

Butterfly, a novel by Julie O'Yang (excerpt)

by Julie O'Yang

'So what exactly did you decide?'

It was two years later that Sato-san put the question to me. The two of us had been hiding for two bloody years, moving about in the marshes along the river, living off small, skimpy meals. We couldn't turn back to our unit, because Cesaru had probably reported us as leak, and we imagined all kinds of humiliations for discredited and dishonoured deserters. Once Sato-san, in his good-will, heroic mood, even suggested that we turned over to our enemy, though neither one of us considered that a real option. *What if they treated us like we did them, in Nanking?* The thought of that day made us tremble like cold babies. Every so often Sato-san would wake me screaming in the dark, and I had to find something to clog his feverish exclamation marks so we would not be heard — The wound on his leg was getting worse again. I tried all kinds of herbs, but I couldn't save him, not this time. One of these days my only friend will die.

'What happened after you went back into the burnt coffeehouse? Did you find Cesaru's revolver?' Sato-san attempted the same question in a different way.

'Why don't you ask me what I saw in the shambles?'

'She was such a beauty, wasn't she? I will never forget the girl in her jade-green summer dress, pouring us a drink behind the bar. She looked like a Madonna.'

'She looked like a painting, so unreal.'

'You saw her again, didn't you? Tell me about her — I want to die thinking of something nice and kind...' A little star flickered in Sato-san's fading eyes. Suddenly it was more than I could take. I burst into tears, my entire body shaking like mad.

'Yes, I saw her, Sato-san,' I held my friend's hand in mine, persuading him to stay alive and stay with me.

'Did you smile to her when you saw her? My mom used to say a smile is a curve that sets everything straight. *Did you?*' he urged in a weak voice.

'I did, Sato-san,' I lied.

The true sequences are thus. I ran into the fire. I found the revolver immediately because it was the only thing that was not burning. Everything was illuminated around me, the environs, my thoughts. The strong smell of gasoline ignited something in me. Suddenly I knew I wouldn't be returning to my unit. I got away from the suffocating fumes, I didn't know how but I did. Then I waited until the next morning to look for Sato-san at the improvised sickbay nearby. He was in a corner to himself. They had removed the bullet but he couldn't sleep from pain. There was no medicine, my friend said when he saw me. Buddy, I came to say good-bye, I said. Take me with you, he said. Are you sure? Please, you're my only friend! So I put Sato-san in a spare set of clothes I found in a house. Together we stole out of the infirmary at the crack of dawn, leaving behind us our guns and soldier's uniform. We had declared war against our country. Now we were on our own.

In the first period Sato-san did pretty well. We managed without medicine and bandage, and his wound healed. Then winter came, his health started to deteriorate, quicker than I had expected. When the warm weather came at last, his calf had turned slowly into a crawling anthill filled with pus and a white army of maggots; he even couldn't lie down properly. There was nothing left I could do to help my friend.

'Yes, I saw her, Sato-san.' I held his hand growing colder and heavy in mine. 'And I smiled at her, you know why? Because that's the language we both spoke. She was lying on the blue silk bench, with her eyes closed, as if she was asleep. Somebody dressed her back in her jade-green summer clothes.'

'Yeah, it looked good on her. I'd like to remember her that way, her skin as white as snow, her lips as red as blood, her hair as black as ebony...' My friend indulged in the fairytale. He remembered the exact words by Andersen he liked to be read to. He had an

incredible memory for details and dates, I could only begin to imagine how insufferable this war must be for someone like him.

'*Was she dead?*' he asked suddenly. 'I wish she was dead. I can't bear to think her living on with all that had happened to her. Tell me she was dead — '

'Yes, she was dead, Sato-san,' I mumbled, sobbing. She was.

'And the boy who shot me?'

'He was dead too,' I lied once more.

'They rested next to each other, like two angels sharing a sweet dream,' I kept up with my untruth. My hand held tightly onto the weighing cold. Sato-san made the last effort to squeeze in my palm. I reached out to check his breath, and closed his eyes. All the while I didn't stop talking, I wanted to finish my story. This time the truth.

'They rested next to each other, like two angels sharing a sweet dream. The girl was dead. The boy was wounded badly, his body covered in blood, his face maimed with crisscross of bayonet, which bored through his jaws. Only his eyes moved. He was not dead, yet. Somehow he had managed to put his friend back in her jade-green summer dress, he wanted to see her die in dignity. Then he lay himself next to her, waiting for the fire to expunge their shame — *our* shame. He was surprised to see the young soldier who suddenly appeared in front of him: they were of the same age.

'The boy beckoned the soldier to come closer, showing him the calligraphy scroll he held in his hand. The paper had caught on fire but he wouldn't let go.

'Stupefied, the soldier looked at the boy and the scroll alternately. "Are you a spy?" he heard himself ask. "*Are you Communist?*" the soldier pressed on. In his head a hornet nest burst open, everything went black before his eyes. A storm raged inside him. His anger petrified him, the same pernicious poison he felt half a year ago when he left the teahouse near the station. That night the soldier saw his personal enemy.

'The soldier raised his rifle. He couldn't bear the sound of bullets but he could finish it all with a single punch into that disfigured head. Suddenly, the boy raised his face from the expanding blaze.

"Butterfly..." the voice escaped his mouth, and he reached out the flaming scroll to the soldier, who panicked, and jumped back. He smashed the gun into the boy's face.

'The soldier was me, Sato-san,' I cried to my dead friend.

'At that moment I still looked for an excuse to get away with! *O welcome pure-eyed Faith, white-handed Hope, Thou hovering angel, girt with golden wings...* But there is no justice in killing either by faith or by law. The moment the boy looked me in my eye, I wanted to know who he was. Where did he come from? Why was he there? What was he trying to say when I raised my rifle to take his life? All at once I had the unyielding, pig-headed wish to find out everything about the person I killed. I want to tell someone he knew how he died. I want to relieve myself from the unbearable burden of anonymity so I could face myself.

'Because Sato-san, he was very young. The boy was of my age!

'*Usso!*

'The only thing I had of him was a shred left of the burnt scroll when I fought a way out of the scorching fire. And I unfolded the charred rice paper to find the little red heart lying in my palm. Before I left home, Sato-san, I visited a temple to consult my fortune. I never told anyone about this. In the dewpond I found a little fish, its heart was beating and beating through the translucent body — which I took as an auspicious sign.

'On the scalded slice of paper, the cinnabar red heart lay surreptitiously: It was made with the red hot lips of a woman.

I decided I wanted to find the woman, sink or swim, Sato-san.'

I buried my friend not far from where he died. I wrapped his body in the sky blue silk curtain I had wrenched from the window as I broke out the hellhole of gasoline fire in Nanking two years earlier. Sato-san came from the seaside Osaka. He had often told of Osakajo, at whose foot he would lie for hours on end as a child, watching the castle of flying towers like a white crane soaring to rootless clouds — he would die a second time to see that sparkling dome of sky of his hometown. I imagined the blue bliss my friend was let in, while I closed his grave along a rock-strewn path so I knew someone would

pass once in a while, and Sato-san wouldn't be all alone. I prayed the world he entered not be one to make sacrifice of others no matter how marvellous the Cause should sound; a world where the sky-god does not teach hate, and whose gift on New Year's Day is a song almost human. And in case I would return one day to visit, I marked the mound of fresh earth with the crimson rain stone Musume-san gave to me. This was the tombstone I erected for each and every one who died of our wanton cruelty. Their faces flashed back to me. Musume-san my first love, Sato-san my good friend, Madame K., the girl in jade-green summer dress, the boy whose brains I knocked out, even my father. Unbearably lucid faces, with horrid, heartfelt details.

The face of Death.

