

## AGAINST A FALLING FABRIC

(Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*)<sup>1</sup>



"The foolish reject what they see,  
not what they think; the wise reject  
what they think, not what they see."

~ Huang Po

Even the doe nuzzling the old Chinese man—seated upon a rock in the tree-lined shelter of a cool glade—was no consolation to him.

"Ah, I am just an old man now," he sighed, the muscles in his broad chest shaking with grief. "Nobody pays me any mind any more."

Several squirrels who'd scampered in from the forest shook tails like plumes, then, with soft, almondine eyes, resumed watching him. The monkeys who'd swung down from the branches regarded him too—tipping heads first one way, then the other, holding feet in hands and gently rocking. The doe went back to grazing.

The chin of his big bald head nodded inwards as the large luminous eyes that used to sparkle with mirth when he was teaching softly teared.

He'd taken to coming here for respite when he could no longer handle the camp of monks and nuns. Though his eyesight was failing (his hearing, too, getting even worse) he knew that his distracted inability to pay attention to his pupils—or even the mundane matters of seeing that the supplies were properly gathered, the meals cooked—lay elsewhere. He was troubled that he just did not know why.

*Perhaps he no longer knew what to do...*

He remembered how at one time he would lecture to 1,000 people on Vulture Peak, with people traveling from far provinces just to hear him discourse on the Dharma. *How in the world had things become so different?*

In front of him one of the monkeys stood, did a backflip, then reseated himself to the chattering approval of the others. Usually these tricks made his eyes grow wide with wonder, his belly shake with amusement. But not today. Another tear slowly ran down his cheek.

For too long now he'd found that no matter which way he led the camp they could find no

monasteries remaining.

*Perhaps*, he thought, that when Emperor Wu's troops had arrived at their own monastery *he should have done things differently*. Yet he could not believe his ears when the captain had confronted him—as he was the senior teacher—and demanded that, according to new proclamation, they renounce Buddhism as a foreign superstition and convert the monastery to a center for studies of native Confucianism. He'd been sewing a rip in one of his robes, and, not wishing to be distracted, had simply nodded his head *No*.

The troops had brandished swords and lances and prodded everyone out of the buildings and courtyard. Then they had gathered all the religious statues, *thangka* paintings and other sacred objects forming the shrine's altar and, denouncing it all as demonic idolatry, smashed everything into a pile of rubble.

As all watched in astonishment, next the buildings were torched. Flames leaping high behind them the troops then left—coarse laughter resounding among the horses' hoof beats...

Since that time—six years that have seemed like an eternity—they trekked to Lung Hsing Monastery, then K'ai Yuan and a dozen others outlying their region. At each one, rubble. His scouts would return—eager with news of one in an area not yet plagued by the mad Emperor and his cadres of Confucian court scribes—and each time, with high spirits, they'd set out as if seeking the promised land of Heaven.

Yet too many times now they'd crest a hill and discover, in the distance, columns of

billowing black smoke. As if the troops had awaited their arrival before destroying. Still more crying refugees with tales of fresh destruction.

They had even had to take on groups of nuns—wandering in utter bewilderment. The older ones wide-eyed with fear, unable to speak of the savagings the younger ones had had to endure as each was bounced roughly along from one soldier to another.

Of course he knew that monks and nuns in the same camp would not be a wise idea, thinking now of new difficulties, but *what choice had he had?*

In the branches above him birds chirruped, startling him. The squirrels and monkeys before him still sat regarding him.

“So, you are my pupils now. Hmmn, yes, I see,” he chuckled.

His thoughts returned to the source of their plague—*Langdharma the heretic!* The heretic’s brother, who’d administered the province before him, had been most favorably disposed towards Buddhism.

He himself had been invited to the capital to discourse the Dharma and had delivered what he’d thought had been a not bad sermon. He’d told the tale of mountains and rivers: *at first in practice, mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers.* Then one begins to notice mountains in everything. Rivers in everything. If one looks, for example, at a peak when the sun is just right, it glimmers like a river. When one gazes into a stream, seeing the cool deep rock bed beneath the spangling surface, then relaxing the eyes with *mushin*, no gaze, no concepts, no form, no emptiness, one sees the surface of the water as being as

solid and of great form as a mountain. Then *mountains become rivers and rivers become mountains...*

The governor had then asked, *But then what happens?*

He'd flashed his famous inscrutable smile and said, *The ox returns home of itself..*

Out of jealousy, a desire for greater power, Langdharma had then murdered his brother—claiming in secret it was necessary because as governor he'd gotten out of control, had become seduced by the *foreign devils*. Shrewdly, to ensure protection, he'd then sent a scholar, Han Tse, to the Emperor Wu with this nonsense of *return to native Confucianism, expel these foreign devils*.

The propaganda was quite elaborate: the Chinese in their innate wisdom should have known better when this tall, gaunt figure Bodhidharma, the First Patriarch of Buddhism in China, had appeared from India several generations ago. Wrong body style for the more corpulent and sensual Chinese. One too aggressive as well—this light-skinned devil Bodhidharma was possessed of unnatural abilities and unnatural quickness and strength and had taught his demonic martial arts to so many since that *the very security of the nation-state was threatened!*

Too, this devil's gaze—piercing with intensity—would enter the softly focused, unsuspecting eyes of the Chinese and subtly *brainwash them with sorcery!* Before one knew it, one would wind up in Hell, with one of the Confucian Mandate from Heaven scribes holding a long list of sins committed (albeit unconsciously), the scribe's face sad in

recounting, as help would *not be available now...*

Never had he heard such claptrap! Such perversion of the Dharma! Why, the monkeys when they chattered made more sense! Cannily the right idea had been *stolen from holy writ* and dissembled as the false piety of another!

Still that part had not been the worst. Cloaked words can always be brought to the light of Truth by the subtle use of dialectics in debate. No, this Langdharma had become the very embodiment of depravity. Palace orgies went on for days—and he was especially fond of despoiling young Buddhist women. Mad Emperor Wu did not seem to care—if he even noticed at all, it was said that when messengers from the Court visited Langdharma he was the very model of piety...

The squirrels and monkeys were chattering in alarm now. He was sobbing mightily. Ah, it was *all so intolerable*. And he could do nothing to stop it. Langdharma would send spies, posing as refugees, into his camp, and like a subtle poison, they'd be too difficult to detect until the damage was done. Stooped with humility around him or the senior monks and nuns, these spies would then turn licentious in private, seducing the unsuspecting with tales of how much better life was at a place nearby—of which he, whom they called the *Old Fool*, was oblivious.

According to this script the minions dutifully deployed, he, the Old Fool, was being punished by Heaven for his youthful arrogance and other such alleged shortcomings—each newly minted disaster cleverly incorporated. Tales of *Heavenly Consorting* that brought

*instant enlightenment* were snake-tongued into the ears of the young females—who would disappear with the spies to face virtual sexual slavery with Langdharma.

At least that was what his scouts loyal still reported. *This dog fattens itself by feeding on our human flesh!* But perhaps not. Perhaps he indeed existed in complete delusion, his dislike of Langdharma misfounded. Perhaps he had indeed failed his people. It would be better if the dog simply killed him off instead of allowing him to wander in abject misery as an object lesson to all...

A branch overladen with monkeys crashed suddenly to the ground—sending them leaping and howling into space, scampering away upon landing.

*Yes, he thought, Manjushri stood before Gautama with a drawn sword!*

He closed his eyes and the whole plan became clear. In the nearby village a farmer sympathetic to them had a sturdy white mare. He would put Young Grasshopper in charge of the camp—telling him to move only if necessary—and go to this farmer and borrow his pony. He would gather some garments to disguise himself as a beggar and outfit a bag with fresh clothes and some black dye. His folding bow and an arrow, too.

Then he would ride like the wind to Langdharma's capital; reportedly the little fool's arrogance had reached such heights that he strolled about without a care, as his subjects were either obsequiously flattering to him or hid in stark terror from him.

When he crossed the last river before the capital, he would dye the mare black—upon his return the river crossing would wash her white again.

Then, with the bow and arrow in the folds of his robe, he would reach the capital, tether the mare and sit and beg alms. It would be just a matter of time before the opportunity presented itself.

Deep, deep within his mind's eye he saw himself stealthily click the bow into place, rise to his full height and with the strength with which he once, as a young man *vajra proud* with the *dharma*, practiced hitting the target, he would draw his great bow until the string was taut against his straining chest and stilled chin...

When he released the bowstring he would not know if it was the arrow or him speeding to its destiny with such strength. *No matter*. When it would hit the heart of the heretic the grief in his own heart would burst. *Void and emptiness...*

Leaves gently rustled as a cool breeze stirred, brushing his cheeks, bringing him back into awareness. Standing, he opened his eyes, turned and set about.

*Mountains would again be mountains...*

[1](#) Some italicized phrases allusive to or quotations from Shakespeare or Zen Masters past...This story is based upon a real moment in Buddhist history, celebrated with a big feast and performances by the Tibetans annually...