

CHANGE

It was two years since he had left the melodiless ways of the city. Although time had long ceased to have meaning for him, he knew that many days had passed since he had eaten. He liked the pain of hunger; it was all part of the ascetic life to which he had committed himself. He stood by the bank of the river and watched the two women approach. By the paleness of their skin he knew they were of aristocratic origin. The taller one wore a dark brown vested garment which accentuated the pale whiteness of her arms and face. Although autumn had dramatically impaled summer three days earlier, today summer had been resuscitated and he felt warm as he sat in the tip of the cassia tree's shadow.

"Look at the poor beggar... as if pierced by an arrowhead." Shielding her eyes from the sun she looked directly into her friend's face.

"I can't hear you. The river is too swift." She bent her neck to the upturned mouth.

"I don't want to point or turn my head too noticeably. Look up ahead, at that raggedly dressed old man."

The tall lady's pearl necklace fell upon the chest of her brown vest as she straightened herself and looked into the Yangtse River. Although the surface appeared calm and smooth,

she was aware of a hypnotically undulating motion as the water moved in mass past her. When she focused on a specific section, the current stood still and the surface rippled vertically. The sun's reflection irritated her eyes.

"More tragic than a hungry beggar is a wealthy matron who has nothing better to do with her time than shed condescending pity."

"...and money." She reached into her tan suede jacket.

"Is your money given from compassion -- or guilt?"

"Does he care?"

"Do you?"

She looked past her friend into the river, started to respond, but instead dropped the change back into her suede jacket.

"Don't, it costs so little to build a wall of noble sentiments."

"And you, what do you do?"

"I feel his pain."

"Can he eat the pain you share with him?"

The autumn wind blew harder through the

cassia tree, and caused occasional spots of white foam to appear on the Yangtze. He watched the backs of the pale white necks of two ladies engaged in animated conversation.