

Eulogy for Bao Bayun

Today we mourn our great leader. A loss of great consequence: how hungry our stomachs, how boring our stories, how cold our campfires will be.

No one knows when he arrived on this land. Some say he came when the valleys were flat, when the rivers were trickles, when memories were just moments, when the concept of time had not yet been born. Some say he came at the same time as the others, who had straw for muscles and squints for eyes and horsetail braids for hair, who came for lumber and railroads and laundry and furs, but mostly for gold—it has always been about the gold—but unlike the others who caught ships and died along the way, a death at the hands of a year-long ocean's journey was not our leader's destiny. Our leader stood at the edge of eastern China, lifted his foot, and tipped forward instead. One step.

When he regained his balance on this Western land, he left a heavy footprint, so wide and deep from his broad and muscled body that the land couldn't regain itself. It sunk in defeat. You know it as California's Central Valley, but we know it as the first great American footprint.

He walked forward and the land walked with him.

His second and third footprints created Lake Tahoe and Lake Shasta. The skies cried in awe at his arrival and filled his prints with their tears.

After those three land-shifting steps, he learned to walk quieter, softer—from toe to heel rather than flat-footed stomp—for he was a kind man despite his brute appearance. He wanted the earth to love him for who he was rather than what he seemed, the way he loved the earth for what it gave and not what it could be. Every time he pulled a tree out by its branches, using the

trunk to sell as lumber and the roots to comb his beard, he would scatter seeds of the same tree type behind him, for he believed not *leave no trace* but *leave it better than how you found it*. Then he would squat and shit all over the seeds, his feces so nutritious that newborn sprouts would peek up as soon as he had finished. If he was constipated, for he often was, he would rejuvenate the land through asshole exhalations, his farts so hot he left forest fires in his wake. Forest fires of purpose. To renew the soil, to encourage it to start again. We never stood in his line of fire, for we never approached him from the back, only the front. Respect meant face to face, and he earned ours in full, collecting us like he did lumber, gathering us into his thick embrace. We were strays and loners with no families: Chinamen, Indians, Irishmen, Mexicans, Desis, and Frenchmen, and our leader shared what little he did have with all of us. He used his money from lumber to make our beds softer, our pancakes fluffier. That's why we stayed. Because he treated us the way he treated himself.

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Today we note his death, but we also celebrate his birth.

It was a night when crickets and cicadas participated in vocal debauchery, a night with a spill of stars obscured by campfire embers, a night of hushed tall tales, when he told us the story of how he came to be.

"I was born in a chamber with red painted walls. I burst from the womb with a Stone in my mouth," he said. "A precious jade." He reached into his shirt collar and pulled out a hidden necklace we hadn't noticed before. The thread was red and the circular pendant was a profound radiant green, its surface made animate by the flickering fire.

"My parents believed the Stone a lucky sign. They sent me to a scholars' home to learn calligraphy and Confucian texts so I could become a government official. My teacher hated me because he knew I was smarter, stronger, better than him. He beat me, but I could not beat him back, or else my family would fall into disgrace. Rather than endure a lifetime of administration servitude, I ran

away to this land.” He stared around, willing us to challenge him to explain how he had survived the journey. Our leader knew his legends, too. None of us dared.

“My parents disowned me. My country disowned me. I became a man beholden only to himself. Until I met all of you. I have no blood family anymore, but I do have a family of men. A family we have chosen.” We grasped hands at his confession, forming a connected circle. A few of us sniffled. The wind sobbed.

“I keep the Stone around my neck to remind me where I came from, where I am going. And the journey I am on to get there. This jade is the embodiment of my life.”

He tucked the pendant back inside his shirt. We exhaled the collective breath we had been holding—the Stone’s powerful presence had demanded our suspension. The fire flickered.

“This life of mine—I dedicate it to you.”

Dear leader, it was our greatest honor to live our lives with yours.

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He was not a man but a god, a god fashioned out of skin, blood, muscle, bone. When he sneezed, his snot would evaporate and transform into color. It was glorious when he caught a cold: the night sky would glow sea-green, royal purple, aquamarine with his mucus strands. Half of us would stand at attention outside his tent with extra blankets and cups of tea; the other half would *ooh* and *ahh* underneath such lovely northern lights.

He sharpened our lumber axes on his own calluses. He chewed empty wasp nests instead of tobacco. He trained his immunity to pain by rubbing fallen flower nectar over his skin, attracting mosquitos which stung him mercilessly. When mosquitos became too weak for him, he advanced to dead porcupines—only those that had died from natural causes, never from his own hands, for he was soft at heart. He rolled atop their bodies until quills protruded from him like acupuncture, a style of medicine he claimed was popular in his home country. His explanation of needles stuck in skin as a form of healing left us bemused for

weeks, until we tried it for ourselves with extra quills and woke with bodies limber and new.

He refused to eat formerly living things. He was the only vegetarian in our camp. To lessen our meat consumption, he showed us new ways to cook vegetables. Instead of sweet griddle pancakes, he cut down swaths of wild green onions and sprinkled them into the batter with salt. He called it Congyoubing but we called it Delicious. He showed us new spices, our favorite the tiny nuggets growing encased in red berries, which made our lips tingle like millions of bees. He delighted in our delight and taught us to grind it onto the Delicious for an extra kick.

He hated how much meat we ate but understood our need for carnivorous sustenance. We were not as naturally strong as him and needed animal flesh to keep up with his pace. He allowed us to bring deer, fowl, and pig carcasses to the camp, as long as we left the foxes alone. Every time we left for a hunt he made us swear to not touch those bushy-tailed auburn creatures, never explaining this rule until Johnny Inkslinger—recently promoted to foreman and one of the men our leader trusted most—brought home a fox carcass he had shot himself with bow and arrow. Johnny knew the rules but thought they did not apply to him any longer.

Our leader slapped Johnny so hard that the fox’s body went flying, set free from the harness tied to his belt loop. The fox landed on its feet, somehow alive again, swishing its tail and swaying its haunches as it trotted into the woods. Agog, Johnny watched his former capture leave, clutching his face where he had been slapped, his bruised cheek blooming deeper purple than the berries Biscuit Slim, our camp cook, cooked down for jam.

“How dare you bring one to our camp?” Our leader hissed. “She will be back, and she will bring more.”

He turned to us. We watched in silent shock: at Johnny, at the dead turned alive, at our leader’s panic. Our leader had never lifted a hand against any of us before.

“We must leave immediately,” he announced. “She will return soon, bringing the curse of infatuation, which will end us all.”

We did not understand but we obeyed his command. We packed up our things and fled, leaving behind what little lumber

we had collected overnight. When we unpacked in a new spot, miles away, our muscles throbbing from hurried flight, we joked around the campfire about our leader's panic. It was easier to laugh at his fear of the fox than to comprehend his wholehearted protection of us.

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A eulogy calls for stories. Shall we tell one now?

With the Delicious and new spices, Biscuit Slim was no longer the best cook on the campsite. If there's one thing us lumbermen know, it's to never piss off the camp cook, but our leader was afraid of nothing and in love with everything. Mutiny was never on his mind.

One day, for breakfast, Biscuit Slim served our leader beautiful biscuits that looked more like cushions, steamy and seductive with golden brown sponginess. We stared across the breakfast table with drooling mouths; we would've sworn off all women for one chance with a biscuit, but before we could try, our leader dumped them in his mouth in one go. He burped and threw the plate like a frisbee into the woods, where we never heard it land—some say it's still flying today—then asked for seconds and thirds. Aghast, Biscuit Slim threw himself onto the grass, kowtowing, blubbering, spittle flying from his lips as he begged forgiveness.

Biscuit Slim, bitter with jealousy, had poisoned those pillowy carbs with a type of flavorless berry that killed upon touch of the tongue. He regretted his revenge the moment he saw the biscuits disappear down our leader's throat, and it was to his relief that our leader was unharmed.

"Kill me now," Biscuit Slim sobbed, voice muffled by his prostrate position, his face smeared into the grass. "I do not deserve to live."

We cheered our leader on. Kill the man who fed us because he tried to kill the man who loved us. Love was enough sustenance for us. We could live hungry if it meant our leader would thrive. But he merely laughed and picked up scrawny Biscuit Slim by the neck.

"I cannot die by a silly little human hand like yours," said our

leader. "It is an impossibility."

He dropped Biscuit Slim back onto the ground, who scrambled upward, knees coated in dirt, thanking our leader for his kindness. We turned away, shaking our heads—we vowed Biscuit Slim's shame would never be ours.

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To those of you here today as spectators rather than mourners: we know the rumors you spread about our great leader. We know what you whispered on journeys between trading posts, even as you profited off our lumber. We know the gossip about a pet ox, because you never believed a Chinaman like him could be as strong as one.

Once we tried to measure his bicep with twine, but we finished the bundle before we could fully wrap around the muscle. He was built like a piece of furniture, a solid wooden plank, and he attracted women of all kinds to our campground like we were attracted to dinner tables when Biscuit Slim announced it was ready. Our leader was the warm squishy biscuit the women wanted to eat. But he turned them down, because he didn't care about women. He seemed to prefer men. We saw men from nearby trading posts go in and out of his tent, and we knew they were fucking because the ground would shake as if herds of buffalo, boars, and oxen had conjoined forces to gallop across it; when he fucked, we had to duck and cover and run to the nearest shelter because the acorns shook off their branches like bullets. Biscuit Slim would groan because he knew he would have to reorganize the ingredient jars that had fallen off his kitchen shelves in the tumult. The sheer magnitude of his fucking astounded us. We agreed it was good he got so much, so often—if his snot had colored the sky, we could only imagine what his semen would do.

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Alas, remember we are at a funeral. With life comes death. First existence, then void.

A year after he had woven the story of the Stone, a herd of

bloodthirsty oxen attacked our camp, likely drawn in by the smells of Biscuit Slim's cooking. We had heard recent stories of an oxen herd that had escaped from their cruel torturous lumber camp to murder men, but we ignored the warnings, believing the oxen would understand that we had never relied on animal labor. Other camps whipped and put oxen to work, but our leader refused to use animals for unsuited labor, not when we had human hands and legs and energy to spare.

Most of us were away cutting down trees with our leader when the animals arrived. They trampled our tents, smashed our lumber, tore our bags of food. Their horns gouged out the hearts of the men who had stayed back, except for Biscuit Slim, who distracted the oxen by throwing them pieces of bread from his protective tree perch. We arrived back at camp enthusiastic with our haul, dragging heavy trunks of wood that were instantly demolished into chips by the oxen's stomping as they bolted toward us. We ran into the bushes. Cowards, all of us, the bloody mess of our comrades' bodies seared into our brains.

Only our leader stood his ground.

The oxen pawed their hooves as they surrounded him. The biggest ox, whose flank rivaled our leader's bicep, stepped forward. It had a gold hoop as thick as Johnny Inkslinger's wrist pierced through its snout, and its eyes were mean but haunted as it appraised our leader.

"Get back," we hissed. We urged him to run, to join us in hiding around the perimeter. We couldn't bear to watch him fight. But he waved us away. To our shock, he bowed, dropped to his knees, bent his neck in a sign of respect.

"Dear ox. I understand your pain. I see your struggle." Our leader cautiously moved his hands up and lifted the jade necklace off, holding it upward in his palms, an offering.

"I give you this jade, the embodiment of my life, in sacrifice. Do not touch my men. They are not at fault for the horrors you have seen."

"No!" Biscuit Slim yelled from his perch. We joined in, screaming our refusal. We begged our leader to fall back.

Neither he nor the ox listened.

The big ox snorted, pawed the ground, and charged, snagging a horn on our leader's shirt and jerking his body upward like a toy—we had never seen our leader so weightless. His body flipped in the air and landed onto the big ox's back, which shook him off. Our leader fell on the ground in a limp crumple, the jade shattering upon impact. When it broke, the sky thundered, cracking in half with a bolt of lightning—a ghost of a man evaporated from the green fragments, an unearthly scream tearing the air.

Was it his soul? we wondered. We didn't know. It was too late to attempt recapture. The wind swept it away.

The rest of the herd tackled him, hiding him from sight. None of us ran forward to save him. We were frozen in our safe hiding places, aghast—our deepest regret—though we know he would not have wanted us to try. Sacrifice cannot be made in vain, or else it is not sacrifice but futility, which our leader hated most.

Our leader was carried off, laying prone atop the undulating oxen herd. We saw his body decimated, impaled by horns and trampled by hooves, yet there was an arm moving with the brown oxen fur, waving as it disappeared. Our leader's last goodbye. *See you later, my friends.*

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Let us finish this eulogy with a name.

His name.

The Chinese among us could pronounce his name correctly, but they refused, saying it was a sign of respect to call him shifu or laoshi instead. The rest of us were confused by the Chinese order of letters, especially since we carried chewing tobacco between our lips and gums. We butchered his name into English, turning the delicate consonants into harsh spittles, the curvy intonations into flatlines. In our mouths he became Paul Bunyan, a name that worked for our tongues. But we knew this was the wrong pronunciation, that our leader didn't deserve such mangling. So we called him leader, or sir, or he, or you.

We asked him once what his name meant in English. He said that beauty couldn't truly translate into such coarseness, but if he

had to generalize, his name meant to embrace. To seize. To stand above the clouds. He drew his name in the soil for us and pointed each character out, dragging his axe on the ground in an art form he called calligraphy. The land shook with his brushstrokes and we begged him to slow down, or tectonic instability would swallow us all. He laughed and acquiesced—he cared for our wellbeing even when he ignored his own strength.

We still remember the strokes he left in the dust. Those lines composing his name. He taught us—his men, his family—his true name, because he wanted us to remember the man, not the myth. It is true that legends have no real names, only stories, because to name is to solidify, and legends are too fluid to contain.

So we call him our leader when we speak of him to outsiders. And you can call him Paul Bunyan, the perverted version made easier for spoiled tongues. You can say he had a pet ox because no one will ever believe the man was as strong as an ox himself. You can say he was a Frenchman or an Englishman because no one will ever believe a Chinaman was so admired. But we know.

We know—not where he went, where he's going, how we will survive a future dearth of his love—but we know *him*. The person.

He is in all of us. His bare hands composed this song, this camp, this country. We will continue his legacy. It is for him that we build, we resurrect, we love.

Today we speak of his spirit. Tomorrow we work for his memory.

Let us raise our hand in the air. Together, let us trace the lines that made up his name, just once, before we erase the personal in favor of legend. Follow my lead: a slash, a horizontal, a vertical, a diagonal, a dot.

And now we chant, with mouths clear and hearts open:
For Bao Bayun.
For 包拔云.

OJO TAIYE

All Our Lives

the stew sauce sizzles
little hope & joy accumulates

we are made of what we *forgive*
i go out for care, gaze & liquor

i am the sky & the borrowed light
an old porch hallowed by fireflies

once slave, once freed & now free
like always i find no refuge in history

it's Father's Day & i am filled with the
need to leave— towards home & i watch

the waves of love crash. i once dreamt
of my father's gait, stylish & lingering—

we were boys once. & in our bellies,
the cottons of time. for i was two when

my dad said *it was time go*— his manly fingers
shrugging off my mother's plea— another

wounded woman in the rain. the body sinks,
the heart inside it doesn't— *compassion* is

like that, until is not. every pain i feel will have
started here, where on the first warm day of the year,