

CHAN Lai-kuen 陳麗娟

Ode to Dead Cats—Cats in Bottles

Dead cats take the subway at rush hour
row after row, crammed onto the left side of the escalator

Cats in bottles
slowly sink down
the sun rises from the water
schools of silver-colored fish swim by

The cats aren't yet dead
sometimes they're asleep, sometimes they're awake
at midnight we hear the sounds of cats clawing at glass

Here comes another bottled
cat
divers don't know what to do with bottles and bottles of cats underwater

The cats breathe in, water trickles into the bottles
the cats don't struggle
they let themselves turn blue

The cats follow the current, drift from one coral reef to another
or stop in the belly of a sunken ship

The cats won't necessarily die
their eyes are swollen

peering through the glass
staring at the world of fish

2002

Translated from the Chinese by Jennifer Feeley

A Letter

midnight Star Ferry Pier

I get a stamp from the vending machine

lick it before passing the letter into the darkness

imagine the one to whom I write goes to the post office building tower

he would climb up the spiral marble stairs

and ask a postal clerk

to stamp a narrow red 'Par Avion' on the envelope

imagine I cram my letter into a carp belly

then teach the fish the rivers and harbours

so that the one to whom I write

will uncurl the wet slip of paper

yet to cook the fish

(2000)

Translated from the Chinese by Kit Kelen and Penny Fang Xia

Note: 'A carp messenger' derives from Yuefu poems of Han dynasty 'A Wife Longs for Her Husband' and the original text is 'but a stranger from far away/brings me two fine carp, I call the boy to cook them/and find in them a message on white silk.'

Vendor of Pain

I don a vendor's blue apron
in the last outdoor produce market in the city
peddle my pain
while the fruit stand displays HK\$10 for three boxes of "Korean strawberries"
or HK\$5 for an almost-rotten banana
the baby cabbages at the vegetable stand
sleep three together in one bag
when they were picked
did they cry out *waa-waa*?

I can't put a price tag
on my pain
I close my eyes and feel it
heavy, it can certainly be weighed
I just can't
decide if it should be classified
as a vegetable or meat, whether
I should consult the Fish Marketing Organization or
the Nasdaq Index
I can't scream, nor do I have
a colorful abundance of pig lungs or tomatoes
I can only watch in vain
as women scurry to and fro
letting the trash pile at my feet

In the evening
the street washing vehicle returns the road to the cars

I take my leave, accompanied by the pain I cannot sell
and the fruit and vegetable stands
chest weighed down
I don't know if it's pain
or the blue apron laden
with coins to make change
my face begins to turn green
the auntie who sells fruit gives me a red apple

(2009)

Translated from the Chinese by Jennifer Feeley

Tennessee Waltz*

*I remember the night
and the Tennessee waltz...*

Actually, I don't remember anything
they say
this is a beautiful city
the seashore is invisible from here
but the seashore
is now a long, dense building
named Beauty

*Now I know
just how much I have lost*

They say
the chandelier
room after room
used to be yours

*Yes, I lost my little darlin'
the night they were playing...*

Neon lights pour out a cart of strawberries
young people swim past me like salmon
the road behind me closes
the department store has also been torn down
I turn around and bump into a golden wall

how do I get home?

...the beautiful

Tennessee waltz.

Suddenly, my feet
take steps unknown to me
my arched hands
recall a waist

Whirling round and round
the stars all fall to the ground
the wall is gone
but I remember
this is the living room
this is a desk
this is a bed
her big polka dot dress

*I was dancin' with my darlin'
to the Tennessee waltz—*

The mall lights go out one by one
the gates slowly lower
in the Milky Way on the floor
an old man in a checked suit and velvet hat
still whirls

(June 2010)

*after "Tennessee Waltz" by Redd Stewart and Pee Wee King, 1947

Translated from the Chinese by Jennifer Feeley

We Scatter the Earth

We are every stone strewn on the ground
we are walls, are windows
we are iron fences, tents, bicycles
glass bottles, white cloth strips, wooden carts
we are plastic eyeglasses crushed to pieces, shoes that have fallen off
we are bullet holes, we
are tanks
crushing forward, crushing backward.
We are lights suddenly switched off
we are hospitals
are morgues
we are journalists keeping watch on the roof of a public toilet
we are mothers who've lost their children
we are songs, rolls of film, videotapes, television sets throughout the world
we scatter the earth
we leave, we don't leave
we are in hiding, we are imprisoned
even though we are only white chrysanthemums hidden in the palms of our mothers' hands

Even though we only bow our heads on the grass
sometimes doing accounting
sometimes doing construction, transportation, retail
sometimes falling in love
sometimes cooking
some of us tell the story again
some of us tell lies
some people teach children to tell lies

our children have just started secondary school

we have just started secondary school

we have just lost our hair

we have just grown our hair

we are

all

present

(May 2009)

Translated from the Chinese by Jennifer Feeley

Metaphors Are on Strike

metaphors are on strike

I can't say how many chilies it takes to equal

the taste of tear gas

the taste of tear gas

is like the taste of tear gas

nor is the scene of the police flinging tear gas at the people

like anything else

it's simply the police flinging tear gas at people's bodies

riot police armed with rifles, cloaked in protective gear

genuinely look like riot police

they suddenly storm in in a row

having rifles pointed at you

isn't like some type of supernatural experience

it feels

like having a row of *motherfucking* rifles pointed at you

language is also on strike

as I retreat my mouth only spits out four-letter words

depravity isn't on strike

nor are courage and nobility

some people aim pepper spray at people's faces

some people are ordered to hide behind and keep spouting lie after lie

some people perform first aid on the fly, share plastic wrap (to protect the eyes) and food

some people give us a fake election

we give you the genuine masses

(2014)

Translated from the Chinese by Jennifer Feeley

Dust Flutters in a Shaft of Light (Excerpts)

I.

Sunlight enters through the room's small corner window, like a square of gelatin dessert suspended in air; the specks of light inside it dance a wild reel. It is a Saturday afternoon. I sit at a tiny, square folding table staring blankly at a notebook. Arms and legs slowly growing longer, I hunch over the undersized table. The television broadcasts an unending stream of women's shows, cartoons and animal documentaries yellowed with age. Time congeals. I stand up. I go out alone. On both sides of the alleyway are huge clumps of dwarf taro, discarded tires, night-soil buckets and cats. Next to the cluster of squatters' shacks is a school. To the right of the alley's exit is the main road, and to one side of this is a park full of oleander. I move forward again, along a street lined with old six-story tenement-style flats. Their ground floors are home to a laundromat, a curtain store, a barber, a shop selling old ladies' fashions; the long road appears to have no end. Then I turn another bend and am on Lion Rock Road. There is a stall selling socks, a stand selling towels, a book bag shop and a book store.

I go into the bookstore, which is full of brightly-colored pencils, cartoon character stationery supplies, mysterious drafting tools, calculators and pens. Though called a bookstore, in truth it sells few books. The store carries all that is from the material world. I always stare at the big boxes of colored pencils, thirty-six or forty-eight colors lined up inside like a rainbow. I buy a cheap paperbound sketchbook, hurry home and open it to the first page, eager to draw something, as if the blank paper hides a giant, unknown world. The memory always ends at this moment. I don't see what I end up drawing. In the many years since then, each time I lay open a sheet of white paper, open a new computer Word file, crack open a new book, or arrive at the cusp of a Saturday afternoon, I always remember the moment when I opened that sketch book to its first page, as if the world were still new, as if many somethings still wait for me to draw them.

II.

My hand in my mother's, we squeeze into the staircase of an old tenement building, climb to its top in one breath. Sunlight shines on the rooftop's big red checkerboard tiles. There is a small shed on the rooftop. In front of the shed sits a rattan chair. An old man with silver hair teaches me how to place my five fingers on the piano's keys, thumb above the key hole, one finger striking each key. One, two, three, four, five. Five, four, three, two, one. Mama buys a piano book from him, with a red cover that opens horizontally. Inside are dwarfs wearing pointed caps. The musical notes look like big tadpoles.

One, two, three, four, five. Many days go by, and I still haven't gone back. Mama says it's because we don't have the money. I never do go back there, but I remember the red and gray floor tiles with the sunlight on them, and the feet of the rattan chair.

IV.

The first house was my grandfather and grandmother's sixth floor flat in a tenement-style building. Dark red floor tiles, a fluttering cloth door curtain, a balcony filled with big tubs of flowers and plants (it was really just an iron window box for flowers) — when the moon hung above the balcony, I thought it was a

big eye looking at me. It is on such an evening that I sit on my grandfather's knee. Not much is happening. Even the television is quiet. As I sit there, my tears begin to fall: one tear, two tears, then a continuous flood. I know it isn't because my feelings are hurt, nor is it due to feeling grieved or indignant, although I have yet to learn these words. I'm not sobbing, just quietly shedding tears. Grandfather keeps asking me, *Does your stomach hurt? Is someone bullying you at school?* I shake my head. I don't know if it's because of the moon, its blueish florescent light, or because of the quiet. All I know is that there seems to be a hard lump in my heart, much bigger than I am, and the thing I don't know, it isn't my grandpa, big sister, little brother or the old house we will soon no longer be able to visit, all of which are there in front of me. Before I know what it is, it's there, and it has followed me ever since.

VII.

Bird with a black crest. Bird with a red backside. Black and white bird with a big belly. Brown bird wearing odd-looking sunglasses. Bird that is violet in sunlight but turns black again in shade. Bird wearing a black scarf with white polka dots, that waggles its head as it walks. Many years later, I search for their names in a book.

Translated from the Chinese by Mary King Bradley

*