

YMAA PUBLICATION CENTER has chosen author Arthur Rosenfeld's *The Crocodile and the Crane* to follow the author's *The Cutting Season* in introducing a new fiction category: Martial Arts Fiction. *The Crocodile and the Crane* translates this ancient, hugely popular, and authentic literary tradition to the setting of a near-future apocalypse, while conveying insights into Asian philosophy, history, and martial arts tradition.



ARTHUR ROSENFELD is a martial arts master, writer, speaker, and coach. His martial arts training spans more than twenty-seven years. Rosenfeld is the critically acclaimed author of seven novels (Avon Books, Bantam, Doubleday Dell, Forge Books, YMAA Fiction), two non-fiction books (Simon and Schuster, Basic Books), several screenplays, and numerous magazine articles (*Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, *Parade*, and others). He consults for the pharmaceutical industry as a recognized expert on aspects of chronic pain. Arthur Rosenfeld resides and teaches by the sea in Pompano Beach, Florida.

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THE CROCODILE

AND THE CRANE



ARTHUR ROSENFELD



THE CROCODILE AND THE CRANE

a novel



ARTHUR ROSENFELD

PRACTITIONERS OF A SECRET healing art that bestows immortality and more, Sanfeng and Zetian are brother and sister and have lived together in China for more than 3000 years. Now, in the near future of 2009, they face an enemy they recognize from their childhood, a terrifying disease that left them orphaned and alone in the world. The disease kills quickly and without mercy—victims die grimacing grotesquely—and as it spreads, it brings the siblings to the edge of apocalypse and pits them against each other in a battle for the world.

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THE
CROCODILE
AND
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THE
CROCODILE
AND
THE CRANE

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Dramatis Personae

- Annabelle Miller–Dalton Day’s business manager
Brush–executive at Crocodile and Crane Holdings in
Hong Kong
Dalton Day–*Gongfu* teacher, writer, coach
Dr. Gary Broten–Centers for Disease Control scientist
Dr. Henri Eonnet–French scientist
Gao Sanfeng–Immortal, *qigong* and martial arts master
Gao the blacksmith–Father to Sanfeng and Zetian,
qigong creator
Gao Zetian–Immortal, *qigong* and martial arts master,
sister to Sanfeng
Huangfu–Zetian’s chauffeur
Jimmy Ngo–Billabong books IT employee
Jou Yuen –Pharmaceutical company director, Crocodile &
Crane Holdings Indonesian division, Zetian’s lover
Leili Musi–Executive assistant to Jou Yuen, nurse, mother
of Lombo
Lombo Musi–Six-year-old son of Leili, first plague victim
Monica Farmore–Marketing executive, Billabong Books
Rachel Kleinman–Billabong Books Senior Vice President,
Monica’s boss
Reggie Pritt–Australian born Hong Kong police captain
Tony Tunstall–Australian Tea Merchant and father of
Lombo

1

Henan Province, China—Shang Dynasty, 1426 BCE

The moon is always swollen above this valley, and the cloying smell of the forest rides the back of night like a cavalryman. Steep walls sandwich the valley. The eastern throw of a vast isolating plain, a country of scrub brush and howling winds, lies beyond. A blacksmith named Gao and his two children wearily walk the edge of the ravine, navigating by the stars until they can walk no more. They make camp, and sleep deeply, undisturbed by the myriad creatures of the forest.

In the morning, they rise and Gao makes a fire. He takes leaves from a pouch and brews a weak tea, which he gives to his children to drink. The elder is an arresting girl of fourteen, with high cheekbones, piercing eyes, and a nose atypically aquiline for her tribe of origin in the far west provinces. Her brother, seven years younger, has handsome, regular features, but is more remarkable for his bird-like crown of thick-shafted hair. When they are properly alert, Gao takes his children to a spot in the clearing, where he leads them through a complex set of exercises, his late wife's ancestral *qigong*.

It was not unusual in those days for families to have martial traditions incorporating breathing and stretching: exercises designed to manipulate biological energy. Gao himself came from a long tradition of such training, as did his late wife, whose death in childbirth had been accurately predicted by a village oracle who read the future in the lines of a burnt tortoise shell. Before she died, she contributed to Gao's practice as well, and the blacksmith built on what he inherited and learned, devoting himself to the perfection of the *qigong* because he was above all a practical man who understood the benefits of self-reliance and medicinal self-help.

More than practical, it turned out that Gao was an energy

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savant, a true genius in the ways of meridians and meditation. While only his children would ever herald him, he kept at the practice long enough to synthesize a system effective beyond any previous. Over time, he noticed he could work longer and harder than others, and that he barely seemed to age. He noticed his children seemed frozen in time as well, changing barely perceptibly over the years. He might have worried about prolonging their immaturity had they not proven utterly immune to drought and famine, and excesses of heat and cold.

Tenacious and seemingly invulnerable, the little family would occasionally stop wandering and settle in a village, staying only so long as the villagers did not notice their peculiarities, did not wonder why the children seemed not to age, and why the family rarely slept or suffered so much as a sniffle. When questions arose, the family would leave quietly in the night, and in this way as well as all other ways, their *qigong* came to define them.

They practice together now, near the rim of the valley, amidst the birch trees and the rising sun. Gao gleams with a morning corona, and his children do too, but less brightly. The *qigong* movements mimic those of animals, but with an additional dimension of mind an animal could never possess. The routine begins by settling the torso into the pelvic girdle like placing an egg into an egg cup. Next there is breathing timed with stepping, focusing heavily on cultivating strength in the diaphragm and keeping the chest from any involvement in the movement of air. After that comes a kind of twisting that evokes wringing water from a towel.

The spiraling wave seizes the heart and lungs and the intercostal muscles, vivifying and energizing these key components of youth and power. After the chest, the arms are engaged, waving and circling until the muscles literally turn around the bones to which they are attached, creating a degree of freedom that is of great value in martial grappling. The head comes last, and with the wave and the breath timed to match, the sense organs and the brain are themselves suffused by a revitalizing bath, one which the trio perform each and every morning.

When the set is completed, the children shine with sweat and

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satisfaction. Their father, who has worked at least as hard, does not perspire at all, for his life force, his *qi*, is settled and calm and cannot be disturbed.

“When will you show us something about fighting?” the girl wants to know.

“Not today,” says Gao. He is torn by how much martial application to show his daughter. On the one hand, he believes such skill to be the province of men—he shows his son often, usually in the afternoon when the girl is mending clothes or fetching water—but on the other hand the girl is beautiful, and for a life far longer than Gao can imagine will fend off the attention of admirers.

“You said that yesterday,” the girl pouts.

The boy and his father exchange a knowing glance. The girl notices and flies into a fury.

“Why do you show *him* then,” she rages, pointing at her little brother.

Gao winces. His daughter has had this temper since infancy, and was wont to cow her mother with it.

“Settle down,” he says.

The girl stalks off. Father and son watch her shimmy up a birch tree with scarcely believable ease. High up in the branches, hoping only for distance from her family, she settles into a crook in the tree. A flying squirrel comes close to her, for she has nuts in her pocket and it is autumn and the rodent is on a mission to gather food from every available source. She reaches out and grabs the rodent by the neck and pinches the life out of it. She hurls the still-warm corpse to the ground, hitting her brother on the back of the head hard enough to drop him.

“Come down right now,” her father commands.

She does, but not before she spies the squirrel’s nest, and in it, baby squirrels. She reaches in and takes two out and brings them down with her, pelting her brother with the first one, then picking it up and wringing its neck.

“Stop!” her brother cries. “They’re helpless creatures.”

“The world is full of helpless creatures, and I refuse to be one of them,” she says, chasing the second baby squirrel, which takes

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refuge between her father's legs.

"Stop being so cruel."

"You're the one who's cruel for not teaching me what you teach him. You think I don't know you practice *gongfu* together? You think I haven't come home and seen you?"

Before her father can answer, she darts between his legs and kills the second baby squirrel with her foot. "That's what happens to the weak in this world," she says. "Do you want that to happen to me?"

"I fear giving you power, seeing what you do even without it," Gao says.

The girl stamps her feet, and screams in frustration.

"Listen to me," her father says. "You are too often angry at the world. Someday you must become a wife and mother. No man will have you until you get the better of your temper."

"I won't belong to anyone then," the girl says. "Not now, not ever."

Sighing, the blacksmith gathers their meager belongings. The boy buries the three squirrels. As the morning warms, they continue their circumnavigation of the valley. They hear the clamor of a community below, and are struck by the unique frenzy of the village, by the smells that issue from the valley, the smoke and the noise.

"Wait here," says Gao, positioning his children in a copse. "I will return before nightfall. If I do not, climb out of the valley and follow the stars as I have shown you."

"To the sea?" asks the boy.

"To the sea," confirms his father.

"You'll come back," says the girl. "I know you will."

Gao creeps down into the valley. He spends the day reconnoitering, and observes a great deal. He has never seen such a density of population, the people literally tripping over each other; their huts built only inches apart.

He discovers that the tribe living there call themselves the Banpo, and the sensitivity to energy the *qigong* has developed within him tells him they have been inbreeding for generations, and are of a weak constitution. He sees they are too numerous for the valley, which can

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support them no more. There is no tree the Banpo have not stripped of bark, no parcel of land they have not tilled and seeded, no rivulet they have not fished dry. There is no weed they have not tasted, no grass they have not used in soup or in hut making, and no vein of ore they have not mined. Yet even as they exhaust every resource and suffer increasingly crowded conditions, Gao learns the Banpo will not strike out for new territory, as their talk is of the monsters beyond the confines of the valley; a tradition of fear has them cowed and pinned down.

At dusk, he returns to his children.

“In the morning we will visit the village for supplies,” he says.

“Can’t we stay?” pleads the boy, who is tired of wandering.

“Not long,” says his father. “A few days, no more.”

2

It was a summer morning even children recognized as evil, a punishing demon that blanketed New York City, crippled the overweight, killed the elderly, forced parched teens to open fireplugs, and tortured the city's row after row of withered flowers. Inside Bloomingdale's Department Store, powerful air conditioners created an oasis for a television news crew filming seventy-three white-coated aestheticians, all perfectly coiffed, moving through a series of gyrations and bends.

They were following the lead of their spiritual concertmaster, Dalton Day. Pale, willowy and tall, he wore a *gongfu* suit of black cotton—the jacket closed by frog buttons—the pants cut loose so he could leap and bend unfettered. His hair was the color of mead, and pulled back into a ponytail, exaggerating his gray eyes, and making him look boyish despite his thirty years. His lips were full and soft, but the rest of his features were angular and flinty, suggesting they could cut if you went at them the wrong way.

“Okay people,” he said, his voice amplified by the store's public address system. “Let's stop and breathe: slowly and deeply: in through the nose; out through the mouth. Hold your arms out in front of you as if you are hugging a tree. Now touch your tongue to the roof of your mouth behind your front teeth. With a little practice, you can exhale past your tongue. This circuit of breath keeps tension down, and makes an energy circuit up your spine and down your midline, following meridians the Chinese call *Ren and Du*.”

He moved smoothly through the crowd, fixing stances here and there, chastely massaging a stiff neck or two, helping raised shoulders drop, and tight hips relax.

“Get comfortable,” he said. “Fine. Now I want you to focus your attention on the soles of your feet, on the spot the Chinese call ‘The Bubbling Well.’ You can find it just behind the middle of the ball of your foot. This is your energetic connection with the

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ground, and I want you to imagine roots emerging from it, anchoring you firmly so you can relax without worry.”

His audience sank perceptibly, and he nodded to himself, satisfied.

“Right. By now these roots of yours are thicker than the largest phone pole you’ve ever seen, but tipped with little digging fingers. Each time you inhale, the roots bring you energy from the Earth. Each time you exhale, you send the roots deeper and deeper into the ground, through the tile floor below you, through the wooden sub-floor and the concrete foundation, and right into the bedrock of Manhattan Island. Exhaling, you drive the roots toward the liquid, bubbling, molten center of the Earth. Inhaling, you bring up enough energy to heat your feet. I know that sounds god-awful on a steamy day like this, but it’s good, believe me, because what you’re doing is charging yourself up like a big sexy battery.”

Dalton saw his audience smile; saw the TV crew grinning. Encouraged, he went on.

“Now the roots are the size of giant Sequoia trees, and as they twist and dive deeper you can feel the energy coming up your legs. You are powerful, ladies. Not even a bulldozer can move you from where you stand. You’re one with the Earth, in contact with a whole new kind of Mother Nature, and it feels peaceful and exciting at the same time. You’re more relaxed by the minute.”

Sure enough, it was clear to him the meditation was working like magic. The normally frenzied sales staff was happy, relaxed, breathing deeply and easily, unaffected by the fact they were live on national television.

“That’s all for today,” Dalton told the group. “But the energy you have brought up from the ground will stay with you. Now it’s time to slowly let your hands down, and open your eyes.”

Surprised and refreshed, the cosmetic clerks mobbed Dalton. Panning and zooming, the TV cameras caught him shyly smiling, flushed with success beyond his expectation. A newspaper reporter cornered him, and thrust a voice recorder at his chin.

“A moment of your time?”

“I really have to catch a flight. I’m afraid a moment is all I have.”

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“Do you consider yourself religious?” the reporter asked.

“I consider myself spiritual.”

“Do you believe in God?”

Dalton hesitated. “If you mean a personal god who watches over me while stroking his beard up in the clouds, the answer is no.”

“You’re an atheist, then? You go it alone?”

“I don’t like labels much. Seems to me they do more to drive people apart than bring them together.”

“What would you say is the distinction between religion and spirituality?”

Relaxed, Dalton sank a bit more deeply into his stance. “The way I see it, religion is organized and taught; spirituality is experienced directly.”

“I’ll have to think about that one. Can you at least tell me what got you started in all this? I can’t find much background on you.”

“A girl named Grace set me on the path,” Dalton answered. “I thought of her just now when I got a whiff of patchouli; she used to wear it.”

“Was she Asian?”

Dalton laughed. “She was a Haight-Ashbury hippie, but she read Daoist texts and taught me all about yin/yang theory.”

“Give me that in English.”

“Daoists were the wooly mountain men of China. They meditated in caves for years at a time, and tried to live life as naturally as possible. They had the idea that the universe is all about opposing forces playing against each other. When things are going well, the interplay is harmonious. When everything seems rough and difficult, it’s because opposites are out of balance.”

“I’ll have to think about that too.”

“You asked about my beliefs. I believe you’re here for a reason. At this interview, I mean. I don’t think anything happens by accident.”

“What else did that young lady teach you?”

“To be dissatisfied with my education, even though I went to a brand-name college, to question everything, to always dig deeper. Grace fell in love with another guy, and I fell in love with the Chinese classics.”

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“Which are what, exactly?”

“Works of philosophy, and political tracts masquerading as novels.”

“You don’t strike me as very political.”

Dalton put his hand on the reporter’s shoulder. “Politics are yet another thing that drives people apart. There’s a lot of great material in those books. That ancient world was gritty and tough—average people didn’t live very long—but it was also full of loyalty and honor, compassion and fighting.”

“*Gongfu*?”

“First you dream it, then you want to do it. These days, of course, *gongfu* training is for the body what meditation is for the mind. It’s all about strength, balance, health, and longevity.”

“Not self-defense?”

Dalton shrugged. “Self-defense against your inner demons, self-defense against the degenerative diseases of aging. Guns are so widespread; I don’t sell the combat side too much. Once you become competent, violence loses its attraction.”

“Easy for a master to say,” the reporter countered. “But lots of folks out there are scared these days, particularly in the cities.”

“Violence is never the solution. It only makes problems worse. We have the power to choose non-violence, to steer clear of our animal instincts and become an internal boxer, which is to say, someone who uses fighting competence to build self-confidence and avoid fighting because he, or she, has nothing to prove. I’m advocating self-cultivation, not a path to pugilism. And by the way, please don’t call me a master. I’ve trained with masters. I know I’m not one.”

“Give me your message in a nutshell,”

“The nutshell is the book.”

“Please?”

Dalton sighed. “Anything worth doing is worth doing slowly.”

“That’s the message?”

“Seed the body with physical practice, fertilize the mind with meditation.”

“In other words you need both philosophy and movement to be healthy and happy.”

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“You got it,” Dalton nodded, giving a cheery wave.

He made his way to the store’s Third Avenue exit and into his waiting limo.

Anabelle Miller was in the back seat. She was lean with a square Welsh face—copper hair, freckles everywhere, and a firm chin. She had met Dalton at one of his seminars and become an instant fan. Initially, he had hired her to do the books for his small school, but she had taken over more and more of his career, finally becoming more of a manager than an accountant, directing him to lucrative corporate speaking gigs and expensive private lessons for well-heeled students looking as much for transcendence as martial competence.

“You looked great on camera,” Anabelle enthused

“I thought I was stiff.”

“You thought the same thing about *Good Morning America*, but it was a triumph.”

“Chasing the limelight is your idea,” said Dalton.

The limo came to a traffic light. Annabelle leaned forward until her elbows were on Dalton’s knees. “You want to help people, right?”

“You know I do.”

“The limelight lets you help more than you’ve ever dreamed. Media appearances give you credibility.”

“Credibility comes from experience and skill, not from cameras,” said Dalton.

Annabelle spread her hands. “Fine. Then go back to teaching in a dirty little corner of the Lower East Side.”

“The school was never dirty.”

“Quit your grouching. You were earning a few hundred bucks a week and doing your laundry at the Laundromat.”

Dalton smiled a reluctant smile. “I’m grateful for everything you’ve helped me do. I just miss the quiet time to practice, and the opportunity to make meaningful connections with people.”

“You can make those connections,” Annabelle said. “Your book will help you.”

“The book was also your idea.”

“I’m glad it turned out to be a good one.”

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The limo took the FDR Drive north, and crossed the Triboro Bridge. Dalton stared out the window, lost in thought. Annabelle watched him. Sometimes she worried she had pushed him too hard too fast. Fresh out of business school with a head full of entrepreneurial ideas, she knew her job was a dream come true, an opportunity to put everything she had learned to work. She didn't want to blow it.

"You might consider following your own advice," she said softly.

"Meaning?"

"Stop wishing you were a monk. Go with the flow. You're the real deal. The fallout from Letterman is fantastic. Five grunting bodybuilders pushing against your arm and you just smiling sweetly at the camera like you're getting your toenails done. If you need more time to train, just say so. If you need more time to meditate, tell me that, too."

"I have to recharge sometimes, that's all. If I keep going and going without quiet time, I lose touch with the source of what I know. Life gets superficial. I don't like myself."

"I understand. When you get back, we'll put meditation and practice times right into the schedule on my PDA. Now, tell me, have you thought about my clothing line idea? I've already talked to one manufacturer in Thailand. You'd have to do the modeling, though. No way we can sell product without your image attached."

"I'm no model. If we do the line, we'll hire beautiful people."

"You're a hunk, boss. You know you are."

"A hunk who knows brown-nosing when he sees it. Now brief me on Hong Kong. Did you get me an aisle seat? I've got to be rested for the meeting and I do better if I can move around a bit."

"Aisle seat it is, but don't sweat the meeting. Foreign rights don't amount to much; you're just going there for PR. The publisher used to be Australian-owned and stodgy, but the Chinese entrepreneurs who took it over are hip and savvy. They understand marketing, and they know that a personal appearance can get the buzz going in Hong Kong. Do me a favor, though. Just remember the Chinese put their last name first, and first name last. I know you know that, but it's easy to forget, and remembering

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will save embarrassment.”

“I’ll remember. But selling *The Boxer Within* in Asia still feels like preaching to the choir.”

“I bet the book does well. The way the publishers explained it to me, young people in Hong Kong favor Western culture, but are proud of their heritage. You offer them access to old knowledge in a new, American way.”

“The publishers told you that?”

“I paraphrase.”

“Of course you do. I’ve got only one thing to tell you.”

“And what’s that?”

“Practice the *qigong* I showed you while I’m gone.”

Annabelle closed her eyes and waved her hands like a windmill in a faint breeze.

“You’re holding your breath,” said Dalton.

“That’s right,” Annabelle grinned. “And I’ll keep holding it until you come back.”

3

Gao and his children blaze a trail downward until someone from below catches sight of them. The Banpo cannot remember the last time someone came in from the terrifying land beyond the valley; they treat the travelers as great heroes. There are days of celebration, and the celebration entails drinking. The alcohol of the Banpo is made from fermented fruit, and it goes to the blacksmith's head. In order to clear himself and stay alert, he performs his *qigong* ritual by firelight, when he believes all the villagers to be intoxicated or asleep.

In the days that follow, the children move freely about the village. The girl attracts a crowd of suitors, but she frigidly rebuffs them all. The boy draws younger children to him, and amuses them with tricks. Meanwhile, Gao finds a forge and makes tools to earn money for supplies. In a few days, he has enough herbs to season into palatability even the toughest game, and he clothes himself and his children in rugged skins for the coming winter.

The family has been in the village for only a week, when a terrible sickness crops up in the village, spreading as savagely as a wildfire. Within the first two days it has crippled the village, destroying the weak and the strong, the young and the old, all horribly and without distinction. Beginning with sneezing, it rapidly leads to joint pain, seizures, and death characterized by a gruesome facial grimace. A sentry goes to the village chief and reports that the blacksmith is dancing in a strange way by firelight. The chief reports this news to the high priest of the village, who concludes that the horrible killing smile must be a curse brought by Gao.

“Bring the blacksmith to me,” the priest orders.

Gao fights valiantly but is no match for the horde that drags him to the temple, where the priest binds him fast to a stone table. Certain a sacrifice to the gods will end their trial, the Banpo gather in their temple. As darkness falls torches flicker, animating the

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shadows of the devout and drawing stick-like insects to the light.

Gao writhes against the deerskin bonds. He knows he has nothing to do with the disease and fears that when his death brings no cure his children will be killed too. When the villagers are distracted setting up the ritual, his daughter sneaks to him and struggles against his bonds.

“Forget about me! Take your brother, and run!” Gao hisses.

The young girl sets her jaw. “No.”

“Will you listen to me this one time?”

“If I can just loosen those deerskin bonds, I can set you free.”

“You would disobey me?”

“Only to save you, Father.”

Nearby, her brother sits near a great bronze gong and plays with a hardwood top. Certain she was pregnant with a boy, his mother carved the toy for him while he was still in her belly, but never had the joy of giving it to him. He has carried it every day of his life. His father beckons him over.

The villagers cluster at the other side of the temple, thirty paces away. Some of their faces are already grotesquely distorted by the affliction, but all are raised in prayer to stone gods. The village priest gyrates in a ritual dance before the worshippers.

“It’s too late,” the blacksmith whispers to his children. “Help me die in peace by knowing you are both safe. Get out of this valley, and follow the river east. Practice your *qigong* every day. Every day, do you hear me?”

“Yes, Father,” says his daughter.

“And you?”

“Yes, Father,” says the boy.

“Never, *ever* neglect our family practice—not the meditation, not the breathing, nor any of the rest of it. Repeat it every day, no matter what happens, no matter what else you do.”

The girl attacks her father’s bonds with renewed desperation, but her fingernails find no purchase. “I’m going to kill everybody in this village to avenge you,” she says.

“Just flee,” the blacksmith implores. “There is no need for vengeance. Nature will exact it for you. Get your brother to safety. He’s too young to be left alone.”

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Headstrong and stubborn, his daughter continues to gnaw the deerskin the way a wolf chews bone. The blacksmith feels her hot breath on the back of his hand, and sees her white teeth grow dark from the tannin. The boy creeps up, but the blacksmith waves him away.

The boy retreats instantly. He has none of his sister's rebelliousness. Obedience is all he knows. He has been trained to it well, following his father across the face of central China. He has crouched by the fire of his father's smelting furnace, and worked to bring firewood. He has done the *qigong* with his father every day, living for his father's loving glances, knowing that his father values him above all else in the world.

"Make me a promise," the blacksmith whispers, looking at his daughter's face, her lips swollen from fruitless biting and pulling. "Our *qigong* is for the two of you only. Never share it with a soul, so long as you both shall live."

"I promise."

"Remember, too, to protect your head and your heart. Those are the two places our *qigong* cannot regenerate."

"Protect the head and the heart," the girl repeats.

The Banpo priest draws near the sacrificial table, forcing the girl to retreat. In his hand, the priest carries the blacksmith's own *guan dao*, a seven-foot halberd with a hooked sword blade at the end. It is a fearsome weapon, conceived for use on horseback. "Our gods demands your life," he says, as the crowd stomps their approval.

"I've told you before, I have nothing to do with the plague that's killing you," Gao replies.

"You came, the smile came. You practice evil dances when you think nobody is watching, and your body stays strong and unblemished while the rest of us perish. Nor do your children get sick, even though our own children die. Your arrangement with your gods has brought sorrow to our village. When you are dead, this plague will run from us like a frightened tiger."

The villagers hoot in agreement. Gao grinds his teeth in frustration. "Know this," he says, straining to lift his body a few inches off the table. "We have not brought your misfortune. You

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are dying because there are too many of you here, and because you go against nature by mating brother and sister. Put too many chickens in one coop, and they too sicken and die: too many fish in a pond, they float belly-up to the surface. You have outgrown your valley, but you lack the courage to leave it. The forest and the plain are filled with animals to hunt, rivers to fish, fields to farm. I have seen them, but you have not because you are too fearful to venture there. My children and I are not killing you: you are killing yourselves. Set yourselves free! Spread out!”

In response, the priest raises the *guan dao* and brings it down on Gao's neck. The blade cuts all the way through to the stone table, and the impact shatters the bones in the priest's wrists, setting him shrieking. Gao's severed head rolls to the end of the table and falls to the ground, landing on one ear. In the last instant of consciousness, the blacksmith's eyes catch sight of his daughter, crouched beneath the table. Impossibly, he winks.

The villagers cheer, certain their suffering is over. The Gao girl wants to throw herself on the people and bite and scratch and kick and hit. Her brother restrains her. She breathes vengeance, but he pulls her out the front door anyway. The children run past the clearing and into the dark woods, their wounded hearts pounding, sobbing for their father, because he is dead, and for themselves, because they are alone. They run until they can run no more, rest, get up and run again. Their fear and their stamina take them far, far away from the hamlet, farther than the Banpo have ever been.

“Are they following?” the girl pants, taking shelter in thick underbrush.

“I don't think so,” her little brother replies, peeking out from behind a thick trunk.

“You should have let me stay and fight them.”

“You don't know how to fight. They would have taken your head too.”

“I would have avenged our father and taken some of them with me.”

“Look,” the boy points. “There's the river!”

The morning light is upon them. Warily, they creep down to the bank. When they have drunk their fill, the girl pulls her

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brother close. "Listen to me," she says. "There is nothing more important than our secret *qigong*. Our father died for it, and he made us promise we would practice every day."

"I will. Every day."

"And you must promise never to show it to anyone."

Terrified, bereft, hungry and feeling horribly alone, the little boy nods.

"Say it aloud!" his sister shakes him roughly.

"I promise!" the boy cries.

"We must honor our father forever."

"Forever," echoes the boy.

A high-pitched squabble erupts on the riverbank. A crane has speared a catfish and brought it out of the water, but the fish is too large for the bird to manage, and it twists and flops in a desperate bid for life. Suddenly a crocodile explodes up the bank, and takes the fish in its jaws. The crane will not back down. It pecks at the crocodile's eyes until the reptile retreats, leaving half the fish. The crane, now able to lift the spoils, flies away with the catch. Each predator has gotten half.

"What will become of us?" whispers the boy.

"We will go forward together and share the world," says his sister. "Just like the crocodile and the crane."

About the Author

Arthur Rosenfeld is a martial arts teacher, writer, speaker, and coach. His martial arts training spans more than twenty-seven years, and includes instruction in Tang Soo Do, Kenpo, Kung Fu, and Tai Chi Ch'uan. Rosenfeld is a critically-acclaimed, best-selling author of six novels (Avon Books, Bantam, Doubleday Dell, Forge Books), two non-fiction books (Simon and Schuster, Basic Books), several screenplays, and numerous magazine articles (*Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, *Parade*, and others). He consults for the pharmaceutical industry as a recognized expert on aspects of chronic pain. Arthur Rosenfeld resides in South Florida.

