

BI SHUMIN

Broken Transformers

Translated by Shi Junbao

Bi Shumin was born in Shandong province, China, and served in the Chinese army after middle school. She then went on to work as a physicist before turning to writing. Most of her work depicts army life and includes Kunlun Mountains, A Red Carpet for You and Flying Northward. 'Broken Transformers' was first published in 1992.

"Mum, let's go. I don't want a Transformer," said my ten-year-old son.

We were standing in a newly opened department store. As mother of a low-income family I was used to steering my son firmly away from toy counters; but this store had taken me by surprise; its manager had shrewdly filled the entrance hall with brightly coloured playthings instead of the usual dull array of cosmetics.

I stood in the doorway, debating whether or not to leave. There had been a sign outside saying the store sold wool, and I desperately needed to knit myself a new hat and scarf. Still, wool could be bought elsewhere.

I gripped my son's hand and drew him towards me intending to make up some excuse to get him out of the store, and thus out of temptation's way. Ten was an age, after all, at which innocence gradually begins to give way to questioning, and I didn't want him to become conscious too early of the power of money and thus of our limited supply. At the same time I hated the thought of his disappointment at not being able to have the toy he so adored. I felt like covering his eyes with my palm!

The last thing I expected him to say was, "Mum, let's leave. I don't want a Transformer." I was at a loss to know how to express my gratitude.

I hated the monstrous cartoon family which had my son glued to the TV set every Saturday and Sunday night; not only did it prevent me

watching the news, but it had so captured the imagination of thousands of children that the toy replicas now pouring into the stores were sucking money from parents like locusts devouring crops.

If we hadn't been in the crowded store I would have bent down and kissed his smooth brow, now covered with beads of salty sweet sweat. But it immediately became clear to me that my sense of relief was premature, for his feet were as though rooted to the spot. His neck twisted towards the counter and he stared, through long dark eyelashes, at the colourful range of robots which stared back at him in disdain.

My heart bled as I looked admiringly at his lithe young neck which, like the branch of a willow tree, seemed able to twist back endlessly without incurring discomfort. Was it only a matter of a hat and a scarf?

A perfect example of the trend towards late marriage and late birth characteristic of the time, I had now passed the age of forty while my son was only ten. I had been through all the turmoil and confusion, whereas his was still to come. My troubles tended to be physical, like the fact that the first northern winter winds had nearly frozen my head off and, worse, I had discovered I was beginning to lose my hair which was, moreover, turning grey. This was not only thoroughly unattractive, but meant I was even less well insulated than before. I considered myself pretty good with my hands; as well as lathing machine parts I could also knit and sew. For some time now I had been planning to knit myself a really good hat and scarf and had even told my husband about it. He had, as a gesture towards financing the project, stubbed out his cigarette. I knew he wouldn't give up permanently, of that I had been convinced from the very first day I met him, no matter what other money-saving hobbies he might dispense with. We also saved by eating less meat at dinner, concentrating our chopsticks on vegetables and hoping our son wouldn't notice the decline.

Despite the fact that since the boy's birth cold winds tended to cause a painful throbbing in my head, I could still do without a hat; my old square scarf would suffice, though no doubt I would look odd, like a solemn Arab woman or Mother Hen from the children's cartoon series. But so what? As long as my son could get his beloved robot.

I glanced at the Transformers. They were so expensive that the price of

a hat and scarf would be enough to cover maybe the leg of one of the larger models.

And what would my husband say? He had always maintained that I spoiled the child and warned me that ours was just an ordinary 'blue-collar family' which shouldn't aspire to the same heights of those better-off.

But was it to be the case that no 'blue-collar' worker should ever own a Transformer?

I had enough money with me for one of the smallest models available, and knew I could make up a story about the hat and scarf which would satisfy my husband and indicate that I didn't need them.

It was at this point, just as I had made up my mind to buy it, that my son suddenly turned towards the exit, saying resolutely, 'Mum, let's go. The paper says 'Transformers are only foreign kids' cast-offs. They move them into China to get our money.'

He nudged my hand with his little damp one and glanced back at the toys as though taking a last look at a corpse. Then he quickened his short legs and made for the door as if fearful the Transformers might otherwise snatch him back.

He sounded like an adult, the logic of his argument certainly exceeded anything I might have come up with and it occurred to me that in comparison with our boy, who was, moreover, a model student at school, my husband and I were selfish.

Spurred by this revelation I strode back to the counter and, without giving a second's thought as to who profited by my action, whether for eigners or Hong Kong Chinese, I impulsively took possession of the smallest Transformer money could buy. Suddenly I no longer cared about the pains I would get in my head and neck. This purchase was a token of appreciation for my son's understanding and an expression of our mutual love.

That evening he skipped dinner in order to play with his robot. He put a black toy pistol into its hand and the creature, with a twist and a turn, obligingly turned into an exquisite streamlined bomber. The thermo-coloured American trademark turned from red to blue and back to red in his warm little hands.

'Convertible Transformer fights for justice and freedom with an iron will . . . ' he sang sweetly. It was the theme song from the TV series.

Although my husband had grumbled, I felt the purchase had been a wise one. True, Transformers were expensive, but the moments of happiness they gave were priceless. In the event of my son growing up to be an important public figure, I didn't want to have to read in his autobiography: I liked toys when I was little but my family was too poor to afford them, so I could only watch the other children playing with theirs . . .

Of course he might also simply turn out to be a blue-collar worker; either way I was loath to leave him with any regrets about his childhood. Children are, after all, easy to satisfy: the smallest Transformer intoxicates them.

'Don't neglect your homework now,' I cautioned in an unusually serious, perhaps overcompensatory, tone of voice. He earnestly promised not to.

Over the next few days I carried out spot checks on his homework and was satisfied to find that he had lost none of his willpower; he allowed himself to play with his toy only after finishing his work.

Winter finally arrived with a vengeance.

My husband prolonged his prohibition on cigarettes, and though I tried to reassure him that my old scarf was perfectly adequate, his response was gloomy. 'You should have a pair of warm boots,' he said.

I gave him a grateful smile and made a face indicating that it was indeed cold down there.

One evening I suddenly found my son playing with a different Transformer: this one was yellow, and much larger and fiercer than his own.

'What's this?' I asked, almost severely. All the guidebooks on 'parenting' warned us not to ignore any new tangents a child went off on.

'Transformer Giant,' he answered calmly, as though discussing a close relative.

Thanks to the protracted TV series, I was equipped with basic knowledge of the Transformer family and I knew that the Giant was one of the principal characters.

Be that as it may, its name was not important to me - its owner was. Without softening my voice I demanded to know whose it was. His reply was matter-of-fact. 'One of my classmates,' he said, without registering my suspicion. 'Almost everybody has one and they're all different, so we trade to play.'

Although I felt a slight twinge of guilt about my tone of voice, I couldn't guarantee I wouldn't react in the same way in the future. Dishonesty was above all others the thing I feared most in children and I was constantly on the look-out for it.

The kids were clever. They traded like primitive tribes. It was a new phenomenon, and I wasn't sure whether to oppose or support it. 'Giant or not,' I said to my elated son, 'don't let it ruin your school work, and be careful with other people's toys.'

He nodded his assent. I could always rely on him to listen.

Somebody was tapping at the door.

My son ran over and hospitably pulled it wide open. But the visitor slowly closed it again as if he wished to remain outside. Presently a round head hesitantly pushed its way through the crack. It was my son's class-mate, one who seemed to go by the name of Farty and who regularly dropped by to get my son to help him with his homework. Only this time Farty hadn't come for help. He neither entered nor retreated but remained hovering on the threshold facing my son and glancing up at me with a miserable expression on his face. Finally he stammered out in embarrassment, 'I'm so sorry... I broke your toy...'

The blood drained from my son's cheeks. I had never seen such an agonized look pass across his face. He took the dismantled toy from Farty, held it before his eyes and blew on it softly, as though it were a wounded pigeon.

After the initial shock had subsided, my son looked at me to rescue him. For one bitter moment the sacrificed hat and scarf flashed across my mind, but there was nothing we could do except face it. Trying to avoid my son's eye, I said, 'It's up to you. It's your toy, what do you think we should do?'

Perhaps inhibited by my presence, he remained silent. I therefore discreetly moved into the inner room and listened intently. I could hear Farty wheezing in the silence and longed to put an end to his misery by running out and saying, 'Farty, you may leave now.' But the verdict, whatever it was, had to come from my son.

'How did you smash it?' I heard him ask, with anger in his voice.

'Just... then, flop...'. Farty must have been gesticulating. An exasperated gurgle appeared to be my son's stifled response.

What was I to do? Maybe I should go out and intervene. Transformers cost money, but magnanimity is something that no amount of money can buy; and although I believed my son had absorbed the moral principles I had instilled in him over the years, I nevertheless recognized that to him a small Transformer was the equivalent of a colour TV set or a deluxe camera to an adult. The prolonged silence was agony for him and for Farty as well as for me.

Finally he spoke. He seemed to have covered a great deal of mental ground and his voice, though weak, was none the less clear: 'Don't worry...'

Farty grasped the opportunity and fled, as though afraid that my son might otherwise change his mind.

I heaved a long sigh of relief, as if I too had just returned from a long journey. Emerging, I kissed my son's sweaty forehead.

'It's dead,' he said as his eyes filled with tears.

'I'll try and glue it together,' I said comfortingly, though with little hope of success.

I duly went flat out to fix it, drawing on all my resources of skill and ingenuity. After spending a great deal more time and effort on it than I would have spent knitting a hat, it finally became recognizable again as a toy. But though it looked all right, it was too delicate to touch and it could no longer change shapes.

My son, meanwhile, devoted himself to the Giant. A Transformer should change shape, he said, otherwise it was just a tin-ker. So saying, he deftly changed the shape of the toy he had in his hand. One has to admire the Americans. Who else would come up with the idea of turning the belly of a fighter into a robot's head and then proceed to create a machine that executes the transition so flawlessly?

A good toy attracts both children and grown-ups, but no sooner had I begun to move closer to watch him play than I heard an ominous crash and saw the toy collapse in pieces.

What had happened? We looked at each other in horror.

Unfortunately, though we could hardly believe it, the truth was all too painfully clear: he had broken the Giant.

For a while my son tried to fix it, but only ended up with more pieces than he had started with. Realizing the situation was hopeless, he gathered

the pieces together, wrapped them in a sheet of paper and prepared to leave the house.

'Where are you going?' I asked, still in a state of shock.

'To return the toy and apologize,' he said, looking calm and prepared. 'Is it Fatty's?' I asked, with a glimmer of hope.

'No.' He then mentioned a name.

Hers! My heart plunged, then leapt into my throat.

The only impression I had ever been able to gain of this girl was that she was like a delicate flower and had a very arrogant mother. The family was well heeled — my husband would call them 'wealthy' — and it was entirely natural that they should have bought such a large and ferocious-looking toy for their daughter.

'You're going . . . like this?' I stammered.

'Should I take something with me?' he asked, confused.

I looked at his limpid eyes and refrained from further comment.

'OK, mum, I'm off.' He disappeared out the door.

'Come home soon,' I called after him apprehensively.

I knew he wouldn't dawdle, but he didn't return soon, and when he hadn't returned later either my heart began to flutter like fish on a hook.

I should have warned him that people were all different, that he might not be pardoned, even though he himself had forgiven a similar accident. I should have prepared him better for the possibility of an unpleasant scene, otherwise he might cry.

On the other hand things might turn out OK. His classmate might have asked him hospitably to stay a little, while her mother peeled him an orange, which my son would naturally push back politely. He is a lovable boy. They would surely forgive him in the same manner in which we had forgiven little Fatty.

The more I thought about it the more I convinced myself that that could be the only possible outcome. Moreover I congratulated myself now on not having filled his heart with my own cynical suspicions.

But as time passed, no matter how I tried to reassure myself, I grew increasingly concerned.

At last he returned, his footstep so light that, deep in thought as I was, I didn't even notice he was there until he was standing right in front of me.

One look at him was enough to convince me that he had undergone a profound inner trauma. I could also tell that he had been crying and that he had already dried his tears in the cold wind so that I wouldn't notice. A child often reveals more when he is hiding something.

I did not have the heart to get him to go into details; it would have been too painful.

'Mum, they want us . . . to compensate . . .,' he said finally, as large, cold tears rolled down his cheeks and on to my hand.

I now had to deal not only with a broken toy but with a broken heart.

'It's only natural,' I said, wiping away his tears, 'that they'd want to be compensated for their loss.'

Then let me go and find Fatty and ask him to compensate me for mine. All he said was 'I'm sorry.' Next time I go shopping I won't take my money, I'll just say, 'I'm sorry.' Will that do?' he asked, jumping up to leave.

'Don't go!' I pulled him back. He struggled wildly, suddenly seeming to have acquired the strength of a calf.

'Why, mum? Tell me!' he demanded, lifting his head.

I didn't know how to respond. Sometimes principles are all very well and, like beautiful clothes can be very attractive, but they are not the stuff from which clothes are actually made.

I had to give him an answer. It is a car's responsibility to teach her kitten how to catch mice. I had to provide my son with an explanation, no matter how impractical it might be.

'The words "I'm sorry" mean you are being courteous. Their value ought not to be counted in terms of money.'

He nodded quietly. I probably sounded like one of his teachers, so he forced himself to listen.

'You forgave Fatty when he broke your Transformer,' I continued, patiently trying to explain things in terms he would understand. 'He was relieved. That was a nice thing to do.'

But, mum, I haven't been forgiven for a similar mistake!' he protested. His sense of shame seemed to override my reasoned arguments.

'Well, son, there are many ways of solving a problem. Problems are like Transformers: they can either be a robot, a plane or a car . . . Understand?'

'Yeah.' He nodded reluctantly. I knew he was unconvinced, and just wanted to placate me.

I let go of his hand, exhausted.

He relaxed and stood aside.

The large broken toy was going to involve a hideous amount of money, and though we hadn't yet reached the stage where we needed to go to the pawn shop — which our street didn't have anyway — we were still pretty broke.

Sitting on the bad news, we waited for my husband to come home. My son looked at me pitifully. Was he hoping I would not tell him about the incident at all, or hoping I would do it quickly?

I dreaded the prospect, but knew it had to be done, and despite my inclination to postpone the reckoning I knew it would be better in the long run to get it over and done with immediately.

On hearing the news, my husband managed temporarily to retain his composure.

'Tell me,' he said calmly, 'how did you come to break the thing?' He couldn't bring himself to give it a name.

'I just twisted it, and "flop", it broke . . . ' stammered my son, looking at me appealingly for support. I'd seen it happen, certainly, but I couldn't have said how.

But describing how it broke was in any event unimportant. The consequence was that our son would never again be able to play with such a costly toy.

My husband's eyebrows locked and the ferocity of his expression sent my son scurrying behind me for protection. Suddenly he exploded.

'Tell me,' he said, his voice rising in a crescendo, 'did you break it on purpose or deliberately?'

I frankly couldn't see what the difference was between 'on purpose' and 'deliberately', but didn't dare interfere.

'I did it . . . on purpose. No, dad, I did it deliberately . . . ' Desperately searching for whichever seemed the less incriminating, he lurched from one to the other, shrinking beneath his father's glare.

'You little wretch! A whole month's salary won't pay for this thing, yet you think you can go around lordling it like the master of some grand mansion. I'll give you a hiding you'll never forget.'

With that he raised his arm, and as it came crashing down I lifted my own to intercept the blow. A blinding pain instantly spread from my side down to my fingers. He was a strong man, a labourer, and it was fortunate I had blocked him.

For a few moments my son was stunned, then he let out a sharp cry, as if it had been he who had been hit.

'You've got a nerve to blubber like that!' shouted my husband, breathing heavily. 'That damn thing your mother bought you already cost her her wool hat, and now that! That's our fuel and cabbage for the whole winter gone!' Then he turned to me and added, 'It's your fault for spoiling him.'

I let him rant. As long as he didn't resort to violence again I could cope. My son had never been beaten before.

That winter, on one particularly freezing day when the sun seemed to be emanating blasts of cold air instead of warmth, I arrived home to find that the stove was barely alight. My son was waiting for me, his face burning red and his eyes glittering like stars reflected in a pool. I was afraid he had a fever.

'Close your eyes, mum,' he said. That sweet tone of his voice reassured me that he was not ill.

I closed my eyes quietly. I thought he must have a little surprise for me: a perfect exam paper perhaps, or a toy he might have made out of paper and bottles.

'You can open your eyes now, mum.'

I kept my eyes closed, savouring the happy moment that only a mother can experience.

'Quick, mum!' he urged.

I opened my eyes on to what seemed at first like a meadow in spring-time. It took me a moment to register that what my son was, in fact, holding in front of me was a bundle of green knitting wool.

'Do you like the colour, mum?' he asked, looking at me expectantly.

Green was my favourite.

'Yes, very much! How did you know I like it?'

'You must have forgotten. You've always knitted me green clothes ever since I was little. I would be able to pick out the colour among a thousand others.' He must have wondered how I could even ask such a question.

'Did dad take you there?'

'No, I went by myself,' he said proudly.

'Where did you get the money?' I asked in surprise.

He didn't answer, but stared at me motionlessly.

He could not have stolen it. The very thought of stealing was anathema to my young son. He must have got the money by recycling used paper or toothpaste tubes, but I hadn't noticed him returning home late with blackened fingers. Well, I'd have to ask him again.

'Tell me, where did you get the money?' I persisted, almost pleading with him to give me a satisfactory answer.

'I asked Farty for it,' he answered clearly.

'You asked who?' I couldn't believe my ears. It was impossible that he could have done something like that. He had always been so obedient.

'Farty!' he repeated, staring at me resolutely.

A loud buzzing sounded in my head. His bold expression seemed to come from a boy I didn't know.

'How did you get it from him?' I asked in a weak voice.

'The way those other people asked us for it,' he said dismissively, as though I was being pernickety.

He saw my hand rise and, thinking I was about to stroke his head, moved in closer. But I slapped him. Remembering, in the split second before my arm descended, an article I had read somewhere warning parents never to hit their children on the head. But it was too late. My hand slanted at an angle and landed on his neck.

He didn't flinch, but merely looked at me in astonishment.

I had never really hit him before, but now I felt certain that this would not be the last time.

Since then, every time a gust of wind pushes open the front door, I expect to see a little fellow with a round head appear. But Farty has never been back. He paid for our Transformer and left it with us.

I fixed the big one with glue. Its bold appearance added a sense of wealth to our house.

Now we have two Transformers that do not transform.

My son has never touched them again.

BARBARA ANDERSON

Tuataras

Barbara Anderson was born in New Zealand in 1926. She completed a science degree at the University of Otago and, thirty years later, an arts degree at Victoria University in Wellington. She has worked as a schoolteacher and a laboratory technician, and she is married with two sons. She is the author of one collection of short stories, I Think We Should Go into the Jungle, and two novels, Girls High and Portrait of the Artist's Wife. For the latter novel she won the Goodman Fielder Watline Book Award, New Zealand's most prestigious literary prize, in 1992.

They fascinated him, the hatching tuataras. Inch-long dragons pecking their way to a wider world. Shells are expected to enclose endearing and vulnerable balls of yellow, grey, or black fluff, but these were different. Leathery, wrinkled like dirty white gloves, the discarded ones resembled something unattractive and crumpled in the bottom of a laundry basket. Each shall had a number written on it with a felt pen. Charles Renshaw opened the inner glass door of the incubator and picked up 18 with care. The occupant had made little progress since his last inspection. The minuscule eyes stared, their sudden blink as startling as a wink from a blank face. They peered at him above a jagged rim, the body still completely enclosed.

Charles despised anthropomorphism in any form. Dogs with parasols rearing on their hind legs, advertisements in which chimpanzees jabbered their delight at cups of tea, made him very angry. 'What happened to the Mesozoic reptiles?' he asked the head.

He replaced the egg quickly, closed the double doors of the incubator, then turned to watch the juveniles which had hatched during the last week.