

CHEN LI

Poems

*In a City Alarmed by a Series of Earthquakes*

In a city alarmed by a series of earthquakes, I heard  
a thousand black-hearted jackals say to their children,  
“Mother, I was wrong.”  
I heard the judge cry  
and the priest repent. I heard  
handcuffs fly out of newspapers, blackboards drop into a manure pit. I heard  
literary men put down their hoes, farmers take off their glasses,  
and fat businessmen take off their clothes of cream and balsam one by one.

In a city alarmed by a series of earthquakes,  
I saw pimps on their knees returning vaginas to their daughters.

*Animal Lullaby*

Let time be fixed like a leopard's spots.  
A tired bird glides over the water, softly dripping its  
tears like a shot arrow waiting to land.  
This is the garden, the garden without music. The grayish  
elephant passes by you with heavy steps and asks  
you to guard the honeycomb, the honeycomb without bees.

I will put away dewdrops for the night, for the grass without clothes when the stars  
rise in the sky, getting higher than the giraffe in the doorway.  
Let nursing mothers leave their infants like  
a cat finally loosens its arched back, no more  
abstractly insisting on the color of love, the height of dreams,  
for this is the garden, the garden without music.

When the awkward donkey parades, don't imitate his snoring.  
Let time stop breathing like a bear playing dead lies down quietly,

some white flowers swatting his eyelashes, some butterflies.

I will wipe the doorplate for the cattle pen, for the swallows without eaves when  
the grayish elephant passes by you with heavy steps and asks  
you to mend the broken column, the broken column without sorrow.

This is the garden, the garden without music. Circling eagles, cease  
hunting; hunting dogs, stop running—like an angel's forehead,  
it's wide enough for fifty castles and seven hundred carriages.  
Let the children far from their mothers return to their mothers,  
like some long forgotten myth or religion is rediscovered and re-adhered to.  
I'll praise and pray for the fruit trees, the fruit trees bare of their fruit.

Let time be fixed like a leopard's spots,  
some white flowers swatting his eyelashes, some butterflies.  
Don't disturb the wrath of the lion soundly asleep.  
This is the garden, the garden without music. The grayish  
elephant passes by you with heavy steps and asks you  
and the mud to cover his footprints quickly.

*Microcosmos* (ten selections)

1

I wait and long for you:  
a turning die in the empty bowl of night  
attempting to create the 7th side.

2

Someone is in the autumn wind—  
I mean, someone is in the autumn wind saying  
someone is in the autumn wind

3

A great event on the desolate  
winter day: ear wax  
drops on the desk

.

4

Multiplication table for kids of clouds and fog:

mountains times mountains equals trees, mountains times trees  
equals me, mountains times me equals nothingness...

5

All the sorrow of night will be turned into golden  
ears of rice by daylight, waiting to be  
reaped by another sorrowful night.

6

“Which runs faster, grass or dust?”  
after a spring shower, beside a deserted railway,  
someone asked me.

7

The white skin turns a mole  
into an isle: I miss the glistening  
vast ocean inside your clothes.

8

Sandals throughout the seasons: do you see  
the free verse my two feet write, treading  
upon the blackboard, upon the dust?

9

I am man,  
I am a disposable lighter  
in the dark universe.

10

The story of marriage: a closet of loneliness plus  
a closet of loneliness equals  
a closet of loneliness.

*Nocturnal Fish*

In the night I turn into a fish,  
an amphibian  
suddenly becoming rich and free because of having nothing.

Emptiness? Yes,  
as empty as the vast space,  
I swim in the night darker than your vagina  
like a cosmopolitan.

Yes, the universe is my city.  
Seen from any of our city swimming pools above,  
Europe is but a piece of dry and shrunken pork,  
and Asia a broken tea bowl by the stinking ditch.

Go fill in your sweet familial love,  
fill in your pure water of ethics and morality,  
fill in your bathing water which is replaced every other day.

I am an amphibian  
having nothing and having nothing to fear.  
I perch in the vast universe;  
I perch in your daily and nightly dreams.  
A bather bathed by the rain and combed by the wind.

I swim across your sky swaggeringly,  
across the death and life that you can never escape.

Do you still boast of your freedom?

Come, and appreciate a fish,  
appreciate a space fish that suddenly becomes rich  
and free, because of your forsaking.

*The Ropewalker*

Now what I sustain is, floating in the air, your laughter,  
your laughter, through the obscure quivering net.  
What if a ball larger than a roof should be thrown over?  
Would it drive you into sudden melancholy?  
A ball like the earth, pouring onto your face the unfastened  
islands and lakes (just like a wheelbarrow with a loose screw).

Those black and blue bruises are the collisions with mountains,  
the metaphysical mountain ranges harder than iron wheels,  
the metaphysical burdens, anxiety, metaphysical aestheticism...  
And the so-called aestheticism, to me, who tremble in the air,  
is perhaps only a restraint from a sneeze, an itch, with  
the head still up.

What runs over you at the same time is the joke system of  
all continents and subcontinents, interwoven in your body like tributaries,  
a joke not very funny: black humor, white terrorism,  
red blood. Red, because you once blushed with your heart fluttering  
for the beloved girl (of course you can't forget the hatred and bright red blood  
aroused by jealousy and fury...) But you're simply a ropewalker  
walking on the earth, yet discontented with only being a ropewalker  
walking on the earth.

Now what I sustain are the subjects left behind by the  
departed circus: time, love, death, loneliness, belief,  
dreams. Will you thus unpack the parcel before a houseful of  
silent audience? The moment of sudden solemnity after roaring laughter.  
You simply pull out, wipe, rearrange the earth's internal organs,  
those spare parts that make the world move, sunshine leap,  
the male and the female animals reach their orgasms...  
They don't even know why you stay there,  
stay there (restrain from sneezing and itching),  
a wingless butterfly turning a somersault where it is.

So you tremble in the air, cautiously constructing  
a garden of jokes on the dangling rope,  
cautiously walking across the earth, propping up  
the floating life,  
with a slanting bamboo cane,  
with a fictitious pen.



*Note:* The Chinese character 兵 (pronounced as “bing”) means “soldier.”  
 乒 and 乓 (pronounced as “ping” and “pong”), which look like one-legged  
 soldiers, are two onomatopoeic words imitating sounds of collision or  
 gunshots. The character 丘 (pronounced as “chiou”) means “hill.”

*Formosa, 1661*

I've always thought that we are living on the cowhide  
 though God has granted my wish to mix my blood, urine,  
 and excrement with this land.  
 Exchange fifteen bolts of cloth for land as large as a cowhide?  
 The aborigines wouldn't possibly know a cowhide can be cut  
 into strips and, like the spirit of omnipresent  
 God, encircle the whole Tayouan island,  
 the whole Formosa. I like the taste of  
 venison, I like cane sugar and bananas, I like  
 the raw silk shipped back to Holland by the East India Company.  
 God's spirit is like raw silk, smooth, holy, and pure.  
 It shines upon the youngsters from Bakloan and Tavacan  
 who come daily to the youth school to learn spelling, writing,  
 praying, and catechism. Oh Lord, I hear their Dutch  
 smell of venison (just like the Sideia language  
 I utter from time to time in my sermon).  
 Oh Lord, in Dalivo, I have taught fifteen married women and  
 maidens to say the Lord's Prayer, the Gospel, the Ten Commandments,  
 and grace before and after meals; in Mattau, I have taught  
 seventy-two married and unmarried young men to say  
 various prayers, to know the main religious doctrines, to read,  
 and by sincerely teaching and preaching catechism, to start  
 enlarging their knowledge—oh, knowledge is like a cowhide  
 that can be folded and put into a traveling bag to carry  
 from Rotterdam to Batavia, from Batavia to  
 this subtropical island, and be unfolded into our Majesty's agricultural land,  
 the Lord's nation, cut into strips of twenty-five ges,  
 that length squared forms one morgen, and then three and four zhanglis.

In Zeelandia, between the public measurement office, the tax office,  
 and the theater, I see it flying like a flag, smiling remotely

at Provintia. Oh, knowledge  
 brings people joy, just like good food and myriad  
 spices (if only they knew how to cook Holland peas).  
 Oranges, with sour flesh and bitter skin, are larger than tangerines. But they don't know that  
 in summer the water tastes even better than lovemaking when  
 mixed with salt and smashed oranges. In Tirozen,  
 I have acquainted thirty married young women with various prayers  
 and simplified key items; in Sinkan, one hundred and two  
 married men and women have been taught to read and write (oh, I  
 taste in the Bible in romanized aboriginal languages  
 a taste of venison flavored with European ginger).  
 Ecclesiastes in Favorlang, the Gospel According to Matthew in Sideia,  
 the marriage of the civilized and the primitive. Let God's spirit  
 enter the flesh of Formosa—or, let the venison of Formosa enter my  
 stomach and spleen to become my blood, urine, and  
 excrement, to become my spirit. I've always thought that we are  
 living on the cowhide, although those Chinese troops are approaching  
 on junks and sampans with large axes and knives  
 attempting to cover us with an even bigger  
 cowhide. God has granted my wish to mix my blood,  
 urine, and excrement with the aborigines'  
 and print them, like letters, on this land.  
 How I wish they knew this cowhide, in which new spelling  
 words are wrapped, can be cut into strips and thumbed into  
 pages, a dictionary loaded with sounds, colors, images, smells  
 and as broad as God's spirit.

*Note:* Bakloan, Tavacan, Dalivo, Sinkan, Tirozen, and Mattau are names of communities of the plains aborigines in Taiwan. The Sideia language and the Favorlang language are dialects of the plains aborigines (Sideia is also called Siraya). Zeelandia was a city built on Tayouan island (now called Anping, in Tainan) by the colonists during the Holland Occupation period (1624-1662). Provintia was a fort they built. It is said that the Dutch offered to exchange fifteen bolts of cloth with the aborigines for a cowhide-sized piece of land. After the agreement was made, they "cut the cowhide into strips and encircled land more than one kilometer in circumference" (See Lian Heng, *A General History of Taiwan*). "Ge" was a unit of measurement used by the Dutch, equaling about twelve feet five inches. Twenty-five ges squared equals one morgen. Five morgens make one zhangli.

*In the Corners of Our Lives*

Many poems live in the corners of our lives.  
They may not have reported to the domiciliary registration office  
or received doorplate numbers from the district office or police station.  
Walking out of the alley, you bump into a jogger speaking on the cell phone.  
His embarrassed smile reminds you of the aged doctor who polishes his  
young wife's red sports car in front of the house every night.  
You realize then that they are two sections of a long poem.

Objects are known to each other, but not necessarily on visiting terms.  
Some float up to become images, courting and showing affection  
for others. Sound and smell usually conspire first, flirting with each other  
on the sly. Colors are the coy little sisters who must stay home,  
get set the curtain, sheet, bathrobe and tablecloth, wait for their master to return, and turn on  
the lights. A poem, like a home, is a sweet burden  
sheltering love, lust, pain and sorrow, taking in the good and the bad.

They needn't go to the health center to be sterilized or to buy condoms  
although they do have their own ethics and family planning.  
Couples of well-matched family backgrounds do not always make the best matches.  
Water can mix well with milk, but it can also be mated with fire.  
Hegel eats tender boiled chicken; black-headed flies debate over  
whether or not a white horse is a horse. Tender violence.  
Deafening silence.  
Incestuous love is the poet's license.

Some of them choose to live in the shadow of metaphor or woods of symbols.  
Some are broad-minded and optimistic, like sunny spiders climbing here and there. Some  
enjoy living outdoors, talking idly and having intercourse; others, like invisible gauze,  
are scattered in your brain, which is divided into many small suites for rent, from time to time  
switching on the spinning wheel of dream or subconsciousness.  
Many poems are said to be imprisoned in the room of habit. In quest of lines you  
close the door, overturn boxes and cupboards, call out desperately, and even ride an electronic  
donkey, drive the mouse and pound the keys. You open the window  
to the big wide world, and surprisingly, there they are:  
Iris after the rain. A flock of gulls  
on their way home from school. Slanting  
waves of the ocean.



But this is not a question of math,  
not a question of military affairs, not even a question of medicine.

“This is a question of philosophy.”  
Outside the palace, the ignored Persian traveler said,  
“Time is the best aphrodisiac  
that fosters changes.”

*Butterfly-Mad*

That girl was walking toward  
me like a butterfly. Steadily she  
seated herself right in front of the lectern.  
There in her hair was a gaily-colored  
hair pin: a butterfly on a butterfly.

For the past twenty years, in this  
seashore junior high, how many butterflies  
have I seen, human-shaped, butterfly-shaped,  
carrying youth, carrying dream, flut-  
tering into my classroom?

Oh, Lolita

One autumn day before noon, the  
sun so warm, a dazzling yellow butterfly  
entered through the window, circling between  
the distracted teacher and the 13-year-old  
girl concentrating on her lessons.

Suddenly she rose, to evade  
those scissors-like glittering colors  
and shapes, a butterfly scared of butterflies:  
ah, she was startled by a butterfly,  
and I, perplexed by beauty.

*Furniture Music*

I read on the chair  
I write on the desk  
I sleep on the floor  
I dream beside the closet

I drink water in spring  
(The cup is in the kitchen cupboard)  
I drink water in summer  
(The cup is in the kitchen cupboard)  
I drink water in fall  
(The cup is in the kitchen cupboard)  
I drink water in winter  
(The cup is in the kitchen cupboard)

I open the window and read  
I turn on the light and write  
I draw the curtains and sleep  
I wake inside the room

Inside the room are the chairs  
and the dreams of the chairs  
Inside the room are the desk  
and the dreams of the desk  
Inside the room are the floor  
and the dreams of the floor  
Inside the room are the closet  
and the dreams of the closet

In the songs that I hear  
In the words that I say  
In the water that I drink  
In the silence that I leave