

The Life of Clay

I sometimes reflect on the long-past afternoon when one poor salesman sold my father living clay for a bare millionth of its worth. Not only my own life changed, impossibly and permanently. Had the salesman been waylaid, or slaughtered in in a boarder-war...then the world would never have known the blessing and the curse of unity under an emperor so much more, and so much less, than human.

I imagine for myself the Taihang mountains, gazing down at my childhood home of Handan. It is ruined, now. From the top of a mountain, the city must look much the same as when Handan was the prosperous capital of Zhou. It is a sad truth that all the grief and tears of the defeated have a small echo, which vanishes almost as soon as it has begun. Surely, when my emperor and his terracotta army are at last unearthed, the king of that epoch will not know which of our eyes has wept for a slain brother, a missing father, or a conquered home. When I contemplate the city of Handan from the height of a mountain-range, there are no faces which turn upwards to accuse me. But, a shiver runs the length of my spine nonetheless.

Did the age of water end an endless bloodshed between our warring states, punish the depraved, and reward virtue? It may be true, or it may be a lie I repeat to myself, to assuage a guilty conscience. Did we overstep the boundaries of mortals, and spite the laws of heaven? Possibly true. Perhaps.

Putting aside the hypotheticals of morality and state, which I never could answer, I turn and consider the husband I might have had, or the children. After the afternoon I first touched living clay, I was severed from a household life. A life which would have been prosperous, surely, for although I am no beauty, my father's wealth and connections would have left me a sought-after bride. The domestic life would have come naturally to me, I am certain. The life of clay was natural as well, of course. Perhaps, even more so, because, in the end, the clay touched directly upon my spirit rather than mere birth or temperament. My clay arms and legs are so vividly a part of me that, should they over-dry, or shatter under the pressure of the earth, I would weep more dearly at the loss than at the severing of my original skin and bone. The clay is not part of me, the clay *is* my own self. Although I often saw my role as a vessel for its machinations, but I no longer credit that thought. If I have gained any wisdom in my age it is this: once something, or someone, is set in motion, it takes on a life of its own. So too have I taken a life I was never expecting. I have led it up and down mountains, across the sea and under the earth, since that one long-ago afternoon.

Chapter 1

My father was a merchant. Even when he gave up his trade for politics, rare was the good which slipped beneath his gaze unvalued. Yes, even now that he is twenty-five years

buried, the voice of Lü Buwei rings in my ear whenever I powder a fragment of cinnabar, or send for a new batch of clay.

How much did you pay for that? —and what, my daughter, will be the return on your investment?

Growing up, I used to take it upon myself to clean and arrange his store-room, because it was separated from the room where my late father did business by only the thinnest of curtains. Not only could I hear every whisper, but, in high daylight, I could make out gestures and nods from their backlit silhouettes.

Of the women in the family, that privilege was mine alone. My mother had enough chores on her hands, and my other sisters were either too idle or too clumsy for that important task. So: I was in the corner of his shop, straightening bolts of silk and bundles of long-burning dugong candles, expensive ceramic vessels, still more expensive bronze, and, of course, imported glass. Eager to deserve the trust he placed in me, I never dropped or chipped an item in our stores. I took great care aligning them on the shelves and counters, so that the metal sparkled, the lacquer glowed, and even the cheapest earthenware seemed hemmed at the edges with gold.

Of course, the wares on his shelf were my father's slightest business. No wandering peddler, he sent others to the market with his more commonplace goods, and kept the others in our store-room for those who knew his reputation well enough to seek him out. Yet, even the gentlemen who came to barter in alliances were reassured by the worldly wealth. His goods were ordered and beautiful and bright. He was as meticulous as he was shrewd: it was there for the visitor to see if he so chose. So, Lü Buwei was respected, and even those who despised merchants would excuse him his profession. In his presence, they did not haggle.

In an age when kings scrambled to keep order, and squandered the lives of their men, my father's word was as law.

“And what, sir, would I want with a full load of your clay?” He began, and the face of the salesman plummeted.

“Not—a—the quantity could be less than you are perhaps imagining, sir,” the salesman managed. He was kneading something in his hand so vigorously that I could see the motion through the sheer curtain between us. From his voice, he sounded young, and he pronounced his consonants oddly. He was nearly as short as myself—a southerner perhaps. “It comes all the way from Zifu, you must understand. Thus, it is a ship-load, not so heavy as one mean when one says ‘load’ in the state of Zhao.”

My father did not answer. He left the salesman to consider his own error, in insulting his buyer's understanding of regional measurements.

I paused, then, leaving a lovely jade rosette at an unflattering angle, and waiting to hear what came next. The salesman had been given his opportunity to excuse himself from the store—but there he remained. Kneading something between his fingers. With expectation laid heavily in the silence of the room.

“And what, sir, would I want with *any* of your clay?” My father continued. “Do you think I own a potter's studio? Or should I carry it to the market on my back, and see if anyone there has a use for it?”

The poor salesman's voice set to trembling, but he must have been a brave man to persevere.

“I thought that might be the case,” he said. “But I have travelled a month out of my way to show it to you, on an alchemist's advice.”

My father whistled through his teeth; I could imagine the twinkle in his eye right now. I knew that the salesman had just done himself a favor. A load of clay might be worthless, but a magician's opinion was not.

“Which alchemist, then, would have me be a buyer of raw clay?”

“He did not give me a name, but he made a stone wall shiver with his art.”

Not an alchemist then, but still interesting.

“I do not wish,” my father said, “To cause you trouble, or him embarrassment. Send your load of clay—no more than five can carry—to *this* address,” he said, adding the name of an acquaintance's warehouse a mile out from the city. He named a price much lower than the salesman had suggested who, cheeks still flushed with feeling, passed that sample of clay he had been kneading into my fathers' hands, and then made his escape from the shop.

My father waited a moment, to make sure the salesman was not about to turn around. I straightened the jade rosette on the shelf, and I fought the urge to smile. My father opened the curtain to the store-room.

“Well, child” he said, his moustache twitching with mirth, “I have something for you to add to the rubbish heap.”

He placed the clay in my hand, and it slid from my fingers.

No, not as a jug drops from a clumsy child's hands, or a full pot slips from a weak woman's arms...this struggled between my fingers like a frog. Grey and sinewy like a bird's neck. Fluid as water itself. The living clay left me death-cold well up to my wrist, a cold so deep and terrible that I could not have come near it if I had plunged my arms so deep into a well in the dead of winter.

Chilled blood coursed through my veins, all the way to my heart—I gasped from the pain, but for an hour at least, I was too cold to speak, and insensible to my environment. The last scene from that encounter, which has fixed itself within my mind forever, is the broken creature of clay drying in shambles on the ground. Later, I would learn that surviving that encounter was little short of a miracle. The clay must have appraised me well, for, if it had wanted to, the clay could have frozen the blood in my veins.

When I came to, I was in the store-room. All of my father’s valuables, which I used to upkeep so carefully, had been mounded in the corner of the room along with the ill-swept ashes of a heating fire. I lay covered in a quilt, on a floor still piping-hot, and wept with the distress when my right hand refused to move. I could not bid my fingers to curl, I could not articulate my wrist, and even my elbow was quite difficult to bend.

My father hovered at the edge of the curtain, and spoke to me without entering the store-room--though, remarkably, it must have been he himself who had re-arranged the room, as no other would have dared treat his wares with such disregard, and, furthermore the hands which had swept the floor were clearly unused to the task.

“My daughter, you will tell no one,” he said. “Not your cousins, or your sisters, you grandmother, your aunts, or the servants in the scullery. Not your old brothers or uncles, if they return alive from the wars, may that be the case, and certainly not your mother.”

I promised, of course.

For a while, I lay in the store-room, trying to warm my arm to life, but eventually I realized I would be missed long before any feeling stirred my fingers besides a heavy, aching cold. I walked into the courtyard of our home, and looked all around me, at the glow of flowers

and imported glass décor, shimmering impossibly under the afternoon sun. I blinked at the ordinariness of the household bustle, skirts and sleeves snapping in a crisp autumn wind.

“Stop standing there, and come help with dinner,” a voice shrilled from the kitchen area. It would be Lü Baozhai, my oldest cousin.

When I did not respond, she marched into the courtyard, and took me by the shoulders.

“Lü Jin, what spirit stole your tongue?”

I looked up into her face, which was pale and pinched as always, and plastered at the edges with strands of her wispy hair. Her nose was pink from the millet steam. Shreds of pork and yam clung to her elbows, as if she had been slicing and chopping too busily to notice. I had a sudden, unbidden image of her pasting the shreds there deliberately, as evidence of hard work, and had to turn my gaze to the floor to stop from laughing.

“I do not know, cousin,” I said, as she grabbed my right shoulder and wheeled me towards the kitchen. Under the pressure of her fingers, chilly goutts of blood dislodged from the clay-touched forearm, and coursed through my veins. They travelled up my shoulder, towards my heart—and set me gasping, even as I attempted to answer my cousin. “Perhaps it is the ghost of grandmother Lü Lijuan, who never did like me—Sun Wukong himself, because this is such a great mischief that the monkey spirit must have had a hand in it—or a soldier killed in the wars, who sunk in the mud with no one to tend his grave—cousin—could it be my brothers, your cousins, dead and here and recognized me?”

“Lü Jin,” she said, and shook her head. “Do stop babbling—unless you would have me think that you are possessed!”

“Sorry, Lü Baozhai,” I say. “I—just—”

“I would not have expected it from you to be possessed, Lü Jin, with the kitchen understaffed, what with three of your sisters wedded in a year? Not to mention your dear mother’s cravings. Too pregnant to cook, but certainly not too pregnant to know that the pork should be *just* this thin, and exactly *so* salty.”

We passed the threshold into the kitchen, then. The heat of the small tight space was a comfort, even as the regular bustle made my head swim. The servants-- old, sweet Bai Lin and clumsy Liu Fenfang, tiny Hu Daiyu and gangly Yu Lanying—drew back to make room for us at the countertop, as my older cousin glared. My younger sister Lü Luli wheeled guiltily, licking a milky “sample” of steamed millet from the corner of her mouth.

“It’s almost ready, cousin,” she said to Lü Baozhai, her full lips shaking with ill-concealed mirth “I’ve kept a close eye on it!”

“Clearly,” Lü Baozhai answered. “I am sure your mother will be proud. And we’re only an *hour* behind.”

Lü Luli looked down, ashamed. Liu Fenfang dropped a freshly washed yam on the floor, and returned it to the scrubbing bucket as Yu Lanying groaned. Old Bai Lin glanced up at Lü Baozhai, and then muttered something as she tossed another log into the stove fire. The smoky smell of moss mixed with the warm spiced yam, the slow-cooking grain, and the still-raw pork that Hu Daiyu mixed with taro root between her dainty fingertips.

The thick, sweet odor became less and less pleasant as I tried to look busy while hiding my right hand. Lü Luli stirred the millet furiously, not letting a drop stick to the sizzling iron belly of the pot; it would have been the easiest task for me, but I knew as well as she did that she had no touch for cooking, and would only ruin the meal if set to an actual task. Yams slipped under my knife, and I bumped into Liu Fenfang in an effort to catch one which had skidded

straight off of the smooth stone countertop. The yam landed in chunks in the dirt around our feet, and Liu Fenfang stumbled backwards into Lü Baozhai, whose wrist flicked upward in surprise. A whole pepper bulb, rather than a few seeds, dropped from my oldest cousin's hand into the stewing millet.

"I hope they like it hot," Yu Lanying whispered to Hu Daiyu—the taller girl bending down comically far so that her mouth was on the level of the Hu Daiyu's ear.

Old Bai Lin grabbed a spoon, and dug out the spice pepper bulb. "No harm done."

"This is what happens when your mother puts *you* in charge of the kitchen, Lü Luli," Lü Baozhai spat, her eyes searching the room for someone to blame.

No one blamed her too much for her meanness, although her words bit the edges of our ears. At was high time that she should have been married, but her father had been off fighting for years now, and paid little attention to the matter the couple times he had returned home on leave. Uncle Lü Hai had no such riches as my father, and the dowry he had to offer would scarcely compensate if Lü Baozhai grew much older and worse tempered. She was skilled in housework, and would have made someone a dedicated wife, but instead spent her best years sowing grains of bitterness in the corners of our house.

Little motes of dust and cooking grime gathered with yam juices to stain the silk sleeves of my dress. I tried to gather the chunks without kneeling, to avoid ruining the pale cherry pattern. While it was not the best I owned in terms of quality of silk and dye, it was soft, and well-tailored, and particularly pleasing to my eye.

It would take quite a lot of scrubbing to clean the sleeves now. Worse, I could feel eyes draw to me as I bent and stood, again and again, to pick up the spilled yam chunks. My head swum with exhaustion, my ruined arm stung each time I squatted down and straightened. No

one said a word but, late as dinner was, the servants paused to watch. I dropped the last chunk on the counter, not in victory, but defeat. A truth had settled around my shoulders like ashes from the fire: my life would not be as it was before. After all, what chore does not require a right hand? Could I scrub, wring and pound out clothing with a single arm? Or change a squirming baby into neater garments? Could I change bedsheets? Perhaps, but not well. Certainly, not without revealing that I had lost the use of a limb.

“Lü Jin, sister,” Lü Luli whispered, looping a warm arm tight around my waist. “Tell me, what is troubling you?”

I could not answer with the truth, and I did not wish to lie, not to her. I merely stood dumb as a mound of earth, with tears building in their ducts like mountain springs after rain. I did not let them fall, but drew smoky-sweet breath after smoky-sweet breath of the kitchen air, and finally staggered out to the courtyard.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw old Bai Lin shaking her head.

“Stop—she is not well,” I could hear Lü Luli say to someone in the kitchen. “Let her be.”

I walked through the sunny courtyard, and felt a love for it blooming up in my heart. The careful woodwork of each wall was neatly lacquered, tall strong pillars supported a scalloped, slanting roof. The tiling under my feet was an understated grey, set off by flowers in vases of Samarkand glass, green fronds in ceramic tubs, and a single swing cherry tree kept for shade and beauty alike.

I entered the store-room, and lay on the ground in the half-darkness trying to wipe that courtyard, and all others from my mind. A part of my heart beat warmly, scolding me to examine the arm again for some sign of vitality, to beg my father to seek a doctor. Thoughts, nervous and frantic, bit at my mind. Would I become a spinster now, and bitter as Lü Baozhai?

Or, worse, would the chill of my arm creep to my heart, and end the life it had crippled? Those fearsome worries only quieted when I remembered that there was a task at hand. *You must tell no one*, my father had said. That was not a casting-off, nor did it sound as though he expected me to die. It was a secret, and it was mine to keep in trust.

I searched through the pile of goods from the store-room for a small silver jar that came from Persia. Inside was a bright red Indian dye, of top quality for screening the blush of a lady's cheek onto silk—or the semblance of boils onto a merchant's daughter's skin.

“Lü Jin, it is time to eat,” came a voice from the other side of the door. Liu Fenfeng.
“Finally.”

I kept my face turned to the floor.

“I am sorry I tripped you before,” I told her, the scene in the kitchen rising in my throat like a stray bone.

“Do not waste a thought on it,” she said, brushing the aside the curtain to the store-room with a slight *rip*, and laying a hand on my shoulder. “But *do* come eat, we are all ready.”

“Liu Fenfeng, make my excuses to my father and mother. I am too ill to join the table.”

I felt the hand lift from my shoulder, as she noticed the small red dots. They were sparing, there—the powdered dye would smear onto her fingers if she touched it, which would bring my ruse to light.

“Shall I bring you your food in here?” Liu Fenfeng asked.

“Yes please. Leave it on the other side of the curtain,” I instructed, and turned my face toward her. A rash weal seemed to spread from ear to ear, and angry red splotches marred my forehead and my chin. Perhaps it was overdone, but Liu Fenfeng did not look to long or closely. There was a small *crunch* as she stepped on something valuable, and then the servant was gone.

The story spread through the house that I was sick, and, likely as not, contagious. One evening spiraled into night, and then a dozen nights. Sometimes I had visitors, who spoke to me through the sheer curtain. Lü Luli came at first when she was bored of housework, pausing for a sunny minute or two by the store-room to comment on how round my mother's belly had become. Old Bai Lin visited on several occasions, always with the pretext of bringing me some item, whether it was a medicinal brew, thick and steaming, or fresh clothing, a new lacquered hairbrush which must have cost her dearly, and a crumbly-sweet mooncake during the mid-autumn festival. My older sister Lü Mae would pass along gossip on occasion, or news of a letter from our brothers. My little cousin Lü Chenhua came to talk once, but choked up in tears. Lü Baozhai spoke to me more often than I would have expected, although it was mostly to complain about my family members, so I could say little in response without risking rudeness. My father seems to have been worried by my trick, for he came by the storeroom himself to inquire when *exactly* my illness began.

“Quite soon after the seller of Zifu earthenware, father” I replied. “Perhaps he spread this sickness to our house.”

I heard a sigh of relief.

Soon after, I was moved to the empty quarters of my oldest brothers. It was a larger space than the storeroom by far, with dark curling woodwork and rice-paper screens shielding me from view on all sides. My chests of clothing lay nestled around the bed flooring, and a dragon-shaped vase greeted me with cherry blossoms. The room was not well positioned to receive sunlight, but there were several sturdy candelabra if I desired illumination. I paced around the room the whole first day, lost as an autumn leaf when first dislodged from the branch. The room called back memories of being lifted on strong, broad shoulders to snatch at the sky, or

being swung round in circles until my fluttering ankles grazed the wall. How strange it was, I thought, that those shoulders which had lifted a laughing child now swung blades in war; how strange it was, I thought, that the child who had once swung weightless through the air had landed as a woman in quarantine. For, indeed, I kept to this room as long as I remained in my father's household in Handan.

In time, of course, my relatives' visits grew fewer and further between. I did not mind, for, lying, pacing, or sitting in the quarters, I had nothing new to speak of. The effective quarantine, as thorough as though I were ill rather than injured, had a strange effect on me. I stopped worrying about time, which was curious, for my life had been hemmed bordered by routines and precision up until now. It was a strange, melting feeling, as though I could not tell where the room ended and I began. Sometimes, I felt as though I looked down from the ceiling at a girl-woman, who withered in the dark—other times, I felt as though I was watching a bright red river, warm and ebullient, which teased me as I froze. At night, I dreamed of earthquakes.

Looking back, I do not know how I could have stood it. Then, with one arm clay-touched, hanging like a phantom from my shoulder, it was natural to pass the days in limbo. I was too reasonable to believe there was a cure for a part of myself I had *felt* die, and I was too naïve to imagine that life would go on. I was too fastidious to show my inner state, and would brush my hair and dress as normal.

Sometimes, I heard servants' whispers through the wall paper. *Has Lü Jin died yet? Her food has returned un-eaten, even the melons she used to love. What could she have done, that they held no funeral? And No, she is not dead yet. I cleaned her chamber-pot only yesterday, and those are not a dead woman's leavings.* I have no doubt at all that my family continued to

grieve my loss in private, but they never spoke of it loudly in the courtyard, and so for many years, life in the household of Lü Buwei continued much as it had before.

Chapter 2

When, after my first close brush with death, my father spoke to me through the curtain, I assumed that I had done the house a great wrong by bringing life to the living clay. When Xu Fu, the alchemist, came to live with us, I quickly learned that I had mistaken solemnity for displeasure, and the fateful seeds of plotting for mere embarrassment.

Xu Fu was a cheerful man, remarkably, unshakably so. He was tall, as men from the state of Qi are apt to be, and had a coast-dweller's penchant for fish—which, he said, every time we ate fish, were simply not the same dried, salted, and imported inland. He had a long beard, which had not yet gone white, but which he claimed would make him look wise indeed when it did. His laugh was embarrassingly loud, he belched grandly whenever he ate, and had a great respect for the “scents of nature.” Although his conversation could be indelicate, I will freely admit that I could not have learned so much about living clay under the supervision of any other teacher.

The stores of living clay arrived a week after Xu Fu. In the meantime, he wandered around the house, stopping in the quarantine quarters occasionally to mention an odd fact—such as that clay will float or sink in water, depending on its shape—and thereafter disappearing. My father told me that he would teach me how to I might touch the clay in safety—the thought of being near it left me ill, but I agreed. I thought, or let myself think, that it was a precaution. I assumed he was there to advise my father on trading the valuable store. I did not realize, of

course, that this shipment of clay had become secondary, and that his primary purpose in residing in our household was to instruct me.

When the alchemist's clay arrived, it was stowed in one of my uncles' empty bedrooms, with access barred to all but the Xu Fu, or so he told me. The same evening the clay came, Xu Fu brought several heated bricks into my quarters, and set them on the floor. He left, and returned with a blanket, which he dropped beside the bricks. Again, he left—and this time, returned with a ball of living clay, held between wooden tongs. It was no larger than my thumbnail, but it set me shivering with fear.

“Why, why did you bring that in here?” I asked him.

He arranged the bricks on the floor around him, humming.

“You'll not be touching the clay today, and are in no danger,” he replied. “Watch, and I will show you the great extent of my ability to animate earth.”

First, Xu Fu held one of the bricks between both hands, the grin on his face fixing with pain. When he could stand it no more, he dropped the brick. Then, sweat pouring from his ample forehead—and the odor of exertion so strong that I moved to the opposite corner of the room—Xu Fu rolled the bead between his palms. He lowered the clay to the edge of the heating brick, as delicately as if it were a baby, and the bead rolled in a small, deliberate circle. Round and around it went, like a spinning top, but occasionally reversing direction. Eventually, the circle wound to a stop, and then the bead dropped down, clinking against the brick like oven-baked pottery, and cracking slightly at the edge.

Xu Fu warmed his palms on a heated block, for a full ten minutes before he spoke.

“I never would have sold your father my clay if I had blood like yours, you know” he said, out of breath, but no longer looking so pained as when he had been charming the clay. “I would have had the world in my palm like so—but there’s life for you!”

He shivered, and I passed him the blanket.

“What could it possibly be good for?” I asked him, for the pain in my arm was still raw, and seemingly worse by the day. “What would you, or anyone else, want with earth that sucks the heat from your blood, and the very life from your veins?” Two months of self-imposed confinement, in clutter, half-light and isolation, had compromised my temperament. It was fortunate, miraculous, for me that I had found a teacher who hardly seemed to notice, much less care, when I was rude—as I often was when I fretted at my life apart during the first, most difficult months.

“If you asked that question to your father, he would answer, ‘for making money,’” Xu Fu answered. “I would imagine, that is why he has dropped his ordinary businesses and begun skulking around the court, surveying the Zhao kingdom as if it were a ware already in his storehouse—I say this with the greatest respect for the man, of course, but watch that you don’t overhear too much or you’ll also be guilty of treason.”

The answer stunned me. If I had not been wallowing, I might have wondered more about my father’s absence from the room adjoining the store-room. I had assumed that my presence was distasteful, since my first disaster with the clay. I had taken his occasional visits as a sign of pity, but not genuine interest. I looked at Xu Fu with disbelief, hardly willing to believe digest the knowledge that he was dealing in riskier commodities, at risk to himself and our household, for the cursed clay.

I looked at the spinning bead on the warm block; by now, it was weaving and wobbling. Like a dying insect. Right then, I wanted to put out my hand and squash it, but I was afraid the touch would damage me.

Xu Fu continued, insensitive to my shock. “Now, Lü Jin, if you asked me that question before he wrote to me about you, then I would have said the clay was good for selling to people willing to take a chance on the stuff of legends—for clay men, clay armies are not unheard of, although they have been for some time, and furthermore, the goddess Nüwa is said by certain scholars to have crafted all mankind out of clay. I intended to sell your father a load of charms, that he might unload it on those credible and proud enough to believe that magic ought to spring from their persons to fill a well of magic.”

“Teacher, it *clearly* does not,” I answered, digging my fingernails into the limp skin of my right hand. It was patchy with white and black, and looked diseased to my eyes, although the discoloration had spread no further than my elbow.

Xu Fu looked at me thoughtfully, for a minute, then left. He returned, just as I curled up to sleep, with a dish of water, a dish of cooking oil, and a burning candle. He passed me the dish of water, and took the oil for himself. Gingerly, Xu Fu lit the oil; it burned so brightly and wide that I was afraid the room was not big enough to contain the burst, and that either my teacher, myself, the curtain, or my father’s silks, would scorch. Luckily, the oil burned out, with a few of Xu Fu’s glossy whiskers as the only casualties of the entire incident.

Then, laughing, he passed the candle to me.

I understood, and I doused it in the water.

“The clay does not care *who* you are,” he finished, a smile of satisfaction defining his face. “It is a matter of the elements which make you up. It does not make you better, than me, of course. I would not drink that oil to sustain me.”

Nevertheless, it was a week before I could bring myself to mold living clay. My father’s patience must have been wearing thin, because, I later learned, he had already managed to orchestrate the adoption of Yiren—prince of Qin, hostage in the Zhao court—by the childless Lady Huayang, wife of Lord Anguo, the Qin heir apparent. A shrewd move, for the old king of Qin was failing at the time, and the health of Lord Anguo was hardly better. Moreover, Yiren was a nervous, malleable spirit, with a deep sense of honor and of gratitude to his benefactors. Indeed, this was the point my father would tie his life to the throne of the Qin. Yet, as my father would have been the first to say, products of a certain nature require a certain price. In expressing his willingness to returning the hostage prince Yiren to the State of Qin, Zhao had made Lü Buwei aware of a dire need for soldiers.

When Xu Fu told me that it was *my* turn to make a bead of clay, I crumpled in laughter. When I realized that he was not joking, I crumpled in tears instead.

Against my protestations, the floor was heated with coals, and I was wrapped in quilts. Xu Fu handed me cloth to wrap my left hand, a fabric so soft and fine that I nearly cried to touch it. He brought in so many heated bricks that the wintry air rippled with warmth, and then, finally, the small bead of clay.

He held it before me—a lump of earth no larger than my pinkie, in a pair of tongs.

“No,” I said, backing up a pace. “I am not going to touch it.”

“It is good that you are cautious,” he said. “Only a fool would treat it lightly if she had your gift.”

“A gift?” I asked, voice rising until I sounded like a child. I held up my right arm, which was bone-pale and willow-thin, black-spotted, and useless as a wasted day.

“If she had your gift,” he repeated. “Listen, Lü Jin. What happened to your arm is a pity, but if you had not frightened, it would not have happened. Imagine you are the clay! You leave your good friend Xu Fu, and then spend weeks in a salesman’s nasty travel pack. You probably share your space with dried fish. And the ride is bumpy. Occasionally, he takes you out of the travel pack. He prods, and turns you round, and tries to figure out if the alchemist was pulling his leg, if there could be any clay so valuable that he should detour a month’s journey. The alchemist has been known to play such tricks before.”

I laugh, for a second—and then see the clay again, and am quiet.

“Then, you pass from the salesman’s nervous, sweaty palms to the hands of Lü Jin. You know, in an instant, that she has clay coursing through her spirit. She could make you into anything—you, who are formless. Because, of course, that is the true magic, the give-and-take. If you were the living clay, you could not imagine what it was like to be a cherry blossom or a dancing teapot, a soldier or a thief. If you could, you would not find becoming animated so *fun*. Yes, fun! Have you heard of it? The clay loves coming to life, and it loves whomsoever can animate it.”

“But *you*, Lü Jin, you drop it. After its whole long journey from Zifu—such inhospitality. And what does the clay do?”

“It holds on,” I answer, before I am aware of having thought the words.

I screw up my face, and reach my left hand towards the clay, but I still could not touch it.

“Why me?” I asked.

The alchemist shrugged. “I cannot answer that—but, I have no doubt the clay will, eventually.”

I looked at the clay ball in the teeth of the wooden tongs, small, silent and grey.

“And when it does,” he said, “be sure to tell me.”

In the rippling heat of the room, the edges of the clay seemed to dance. I knew that it was an illusion of the air, that it was not truly reaching toward me, straining to become—a bead? An insect, with tapered waist and filmy wings? A dragon the size of a dragonfly, or a bracelet as thin as grain? An official’s seal, or a dancer’s hairpin?

I pressed my left hand to the heat brick, until it seemed that the skin must have singed from flesh. Then I brushed my smallest finger to the clay—and felt it writhe with agony. I gaped in surprise, and pain, but did not drop the clay ball as sucked warmth from my arm. I squeezed it tighter.

“If you ruin this arm, you will never be anything,” I shouted—loud enough that they must have heard me in the courtyard, and thought it the ravings of illness. “It will serve you right—demon-spirit—monkey clay!”

The clay ball flew to fragments, dry baked crumbs so small that they could scarcely be seen or counted. I collapsed to the floor, and watched limply while Xu Fu wrapped a heated cloth around my left hand. The skin was sore and tender to the touch, but I had use of every joint. Only the small circle of skin which had touched the clay directly was pale and peeling with chill.

Down on the ground, my faces inches from the heat bricks, the world was strange and bent as in a fever-dream. It was from Xu Fu’s eyes, not mine, that tears leaked, when he regarded my face. But as for me, it was the clay I pitied then, rather than myself. It was then, I

think, that I finally recognized it as *alive*. I had been treating it as an enemy, when I ought to have recognized it as a friend, as a sister to my spirit.

Through fatigue-glazed eyes, I looked at the burnt crumbs of clay along the floor. I recognized another creature of which too much had been asked.

“I have learned my lesson, teacher Xu Fu,” I told him, the words slurring.

“I understand,” he said. “I am sorry to have put you through—I should have told your father—it is too strong in your—”

“Learned my lesson,” I repeated. “Next time, I will think of *one* thing when I mold it. Otherwise, confused.”

“Lü Jin?”

I did not answer my teacher, for it was then that I was first struck by a vision. In front of my eyes, a face swam, red and thick-featured as if sculpted out of clay. It grinned, showing bony fangs—was it a god, or a demon spirit? Or just the beginnings of a nightmare?

“Good work today,” boomed the voice. Its consonants clashed like swords, and its vowels tore like flesh. I knew then that I was addressed by a war deity. “I will be seeing more of you, I take it.”

I bowed by head down to my neck as best as I could, and then I slipped through the curtain of sleep. I must have slept for a long while indeed, for I woke up, I found that the room had been subdivided with a curtain, into my bedchamber and a workshop. There were stone benches with hollow tops, and metal grates above that, perfect for holding coals or heated brick. There were tongs and scalpels hanging from pegs in the wall, obviously for clay work, next to several wooden swords, for what purpose I did not yet know. But, when I examined them, a curious red face swam again before my eyes—and its teeth seemed bared in approval.

The first creatures I made of clay were not precisely what Zhao had anticipated, when my father whispered of loyal, fearless, bloodless fighters. I began with flowers.

The process was my own design—and I was proud of it. After the fragmented ball of clay, I did not trust myself to mold the clay fully during the chill moment of contact. Thus, I turned to sculpture, and formed the shape, more or less, before animating it. It painstaking. Not only was I a novice to the art, but I had to perform the task one-handed, and without touching the material directly.

As usual, I would heat the floor, and wrap my entire body in quilts, and surround the clay with heated bricks. Then, I would wrap my left hand in cloth, and then grasp an ivory hairpin as best as I could. I carved and flattened small sections of clay, which was difficult, and then layered them on top of each other, which was much harder. At the end, I would touch the flower, as quickly as possible, with the smallest finger of my left hand, and then pass it through a candle-flame.

The bloom would warm to life, then, and bake then and there, without need of a kiln. It was a joyful thing, a moment of such pure happiness, to watch my creations finish themselves. The flowers might thin and refine the edges of my rough petals, or spring miniature thorns where I had only thought to create a smooth stem. Like a spark finding oil, the living clay needed so little encouragement that even the sloppy work of my wrapped left hand inspired it to become beautiful. Once the clay appeared dry and warm in color, it was safe, even pleasant, to touch. I could not bear to destroy a finished flower, and so I kept them all, even as my work improved. By the time I had complete the first crude blossom, my distaste for the clay dissipated fully, like a quarrel between lovers, which left us all the more eager for contact. I never again fragmented

the clay on contact, and, the whole time I made flowers, I had no more visions of the war deity, and began to dismiss his angry red face as a dream.

Once my floral creations had attained a certain delicacy, Xu Fu sent for array of the finest pigments, in every color man could mix.

“Selected from my own chemical stocks, Lü Jin” he told me, as he tossed me the near-priceless bag overhand. “So use them at *least* as carefully as I would.”

Xu Fu told me what each was made of, where it came from, what it cost, and how it would look once dry and cooked. I spent entire days contemplating the colors, and how to blend them. The flowers bloomed within my mind, far more vivid than any green thing growing in the soil. But I had no more than to lift a brush to realize that I was incapable of bringing that fullness to my clay. I asked for Xu Fu’s help.

He painted the flowers for me, exactly as I described, with more skill of the brush than I have ever attained. I peered through a small gap in the edge of the wall papering as he placed one or two of the finer pieces in a decorative bowl in the courtyard. I almost cried with satisfaction when a younger cousin, Lü Chenhua, whose face I had not contemplated in a year, stopped to stare in wonder at the beauty of the artificial flower.

That day, Xu Fu told me that my next task would be to craft a hand. I bit my lip, aware of the reason, but, I could not help laughing at the cleverness his cheerful manner belied. After seeing the first painted flower I would never again be content to bring clay to life if it were but dry and colorless. But, my left hand was clumsy as Liu Fenfeng.

I bit back the argument that I would learn how to paint left-handed. After all, I had learned to brush and tie my hair and dress without my right arm. I had taught myself to hold chopsticks in my left hand, and even carve out rudimentary forms in clay. With sudden clarity, I

saw every mote of dust in the room. The treasures which had once overawed me with their value and brightness were poor indeed in comparison with what I might create—it made sense to me, finally, why my father would have swept aside and abandoned those goods once the abundance of my power became clear. For so many long months now, I had near buried myself alive, and now the color and textures sparked with such poignancy in my soul that I would bury myself in them.

It took me a full week to sculpt my first attempt at an arm. The forearm was easy—like a flower stem, but thicker—but I found great difficulty in the fingers. It was a great challenge to match them in length and width, and to shape nails and knuckles that bent properly, rather than gnarling like roots of ginger. Due to the extended carving time, and the heat of the room, the clay began to dry, and I had to massage water over the arm with a damp cloth, but still it cracked and fell to pieces. It was not beautiful when I finished, and by then I was beginning to wish that humans had hooves like oxen rather than hands, that it might have been easier to carve.

Before I could attach the new arm, of course, the lifeless limb had to be removed.

The amputation itself posed some question. Neither Xu Fu nor my father had ever performed such a surgery, or possessed the necessary skills, but, my father reasoned, any medic who could be paid off to keep silent must not be skilled enough to live honestly by his profession, and could not be trusted under the circumstance. There was no question of re-hiring the seedy fellow from Handan who, at the beginning of my supposed illness, had diagnosed me with a chronic miasma based on the symptoms of a few spade coins tucked in his pocket. On the other hand, a skilled physician would ask how I had lost the use of my arm, why we had chosen to amputate a year after the injury, and why we passed it off as a pox.

In the end Xu Fu wrote to a friend, and one-time alchemist, Hua Cao. The man had lived multifarious life—by his early thirties, Xu Fu told us, Hua Cao was a skilled magician, but by forty, he had switched completely to the healing arts. Now, a grey-beard of fifty-five, he had devoted himself to Shennong, god of agriculture and medicine, at a mid-sized temple in Yexian. A letter was hurried across the border from the Zhao state to Wei, and a week later, a return message announced his arrival two days hence. He would come at midnight, as we had suggested. For, as far as Hua Cao knew, his job was an exorcism.

“It had a face like a war deity,” I told him, trying to keep the red grin and slashing voice vivid in my mind. The best lies are always the closest to truth, and my near-sleep vision was the only encounter I had ever had with the supernatural. “It reached out a hand, with a claw like a dragon, and touched my wrist. I felt the blood chill in my veins, and have not recovered use of the hand.”

“You say this happened a week and a day from yesterday?” Hua Cao said, a frown darkening his brow. For a northern man, he was swarthy—nearly as much as a peasant in the field. It made sense, for, his god was a man of the field as well as an herbalist, and a disciple would surely spend time in the sun as well as indoor prayer.

“Yes,” Xu Fu said, as I bowed my head in agreement.

“You did well to conceal this from the household,” Hua Cao said, addressing my father. “Many would fear such a curse, and rightly so, even as their daily tasks do not diminish.”

“Domestic life continues, indeed,” Lü Buwei answered. “And no good harvest comes to a man who plants panic in his field.”

“Is she stout of heart?” Hua Cao asked, gesturing slightly to myself.

“Indeed.”

“Good,” he answered. “For, child, I must tell you that the ill spirit surely lingers in your veins, and could suck your life away at any minute. It is good that I was summoned, and quickly. The demon presence must be removed at any difficulty.”

“Do what you must,” I said, without needing to feign the tremor in my voice. He was an honest man, with kind rheumy eyes that I remember to this day. He would try every remedy he knew, before cutting my arm, but all were doomed to fail, for there was no spirit in my empty arm—not a demon’s, nor mine own.

I suffered greatly over the next week, as the priest tortured my body to rid it of a figment. Hua Cao threatened the demon with spewing knives, and spat on my arm. He burned and soaked talismans around my bedside, till the air was thick with smoke. I ate herbs which made me vomit, and others which turned my bowels to liquid. I clenched my teeth, as buttons of mugwort were burned on my back, marring the once-clear skin.

At last, Hua Cao broke the news that he would need to amputate. I nodded agreement—for my throat was then too sore from retching to speak easily—and my father granted permission. It was Xu Fu who kept me company as the priest severed my right arm.

First, he gathered his implements, and cleaned them with a cloth. Next, I was laid on the floor, with my arm propped up on one of the stone work benches of my quarters. Hua Cao placed a thick cloth between my teeth, and told me to bite it. Then, he took a butcher’s knife, and sliced through the flesh an inch above my elbow. My breath caught, as I watched the skin and muscle shear away in a few short strokes. Red, bright as the war deity’s face, poked through in a constellation of dots that bloomed into a current. It ran through the pale cloth Hua Cao gathered around it, and then continued, in dark gouges, down the surgeon’s arm. My breath came

heavy at the sight, although the shearing of the dead flesh had left me with a curious satisfaction, like tearing the flaky white outside off of a blister.

It was when he began to saw through bone that I felt the pain—the living bone, that ran from my dead forearm up to my quite live shoulder. It was heavy, and it was fearsome. Every tooth of the saw blade bit into the fine twin bones of my arm. My shoulder convulsed, and I tried to spit the cloth from between my teeth, to beg him to stop, and a cry built deep in my throat. When the marrow cracked, it was as a storm: I saw the snap, in jagged spikes like lightning, then heard my cry, guttural as thunder, while all the while pain washed me, deep and terrible, overflowing every dam.

At last, the work was over. The wound was burned to seal it, with a cruel, flesh-hungry torch. The cloth was wrested from my clenched jaw long enough for a brew, thick and green, to be poured down my throat. And then red and grey was all I saw. It bubbled up behind my eyes, and crept in even to my sensation of pain. I recognized no one then, and can only recall the time which followed as in a dream.

Tall grey men walked around the room. One gathered black blood from a red severed arm in a grey vial, another swam in and out of focus as if he came near and then retreated.

“She will live,” a voice said, grey as with exhaustion.

“With that fever?” A third replied. “Tell me the truth—there will be no retribution. But tell me the truth.”

The face swam in and out of focus. Grey water bulged in its eyes, and grey fibers from its beard shifted in the light. I clawed, as though through a pool of grey kelp, to reach it, and then my right-hand side burst with spasms of bright red pain. I knew instinctively that I must ask them to stop talking, for the sound of words was too heavy, and stillness the only answer.

“She will live,” the grey voice repeated.

“She is a brave girl,” the blood-gatherer answered.

“If only you knew,” the last voice finished.

A constellation of red stars punctured my sight, and bloomed like blood along my senses until I could neither see or hear.

It was not a quick recovery. Hua Cao stayed in Handan long enough to see that I would, indeed, live, and then returned to the temple in Yexian. I never had the chance to thank him for a job done well, considering the circumstance. Once I was lucid, and had the strength to talk, I called for the arm that I had built—only to find that it had cracked apart in my absence, to dry unsalvageable crumbs.

I built another arm, in much the same way as the first. It cost me considerably more discomfort, for every movement hurt the swollen mass of my right shoulder and upper arm, but the task was my principal distraction from the pain. As terrible as the surgery had been, it was brief, and the memory diminished in force—the recovery was almost worse, as exhausted nights wore by when my bone ached too deeply to sleep, and each day brought fresh twists and twinges to the wounded area. I rolled clay, tapered and bent it at all the appropriate places, formed fingers and raised lumps where there ought to be knuckles.

When I finished the arm, I animated it and attached it to my body. I deliberately leave no specific instructions, for I have since learned how this magic may be misapplied; suffice to say that we used the blood gathered in the operation, and fed it into the hand and forearm of clay. Suffice to say that the hand was joined to mine. Suffice, indeed, to say that of the works I have wrought with clay, that feeding it my own blood was one of the goriest but but also the least terrible.

It was a terrible limb, on the first attempt. After all my time carving it, I could scarce believe that it would not work. But, upon reflection, the failure was almost inevitable—after all, an arm is much more complicated than a flower.

“How does it feel?” Xu Fu asked, the moment we had attached it.

“There is no—” I faltered “There is no—elbow.”

The new arm bent, of course, at the place an elbow should be, but it was not dynamic. The fingers, too, I discovered, were fixed in place. The weight was—simply wrong. The fingers were disproportionate, and fat and clumsy as an infant’s. I could not stand it, and the clay limb seemed to sense my discomfort. Yet, ugly and awkward as it was, the hand afforded me an ability that I had never had before. With an arm of living clay, I could imbue clay with the vital spark in a more controlled manner. I could shape, and touch the material directly. And, thus, my second attempt at an arm was far superior.

It was no easy business to replace the arm of clay, of course. First, the limb was smashed off, which hurt briefly, but sharply as the cracking of bone. It must be left to dry and crumble, then, it must be boiled in water for a day and a night, to extract the original blood, which would be compounded with fresh. Indeed, I was pale and anemic by the time I was finally right-handed. But, finally, I had a sense of progress and of joy; I endured this pain because I could feel my body becoming whole.

With the second arm, I shaped a third, this one attached to me in two, jointed installments that turned nearly as smoothly as a human elbow. With the third arm, I fashioned a proper arm joint, and began work on improvements to the natural design, insofar as my trade was concerned. I crafted a superior hand for artwork, with long tapering fingers which bent backwards or forwards at every joint. I shaped palm that curved more deeply, to hold water as need be. I

made nails as sharp as sewing needles. By the fourth iteration, I bore an arm with a delicacy of articulation which my natural hand could never have attained.

An ant requires less warmth than a duck does, a horse requires a frightening amount, and a clay human tugs at the spirit, asking for more vitality than it contain, and more than a body can give.

Chapter 3

The first men I made were hardly deserving of the name—they were rough-hewn, poorly-decorated creatures. I found that I could hardly bring myself to invest them with life, for their only purpose was that of dying on the battlefield. At the time, I told myself that it was my duty to my father and teacher to create what they asked of me.

If I could have made them in a hurry, perhaps the thought would have rung with truth to the end, but that was not the case.

First came the man who fell apart, only half-finished. I built him solidly out of the clay—limbs, head, central cavity—and he lacked the support that bones lend to us men and women of flesh. I moped for a week, nearly, before beginning once more, telling the alchemist that making a man was surely above my abilities, and that it was cruel to expect so much of me.

Xu Fu nibbled at the food I had left upon my plate while he considered, then pushed aside the dish, and left the room with a wink.

Apparently, he spoke to my father, although I know that was a task he avoided whenever possible. For, within a week, a young potter's apprentice had been hired away from his master, and led blindfolded to my quarters.

He had a reddish, sloppy face, and a listless temperament which to me bespoke low-class so I wondered why Xu Fu thought the man could be trusted, and for a moment I questioned my teacher's judgement. After all, I had been tasked to build a military force, and a secret weapon loses its potency once the secret is spread out by careless lips.

"I'm supposed to teach a *girl*?" were the first words he said, when Xu Fu took off his blindfold. Of course, I realized, as I watched the youth's face turn from golden-red to a state of solid magenta—with myself as a pupil, he would hardly brag to his fellow apprentices that he had been hired to teach someone sculpture under strictest vows of secrecy. He would invent some other story—that he had been brought to assess some fortifications, perhaps, but never that he had taught a merchant's daughter his craft, under the supervision of an alchemist who, apparently, thought the whole situation a magnificent lark.

Ma Dahzu grumbled as he showed me to wind strips of clay around each other into a hollow torso which did not sag in on itself. He frowned all the while that he showed me to make molds, looking at me as if it were I the vulgar one. In truth, I remembered then that not all merchants are as highly regarded as my father, and thus, in technicality Ma Dahzu outclassed me. Yet, my hands—the flesh and the clay—were smooth, while his were callused; even living in quarantine with rare visitors, I presented myself elegantly, in soft, rippling silks which he, in his coarse garments, would not afford even if his skills doubled. At the time, I did not know why his displeasure at the sight of me had bitten my spirit so. But, then, I had so little exposure, then, to men of my age, that perhaps it is no surprise I let his insulting regard irritate me to the point where I felt that it was *I*, not he, who wore a plain and scratchy tunic.

"You can leave, then," I said, "Without your pay, if you find it so insulting to teach me."

Xu Fu frowned, then, and softened my words to the potter's apprentice.

“She did not mean to insult you, my friend” I heard him whisper, and then, to my mortification, “Quite the opposite.”

Ma Dahzu made a stifled sound, and looked at the floor until a dreadful silence had filled the entire room. It was his embarrassment which gave me an upper hand. The picture of a clay ball exploding passed before my eyes for an instant, and I realized that here I had imagined a rival’s attack when I was truly witnessing an attempt at defense.

It was the first time since my initial retreat to the store-room that I had considered myself as a woman who might, perhaps, be of interest to a man. Of course—Ma Dahzu did not know that my right arm was clay. Of course—he had not been told that my confinement was due to an illness. He had been paid for a job, and to not ask questions, which made a mystery out of me. I took every chance to brush his hand while he taught me the artisan way with sculpting, over the course of a month. I would say goodbye over-sweetly when he was led, blindfolded, to the gates of the house late each night, on route to makeshift quarters in one of my father’s nearby warehouses. I intended it as a revenge, for his insults and his slights. It gave me no end of satisfaction to watch him blush, or stutter with his words—such power I held, indeed.

But, how often it is that revenge strikes the one who would wield it as a weapon. I listened, heart stilled, three weeks in, as Ma Dahzu asked Xu Fu to return his last paycheck to my father, with apologies, and with a request for his belongings to be returned to the artisans’ complex in town.

“He will want to know why,” was all the alchemist said. It was the end of a long day’s training, and bags of sleep hung heavy on all our eyes.

“It is Lü Jin, sir. She mocks me day in, and day out—it is intolerable.”

“I will tell him in the morning, then. Although, perhaps I will temper those words for your sake when I do.”

Xu Fu returned to cleaning the grates of the work bench. I put down my tongs, quietly on the peg, and walked over to Ma Dahzu, who sulked in the corner of the room, crouching, and empty-handed. I tapped him on the shoulder, and he wheeled around, blinking with rage.

“I need the money—I don’t know what I’ll say—but I won’t stand—”

“I have not been mocking you of late,” I told him, under my breath. I looked away from his face, then, for my heart fluttered like a bird inside my chest, and I felt sure he would wring its neck.

Ma Dazhu said nothing to me then, and, throat burning, I helped Xu Fu to finish cleaning the day’s work, and then passed behind the curtain to my bedchamber before either man left the workspace to sleep. I hugged my knees to my sore chest, and berated myself for speaking so openly—and to one who bore me no good will, after all. I could not get comfortable, and shifted this way and that on the floor.

In the morning, much to my surprise, Ma Dahzu was still there. He greeted me cautiously, and I him. And, thus, our quarrel passed.

Soon, we were stealing secret kisses, sending Xu Fu out with pleas of missing tools, although, Xu Fu, no fool and well into his middle age, surely knew what we were up to. I had learned enough of womanhood from before my confinement to take no greater liberties, or risk a bastard child. It was a simpler, more innocent love, concealed in snideness and blushes and brushes of the hand—in my forgetting, or pretending to forget, that he had pimples and his forgetting, or pretending to forget, that he should not be teaching me his craft—which imbued the first clay soldier I ever finished with a poet’s tender heart.

The potter's apprentice had left the house in his blindfold, and the alchemist was asleep. The clay man lay finished, with a sword in his hand, and a face that looked suspiciously like that of Ma Dahzu. I tossed and turned, unable to find a comfortable way in which to sleep, knowing that I should wait until the morning—but I could not rest. So, I stood, and wrapped myself tight in a quilt. I lit a single candle, and reached my clay hand forward. Gently, I touched the clay lips, and watched them tremble to life.

Synopsis of the remaining chapters:

This story is based on the history of the rule of Emperor Qin Shi Huangdi. I intend to follow just about all of the historical events very closely, save for the fact that many of them are the intentional or unintentional result of the story's protagonist (Lü Jin) and her ability to work with living clay, at that certain individuals who appear as humans in the historical text of the time aren't exactly that, and that thousands of individuals who appear as clay in the Emperor's mausoleum, aren't only what they appear.

LJ makes clay soldiers, some of whom she has a difficult time convincing to leave and fight, but which she manages in the end, although unsure in her heart whether it is right. In the middle of this, her living brothers die at war. MD and LJ grow closer, but he is increasingly frustrated by her caginess regarding the secrets of her life.

After much political machination, Lü Buwei, with the influence won from Lü Jin's clay army places Yiren on the throne of Qin as King Zhuangxiang, with LB himself as chancellor—LJ assumes she will be done with clay-crafting for others' benefits, and intends to forge a mid-ranking identity for herself at the court, hopes that Lady Zhao, the dancing girl from LB household, will not recognize her. King Z dies after three years though (potentially through some accident involving the clay? Or, simply, that LB picked a candidate that he knew would be weak enough to allow him influence, but didn't count on the man's ill health). MD breaks up with LJ when she leaves Handan, and, upset, she tries to make a clay replicate, with whom things go ill.

When King Z's son, the future emperor Qin Shi Huangdi, ascends power, LB is the regent, but along with the power comes danger, as LB's relationship with Lady Z becomes problematic. LB asks LJ to make a suitor for Lady Z, to distract and create a side-scandal, which LJ does—only to find out (as she could have seen before, from the first clay soldiers), that the clay suitor Lao Ai does not intend to do her bidding. She made him to be fearless of danger, and absolutely committed to getting what he wants for himself—so LA goes beyond simply seducing the dowager queen, and attempts a coup. The coup backfires on LB, who commits suicide rather than be executed.

LJ is safe in the court, due to her false identity and the fact that LB never divulged the secret of her clay magic, so only a few, mainly Xu Fu, Ma Dahzu, and Lady Z, have an inkling of her power. However, she blames herself for her father's death, and generally has a rough time of it. Lady Z, convinced that it is XF who had the clay magic, pleads with him to help, which he relays to her. At first, LJ refuses—and sneaks out of the court for a while, with only the clay on her back. She is a nobody and a nothing. During that time, she loses some of her snobbery, but also finds she misses the sense of control she had over her life when she made the clay. She also realizes that, to most people, it is not the personality of the emperor and the pettier power struggles at court which affect them—and regrets throwing away her chance to make changes in the world because of a personal dislike.

It is when her stores of clay begin to run dry, and her clay soldiers come back in need of extra limbs, that she realizes she will not be able to stay in hiding. She returns, and throws herself into working for the empire from behind the scenes. She becomes confidante of the replacement chancellor, Li Si, during the period of unification (possibly, she has already met him, since he had visited LB's court). She eventually comes to feel that she is following in LB's footsteps, and that he would have liked for his family to be turning the wheels of power even through the unlikely character of herself, for what she considers right. But, she never forgives the Emperor, who was implicated in LB's death, and maintains a strong personal dislike contrasted with Li Si's professed dedication.

The third assassination attempt on the Emperor's life succeeds. Afraid of a panic at court, of herself and others losing their position, and chaos, she creates a clay replacement. The clay replacement is unable to keep up with the job, so, around the time when the historical Emperor ordered that speaking of his whereabouts would be punishable by death, she creates another couple from the same mold. In making them, she invested them with too much of how she thought the old Emperor to be, but, like LA, they are headstrong and very independent of her. Not only that, but, unlike her other clay people who were happy to return to the clay, they desire to be immortal individuals.

LJ tries to discover from XF if that is possible, and, after his expedition to the Zhifu island where the living clay is made, she learns the secret of the blood magic at the heart of the clay. Meanwhile, many of her other clay people are unhappy, finding themselves at the edges of society, unable to have children and thus lineages of their own, and they rally around the clay king who promises them eternity in and of themselves. She eventually convinces XF to tell them it is impossible, and he is executed along with many others, at the urging of LS.

[...not all the details worked out around the ending; the terracotta warriors are the army, which she leads to the mausoleum, but I haven't decided whether I want her to have (a) tricked her own creations into thinking they will survive underground, or (b) decides that they deserve a life apart from all the political machinery she has participated in, or (c) they are there, waiting to re-emerge at some later date, convinced that the time is not now...in any case, LJ contributes to the death of the clay emperor, the clayness of which a dismayed LS conceals by having carts driven alongside the royal procession...and she is left wondering whether her power was used for good or for bad, and whether she was right to make and then try and remove the clay people]

[Also, she might make herself a great clay animal sidekick at some point, if the story calls for it]

Main References:

Many thanks to the staff at the MIT libraries, for connecting me with relevant resources.

"China." *Daily Life through World History in Primary Documents*. Ed. Lawrence Morris. Vol. 1: The Ancient World. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2009. 18-19. Gale Virtual Reference Library. Web. 7 Oct. 2016.

Jia, Yi. 2015 "Transformations of Woman's Social Status in China." *Annales: Series Historia et Sociologia* 25 (2): 317-28.

Liu, Yang, Edmund Capon, Albert E. Dien, Jeffrey K. Riegel, Eugene Yuejin Wang, Zhongyi Yuan, Rong Zhao, Kaywin Feldman, Institute of Arts Minneapolis, and Art Museum of San Francisco Asian. 2012. *China's Terracotta Warriors: The First Emperor's Legacy*. Minneapolis, Minn: Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

Perkins, Dorothy. 2013. *Encyclopedia of China: History and Culture*. Routledge.

Rodríguez Carreiro, Daniel. 2013. "The Dao Against the Tyrant: The Limitation of Power in the Political Thought of Ancient China." *Libertarian Papers* 5 (1): 111-52.

Sima, Qian, William H. Nienhauser, and Tsai Fa Cheng. 1994. *The Grand Scribe's Records*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Wang, Q. Edward. 2015. *Chopsticks*. Cambridge University Press.

Wood, Frances. 2008. *China's First Emperor and His Terracotta Warriors*. 1st U.S. ed. New York: St. Martin's Press.

MIT OpenCourseWare
<https://ocw.mit.edu>

21W.758 Genre Fiction Workshop: Fantasy
Fall 2016

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <https://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.