's Alley and stare at the sea. The sea in the Village of Stone is rarely blue; in fact, the true colour of the sea is yellow-brown, the colour of soil, or a soil-coloured banner. I would stand and watch the typhoon winds churning the ocean into waves, not unlike a fisherman's wife who waits year after year for her husband to return from the sea. The rough winds buffeted me until my skin, my hair, my eyes, even my fingernails took on the colour of the sea. I was a small, soil-coloured person. My entire body was the colour of dirt. The

sea was my only friend, my constant, mysterious and awe-inspiring companion. Each day I would walk down the beach and wade into the sea. The sea was unusually pungent, and tasted strongly of salt. With each cresting wave, I was immersed in the sea to my very marrow.

All my impressions of the Village of Stone begin with that cruel, muddy sea. The sound of the sea, the colour of the sea, its volume and surface area, its four seasons, its penchant for swallowing boats whole; the Sea Demon who gobbled up children from the shore during typhoon season, and the women who stood on the shore wailing for their lost men. At seven, the sea was something to be feared, something to be worshipped.

‘The only thing separating a sea scavenger from the Sea Demon is three inches of wooden plank.’

Our next-door neighbour, the father of my best friend and the captain of his own fishing boat, used to say this often.

That’s what the fishermen and women of the village called themselves, ‘sea scavengers’. They relied on the sea, or whatever they could beg, borrow or scavenge from the sea, to provide them with a living, and that’s how the name came about.

Our next-door neighbour was a sea scavenger himself, with his own boat and crew. Everyone in the village called him ‘The Captain’. The Captain’s skin was the colour of brass, and I thought he was the bravest of all the sea scavengers in the village. He once caught a shark, and everyone in the village came to have some of his shark cartilage soup. You are what you eat, as the saying goes. People in the village said that shark cartilage soup strengthened your bones.

At least, that’s what the Captain always said. The Captain was always saying things like that.

I was often to be found by the Captain’s side in those days, and whenever a damaged boat came in from the sea,

he would turn to me and say:

‘You know, Little Dog, the only thing separating a sea scavenger from the Sea Demon is three inches of wooden plank. You know that, don’t you, Little Dog?’

The sea was all the Village of Stone had, the only nature it possessed. The village was built on a peninsula with no rivers, lakes or farmland, just the craggy, desolate mountain behind it that sloped down to the sea. The inhabitants of the Village of Stone built their houses, row upon row of them, on the lower slopes of the mountain, so that all the streets were at a sharp incline. This was partly to protect the houses from the tide, but more importantly, to prevent them from being swept away by the frequent typhoons.

To help withstand the fierce typhoon winds, every year my grandmother and all the other villagers would climb on top of their houses to pile stones onto the black tile rooftops. We children were given the task of climbing the hill to collect stones. The more stones you could pile onto a rooftop, the less likely that it would be ripped off and carried away by the typhoons – assuming, of course, the weight of the stones themselves didn’t make the roof collapse first. And so the village was truly transformed into a Village of Stone: the houses were built from boulders found around the peninsula, the streets were paved with smaller pebbles, and even the rooftops were covered with piles of stones. No matter how you looked upon the village – from the ground, from the hillside, even from the sky above – it really was a village constructed entirely of stone.

Nor was there even any soil in the village, for the constant storms that lashed the peninsula during typhoon season had eroded the ground bit by bit, until all the remaining topsoil had been washed away. The typhoons and rainstorms carried away everything they could – all the smallest, feeblest bits of matter, weeds and roots and